

Pentecost, festival of the Ruah. **Life-giving and liberating force!**



Each Pentecost is a new opportunity and challenge for each SSps to renew and deepen our personal and community consecration to the Spirit who called and animated our Founding Generation. Let us reread the history of salvation past and present, tracing Her new and ancient presence that She wants to reveal to us, Her Handmaids, in the "today" of our lives.

“In response to the call of the Holy Spirit and the needs of people, Blessed Arnold Janssen, together with Blessed Maria Helena Stollenwerk and the Blessed Servant of God Josepha Hendrina Stenmanns, founded our Congregation as a religious-missionary community dedicated to the life-giving Spirit”
Prologue to the SSps Constitutions

1. “DEDICATED TO THE LIFE-GIVING SPIRIT”, TO THE SPIRIT THAT GIVES LIFE...

Understanding the Holy Spirit as a life-enhancing presence, as the presence of God himself in each person, means bringing to fullness the dignity of daughters and sons of God. It means being called to create life and to seek it for every person who comes into contact with us.

The universe was chaotic solitude and chaos, darkness, it was emptiness and absence (Tohu wa bohu)... A powerful wind swept over the waters... (Gn. 1,1-2). According to the Christian interpretation of the biblical texts, this text is considered to refer to the "breath of God", thus the word of God, which will be expressed in a creative way, is present from the beginning in the breath of God. The life-giving force of moving air is an expression of the vitality of God, which is recognized in human breath. God formed the first human being from the clay of the earth and through a breath infused him with the Spirit of Life (Gen 2:7). In the Hebrew Bible, human breath is therefore considered a vital principle of divine origin.

The people of Israel confirmed this presence of the life-giving spirit through the voice of the Judges **and** the Prophets, who cared for life, who sustained the hope of the people crushed in despair. It was in that liberating experience, in Egypt, where the people recognized that the Spirit also gives life through their leaders (Num11,17-25).

The life-giving Spirit, in the prophet Ezekiel (Ez. 37:4-14), is capable of giving life back to what is dead, to what is divided, and this image recreates, gives life and hope. In his vision the dry bones come to life through the Ruah, which is the Spirit of Yahweh. The Ruah is a force that cannot be felt or defined. It can only be captured by its effects of vitality, wholeness and integrity, which produces new joy of living, drive and courage. This powerful Ruah, in this text, "revives" the people of Israel after the exile, with the connotation that the breath of God is "a longer breath" than death itself...

This presence of the Ruah in the History of Salvation, was not only manifested in men, but also in women, triggering processes of protection, justice, salvation and liberation. But how can we enjoy it even more? Can we, SSps, deepen and appropriate the action of this Ruah that was always life-giving: protecting and caring for it, but which is also liberating: listening to the cry of the slavery of humanity and inspiring salvation?

Let's go through together some concepts and stories together. Perhaps they are familiar, but on our Feast of Pentecost, we want to remind each other. Let's give ourselves the opportunity to go deeper, without prejudices, without preconceptions, let the facts speak to us... and, above all, let's allow ourselves to be surprised...

That same Spirit who acted in the first part of our story is the one that is also present in female figures of the Old Testament, making them our matriarchs and heroines, women who were open to the presence of God in them.

Starting from the fact that women in Israel occupied a place of strong subordination¹, considered by men as objects, it is significant to find texts in the Old Testament that highlight the figure of women as saviors of the people, that is, the ones who restore hope to the People of the Promise, and so we find:

- **Debora**, in her double capacity as heroine and "judge"; representing the "wise" women. Those who govern the people to save them from danger. The troops under her command triumph victoriously against the enemy, hence the song of Judges 5:7 proclaims her as mother. "Rise up," fight (Judges 4:14) and sing the song of victory with her (Judges 5:12). She functions as "a mother in Israel," a rare metaphor for the parental role that implies a "spiritual guide."

- **Judith**, who will use her beauty for the salvation of her people. Faced with the imminent surrender of her leader to the Assyrians, she calls two elders, reproaches them for their lack of faith in God and makes them see the devastating consequences of surrendering to enemy hands. Ossias, head of the city, then recognizes the wisdom of this woman (Judith 8,29) who does not remain with her arms crossed; she is inspired to act boldly. And so, Judith, using her beauty, seduces the enemy to finish him off.

- **Esther**, the beautiful young queen intercedes before the king to save all the people from the hand of the king's first dignitary who had planned to exterminate them (Est 3, 13). Trusting in the Lord, she denounces the enemy of the Jews and obtains favor from the king. In this way, thanks to Esther's actions, the Jewish people are saved.

