



CONFERENCE ON WORLD MISSION AND EVANGELISM

COME HOLY SPIRIT - HEAL AND RECONCILE

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THE GIFT OF UNDERSTANDING

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*“The Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you”
(John 14:26)*

In the fourteenth chapter of John we find Jesus expounding on ideas and concepts that the disciples find rather difficult to comprehend. Jesus is teaching them about the way, the truth, the life, and love.

The philosophical depth of these concepts was proving difficult for the disciples to follow. They must have been sufficiently confused when Jesus went on to tell them that

I am in the Father, and the Father is in me, and since I am also in you and you in me, then the Father will be in you ... and ‘because I live, you also will live’ (v.19) ... and if you love me my Father will love you, and I and the Father will come and make our home with you (v. 24).

At least three of the disciples were honest enough to admit that they were finding it rather difficult to follow the thread of thought. Thomas was very frank and told Jesus that they had no idea of where Jesus was going, much less the way that would take him there (v.5). Philip told Jesus that they would be satisfied if Jesus showed them the Father (v.8). And Judas (not Iscariot) demanded to know how come Jesus would reveal himself to them, and not to the world (v.22).

This particular discourse was so difficult for the disciples to comprehend that Jesus finally told them if they couldn’t conceptualise what he was talking about “then believe me because of the works themselves” (v.11).

It is against this backdrop that we should understand the text for our message this evening. I wish to base my reflections on the 26th verse of John 14. “... The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you”. The Advocate, the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised would be sent to the disciples did indeed come. In our message today I would like to reflect on what happens when the Holy

Spirit comes. The very theme of the Conference that is now coming to an end is “Come Holy Spirit ...” What happens when actually the Holy Spirit comes?

As we learn from Pentecost, many things happen when the Holy Spirit comes. Among other things the coming of the Holy Spirit represents **the gift of understanding** and this is the theme of our meditation this evening.

At Pentecost the gift of understanding overcame the curse of confusion that occurred at Babel. The project in the Plain of Shinar was motivated by human ambition and selfishness to build a proud tower unto heaven and “make a name for ourselves”. As a result the unity of the human beings to frustrate the divine purpose and will was destroyed, and people were made the parochial captives of our own languages, divided by our inability to hear or to be heard, to understand or to be understood. Because human beings sought to compete with, nay to play god; because of human pride over their great achievements; because of their disregard for God’s design, the diversity of language at Babel was reduced to a curse, and it has served to do little in this world but maintain the differences and erect a wall of ethnocentrism behind which we can hide and from which we can protect ourselves against others.

At Pentecost on the other hand, diversity was overcome by a power that transcended it, the power to understand, to hear in one’s own language, one’s own accent, regional dialect, the wonderful works of God.

The gift of understanding did not diminish the diversity of that great crowd at Pentecost; the people did not cease to be who they were, Medes, Persians, Elamites. They were not reduced to some vague generality without past or place. No, they did not become less than they were, they became more than they had been, for they became at one with all those who heard and understood that God was alive and active in this world and eager that they, all of them, should participate in God’s purposes. It is the reality of the particular that makes the universal so powerful and appealing.

And that has been our experience at this Mission Conference. Each day when we gathered for worship we prayed the Lord’s Prayer, each in our diverse languages; we have shared our experiences from the diverse contexts in more than 105 countries represented by over 600 participants; we have told each other stories and testimonies about God’s great deeds in our lives. That way we have enriched each others spirituality, and deepened our understanding of our unity in diversity. The realities of our particularities made the universal that more powerful and meaningful.

The unity of Christ’s Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church is a unity that is based upon an understanding of who and what God is and has done, is doing, and will do in our lives, in our churches, in our countries. The understanding that united the faithful is an understanding of the mighty works of God, but there is another understanding at work as well, and that is our understanding that others hear of the same mighty works of God in their own tongues. The gospel is not our gospel that is to be translated from our language and experience to others for their benefit; the gospel, rather, is the good news of Jesus Christ that all of us are privileged to hear, and the unity of what we hear overcomes the diversity of who we are. As Christians we are members of a fellowship that exceeds our capacity to define it. The gift of understanding that we receive from the Holy Spirit transcends logic and diversity and is a gift of the spirit of unity; unity of the Church of Jesus Christ and unity of humankind within the one household of God.

During our time together here in Athens we have prayed and sung on numerous occasions, Come Holy Spirit And we shall continue to say this prayer long after we have gone back to our respective places and countries. This is because the coming of the Holy Spirit defines the mission of the church in a wider context that is inclusive, celebratory and filled with a renewed invigoration of faith.

