

THE MEANING IN THE MUMBLING

I confess that few things annoy me more in the life of the Church than the invocation of the Holy Spirit. I realize that sounds strange—maybe even blasphemous—but I'm serious. Too often we think of the Spirit as a magical friend who will come when bidden and reveal to us how to think, act, and feel about a particular issue. But we only need think about all of the mistakes the Church has made—all of the mistakes we as people of faith have made—to realize how problematic such a notion is.

No less than the late Pope Benedict has said so. Back in the late 1990s, when he was still Cardinal Ratzinger, he gave an interview to a Bavarian newspaper in which he spoke about inspiration and the Holy Spirit in the context of Papal Conclaves: "I would say that the Spirit does not exactly take control of the affair, but rather like a good educator, as it were, leaves us much space, much freedom, without entirely abandoning us ... Probably the only assurance [the Spirit] offers is that the thing cannot be totally ruined."

And so, this morning, I would like to build on the idea that the Spirit is like a teacher and how it is in learning to listen to it that we can discern the answer, the way forward, and even the will of God.

Luke imaginatively and dramatically sets the scene in the upper room on that first Pentecost. Gathered together, the Apostles were suddenly taken over by a kind of religious ecstasy and began speaking in tongues—that strange phenomenon we now call *glossolalia*. The din of voices mumbling wildly away attracted a crowd of astonished people who asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" In other words, despite the multitude of languages, despite the noise, there was understanding because they had learned to master the one divine language: the language of love. Perhaps it's a language some in the crowd did not yet understand which is why they were amazed and perplexed and said to one another, "What does this mean?"

What does this mean? There's no doubt that in our journey of faith there have been, and are, many things we encounter which seem odd and incomprehensible, things we find alien and even repellent. They may jangle our sense of privilege and calm, and even challenge our beliefs and practices. When we're confronted by new ways of thinking, acting, and believing and find ourselves amazed and perplexed it's natural for us to ask, "What does this mean?"

And it's precisely at these moments, in these encounters, at these crossroads, that the Spirit meets us and, if we are open, begins to teach us so that we may grow up spiritually. But in order to be taught, we need to cultivate the fine art of listening since the divine language of love is intelligible only to those who have the courage and resolve to actually listen to those around them, to truly hear the stories of their lives, their deepest longings and their wildest hopes. For only when we listen can we begin to understand that despite the perplexing differences between people, there is one commonality that overrides all, and only love can take us and join us together with what is deepest in ourselves: our shared humanity.

This doesn't happen all at once. We need to be patient. God's glorious truths don't descend upon us in a blinding flash which obviates at once doubt and ignorance. Understanding and discernment aren't bestowed upon us like some sort of suit of divinely bespoke clothes. Too literal an interpretation of the Pentecost event may lead us to believe that these abilities will come upon us—abracadabra—in the twinkling of an eye. But if we are diligent students, we will, in time, learn to understand and accept those things that we currently find foreign and baffling.

We need to grasp this truth today more than ever. Our world positively teems with the new, the untried and the foreign, and finding ourselves unsettled and confused, we ask, "What does this mean?" Every day we encounter people whose experiences and languages are different from ours. Much of what we cherish is being changed—even dismantled—with alarming speed. The familiar harmony of the world we knew is being displaced by strident and severe dissonance. In the face of all of this, our kneejerk reaction may be to shrink back in frozen alarm. Yet if we're willing to wait for the winds of the Spirit, even though they may feel like the icy winds of desolation, we'll find that over time our ears hear, our eyes see, and our hearts feel differently than they did. We may find our hearts strangely warmed by those winds. We may even learn to master the language of love.

No doubt the answer to our question, "What does this mean?" will be surprising and challenging, and will require that we release the baggage of our preconceived notions and our preference for unilingual conformity and harmonic predictability. But as we learn, however slowly and imperfectly, the divine language of love, we will hear harmony in the voices we thought discordant, we will see beauty in the things we thought ugly and we will grow to love those we thought hateful.

There's a famous passage in Thomas Merton's writings in which he describes walking along the street in Louisville, Kentucky:

"At the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realisation that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of

renunciation and supposed holiness. The sense of liberations from an illusory difference was such a relief and joy to me that I almost laughed out loud."

That is what this means. It means, to paraphrase Teilhard de Chardin, that when, in a world of perplexing brokenness, staggering incomprehension, and painful division, we learn to harness for God the energies of love, we will, for a second time in the history of the world, have discovered fire.