

Solemnity of Pentecost – May 24, 2026 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham – 5:00pm Saturday & 8:30am Sunday Masses – 965 words

On this feast of Pentecost, we recall the story of the Tower of Babel from the eleventh chapter of the Book of Genesis. This was after the great flood; after the new beginning for the human race. And it said that everyone at that time spoke the same language, and that they contrived to make a name for themselves by building a very great tower with its top in the sky. They made no reference to God in the process: the tower was to honor them – not him. And the consequence of their sin was that they were scattered, and the languages of the earth were confused. Their desire to be godlike apart from God led to the fracturing of their humanity.

Contrast this with the Christian Pentecost event recounted in today's first reading: it said that Jews were gathered to celebrate the feast from every nation under heaven. We can almost hear the cacophony, as we imagine so many people speaking different languages in the same place. Meanwhile, the apostles, together with the Blessed Virgin Mary, were not in a tower built out of pride, but in an upper room, united in humble prayer. The rushing wind and tongues of fire indicated the presence of God. They were then filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit. And then, they went out, and they were able to communicate with all about the mighty acts of God.

From there emerged a new flood and a new humanity. The new flood was in the form of the waters of baptism, which countless people received following upon the preaching of the apostles. And the new humanity was the consequence of the divine life that they received in their souls through baptism, which gave them the power to be lifted up not just to the top of some great tower, but to heaven itself. Pentecost was not a simple reversal of Babel, putting us back to where we were; rather, it transcended it, elevating us to something even greater. Now, all those who submit themselves to God can become truly godlike and have the fullness of humanity.

And the contrast of these two stories really highlights the fundamental choice that looms before us constantly throughout our lives. There is no doubt that we desire to be godlike. That yearning and that potential are hard-wired into who we are; we cannot help ourselves. But the fundamental choice is whether we seek to realize our potential with God's help or apart from it; whether we order our lives in prideful ambition or humble submission. As Saint Augustine put it, "our hearts are restless, until they rest in" God. The gift of the Holy Spirit, which we first receive in baptism, enables us to reach our goal, in spite of the otherwise great differences among us.

I want us to fast-forward through history a bit, though, to see how this dynamic has continued to play out – how it was not limited just to this biblical scene. Let's go forward 1,500 years. How did the great missionaries, who baptized thousands in far-off lands that were so very different than our own, manage to succeed in their work? They arrived in their very different Western dress; they relied on the help of interpreters; they celebrated Mass in Latin, they sang chants from an entirely different musical genre than the local ones; and they were so different in many other ways, too. Yet the faith still spoke to those people. It was the work of the Holy Spirit.

Well, let's go another 500 years beyond that, basically to our time. Just look around. We are preparing to celebrate the 250th anniversary of our very young nation, which has always prided itself on being a "melting pot". Yet our beloved country seems to be more divided than ever. Nevertheless, here we are each week, professing the same faith – yes, the same faith as those people from 500 years ago and those people from 2,000 years ago –, in spite of so many differences. We are from different races, backgrounds, levels of education, economic means, etc. In worldly terms, much divides us, yet here we are, united in humble prayer to get to heaven.

Yes, this is the work of the Holy Spirit, today, too; and thanks be to God, he has inducted us also – through the waters of baptism, and then the other sacraments we have received since – into that new humanity that is able to transcend mundane categories and get us all to where we will find perfect fulfillment and total happiness. No worldly formula can ever explain it, any more than how the missionaries of yore could travel across the world to a culture that was entirely different and somehow unite people in the same Catholic faith there. It is the work of God; those who cooperate with him will ultimately realize their potential of becoming like him.

How fortunate we are to have been chosen by God to receive the gift of baptism; to have been strengthened and nourished with the other sacraments; to be part of his holy Church; to have been helped by the prayers of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Apostles, and all the saints. And what a gift we have received – to have the Holy Spirit himself dwelling in our souls and so putting us on the path to the fulfillment and joy of heaven, of the new Jerusalem. We are bound to give thanks, and we are bound never to take God's gift for granted. On this Pentecost, gathered together in prayer, we beg the Holy Spirit to bring the good work begun in us to completion!