

The Church on Fire

By Jim Seghers

Jews from all over Israel and the Roman Empire crowded into Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost so named because it took place fifty days after the celebration of Passover (Lev 23:15-16).¹ Jesus promised his followers, you will “receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses² in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). A little group of his followers were huddled together fearful and indecisive when “suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them as tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 1:2-4).

Jesus spoke of his “Church” (Mt 16:18, 18:16). On this momentous Pentecost the Holy Spirit molded this band of flawed men into a force that would transform the world. It began with Peter boldly proclaiming that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies, that he rose from the dead; they were the witnesses of this stupendous event, and he offered them salvation from their sins and eternal life. Those who received Peter’s words in their hearts “were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” (Acts 2:41).

On that Pentecost the Holy Spirit brought the Church to life in the “new covenant” that Jeremiah foresaw (Jer 31:31) and Jesus instituted in his blood (Lk 22:20). The Church was the culmination of a series of provisional covenants that God instituted with a man Adam (Gen 1-2), extended to Noah’s family (Gen 9), advanced to a tribe under Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; 15, 17, 22), became a nation of many tribes under Moses (Exod 19-24), and finally became a kingdom under David (2 Sam 7; Pss 89, 132). Therefore the Church is in continuity with and the fulfillment of the faith of the Old Testament in the fullness of God’s revelation in the person of Jesus.

The apostles proclaimed the “good news” (*evangelion*) that Jesus was the divine Son of the heavenly Father. He assumed human nature to offer himself to the Father for all men without distinctions. Jesus is the only means by which anyone can be saved: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). St. Paul declared: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities – all things were created through him and for him” (Col 1:15). The Christian faith spread by preaching (1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11) for the Apostles understood that their oral teaching was the “word of God” (1 Thess 2:13).

The Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint constituted the “Scriptures” of the apostolic Church. Eighty-five percent of all the Old Testament quotations used in the

¹ It was originally called the feast of Weeks (Deut 16:10) or the feast of Harvest (Exod 23:16).

² *Martus* in Greek from which we derive the English word martyr.

New Testament were cited from the Septuagint. Eventually, the books that make up the New Testament were written. St. Irenaeus (d. ca. 195) was the first Christian writer to identify books of the New Testament as “scripture” in the same sense as the books of the Old Testament. By the end of the second century there was a general acceptance of the four Gospels, Paul’s letters, 1 Peter, and 2 John. The acceptance of the other books varied greatly in the third and fourth centuries. The definitive list of the books that make up the Bible did not become authoritative until the fourth and fifth centuries. This determination was made by those in authority, namely, by popes and bishops at synods and councils.

During the first four centuries of the Christian era, there was a considerable amount of Christian literature that needed sifting. In addition to the 27 books that make up the New Testament, each of the following books had some support as being divinely inspired: the *Shepherd of Hermes*, *Doctrine of the Twelve Apostles*, *Apostolic Constitution*, the *Gospel According to the Hebrews*, *Paul’s Epistle to the Laodiceans*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, and the *Epistle of Clement*. Furthermore, 50 Gospels, 22 Acts and various Apocalypses circulated in the early Church.³ However, as was mentioned earlier, the books of the Old Testament that the early Church accepted as canonical were the sacred writings found in the Septuagint.⁴

Christianity was never a religion of a book, even a divinely inspired book. It always called for a radical surrender to Jesus the New Adam (1 Cor 15:45) who abolished the sinful inheritance of the first Adam in the sacrament of baptism (Rom 5:18-19). It was through the ritual of baptism the Christian died to sin to rise with Christ “in newness of life” (Rom 6: 3-4). With the removal of sin, converts “became partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4) and the Father’s adopted sons and daughters (Gal 4:5). The seven sacraments, beginning with baptism, were the conduits of Christ’s infinite merits.

