



# 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: **"Forgiven...Retained."**  
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## Readings for this Sunday:

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

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Today's celebration was originally in honor of a Jewish holiday: the Feast of Weeks. At this holiday, the first fruits of the grain harvest were presented at the Temple and, in later times, the giving of the Law to Moses was commemorated. This was the occasion that we hear about in the book of Acts today when there was a large number of pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem from all over the world. While keeping the feast, the apostles experienced the dramatic scene we heard about in today's first reading.

It wasn't by accident that the description of the fire and wind parallels the passages in Exodus describing God on Mount Sinai. The early Christians saw their own Pentecost experience as a new presence of God to his people. This time, it wouldn't only be the people of the Jews that would experience God's special care and presence, but people from all over the world, symbolized by the various races and nationalities mentioned in Acts. So much for history; what about now?

Our celebration of the Holy Spirit is largely external, I'm afraid. The red clothes are nice, of course, and the decoration of the church is meant to show that this, the end of the Easter season, is different somehow. But that, along with any other

restrictions or customs or rules, are quite inappropriate for today. This is a time for spontaneity, surprise and the willingness to go in new, unanticipated directions. It's not for nothing that the Holy Spirit's appearance on that first Pentecost was heralded by a wind. We're in typhoon season right now, and although we can track these storms, measure them and attempt to anticipate them, we can never control or guide them. That's what the Spirit is like. In "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe", Mr. Tumnus the fawn makes a comment about Aslan the Lion. Of course, Aslan is generally thought to be a Jesus-figure, but in this case it also works for the Spirit: "He's not a *tame* lion."

At the close of the Gospel reading for today, which describes a scene from that first Easter Day, Jesus breathes on the apostles and gives them his Spirit. The words he uses are: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." For generations, those words have been used by the Church to describe the special function that priests have to hear confession and to dispense absolution. (That's what they'd like you think...as they say in the Da Vinci Code!) The deeper truth is that beyond the importance of the Sacraments and particularly that of Confession (which I support and believe in), it is also true that any Christian man or woman also possesses when it comes to dealing with others.

Each of us has the power to forgive sins committed against us by others. It is one of the ways that God's Holy Spirit works through us to reconcile the world to God. In this congregation of Holy Trinity, Makati, I have seen powerful things worked by God through bringing people together, expressing regret and sorrow for past hurts, and getting on with the job of being with and for each other as fellow members of Christ's Body on earth. On the other side, I have seen how we also have the power to retain sins. That happens when we just can't give up the resentments we have from the past, preferring to take them out from time to time to bleed all over ourselves and everybody else around us, preferring the self-righteousness that says, "I deserve more." We have the power to make that statement, and when we do, the sins of those who have offended us certainly are "retained." But that is not a gift of God: it is a double curse. We don't just curse *others* when we don't forgive: we *curse ourselves* with the burden of our unforgiving, unforgiven past.

If you come into church on a Sunday, harboring resentments, anger, jealousy or plans for revenge, you have fulfilled Jesus' words in a true, but a terrible way. God offers us an alternative, if we choose, and that is the gift of the Holy Spirit: unpredictable, frightening and comforting at the same time; certainly not a pussycat; more like a lion, and not a *tame* one at that. The Spirit gives the power to forgive and to accept forgiveness.

May today be an occasion of house-cleaning for you: opening up to God's Spirit to clear out resentment and regret and start living in the Pentecost world.