

PENTECOST, 2013

For the most part, we live in a part of the country that is spared extremes in weather. The full force of hurricanes is not felt this far inland, we seldom have mammoth blizzards, and even though summer heat can be oppressive, we are regularly spared the triple-digit temperatures that are common in cities like Phoenix and Dallas. There are, however, occasional tornadoes, two of which have done extensive damage in nearby La Plata, Maryland. What's especially dangerous about such storms is that about 40% of them occur at night, when many people have already gone to bed and so are unaware of warnings broadcast on radio or television. The survivor of one later wrote: "The only thing more frightening than the sight and sound of a tornado approaching is one that strikes while you're asleep.... Nocturnal tornadoes, as they are called, are like nightmares that have come to life."¹ This kind of fierce wind, striking suddenly and without warning, is utterly destructive.

Something of the same unexpected suddenness occurred on the first Christian Pentecost. As St. Luke tells us in our first reading today, "When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were" (Acts 2:1-2). The huge difference, of course, is that here was not something destructive but life-giving, not something to be feared but to be welcomed, just as the Spirit always is in the New Testament. At Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended upon him and a voice from heaven declared him to be the Father's beloved Son on whom his favor rested. Then, after his forty days in the desert, the evangelists tell us that Jesus returned to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit" (Lk 4:14), and shortly thereafter he began his public ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth by applying to

himself words from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor” (Lk 4:18).

Just as Jesus preached glad tidings in the power of the Spirit that was upon him, his first disciples proclaimed the Good News under the same impulse. St. Peter’s very first sermon applied to himself and his fellow disciples what had centuries earlier been voiced by the prophet Joel: “It will come to pass in the last days, God declares, that I will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh. Yours sons and daughters shall prophesy ...” (Acts 2:17). When Peter had finished preaching and the people asked him what they were then to do, he assured them that if they repented and were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, they would receive the gift of the same Spirit. Some days later, at the time of his first arrest, Peter replied to his interrogators boldly, “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 4:8), and when he and John were released and returned to their own people, Luke writes that as they all prayed, “the place where they were gathered shook, and they were all filled with the holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31).

It would be easy to point out the many other references to the Holy Spirit in Luke’s account of the history of the early Church. There’s no need to do that, but the key point to recognize is how very often—indeed, almost exclusively—these references are made in the context of proclaiming the Gospel to all peoples. But let us never forget that it was not merely the early disciples who were gifted with the Holy Spirit. Each member of the Church has received the same Spirit, which is perhaps the principal reason why we can rightly say that the Church is, by its very nature, missionary—by its very nature is called to go out to all the nations. I therefore want to reflect this morning on the missionary nature of the Church and what this means for each one of us.

When we hear the noun “missionary,” we almost inevitably think first of all of men and women associated with groups like Maryknoll or the Columban Fathers, whose members have gone to almost every part of the world planting the seed of the Gospel. Their dedication and heroism are legendary, but in recent times they themselves have come to recognize that some of their original ways of evangelization were too dismissive of the religious beliefs and practices of the people to whom they had been sent. I recently finished directing an excellent doctoral dissertation written by a priest from Kenya, a member of the Luo people, who live mostly in the western part of that country and in the neighboring areas of Uganda. Although his dissertation was characterized by academic rigor, it was obvious that he wrote with deep feeling about the way in which earlier missionaries to his ancestors had simply replaced African religious symbols with ones they had brought with them from Europe. By cutting the Luo people off from their traditional objects and symbols of faith, from the rites and customs that had given them a solid background for a firm belief in God, a religious vacuum was created that made it difficult for these people to experience God’s presence and providence. The prominent South African, Anglican archbishop Desmond Tutu made the same point when he once wrote that “the African religious experience and heritage were not illusory, and they should have formed the vehicle for conveying the gospel ... to Africa.... [We] had a genuine knowledge of God and ... our own ways of communicating with [God], ways which meant we were abler to speak authentically as ourselves and not as pale imitators of others.”²

Nowadays, foreign missionaries are generally well aware of this truth and consequently try to build upon what is already positive in the religious beliefs and practices of the people to whom they are sent. As Pope John Paul II wrote in his great encyclical on missionary activity, *Redemptoris Missio*, “the Spirit’s presence and activity affect not only individuals but also

society and history, peoples, cultures, and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history.”³ For us, who may not be going to other countries to proclaim the Gospel but who are nevertheless called to participate in the essentially missionary nature of the Church, the same principles apply.

There are plenty of persons with whom we live and work who know little or nothing of the joy and peace and grandeur that can come from living an authentic Christian way of life, but the way to bring them to some awareness of this is certainly not by assuming or implying that everything about their present way of life is purely and simply wrong. Pope Francis has given us some helpful pointers in this regard through things that he said while still archbishop of Buenos Aires and that are now becoming widely available in English translation. As regards his meetings with atheists, for example, he had this to say:

When I speak with atheists, I will sometimes discuss social concerns, but I do not propose the problem of God as a starting point, except in the case that they [bring it up]. If this occurs, I tell them why I believe. But that which is human is so rich to share, and to work at that [level] ... we can mutually complement our richness.... I do not approach the relationship in order to proselytize or to convert the atheist. I respect him and I show myself as I am. Where there is knowledge, there begins to appear esteem, affection, and friendship. I do not have any type of reluctance, nor would I say that his life is condemned, because I am convinced that I do not have the right to make a judgment about the honesty of that person, even less if he shows me those human virtues that exalt others and do me good.⁴

It should not surprise us that this approach has received an appreciative welcome on the part of non-believers, one of whom recently wrote: “I do believe the pontiff to be a genuine man when it comes to taking care of the poor, and perhaps we will see an increased interest in combating poverty from the Catholic Church.... I believe that Catholics and atheists can work together, just as all of humanity can work together towards equality and justice when we put the needs of modern people first ...”⁵ In the power of the life-giving Spirit who was breathed upon us at the time of our baptism and who is called down to transform and vivify the bread and wine at each celebration of the Eucharist, may we put the needs of all our brothers and sisters first, serving them with generosity and good will in whatever ways we can.

¹ Becky Kellogg, “Night Tornadoes Particularly Deadly,” http://www.weather.com/outlook/weather-news/news/articles/nocturnal-tornadoes_2011-04-04 (accessed May 14, 2013).

² Desmond Tutu, “Whither African Theology,” in Edward Fasholé-Luke et al., eds., *Christianity in Independent Africa* (London: Rex Collins, 1978), 364.

³ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 28.

⁴ Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Abraham Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth*, trans. Alejandro Bermudez and Howard Goodman (New York: Random House, Image Books, 2013), 12-13.

⁵ Luis Ruuska, “Why This Atheist Has a New Hope in Pope Francis,” www.huffingtonpost.com/luis-ruuska/pope-francis-b_2917860.html (accessed May 15, 2013).