

## PENTECOST AND THE CHURCH

(Part I)

by Philip Kariatlis

The feast day of Pentecost, celebrated fifty days after Pascha, marks the day on which the **Holy Spirit**, after **Christ** had **ascended** into the heavens, **descended** upon each of the disciples of Christ enabling them to speak to all nations in their own languages. Many today consider this event to be the 'birth-day' or the foundation and establishment of the Church of God on earth. However, the first point which must be made from the very beginning is that, if the **Church** is understood to be the event of *koinonia* by grace between the entire created world and God,<sup>1</sup> then this communal mode of existence **existed** from the **very moment** that God decided to communicate with the world when He **created it out of nothing** (*ex nihilo*). Therefore, far from coming into existence on the day of Pentecost, the Church existed from the very beginning of the world.

With regard to the origins of the Church, one could even go further and argue that, in principle, the Church always existed to the extent that it was **forever** part of God's **pre-eternal** will, since God for all eternity has willed that His creation share in His beatitude. Whilst it is true that **different stages** of the Church's historical journey can be discerned [from the Old to the New Testament], these various phases precisely gave expression to different aspects of the relationship that God had concretely initiated with His Church from the moment the world was created. Now, in so far as the Church is fundamentally the gift of God's communion (fellowship or participation) with the world, in this sense, can it then even be said to **precede** the **creation** of the world, since it was always part of God's pre-eternal plan to communicate with His creation. Such a statement which may sound daring at first, expresses nothing other than God's desire, arising out of His **absolute love**, to share, with the created world, **all** those things that are **naturally** His, **by grace** – that is, life, love and even divinity through His Church. Therefore the claim that the origins of the Church lie in the day of Pentecost does not stand.

Having highlighted the erroneous identification regarding the Church's origins with Pentecost, our attention is now turned to reflect upon the precise nature of the inseparable **correlation** between **Ecclesiology** and **Pneumatology**. As the day heralding the **permanent pouring out** of the **Holy Spirit**, firstly upon the apostles and then to all believers, Pentecost was surely a **culminating** and decisive moment for the Christian Church enhancing it with the power to 'articulate strange and foreign words, strange and foreign doctrines, strange and foreign teachings'<sup>2</sup> to all those who had gathered in Jerusalem. Such a showering of divine and inexhaustible grace by the 'Spirit of truth' signalled an even **more intimate koinonia** between the divine

and created realms – the Spirit was the **perfecting cause** of the *koinonia* realised by the Incarnation of Christ. For this reason, Pentecost is rightly considered to be the **consecration** of the Church.



Far from being left orphaned by the ascension of the Lord, the Church, which already existed in the community of the twelve apostles and before, was now not only **strengthened, anointed, and sanctified** by the gifts of the Holy Spirit but also **equipped** to commence its mission of spreading the Christian message in **word and deed**.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, we see that the **sanctifying and redemptive** gift of the **Holy Spirit** not only consecrated the Church but also **set it into motion** so that it could act both **evangelically** and **sacramentally** until the eschatological age where it will attain its fullness and perfection. From the above it becomes clear that the day of Pentecost marked not only the day of the Church's **consecration** but also its **mobilisation**, and it is to this dynamism of the Pentecost Church, especially as this is seen in the second chapter of Acts, that we now turn.

### The Gift of the Holy Spirit's Communion – the Consecration of the Church

The day of Pentecost, as portrayed in the New Testament book of the Acts of the Apostles, 2:1-47 by St Luke, marked the coming and **permanent outpouring** of God's Holy Spirit onto the New Testament Church. Indeed, the **occasion** for the narrative regarding the coming of the Holy Spirit is inextricably linked with St Luke's concern to explain its **significance** for, and its relation to, the primitive Church. Undoubtedly for the author of Acts, the descent of the Spirit onto the apostolic gathering in Jerusalem (cf Acts 2:5) marked a **radically new phase** for the Church of God: one the one hand, the Holy Spirit is depicted as an **extraordinary gift** bursting forth into the ecclesial gathering (Acts 2:1-4) thereby introducing a **pneumatological dimension** to the **Church** and in this way firmly **establishing** the **communal mode** of the Church's existence; whilst on the other hand, we witness the effects of this divine presence in the **overwhelming fellowship** within the **members** of the ecclesial community, whose missionary zeal would subsequently take them to the ends of the earth in order to give witness to the priceless treasure of Christianity to the entire world. Already, the **communal** and **missionary** aspects of the

2. From the first Praise sung on the feast day of Pentecost in the Orthros service.

3. This is seen especially in the concluding verses of the Gospel according to St Matthew: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Mt 28:19-20). Note the unity between 'word' and 'sacrament'.

