

Vigil of the Pentecost and Whitsunday



The Vigil of Pentecost is traditionally a day of fasting. This requirement has been done away with in the most recent Code of Canon Law, but many traditional Catholics fast anyway. The Feast itself -- a day also known as "Whitsunday" -- is considered a sort of "birthday" for the Church and marks the beginning of the week known as Whitsuntide. Vestments on Whitsunday are red, but the name "Whitsunday" comes from "White Sunday" because, at one time, those who entered the Church at Easter would once again wear their white robes today.

Pentecost is the second greatest Feast of the liturgical year -- the first being Easter -- and takes place 50 days (7 weeks) after Easter (the earliest possible date for this Feast is 10 May). This day celebrates the coming of the Holy Ghost upon the disciples and Our Lady and, in a sense, the reversal of the story of the Tower of Babel in that the the Apostles were given the gift of tongues by which they could preach and be understood by anyone in any language -- a demonstration of the Church's true catholicity.

The Christian Pentecost corresponds calendrically to the Pentecost of our Israelite ancestors, a day which came 50 days after Passover. The Old Covenant Pentecost was known as Shavu'ot (also called Hag ha-Bikkurim or "Festival of Weeks"), which is the celebration of Firstlings. ¹ This feast was commanded by God and is recorded by Moses: Leviticus 23:15-22

You shall count therefore from the morrow after the sabbath, wherein you offered the sheaf of the firstfruits, seven full weeks. Even unto the morrow after the seventh week be expired, that is to say, fifty days, and so you shall offer a new sacrifice to the Lord. Out of all your dwellings, two leaves of the firstfruits, of two tenths of flour leavened, which you shall bake

for the firstfruits of the Lord. And you shall offer with the leaves seven lambs without blemish of the first year, and one calf from the herd, and two rams, and they shall be for a holocaust with their libations for a most sweet odour to the Lord. You shall offer also a buck goat for sin, and two lambs of the first year for sacrifices of peace offerings. And when the priest hath lifted them up with the leaves of the firstfruits before the Lord, they shall fall to his use. And you shall call this day most solemn, and most holy. You shall do no servile work therein. It shall be an everlasting ordinance in all your dwellings and generations. And when you reap the corn of your land, you shall not cut it to the very ground: neither shall you gather the ears that remain; but you shall leave them for the poor and for the strangers. I am the Lord your God.

On a deeper level, the Christian Pentecost was prefigured by God's revealing Himself on Mt. Sinai:

Exodus 19:9-11, 16-19

The Lord said to him: Lo, now will I come to thee in the darkness of a cloud, that the people may hear me speaking to thee, and may believe thee for ever. And Moses told the words of the people to the Lord. And he said to him: Go to the people, and sanctify them today, and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments. And let them be ready against the third day: for on the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai...

...And now the third day was come, and the morning appeared: and behold thunders began to be heard, and lightning to flash, and a very thick cloud to cover the mount, and the noise of the trumpet sounded exceeding loud, and the people that was in the camp, feared. And when Moses had brought them forth to meet God from the place of the camp, they stood at the bottom of the mount. And all mount Sinai was on a smoke: because the Lord was come down upon it in fire, and the smoke arose from it as out of a furnace: and all the mount was terrible. And the sound of the trumpet grew by degrees louder and louder, and was drawn out to a greater length: Moses spoke, and God answered him.



When Jesus walked out of His Tomb and before He ascended into Heaven on the 40th day, He promised the coming of the Comforter.

Acts 1:4-5 4

And eating together with them, he commanded them, that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but should wait for the promise of the Father, which you have heard (saith he) by my mouth. For John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost, not many days hence.

As they waited for this promise of the Father to come true, Mary and the disciples prayed a [Novena](#) of prayers, and then the Comforter came on the 50th day, overwhelming Our Lady and the Apostles in a scene that sounds very much like the experience at Mt. Sinai, each with manifestations of fire, wind, and sound:

Acts 2:1-4 1

And when the days of the Pentecost were accomplished, they were all together in one place: And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a mighty wind coming, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them parted tongues as it were of fire, and it sat upon every one of them: And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they began to speak with divers tongues, according as the Holy Ghost gave them to speak.

The Holy Ghost inspired St. Peter to the point where his preaching, on that one day, brought 3,000 souls as among the "firstfruits" to God, a sort of reversal of the effects of the Sinai events:

Exodus 32:26-29

Then standing in the gate of the camp, he said: If any man be on the Lord's side let him join with me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him: And he said to them: Thus saith the Lord God of Israel: Put every man his sword upon his thigh: go, and return from gate to gate through the midst of the camp, and let every man kill his brother, and friend, and neighbour. And the sons of Levi did according to the words of Moses, and there were slain that day about three and twenty thousand men [New American Bible: "three thousand men"]. And Moses said: You have consecrated your hands this day to the Lord, every man in his son and in his brother, that a blessing may be given to you.

His Holiness St. Peter, witnessing the events of the Pentecost, recalling the darkness of Good Friday, and foretelling the coming destruction of Jerusalem forty years hence, saw this as a fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel:

Joel 2:28-32

I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy: your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Moreover upon my servants and handmaids in those days I will pour forth my spirit. And I will shew wonders in heaven; and in earth, blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood: before the great and dreadful day of the Lord doth come. And it shall come to pass, that every one that shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved: for in mount Sion, and in Jerusalem shall be salvation, as the Lord hath said, and in the residue whom the Lord shall call [New American Bible: "There will be those who escape, as the Lord has said, Even among the survivors whom the Lord calls"].

