

# PENTECOST

## Images of the Holy Spirit

For many the Holy Spirit is the most mysterious person of the Trinity. Jesus, who became human and after his resurrection is very present in heaven and earth, is closest to us. God the Father we inadvertently picture as an old wise man, who cares for us and is concerned with us as a loving father. But the Holy Spirit?

The Spirit is spiritual and bodiless – how could we ever form a picture of the Spirit in our minds? We may forget, however, that the notion of God as father is also just an image. The first person of the Trinity is just as spiritual and disembodied as the Holy Spirit. And we may perhaps also overlook that the Bible hands us concrete images for God's Spirit as well.

As human beings we need images to make a celestial God understandable to us terrestrial creatures. By means of earthly images it can become more clear to us who and how God is. Images are not arbitrary. An image or symbol always incorporates elements of that to which it refers. God is like a father, like a rock, fortress or mother hen. Each image clarifies a certain aspect of God. In the same way the Scriptures present us with images for the Spirit: the Spirit is like a dove, like the wind, fire, water. These rich images may resound on levels far deeper than the surface of our soul and spirit. In this document we will reflect on them as they appear in the Bible and hence also in art, so that they may start to come alive to us.



### Acts 2:1-4

**2** When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.



Today the church tends to depict Pentecost with abstract forms—intense colors of red and orange, perhaps cascading from the ceiling of the church or painted as swirling forces to suggest the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Historically the church has pictured the scene as an assembly of people clustered in a small room with flames of fire over each head, with Mary, the mother of Jesus, positioned in the center of the gathering, usually in a posture of prayer.

This 1626 wood engraving by the Flemish artist, Pieter Van der Borcht II (1545 – 1608), is a fragment from a Missale (liturgical book with text for worship) and clearly fits this established tradition. Van der Borcht has chosen to envision the very moment the Holy Spirit appeared.

According to the Book of Acts, the apostles, with Mary and the other women, gathered with one mind in prayer to await the outpouring of the Spirit. We see Mary as she prays imploring the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As we reflect on Pentecost may we await with the same expectation as the Apostles and Mary, the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.



This large wood engraving of 13 ½ x 9 cm is thought to have been an engraving after a work by Pieter van der Borcht II. It was an illustration in a 1626 Missale published by Plantin, a book publishing company in Antwerp

## FIRE

One of the Biblical images for the Spirit is fire. In the Old Testament, fire often represents God present somewhere in his majesty. For example, Sinai was enveloped in smoke, 'for the Lord had descended upon it in fire.' There is something awesome about fire, because fire can spread destructively.



At Pentecost, the tongues of fire show that the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit, they make the invisible visible. These flames also call to mind the fire that set the burning bush ablaze. This burning bush has often been interpreted in the past as a symbol for Israel and the believer. God makes a fire burn in us, he purifies and sanctifies us, but does not consume us. The Spirit burns away the wrong in us and fills us with God's love. He sets us on fire, makes us enthusiastic (literally full of the Spirit) and 'enthusiastic'. This watercolor by Roeli Willekes is a beautiful image for such fired-up people.

Roeli Willekes: Palmarum , from the series Psalms on the way to Easter, 2002.

## WIND

There's a spiritual presence in Andrew Wyeth's painting titled Pentecost, which shows two tattered fishing nets hanging out to dry on a gray New England day, billowing in the wind like sails. *Pentecost* was painted on Allen Island, a former fishing outpost about five miles off the coast of Maine that Wyeth's wife, Betsy, purchased in 1979. The painting's title likely originated with Betsy, who titled most of Wyeth's works, with his consent. She said the island was originally called Pentecost Island, a name bestowed by the English explorer George Weymouth upon his first landfall in the New World on Pentecost Sunday, 1605.

Wyeth's paintings often incorporate wind. Some read the wind in Wyeth's paintings as ominous or haunting, but maybe we should read it as a benign spiritual presence—a divine one. As God sweeping through gloom, asserting his hereness and giving life to that which is otherwise lifeless. If the presence is ghostly, it's holy ghostly. It activates and uplifts. Perhaps we are the nets in Pentecost—vessels torn and patched but full of God's breath.



