



Pentecost's Closed Door

Pentecost is a perfect time to reflect on the mission of the International Dominican Foundation. It marks for the Church a moment of Hope and Courage, a time to realize God's grace at work in our world. Imagine how those first disciples must have felt to realize that what had been so much a part of their daily lives was in fact earth shattering, world changing. Those tongues of fire that touched them both made them burn with zeal and enflamed their proclamation of the Gospel. Their hearts were ablaze and their lips glowed with the message in their hearts.

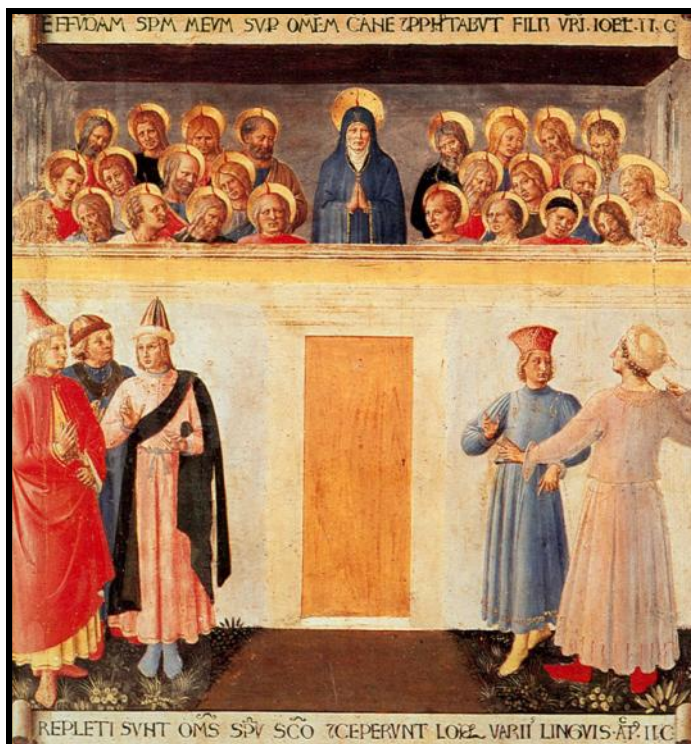
Fra Angelico's 15th century depiction of Pentecost which is part of a series known as the *Armadio degli Argenti* (Silver Chest) with various scenes in the life of Jesus, presents us with a critical insight. There is a horizontal divide cutting straight across this pane. Above we find Mary and the disciples inspired by the Holy Spirit whose flame awakens something in each of their faces. But below this divide and quite distinct from this inspired gathering we see the people, uninspired and unaware of the marvel

beyond their sight. Some appear to be discussing while some seem to be arguing. Perhaps Fra Angelico wanted to capture that moment before the Church really birthed forth. I say this because there is a very odd feature smack dab in the center of the picture, a big wooden door that is shut. There is another clue in this painting and that is found in the faces of the disciples. They seem puzzled, as though they are just realizing what has taken shape, wondering what to do next. They see the reality of the people below and sense a deep longing to burst forth from the upper room. This makes Angelico's closed door all the more intriguing. Why is it closed? Does it open out or does it open in? This strange threshold is what the Dominican artist wants us to notice. Pentecost confronts us with a question; it challenges us to look at the closed doors in our world and in our hearts. Does the door open out or open in? This uncertain reality is what philosophers and theologians talk about as liminality, from the Latin *liminis* for threshold. It is marked by a feeling of ambiguity or disorientation in the middle stages of things. Pope John Paul II, in the 1994 work titled *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* offers us a sense of this "liminal" dimension when he said:

"It is Jesus that you seek when you dream of happiness; He is waiting for you when nothing else you find satisfies you; He is the beauty to which you are so attracted; it is He who provoked you with that thirst for fullness that will not let you settle for compromise; it is He who urges you to shed the masks of a false life; it is He who reads in your heart your most genuine choices, the choices that others try to stifle.

It is Jesus who stirs in you the desire to do something great with your lives, the will to follow an ideal, the refusal to allow yourselves to be ground down by mediocrity, the courage to commit yourselves humbly and patiently to improving yourselves and society, making the world more human and more fraternal."

This challenge to vitality and vibrancy, to courage and optimism, to integrity in one's self and in society, is hidden in the ambiguity of Fra Angelico's "closed door". It only slowly comes to the observer that the artist has placed before us something more. We see that there is a clear vertical line that cuts the horizontal divide created by both



the door and the figure of Mary above. The wood of the cross is captured by Fra Angelico in the central image of the closed door. Christ crucified, the scandal that made the disciples hide in the upper room for fear, and the folly that made people on the streets fail to see their salvation, is met by the image of Mary, the Mother of the Church. Fra Angelico has in fact painted the Pentecost but left it still unfinished. The demand of Pentecost is for the Church to be the threshold of welcome and of mission. Mary as Mother of the Church and Gate of Heaven (*Mater Ecclesiae, Porta Caeli*) is captured by the artist in a most subtle way.

In light of Fra Angelico's "closed door" I would like to extend a Pentecost message to all our readers and supporters. The work of the International Dominican Foundation is not unlike this threshold moment. The door opens both ways, inviting people to see the work we do, but it also sends us out on mission. I think these past months have been a time to discover that the International Dominican Foundation exists and the work of its projects in Jerusalem, Rome and Cairo have real worth and significance for everyone. My challenge is how to enlist your help, the many people who have come to us, so you might now join in the Foundation's Mission. I am convinced that many people have been moved by the good works being done by the Foundation's projects, not unlike the early disciples the door can seem closed and we are unsure as to what next needs to be done. In a real sense we are not unlike the first disciples who felt something take flame in their hearts but needed to cross that threshold and tell their friends, neighbors, even an unlikely colleague, about the good being done, things for which we have come to care.

What is the Bible all about? How did it take shape and how has it been handed down all these years? What records and artifacts has history left hidden for us to yet discover? Not only the Bible, God's Revelation, but how the human imagination has come to understand the message it contains and how it has been handed down one generation to the next. How have philosophers and theologians met the challenges in each century, finding new and exciting ways to cross their thresholds into a world hungry to understand. Even today, as our world faces the challenges of two great religious traditions, we take courage in the love that opens doors of our hearts to those unlike us, people whose own unique encounter must meet the faces of those who are also children of Abraham's God. It isn't easy, confusing even, but then, that is the Pentecost message. We must leave the upper room inspired and go out to meet the people whose streets cross Cairo, Jerusalem, Rome, and yes, even your home town.

In this newsletter you will find a link for our brochure that you can send to friends via email or print out and give to someone. Please circulate them to those people who have no idea of the good works being done by the Foundation's projects and its meaning and value today. Recall John Paul's words, that *"It is Jesus who stirs in you the desire to do something great with your lives, the will to follow an ideal, the refusal to allow yourselves to be ground down by mediocrity, the courage to commit yourselves humbly and patiently to improving yourselves and society, making the world more human and more fraternal."*

Fra Angelico's "closed door" of Pentecost inspires us at the International Dominican Foundation to cross that threshold in hope and courage. We welcome in those who seek to know our works and we are sent forth to labor, sharing the Good News in many lands amid many languages. *Veni Sancte Spiritus, Come Holy Spirit!*

fr Michael

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