



Delray Beach, Florida

St. Matthew's/St. Paul's Joint Celebration - The Feast of Pentecost- Year B - May 30/31, 2009  
(Ezekiel 37:1-14) **Acts 2:1-21**; (Ps.104:25-35,37) John 15:26-27,164b - 15)

Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, *Rector*

Surprised! That was my reaction on Thursday, when I got an e-mail from the diocesan office that included a letter from our Bishop, Leo Frade, along with a press release announcing the Father Alberto Cutié, the Roman Catholic priest, “Fr. Oprah,” was being received into the Episcopal Church. Surprised! Surprised, and more than a little ambivalent. That was my reaction. Of course, when the scandal first broke and the pictures of Fr. Alberto’s tryst on the beach were being circulated across America and around the world my initial reaction was: too bad he isn’t a priest in the Episcopal Church. Then he wouldn’t be having this problem.

He wasn’t an Episcopal priest, however, he was a Roman Catholic priest and he had taken made a solemn promise of celibacy. It should be observed that celibacy is not a doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, but a rule of discipline. Not only Anglicans, but also the Orthodox Churches allow their priests to marry. Celibacy was not required of priests in the Roman Church until the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Moreover, the Roman Catholic Church does not view celibacy to be of the essence of the priesthood. If a married Anglican priest with children were to do the reverse of Fr. Alberto, as come have done over the years, that is, decide to go over to the Roman Church, they would be re-ordained in the Roman Catholic Church and would be allowed to serve as priests, wife and children and all, and celibacy would not be expected of them.

It is also pretty clear that Peter, the apostle on whom Jesus would build his church, the one who by tradition is the Vicar of Rome and the first Pope, was married. After all, one of Jesus’ early miracles in the gospels is the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (See Matthew 8:14-15; Mark 1:29-31; Luke 4:38-41). So the Roman Church’s insistence on celibacy as a requirement for priests, stands on tenuous grounds and can, and likely should be, called into question.

Having said this, it must nonetheless be recognized that Fr. Alberto was a Roman priest and he had made a solemn promise to be celibate. This represented a sacred oath and commitment. This is what made the story a scandal for the Roman Catholic Church as well as a personal and spiritual crisis for Fr. Alberto. It was also the reason for my ambivalence when I first received news that he was being received into the Episcopal Church. After all, a promise is a promise, and it appears he broke his and he seems to have publically acknowledged this.

He and I, and all priests, Roman and Anglican, are called to higher standards. Our ordination vows are unapologetically clear about this. Just look at the Ordination service of a priest, a deacon or a bishop, in the Book of Common Prayer or in the Roman rite.

We are expected to observe strict boundaries. When we do not live up to our promises, when we do not live within appropriate boundaries, then the integrity of the priesthood and the ministry of

Christ entrusted to us is compromised and a scandal, which literally means a “stumbling block” that trips people up, results.

The high-profile reception of Fr. Alberto into the Episcopal Church was, I felt, over the top given the background story and I found this troubling. I couldn't help feeling that it made us look like the church of “anything goes.” Actually, I am still wrestling with these feelings.

Still, I imagine that Fr. Alberto's life has probably been hell the past few weeks, and likely the past couple of years. He can't but help to have felt shame and embarrassment, as he let down his bishop, his fellow priests and the church he had grown up in; as he lived not only with a secret relationship he could not share, but also conflicted feelings around his vocation and call. A significant part of our story as church *is that we are to be a community* that, by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, heals and restores people from those very negative and unproductive experiences of shame and guilt and embarrassment.

Who of us has not experienced these? Who of us has not been grateful to those who, in the spirit of Christ and his love, heal us and restore us? Is this not what Christ's ministry was all about? Read the Gospels. This pattern of forgiveness and restoration appears again and again.

Moreover, with respect to Fr. Alberto, there is more to the story than most of us were aware of... How often that is the case when there is a media frenzy and we don't get all the facts. You see, Fr. Alberto had been contemplating this switch to the Episcopal Church for about two years. He had been with the clergy of the Episcopal Diocese of Southeast Florida on April 7<sup>th</sup>, Holy Tuesday, when we gathered in Miami with our Bishop for a day of reflection and to renew our ordination vows as is traditional during Holy Week. I didn't realize he was there. I didn't even know who he was. That was about a month before the story of his relationship and the beach pictures broke.

In fact, Bishop Frade had arranged for several of the priests of our diocese, who had been Roman Catholic priests and who had been received into the Episcopal Church, to meet with Fr. Alberto on Holy Tuesday, and to share with him what life as an Episcopal priest is like.

So it is clear that the die was cast before the story broke this past Thursday. Fr. Alberto found himself in a very difficult and painful dilemma: the collision of the power of his love for his fiancé, Ms. Canellis and the power of his call to serve Christ and Christ's Church as a priest. In the Roman Catholic Church, this dilemma could not be resolved so he decided to come over to us.

Do I wish that he had shown better judgment than to be caught in a scandal before he had worked out his dilemma? Yes! Was I surprised and shocked Thursday? Yes! But that's often how the Holy Spirit works: in shocking and surprising ways; calling us out of the darkness of sin and anguish and shame and embarrassment and the paralysis that so often comes with these, into new life and service in Christ. Think of today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. It's an incredible story.

According to the writer of Acts, who is the same person that wrote the Gospel of Luke, the Pentecost experience occurs ten days after Jesus had been taken up to heaven. Jesus had taken the Twelve, his closest disciples, out to the edge of Jerusalem, and he had instructed them to go back to the city and wait for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was taken up into heaven and then they returned to the city, and waited for gift that had been promised (See Luke 24:44-52 and Acts 1:1-12).

