

Pentecost 2010: A Time for a New Beginning

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Pentecost is correctly known as “the birthday of the Church”. It is the fiftieth day of Easter and the last of the three great feasts that celebrate the Paschal Mystery. Unfortunately, this great Church whose birthday we celebrate has in recent years been burdened with the consequences of sinful scandals that have caused much pain.

Those scandals have been well documented and are known to everyone who follows the news, so I don’t need to repeat the details here today. What I do want to do on this Feast of Pentecost is look to the future, because I firmly believe some of the Church’s darkest hours have given the Holy Spirit the greatest opportunities to inspire God’s people to change and to grow.

Just as that first Pentecost was the beginning of the Church, so each Pentecost that follows is an invitation for new beginnings. On this Pentecost I believe that asking the Holy Spirit for a new beginning should be our fervent prayer.

That being said, we must humbly acknowledge the truth that the Church, right from its first beginning, has always been a hospital for sinners, not a luxury condo for saints. Among the twelve apostles there were two traitors, a doubter, and several glory-seekers. Still, God used this sinful group to build a Church where holiness abounds, even in the midst of sin and scandal, and eleven of those first twelve were lifted above their weak human natures by the grace of a Redeemer who loved them—and whose love they accepted and returned.

If the Holy Spirit could work in and through those first leaders, then surely that same Holy Spirit can work in and through their successors, our bishops, even though some of them have failed miserably in their roles. The Church has endured much faulty leadership throughout its history, but this has never obscured the profound holiness among the People of God, whose lives are nourished by the presence of Christ in the Word of scripture and the sacraments of the Church. This holiness, found in men and women, ordained, religious and lay, has always been the quiet, often hidden, face of the Church and has always been more powerful than any of the evils that have threatened to obscure it.

I love this Church, even with its faults and failings, and I know that most of you do, too. While I cannot predict exactly what forms this new beginning might take, I have great hope that it will indeed happen. What I am hoping for is a Church leadership that will continue to courageously teach the truths of our faith, but will do so as humble servants of that truth, obedient to the Holy Spirit and inspired by the Scriptures and the gentle love of the Good Shepherd. I would like to see a Church which keeps secrets only when it is necessary for true justice, and not to protect the Church from scandal. I would like to see a Church which is as willing to celebrate and use the gifts of its laity as it is now prone to protect the turf of its clergy.

An institution could not possibly exist for almost two thousand years if it weren't doing something right, so I disagree with those who would say that a new beginning means that we have to toss everything aside. I also disagree with those who suggest what I would call band-aid solutions: things like going back to the old Latin Mass, or eliminating mandatory celibacy for Latin Rite priests, or forbidding Communion in the hand, or changing certain teachings that some find offensive or burdensome—the list could go on at some length. While these purported solutions might please those who promote them—and indeed some of them might be worthy of consideration, they do not hold out hope for a new beginning. No, a new beginning must come from a broader understanding of who we really are as Church.

I believe that this new beginning has already begun. Even though the Church has been beset by some unfair and often ignorant media coverage, it is becoming more and more clear that having our dirty laundry yanked from its hidden hampers will, in the long run, be a good thing, not a bad thing. If we are humble and honest, we might even see the work of the Holy Spirit in this reality check.

It is probably unrealistic to expect instant and miraculous change. It's even possible that things could get worse before they get better. I hope that will not be the case, but who knows? What I do know is that the Holy Spirit is still in charge, and thanks to that Divine Presence, the Church has always had good holy lay people, priests, religious and bishops to continue the work entrusted to her by Jesus, and they have done much good throughout the Church's history and continue to do so today.

Let us try our best to heal the wounds of those who have been hurt and to forgive the sins and crimes of those who have caused that hurt. Let us pray for those who are most able to lead us to the new beginning, that they will step forward and do so with humility, courage and conviction. Let us remember that sin does not obscure truth, that no living humans belong on pedestals, that a Church that is human will always have humans that are sinners, that a new beginning is not an easy undertaking, and that the power of holiness will always be greater than the power of sin.

There have been and will be those who leave because they are hurt, angered or humiliated by the scandals that have come to light. This does not mean that they are weak or without faith. And there are and will be those who stay because they know that the Church is not defined by a few sinful people in high places, but rather by the holiness and generous service of a multitude of faithful Catholics who do the work of the Lord day in and day out. From the beginning this has always been the solid foundation of the Church, and so in truth will it always be.

As always, hope abounds where good people do not lose heart.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the HOLY SPIRIT!