Or those other women, who, open to the gifts that God granted them, become an active part of the History of Salvation: Abigail (1 Sam 25,2-42), the woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14,1-20) or Rizpah (2 Sam 21,10-14); the prophetesses, in the broad sense of the term, from Endor (1 Sam 28,7-25) to the wife of Isaiah (Is 8,3) and the prophetess Hulda (2 Kings 22), who is, perhaps, the most interesting character due to her unique charisma of discernment.

They display the abilities and gifts that they possess and that very few women can fully develop. They trust in the energy and dynamism that the Spirit has given them and they put themselves at the service of the society of their time.

¹ *Let us also remember that all the sources are written by men, therefore, they reflect the male experience and attitude, not what women felt and experienced, thus rendering them invisible in their entirety (as well as the children).*

These are the actions where - from the biblical story - the intervention of God through women is recognized, giving back, defending and committing to the life of a people. It is the Ruah that acts, giving life, and making women protagonists in the complexion of the Promise.

Throughout that same history, as in other stories, thousands of women have given their lives to save others. They have been bearers of hope in the midst of contradiction and threat. They have created movements in favor of the little ones, and have taken responsibility for breaking all types of cultural and religious prejudices that deprived them of being “part.” These concrete actions in favor of life arise from the action of the Spirit who, without a doubt, acts where he wants and with whom he wants.

LET WHAT WE READ RESONATE...

(Suggestion for personal reflection and community sharing)

I reread the text...

1. What inspires me from what I read? Where do I discover life?
2. What “matriarchs/heroines” can I rescue from the culture I was born and what gift of the Spirit is manifested in it? And if I am in another culture, what new matriarch/heroine do I discover in the new culture and to what does she invite me ?

Taking the Congregational Directions of the 15th General Chapter:

1. How can I relate this text to our Congregational Directions? Where do I find the freshness of the Spirit, the novelty, the invitation, the radicality?

2. “DECONSTRUCTING” OUR BELIEFS...

It is known that the Hebrew concept to designate the Spirit is Ruah², which means “vital and creative force of God, which sets everything in motion and animates all things.”³ The importance of that Ruah dates back to the 6th century BC. at the time of the exile of the people of Israel. In this time of hopelessness, the prophet Ezekiel describes how new life and new hope are possible through the divine Ruah. Unfortunately, in the process of biblical translations, not only was the concept of Ruah, translated from feminine to masculine, but also much of the experience of vitality, insight, and audacity associated with Ruah was lost. We could find in that “loss” a hidden calling for us as Missionary Servants of the Holy Spirit, to rediscover ourselves as bearers of life, insightful and bold when it comes to living the mission...

For the early Church this force is central. We refer to two texts in the Gospel of Luke:

- **The encounter of Mary of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit.**

And, talking about how women open to the action of the Spirit were able to restore hope to the people, let's look at Mary. In her, the action of the Spirit of Life through women takes on a special meaning in her person: the very life of God becomes a body in her body. This simple woman, from the town, hard-working,

² *It is important to remember the feminine background of the Hebrew term Ruah. With the New Testament this concept was transformed into the neutral Greek concept of Pneuma. Later, the Catholic Christian tradition welcomed the masculine Latin term Spiritus, later personifying it with Spiritus Sanctus, the Third Person of the Trinity. In this process, not only was the concept itself translated from feminine to masculine, but much of the experience of vitality and vividness with which the Ruah was understood was lost. (cf. Lucia Rodriguez, The Spirit and the Woman.)*

³ SCHUNGLE, S Helen. *The Feminine Face of God. Concilium Magazine num. 258. Spain*

young, is chosen by God to participate in his saving plan. **There is nothing extraordinary in her life, other than her openness and surrender to God. Mary does not behave like a submissive woman, as the patriarchal tradition that has prevailed for centuries makes her appear, but in reality, she is a daring and brave young woman, a risk-taker and a committed person.** She is a prophetic woman who knows how to announce the greatness of the Lord and denounce the abuses of the ruling class (Lk 1:46-56). Courage, commitment and mercy came together in her, and because of this, she was a perfect channel for the Holy Spirit.

- **In the Acts of the Apostles cap. 2: the story of Pentecost.**

In order to put the community that is gathered and waiting into context, we go back to Jesus.

