# Homily for Pentecost Sunday 2020 – Cardinal Vincent Nichols

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Life has been so strange for these last ten weeks. There has never been a time quite like it, difficult yet gifted. For, in fact, these weeks have been full of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, whose coming on the group of the first disciples of the Lord we celebrate today. We thank God for the giving of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, then and now.

A few days ago, I had one of these ‘virtual meetings’ with all the men who are in preparation for service as priests in our parishes. There were over 20 of them, many now part of a ‘household of a presbytery’ where they help out in the ministry of the priests. Their stories were full of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

They spoke of their joy and encouragement in being able to share in the life of the priests, who had welcomed them so warmly into their homes. Such gracious hospitality, a touch of the Holy Spirit.

They spoke of finding that prayer was at the heart of each day and that these weeks were giving them time to grow closer to the Lord.  Such prayer is the gift of the Holy Spirit who shows us how to pray when our hearts know not what to do. This gift is there for all of us. We just have to ask and open our hearts.

They spoke not only of their own prayer but of all the ways in which they have been drawn into sharing prayer with others, over the internet, over the telephone, in rosary circles, in Scripture reflection. Many of you are doing this. Yes, it is the Holy Spirit who urges us to reach out to others and share with them the joy and consolation we find in the Lord's presence. We are just like those first disciples: we need this encouragement, this gift, in order to overcome our reticence and speak openly with others, with care and respect, of the greatness of our faith. There is no time like the present for doing that!

The seminarians spoke too of sharing in the awful sadnesses of this time: being present at gravesides with such a small group of people bidding farewell to a loved one, feeling the painful breaking of bonds that death entails, without the comfort of wider family and friends.

The great work of the Holy Spirit is, of course, to bring about the astonishing miracle of the Mass.  Through the power of the Holy Spirit the bread and wine which we bring to the altar becomes the Body and Blood of the Lord, our nourishment for the journey of life. How hard it is to be away from this Eucharistic Communion. How much we need to rely on the same Holy Spirit to bring the presence of the Lord into our hearts through a spiritual communion. The Holy Spirit can do that.

No confines, walls or rules can limit the gracious working of the Holy Spirit whose gifts are to be found in so many places.

Today we think of the group of disciples, with Mary, waiting, as they were bidden, in the Upper Room. The doors were closed. Jesus came and breathed upon them and said ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’. Then they were empowered, fired by that gift which is also described as being ‘like tongues of flame’. Flinging open the doors, out they came, ready at last for their mission.

We, too, are waiting to open these doors, the doors of our churches. The waiting has been hard but we have accepted the Government's decision to close our churches because the protection of life required it. But last week's announcements by the Prime Minister that some indoor sales premises can open tomorrow and that most shops can open on 15th June, questions directly the reasons why our churches remain closed.

We are told that these openings, which are to be carefully managed, are based on the need to encourage key activities to start up again. Why are churches excluded from this decision?

The importance of faith to so many people is clear. The role of faith in our society has been made even clearer in these last weeks: as a motivation for the selfless care of the sick and dying; as providing crucial comfort in bereavement; as a source of immense and effective provision for those in sharp and pressing need; as underpinning a vision of the dignity of every person, a dignity that has to be at the heart of the rebuilding of our society.

The opening of our churches, even if just for individual prayer, helps to nurture this vital contribution to our common good.

Opening churches must be done safely. That is so important. We are confident that we can do so. We have developed expert guidance. We are ready to follow the Government's guidelines as soon as they are finalised. What is the risk to a person who sits quietly in a church which is being thoroughly cleaned, properly supervised and in which social distancing is maintained? The benefits of being able to access places of prayer is profound, on individual and family stability and, significantly, on their willingness to help others in their need.

It is now time to move to the phased opening of our churches.

Thankfully the mission of the Church, inspired by the Holy Spirit, knows no boundaries.  We see this every day. I am confident that the experience of this ‘lock down’ is teaching us many new ways of sharing faith, of explaining faith, of putting faith into practice. Thank you all, so much, for the witness you are giving.

In speaking today of the gifts given by the Holy Spirit, Pope Francis says this:

‘Dear friends, we are called to share the comfort of the Spirit, the closeness of God we have received. How do we do this? Everything we would like others to do for us let us do to them instead. Do we want to be heard? Let us first listen. Do we need encouragement? Let us give encouragement. Do we want someone to care for us? Let us care for those who are alone and abandoned. Do we need hope for tomorrow? Let us give hope today. Let us, then, become messengers of the comfort bestowed by the Spirit.’ ([Message of Pope Francis for *Thy Kingdom Come*](https://rcdow.org.uk/news/popes-message-for-thy-kingdom-come-2020/))

Today we remember: the Holy Spirit is the fire that keeps us going; the water of the immensity of God's life within us; the dove of his peace after disaster; the wisdom that shows us right from wrong; the creative spirit who makes a work of art of our lives, the wind that will urge us on to our heavenly home, if we will let him do so!

Holy Spirit of God:
Thou of all consolers best
Thou the soul’s delightful guest
Dost refreshing peace bestow.

Give us comfort when we die
Give us life with thee on high
Give us joy that never ends.

Amen

Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster