

Feast of Pentecost
Cycle A
June 12, 2011
Saint Margaret Parish, Bel Air

The Descent of the Holy Spirit

There is a fifteenth century Russian icon entitled *The Descent of the Holy Spirit*.

I wish I had a large representation of it for all of us to see but I do not. So, I will try to describe it and please just try to imagine it with me.

This icon – *The Descent of the Holy Spirit* – depicts Pentecost with complete quiet and calm. It is in sharp contrast to the strong wind, the fiery tongues, and the fearful disciples that we see in today's readings.

This icon portrays the apostles sitting in a semi-circle with complete serenity and peace. It conveys the coming of the Holy Spirit as an inner event.

The idea is that through the birth of Jesus, God becomes God-with-us. Now, through the sending of the Spirit, God becomes God-within-us.

Surprisingly, the figures in the icon are not looking at or talking to or working with one another. Instead, they are all listening intently to God-within-them.

Each of the persons is portrayed differently. Each has different colored hair, different ways of sitting and even clothes that are different in style and color.

And yet, despite all of these differences, the icon portrays complete harmony. The message is that God-within-us makes many individuals into one community.

The Lesson of the Icon

That is the great lesson from this fifteenth century Russian icon or painting – *The Descent of the Holy Spirit*.

The presence of God-within-us is the common ground between each of us and God. And because of that, it is what makes us one.

And so, what we need to do is awaken our awareness of the Spirit's presence as what grounds us, much as the apostles do in the icon. This awareness leads us to realize God's presence as our common grounding with all people – the most solid and lasting basis of community that we could ever hope for.

Thomas Merton's Insight

The well-known Trappist monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton has an excellent insight on this.

I want to read a few sentences from Merton that relate directly to this point. I will read them slowly and please just try to take them in.

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Thomas Merton writes: *“The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless.*

“It is beyond words, it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity – we discover an older unity.

“My dear Brothers and Sisters, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not.

“And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.”

Conclusion

Merton’s thoughts are simple and yet quite profound.

We sometimes make the differences between us, like the differences in the figures in the icon, we sometimes make these obstacles to communion or community or unity. For example,

- Black, white, brown, and yellow,
- People in Harford County and people in Baltimore City,
- Christians and Jews,
- Christians and Muslims,
- Jews and Muslims,
- Catholics and those who are not,
- American citizens and immigrants who want to be citizens,
- Politically liberal and conservative,
- Catholic progressive and traditionalist.

Have I left anyone out?

We so often allow differences to obscure the communion and community and unity that is there. As Merton writes, *“We are already one.*

“What we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.”

This is the Holy Spirit, God-within-us. This is what Pentecost celebrates.