

Homily
Pentecost Sunday
May 24, 2026

Deacon Don

This Feast of Pentecost is often called the birthday of the church. That is a good description, but there is a problem. When most of us say “the church” we unconsciously think of the church as we know it now. On the first Pentecost there was no “church”. There was no papacy as we understand it today, but there was a leader of fishermen named Peter who made mistakes and often messed up. There were no papal encyclicals. The first one was written in 1730. There were no cardinals. That rank was created in the eleventh century and it was not until medieval times that we see the title “monsignor”. There was no canon law until the twelfth century. There were no church buildings, basilicas or cathedrals until the fourth century and there were no monks or nuns at the beginning of the church. But, still there was church.

Much of the organizational growth of the church over the centuries was necessary. But, it had the unfortunate effect of making people identify the church with its real estate, bureaucracy, titles and laws instead of with themselves. Remember, the Holy Spirit fell on people that first Pentecost and the church was born. The spirit did not fall on the structure or the externals for there were none. The spirit fell on unwashed fishermen, peasant carpenters, ordinary housewives, tax collectors and the seedy marginal folk.

The spirit glued them together by three things – Baptism into Jesus, the breaking of the bread and witness by ordinary people. These were the basics of being church. The presumption was that each one upon whom the spirit fell had gifts to use to spread the gospel. The early church was fisherman, tax collectors and simple people with a variety of gifts. The miracle of Pentecost was not that people could understand what the disciples said. The miracle was that ordinary people who recently had been in hiding and full of fear suddenly were church and making bold proclamations without fear.

A convert once told me that he became a Catholic when a Christian friend took care of his family when he was out of work. He said that was the first time he ever thought the church might be worthwhile. Note, he did not say it was the first time he thought the Vatican, the titles or the real estate might be worthwhile. No, he said when he saw the witness of his friend that the church might be worthwhile. Often that is why people join our church, not because of lofty doctrine or great buildings, but because they see the church in action in the lives of people who are church.

If we were set down in the desert, we would still be church. If we had to gather in a prison cell to celebrate mass or hide in a barn to baptize our children, we would still be church. Baptism, Eucharist and Witness make us church. They are our defining identities as they were on that first Pentecost when the church was born. Everything else like the structure, buildings, titles, and canon law are helpful, but they are basically peripheral and incidental.

Our readings tell us another important truth that the church originated not with people, but with God. Christ founded it, guides it and is still its head. That makes the church unique. No civic club, fraternity, business, social club, bank or government can say Jesus Christ is the founder. Our church was so beautifully described by Vatican II. In the words from the document, The Constitution of the Church, it reads – The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially, those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are also the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the church.

Our church is more believable when its love is visible when the church is shaken by every life violated by violence, when it agonizes over hands without work, stomachs without food, and human beings without human rights. Or, when it is the church of the outcast, not a church that casts out people and when nothing that is human is a stranger to it.

Our church is far from perfect. We have made mistakes in the past and we will make more in the future. The church will wax and wane while cynics will continue to write her obituary. But, the church is here to stay. It is the creation of God who told us – I will be with you until the end of the world. As members of this church, we might want to say – Lord, send out your spirit to help us renew the face of the earth.