

Pentecost is called the “birth” of the Church because it is here that the Church was definitively manifested, not created or conceived – that happened earlier (like the conception of baby) but rather when it was manifested – like a baby being born (now I can see them). Pentecost, then, implies a *kind of* departure (our Lord has now ascended) and yet, simultaneously, a continuation or transmission. This simultaneous departure but also continuation was reflected in the weekday Mass readings this past week. Last Wednesday, for example, the Gospel was part of our Lord’s great priestly prayer to the Father right before His Passion. The first reading on Wednesday was from Acts and related Paul’s departure from Ephesus and his address to the presbyters (priests) of that area. These readings will be used to illustrate this simultaneous departure-continuing on.

In the Gospel last Wednesday (Jn 17: 11-19) we heard our Lord say: “When I was with them I protected them in your name that you gave me, and I guarded them [His disciples], and none of them was lost except the son of destruction, in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you.” Notice the past tense – when I *was* with them, and Jesus also says: But now I am coming to you. So there is going to be a certain kind of departure. But the overtone of the whole prayer is that this protection and guidance continue. How so, and why do “they” (the disciples of the Lord) need protection and guidance? We will come back to that question.

In the first reading on Wednesday (Acts 20:28-38) St Paul tells the faithful of Ephesus that he is departing and won’t be back. He is going to Jerusalem and he knows that what awaits him there is “imprisonment and hardships.” So this is departure. But Paul also exhorts continuation in this discourse – so again: a simultaneous handing on / continuation / transmission.

One thing this departure-continuation brings out is a “cycle of life.” Not an individual person’s life, although that is certainly related, but rather a cycle of life over time. I arrive, I depart, others take my place, and the cycle repeats over and over again, and will continue until the end of time. I am just passing through this world for a short time, then I’ll be gone and someone else will come and then they will go. We are just sojourners in this world (1 Peter 2:11). This cycle alone is worth our while to just sit and ponder so as to let this truth sink into our minds. While it’s blatantly obvious to everyone that this is true, it is very easy for a person to spend their entire life ignoring this simple, obvious reality, pretending that it’s not true! Why ignore it? Well maybe it tends to cast a person into some sort of despondency, making them think something like: well what’s the point of it all? Why go on? It seems like I’m just a passing irrelevance. In fact, that is a very good question to come to; good questions often come up when a person stops and thinks and looks at plain, simple, obvious truths.

To understand and appreciate this cycle we now need to look at the continuation, the handing on, the transmission part. Handing on of what and for what purpose? Paul’s words to the “presbyters” (priests) of Ephesus will bring this out: “Keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you overseers, in which you tend the Church of God that he [Jesus] acquired with his own Blood.”

So what is happening? Why this cycle? What is it doing? It is the building up the Kingdom of God. Some saints have speculated that this cycle will continue until the number of human souls in Heaven equals the number of fallen angels (which are now demons). Of course this is just speculation but it helps bring out a correct understanding of this cycle of: arriving-departure-continuation/transmission.

What is being handed on, continued, transmitted? It is, let us say for short, “The Way.” We are just passing through this world to get to the Kingdom; this life is just a short trial period. The purpose of this brief period of our existence is to forge a relation of love with our Father which is the requirement for entering the Kingdom. “The Way” (as it was called in the early Church) is simply how to do that, what that entails; it is everything that God / our Lord has revealed to us (His teachings) and the means of grace He has given us (especially the sacraments). How do we know how to build relation with the Lord? God told us “The Way.” So the overall cycle, whose purpose is simply building up the Kingdom – is this:

Birth – receive The Way and act on it – transmit The Way to the next generation – depart for the Kingdom = eternal bliss, complete fulfillment – repeat until the end of time.

Why, after so many people have existed, hasn't this ended yet? Well at least in part because many reject The Way. The Way entails real humility which is a stumbling block for many. Each individual person is responsible for receiving The Way and choosing to act on it and sadly many simply reject it, choosing instead the pride of life. Then, rather than transmitting The Way they transmit this pride of life to their children.

The question we want to come to now is: Who is responsible for transmitting The Way? It is the Church, principally: Clergy (especially the Magisterium) and parents. The order of transmission of The Way (everything we need in this life to get to Heaven) is:

God / Jesus → The Apostles → The Magisterium who are the successors of the Apostles, plus priests → the faithful, including parents who are to be the first transmitters to their children.

Parents are not meant to just teach and exemplify (& thus transmit) anything in this regard, but that which was handed on, that which comes from God, transmitted through the Apostles, and then through their successors as well as the presbyterate working in conjunction with the successors of the Apostles. Then they die and enter the Kingdom (*if* they embraced The Way) and then their children pass it on to their own children; likewise, clergy die, enter into their reward (*if* they embraced The Way) and our Lord raises up others to take their place, to now give them a chance to enter the Kingdom. The cycle continues until God decides, until the end of the world.

Transmitting The Way is an infinitely huge responsibility. How can man possibly do it? He cannot do it just by his own natural capacity; God must come to his aid. One thing we have (thankfully) is our Lord's guarantee that whatever His Church teaches *definitively* (through His Magisterium and in particular the Pope) will not be in error, it will be The Way. We also have His words: whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven. Only God could make, much less carry out, such a promise while simultaneously giving man such a great honor in participating in His work.

What is Pentecost? It is the beginning of man's direct participation in the work of Christ in building up of the Kingdom of God. It is the birth of the Church, the work of handing on that which has been given by our Lord. Jesus taught everything we need to know and He created the sacraments. He is not here now, in human form, to teach us or (for example) to forgive sins. How does He do it now? It is through the human agency of His Church, through which He continues to guide us in a mystical way.

That is the cycle of life and its purpose. It is the ultimate good so make it first and foremost, apply all your strength towards it, make everything else a support to that which is first; everything else – as good as it may be – is secondary and is to be ordered to this ultimate end point. We only get one chance, one lifetime to do it.

Let us come back now to the readings of last Wednesday. Those readings also brought out a particular dimension of The Way and the handing on. In His priestly prayer to the Father just before His death, He said to the Father: I have protected them and guarded them. He prays that they continue to be protected and guarded from the Evil One. St Paul repeats this practically verbatim to the priests of Ephesus; he tells them to keep watch over their selves and over the whole flock and then says: "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come among you, and they will not spare the flock. And from your own group, men will come forward perverting the truth to draw the disciples away after them."

There is no mincing of words here. The reality of what has come to be called spiritual combat is revealed by God Himself. The Way will not be easy and there are many people and many things, many temptations, that will try to tear you from it. Many volumes have been written on this subject by the great teachers of the faith, and we cannot possibly do it justice here. Perhaps the first step in this "spiritual combat" is the most important one: to be aware that it *is* a reality, for each and every one of us, there are *no* exceptions. This spiritual combat is something *everyone* faces *every* day. So many pridefully float through life thinking they are so good, that they are above and beyond such a thing, that everything they think, say, and do is perfection. This is practically the definition of foolishness. Even our Lord Himself entered into spiritual combat. Are you greater than Him? Sadly, some seem to think so. Don't fall into it. Be aware and engage the struggle. It's part of the cycle of life, it's part of The Way. Don't be afraid – the Lord Himself will come to your aid.

*God bless you, Fr Kuhn.*