We have already stated that the building of the Tower of Babel was a selfish endeavour driven by a rebellious spirit whose logic was driven by idolatry and lust for power. In our world of today we detect a similar logic which is driving the prevailing tendency to create and sustain a global system that concentrates economic power in fewer hands and controls most of the world resources condemning millions of poor people to a wretched life and to death.

When the Holy Spirit blesses us with the gift of understanding we are enabled to discern a world that is broken, fractured, divided, and violent; a world that is in need of healing and reconciliation.

When the Holy Spirit blesses us with the gift of understanding we are enabled to discern a humanity that is fast losing the capacity to relate as human beings; where human beings are reduced to being commodities and the worth of the individual is measured against their ability to consume.

When the Holy Spirit blesses us with the gift of understanding we are enabled to discern the danger in which we have put the rest of the creation, which all the while groans for liberation just like the human beings who suffer oppression.

When the Holy Spirit blesses us with the gift of understanding we are enabled, like Apostle Paul was right here at the Areopagus, to confront the clever and the wise with the truth of the Gospel of Christ. The Epicurean and stoic philosophers held Paul in contempt wondering what this babbling was trying to say. But empowered by the Holy Spirit this babbling not only outdebated them, his message lived to transform the lives of millions around the world. **And 2000 years later, our presence here, having come from all corners of the earth, is a powerful testimony to the success of the Gospel that St. Paul proclaimed to the Athenians for the first time.**

As at the time of Paul's visit to this very place, when standing in front of the Areopagus he saw how extremely religious the Athenians of their time were, so in our world of today we seek the empowerment of the Spirit to see modern idols for what they are, the mammon of our time. At a time of economic globalisation money has been elevated to the level of an idol – without it you are nothing, and for it even human beings are trafficked and sold. And this happens in many capitals of countries in the North, East, West and South. Those most affected by the processes of globalization are the young people.

Let us pray for the Holy Spirit to bless our young people with understanding and enable them to see visions and dream dreams what will make it possible for another world to emerge; another possible world that is more just, more caring, more participatory, more peaceful. That the young people at this conference and in our congregations and parishes will bring fresh thinking and energy into the ecumenical movement and into our churches. That our young people will find a more meaningful and fulfilling life and carry that as their mission to inspire other young people whose lives are empty and meaningless.

And today being the Sunday that, in the Orthodox tradition, is dedicated to women in honour of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome who were the first to witness the empty tomb, let us praise God for the spiritual courage of these women who were also the very first to hear the good news from the risen Lord himself and literally ran with the breaking news to tell the disciples. We praise God for the ministry of women who have since continued to be the strength of our congregations and parishes. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will increase the capacity of women in the churches and in society at a time when humanity is in need of courage and hope for a more humane society and respect for life.

Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will bless all of us here, and our brothers and sisters in Christ everywhere else to emulate Apostle Paul and boldly proclaim the good news even when it means confronting the powers and principalities of our time; even when it means speaking truth to power; even when it means taking risks in overcoming violence and all other forms of oppression and discrimination in our communities.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, Our world of today is in serious need of a moral compass. Therefore So part of our mission and calling today is to engage in spiritual discernment so that we are able to distinguish the authenticity of the multitude of claims that seek to rescue humanity from its own malady.

As we leave this place, this very very special place, the hallowed place in which Saint Paul stood and from which he proclaimed the good news of the risen Christ, the saviour of the world, the whole inhabited earth, let us embrace with graciousness the generosity of Jesus who pours his spirit to the world in need of a saviour.

Let us go from this place with renewed energy from the risen Christ, and equipped with the prayer, Come Holy Spirit ... help us to overcome our differences and unite our diversity by the gift of understanding. Like the Apostle Paul and the Disciples of Christ, who heard the good news as they were, where they were, and were never the same again, let us allow the same Holy Spirit to come upon us, to convict us and transform us in such a way that we shall never be the same again.

Pentecost is the Spirit whose gift is that of understanding, of knowing who and whose we are. As we go forth let us celebrate once again that gift to the Apostles and to us, as we pray that what transformed them may transform us, and as we pray Come Holy Spirit transform the world that God so loved that He sent His only begotten Son to teach us how to live and relate, to die for us and for our salvation, and to defeat death by raising again from the dead to the glory of the Triune God, so that today we can say Christ is risen, He is risen indeed, go forth and proclaim the good news. Amen.