

Andrew C. Thompson, "Overture: Progress of the Paraclete,"
Homily Service 41:3 (11 May 2008 - 31 August 2008): 1-2.

Overture *Progress of the Paraclete*

Pentecost is upon us.

This oft-neglected holiday celebrates the event that got the disciples off their backsides and out into the world, where the good news about Jesus needed to be heard. Often called the "birthday of the church," the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:1–21 was hugely significant for the small band of Jesus' followers who had remained in Jerusalem after his ascension. As the inheritors of that Holy Spirit-formed church, Pentecost should be significant to us as well. If the Spirit first entrusted Jesus' mission to those plucky disciples, it entrusts the same mission to us today.

We would like to think the church has made some progress in the past two thousand years. Part of that desire is a natural affinity for our spiritual ancestry, but part of it is also our present-day culture's rather unnatural obsession with the notion of progress in general. In our market-dominated, profit-obsessed milieu, many cultures (Americans in particular) have a deep-seated need to register progress in every possible way. Progress means personal validation—how else do you explain the McMansion phenomenon? The church is not immune to the progress bug, either. It defines progress by numbers of warm bodies in the pews or the size of the sanctuaries or Family Life Centers. We talk about "church growth" as if market theory were part of the Great Commission itself.

At Pentecost this year, we should think back to when the "church" consisted of only a few terrified disciples, huddled in a locked room. Then we could put pneumatology in its proper place: at the very heart of the church's identity and mission. After all, without the Spirit's action, those disciples would never have made it out of Jerusalem. So when viewing the long time period from that age to this, we might ask ourselves: *Since the Holy Spirit first descended on the disciples in Jerusalem, have we made any progress? And how could it be measured?*

A first glance might suggest that, yes, the church has progressed in some important ways. We have gone from one single room of disciples to an estimated two billion Christian believers worldwide. The church exists

on every inhabited continent. In its better moments, the church even proclaims the reign of God through word and deed.

Then again, other signs confound notions of the church's progress. In the last century, there were more people killed by war, famine, and disease than in all previous centuries combined. Two horrific world wars were prosecuted by some of the world's oldest Christian societies. The twentieth century saw the planet's environment *and* the planet's people decimated by the forces of greed and exploitation. Practically all our technological and scientific advances have opened up new ways for us to kill one another, whether through military, economic, or environmental means. The church is a constant witness, but it has been unable to stop the bad from happening. Christians themselves seem no more holy than they have ever been. So where is the progress, really?

People tend to chart progress in cumulative ways centering on observable growth—which is why, in the church, it is always easier to chart progress by the size of the sanctuary than the holiness of the people who fill it. But God's progress is different. God's progress is revealed in God's love, which is *always* and *everywhere* poured out on the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. The *progress of the Paraclete* is a movement that proceeds from the Father and the Son. It sanctifies the church. But it is not cumulative. Since every child is born as an unbeliever, the church is (as the saying goes) only one generation from extinction. So the Spirit's work must happen anew over and over and over again. It is qualitative and regenerating rather than quantitative and cumulative.

This is actually good news for the church. Like the disciples on the first Pentecost, the church can learn the truth that the Spirit is sufficient for its needs. The Spirit's love is always complete and does not need to build upon itself. Without this love, the church knows only fear and trembling. With it, the church can have the power and courage truly to embody the gospel. For the world, that is the difference between life and death. And for those of us pilgrims who live in the time between the coming of the Paraclete and the coming Parousia, that presence of the Spirit is the only way progress can truly be measured.

Andrew C. Thompson

Editor's Note: We would like our readers to know that one of our frequent writers, The Rev. David Tripp, PhD, suffered complications from knee surgery and passed away December 16, 2007. David was a British Methodist pastor for 28 years before coming to the United States to teach, write, and serve congregations. His parish in North Indiana had burned down last year and David was instrumental in rebuilding the church and holding services in the new sanctuary within less than a year. Liturgical reform and Homily Service have lost a good friend. We extend our sympathy to his spouse, The Rev. Diane Karay Tripp, a writer, and to his family.