

CATHOLIC HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION
CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSEMBLY
San Diego, California
Opening Liturgy - June 3, 1979
Most Rev. Thomas J. Murphy

The opening oration for the celebration of the Liturgy today is a powerful prayer which offers a basis for our reflection on the Word of God and the reason we have come together this afternoon to mark the beginning of the 1979 Catholic Health Assembly. The prayer is expressed in the following words:

Father of light, from whom every good gift comes,
send your Spirit into our lives
with the power of a mighty wind,
and by the flame of your wisdom
open the horizons of our minds.
Loosen our tongues to sing your praise
in words beyond the power of speech,
for without your Spirit
people could never raise their voices in words of peace
or announce the truth that Hesus is Lord!

If any words sum up the celebration for this Feast of Pentecost, it seems that this prayer captures the theme in the best possible way. The prayer takes the dramatic images of the first Pentecost and asks that the Spirit might enter our lives with the power of a mighty wind, and by the flame of wisdom. The prayer also recognizes the responsibility which is ours as people who share different ministries, and by loosening our tongues to sing the praises of God, we are asked to untap the potential within each of us. And by responding to the challenge of Pentecost, we achieve the possession of the Easter gift which the Lord has shared with us - the gift of peace. In so many ways, this prayer brings together the themes found in the readings of today's liturgy.

At the same time, unlike other excerpts from Scripture which offer a reflective challenge for prayer and meditation, each of the readings that have been announced to us today have a driving inherent force which challenge the listener to a response, a response that has been part of the challenge of the Christian tradition for almost 2000 years. The challenge is the same today as it was when the Spirit touched the apostles and sent them forth to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel. The challenge is the same as was given by Paul to the Corinthians where the Corinthians were told of the different ministries which they possessed, whereby the Spirit would operate in them for the benefit of the community.

Today's liturgy is a call to ministry to all believers in the Lord Jesus by challenging us to use the different gifts we each possess in order to proclaim the Good News in the world today. As people who share a unique and necessary ministry in the world today, the Feast of Pentecost is a unique call to you as members of the Catholic Health Assembly to use your gifts to evangelize a world that aches to be relieved of its pain and to be touched by the healing power of the Spirit today.

2.

The most basic definition of ministry in the Church today is to describe ministry as an act of Christian service. Christian service entails the preservation and respect for the values of our Christian tradition. Paramount among these values is the gift of life, human life shared by each of us here today, and the promise of eternal life which the Lord has shared with us. But ministry as an act of Christian service does not and should not exist in a vacuum; it must have a purpose. For us gathered for this annual Catholic Health Assembly, the very faith which brings us here on the Feast of Pentecost is a cry to share that faith, to live that faith, to proclaim that faith. This is the ministry of evangelization to which you are called .

If ministry is an act of Christian service, and if evangelization is the proclamation of the Good News to believers and unbelievers, that challenge for the exercise of this ministry of evangelization is offered to you as an opportunity to create a new Pentecost through your ministry of health care. No more appropriate feast could be celebrated to initiate this assembly with its theme of "Evangelization and the Health Ministry" than this feast of Pentecost, the feast of the action of the Spirit.

Christian ministry today must follow the pattern whereby the Spirit touched the lives of people in the early Christian community, a pattern which involved evangelization and the proclamation of the Good News. After the first Pentecost, the first coming of the Spirit to the Christian community, the ministry of the disciples was a ministry of the Spirit, a Spirit who enabled and empowered these first proclaimers of the Gospel, a Spirit who affirmed and confirmed the different gifts of each follower of the Lord, a Spirit who communicates and facilitates His presence through each of us as ministers of the Lord.

