

We are Church

The celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Winnipeg Metropolia of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Canada is a time of grace, a very special time to reflect seriously – as Church and as individual faithful – on our Christian vocation, and to make a serious effort to respond to Jesus' invitation to draw closer to him.

We now begin a series of spiritual reflections, which are an important part of our Jubilee celebrations aimed at our spiritual renewal.

Today, every Ukrainian Catholic parish throughout Canada joins together to reflect upon the theme of “We are Church.”

Themes: Community of believers centered on Jesus Christ; the Church is Christ, continuing the work of salvation through the believers; the Church continues the work of the Lord: the work of compassion, forgiveness, and unconditional love, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the Acts of the Apostles we read that, after the Ascension of Jesus to heaven, the apostles together with a group of women, which included Mary, returned to Jerusalem.

In the first chapter of Acts we read that “All these were constantly at prayer together, and with them a group of women, including Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers.” (Acts 1:14) A little further we read: “When the day of Pentecost came, they were together in one place. Suddenly out of the sky came a sound like a strong rushing wind and filled the whole house where they were sitting. There appeared tongues as if of fire, which parted and came to rest upon each one of them. All were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to make bold proclamations, as the Spirit prompted them.” (Acts 2:1-4)

Community of believers centered on Jesus Christ

What really happened in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost 2000 years ago? To put it simply, we can say, that in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost 2000 years ago, God gathered together about 120 people (that's the number Holy Scripture gives us) which includes the Blessed Mother, the apostles, and other disciples of Jesus, and formed them into one body.

120 people, who prior to the event were living their own private, individual lives, but who after the descent of the Holy Spirit became a dynamic community of men and women centered on the person of the Risen Christ.

In other words, on the day of Pentecost the Church was born in Bethlehem of Judea. Jesus was born with a physical body. In Jerusalem, on the day of Pentecost, Jesus was born again with a mystical body; that is, in the community of believers, which we call the Church. (On the day of our baptism Jesus was born in our hearts.)

This is what Saint Paul meant when he wrote to the Corinthians: “All of us, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves of free men, have been baptized in one Spirit to form one Body, and all of us have been given to drink of one Spirit.” (1 Cor12:13) This why we can say that the Church is Christ, who continues his work of salvation “through the community of believers. Jesus said: “You will do the works that I do, and even greater works you will do!”

This is the real meaning of Pentecost: All believers forming one body, filled with one Spirit, whose one mission, is to continue the work of Christ in the world. In other words our Christian vocation is to become like Jesus and do what Jesus did. Our mission is to be Jesus for others.

The Church is Christ, continuing the work of salvation through the believers

Pentecost, the descent of the Holy Spirit, is not only an historical event that happened a long time ago in the Holy Land. It is an on-going reality. The Holy Spirit is constantly working and transforming the hearts of those who receive him with faith. The Holy Spirit is active in the world today. He is active in each one of us right now.

In order to better appreciate the significance of the Holy Spirit's action in our lives today, we need to look carefully at the historical event.

When it happened in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, Scripture tells us that there was a sound of a strong roaring wind that filled the house where the Blessed Mother and the disciples were gathered.

Wind in the Bible is a symbol of power. Jesus to Nicodemus that “the Spirit is like the wind that blows wherever it desires, and no one can tell where it comes from or where it will go.” Like the wind, the Spirit is powerful, invincible, and invisible. We can't see the wind.

These are the properties of the Church, the Body of Christ, that is filled with the Holy Spirit, (which is the power of the Risen Christ), and is enabled to perform the mighty works of the Lord. There is no way you can stop her, or overcome her. Jesus said: “Not even the gates of hell can prevail against her.”

It was the power of the Holy Spirit that gave the first Christians the strength and the courage to suffer persecution, imprisonment, torture, and even death itself for their faith in the Risen Christ. This same invisible power of the Holy Spirit is present in the Church today. Churches, monasteries, and convents can be destroyed. Bishops, priests, nuns, and lay people can be tortured, imprisoned, and killed. But the Church cannot be destroyed.

That is why, on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the persecution of the Church in Ukraine, Cardinal Joseph Slipyj was able to write in his pastoral letter: “I thank God for giving me the strength to bear this cross for nearly eighteen years. I bow my head in reverence to my ten brothers in the episcopate, to more than 1,400 priests, 800 Sisters, and tens of thousands of the faithful laity, who by their imprisonment and sacrifice of their lives sealed their loyalty to Christ and the Universal Church.”

