

PENTECOST, Sunday May 31st

Happy Birthday!

One of the most iconic monuments in Rome is the Pantheon. It was built as a pagan temple in the 2nd century but in the 7th century was transformed into a church. It is magnificent: one of the best-preserved buildings from ancient Rome and boasts the largest unsupported concrete dome in the world. At the centre of the dome is an enormous oculus (circular opening) that floods the building with natural light.

On the Feast of Pentecost, a medieval practice that was once common in a number of cathedrals in western Europe is still enacted. During the Mass thousands of red rose petals are dropped from the oculus of the Pantheon onto the crowd gathered 43 metres below.

The rose petals are meant to represent the descent of the Holy Spirit like “tongues of fire” on the Virgin Mary and the disciples. The petals are brought to the top of the dome and dropped by members of the fire department.

It is just one example of how Catholics celebrate the annual Feast that is considered the birthday of the Church.

We too celebrate birthdays every year: our own, those of our family members and others we love. *What* is it we celebrate on a birthday? And *how* do we celebrate it?

What we celebrate is that person who came into this world, was born, years earlier on the current date. We celebrate what they mean to us, the love between us. We commemorate the years we have had together.

And *how* do we celebrate a birthday? Well, different cultures have different customs but ones common here include:

A gathering of family and friends. Those who are close to the person assemble. A birthday may be about a particular person but it is also about those whose lives that person has touched. There is an intimacy to birthdays but it is the intimacy of fellowship. It manifests itself as a party.

A room is decorated. Banners hanging from the ceiling, balloons either filled with helium or taped in place. The room is filled with reminders of what the day is about.

We present them with a beautifully decorated cake. It is meant to be shared by all those present.

The cake has lit candles upon it; each candle representing a year of the persons life (until we get to an age where the number of candles is prohibitive or embarrassing!).

Even if it is not dark, the lights are often turned off as the cake is brought in. This makes for a more dramatic presentation but it also reminds us that this person has been a light in our lives.

A special song is sung by all gathered. It is a festive occasion, a unifying occasion. We sing as with one voice a joyful song. We sing it loud, for all to hear – not embarrassed if our voices are off-key or flat – for we are not ashamed of what and who we are celebrating.

The candles are then blown out by the guest of honouree. Before their breath passes over the candle flame, we tell them to make a wish.

Cards and gifts are given, symbols of our appreciation and love of the person.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the annual celebration of the birthday of the Church, when the Holy Spirit entered into the lives of the original disciples in a new and powerful way; transforming them, filling them with truth and life, uniting them in conviction as to the difference Jesus Christ makes and giving them courage to proclaim it to the world.

This faith and new life given by the Holy Spirit united them as one Body, one family. It made them into the Church. And that same Spirit continues to work in the Church today, transforming our lives, making us part of Christ's Body.

Jesus had commanded the disciples at His ascension to return to Jerusalem and pray – to prepare themselves – for the coming of the Holy Spirit. And they did. They gathered together for ten days.

They were assembled because of their common love and dedication to Christ. They were close to Him: His followers, His disciples. Many had known Him from the beginning of His public ministry (His mother, Mary, from the very beginning of His life on earth). He had touched their lives in a profound way that made them willing to leave everything behind in order to follow Him.

The Spirit would make Jesus more present to them now than He had even been before. An intimacy that would permeate their whole being. The Spirit would transform their ordinary love of Christ into something extraordinary: a supernatural love; a participation in divine love. Christ would now be alive *in* them.

The place in which the disciples were gathered was suddenly filled with a new and powerful presence that decorated the room with sound “*like the rush of a violent wind*” and light; “*divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.*”

Such a dramatic presentation! A violent wind can uproot trees; this wind would uproot lives. And a fire that burns away the dross of everyone it touches; purifying, enlightening, refining. “*O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him*” (Psalm 34:8).

The Holy Spirit, in Hebrew the “*ruach hakodesh*,” the breath of God, entered into them and gave special gifts to remake them into the persons God wished them to be. His witnesses to the whole world.

And now, together in fellowship, they would sing loudly as with one voice the same song; unashamed of their lowly backgrounds and their despised Leader: “*All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*”

“*But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say... that God has made [Jesus] both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified’*” (Acts 2:14,36).

What do we celebrate today? The birthday of the Church. We celebrate the new life first given to believers 2000 years ago on this day by the power of the Holy Spirit, making them one Body, one family. We commemorate the many years – centuries – that the Church has been animated by the Spirit. We celebrate the continued presence of the Spirit in the Church and the love we share in Christ as an assembly of believers.

And how do we celebrate this birthday? As St Paul says in the Second Reading, by using the “*varieties of gifts*” that the Holy Spirit has given to us for the “*varieties of services*” and “*activities*” by which we work for “*the common good.*” We celebrate by living our faith, witnessing to Christ in the world, and working for the building up of His Church, His family, to the greater glory of God.