THE HOLY GOOSE

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When we think of today’s Feast of Pentecost, the most common image (and it’s derived from Scripture) is that of a dove – the dove of peace that told Noah the flood was over or the dove that descended on Jesus at his Baptism. As we all know, depictions of the Trinity in art show the Holy Spirit as a dove.

That white dove is an attractive symbol, alright. In the middle ages, they used to release hundreds of them in the cathedrals on Pentecost Day, but they discontinued that practice when the doves rained down more than light and grace. In our time, I remember Pope John Paul II releasing doves from the balcony of St. Peter’s not long before he died. The dove is gentle, graceful, and charming – and all that is perhaps its limitation. This bird is too sweet and sentimental!

Well, leave it to the Irish to get it right when it came to the bird of Pentecost. In the old Celtic tradition of fourteen hundred years ago, the Holy Spirit is not represented as a white dove, tame and pure, but rather – by a wild goose! You see, geese are not controllable – as all of us locals know; they make a lot of noise; and they have a habit of biting those who try to contain them or even get too close to them. It is also interesting that geese fly faster in a flock than on their own.

Again, the Celts had it right. The Spirit is like a goose. The Spirit comes not in quiet conformity (like the dove) but demanding to be heard (like the goose). And the Spirit’s song does not sound all that sweet to everyone. This Spirit drives people together, demanding they support and accompany one another on the sometimes perilous journey of life. And it often forces those on whom it rests to become noisy, passionate, and courageous guardians of the gospel. Pentecost is the wild goose of a St. Patrick himself risking his life to bring Christianity to the emerald isle. Pentecost is the wild goose of a St. Francis Xavier traversing the Orient 450 years ago and dying there as he preached Christianity. In our day, Pentecost is the wild goose of a priest and martyr from Oklahoma named Father Stanley Rother who last year was declared Blessed for his heroic work defending the poor in the 1970s in Guatemala whose authoritarian and corrupt government the US supported. And Pentecost is the incessantly wild goose of a Pope Francis who will not allow Catholics to shirk their responsibility to care about the countless refugees to whom our country and the world are largely indifferent right now.

By the way, the noisy goose of Pentecost is also the whistle blower.

The goose of Pentecost has descended on the disciples of every age, making them the noisy, irritable people fighting for justice, running free clinics for the poor who shamefully do not have health care in the U.S., helping people to find jobs, trying to make a real difference. These are sometimes the disciples who look hard at what we do not see, or choose not to see: e.g. frail women and small children in Bangladesh and too many other countries, where workers cannot organize, working eighteen hours a day for a handful of change to make sneakers, soccer balls, and designer clothes for us to use. The geese babble, “that’s not right!”
The raucous goose of a Spirit makes some people bold enough to shout a truth we would rather not hear: that around the world, billions of people, many of them children, live in dire poverty and are hungry all the time. Closer to home, it is easy for us, if we wish, to shield ourselves from any contact with the poor in or near our own communities. Francis the Goose tells us that to be serious Christians we cannot be passive but rather active in helping those in need.

Yes, the Holy Goose is always nagging us to identify with the poor, with the least among us, with the unborn – and with the born too who are neglected and ignored. In our parish, the honk and the bite of the Spirit has helped us to understand that God calls us to service and that this includes rubbing shoulders with God’s least ones. The Holy Goose reminds us that we are a community that is called to care about the common good (the public good) and that we either fly comfortably together or we will fall back to earth on our own – and that others who are in need will fall back to earth if we are not willing to fly with them. In our parish and in our Westerville Community, we at St. Paul’s have plenty of opportunity to be open to the Holy Goose’s pecking at our heart strings.

We always have the temptation to tame the Spirit, to bank the fire, and to domesticate the dove. We can easily be seduced by that gentle, lulling cooing of the dove – until, every once in a while, we hear that darn honk.

The honk is the noisy, Pentecostal Spirit sounding a note of responsibility and fidelity to the social teaching of our church – and recalling to our memories those inspiring stories of the Good Samaritan, the woman caught in adultery, and the Good thief. These stories remind us that the heart of the Gospel and the chief criterion for salvation is precisely those words of Jesus in Matthew 25 that we have come to call the corporal and spiritual works of mercy which God will give us the grace to perform. Matthew 25 is the passage where Jesus says: “whatever you did for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did for me.”

Oh, yes, the Pentecost goose is annoying and vulgar and loud – just like Jesus who embraced the poor and the leper and even the sinner. And just like the Apostle James who reminds us in his Epistle that faith without works is dead!

So we have to admit that the Celts were on to something here. It is good to pay attention to them and to take a second look at Pentecost – which is not a sweet feast of gentle doves but rather a feast of geese: noisy, dirty geese who shout for the Lord, bite those who would exploit the weak, and gather people in community and teach them to fly together.

The next time we hear the geese flying overhead (and around Westerville there’s often a disgustingly large number of them), let’s think of Pentecost and the church and our lives as disciples on whom the Spirit has descended. Let’s think of what it takes to live as disciples. Let’s think too of the symbols of Pentecost – the red for passion, the fire for action, and a common language of mercy and compassion that will quiet the babble of voices without hope. Passion, fire, mercy, and compassion – that’s what Pentecost is all about. Pentecost is fundamentally about the Holy Spirit – or, if you will, about the Holy Goose!