

The Birthday of the Church

- *Pentecost Sunday*
- *May 19, 2013*
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Today is the birthday of the Church. It is on Pentecost that the Holy Spirit came upon the first men and women who followed Jesus, made them a community, infused in them as it were a soul which made them the People of God. They were called and inspired to be one, a body with many different members, functions, and gifts with Christ as the head. Today at Pentecost the Spirit brought the Church alive. As I calculate it, this is her 1,980th birthday, so there are many candles on her birthday cake!

The age of the Church calls to mind a somewhat humorous or scandalous image of the Church which was uttered by a Jesuit when many of us were gathered to discuss among us how we could grow as “leaders in the Church”. This Jesuit, in an unguarded moment, said to the group, “It is fine and dandy to talk about leadership in the Church, but what we are all avoiding saying is that grandma just fell out of bed upstairs!” That was twenty years ago. Grandma seems to be a tough old gal and capable of many tumbles. Leaving this aside for now, maybe the birthday of the Church is a good day to make an accounting of how she is doing.

First of all I’d like to invite four persons to her party, the four great parts of the Church. I remember reading an article on the back page of the London Times during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity back in about 1981. I can remember exactly where I was standing, so much did this article inspire me. It was called “The Great Church”. It’s point was that there are four essential dimensions of the Church which are each most deeply held by one of the four great divisions of the Church, that these four dimensions belong to one another, and that only the combination of all four constitutes the Great Church. The Orthodox tradition has the greatest sense of mystical depth of the Body of Christ; the Protestant churches have a profound rootedness in and faithfulness to scripture; the Roman Catholic Church has a unity of structure and a sacramental fullness; and the Anglican tradition offers an open and free forum for the discussion and debate of ideas. The author’s point was that no one tradition, as it were, can specialize in all four, that each is unique, that they all are part of the Christian tradition, that they belong together, and that only when all four are honored and joined do we have The Great Church.

What I make of this is that in taking stock of the Church on its birthday we need to celebrate the great Church, not just the one billion Roman Catholics, but the more than 2 billion Christians whom the Spirit first brought alive on the first Pentecost and continues to inspire and of whom she is the soul today. I can’t imagine that our divisions are God’s providence, yet I also can’t help but believe that the mining of the deep vein of gold in each tradition is providential and is meant as a gift for the whole Body of Christ. Perhaps, to change the metaphor, we can see the Christian Church as originally one great river—although as we know it was never perfectly unified—which divided, forked, not one part so much breaking off from another, but going along

different channels, so that the one great river now spreads out over several streams and irrigates a wider land among its streams. I believe that, though the ecumenical movement has not brought the churches together structurally, the Spirit has in these years brought more of the gifts of the other parts to each part. For instance, our Roman Catholic Church today has a greater mystical spirituality, a greater groundedness in scripture, and more of an open and free discussion and debate of ideas among the people themselves than it did before. Perhaps the Spirit of Pentecost is working ecumenism in an unexpected way. The Spirit can be expected to be unexpected!

On her birthday it is worthwhile noting that the business of the languages of the first Pentecost under the inspiration of the Spirit is still going on. No one there spoke English, French, Tagalog, Spanish, German, Chinese, Somali, Vietnamese, Russian, etc., but today all the languages of the world have been picked up by the Spirit to spread the Good News and to unite Christian people from all nations and languages. The people on that rooftop would have been more surprised by this diffusion in all these languages than the people below were surprised to understand the rooftopers in their own language. I'd love to watch the reaction of the apostles to any Mass in Africa today bursting and prolonged by singing, dancing, music, and joyful expression. This spirit animating the Christian People of God is more powerful and more evident—not less—than on that first day. Not only do we celebrate the birthday of The Great Church, we also celebrate the birthday of the Whole Church, the Church of the Nations, which from the beginning God had promised in his covenant with the Jewish peoples that they would be a “light to the nations”.

Perhaps on her birthday we should note that the Church is somewhat arthritic —though out of love I don't think we would dwell on it. We know that, we can say that, we can be angry about it and hope for healing. Certainly this is what is behind all of our unrealistic hopes and expectations placed on Pope Francis, an awareness of a much loved but also arthritic Church. You can't really expect that your arthritic grandmother will be healed, but we can indeed hope and expect that the Church will be healed, for the Spirit in the Church can and has ever made new the People of God, is herself a principle of rebirth and renewal in every age. It simply is not the Church ensouled by the Spirit if it is not repeatedly reborn, renewed, made young and vibrant again and again, through baptism, confirmation, reconciliation, Eucharist, marrying, ordaining, anointing and the compassionate and just service of others which flows from these, through what we are doing.

If we do think of grandma falling out of bed upstairs, it's good for us to take note of it, to say it, and to help her kindly. It's also good to realize that if it were not for grandma upstairs, we would not be either downstairs, nor even just plain be at all. Perhaps it's time to bring grandma downstairs among the people, all the people, especially the poor people. Maybe the best expression of this is what Cardinal Bergoglio said to the Cardinals a few days before he was elected as pope by them:

“When the Church does not come out from itself to evangelize, it becomes self-referential and gets sick (one thinks of the woman hunched over upon herself in the Gospel). The evils that, in the passing of time, afflict the ecclesiastical institutions have a root in self-referentiality, in a sort of theological narcissism. In Revelation, Jesus says that he is standing at the threshold and calling. Evidently the text refers to the fact that he stands outside the door and knocks to enter... But at times I think that Jesus may be knocking

from the inside, that we may let him out. The self-referential Church presumes to keep Jesus Christ within itself and not let him out.

That sounds like the Spirit to me, that sounds like new life, that sounds like the Christ we celebrate in this Mass, this Missa Est, this sending forth. That's a very good way to conclude the Church's birthday party by letting the candles burn of the great, whole, and elderly Church but still making a wish and deepening it with prayer and never giving up hope.