



# Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers  
From the clergy and members  
of Holy Trinity Church  
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"What's in a Name?"**  
Comment: Fr Strand asks the congregation if they are Pentecostals and suggests a surprising response.  
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## Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Acts 2: 1-11  
Epistle 1 Corinthians 12: 4-13  
Gospel John 20: 19-23

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One of the things that newcomers to the Philippines have to get used to is the novel use of terms in our culture here. I have often heard the whole religious world neatly divided into two parts: Catholics and Christians. "Are you a Christian?" "No, I'm a Catholic." "Is that a Catholic church?" "No, it's a Christian one." I'm not sure how this happened, but the same phenomenon exists in Latin America, too. I don't necessarily blame the Roman church for it, since I have been in at least one circumstance in which I heard about a meeting of "the Christians" that most certainly *didn't* include Anglicans...or maybe it was just *me* that they wanted to avoid!

For Catholics, the term 'Christian' has come to mean 'Protestant', while Protestants have been taught by misguided clergy over the years to consider the Roman Catholic Church as so corrupt and misguided that there is no salvation within its membership and therefore not a "Christian Church" at all. And that's not even mentioning the local Filipino group that thinks that any mention of 'The Church of Christ' in the New Testament refers exclusively to them!

Of course, the Roman Catholic Church *officially* recognizes itself as Christian, even if it may not be too generous in admitting that other groups are really *quite* as authentic a church as it is! And even though there have been times when cruel Protestant teachers have claimed that the Roman Catholics Church is a thing of the devil, the fact remains that we all call Jesus Lord and see in our histories some tell-tale traces of a common origin in the event we celebrate today: the old Jewish festival of the Gift of the Law, baptized by the Church to become the celebration of the Holy Spirit.

That brings up another term, however, that has equally been used and abused by Church groups, and that is *Pentecostal*. I don't suppose that if I asked whether anyone here were "Pentecostal" that very many would raise their hands. Why? Because for most of us the term evokes images of wild goings-on in church, of weird speaking in tongues and women with towering hairdos (although that may be a truly American phenomenon) and an approach to the Christian life that can seem restrictive, exclusive and uncompassionate.

There is however a semi-official use of the term Pentecostal in use in church circles and designating bodies that are concerned primarily with perfection, holiness, and the experience of the gifts of the Spirit (like speaking in tongues and divine healing), and that firmly believe in the literal infallibility of the Bible, and the existence of eternal punishment for the wicked. Some of these groups use the word 'Pentecostal' in their names, but others do not: the largest Pentecostal church in the world is known simply as the 'Assemblies of God.'

But titles, like labels, can be very limiting, and this name can also frighten us away from a very fundamental truth of our Christian Faith. The fact is we are all Pentecostals because the Christian Church was born on Pentecost and its first infant cry of the Gospel message was as a result of the unrefined, emotional, exuberant and decidedly un-Anglican earthquake, wind and fire that shook up the room in which the apostles were gathered and then chased them outdoors to confront a world waiting to hear the Good News.

Even the Pentecost story can be intimidating to some. They may think that being true to the witness of that first great day of the Christian Church, they too must stand on the street-corner and preach, or worse, begin to speak in tongues or use only one kind of music in church.

It is true that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit as experienced by the early Church was speaking in tongues, a phenomenon that even St Paul approves of...when it is under control and exercised with common sense. But there is something very different about the tongues spoken on that first Pentecost Sunday. They weren't just ecstatic sounds or gibberish that the apostles were using to show how special they were. No indeed, we are told that the people who heard those first Pentecostal revivalists *understood what was being said to them* in all of the languages of the Eastern Mediterranean. It is an important distinction and one that can encourage us today.

Yes, we are all Pentecostalists, or we ought to be. The gifts of the spirit spoken of in Scripture are all meant to be ours if we claim them. And the ability to share one's faith in words that will be understood is not always a matter of speaking Tagalog, or Chinese or English, but of using the personal language that each of us understands. We are told speak to children in words they will understand; to speak to the mature using terms they will appreciate. If we are in business and industry, then that's the tongue we will speak in; and if we are shy and retiring, well then God will use us to witness by our lives to other shy and retiring folks who need to see that God needs them too.

And how is that witness shared? Probably *not* by opening a bible and preaching in the middle of the office or the embassy or the shopping mall, but *possibly* by giving a reason for some of things that make you delightfully weird: the skill in which you deal with stress and conflict, or the fact that your marriage is working, or that you seem to be able to a happier person than those around you. If being a Christian has something to do with all those things, if God in Christ did something in your life that made good things happen, then tell people that. That's all it takes to be a Christian witness; that's all it takes to be truly "Pentecostal" in the most authentic use of that word.

So how many people here are Pentecostal? The correct answer is *all of us* that are members of the universal Christian Church whose birthday we celebrate today. And if that sounds intimidating and scary, well perhaps that's exactly what it ought to be! It wasn't any better for the apostles on that day of wind and fire and foreign tongues, and yet they survived. In fact, they did much better than that, and the fact that we are here today, worshipping God far, far from Jerusalem, as men and women of all races and nationalities is the proof. So, fellow Pentecostals, "Praise the Lord!"