

that they can be a valid means of prayer and worship for the industrial congregations of today.

The key question in ecumenical discussion is the nature of the Church. The Catholic student who wishes to take part in ecumenical activity will need to be conversant with ecclesiology, and he will have read something of what Catholic theologians have written in relation to the discussions emerging from the work of the World Council of Churches. He will find there Catholic teaching which is traditional and yet in touch with the difficulties of other Christians seeking for unity, but unable to find it. If he can read French he will be able to build up a considerable knowledge of the subject. Even in English there is enough to provide a foundation and framework. If he perseveres he may well succeed in persuading those around him of the necessity for regular work of this sort, sponsored by responsible Catholics and sanctioned and blessed by their bishop. The opportunities are there and waiting, as they are in the whole of our contemporary society, where Catholics are constantly in contact with their separated brethren but lack the knowledge and training to turn their good will into apostolic work.



## A PENTECOST SERMON OF ST AUGUSTINE ON THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

*Translated by* HUGH FARMER, O.S.B.

### INTRODUCTORY NOTE

*In his popular sermons St Augustine (Bishop of Hippo 396-430) never tired of insisting on the unity of the Church. This was particularly necessary in face of the strong Donatist schism which had originated from the supposed invalidity of the consecration of Cecilian, Bishop of Carthage, and had flourished for more than eighty years. This dangerous attack on the validity of the hierarchy and sacraments threatened the very existence of the African Church; the Donatists claimed to be the one true*

Church, they had the appearances of Catholicism and much of its reality: a hierarchy, valid sacraments and orthodoxy on most points of doctrine. They had also obtained control of many churches and frequently resorted to violence in support of their claims.

St Augustine strongly insisted on both the visible and the spiritual aspects of the Mystery of the Church: both are due to the Holy Spirit who dwells within her like the human soul in the body, Pentecost is both the cause and the sign of her unity and universality, as he recalls in sermon 268 translated below. The Donatists impugned both these notes; but their sect, he answered, was confined to Africa like that of the Eunomians to Asia, while the Catholica is everywhere, spreading in all directions like a growing vine. The schismatics, however, are useless branches, cut off in their sterility by the husbandman and remaining in the same state ever since. Spiritual death is the consequence of schism; a separated member loses the life of the Body and the Spirit of Christ. (Cf. *Sermo XLVI*, c. viii, no. 18; *Sermo CCLXVII*, ad finem.)

The gift of tongues at Pentecost showed that the Church was truly universal even when contained within the Cenacle. But St Augustine had seen this universality realized by the spread of the Church throughout the civilized world, so that she now spoke all languages, no longer by a miracle of tongues, but simply through her diffusion. He could identify himself by charity with all nations in the Church: 'Greek is my language, Syriac and Hebrew too . . . because I am in the unity of all nations.' The provincial sectarianism of the Donatists, on the other hand, showed that their claims were unfounded. (Cf. *Enarratio in Psalm 147*, no. 19.)

Although his tireless preaching that the decisions of the Catholic Church show the path for all to follow and that communion with her was necessary for every Christian dealt them blows from which they never recovered, and even though in 411 a Donatist conference admitted that Cecilian could not be proved a traditor, the Donatists survived as a small sect until the Arabic invasions of the seventh century. Perhaps St Augustine himself would not have been surprised. In a sermon discovered fairly recently he said: 'Since we are Catholic Christians, let us run in this way which is the only Church of God, as foretold by the Scriptures. God did not will her to be hidden, lest anyone might excuse himself; it was foretold that she would fill the world, and in fact she has done so. Heresies and schisms should not trouble us; we should rather be troubled if there were none, because they have been foretold.' (*Miscellanea Agostiniana*, vol. I, p. 286.)

**T**HE coming of the Holy Spirit makes this day a solemn feast for us; it is fifty days since our Lord's Resurrection, seven weeks of seven days. But seven sevens are only forty-nine, the extra one is added to draw our attention to unity.

What was the coming of the Holy Spirit, and what did it accomplish? How did he show us his presence, and how did he prove it? By everyone speaking the languages of all nations. A hundred and twenty men were there in the same place—the holy number of the twelve apostles multiplied by ten. Did then those on whom the Spirit came each speak a single language, so that some spoke one and some another, and thus between them the languages of all the nations were spoken? Not so; but each and every man spoke the language of each nation. A single individual speaking every language is a sign of the unity of the Church amidst the different tongues of all peoples. Notice how our attention is here directed to the unity of the Catholic Church which is spread through the whole world.

Whoever has the Holy Spirit is within the Church which speaks in the tongues of all peoples. Whoever is outside this Church does not have the Holy Spirit. He deigned to prove his presence by the languages of all the nations precisely so that whoever is within the unity of the Church which speaks all languages may thus realize that he has the Holy Spirit. 'There is one body', says the apostle Paul, 'one body and one Spirit.' Consider our bodily members. The body is made up of many members, and a single spirit animates them all. I co-ordinate all my members by my human spirit which makes me a man. I command them to act, by willing the eyes to see, the ears to hear, the tongue to speak, the hands to work and the feet to walk. The function of the members is different, but a single spirit unites them all together. Many actions are commanded and accomplished, but only one principle commands them, only one is obeyed. Now the relation of our spirit (that is, our soul) to our members is the same as that of the Holy Spirit to the members of Christ, that is, to the body of Christ which is the Church. Thus when the apostle says 'one body', he does not want us to think of a corpse. He says 'one body', but is it alive? Yes, it lives by a spirit—'and one Spirit'.<sup>1</sup> Consider our body carefully, brethren, and grieve for those who are cut off from the Church. But as long as we are alive and well,

<sup>1</sup> Eph. iv, 4.

all our members perform their functions. And if one member is in pain, all the members suffer with it, but because it is in the body, the member can suffer but cannot die. Death indeed is nothing else than the loss of the spirit. If a member is cut off from the body, does the spirit follow it? Yet a separated member is recognized for what it is: a finger, a hand, an arm or an ear. It keeps its form apart from the body, but not its life. So also the man separated from the Church.<sup>2</sup> You look for a Sacrament and you find he has it, you look for Baptism and you find he has it, you look for the creed, and you find he has that too. All this is the form; but it is useless to glory in the external form without being animated by the interior Spirit.

