

## **THE SPIRIT AT WORK: PENTECOST SUNDAY B**

For this Pentecost Sunday let me start with a true story about how strongly the Holy Spirit works for good outcomes in human situations. The story comes from Northern Ireland (with thanks to Paul O'Reilly SJ for its core).

Northern Ireland is a particularly beautiful scenic place. But until recently it was a nation at war between two groups of people, Catholics and Protestants, divided along ethnic, social, cultural and religious lines. But after more than 40 plus years of violence, murder, injury, pain and suffering, peace has at last come to places where people simply did not expect to see any outbreak of peace in their lifetimes.

How and why has peace been happening? Because the Holy Spirit of God has been at work. The long and drawn-out peace process has been the work of the Spirit. Slowly and tentatively – two steps forward and one step back – this peace process has gradually been replacing what people there have called 'the Troubles'.

It seems, looking back, that there was one decisive turning point when the cycle and spiral of violence came to a sudden full stop. It was when a bomb exploded on Remembrance Day, November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1987, in the small town of Enniskillen (population about 10,000 persons). 12 people were killed and 72 were injured. Among those killed was a young woman called Marie Wilson. It was her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Some birthday present! Her last dying words to her father, Gordon Wilson, the Methodist minister of the town, were these: 'Daddy, I love you very much.'

An hour after the blast the BBC interviewed him. The journalist asked how he felt about the people who had just blown his daughter to bits on her birthday. Without a moment's hesitation Gordon answered: 'Of course I forgive them. I only hope that her Spirit may be with us and bring us to Peace.'

The interview was played on the news that night. It was a moment that touched the nation. Since that moment of faith and forgiveness the momentum towards peace has changed for the better the long, violent and tormented history of Northern Ireland.

That must surely be the work of the Spirit of Pentecost, the Spirit that Jesus let loose among us on the first Pentecost Sunday, the Spirit that breathes where it chooses, the Spirit that will never be snuffed out. That Spirit of God keeps on overcoming resistance and breaking down barriers.

Here in Australia, the Catholic Church has begun today the countdown to a very vital and promising event, scheduled to take place in 2020. It's called 'the Plenary Council'. It will be an assembly of the whole Catholic Church of Australia. It will engage the entire People of God, by means of its representatives. It will involve a comprehensive process of deeply listening to one another, of seeing, feeling, judging and acting together, and all this for the sake of a complete review, renewal and reform of the Church's mission, outreach, structures and workings. The Holy Spirit present to the gathered Council can shine a spotlight on everything to do with the Church - the good, the bad, the ugly and the beautiful.

Surely, this planned Plenary Council cannot succeed and will not succeed without the powerful presence and action of the Holy Spirit, who is the love of God at work within us and among us, the love that empowers us to listen to one another, understand one another and work together for the good of the whole Church. It will be concerned with every group and every individual within the Church, and especially, one hopes, with the poorest, the last and the least, those particularly dear to the heart of Jesus.

That wise international Jesuit scholar, Gerald O'Collins, has said so well: 'What we DO with the Church depends upon what we THINK about Jesus.' So, in short, the Plenary Council 2020 will focus most of all on discerning, discovering, and applying the dream of Jesus for his Church in Australia.

So let us pray today and every day, and over and over again, to the powerful Spirit of God that can overcome all resistance and break down every barrier: 'Come Holy Spirit! Be for us the love of God at work, the love that "changes everything" and everyone. Create among us all a new, ongoing, and lasting Pentecost!'

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