

PENTECOST SUNDAY

15th May 2016

“The spirit of the Lord hath filled the whole world.”

– *Wisdom 1:7.*



The description in the book of Genesis of the creation of the first man shows us that God first prepared Adam’s body and then made him a living person: “the Lord God formed man of the slime of the earth: and breathed into his face the breath of life, and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7). It is precisely our soul that gives us life and makes us persons rather than corpses or animals. Something similar happened with the creation of the Church. Pentecost is not really a day when the Church sprang suddenly into being, but the day the Church was *promulgated*, or sent out into the world. Christ our Lord had already begun preparing his Church when he chose and instructed his Apostles; he established her in his own blood on Calvary, and the Fathers of the Church say that the Church was born from the side of the sleeping Christ, just as Eve was born from the side of the sleeping Adam. But just as God breathed life into Adam’s body to make him a living person, likewise on this great feast of Pentecost, God breathed life into his Church. In other words, He sent the Holy Spirit to be the soul of the Church.

This is why in the Creed we profess our adherence to the Church immediately after professing our faith in the Holy Spirit: “I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints.” As St. Thomas Aquinas notes: “We see that in a man there are one soul and one body; and of his body there are many members. So also the Catholic Church is one body and has different members. The soul which animates this body is the Holy Spirit” (*Commentary on Apostles’ Creed*, article 9). As you know, Saint Paul in his letters loved to remind the early Christians that the Church is the Body of Christ: an organised union between members and head. And just as Our Lord Jesus Christ is the head of his Body the Church, so the Holy Spirit is like the soul or the hidden heart of this Church.

The Church is a Body because, like a body, she is a *visible* union. So often Our Lord used visible images to explain his Church: a field, a kingdom, a city on a hill. The Church is certainly not just an invisible or purely spiritual reality. And just as we can recognise a body by the bits that make it up, likewise it is possible to define the body of the Church in terms of its members. Our visible union with the Church is established by three objective facts: the sacrament of baptism, our outward profession of the Catholic faith, and maintaining communion with the visible hierarchy of the Church, notably the pope. But this external reality is only part of the picture: this mystical Body which we call the Church is a living Body. The Holy Spirit, sent by Our Lord the day of Pentecost, gives life to this

Body. The Holy Spirit does for the Church everything the soul does for the body.

First of all, it is our soul that gives unity to our body. And so the Holy Spirit – by his grace and by the assistance he gives to the Church in passing the faith on to us – gives union to the Church. After Pentecost, according to the book of Acts, “the multitude of believers had but one heart and one soul” (Acts 4:32). The soul is also the source of the body’s activities: philosophers say that the soul is the source of movement of any living being. And this is what the Holy Spirit does for the Church. Saint Augustine puts it like this: “The functions are diverse; the life is common. And such is God’s Church: in some saints she performs miracles; in others she preaches the truth; in certain saints she practices virginity, while conjugal chastity is kept in others. Each has its proper task, but all equally possess life. And that which the soul is to the body in a man, the Holy Spirit is to the Body of Christ, which is the Church. The Holy Spirit does in the entire Church what the soul does in all the members of the body” (*Sermon 267*). Finally, the body itself exists for the sake of the soul. The reason the Church exists – the reason for her authority to teach and govern, the reason for her outward marks that allow people to recognise her – the reason for all this is so that the grace of the Holy Spirit can be given to us and make us saints.

Writers sometimes use sloppy, imprecise language and say things like, “some people are members of the body of the Church some people are members of the soul of the Church,” as if these two realities could be separated. Expressions like that suffer from an unfortunate mixing of analogies, because one can indeed be a member of a body, since a body has parts, but no one can really be a member of a soul, since a soul is an invisible, spiritual reality that does not really have parts as such. Indeed, it would be misleading to separate the concepts of the body and soul of the Church in such a way that would lead us to thinking of two parallel realities, a visible hierarchical Church and an invisible spiritual one. That is why it is important for us to understand that the Holy Spirit himself is the soul of the Church: the Church is a living Body and it is the Holy Spirit that gives it this life. As Saint Paul says very bluntly: “One body and one Spirit” (Ephesians 4:4).

Understanding that we are members of a Body whose soul is the Holy Spirit himself gives us great reason to rejoice on this feast of Pentecost. It also gives us every reason to be faithful and to live our life to the full. Some breeds of dog, for some reason, are thought to be more attractive when they have a stub tail. So when they are very young, their tails are tied so tightly that they fall off, once the blood supply has been completely cut off. A member that has been cut off from a body no longer receives the life of the body. It is in the same thing in the Church. There is such a thing as a *dead* member: that is what we become if we commit a mortal sin. That is why confession is so important. A dead member remains a member of the Church as long as he continues to profess the faith and to remain in union with the visible Church, and he does receive many actual

graces, which God sends to bring him back to the state of grace. But the longer this sad, dead state goes on, the weaker we become. If we let the stream of grace dry up altogether, the dead member falls off: perhaps through apostasy in this life, but in any case through what Scripture calls “the second death” (Apocalypse 21:8) in the next. So, on this day of Pentecost, let’s make the resolution to take full advantage of the life we receive today. Young and older, married and single, clergy, religious or laity, each one of us can become the saint the Holy Spirit wants us to become. “Thou shalt send forth thy spirit, and they shall be created: and thou shalt renew the face of the earth” (Psalm 103:30).