The ministry of health care is a ministry which responds to the greatest value of human experience - the value of life, its care, its preservation, its reproduction. Health care in our country and world today speaks a language of professionalism, science and incredible technology. But this language is spoken by human beings who are asked to repeat the miracle of the first Pentecost by exercising a compassionate, concerned, and Gospel centered care for those seeking the valuable ministry you offer within the health care apostolate. In so many ways, whether the invitation is voluntary or involuntary, you are invited to be a part of peoples' lives at critical and crucial moments. You exercise a ministry in relationship to people which offers the most favorable climate and environment possible for the proclamation of the Good News. On the first Pentecost, people were amazed because the followers of the Lord spoke in a language whereby each person, despite background, education, or knowledge, heard about the marvels which God has accomplished. You are asked to speak that language today whether as administrator, doctor, nurse, technician, or hospital aide. You are called to a ministry of healing, a ministry which affects not only the physical life of people, but the life which the Spirit offers to all human beings.

3.

There is a need for a new Pentecost in the world today. Perhaps there will not be the same signs that accompanied the first Pentecost of a strong wind and tongues of fire. The Pentecost today might well occur through a gentle breeze and the warmth of Christian love on the part of each of us in relationship to one another. As ministers serving other human beings in the name of Jesus, your service affects people at critical and important times - times of doubt and despair, times of anguish and uncertainty, times of pain and sorrow. These times affect not only people directly ministered to by each of you within the ministry of health care, but countless relatives and friends. Somehow or other your ministry of Christian service must confront the ultimate questions dealing with the basic issues of human experience - the issues of life and death. Those issues become the climate and environment for the entrance of the Spirit into peoples' lives to gain some appreciation, some understanding, some insight into the relationship each one has to God. This is the climate, this is the environment for a ministry of evangelization, for the proclamation of the Good News of the Gospel and the healing power of the Spirit.

These words may seem idealistic, but they become very real when they are translated into human experience. I cannot help but recall a few years ago when I had the gift of experiencing the ministry of people involved in health care. That ministry was expressed in a variety of ways by countless people, but it was a ministry which announced the presence of God. It took on various forms from a surgeon who said he did all he could, but the final decision was in the hands of God and that he would pray for me; it manifested itself in the solicitude and care expressed by office personnel and nurses' aides as they fulfilled routine and monotonous tasks as one entered a hospital; it burst forth unexpectedly as one woke up from a brief slumber to discover a hospital aide cleaning the room while saying silently the decades of the Rosary which she told me was her gift, unrecognized and unnoticed, on behalf of each of the patients in the rooms for which she was responsible. So many people became a gentle breeze and the incarnation of warm Christian love that brought forth the presence of the Spirit.

Health care ministry is a ministry of the Spirit, a Spirit who touches peoples' lives. The liturgy we celebrate today contains a unique prayer that is known as a Sequence or prayer before the proclamation of the Gospel. In so many ways the words of that prayer are the challenge of health care ministry. The words of the Sequence include the following verse:

"Kindly Paraclete, in your gracious visits to man's soul,
you bring relief and consolation.
If it is weary with toil, you bring it ease;
in the heat of temptation, your grace cools it;
if sorrowful, your words console it."

The visits which the Spirit makes to peoples' souls today will be accomplished through human beings in the world today. No group of people have such an opportunity to become instruments for the work of the Spirit than those involved in the ministry of health care.

4.

Health care is often characterized by the antiseptic setting of efficient personnel, stainless steel instruments, and institutional settings in hospitals, nursing homes and hospices. Into that climate and environment the minister of health care enters and as ministers of the Spirit today, you are asked to be the gentle breeze that creates a new Pentecost in the lives of people. You are asked to express the fire of a warm caring love that could set a world on fire.

Today we pause in our prayer to reflect on a magnificent event which occurred two thousand years ago. The incredible challenge offered to ministers of health care is that Pentecost is possible again through who you are, through what you do, and through what you proclaim as ministers in the Church today.

Once again, the power of the opening prayer of our liturgy becomes the basis for our hopes and dreams:

"Father of light, from whom every good gift comes,
send your Spirit into our lives
with the power of a mighty wind
and by the flame of your wisdom
open the horizons of our minds."

The Spirit will come into the lives of countless people because a group of people such as yourselves have responded to the call to ministry which is yours within a world today. "Come Holy Spirit!" You know, he really will come if we are willing to bring Him.

Most Rev. Thomas J. Murphy
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