

05/20/18 Pentecost B

-- As you head south from the old city of Jerusalem toward Bethlehem on Hebron Road, you will see on your right a hill with what looks like a castle entrance. It's about three miles south of the old city.

-- This is the entrance to the Tantur Ecumenical Institute. It was established over 50 years ago, originally by the Vatican in cooperation with Notre Dame University. I spent three months there in 1996.

-- The Institute has been a place for study and dialogue for Christians in the Holy Land. It has also been a place where those of different faiths (especially Jews, Christians and Muslims) have been able to meet in the most "neutral" site possible in that area.

-- For a while, it was even a place where a Messianic Jewish group met weekly because nowhere else would accept them. In other words, it has been a place for peaceful dialogue among those with tense divisions.

-- Today we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, originally a Jewish feast, but a day when we reflect on the gift of the Holy Spirit. When we hear "the Holy Spirit," some of us may think of people speaking in tongues, miraculous healings or people jumping up and down praising the Lord.

-- Though these things take place at times, I don't think that's the primary way the Holy Spirit works, especially in our day. I think of places like Tantur, places where people of different views can get together and talk in peace to seek greater understanding and unity with each other.

-- The first reading for the Vigil Mass tells us that communicating with understanding was a problem from the very earliest time of humanity. Pride caused people to divide from one another the point that they were speaking a different language, literally and figuratively.

-- When the Pentecost event in Acts took place, notice what occurred. It was not that people suddenly spoke the same language again. No, but they could understand Peter as if he were speaking their language.

-- That's a great lesson for us. The Holy Spirit doesn't come to make us uniform, to make us all think alike. The Spirit comes to help us, as people with different backgrounds, perspectives and even beliefs, to hear each other with understanding and to celebrate what we hold in common.

-- That's what takes place at Tantur and what I experienced there. But we don't need to go to the Holy Land to experience this. It happens whenever Christians get together to understand one another better and to serve their brothers and sisters in need (e.g., our Loaves and Fishes).

-- It takes place when we get together to resolve differences in our communities in a civil and loving manner. It occurs when family members reconcile after a bitter fight or misunderstanding. And it happens when we use social media to unite and affirm people rather than divide them. These things are sorely needed in our polarized world today.

-- At those times the fruit of the Spirit which St. Paul spoke of is evident. It's evident when we foster peace, kindness, generosity, self-control and all those other signs which show the Spirit's presence among us.

-- Normally it's not flashy or spectacular. It often involves hard work to get to that point. But it's worth the effort. For God is working along beside us, giving new life and spirit to our efforts.

-- We are called to be instruments of the Holy Spirit in our world. We don't need to speak in tongues or perform miraculous healings to do this. We simply need to allow the love, joy and peace of the Lord to shine through our lives in our efforts to unite God's people.

-- And, over time, those small efforts will result in a mighty wind that will blow across the world with the grace of the Holy Spirit. It will change the world.