

Pentecost Sunday
Homily – May 23, 2010

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Davison, Michigan

Have you noticed how fascinated we are with fire? Little children say they want to grow up to be firefighters. On a winter's evening, we like building a fire, not just for the warmth but for the chance to watch it do its work. On a summer's evening in the woods, we enjoy gathering around a campfire, not for the warmth but for the sheer pleasure of being near it. Fire fascinates us.

Today is Pentecost, the day of the sacred fire.

And the disciples of Jesus were all in one place together. Suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.

It was nothing less than the power of the living God, the Holy Spirit, coming into the midst of the followers of Jesus.

Peter, the apostle who denied that he even knew Jesus on the night of his Master's arrest, took his stand and preached a sermon so convincing that three thousand people were converted to the cause of Christ.

These were the events of the day of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church of Jesus Christ. It is the day God entrusted the tending of the sacred fire of the Gospel to his people. The fire burned brightly in Jerusalem that day.

But it was not God's intent for his sacred fire to stay there. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the followers of Christ spread the fire to the whole world. The apostles tended the fire carefully and passed it to those who were not apostles. The first generation passed it to the second generation. The second generation passed it to the third and then to the fourth. Down through the centuries, the flames of faith burned brightly. The Christian faith gained and its ranks grew because people who were attracted to the sacred fire had their lives changed.

When people were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, they came to know the peace that passes all understanding. The followers of Jesus were known to demonstrate enormous courage under duress. Roman authorities tried to stamp out the Church by persecuting those who claimed Christ as Savior. When Christians were torn apart by wild animals in Roman arenas for the entertainment of the emperor and faced their deaths so courageously, others were attracted to the faith rather than repulsed by it.

See how they love one another. The Church gained in membership because people treated one another differently. Their commitment to Jesus translated into the religious duty of caring for the sick and the dying. Those who kept the sacred fire founded hospitals and orphanages and schools and reached out to the poorest of the poor.

People noticed how the Christian faith could turn a person's life around, how the faith moved people to treat one another in love, how Christians seemed to be motivated to get involved making a difference in the world, how people in the Church of Jesus seemed to demand the best of themselves and the world around them. Uncounted millions were attracted when the sacred fire burned brightly in the Church of Jesus Christ.

At other times, the sacred fire was reduced to a glowing ember of what should have been. There have always been those who get the message twisted. Unfortunately, not everything done in the name of Christ or his Church has been just, beneficial or even moral. Yet in every generation there have been committed people—saints of the Church—who faithfully tend the sacred fire of the good news of what God did (and continues to do in Jesus) through the fire of the Holy Spirit.

And now the sacred fire has been handed down to us. We must tend it carefully and prepare to hand it to those who will follow. The task is probably no greater for us than for any other generation. But we cannot take the future of our congregation for granted. Enormous challenges confront Christ's Church today. All around us we see the trivializing of religion in general and Christianity in particular. In America religious faith is treated as if it was nothing more than some sort of an optional hobby. As a nation we seem to have forgotten strong religious institutions are necessary safeguards against the intrusive power of the state into our lives.

A case can be made that the flames of the sacred fire do not burn as brightly as they did in the 1950s. And this is happening at a time when our nation faces a serious spiritual crisis. We see the symptoms all around us. We think the problem has to do with education; but it is a spiritual crisis that is at the root of schools graduating students who cannot read. It is a spiritual crisis, not a sociological phenomenon, which is at the root of families falling apart because lasting, respectful relationships between husband and wife, between parents and children are not maintained. And it certainly is a spiritual crisis when in a culture of death the most precious gift of life within the womb is not guaranteed the right to life. As the Church, we need to address the crisis of the human spirit with the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We are tenders of the sacred fire of faith. We need to continue to build a community of faith here which is concerned with reaching out to the vulnerable in this city, in this country, in this world. We need to experience the presence of God. As we grow in membership, we need to strive not so much for uniformity but for a unity amidst the diversity of three thousand eighteen families.

See how they love one another. Fellowship has always been essential to the practice of our faith. We will also do that in the hearing of the word of God, in the study of the Scriptures, in the preaching of the Word, in the hearing of sacred music, in the breaking of the bread, in the formation of our children and youth, and in the care of our elderly. In these ways, people have always caught the fire of faith.

On this Pentecost Sunday, we give thanks for those who have tended the sacred fire and have passed it down through the generations to us. It is also the time for us to pray for the continued presence of the Holy Spirit that we will have the strength and courage to tend this fire and pass it to the next generation.

