

+ WHITSUNDAY

Pentecost Sunday, May 19th, 2024

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Philip Anderson, Abbot of Clear Creek Abbey
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And there appeared to them parted tongues as if were of fire, and it sat upon every one of them: and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
My very Dear Sons,

The scene of the first Christian Pentecost, as described in the *Book of Acts*, only lasted for a few minutes—perhaps an hour. The historic event was limited in time and space. But the mystery contained in this supernatural occurrence cascades down through the ages and ever renews the Church and the face of the earth.

Over the centuries spiritual tongues of fire have appeared at regular intervals. Our Blessed Father Saint Benedict was one such spiritual tongue of fire. Saint Francis was such a flame, as were Saint Dominic and Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Saint Claire was a beautiful tongue of fiery spirit, as were, indeed, Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa of Avila. These are just a few names of very popular Saints. There are legions of others. The Saints have spoken and continue to speak in our day the wonderful works of God, and their words are fire, not of the destructive sort, but of a kind that gives life. It is a fire that purifies in order to produce fruits of sanctity.

Our Lord seems to like this sort of fire. “I am come to cast fire on the earth; and what will I, but that it be kindled?” (Lk. 12:49) And the Precursor, Saint John the Baptist, confirmed this saying, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Mt. 3:11). Never did words penetrate more deeply into the substance of the human story. We cannot help thinking of that flaming sword, wielded by the cherubim, set in place to guard the earthly Paradise from which our first parents were cast forth, at the very beginning.

But the fire of Pentecost is a particular sort of fire, a fire that is in the figure of a tongue. What tie is there between this fire and tongues? A fire that is a tongue of fire is a fire that expresses something, a fire that has a meaning, a spiritual fire. Tongues are used for speech, which is the principal means for a man to express himself. Associated with the first Christian Pentecost is the *gift* of tongues, whereby the Apostles were instantly able to speak the praises of God in such a way that men of all nations were able to understand them. Saint Paul says much about the spiritual gift of tongues, emphasizing that this gift is of little use, where there is no one to interpret the message. It is all about expressing something, revealing something useful for human beings and for their salvation.

These tongues of fire, of spiritual fire, also serve to purify, as fire purifies gold in the crucible. Those human flames that were the great Saints were very pure souls, who radiated purity and brought others to purer life. Having purified their own souls—so to speak, although this was as much and more the effect of Divine grace—they were able in turn to transmit that purity, that is to say spiritual soundness, wholeness, cleanness, to many

others. We need but think of the absolute purity and modesty of Our Lady. The Fathers of the Church sometimes point to the fact that the tongue of dogs—especially those who licked the wounds of poor Lazarus—have the power to purify, to heal. How much better holy tongues of spiritual grace!

The principal aspect of the spiritual tongue of fire, however, is charity, Theological love, a supreme love which Saint Paul calls the “link of perfection.” The angelic order of the seraphim is one aflame with the highest love of God. At Pentecost a certain fullness of Divine love descended upon the Apostles and Disciples, engulfing them in the flames of holy love and giving them the courage to go out and win the entire world for Christ and for His Kingdom. But this charity had to speak in order to evangelize. It had to be a tongue for the purpose set forth by Divine Providence, that of heralding the Kingdom of Divine Love.

Where are the living flames of Divine charity today? Where are the Saints? The Good News of the Gospel is being proclaimed on a wider scale than ever before in the History of the Church. The text is out and available on your hand-held device. Countless volumes of the Church’s catechism have been put in print and made available in every region of the world. And yet in our land, as in Europe and many places of long-standing Christian culture, the tongues do not seem to be aflame anymore—or rarely. Love seems to have grown cold. The anti-gospel, on the contrary, is growing every day with incredible swiftness, and one wonders, along with Our Lord, whether, “[W]hen the Son of man comes, will He find faith on earth [at all]” (Lk. 18:8). What is to be done?

It is true, we often think of ourselves as the entire world, whereas there are many other places on the planet, vast regions, where the Faith *is* quite alive, where the flames of spiritual fire *are* burning brightly. It is not so difficult to identify these places. It is where Christians are dying as martyrs for the Faith. At present it is mostly at the hands of militant Islam that our brothers and sisters in Christ are paying the supreme price. Sudan, where a young mother has been condemned to death for converting to Christianity, and Syria, where Christians have lately been crucified—literally—are poignant examples. We must pray for these Christians, learn from their shining examples, and imitate their poverty of spirit and their intrepid Faith.

With respect to our own situation, we need to remember that there simply is no darkness, no hideous strength of evil in the universe that can resist the Holy Ghost, the Holy Spirit of God. At Pentecost He comes as Gift, and in this Gift there are all the spiritual treasures we need, all the panoply of spiritual armor we need in order to protect ourselves and all our loved ones. A single soul that truly takes these things to heart, with the grace of God, can suffice to lift up the world. What a fire this is!

A monastery is many things. Along with other names, Our Blessed Father Saint Benedict refers to it as a “workshop.” Indeed, it is a shop, but not just any shop. Here a fire burns, where red-hot iron is hammered and shaped into tools and into weapons. But this fire itself, like the tools and weapons, is spiritual in nature. It is an effect of the very Spirit of God. It is in this spiritual forge that the good works of monastic life are wrought for the Glory of God and the good of His Holy Church. May we all, monks and Christ’s faithful of all walks of life, learn the rules of the spiritual craft, so that we can produce the tools—and even the weapons—we need today and may need in the future. Let us become in turn, like the Blessed Virgin of Nazareth and all the Saints, pure and spiritual fire, full of the gifts of the Gift of God. Amen. Alleluia.

