

# Pentecost: The Birthday of the Church

Jesuit theologian Gerry O'Hanlon lives in Ballyfermot, Dublin.



By Master of the Baroncelli Portraits - <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

**Pentecost by Master of the Baroncelli Portraits, 1490, Belgium**

When I was a boy, I hadn't heard much about the connection between the Holy Ghost (the common title then) and the Church. I do remember bits about my confirmation – rows of schoolboys filing through the streets of Dublin to the Pro-Cathedral (now cathedral) in Marlborough Street,

the dread that the archbishop might ask me a catechism question (didn't happen!) and the somewhat alarming anticipation of a slap of the cheek (in the event a gentle tap) to signify that I was now a soldier of Christ, expected to suffer for my faith even to the point of the witness of martyrdom.

It was only later that I learned of the connection between the Holy Spirit and the Church itself. And it made sense. After all, as in Acts of the Apostles, chapter two, on the 50th day after Jesus left them, the small community left behind (including the eleven, Mary, several other women and others) gathered in an upper room and had an utterly transformative experience of the Holy Spirit. A powerful wind from heaven, tongues of fire, each receiving the gift of the Spirit enabling them to speak in foreign languages. If the tower of Babel, with its arrogant desire to rival and surpass God, resulted in the phenomenon of different languages as the fragmentation of unity, this pentecostal religious experience of the early disciples led instead to a new unity in diversity. It was the birthday of the Church.

This encounter inspired Peter, in a missionary spirit, to address the crowd in Jerusalem with the Good News of Jesus Christ, leading the crowd to conversion and to ask what they must do. Peter replied, 'Repent, and be baptised, your sins will be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.' Then a frightened, shocked and bereaved group of men and women were transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit into a Church with a mission to be a light for the world, a Church which we today inherit.

This is the background to our celebration at Pentecost: the call, again under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to each one of us to be part of the move to rejuvenate our Church, to reform and renew it, according to the call of Pope Francis, endorsed now by Pope Leo XIV. The Holy Spirit is

the providential presence of Father and Son in our world, constant source of creativity and purposeful novelty in the Church, helping it to adapt suitably to the signs of the times, to changing cultural contexts, while being faithful to the original message of Jesus.

We are being asked to reconsider the place of baptism (along with confirmation and Eucharist, the initiation sacraments of Christianity) as involving responsibilities as well as rights and basic equality for all Christians. This means for adult Catholics a role of 'co-responsibility' in running the Church at every level, including the local parish. It means too an invitation to feed into the formation and reception of church teaching, not least in controversial issues like the role of women. Thanks to the 'sense of faith' we all receive with the Holy Spirit at baptism, the Holy Spirit will 'lead us into the fullness of truth'. It means learning about and practising processes like conversation in the Spirit so that we can discern together where the Spirit is leading us without any diminution of the authoritative role of bishop and priest.

It means, in short, a paradigm shift in our understanding of Church, leaving the fearful safety of the upper room to enter the risky but Spirit-filled world outside in dialogue and hope. This is the synodal Church of Popes Francis and Leo, endorsed by the Irish bishops. This is a Church where the chief protagonist of faithful change and movement is the Holy Spirit, as Pope Francis never tired of saying. And the invitation to get on board is addressed to all of us at this new Pentecost time for our Church.