Can you imagine how they felt as they awaited that promised gift? They felt like parents awaiting the birth of a child...Or graduating students waiting to receive their diplomas and degrees.....They were giddy and happy and joyful, but they were also, likely, a little nervous. What will this new life be like? What will it be like when this child is born? What will it be like to go to college? What will it be like to have my degree and go into the workaday world?

Yes, there is trepidation in all of this. You can believe those disciples felt some trepidation. The gift of the Holy Spirit? The power from on high? What will this be like? What will it lead us into?

Then it came. They didn't know it would come on Pentecost, the day of first fruits, *Shavout*, when Jews celebrate the first fruits of the spring harvest, and also God giving the law to Moses, fifty days after Passover (and, parenthetically, fifty days after Christ's resurrection).

It came with the rush of something like a violent wind, that shook them all, and frightened them, and blew away any lethargy or apathy they may have been feeling (Acts 2:2). It came dancing, like tongues of flame, fire and light, purifying, cleansing, leading, passionate light (Acts 2:3). They began to speak in other languages, the languages of the world, as the Spirit gave them ability (Acts 2:4). They began to tell of God's wondrous deeds of power (Acts 2:11).

Luke tells us that all of this created such a commotion that people out on the street, people from all over the known world who were in Jerusalem for the festival, gathered around the place where this Spirit ruckus was going on (Acts 2:5ff). Can you imagine the media frenzy that this would have caused if CNN and FOX News and the National Enquirer were around then? Naturally, people in that crowd were wondering what was going on. What is this all about? What indeed?

As always, there were cynics in the crowd: "Oh, they're just a bunch of drunks!" (Acts 2:13). Well, they were drunk....They were drunk with God's love, God's Spirit and God's power. And then, perhaps the most surprising Pentecost thing of all happened....It was more shocking and more surprising than the rush of the violent wind....It was more shocking and surprising than the dancing tongues of flame.....

The thing that happened, that must have shocked and surprised them all? Peter stood up and addressed the crowd (Acts 2:14). Peter, who only a short time before had been a coward: the rock who had turned into rubber....Peter who had made a solemn promise to Jesus never to abandon him. "Even though all become deserters, I will not!" he had sworn to Jesus the night of Jesus' arrest (Mark 14:29)...Peter, who had been a scandal to them all, stood up and addressed the crowd....That was the most surprising Pentecost event of them all...It was a witness to the power of God's love to transform a coward into a hero; to transform a sinner into a saint...

That has always been a chief work of the Holy Spirit and of God's grace. It is, in fact, what baptism and the Christian faith is all about: transformation, conversion; turning to God in Christ anew, with new courage, with new resolve; leading people, including each one of us, to become more than we ever were, more than we ever dreamed we could be.

That's what happened to Peter, who had denied Christ three times and run away in shame and fear and embarrassment....Christ and the power of his Holy Spirit, the promised gift, restored him and laid a new claim on him. And Peter stood up on that day of Pentecost and addressed the crowd. What a spectacular, surprising, shocking, amazing thing!

What in your life has caused you to feel shame, or embarrassment or guilt? Do they still cause these feelings within you? Feelings of shame, guilt and embarrassment? Is there a part of your life that needs healing or love or forgiveness? Do you need to be reclaimed by the grace and love of God through the power of the Holy Spirit? If so, this day, this feast of Pentecost is for you....The Gospel of Jesus Christ is for you. In truth, it is for all of us.

As St. Paul once stated so pointedly and so truthfully declared, "all have sinned; all fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). All of us, each and everyone, need to be reclaimed daily by the grace of God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ, through the proclamation of his Gospel and by the power of that same Holy Spirit.

Sin and shame and embarrassment and guilt come into all of our lives at one time or another....But Christ's message of love to us all is that we are not to wallow in our sinfulness, in our embarrassment, in our shame or in our guilt.....These have been nailed to his cross. They are to be set behind us and we are to move forward.

This is not to deny the reality of sin and its effects....It is not to pretend that sin is okay and doesn't offend God. Not at all...An essential aspect of the Christian life is to acknowledge our sins clearly and truthfully before God, to repent and to turn to God and to strive to live in holiness and righteousness. And an equally essential recognition of the Christian life is our awareness that wallowing in sin, wallowing in shame and guilt and embarrassment and in the fear that is often symptomatic of these is neither productive nor the life to which God calls us....Too often, those who find themselves obsessed with these feelings – shame, fear, guilt, embarrassment – are only engaging in form of narcissism – focusing on themselves in a very unhealthy way instead of focusing on Christ and his call to genuine life.

The message of Pentecost, the shocking, surprising news of the gift of the Holy Spirit, is that, not only Peter, or Father Alberto Cutié, but each and everyone of us, is called out of the darkness of our sin and shame, out of our embarrassment and fear, into God's marvelous light and into Christ's life and love. God has better and more important things for us all to do than to be mired in the muck and mire of our sinfulness. God has ministry for us to do: to feed the hungry; to heal the sick; to bind up the broken-hearted; to be friends to the abandoned; to find the lost....That's our vocation and ministry... You, me, Fr. Alberto Cutié, each and everyone of us....

So let's go into all the world, let's go shouting and singing in all the languages and ways we can...Let's go each and everyone of us, and proclaim with great joy and generous thanksgiving God's deeds and power of love and forgiveness, which he has shown to so many, even to the likes of us. Let us rejoice in the power of the Holy Spirit. Alleluia! Alleluia!  
Happy Pentecost!