

**“If thou take thy grace away,/ nothing pure in man will stay;/all his good is turned to ill.”**

***Veni, Sancte Spiritus***  
***(the Sequence for the feast of Pentecost)***

Today’s feast of Pentecost ranks alongside the feasts of Christmas and Easter as one of the three great events of the Christian calendar, and like them has been celebrated with an eight-day octave for at least 1,300 years. The feast of Pentecost marks the tremendous out-pouring of the Holy Spirit upon Our Lady and the Apostles gathered together in prayer (Acts 1:14). With this out-pouring, Our Lord’s promise to send His disciples another Advocate, the Paraclete who would teach them all truth (Jn 16:13), was fulfilled, and the Catholic Church was founded.

The ‘mighty wind’ that filled that Upper Room (Acts 2:2) was the breath of God sent to renew the face of the earth (Ps 103:30), and to give to Christ’s disciples a new birth in the order of grace, making them partakers of the life of God Himself (2 Pet 1:4). On this day the Holy Spirit appeared also as tongues of fire (Acts 2:3): *tongues* because the Apostles were charged with the task of preaching the Word of God (Mt 28:19-20); and *fire* which would burn away the impurities of sin so that a new heart might be created (Ps 50:12) within all those who are born again of water and the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Baptism (Jn 3:5).

Like the feasts of Christmas and Easter, Pentecost gives an immensely rich and multi-layered perspective on the many mysteries of our Catholic Faith. Today, we shall consider just one of the treasures of Pentecost: the cleansing power of the tongues of fire.

First, don’t let today’s feast pass you by as if it were just another ordinary day. Take on board some of the glories of Pentecost and decide, right now, that you *will* pray to the Holy Spirit today and throughout the coming week.

Throughout the Old Testament especially, but in the New Testament also (Mt 3:11-12; Lk 3: 16-17), God tells us that He will purify us as silver and gold are purified, with a heat that will burn away the dross and cleanse us of impurities (eg. Job 23:10; Prov 25:4; Is 1:25). That may not be a comfortable image, but it is used so many times in Sacred Scripture that we cannot easily dismiss the thought if we would be followers of Christ. But what does this mean in practice? What might we do to co-operate with such a cleansing action?

To start with, we need to recognize and accept that our souls need cleansing, for as St John tells us later on in the New Testament, ‘If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us’ (1 Jn 1:8). So the first step to capitalizing on today’s feast is to get to Confession, especially if you haven’t been for a while or if you have got out of the habit of going regularly and frequently. And remember, we are all obliged to fulfil our Easter duties by receiving Holy Communion at least once – and getting to Confession at least once – between Ash Wednesday at the beginning of Lent and Trinity Sunday at the end of Eastertide next weekend.

Next, we do well to pray the Prayer to the Holy Spirit often, and not just at this time of year: ‘Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of thy faithful, and enkindle in them the *fire* of thy love.’ If we combine regular and frequent Confession with this Prayer to the Holy Spirit we will be able to burn away our sinful habits, those persistent habits of anger, or impatience, or bad language, or impurity for example. By concentrating on one bad habit at a time, we can – with a daily Examination of Conscience – begin to chip away at sinful conduct and replace bad habits with good habits, learning to do good and avoid evil (Ps 33:15; 1 Pet 3:11). This is the daily goal of the life of virtue, namely to live each moment as if it were a gift to Almighty God, but for that to happen, each moment must be made *worthy* of being given as a gift to Him!

Then we must persevere in these newly formed good habits, making sure they take root in the rich soil of our souls (Mt 13:23), so that we can go on practising the virtues, and go on living a life that is fit to be presented before the throne of God at the end of our time on earth.

This is what it means to be sanctified: to receive the grace of God into our souls through the Sacraments, and to preserve and nurture that grace through prayer and penance and the practice of the virtues, until we become more conformed to the likeness of Christ (Rom 8:29). But this comes at a cost. We cannot be like Christ unless we are willing to become like Him in *all* things, just as He became like to us in all things except sin (Heb 4:15). We must become sinless, we must crucify our stubborn wills on the cross of penance, and we must practise the virtues, day in and day out. And when we fall, we must pick ourselves up again with the help of God's grace and the power of His merciful forgiveness, for it is only by the power of God's grace that we might become more like to Christ; and it is only by becoming more like to Christ that we might get to heaven (Jn 14:6).

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**Suggested reading on the Holy Spirit and Pentecost:**

- *The Seven Steps to Sanctification: How to Awaken the Gifts of the Holy Spirit Within You* by Walter Farrell and Dominic Hughes
- *The Paraclete: A Manual of Instruction & Devotion* by Marianus Fiege
- *The Holy Spirit in Christian Life* by Pere Gardeil
- *The Gifts of the Holy Ghost* by John of St Thomas
- *The Seven Gifts* by Bernard J. Kelly
- *An Explanation of the Veni Sancte Spiritus* by Nicholas Gihl
- *The Sanctifier* by Luis M. Martinez