

A year ago at this time I was just about to head off on my month-long silent retreat in South Dakota. Among the things I packed for the retreat was an old Bible. During the retreat I opened that Bible and found in it a letter I had written to Jesus on November 21, 1996 while on my Deacon Ordination retreat. It was an interesting (and providential) discovery, kind of like a time capsule. Re-reading the letter I had composed in the fervor before ordination, with all its idealism and hopes, from the perspective of more than two decades of living day in and day out as a priest was convicting.

“Is it still Easter?” I can imagine that question being asked with surprised by those who aren’t well-versed about the liturgy. By the time we get to Pentecost, I suspect for many of us, Easter and the Resurrection aren’t in our minds anymore. We’ve probably forgotten about them. Today I want to preach about living out that long season and losing sight of our spiritual mission and goals over time. And how it

can serve as an analogy for our whole life's spotty attempts to acquire spiritual holiness.

I think for many people the Easter season, if it's remembered at all, is experienced as a let-down compared to Lent. Any spiritual gains we made during that season slip away in the weeks after Easter and we end up where we started from. It's often the same when we look at our lives as a whole. There are periods of spiritual striving and movement. But they usually don't last long. And we fail in our resolutions.

But Pentecost is the perfect time to reexamine that depressing cycle. Dr. Tom Curran was here yesterday, giving a series of talks. I was thinking of this as a topic for my homily, but he gave me some ideas about spiritual powerlessness and the Holy Spirit that I want to use.

Going back to my ordination letter, in it I had made a number of resolutions of how I was to live my priesthood. It was written during my deacon retreat, but you have to understand that for seminarians the deacon ordination is the big moment. That's when you make your vow

of celibacy and commit to becoming a cleric for the rest of your life. So, the letter was written at a moment of maximum excitement and zeal for Jesus and His Kingdom. Reading those old resolutions during the silent 30 days in South Dakota allowed me to examine how I had put my vocation into practice. I'll spare you the details, but let's just say I hadn't kept all my resolutions very well.

This Pentecost is an opportunity for all of us to do something similar. Think about your own spiritual life and relationship with God. Is it less than you had hoped for from the perspective of your best, most zealous days, in fact, disappointing? Why might that be?

Yesterday, Dr. Curran made the point that there are three discoveries in living out the spiritual life – God's call, my powerlessness to fulfill that call, but God's empowerment of me to do what I can't. The problem is that we try to skip over the second point – our powerlessness. We don't like that one because it feels like failure and failed resolutions. But here is how it goes in God's mind. He calls each

of us. I certainly remember the call I received to the priesthood – and I firmly believe that I got that discernment correct. So, all I needed to do was do the actions a good priest does, right, as I promised in my letter?

But it didn't work out like that. It was harder than I thought.

Looking at that letter and my resolutions again, I would say I've always under-estimated my powerlessness. Too often I've tried to do it for God, all by myself, with my natural talents and abilities, rather than let God do it for me. I constantly forget I can't really do it. Only the Holy Spirit working through me can do what God wants done.

Look at the Apostles on Pentecost. Was it their natural way with languages that allowed them to speak to all those nations? Or was it the Spirit using them. The Apostles were a bunch of very average men before Easter. In fact, they had proven they were ignorant cowards during Holy Week – abandoning Jesus in His time of need. They had proven to themselves they were powerless. But it was precisely this past experience and knowledge of their failure that allowed them to be

open to Pentecost and the Holy Spirit. They were empowered by God because they knew by then that they couldn't do anything themselves.

What about you? Let me ask you some questions this Pentecost. Is your relationship with Jesus, and entire spiritual life, less than you think it could and should be? Who do you really trust more to get things done – God or yourself? Do you accept that you are powerless on your own to become the person you think God wants you to be?

The way to empowerment is through a trust in our own powerlessness. That's the only way the Holy Spirit will be able to work fully in us – by our getting out of the way. And that is Good News because it means that our failures are very helpful! When I fall on my face, I should take that as another lesson in my own powerlessness, that I can't do it! And then, either I get depressed and down on myself – or, I take one more little step towards finally learning my lesson and getting out of the way, and letting the Holy Spirit do it for and through me.

Pentecost is the celebration of the empowerment of the powerless by the Holy Spirit. A major project for most of us here today is to pray for a greater openness to the Holy Spirit in our lives. We periodically have prayer services here at HFK asking for the grace of the Spirit to become more fruitful in us. Come to those and ask for that. But, also, don't become discouraged by your spiritual failures. They aren't really failures so much as you just trying to do too much, and not trusting enough in the Spirit. The Church and world need empowered Disciples these days. Let us, then, be humble and faithful enough to recognize our powerlessness, and trust God do His work through us.