

# *International Apostolic Pastor's Conference*

## *Christ and the Body of Christ*

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During the 25th anniversary celebration (2004) of our spiritual family I shared some reflections which I would like to extend to all of you, because I believe they give a good summary of two points of "revelation" and inspiration that are basic to the spirituality and fundamental calling of our movement.

**Let us read** together Acts 2:1-4<sup>1</sup>, and then verses 41-47<sup>2</sup>.

Here we have the description of an event of decisive importance, out of which was born the church and all of its history; we have in embryo the church's whole seed, its DNA.

Some things happen here that are of critical importance.

**In the first place**, hearts are pierced, wounded ("cut to the heart"). And, through this wound, the Holy Spirit breaks through into people's lives. He, as a person, transmits the very life of God to the lives of those who, having been wounded, receive Him.

His objective is to form Christ in them.

From this initial event there begins – in the apostles too – the fertilisation, the conception and subsequently the formation of Christ in their hearts.

It is because the Holy Spirit comes from within and penetrates so deeply, planting in the heart that seed of life which alone can produce the life of Christ.

Thus begins that process of Christ being formed in us that is the absolutely strategic and fundamental objective of the life of every Christian.

Here the foundation is laid: not intellectually or emotionally, but by the Holy Spirit breaking through and entering into a person's life.

But at Pentecost **something else** occurs too: the fruit of this breaking in, this outpouring is *the church, the body of Christ*.

And the creator of the church is again the Holy Spirit.

The church is not the product of man-made agreements, if it is truly the church generated by God. It has life, is formed and develops only to the degree to which it comes forth from the presence of God and originates in an inner revelation of God.

One of the problems in today's world is the lack of understanding of this fact. This is why the church is considered as something we ourselves can produce, about which we can come to an agreement, "sort out"...

All this is a man-made product. The divine product is related to the nature of God, who He is, how He is structured; it is related therefore to God Himself who takes it upon Himself to penetrate our hearts, implant Himself at the centre of our hearts and make us partakers of the divine nature, revealing to us at the same time the nature of the church.

For the nature of the church is intimately bound up with the nature of God: the church **reproduces** the nature of God.

The foundation we see established by the Holy Spirit here in Acts is: Christ and the Body of Christ.

Pentecost generates Christ and the church.

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<sup>1</sup> "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. **2** Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. **3** They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."

<sup>2</sup> "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. **42** They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. **43** Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. **44** All the believers were together and had everything in common. **45** Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. **46** Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, **47** praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

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This is an extraordinary revelation! The foundation is God Himself, coming to dwell in our hearts.

The foundation is not a theology, except inasmuch as the theology explains the fact.

The very foundation of the life of God, expressed in Christ and in his church, is in the Holy Spirit who comes to dwell in our hearts.

And He then produces a *river of revelation*, which is accompanied at times by a flood of ideas, emotions and feelings, powerful experiences which translate into manifestations, sometimes strange ones, such as those of the apostles and disciples we have here.

For this revelation is so powerful, the river put within us is so overwhelming, like a waterfall pouring down.

It blows a fuse in our traditional modes of expression, in our thinking and our normal means of communication. We have to speak in some other way, perhaps in tongues, or falling down or leaping around or shaking, or any of the other manifestations which you have experienced or heard about.

This is Pentecost – God coming to visit man, God deciding to establish his kingdom in us and among us.

And it is glorious, extraordinary: nothing else ever happened that is so extraordinarily beautiful or so incomparably powerful!

And it all begins with a tiny group, the company of disciples...

Allow me here a small autobiographical note, allow me to remember...

We were in the lounge in my home, in the autumn of 1977. We were gathered for prayer, a group of brothers and sisters, Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal, and that evening the Lord burst into my wife's and my lives.

I still remember that moment with great emotion. I had been a pastor since 1968, converted in 1960, but only in 1977 did I experience the Holy Spirit.

I still remember Marco's embrace (Marco will remember it too) and I also remember that Emilio (who I think was sitting on my left) spoke in tongues, in English, and I understood what he was saying...

It was a most powerful, extraordinary experience and my whole life was changed by it.

Not just because of the experience itself, the powerful, intense feelings of the moment, but for what the experience meant in terms of **revelation** of the things I am speaking of now, which began that evening in 1977. And also for what that experience signified as a model, in embryo, of what God was about to do.

It was something really small: there were only ten or fifteen of us, but all of God's plan was already there.

In the same way, at Pentecost there were not thousands of people, just a small group of men visited by God. But the fire started there that set alight whole regions, whole countries, nations and continents.

We were a circle of people, a group of brothers, friends, meeting together and we were having an interdenominational prayer meeting. This was something new at the time: Pentecostals and Baptists praying together.

Right there and then I saw the revelation take shape, both in my heart and beyond, what God was going to build in the coming years.

When we consider the origins, the DNA of our movement, I never fail to recall that evening, and the fact that the Holy Spirit came to visit us. Moreover there, through that type of meeting, He was teaching us that He goes beyond denominational boundaries, that He wants brothers to come together, that denominations are something we have produced and that the body of Christ, the church, is something that transcends them...

He was teaching us to listen to one another and to dialogue; that He is the King and we are his subjects and must be ready to be changed, including me, the old Baptist pastor with my theology and experiences.

We were learning that we had to come together, to walk together, even though our past histories were different: **different pasts, but a common future.**

We were hearing the Lord tell us that His purpose was not to leave everyone bound to his past, separated from his brothers for the rest of history. God's plan was to transcend these different *pasts*, even though still appreciating their value, wealth and validity, inasmuch as

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they were the fruit of the searchings of many other men of God who had sought to be faithful to the Lord in former centuries.