1. Cf Archbishop Stylianos who defined the Church as "h] ejn cavriti koinwnia ktistou' kaiv ΔAktivstou prov' swthriva tou' ktistou' kaiv dovxa tou' ΔAktivstou".

Pentecost Church are noted.

The first part of the narrative (i.e. Acts 2:1-4) clearly brings out the profound and **animating** relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Church. In this extraordinarily succinct description, the Spirit is compared not only to a '**mighty wind**' (Acts 2:2) whose **sound filled the entire house**, but also to '**tongues as or fire**' (Acts 2:3) which were **distributed** and **rested**<sup>4</sup> upon all the faithful of the gathering. Therefore, when read in conjunction with his gospel, we see that Luke's understanding of the Christian Church is a gathering which already existed in the world by Christ but which was now '**animated**' by the Spirit in order to live and grow until its fulfilment in the end times (cf Acts 1:4-5, 8). Indeed the **same Spirit** of God who '**swept over the face of the waters**' (Gen 1:2) at the beginning of the world's creation; who was at the very **biological conception** of Jesus (Lk 1:35); and who was with Jesus throughout His entire earthly ministry including His **baptism** (Lk 3:22) and **transfiguration** (Lk 9:34), was now **over Jesus' disciples** (cf. Acts 2:2), doing many signs and wonders (Acts 2:43), so as to **animate** and **stir** the Christian Church. This not only highlights the **continuity** between the Church before and after Pentecost (which again underscores the serious flaw in believing that Pentecost marks the 'birth-day' of the Church) but also underscores the **inextricable bond** between the **Church** and the **Holy Spirit** – indeed a bond which firmly embedded the Church in the event of the Spirit's descent on the day of Pentecost.

Having underlined the **pneumatological constitution** of the New Testament Church, our attention is now turned towards reflecting upon the **communal dimension** of the **consecrating gift** of the Holy Spirit bestowed upon the Church on the day of Pentecost. With the descent of the Holy Spirit, the **communal mode** of the **Church's existence** was firmly **established**. That a communal ontological structure of the ecclesial community was implied, is clearly manifested by St Luke firstly in the fact that the **Holy Spirit** is underlined as coming to '**all**' who were in one place:

they were **all together** in one place [pavnte" ojmu' ejpi; to; aujtoiv] (Acts 2:1).<sup>5</sup>

That is to say, the Spirit was **not conferred** only upon **one person** or a particular group of people, but to the **whole people of God**: "**they were all filled with the Holy Spirit**" (Acts 2:4) thereby emphasising the **universality** of the Pentecostal gift. Having previously highlighted that the Church is fundamentally a fellowship of people **called** and gathered **by God**, the very fact that the coming of the Holy Spirit took place when *all* had gathered 'together in one place', betrays the **communal dimension of the Spirit's gift** upon the ecclesial gathering. Consequently, it becomes clear that the Holy Spirit's role was to bring about the communal mode of the Church's existence, rather than a private, individual manner of life.

The book of Acts offers another example of the communal dimension of the consecrating gift of the Holy Spirit upon the Church on the day of Pentecost. In the same chapter, St Luke **expressed** the **communal** nature of the gathering in even **stronger terms**. In describing the life of the believers, he wrote: they spent much time **together** [ojmoqumadovn] in the

4. At first sight the form of the verb ejkavqisen may seem peculiar since it is in the third person singular yet its subject – glw'ssai [tongues] – is in the plural. Even though this minor detail may go unnoticed, perhaps it reveals Luke's linguistic desire to emphasise the identification between the 'tongues as of fire' with the one Spirit of God. Only when understood as a reference to the one Spirit does the form of the verb make any sense.

5. This is repeated again in Acts 2:44.

temple (Acts 2:46).

Whilst the English NRSV translation of the Bible has translated this, simply as, 'they spent much time *together* in the temple', the meaning of **omothymadon** is **far deeper**. Not only does it imply the same physical locality occupied by certain people, but more importantly it signifies a **deeper harmonious unity**, where the group can be said to be 'of one mind and unanimous desire'. It follows therefore that the 'togetherness' of the first Christians on the day of Pentecost, according to St Luke was so intimate that their '**mind**', '**soul**', '**desire**' and '**action**' were inseparably **one** and **homologous**. That is to say, far from being a unanimity simply resulting from being 'together' in the same place at the same time, their harmonious unity was one which was realised by the Spirit's bestowal of the gift of **profound fellowship** or communion upon the Church, resulting in an **unbreakable solidarity** within the believers of the community. Without doubt, for Luke-Acts the source of such fellowship was the presence of the Holy Spirit who had initiated such a profound communal mode of existence within the ecclesial community on the day of Pentecost.