Confirmation (Acts 8:14-17; Eph 1:13-14) matured the divine life given in baptism and commissioned the Christian to win the world for Christ as his soldiers in the great battle of spiritual warfare. It is the sacrament of martyrdom. The *Blessed Eucharist* (Jn 6:53-54), which is the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus under the appearance of bread and wine, transformed them into Christ, strengthened the divine life in them, and becomes the source of their bodily resurrection in paradise. It also united the Christian with the eternal sacrificial offering of Christ to the Father for the salvation of souls (Heb 6:19-20; 7:23-25; 9:23-25). *Confession* (Jn 20:21-23) healed the Christian from the malady of personal sin and the attachment to sin. The *Anointing of the Sick* (Jas 5:14-15) healed them spiritually, gave them courage and hope during serious illnesses, and sometimes healed them physically. *Holy Matrimony* (Eph 5:21-33) bound a man and a woman for life in the covenant of Christ’s love for the Church, displacing the ego and selfishness that wrecks marriages. In this sacrament Jesus gave married couples the grace to live a lifelong union of love and fidelity, and strengthened

³ Henry G. Graham, *Where We Got the Bible*, pp. 34-35.

⁴ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 53. See also: McDonald, *Formation of the Christian Canon*, pp. 25-26, 3, 54, 92, 94, 111, 127-128, 199; Von Campenhausen, *Formation of the Christian Bible*, pp. 1-3; McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 119; *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 523; Kelly, *Canon of Scripture*, pp. 77-88; Sundberg, *Old Testament and the Early Church*, pp. 129, 138-141; Metzger, *Introduction to the Apocrypha*, pp. 154-157; Bruce, *Canon of Scripture*, p. 97.

them to guide their children to heaven. *Holy Orders* (Lk 22:19) extend the priesthood of Jesus Christ into time by empowering consecrated men to act as conduits of supernatural life in the Person of Christ so they could faithfully shepherd God's people.

St. Paul expounded the nature of the Church as Christ's Body to which all Christians are supernaturally united as brothers and sisters with their Head (Col 1:18; Eph 5:22-24, 29-30; Rom 14:4-8; 1 Cor 10:17; 12:4-26). Jesus also identified his Church as "the kingdom of God" or the "kingdom of heaven" (Mk 4:26; 4:30; 10:15). He formed its organizational structure and gave the Church his authority (Mt 16:16-18; 18:15-18; Mk 6:7; Lk 10:1-2). He selected the apostles and appointed Peter as their leader (Mt 16:18; Jn 21:15-17). He gave the Church a firm foundation that represented the twelve tribes of Israel (Eph 2:20; Rev 21:12-14). During apostolic times the hierarchical structure of the Church was evident consisting of bishops, priests (presbyters) and deacons (Acts 14:23; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Pet 5:1).

Drawing on powerful Old Testament imagery (Hos 2:2; 14-23; Jer 2:2), Jesus' relationship with his Church is also depicted in marital terms. He is depicted as the heavenly bridegroom (Mt 9:15; Mk 2:19; Lk 5:34) and the members of the Church as his bride (2 Cor 11:2-3; Eph 5:22-33; Rev 19:7-8). The richness of this metaphor uniquely captures the intimate, loving relationship Jesus has with each of his members, which is poetically depicted in the Song of Songs.

Finally, the Church will reach its triumphal culmination when Jesus returns. Then "all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor 5:10). Then all the faithful members of Christ will be perfected in the glory of heaven.

For two thousand years men and women for every walk of life has been inflamed to surrender everything in the great Christian quest to follow Christ. It is the greatest love story. Such a faithful witness was the martyr Edmund Campion who returned to England under the constant threat of death in order to minister to Catholics during the persecution of Queen Elizabeth. He was captured, brutally tortured and sentenced to death with two other priests: "You must go to the place from whence you came, there to remain until ye shall be drawn through the open City of London upon burdles to the place of execution, and there be hanged and let down alive, and your privy parts cut off, and your entrails taken out and burnt in your sight; then your heads to be cut off and your bodies divided into four parts, to be disposed of at her Majesty's pleasure. And God have mercy on your souls."⁵ The condemned men responded by singing the joyous Christian hymn *Te Deum* that began, "Thee, O God, we praise."

Henry Walpole attended Campion's execution. He was a Catholic, like many today, who made easy moral compromises. However, he stood "so close that when Campion's entrails were torn out by the butcher and thrown into the cauldron of boiling water, a spot of blood splashed upon his coat. In that moment he was caught into a new life; he crossed the sea, became a

⁵ Evelyn Waugh, *Edmund Campion*, pp. 193-194.

priest, and, thirteen years later, after very terrible sufferings, died the same death as Campion's on the gallows of York."

"The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church."⁶

⁶ Second century Church Father Tertullian from his *Apologeticum* (The Apology).