The first surprising fact is seeing him surrounded by so many women. They listened to his message, learned from him and followed him closely, just like the male disciples. This fact is incontestable⁴ and, at the same time, surprising, because in those years women were not allowed to study the law with a rabbi, nor to travel through the countryside following a man. To sleep in an open field next to a man, a group of men, was probably a scandal. Nothing like this had been known in Galilee.

It is these same women who were a significant presence during Jesus' final days. There is less and less doubt that they took part in the Last Supper... Why would they, who normally ate with Jesus, be absent from that farewell dinner? It would be more absurd to exclude them if it were a Passover meal, one of the banquets that women did attend. The Last Supper took place in a house where the disciples always gathered in those days. And, even after the crucifixion of Jesus, they gathered "in the company of some women, Mary, the mother of Jesus and his brothers" Acts 1,14;2,1-4

And one of those days... while they were gathered together in the same place (Acts 2:1-4), something happened. Let's put aside the tongues of fire, and let ourselves be moved by this experience...

In the beginning this narrative did not refer to a miracle or what we know today in the story, but rather it referred to the phenomenon of "speaking in tongues", or glossolalia. The final text is going to say "in other languages", and this would be in foreign languages, but behind this expression is "they spoke in tongues", which means, in an inarticulate speech and... we may say that the text tells us about an outburst of praise to God in a language different from what was known, in this community gathered in Jerusalem.

Then, after the vision of the Risen Lord and the impressions of what they had heard about the empty tomb, the disciples, women and men, who were still in Jerusalem, were gathered ACTS 1:13-14. And, at the Jewish Feast of the Tents (Pentecost), in the middle of that meeting, there was an eruption of prayer, different from what was familiar to them. It was not the recitation of the Torah nor the singing of the psalms so well known to them. Rather, it seemed inarticulate, confused, but the experience took hold of everyone and shook them to the core as they experienced that God was truly in their midst. **This prayer/communion experience definitely turned them into a community and - this is crucial - this is what was interpreted by the early community as an experience of the Spirit, without flames, without fire...** This was the beginning of that type of experience of the Spirit in the early Church⁵.

LET WHAT WE READ RESONATE...

1. What new thing does the Spirit give me?
2. What invitation do I perceive?

3. Taking the Congregational Directions of the 15th General Chapter:
How can I relate this text to our Congregational Directions? Where is the newness of the Spirit, the invitation, the radicality?

⁴ Finding on all Christian sources

⁵ LOHFINK, Gerhard. *Jesus of Nazareth. The Paschal Events*, pp. 307-308.

3. HARVESTING OUR SHARING... TO SOW AGAIN

Paraphrasing Pope Francis⁶, let us choose to be a Congregation that has been injured, wounded and stained by going out into the streets, rather than a Congregation that is sick from staying inside, comfortable as we cling to and provide for our own security. How will we do this?:

- **Disposing ourselves** to be possessed by the Divine Ruah (Lk 1:38), returning to our “first love”, to the passion for mission, to give our life for the Kingdom without measuring the costs;
- **Creating life and taking care of it**, because She, the Ruah, creates life (Gen 2,7), sustains life, and is capable of giving it back (Ez 37,4-14);
- **Living hospitality**, and inclusion of everyone in our homes, and in our conversations, because She, the Ruah, “blows where She wants and how She wants”, and, it seems that also, in whoever She wants (Gen 18 ,1-15);
- **Being compassionate and supportive**, because She gives gifts to be shared, She gives them to make this divided, suffering and wounded humanity⁷ a sisterly community, where the fullness of human dignity is sought above any other worth (Rahab. Josue 2-3);
- **Experiencing living in intercultural communities, as a place where the Spirit bursts forth in all its strength and originality**, and so, as on that first Pentecost, we cannot keep silent about those experiences of joint construction and communion (Ruth 1,16-17);

These are fruits that show that the Spirit dwells in us... These are the values of the pilgrimage during which we become, and our communities, a “field hospital”, which chooses and prefers closeness, tenderness and compassion. to the words.

Thus, we will be that “melody of compassion” that the 15th General Chapter asks of us, a Congregation that every day when it wakes up, once again chooses to be a living sign of a Church that walks together, that supports those who do not arrive and who does not want leave anyone behind.

Let this be our option and style of living the mission!

⁶ “I prefer a Church that is rugged, wounded and stained by going out into the streets, rather than a Church that is sick from confinement and the comfort of clinging to one's own security” (EG 49).

⁷ “We recognize that we are part of the darkness in the Church and in society. From our vulnerability, we rise with hope and unity in a wounded and divided world. We commit to radically living our consecration in intercultural, international and intergenerational communities.” Congregational Addresses, number 3