Accordingly, the 'togetherness' of the Pentecost Church cannot simply be understood in terms of a mere sharing of material good, as is often claimed, but was something infinitely greater having a definitively **spiritual dimension** to it – the **mutual sharing**, being but one **external expression** of the **divine-human bond** of communion. Indeed this mutual sharing of goods, affirmed in Acts 2:44, took place, as we shall see only **after** the community had accepted the Holy Spirit in their lives, verifying the fact that the sharing of their material goods was but one external aspect of the Spirit's gift of *koinonia*. And so, notwithstanding the fact that the Holy Spirit's presence upon the Church resulted in a strong willingness within the community of the faithful to support and provide for one another, His permanent presence in the Church now **consolidated** and officially **sealed** the truly **theandric nature** of the Church, opening it up to the eschatological age of the Kingdom already in its present historical phase.

Clearly, for St Luke, the saving effect of the **Holy Spirit's presence** in the Church was that it **initiated** the way for the faithful to participate in the very person and life of Jesus Christ who would lead them to the Father. That is, it was the communal gift of the Holy Spirit which consecrated the faithful members of the Church by bringing them together, and therefore subsequently enabling them to experience the identity of Christ, so that through Him, they might be led to God, whom Jesus had acknowledged as His Father. And so the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit was that **saving gift of intimate unity** with the **Father mediated through Christ** and made possible by the presence of the Holy Spirit upon the Church.

*In the next issue we will examine the commencement of the Church's missionary action upon the world – that is, the mobilisation of the Church – which would enable the saving effects of Christ's incarnation to be communicated to all nations.*

6. Cf Bauers who translated this word as "with one mind or purpose or impulse". Walter Bauers, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans by William Arndt and F. Wildbur Gingrich, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 566).

7. Besides, many liturgical texts testify to the fact that it was the work of the Holy Spirit to draw humanity together into communion in contradistinction, for example with the division of the people at the tower of Babel (Gen 11:7). This particular aspect of the Holy Spirit's work is specifically mentioned in the hymnal tradition of the feast of Pentecost expressing it in the following way: "when the Most High descended and confused the tongues, He divided the nations; but when He distributed the tongues of fire, He called all to unity". (*Kontakion* of Pentecost).

# PENTECOST AND THE CHURCH

(Part II)

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## The Church's Missionary Mandate—the Mobilisation of the Church

Having examined the communal dimension of the sanctifying gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, our attention is now turned towards reflecting upon the commencement of the Church's official missionary action towards, or mobilisation within, the world. According to the book of Acts, the event of Pentecost was not only the fulfilment of the Church's communal mode of existence, but also the starting point of the Church's mission, which, as we shall see, was both outwardly and inwardly orientated. That is to say, the Church's mission involved both living out the gift of the communion of the Holy Spirit – in this sense, the gift of *koinonia* was also a goal which needed to be fully realised – and then actively seeking to share this communal mode of existence with the entire world. Thus, the Church's mission involved coming together 'in one place' and then dispersing so as to share this divine gift of *koinonia* with the entire world. From this it becomes evident that the Church's missionary mandate, far from simply being a means to propagate the Christian faith to all the nations of the then known world, also involved making visible the Spirit's communal presence within itself. In this latter sense, the Church's mission also included the building up of the communal mode of existence between God and the faithful until the final *Parousia*. Our attention in this article will be focussed upon discerning these two approaches to mission, which were made possible, for the Church, on the day of Pentecost.

Broadly speaking, the term, 'mission' in the book of Acts, conveying the biblical idea of 'being sent', simply designates everything that the resurrected Christ sent the Church into the world to do, by the gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, so as to bring the kingdom of God to bear upon the world. In the Pentecost account of the book of Acts (Acts 2) the mission of the Church is not so much described in terms of going out into the world to proclaim God's kingdom as it is about 'every nation under heaven' (Acts 2:5) coming together 'in one place' inaugurating here and now the last days – i.e., the kingdom of God. (cf Acts 2:17). It is this idea of mission, involving the Church being sent to bring the nations together as a proleptic or preliminary experience of the kingdom, which the term 'inward orientated mission' designates since mission, in this case did not involve a sending to the ends of the world but implied the convocation of the dispersed people of God. That is to say, just as important as it was for the early Church to journey to the ends of the earth to make known the kingdom of God (i.e. an outward orientated mission), so was it equally important that communal ties within the household of the faithful be firmly established and maintained. This latter idea of mission entailed the building up of the *ekklesia* in the service of the imminent kingdom and it is to this aspect of mission to which we now turn.

