

PENTECOST PREACHING

By R. B. Williams, OP

A famous Dominican novice master, "famous" because of his malapropisms, is supposed to have said to his novices before the election of a prior: "Brothers, please pray. If the Holy Spirit is not with us, God help us!" That statement should apply to us preachers not only on the Feast of Pentecost but anytime we preach!

Our Catholic theology of the Holy Spirit is rich and varied, but I would dare say that for most Catholics, it is tied in with the Sacrament of Confirmation and the "gifts" that had to be memorized. Our religious imagination immediately turns to the white bird or to the scene that resembles the Last Supper with tongues of fire added. Certainly the advent of the "charismatic movement" in this country has brought some attention to the place of the Holy Spirit in Catholic theology. But, again, this often translates to comments about speaking in tongues or being reborn, or even "slain in the Spirit." Thus we marginalize the Holy Spirit by relegating "it" to the extraordinary or to special powers possessed by ordained persons.

St. Paul points out in First Corinthians that to each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the building up of the community, and in Romans that the Spirit prays for us when we cannot find the means to pray. It seems to me that this places the Holy Spirit squarely in the midst of everyday spiritual life and struggles. The many "tongues" of the account in ACTS reminds us that the experience of the Holy Spirit is a universal event. None of us is "left out."

I think I have experienced the Holy Spirit as a preacher most often when my preaching has an impact on a widely diverse audience. Once I preached a retreat for priests and there were participants from six continents. Yet the evaluations revealed overwhelmingly that somehow, in different ways, I was able to be of help across those cultural boundaries. In my current ministry at Tulane University, I have student parishioners from around the world. I often find myself thinking of that novice master's concern about the Holy Spirit. How can I reach across the boundaries of culture, language, economics, age, etc.? Perhaps there is an "answer" in St. Thomas Aquinas' description of the New Law as "the grace of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts through faith in Christ. (I-II, q. 106, art.1)". I believe that the "heart of the Preacher" brings him or her together with the hearer's everyday experience. Here

the work of the Holy Spirit, day in and day out, is manifest. Perhaps our "gift" of preaching can enable the "gifts" of others to emerge and the work of the Holy Spirit becomes a reality experienced not just at the "feast of Pentecost" but becomes "pentecostal" in the best sense of the word. For, "if the Holy Spirit is not with us.....