The Church does not need props. The power of the Holy Spirit changes the lives of people from within, not from without. The Church does not depend on environmental circumstances. It is the power of God that changes human hearts. Only the power of God can harmonize and heal relationships. Only the power of God can draw people together in the love of

Christ. Only the power of the Holy Spirit, invisible like the wind, can set aflame the hearts of men, women, and children with the fire of Christ's love.

As we continue to read the Acts of the Apostles, when the Holy Spirit descended on the first Christians tongues of fire appeared above them.

Fire in the Bible has a dual symbolism. It signifies purification and passion.

Fire is as a sign of purification. It refines. It burns garbage and waste. The Holy Spirit, like fire, purifies the Church. It cleanses the faithful of all stain, of all that is evil. It cleanses us of sin, and heals us of the harmful effects of sin, of all that is not of Christ. The Holy Spirit sanctifies and makes us holy.

Fire also symbolizes passion and purpose, an inner hunger and thirst. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of the Word of God as a "Burning fire in my heart." (Jer 20:9)

The disciples, who encountered the Risen Christ on their way to Emmaus exclaimed: "Were not our hearts burning within us as he explained the Scriptures to us?" St. Teresa prayed: "Jesus, enflame my heart with the fire of your divine love!"

The Pentecost fire reminds us there is in the Church, in us a yearning, a hunger and thirst, a burning desire for God that purifies and heals us. That is what St. John the Baptizer was talking about when he prophesied that Jesus would come and baptize with the Holy Spirit. A person on fire with the Holy Spirit has a burning desire for God and the things of God.

A third sign that was evident during the Pentecost event in Jerusalem was the disciples speaking in strange languages they hadn't learned, but others understood. They were not unintelligible sounds. They were intelligent statements, clear and edifying proclamations. They were praising God in languages the people of different nations, who came to Jerusalem that day, understood. They all understood the apostles proclaiming the mighty works of God. And they were amazed.

The Church continues the work of the Lord: the work of compassion, forgiveness, and unconditional love, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Before the descent of the Holy Spirit, the apostle Peter was afraid even to admit that he was a follower of Christ. When the Spirit entered his heart Peter stepped out boldly without any fear at all and preached a sermon with such conviction that, as a result 3000 converts started to believe in Christ that day.

This is the purpose of the infilling of the Holy Spirit: to enable the Church to speak boldly, clearly, honestly, and with conviction about God and the things of God. This also means that the Gospel, the Good News, is for all nations.

The Church is not only for itself. The Church is for others. If the Church does not reach out to others, especially to the poor and the most abandoned, it ceases to be Church, that is, a living organism that gives life of the Holy Spirit to others.

This is the key to the full realization of our potential as Church: self-forgetfulness, focusing on others, on Christ, on neighbor. The power and effectiveness of the Church depends on its self-forgetfulness. We are Church to the degree that we take the attention off ourselves and

focus on others, especially the poor; and with deep conviction proclaim the Good News of God's love, and become living witnesses of Christ's love to those around us.

When the Church is preoccupied with self, when it does not live for others, when it does not seek Christ and his Kingdom first, but itself, its own glory, it degenerates and dies, and becomes a boring, heartless and lifeless organization. We cease to be Church. We're just playing church.

The Church, the people of God, the community of believers are called to love; to love God with their whole heart and soul, and their neighbor. For this to happen, the self has to die. Where the love of God and neighbor are clearly evident, there the Church is alive and well. If we're not loving, we're dying. Jesus said: "By this will they know that you are my disciples if your love one another."

Jubilee Prayer

Lord, Jesus Christ, as we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Ukrainian Catholic Metropolia of Canada, we give thanks for your loving kindness and the abundant graces received during the span of fifty years.

We also humbly ask for the grace of an ever deeper realization of your loving presence; that we are all children of one Heavenly Father.

Again and again, we pray for the grace of perseverance in faith; that we may all be united in your loving and compassionate heart, and that with renewed enthusiasm, love and compassion, we might continue the work of salvation for the glory of our Heavenly Father.

May your holy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven! Amen.