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This is a homily exploring what the church imagines on Pentecost Sunday. The names for the Spirit from "Veni Sancte Spiritus" should be read with good pauses between.

Pentecost is the last of the 50-day season that began on Easter Sunday. These 50 days are called "the Sunday of the year" because 50 days is very nearly one-seventh of the year's total length. Easter's 50 days should be to the rest of the year what Sunday is to the other days of the week. Once this meant such things as no fasting and no kneeling during Easter's 50 days, just as no fasting and no kneeling on Sundays all year round.

The story of the mighty wind and the flame-like-tongues is presented in art over and over as the core image of this Pentecost Day. But that image of wind and flame, whether presented as calm or chaos, is but one in an amazing chain of images and stories that converge today.

Even our modest book of readings here gives some taste of the broader stories of Pentecost. It provides them as options to be read at Vigil Masses last night. If we wish to imagine what this Pentecost day is about for the church, these stories offer their own windows to surround that window with Mary and the apostles being surprised by a strong wind and hovering flames.

There is, to begin, the story from Genesis about the building of a tower. It starts this way: "Now the whole world spoke the same language, using the same words." And in this "once upon a time," this "time out of time," the people propose to build a tower: a human dream that has never died. They wanted their tower to have its top in the sky, and they wanted it to be something that future generations would see with great wonder. But after they have been building for awhile, there is an intervention from on high. God doesn't knock down the tower, instead God makes vast confusion. The people wake up one morning to discover they can't understand each other's words any more. God has given them the gift of an abundance of languages. The tower project has to be called off because people can't work together. But even so, the tower they began is remembered by the name they gave it, Babel, a word we still use to describe human sounds we cannot make out, a baby playing with sound or the way our ears cannot take in a foreign tongue.

What's this Babel story all about? Is it an explanation of why there are different languages? Is it about our arrogance, forever thinking we are in control and can make anything we like of the world or society? Is it about what happens when people leave the land and start cities? Yes to all, plus it is just a good story. And it is told at Pentecost to set up its reversal: that day when people come from many lands and cities to Jerusalem. These visitors speak dozens of languages but when they crowd together to see what was the sound of the wind and flames all about, and when they hear what Mary and Peter and James are saying, they realize that each person hears in their own language. It is Babel turned upside-down.

The second story for Pentecost is from Exodus and it reminds us that Pentecost didn't begin with Christians. In the time of Jesus and long before, this festival of the Jewish people came 50 days after their festival of Passover. It celebrated the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. We can hardly know our Pentecost without knowing what the Jewish people have been celebrating and still celebrate when they have counted 50 days from Passover. Listen to Exodus: "Mount Sinai was all wrapped in smoke, for the Lord came down upon it in fire. The smoke rose from it as though from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently." And we heard today: "There came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind.... Then there appeared tongues as of fire." Smoke and fire and the earth trembling, then God gives the Law in the book of Exodus, God gives the Spirit in the book of Acts of the Apostles.

A long time ago Christians started contrasting these two gifts, the Law and the Spirit, and that can be interesting. But the story of Pentecost doesn't oppose these two, Law and Spirit, it says: the Law and the Spirit come to us in similar ways, both gifts of God. And one is not the opposite or the enemy of the other. The Law of God is in fact Spirit-filled. The Law is praised in our scriptures as our delight, our companion, our safety, our hope. Never just rules, it is a way to walk, a way to be with others, a way to breathe in and breathe out the very Spirit of God. We could learn much from praying Psalm 119, a many-splendored poem to celebrate the Law as our dear companion given to us by God.

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A third story that Pentecost tells comes from the prophet Ezekiel and we know it well: the valley of the dry bones. In the spirit of the Lord I was taken to the center of

a great open space and this space was filled with bones. I had to walk through them to know how many, how terrible and how many were these bones. Then the Lord asked me: Can these bones live? So I called out to the bones, and there was a sound, bone joining bone, a rattling of the bones, and then skin covered them. But they were not alive. And the Lord told me to call on the spirit, to call the four winds to come and to blow and breathe into these bones and so it happened, and the bones came alive!