## Inward Orientated Mission

Having described the gift-aspect of the Spirit's *koinonia* in only four verses (Acts 2:1-4), the remaining part of the Pentecost narration (Acts 2:5-47) concerned itself with the effects of the Holy Spirit with regard to the inwardly orientated mission of the Church.

The early Church's response to the outpouring of the Spirit is concretely evidenced in four key actions which included: their daily reflection of the word of God, their apostolic fellowship, their celebration of the Eucharist and their communal prayer life:

**They devoted themselves** [ἤσαν δὲ προσκατεροῦντες] **to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.** (Acts 2:42).

That these four key aspects of mission (i.e., apostolic teaching, fellowship, common meal and prayer) constituted fundamental activities of the Church, which therefore cannot be overlooked in favour of an outwardly focused approach to mission, is already seen by the grammatical form of the verb 'devoted themselves'. St Luke's use of the present participial form of the verb

'*proskarterein*' is significant in that it emphasised the Church's ongoing persistence to adhere firmly to, and put into practice, on a daily basis, the apostolic proclamation, the Lord's Supper, corporate prayer and fellowship which would have also included the material collection of gifts and money for distribution to the poor and those in need. From this it already becomes clear that St Luke was most concerned to underscore the depth of the Church's mission, which involved living, in the strongest of ways, a communal life.

This inwardly orientated aspect of mission, which served the building up and maintenance of the community, implied that the faithful within the Church were to have all things in common, 'praising God and having the goodwill of all the people' (Acts 2:46). The following verse reveals the results of this communal life:

**And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.** (Acts 2:47).

In this case, the book of Acts makes it clear that it was in coming together to deepen this bond of *koinonia*, that the faithful within the Church brought many new people into their community. Accordingly, far from being only outwardly orientated, mission involved the gathering of the many nations in order to make present, by way of foretaste, the eschatological kingdom of God. This Christian expression of mission fundamentally presumed a thirst for the fullness of life – i.e. an 'other'-centred life – expressed in communion with Christ and made possible by the Holy Spirit where all were regarded as sisters and brothers closely linked together. It was precisely for this reason that service towards the 'other' within the community was not only presumed but was seen as a condition *sine qua non* of what was meant by mission.



### *Outward Orientated Mission*

Having become fully equipped on the day of Pentecost as a communion between God and the faithful grounded in grace, and continuing to maintain this communal mode of existence, the Church of Christ on earth was now **mobilised** or set into motion so as to hasten to the ends of the earth to reveal what, up to that point was the hidden plan of God (cf Eph 3:3-11) and to spread His 'message of reconciliation' (2Cor 5:19) to all people throughout the ages. And on that journey, to heal everything that could sunder the faithful from God, one another and the entire created order, the Church's **mission** essentially was **to make known God's loving purpose** for the entire world – that is, the bestowal, to the world, of the gift of His kingdom. This aspect of the Church's mission which involved an **outwardly focused action** to lead all into the calm harbour of God's all-embracing kingdom basically implied an invitation 'to all nations' to experience that **perfect rapture of mutual love and communion** which **defines** the very **life** of the **Holy Trinity**.

The experience of the divine gift of God's abiding love to the historical Church, which signifies nothing other than the world's salvation, took place in the **preaching of the word of God** and in the **celebration of the sacraments**. That is, by the **living presence** of the **Holy Spirit, Christ** was **acting** in and through the preached word and the celebrated sacrament, **leading** the **faithful** to the **heavenly Father**. For this reason, one can already begin to discern an understanding of the Church's mission in terms of a commitment not only to offer hope in a future coming of God's kingdom by mere instruction, but **to be** that very sign of God's eschatological reign. That is to say, the **Church's evangelising and sacramental tasks** were not simply carried out for the sake of merely informing people of certain teachings of a historical figure named Jesus, but to **announce** the good news of the coming of the kingdom of heaven here on earth. Far from merely implying a retrospective continuity with the past, **mission anticipated** in a real way the eschatological destiny of the Church – that is, **God's heavenly kingdom**. All mission in the Church ultimately served to celebrate the kingdom of God already present in the world.