Andrew Wyeth: Pentecost, 1989, tempera with pencil on hardboard panel, 20 3/4 x 30 5/8 in. The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection (private). Photo © Artists Rights Society (ARS)



# OUTPOURING

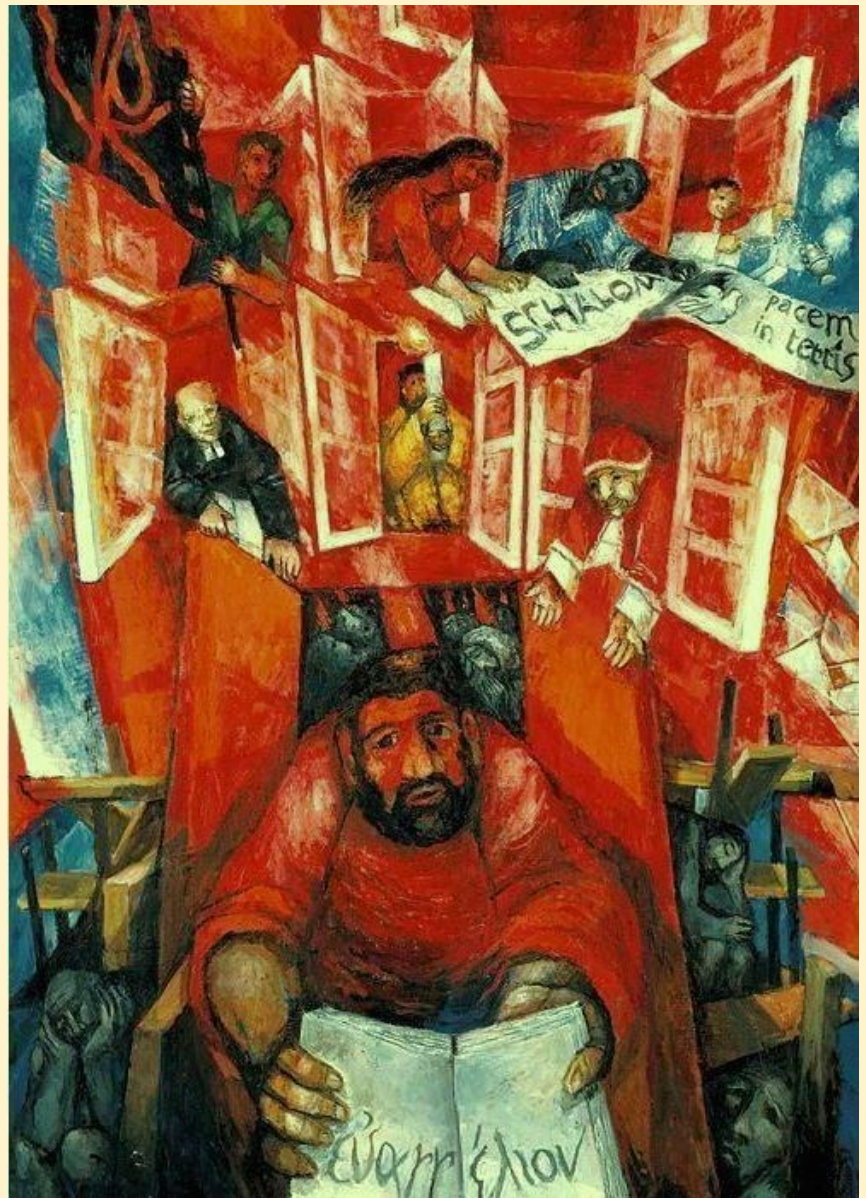
Pentecost images have a limited number of variations. We usually see the disciples sitting together with tongues of fire on their head as a sign that the Spirit has descended on them. Artists are also inclined to use the symbol of the dove, which, by itself or in a dynamic flock, dives down or hovers 'praying' or brooding' above people. The German Catholic priest-artist Sieger Köder does something different, and yet he remains close to the Biblical story. He does not show us the Pentecost event itself but shows us its meaning. First of all he focuses on the element of the tongues and languages that play a central role in the Pentecost story. At Pentecost, the Spirit equips Jesus' disciples to witness about Christ to all the nations on earth.