What is this? God tells the prophet: "You say that our hope is lost, our bones dried up, we are done for. But I will bring you back, O my people! And I will put my own breath, my own spirit into you!" This is perhaps the truest story of Pentecost. Maybe it is this story that helped the church in the 1960s know that the great Second Vatican Council could be called a New Pentecost. It seemed like we had been lying like dry bones in a big hot valley for so long, and suddenly there was something moving, suddenly there was wind or breath whistling around. An old man had become pope, and he said he was going to open the windows and let the spirit blow through the house of the church.

Did John XXIII suspect what would happen? He spoke of the "prophets of doom," powerful folks in the church who never wanted a window open. And John XXIII died before it really got going. It probably would not surprise him that now we have a sort of counter-Pentecost. John knew that the rattling of the dry bones could be a fearful thing. It was better, some people always say, it was better when the bones just laid there all shiny in the sun and quiet. Perhaps it even happened like that a few weeks after this exciting Pentecost of rushing wind and fiery tongues and everybody from everywhere understanding the apostles. Maybe a month later some were saying: "OK, OK, that's well and good, but we're going too fast! We got to have some control here!" Of course, that too will pass and perhaps quickly if we keep our ears open for the rattling of the dry bones and the Spirit of God whispering to our little communities.

So here is Babel, here is the fire and quaking of the mountain Sinai, and here is the coming together of the dry bones. On the other side of the apostles' big day in Jerusalem there are centuries and centuries of the church. And here too people knew that Pentecost wasn't simply history but possible reality in their lives and their churches. Some wrote poems about this. One is the "Veni Sancte Spiritus," "Come, Holy Spirit." It is something like a litany of what we might call the Holy Spirit of God. What these poems, these song lyrics, do is this: They shatter the walls we build to

shut God in. They give a rainbow of how we might name God and they invite us: Go on, continue, keep the poem moving, call out the way you have met the Spirit of God.

Here are some of the names for the Spirit in this ancient poem. Listen to each, reflect on it for a few seconds in silence, be ready for the next: Father of the poor. Our heart's unfailing light. Consoler. Welcome guest. Sweet refreshment. Sweet repose. In our labor, rest most sweet. Pleasant coolness in the heat. Finally the poet intercedes: "Bend the stubborn heart and will, / Melt the frozen, warm the chill." How else we will begin to know this Holy Spirit unless we find such words? Give up the image of the little white bird at least long enough to let these other images of the Spirit become part of our imagination.

Another of these poems is the "Veni Creator Spiritus." "Come, Creator Spirit." It too brings a spectrum of images and names. Some of them are like opposites: the Spirit is a living fountain of water, but also raging fire. And the Spirit is anointing, the health and delight that comes when we treat our bodies to the oils of plants and flowers.

More than 100 years ago in England, the poet Gerard Manly Hopkins added to these poems. Many of us might remember: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." But Hopkins looks about and sees what we people have done: "Generations have trod, have trod, have trod. And all is seared with trade ... and wears man's smudge, and shares man's smell. The soil is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod." But always, always there is hope because there is the Spirit. He ends his poem: "The Holy Ghost over the bent world broods, with warm breast and with, ah!, bright wings." So we are back to the image of a bird, but now a great mother bird that hovers and protects and broods over the world, and warms us with her breath, and makes a new dawn with her bright wings.

The stories of Babel, Sinai, dry bones, and the best Spirit songs of the church leave us to ponder: Where are our imaginations now? Why, day by day, in church and at work and as citizens and as human beings, why are we so often and so thoroughly being choked, our breath cut off, by what is petty, what is dull, what never sees to the depths of things, what never rises and sees how truths converge? We dully become satisfied with a world that should make us deeply unsatisfied, should make us hungry and thirst for change and for justice, because we are not somebody's helpless robots going about our daily task, accumulating our sad wealth, content

with what the media call entertainment. We are children of this Spirit, we know very well that we were not claimed by Christ and anointed by the Spirit in order to disappear into a petty, sad routine that is choking off the power of our imaginations, our ability to see what might be, what should be, even what truly is!

What then is Pentecost for us? An hour in a three-day weekend, that weekend being what really matters in our lives? Well, the weekend should matter, but how? Why? And what is the name of this weekend? Do we dare let the horrors of war enter the mix of being Christian in America this Memorial Day weekend? What does that have to do with what the generations have done to the earth and its people?

We can make some Pentecost beginnings, but not in here only. Outside where "the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with, ah!, bright wings."

Editor's note: *This reflection was originally published in the May 2007 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Easter reflections](#).*

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