Just as the inwardly focussed approach to mission was guaranteed by the presence of the Holy Spirit within the community, so too was the outward aspect of mission the result of the **transforming power and efficacy** of the **Holy Spirit**. Indeed, the entire **impetus** for the Church's missionary activity towards the Gentiles in the book of Acts is attributed to the **flourishing role** of the Spirit in the Church. For example, St Luke clearly attributed the rapid Christianisation of the Church into the whole of Judea, Galilee and Samaria to the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:31). Furthermore, according to Acts, it is the Spirit who is described as illuminating **Peter** about the **conversion of Cornelius** (Acts 10:19; 11:12) and leading **Philip** to the **conversion** of the **Ethiopian eunuch** (8:29; 39). With respect to the maintenance of a communal mode of existence with the Church, again it is the Spirit who is depicted as guiding the Church in the **election of elders** (Acts 20:28) and **sanctioning the decisions** reached at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:28). Indeed, just as the Spirit had been sent through Christ from the Father, so too were all those apostles sent by Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit sent to bear witness to the Father's Kingdom, to keep His word and to do His will and His works in the world (cf. Acts 3:1-10; 8:13; 19:11-20).

### *Critical Reflection*

Based on the book of the Acts of the Apostles, this article identified **two approaches** to the complex issue of mission which, it argued need not necessarily lead to any dichotomy. On the one hand there was the outward movement of the Church, which, by the power of the Holy Spirit had the mandate to take the message of Christ to the ends of the earth. On the other hand, the mission of

the Spirit filled Church of Christ involved the **coming together** of the dispersed people of God to one place. That is to say, not only did the mission of the faithful within the Church involve being **sent** and thus **dispersed** in the world with the charisma of preaching the Gospel, but also their **convocation** in one place as a **sign** of the presence of the kingdom here and now. In this case, mission was not only expressed by way of a **centrifugal** action, but also by a **centripetal** one, which involved the assembly of the faithful 'in one place'. In this approach, it was a mission carried out by the assembled communities which came together to hear the word of God, to celebrate the Eucharist, to care for the poor and to pray together. Indeed, it was shown that an integral theology of mission cannot dismiss this essential view of mission.

Having underlined Holy Spirit's presence **both** as the inspiring force for the **communal existence** of the Church and for its subsequent **growth and expansion**, a simple **analogy**, which may serve to clarify what is meant here by the Church's missionary mandate, is the following: in the same way that **biological life** is maintained by the **contracting and expanding** movements of the **heart** which pump blood to the entire body, so too would life within the Church be sustained by the faithful coming together – in this way continuing to share in the gift of the communion of the Holy Spirit – but also, going to the ends of the earth in order to proclaim the kingdom of the risen Christ. It would be this official public missionary work of the Church which would enable the saving effects of Christ's incarnation fostered by the Spirit's abiding presence to be made real and subsequently communicated to all nations. Accordingly in order to be faithful to the biblical sources with regard to mission, we have shown that both approaches have to be preserved.

### *Concluding Remarks*

In concluding our reflection on Pentecost and its relationship to the gift of the communal mode of the Church's existence in the New Testament, it has become clear that the Church's experience of **fellowship by no means excluded** any notions of **mission** within the life of the faithful. Indeed, it was shown that the Lukan account of the Spirit's presence in the Church on the day of Pentecost made very clear the early Church's desire for mission as this constituted the most basic presupposition for the **recapitulation** of all into the kingdom of God (cf Eph 1:10). To the extent that the gift of *koinonia* was also understood as a **goal** towards which the Church had to aspire, **mission signified** the **Church's eager intention to live out that communal reality** and to **share** it with the **scattered nations** of the world (cf Jn 11:52). Accordingly, the event of Pentecost highlighted that any understanding of the notion of 'Church' deprived of mission would fall far short of the true nature and function of the Church in so far as the Church's mission simply served to bring about the ultimate destiny of the Church in the heavenly kingdom.

Moreover, it was the early Church's experience of the *koinonia* **created** by the **Holy Spirit** on the day of Pentecost which not only gave the disciples a real experience of **solidarity** amongst themselves (which they had to maintain on a daily basis) but also a **strong desire to create** that *koinonia* which they believed was willed by the risen Lord **with all those scattered** around the world. Therefore far from being diametrically opposed as is often suggested, **communion and mission**, as a sign of the kingdom are **intimately related** in so far as the whole missionary activity of the early Church has been orientated towards making manifest the fullness of God's heavenly kingdom. In becoming the redeemed community of God on Pentecost, the Church had to maintain this and subsequently bring all people into such a communion with the eschatological kingdom. And so, for as long as the Church is part of history, its movement or mission to lead all to the kingdom can never possibly cease to exist.