Apologist Jacob Michael ² reminds us of the deeper meanings of St. Peter recalling Joel's words:

The fact that there "shall be those who escape" necessarily implies that there will be those who do not escape; if there is a group identified as "survivors," the necessary corollary is that there will be many who do not survive. But the question is, "survive what?" The answer is in the context of Joel's prophecy - the coming "day of the Lord" in the form of a powerful foreign army (Rome, in this case), which will wreak havoc on the city...

...Remember that Pentecost marked the birth of the Church - and indeed, this is symbolism behind the Lucan report that the Holy Spirit descended, not only upon the apostles, but also upon the Virgin Mary who was with them (cf. Acts 1:14), a kind of recapitulation of the Annunciation scene. There, the Spirit overshadowed Mary in order that the Head of Christ's Mystical Body might be conceived; here, the Spirit descends once again upon Mary in order that the Members of the Mystical Body might be conceived and brought to birth.

But with the birth of the Church, there now existed a great tension: the New Covenant was now in effect, but it stood over against the Old Covenant which was still in functional existence. It would be much easier for later generations, when the duties of the Old Covenant could no longer even be practiced, due to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. But here, at the beginning of the Church, the average Jew faced a very, very difficult decision: to follow this new break-away sect that claimed to be the ministers of a New Covenant from God, or to stay with the priests of the Old Covenant which had been the tradition of the fathers for thousands of years?

The Spirit was given in order to authenticate the messengers of the New Covenant, and to make it clearer to those who might doubt what their next move should be. This very nearly parallels the event that Pentecost celebrated - the giving of the Law, after which a similar dilemma presented itself to the average Israelite: do I follow the majority, including Aaron the high priest, and worship this tangible, visible Golden Calf? Or do I remain in the minority and walk by faith, while Moses is no longer with us or visible to us? Do I follow the visible authority in Aaron here, since he is the high priest, or do I resist?

These are the same kind of questions the Jew of St. Peter's day had to resolve. Do I stick with the majority, my brothers, my parents, my friends, and all of my ancestors by identifying myself with the high priest at Jerusalem, along with all of the visible, tangible signs of the Old Covenant (the temple, the priesthood, the animal sacrifices)? Or do I break away from this visible authority and walk by faith, pledging my allegiance to this no-longer visible Messiah, who has founded an invisible and "spiritual" Jerusalem, with a new priesthood and a new sacrifice?

Such a situation certainly requires an extra outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and especially those gifts of Wisdom, Understanding, Knowledge, Counsel, and Fortitude that would be so necessary in order to leave the ancient Judaic faith of Israel in favor of Christianity. If the Spirit is given here, it is certainly, in a special way, because of the urgent nature of the decision being presented: the count-down to "the day of the Lord" had begun, and time would run out in a mere 40 years.

This takes us back to our own time, and the liturgical year we celebrate. The liturgical cycles are micro-scale models of not only Salvation History, but also natural time. The Feast of Pentecost inaugurates the longest season of the liturgical year, corresponding to the "season" of history that is the Church Age. As the liturgical season of Pentecost winds down, thus bringing to an end the entire liturgical year (which begins over anew with Advent), the Church begins to place the thought of immanent judgment before us - the End of the World, the penultimate "last days," when all men will stand before Christ the Judge.

During today's festivities, remind yourself of where Pentecost leads and consider the commitment God asks of you lest you call down judgment on yourself...

Customs

The "Veni Sancte Spiritus" Sequence at today's Mass, which comes right after the Epistle, includes the words, "Heal our wounds, our strength renew, on our dryness pour thy dew."

From this comes the custom, thought to bring blessings, of walking barefoot through the dew on Whitsunday morning. (Another custom, though one rarely practiced anymore, is "cheese rolling" by which people would race to see who could roll round cheeses downhill the fastest. This is -- or at least was -- done in England and Germany).



The Dove -- the form the Holy Ghost took at Christ's Baptism -- is the primary symbol of the day. In medieval times, there even used to be "Holy Ghost Holes" in the roofs of some churches from which a dove -- real or a model -- would be lowered over the congregation as trumpets sounded or the choir mimicked the sounds of rustling winds. When the dove descended, red rose petals or, incredibly, pieces of burning straw symbolizing the "tongues of flame" in Acts would shower down.

Carrying on the symbolism, doves, the liturgical color red representing the Holy Ghost, the color white representing the white robes of the Catechumens, red and/or white flowers, lots of greenery to symbolize life (the color green represents hope and life and, in Eastern Churches, the Holy Ghost), fire, the number three representing the Theological Virtues given to us by the Holy Ghost, the number seven representing the Gifts of the Holy Ghost, the number 12 representing the Fruits of the Holy Ghost, etc., -- all of these symbols could be incorporated into the day. The columbine flower (see right) has been used to decorate on Pentecost and its octave. The petals of the flowers are dove-shaped, whence comes its name -- after "columba," the Latin word for "dove."



In medieval times, families in many parts of Europe would suspend a carved and painted wooden dove over their dining table. Such a custom could be easily revived for the throughout the Octave of the Pentecost -- and imagine that dining room table covered with a white tablecloth, sprinkled with red rose petals, and with a vase of columbine at its center.

On this day, as on 1 January, a plenary indulgence can be acquired, under the usual conditions, by reciting the "[Veni, Creator Spiritus](#)" (Come, Holy Spirit), a prayer attributed to Rabanus Maurus (A.D. 776-856). It is prayed during the liturgy today.

Footnote:

¹ The original purpose of the Feast of Weeks was changed by the Pharisees. They, and hence, modern Jews celebrate it as the Giving of Torah on Mt. Sinai, or "Hag Matan Torateinu."

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