God, my dear brethren, strongly draws our attention to unity. Let this example convince you. When God made everything and creatures began to exist, he made stars in heaven, flowers and trees on earth. At his word 'Let the earth bring forth', the trees and flowers came into existence. When he said 'Let the waters bring forth fishes and birds', it was so; when he said, 'Let the earth bring forth a living soul of all beasts and cattle', it was so.<sup>3</sup> Did God make all birds from a single bird or all fishes from a single fish? All horses from one horse or all animals from a single animal? Did not the earth rather bring forth many together, and bring many into existence by many births?

But when God created man, he made only one individual from whom the whole human race has descended. He did not even choose to make first two separate individuals, male and female; but first one man, and then from him one woman. What was the reason for this? Why did the whole human race spring from a single individual, except that thereby God might recommend unity to the attention of us all? And Christ our Lord was born of a single human parent, a woman; unity is a virgin, it preserves virginity and incorruptibility.

Our Lord himself recommended the Church's unity to the apostles; when he appeared to them, they thought they saw a spirit, they were afraid, but afterwards they were strengthened by his words: 'Why are you troubled and why do these reasonings arise in your hearts? See my hands, touch and see, for a spirit has

<sup>2</sup> St Augustine treats this theme more fully in *Tractatus in Joannem* XXVI, no. 13 and XXVII, no. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gen. i, 20-24.

not flesh and bones, which you see that I have.'<sup>4</sup> And while they were still astonished for joy, he took food, not because he needed it but to show his power, and he ate it in their sight. He thus drew their attention to the reality of his body (against the wicked) and to the unity of the Church. And what did he say? 'Are not these the words I spoke to you while I was still with you, how that everything must be fulfilled which was written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms?'<sup>5</sup> Then, the Gospel says, he opened their minds that they might understand the Scriptures. And he said to them: 'Thus is it written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise again from the dead on the third day.'<sup>6</sup> Here indeed is our head, but where are the members? Here is the bridegroom, where is the bride? Read the marriage-contract, listen to the bridegroom. Do you seek the bride? Listen to him: no one takes away his bride from Christ or substitutes another for her; hear this from him. Where do you seek Christ? In human fables or in the truth of the Gospels? He suffered, he rose again on the third day, he showed himself to his disciples. Now we have found him, but where do we look for her? Let us ask him. 'It behoved Christ to suffer and rise again from the dead on the third day.' That has taken place already, we see it now. Tell us more, Lord, tell us, lest we fall into error. 'And preach in his name penance and the remission of sins to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.'<sup>7</sup> The Church began at Jerusalem and reached even to us. She is both there and here. The Church did not leave Jerusalem to reach us; she grew, but did not depart from thence. Soon after his Resurrection he recommended this. He lived with them for forty days, and just before he ascended into heaven he again recommended the Church herself. On the point of departure the bridegroom recommended his bride to his friends: he did not mean that she should love one of them only, but that she should continue to love him as her bridegroom and them as the bridegroom's friends, but no single one of them as her

<sup>4</sup> Luke 24, 38-39.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. In Sermon CXVI, no. 6, St Augustine, beginning from this text, contrasts the Apostles' knowledge with ours. 'They saw the Head, they believed what he told them about the Body. . . . We see what they did not see: the Church spread among all peoples. But we do not see what they saw: Christ in the flesh. . . . The Whole Christ has been revealed to them and to us, but seen by neither; they saw the Head and believed in the Body, we see the Body and believe in the Head.'

bridegroom. The bridegroom's friends should be zealous for this; they should not allow her to be contaminated by impure love; to be loved in that way is really hatred. Consider carefully the zealous friend of the bridegroom: when he sees the bride as it were prostituting herself with the bridegroom's friends, he says: 'I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. I have been told, brethren, by those who belong to Chloe's household that there are divisions among you, and each of you says: "I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas, I am of Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?'<sup>8</sup> Like a true friend he rejected the love of a bride who was not his own. In order to reign with the bridegroom he chooses not to be loved as a bridegroom.

The Church then was recommended to us, and at the ascension Jesus spoke in this way to those who had asked about the end of the world, those who had said: 'Tell us when shall these things be, and when shall be the time of thy coming?'<sup>9</sup> He answered: 'It is not for you to know the times which the Father has appointed in his power.' Listen, disciple, to what you can learn from the master: 'But you shall receive the power of the Holy Spirit, which shall come upon you.'<sup>10</sup> And indeed so it happened: he ascended into heaven on the fortieth day, and today all who were present were filled with the Holy Spirit coming upon them, they spoke the languages of all nations. The very same unity is again commended by the languages of all nations. It was commended by the risen Lord, it was commended by the ascending Lord, it was confirmed by the Holy Spirit who came today.

8 1 Cor. xi, 18; i, 11-13.

9 Cf. Matt. xxiv, 3.

10 Acts i, 6-8.