

THE EVERLASTING BIRTHDAY

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HE SON OF GOD BECAME MAN to redeem the human race by his death on the Cross. After His death He could have remained on earth forever, but it was part of the divine plan for Him to return to His heavenly Father in due course of time. In His love for us He made sure that everyone would have the means necessary for eternal life. That is why He founded His Church, to show men His way of life—the only way to salvation.

Early in His public ministry Christ selected from among His followers twelve poor, rough and uneducated fishermen. Even today it is difficult for us to understand why Jesus chose men of such calibre as the pillars of His Church. Was there any manifestation of divine wisdom in such a choice? Christ had a reason for everything He did. He knew the Apostles were ignorant of the essential elements of formal human learning. He realized that these twelve could not understand nor penetrate the divine truths of His doctrine any more than anyone else. In fact, they were least apt. He saw that all of them were subject to many imperfections. In preaching the Gospel He foresaw that their innate prejudices and false opinions would color the heavenly doctrine. It was not beyond possibility for their zeal to be directed to an unworthy end. Though Peter was the visible head of the Church, did he not deny Christ? Judas, one of the chosen twelve, would even betray his Master. And the others? They also deserted Him in His hour of need. Christ knew all these things but He permitted them as part of His plan. It is only in the understanding of His plan that we can realize the manifestation of His wisdom. By selecting those poor Galileans Christ was to show the world for all time the power of grace to perfect nature. The Apostles would be shown the painfully slow but marvellously effective power of grace. They would accompany Christ during most of His public life. They would hear His doctrine and witness his miracles and prophecies. They would share in the sorrow of His death and the glory of His Resurrection. They would believe in Him and love Him, yet without grace all this would have availed them nothing.

It was only after the Resurrection that they more clearly understood the wisdom of their Saviour. As St. Luke relates, "He opened

their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures. And He said to them. Thus it is written and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise again from the dead the third day—but stay you in the city, till you be endued with power from on high.”¹ Not until now did they understand the discourse of Christ spoken after the last supper, “I go to the Father—and I will ask the Father and He will give you another Paraclete the Holy Ghost, Whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things—He will teach you all truth—you know Him because He shall abide with you and shall be in you.”²

When Christ ascended to His heavenly Father, the Apostles repaired to the upper room of a house in which they were accustomed to assemble. There they sensed deeply and bitterly the powerlessness of nature. Their base and cringing fear was only matched by their blindness and lack of trust in God’s grace whose mysterious urge they had not yet learned to follow. With Mary, the mother of Jesus, and several other women and disciples they remained in prayer for ten days. The fulfillment of Christ’s promise to send the Paraclete was imminent. “And on the tenth day of their prayer and preparation there came a sound from heaven as of a mighty wind coming—and there appeared to them parted tongues as it were of fire, and it sat upon every one of them, and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost and they began to speak with divers tongues according as the Holy Ghost gave them to speak.”³

The Holy Ghost had come. In an instant, by a miracle of omnipotent grace, marvelous changes were wrought in the Apostles. From cringing cowards they became towers of strength ready to suffer even martyrdom and laugh at their tortures. The confidence in the power of God led them to brush aside as trivial what human prudence would consider insurmountable. Through grace they were spiritually and even physically prepared for all eventualities. These same uneducated fishermen who had often mistaken the meaning of Christ’s words were now divinely illuminated. They understood the profound and saving truth of their Master. They who had been so timid were filled with zeal and courage. Now the twelve boldly professed Jesus Christ before thousands of people. Peter, who had denied his Redeemer a few weeks before, now openly preached faith in Him Who was crucified and Who had risen from the dead.

It happened that on that very day Jews from every nation had

¹ Luke, 24, 45-49.

² St. John, 14, 16ss.

³ Acts, 2, 2-4.

assembled in Jerusalem. They were there to celebrate their own Jewish Pentecost. When they heard the wondrous events that had taken place, they hastened to the house where the Apostles were gathered. They heard the Apostles and were amazed because the twelve were speaking to them in a language each one of them understood! Some of them were skeptical and accused the Apostles of being full of new wine. Peter, whose faith had wavered on the waters, now stood up fearlessly and spoke to the Jews. His reply, serious as it was, is not without a note of humor. "With your ears receive my words—for these are not drunk as you suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day." The Jews knew as well as Peter that ordinary men scarcely have the opportunity to become intoxicated by nine o'clock in the morning! Peter continued, "Ye men of Israel, hear these words. Jesus of Nazareth, being delivered up, you by the hands of wicked men have crucified and slain. This Jesus hath God raised again whereof we are all witnesses. Therefore let all the house of Israel know most certainly that God hath made both Lord and Christ this same Jesus whom you have crucified."⁴ The Jews were struck by Peter's words. Through him the Holy Ghost was softening their stony hearts. With compunction they asked Peter and the other Apostles, "What shall we do, men and brethren?" And Peter answered, "Do penance and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ—and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."⁵ St. Luke tells us that they heard his words and over three thousand souls were baptized.

Thus on Pentecost Sunday in the presence of these converted Jews the infant Church sprang into existence. On that day the Church was born and that Pentecost has become her everlasting birthday. Her course was already gloriously begun. Through the work of the Holy Ghost, the Church would renew the face of the earth. Through the Apostles it displayed a faith sufficiently strong to carry it through all opposition, a hope that would enliven its darkest moments, a charity glowing with ardor for God and man beyond all human understanding.

Christ promised Peter that He would be with the Church for all time. From her birth on that day even until today, that promise has been kept. In the beginning it seemed that the Church was doomed. It was despised, feared and driven into the Catacombs. The Roman Empire fought her for years. But divine in origin, doctrine and mission, she grew rapidly in extent and power. In subsequent cen-

⁴ Acts, 2, 12-36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

turies the Church spread to all the known world. Pagan nations succumbed to her charms and were molded into civilized and cultured commonwealths. The Apostles and their successors willingly and even joyfully gave up their lives to perpetuate their Master's sacred trust.

The Church has weathered every storm. Today when the heresies of centuries have united in a general attack not only on the Church and Christianity alone but on the very foundations of morality, we need not fear. Christ Himself assured us that His Church will triumph until the end of time. In the hope of today for a better tomorrow, His words stand out as a beacon light above all blackouts. "Fear not, for I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world."⁶ The birthday of the Church is everlasting because the feast of Pentecost is never ended. This annual festival is not just a commemoration of the visible appearance of the Holy Ghost, but a renewal and continuation of grace for all ages and generations. The Holy Ghost came to remain and will remain with the Church forever.

⁶ Matt., 28, 20.

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