

Sunday of Pentecost, Cycle B
May 27, 2012

Acts 2:1-11

Galatians 5:16-25

John 15:26-27, 16:12-15

I'll begin this homily with a kind of mathematical question: Our first reading from the second chapter of the Acts of Apostles begins with the words, "When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together." So, I ask, how many persons did the writer, St. Luke, intend to include in this word "all"? Most people probably think just of the Twelve, that group of the closest followers of Jesus, to whose number Matthias had just been added to make up for the loss of Judas Iscariot. However, there were surely more than Twelve there "in one place together." At the very least, we'd have to include those other persons whom Luke mentions in chapter one as staying in the upper room in those days, namely, "some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers" (Acts 1:14). However, we shouldn't stop there either, because still later in that first chapter we read that during those days "Peter stood up in the midst of the brothers," and Luke adds: "there was a group of about one hundred and twenty persons in the one place" (Acts 1:15). Since this is the number of persons given just before the pronoun "all" in today's reading, we must conclude that well more than a hundred followers of Jesus received the Holy Spirit on that first Christian Pentecost.

Does this mean, then, that the traditional Pentecost icons of the Eastern Church, a photocopy of one which you have before you, is inaccurate since it seems to show only those whom we often call "the Twelve Apostles"? Not at all. For one thing, simply from an artistic or aesthetic point of view it would have unduly cluttered the icon to try to squeeze more than a hundred figures into it. More significantly, however, is the fact that the twelve figures seated in this icon were never intended to represent simply "the Twelve" whom we regularly hear about in the Gospels. Four of them are holding books—most obviously in this small photocopy the one second from the top on the left, who is holding a red codex—and these represent the four Evangelists, of whom Mark and Luke were certainly not part of the original Twelve.

Still more tellingly, the topmost figure on the right represents St. Paul. It is totally anachronistic to include him at the first Christian Pentecost, for at that time he was still a Pharisee who, in the coming decade, would be strenuously hunting out Christians and bringing them back to Jerusalem in chains. But if it is historically false to include Paul in that scene of the

descent of the Holy Spirit, it is theologically absolutely correct, for if there is anyone who was truly Spirit-filled, it was surely the Apostle to the Gentiles, the one who wrote to the Romans that “the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:16) and to the Corinthians that they themselves were his letter, “written not in ink but by the Spirit of the living God” (2 Corinthians 3:3). All of this is the iconographer’s way of showing that at this first Christian Pentecost there was fulfilled what God had spoken of old through the prophet Joel: “I will pour out my spirit upon all mankind. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. Even upon the servants and the handmaids I will pour out my spirit in those days” (Joel 3:1-2).

You also see at the top of the icon the segment of a circle, the circle going beyond the edge of the panel so as to symbolize the transcendence of heaven. From that heavenly circle there descend rays or tongues of fire onto each of the seated figures, that is, onto *all* those who in the early Church went forth in the power of the Spirit to proclaim the Good News. But what of the recipients of their preaching? This brings us to the strange figure at the bottom of the icon. In the most ancient manuscripts, this dark space was filled with a crowd of persons, the multitude of hearers “from every nation under heaven” mentioned in our reading, but this made the scene in those earliest icons too busy and cluttered. For this reason, the iconographers soon replaced the crowd with this one symbolic figure, who in some icons bears the inscription *Cosmos*, literally “the whole world,” even as we hear in the Book of Wisdom: “The Spirit of the Lord fills the whole world” (Wis. 1:7). However, I dare say none of us could figure out all the symbolism of that mysterious figure without the help of experts in the history of iconography. Here’s an explanation from a seventeenth-century Russian author:

Why at the descent of the Holy Spirit is there shown a man [standing] in a dark place, bowed down with years, dressed in a red garment with a royal crown on his head, and in his hands a white cloth containing twelve written scrolls? The man [stands] in a dark place because the whole world had formerly been without faith. He is bowed down with years, for he was made old by the sin of Adam. His red garment signifies the devil’s blood-sacrifices. The royal crown signifies sin, which ruled in the world. The white cloth in his hands with the twelve scrolls means the twelve Apostles, who brought light to the whole world with their teaching.”¹

We can now begin to sense the magnificent teaching of this Pentecost icon. There is just one final point I would like to make about how it and a multitude of similar ones so well illustrate the scriptural account of the descent of the Holy Spirit. Note how the seated figures are all quite different from one another: their heads are turned in various directions, their gestures are different, their clothing is varied in color. Each is distinct, and this brings out in a graphic way what St. Paul says in today’s second reading about there being “different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; different forms of service but the same Lord; different workings but the

same God who produces all of them in everyone, [for] to each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit” (1 Cor. 12:4-7). This is actually a very consoling truth. No one of us can do everything, but each one of us has certain gifts, certain strengths, and we are called to use them in appropriate ways for building up the kingdom of God. Anyone’s individual contribution may not mean all that much by itself, but together we—and all the members of the Church—can do great good if only we are responsive to the workings of the Spirit who has been given to each of us, first at our baptism but also at every celebration of the Eucharist. As we pray in one of the Eucharistic prayers, “grant that we, who are nourished by the Body and Blood of your Son and filled with his Holy Spirit, may become one body, one spirit in Christ.” May our reception of the Eucharist today deepen this unity that we already enjoy and lead us to want to bring others to it as well.

Abbot James

Wiseman

¹ Quoted in Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983), 208.