

Pentecost “The Awe, Wonder and Danger”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Today we celebrate Pentecost! The symbol for the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles is fire which is why I get to wear red today. The only other times I get to wear red during the liturgical year is on Passion Sunday, Good Friday and the feast days of martyrs. You see red is also the color reminding us of the witness of the martyrs. This is also why cardinals wear red vestments. There is a tension with the color red in the liturgical life of the Church. Red represents the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, a pleasant thing to think about. Red also represents the blood of the martyrs, somewhat unpleasant albeit important.

You also see this tension in the final gift of the Holy Spirit. It is translated two different ways. One list says wonder and awe, and the other list describes this gift as fear of the Lord. I want to talk about both of these today. Stay with me! When you place side by side the words wonder and fear, at first glance they don't seem to belong in the same sentence. On the other hand, I don't think it is possible to experience the sensation of “wonder” without simultaneously being present also an element of “danger”.

What do I mean by this? When we look at the stars at night and see how big the universe is we also simultaneously recognize how very small and fragile we are. With every birthday and anniversary we celebrate rightly, if for only because we have made it this far. It is impossible to experience a true sense of “wonder” in life without simultaneously being present somewhere an element of “danger”.

I think about this when I am camping, especially when I am enjoying my campfire. Sometimes, late in the evening, I will begin to ponder my relationship to the fire as I am sitting there. It is what theologians and philosophers do. We are an odd lot. You see, if I sit at the right distance to the fire I will be warm. If I got too close, my shoes will begin to melt, if you are absent minded your clothes could catch on fire. When you are sitting next to a campfire, wonder is mixed with danger, especially if you like playing with gasoline. Life is like that.

I think parents probably know this truth best of all. When a baby is born into the family, how can you not have moments of wonder and awe, marveling at the miracle of life? On the other hand, how can you not have moments of healthy fear and a respect for the dangers surrounding caring for a baby? Discipleship is like that.

Pentecost is a beautiful and wonderful feast day celebrating the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus' disciples. The obstacle of language barriers is overcome by the common vocabulary of faith. We celebrate the birthday of the universal Church and the culmination of the Easter Season. It is a happy day! Pentecost is also a dangerous day. Just like the disciples were transformed by tongues of fire, we are called to be transformed as well. We are called to give

witness as well. Translate the word witness into Greek and you get the word martyr. Ask the Christians in Middle East about that.

I think this is an important insight because too many Catholics have bought into what I believe Fr. Groeschel called the big lie. What is the big lie? The big lie is this: if I do everything the bible tells me to do, if I live my life so to be the best Christian possible, God will protect me and my family from disaster. Neither I nor my family nor my friends will have any accident, diagnosis, or even acne. This is because I am doing everything God has asked me to do. Why is this “the big lie”?

This is the big lie because nowhere in the bible does Jesus promise that if we are good disciples our lives will be easy. Yes, Jesus does promise his disciples everlasting life. The road to eternity however is by way of the cross and we all have a cross to carry. Being a disciple of Jesus is wonderful. Being a disciple of Jesus can be dangerous. This is because a relationship with the Lord includes expectations on how we live our lives.

A playful example of a dangerous activity could be to dedicate some time this week with your family, taking two minutes each some evening to share what you love about the others, no criticisms, just a time to share love with each other. It’s dangerous because we make ourselves vulnerable. It’s worthwhile because it helps strengthen our relationships, giving the Holy Spirit a window to bless us with grace.

Here is another dangerous activity. You know that friend, neighbor or family member who hasn’t been to Church in a while? Invite them to join you next Sunday here at mass. You might be afraid to do this because they might say no. This activity is wonderful because, they might say yes or, at the very least, you might be planting a seed. And then you will be participating in what this feast day of Pentecost is really about, the transformation of the world into the Body of Christ, one soul at a time.

Another great activity this week: let’s grow in the gifts of the Holy Spirit that we have been sealed with in the Sacrament of Confirmation. They are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord, also called wonder and awe. When we lead our lives by the gifts of the Holy Spirit our lives will produce the fruits of the Holy Spirit. They are charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, longanimity (which basically means living life in context to the big picture), mildness, faith, and finally, modesty, continency, and chastity. When we champion these virtues in the culture in which we live we run the real danger of being mocked, and so there is danger. But we know, as witnesses of the Gospel, how beneficial these virtues are for healthy and holy relationships and this brings us hope and joy.

When we live by the Spirit, our lives shine helping those around us grow closer to Christ. We are a warm fire to stand by during the coldest nights. Living in the grace of the Holy Spirit helps us through life’s challenges, helps us learn from life’s challenges, and helps us grow in our capacity to love God and people around us in way we wouldn’t otherwise.

You see, the perspective from heaven is, everything in this life is just a preparation for everlasting life. That is the destination. The Holy Spirit helps us on this journey, which is at times a perilous one. This is why when it comes to discipleship we shouldn't be complacent. Back to the campground, when you step out of your tent at night and view the billions of stars in the sky, you can't help but remember how small, finite and fragile we are. We are reminded that God is God and we are not, and that brings with it a healthy sense of fear reminding us of how dependent we are to God. We thankfully have cause to rejoice in these moments however. God has welcomed us into his life through a relationship with his Son Jesus Christ. The Father and the Son have sent us the Holy Spirit so that we may embrace the Gospel to the fullest. With a healthy sense of fear that recognizes the precious little time we have in this life, we now have the grace to grow into the person God intended us to be, aided by the gifts of faith, hope and love, and no short measure of wonder and awe.