In order to depict this aspect, Köder contrasts the Pentecost story of language connection with that of language confusion at the building of the tower of Babel. We see the tower of Babel represented in grey and dark colors on the lower half of the silkscreen/serigraph. The people sitting on the scaffolding of this never completed construction are looking drab, dispirited, and lonely. In their stubborn, high-handed way and pride they wanted to build a tower reaching to the heavens, but God came down from heaven, ensured that they no longer understood each other and scattered them across the earth (Genesis 11).

However, in the middle of the spiritless remnants we see a new building rise up, bathed in a warm, fiery glow. Below Peter comes towards us through open doors. In his hands he holds a book on which is written the Greek word 'evangelion.' The Gospel, the Good News of Jesus' life and resurrection, forms the basis of a new construction, built by the Spirit. Behind Peter is the room where we can see the disciples with the tongues of fire on their heads. They are also still grey, but the Spirit already enables Peter to step outside, full of fire, in order to deliver his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:14-41).

The rest of the building consists of open windows with people leaning outside, directed towards the world outside. On the first floor three clergymen are pictured, representing three ecclesiastical traditions. On the left we see the Lutheran theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer as the representative of the Protestant churches that emerged from the Reformation. On his lap is a Bible. In the middle window stands the Orthodox patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople, who in 1965 revoked the ecclesiastical excommunication of 1054 against the Catholic Church. He holds an Easter candle. On the right Pope John XXIII represents the Catholic Church with his arms characteristically stretched out to the people with open hands. On the banner above him is the title of his encyclical *Pacem in terris*. With these three 20th-century church leaders the emphasis on this first floor is on the unity of the church and ecumenism. The new building appears therefore to be especially meant as an image of the church, which found its origin in Pentecost.

On the second floor four young people lean out of the windows. They stand for the youngest generation of followers of Christ. The men on the far left and the far right represent the young people who are active inside the church. On the left a German youth leader holds a flag with the Chi Rho monogram of Christ. During the Nazi period this flag was the banner of young people who were not afraid to show who their real Führer was. On the right a young priest waves a censer outside, as if he wants to spread the fragrance of Christ in the world. The two middle figures, a woman and a young black man, want to strive for peace and justice; their engagement is directed towards the world. Together these four people show that everyone is welcome in this building of the Spirit and that there are many ways that we can be witnesses of the Gospel.



Where this beacon of light, this red lighthouse radiating warmth and light leads to is hidden from our view. On the third floor we do see an empty open window. This, said Sieger Köder, is the most important window. It is the window of the future. Who would we like to place there and with which object or symbol? There is hope, as Jesus pours out his Spirit on his followers not only on that first Pentecost, but also today and in the future.



“Suddenly,” Luke writes, suddenly there was wind and there was fire. Pentecost fills our minds with color and light and flame and wind. It is a vibrant time of surprise, wonder, and joy. It is a time of being filled with the Spirit! How do we express this experience of the Holy Spirit?

Art is of course, a way that humans have found to try to express that which can't truly be expressed. I hope you have enjoyed exploring some of those expressions.

Now we must reflect on what does Pentecost mean to us? We know it is the day the disciples received the Holy Spirit. We know Pentecost is known as the birthday of the Christian church. But, what does it mean to us?

For me it's about inclusion and invitation and permission and commission. It is a time to bless those in our midst that are kindling a spark. It is a time for testimony, for telling our story, the personal witness of faith in our lives. In Luke's account people are speaking different languages and then they all begin to understand each other. They were amazed and perplexed, they were ignited by the Holy Spirit.

God moves toward us in this outpouring of Spirit, so we must move toward God in response and acceptance. We must also let what has been poured into us pour out of us.

In Acts 2, the story leaks out, and those passing by hear it. How can we keep letting the story leak out into the world around us in ways that bring hope and change lives? The Spirit still moves, let it move you.



**The United Methodist Church forms disciples of Jesus Christ who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously in local communities and worldwide connections.**