But the Lord was saying to us: There's more.

If there is one thing I long for (because I know it isn't easy at the age of sixty) it is to be as open and available as I was in 1977 – to have the same readiness to tread new ground and cross new frontiers, to be pliable in God's hands, for everything new He has for me and for His church in the future. To continue under the cloud, following the pillar of fire.

It isn't easy, because with the passing of the years one develops certainties, and it is not easy to be genuinely available for God to use.

Therefore my desire for myself, for my brothers and those who have walked with me through these years is the same kind of openness, availability, flexibility and teachability in the hands of the Holy Spirit.

That, as the Holy Spirit has begun to speak to us, inspire us and reveal Himself, He may continue to do so. And that we may maintain the deep conviction that we still do not have it all but are only a part; that the journey continues and the church is going forward.

For, after restoring those things He gave us to restore (though sometimes more in theory than in practice – herein lies our fragility, our insufficiency), the Lord warns us not to grow proud and not to think that we *are* the revelation, because the revelation is an instrument given us so that we can work.

Let us keep going forward to restore the things revealed to us in actual practice, and then keep going forward ...

### **Christ and the body of Christ**

As I see it the essence of the whole matter (however much I think it over) is that the sum of our revelation is in these two things: **Christ and the body of Christ.**

To be sure, we have a long way to go to be transformed into the image of Christ, and a long way to go to manifest the body of Christ in our midst. But these are the twin pillars of these 25 years.

Already then I was on fire for Christ, but this fire has grown and continues to grow more and more.

And I long for this passion for Christ to grow more and more each day in all of us, so that all of us, brothers and sisters, can be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ.

For everything produced in us and around us has the objective of forming Christ within us: this is the invitation, the highest calling the Lord has for us.

If we look again at Hebrews 6<sup>3</sup>, we can see that the foundation, the elementary teaching, is all about Christ. The subject matter is Christ<sup>4</sup>.

Now the risk, on reading this text, is to think one can, so to speak, "build" Christ *from without*. But Christ can only be built *from within*, through fellowship with the Holy Spirit. And this must be a continuous process, which each one of us must carry forward in our own lives.

Secondly, the passage is about the body of Christ<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> "Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, **2** instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. **3** And God permitting, we will do so." **Heb 6:1-3.**

<sup>4</sup> "Repentance, faith in God and baptisms basically describe the relationship with Christ which must be built from within, the process of salvation by which we are identified with Christ, the immersion (Rom 6) in Christ! – God's saving work in Christ. But we are already reminded here of God's simultaneously taking possession of our lives, the Lordship of Christ.

"The laying on of hands (the exercise of authority in the body of Christ!), the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment emphasise the government and, so to speak, the practical control which as Lord he has over the church, death and life. Hallelujah!

"The moment of transfer from the old authority to the new is as it were fixed and described in the act of baptism. Here salvation is expressed by an obedience which becomes active submission to the authority and government of Christ in my life ("You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God" **Rom 6:22** through 'obedience, which leads to life' **Rom 6:16** – Romans 6 is the chapter about baptism!)." – G. Traettino, *Il corpo di Cristo*, TdR.

<sup>5</sup> "But what is the *historical site* of this 'immersion' and this 'obedience'? *Where* do we practically express our submission to the government of God in our life? It is Paul who reveals to us that our baptism is intimately related to the formation of the Body of Christ ('For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.' 1Cor 12:13)

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And elsewhere<sup>6</sup>, the Bible says that the two **are one!** And this is another thing that has impressed itself on me.

Just as husband and wife are one. There is a mystery in the oneness of husband and wife and there is a mystery in the oneness between Christ and the body of Christ. Does that seem insignificant? Certainly not to me...

And even if this were the only thing we have understood in these twenty-five years, we should be profoundly grateful to God. It's enough to keep us going for the next 25, 50 or 75 years: we still have a long way to go!

Don't be discouraged, it is like the development of a caterpillar: first the chrysalis, then the butterfly...

The fact that we have understood we are called to be a butterfly doesn't mean we are already one: realising this spurs us on...

And there comes the point where the caterpillar, within the cocoon, bends double, breaks its back and then begins to break its jaw and raise the top of its skull... Everything inside the cocoon is smashed to make the chrysalis.

Perhaps we are still only a chrysalis, but within us is the dream of becoming a butterfly, the dream of something new, which is consuming our very life.

We want to be like Him, we want to please Him, we want God's dream to come true here in our midst.

That it may be seen here on earth that it really is possible, And the Scripture says: then they will believe.

Let this passion take hold of you and the Lord will be glorified, in my life and in yours, in us, as an ongoing fellowship, as a spiritual family on the march.

It's like a caterpillar, our movement is like a caterpillar: we have seen, hoped, dreamed and believed.

Very often we experience defeat, disputes, disappointments, partial objectives, and we are tempted to get discouraged. We say, "That was all there was."

No, that wasn't all, but what counts is the direction, the calling, the understanding of the dream which God has put in our hearts. And he has got hold of us on the inside and will not let us go, because it's all about the work of the Holy Spirit which is in us.

Let our prayer be just this: **draw us to yourself, Lord...**

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"Immersion (baptism) in Christ is therefore, *ipso facto*, immersion in the Body ('The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. **So it is with Christ.**' 1Cor 12:12).

"The two things coincide. The body becomes the historic site of immersion, obedience and death. 'I no longer live, but Christ lives in me' Gal 2:20. And the Spirit is the one who makes this possible (1 Cor 12:13)." – G. Traettino, *Il corpo di Cristo*, Tdr

<sup>6</sup> "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. **32** This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. **33** However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband." **Eph 5:31-33**