

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
SOLEMNITY OF PENTECOST, JUNE 9, 2019
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
WASHINGTON, D.C.

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we conclude this glorious Easter Season, as the Apostolic Nuncio, I greet you in the name of Pope Francis and assure you of his fervent prayers and spiritual closeness. Today, Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate that great outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles who were gathered in prayer with Mary, the Mother of the Lord.

Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.

In my role as a diplomat for the Holy See, I have had to learn many different languages, beyond my native French. I had to learn English, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, and even Creole! There were so many places in my missions where the people spoke their own native tongues. How many times language can be a barrier to understanding! How many immigrants struggle to learn English when they first arrive here and even when they know English, struggle with their accents! How many Americans today, with the new influx of migrants, especially from Central and South America, struggle to communicate with others. In contrast to the frustration that we sometimes have in understanding others, in today's first reading, everyone immediately understands the Apostles as if the Apostles were speaking to each person in his own language. Everyone understands, because the Spirit brings unity.

This unity of Pentecost is intentionally contrasted with the story of Genesis 11- the building of the Tower of Babel. In that story, the people say: *"Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and so make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we shall be scattered all over the earth."* Ancient peoples built ziggurats, multi-level towers, to their gods; the higher the tower, the more they thought they could secure the benefits of God. Rather than build a tower out of genuine piety, they wanted to show what they could do. They do not say: "Let us make a name for God!" They made a monument for themselves – to boast of what they have done. Theirs was not the sin of atheism but of false religion – religious pride. Of course, their tower collapsed; the people were scattered; they became confused and were unable to communicate with each other.

Saint Augustine wrote: "Through proud men the languages were divided; through the humble Apostles, they were reunified." At Pentecost, everyone understands the language of the Apostles. They *"hear them speaking in their own tongues of the mighty acts of God."* The Apostles speak of God, not themselves. The Apostles, united in heart and mind by the Holy Spirit, are the "anti-Babel".

The Church, from the first moment of her existence, has spoken in all languages and to all peoples. She lives in all cultures, instead of trying to keep other cultures out, as many try to do today. The Church happily receives the beauty of peoples and cultures, appreciating their gifts and drawing them into a unity,

a great unity which reconciles differences, while allowing her children to appreciate the many faces of the Beauty of God.

The Holy Spirit is the bond of unity and love between the Father and the Son. Through the power of divine charity, which is represented by the tongues of fire, the Holy Spirit unites peoples and nations. But there are different types of unity: a unity according to the flesh and a unity according to the Spirit. The difference is the center of unity. Around what is our unity built – around ourselves or God? Therein lies the difference between the confusion of Babel and the unity of the Church at Pentecost.

People observe how fractured and polarized society is. They say they want unity – unity in the country, unity with their neighbors, unity within their own families. Many genuinely want to heal broken relationships and desire peace among nations. We all want unity, but it is elusive, seemingly more difficult to attain.

Why? In general, I believe it is because while we all want unity, we want it to be centered around our own point of view, on our own terms. We want people to agree with us. Just turn on the news. You will see and hear the “talking heads” – Blah! Blah! Blah! – trying to convince us to agree with them. They even provide the plans as to how to agree with them. Seldom, if ever, do they listen to another person’s point of view. How much confusion! How much “babbling” on! This is what we might call the unity of the flesh – in which we are at the center. It is precisely this self-referential attitude in us and in the Church that Pope Francis rightly laments. It is not “of the Spirit.”

In contrast, there is unity according to the Spirit, in which the person accepts God as the center of unity. Only when everyone aims at this “One” do we approach and encounter one another. To pass from Babel to Pentecost means to shift from being self-centered to being God-centered, which is exactly what the Apostles are when they begin preaching. The Church could not be born like any other organization, developed from the initiatives of men on their own terms; rather, she had to be created by divine initiative from the gift of God Most High.

Prior to Pentecost, the Apostles had argued about who would be the greatest in the kingdom (Mark 9:34). After Pentecost, with the descent of the Holy Spirit, their thoughts revolved, not around themselves, but around God and His mission. It is after Pentecost that the community of believers is *gathered in prayer*, shared everything in common and was of *one heart and mind* (Acts 4:32)

What is the language that the Spirit, the source of this unity, taught the Apostles? It is the language of humility. This is what everyone understood. They learned to preach not themselves but God, who humbled Himself to become a little child; who humbled Himself accepting even death on a cross; who made Himself low in descending among the dead, but through his humility was raised and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

The gentle fire of the Spirit melts our hearts, purifies them of their sinfulness, and makes us more understanding of others. Humility is the language necessary for true unity. Humility involves thinking less of ourselves and more of God, more of our neighbor made in God’s image and likeness. Humility is the sure medicine for overcoming the spiritual sickness of pride and for moving beyond our self-referential ways. Salvation, communion with God, lies, not in building a high tower but by humbly accepting the gift of salvation from the God who descends to be with us and remain with us. By having an attitude of humble receptivity, we become one body, one Spirit (Eph 4:4) in Christ.

As Easter draws to a close, in this Basilica dedicated to Mary, we recall the model of humble discipleship, through whom the world's salvation was born. It was the *lowly handmaid* who accepted God's gift saying: "*Let it be done to me according to Your word.*" At Pentecost, she who had been overshadowed by the Spirit, again encounters her beloved Spouse as she gathers with the Apostles in prayer. Mary is a model of humility for the whole Church at Pentecost. She is God-centered and so *all generations shall call her blessed*. May she intercede for us that we may be God-centered and like the Apostles proclaim to the world the mighty acts of God and the salvation that comes to us in her Son Jesus who is truly Risen!