

PENTECOST SUNDAY - YEAR C (Homily 02)

“Pentecost: Recovery, Unity and Service”

(Acts 2:1-11; Psalm 104; Romans 8:8-17; John 14:15-16, 23b-26)

The cover of the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous and the sobriety medallion of AA feature a triangle. Around the triangle on the medallion are the words Recovery, Unity and Service.

This medallion and those three words – recovery, unity and service - capture a clear message for us on this Pentecost Sunday: forgiveness and healing through the Holy Spirit (recovery), fellowship as the church (unity), and our mission of Christ-like ministry to others in need (service). In short, Pentecost is all about healing, fellowship and ministry.

It is not surprising that these themes from AA can provide a context for our celebration of Pentecost today, the birthday of the Church. The beginnings of AA, written up in the Big Book, resemble in a striking fashion the accounts of the activity of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles. Listen to this quote from the Big Book:

Their sobriety was transcended by the happiness they found in giving themselves for others. They shared their homes, their slender resources, and gladly devoted their spare hours to their fellow sufferers. They were willing, by day or night, to place a new candidate in the hospital and visit him afterward. They grew in numbers. They experienced a few distressing failures, but in those cases they made an effort to bring the person's family into a spiritual way of living, thus relieving much worry and suffering.

Doesn't that sound like the early Church? It goes on: *A year and six months later, these three original members had succeeded with seven more. Seeing much of each other, scarce an evening passed that someone's home did not shelter a little gathering of men and women, happy in their release, and constantly thinking how they might present their discovery to some newcomer.*

What an inspiration these early members of Alcoholics Anonymous are for us today in the Church - would that we could recapture that same excitement and spirit about our faith, our Church and our mission in the world.

The first reading from the Acts of the Apostles takes us back to that first momentous event, the birth of the Church, the giving of the Holy Spirit to the disciples of Jesus after his resurrection and his appearances to them. Unity is the key theme here. *They were all together in one place*, waiting for the promise of Jesus to be fulfilled. What a beautiful image of Church – the gathering, the *ecclesia* in Greek, the *qahal* in Hebrew.

To be a baptized Catholic Christian is to gather with others to worship and praise the Lord, to be open to the movement of the Spirit in each one's life and in the life of the community that gathers.

The double miracle of speaking in other languages and hearing in one's own language underlines the theme of unity, overcoming the division and confusion that occurred at the tower of Babel. Gathering, being of one mind and heart, coming together to learn, pray, worship and love each other, is at the heart of being Church.

How can it be that so many Catholics seem to think that a few prayers once in a while all by themselves somewhere is what it means to be Catholic? To the contrary, the scriptures teach us clearly that to be disciples of Jesus, we must gather together for prayer and worship. The ideal would be to gather together on Sunday for worship, and at least once during the week to study our faith and to pray.

The recovery aspect of the triangle is highlighted by today's Gospel. *It was evening on the first day of the week, the day that Jesus rose from the dead.* John is proclaiming that what is happening through the resurrection, appearances, ascension of Jesus and Pentecost event, the giving of the Holy Spirit, is a new creation even more marvellous than the original ongoing creation, amazing as that is.

This new creation happens through forgiveness and healing. The disciples had betrayed, denied and abandoned Jesus and had every reason to be afraid. Yet with Jesus there was only forgiveness, peace and joy. Forgiveness is the essence of this new way of life that Jesus came to give us. He then empowered the disciples to forgive as he forgave the world. To forgive as he forgave, to love as he loved – this is the newness that has come into the world, a newness that we as Church are commanded to live.

Last of all, the second reading from St. Paul to the Corinthians obviously underscores the importance of service. It did not take long for the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous to discover that the key to their new found sobriety was to give it away. What kept them sober and growing was service, trying to help others, even if they failed.

St. Paul is very strong and clear. The gifts of the Spirit are given to us to equip us for service. *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* Rediscovering and living the ideal of the common good is a gift that the Church can give to the world today. It is the sacrificing of the common good that led to the economic recession that still grips the world. Reckless spending and speculative investment for individual and corporate gain without concern for the good of others is at the root of the present social chaos in Greece that threatens Europe if not the rest of the world.

We still have not learned this lesson so basic to the life of the Church and the giving of the Spirit to that early Church – that service is what gives life meaning and purpose. Sr. Winston Churchill had it right when he said, “We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give away.”

Jean Vanier, the founder of the L’Arche movement for the mentally challenged, has grasped the secret of this Pentecost message. His followers recover from their own issues first, then live in community with each other as they volunteer and give their lives in serving the mentally challenged. They are a happy, fulfilled group. No wonder that in 2009 the L’Arche Homes of Winnipeg received the Caritas Award for outstanding service to humanity.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is itself a celebration of recovery, unity and service. We are forgiven and healed by the Word and Body and Blood of Jesus; we are gathered together as a Christian Catholic community, and we are mandated, empowered, missioned, sent out to serve all those in need.

So let us be reminded of an important message from the movement of Alcoholics Anonymous. Pentecost, being Church, being a Catholic Christian, is all about recovery, unity and service. It is all about experiencing God’s forgiveness and healing ourselves through faith in Jesus, doing so together in community and fellowship, and then expressing our love for God through loving service of our brothers and sisters in need.