

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

PENTECOSTAL FIRE

We don't respond well to our highest word for a feast - *solemnity*. It sounds a bit grim. That's because we think *solemn* means *not cheerful*. But in truth it means *full*. A solemnity should be a *full celebration*: one which leaves nobody out, and one which has nothing about it that falls short of joy.

The Beauty Of Symbols

Symbols speak beautifully of beautiful things. We often can't say what we mean, when we're in the higher realms of our being: our desires, our hopes, our love and faith. So we call on something symbolic to speak for us. It is a mighty relief for a Western man or woman to lay aside the endless urge to explain, to put into words, to reduce life to definitions and formulae: and to surrender all these things in favour of an eloquent and absorbing symbol. *A rose is a rose is a rose...* and I find that the really powerful symbols are surprisingly simple. Many of them we gather into that deeply symbolic place, a garden (always supposing we are privileged to have one). A rock, which can be just a hazard or a nuisance, is a symbol when someone takes it up and places it in a garden. What does it mean? That depends how big it is, where it stands or lies, what it looks like, and who is looking at it. Its very simplicity lays it open to many responses. The air is another symbol, especially to those of us who live most of their life under fluorescent tubes. Just to lie on the earth (another symbol) and gaze into the empty sky is sometimes wordlessly healing. But I think of all these elemental things, few can have the power of fire.

Flames Are Powerful

I don't think I'm a pyromaniac, but a quite small fire has the power to stop me in my tracks. A little unexpected bonfire between the trees in an autumn park could hold me for ages, as can watching a stormy seascape. The flames are vivid, they are alive, they move and spread as they will. They crackle and explode. A bigger fire is terrifying, and gives me a glimpse of a power that can sweep all

before it irresistibly. A fire in the calm moorland house where I sometimes take a few days' rest makes the television superfluous. A candle has the power to bring a sense of repose and recollection that is ready for prayer. All of these work without the need for words, and that is the way with symbols. They operate on a deeper level.

The Flames Of The Spirit

Is the Spirit of God a candle-flame, a forest fire, or a household hearth? Yes, all of them; also a volcano, a bolt from the blue, and divided tongues of flame that free their hosts from the limitations of language. The important thing about Pentecostal fire is that it falls on *people* and they are the fuel who burn with it. It is present in the votive light of a praying heart. It is present in the devouring passion of the saint, the poet, the lover. It is present in the faithful warmth of a promised life, ever ready to welcome, to share, to comfort and encourage. It is present in the eyes of the teacher and the taught, as the truth dawns in their discourse. It is sometimes to be discerned in the slow-burning fuse of pain, as what is selfish and imprisoning is burned out of us, and we are taught our dependence and need. It is there wherever desire is kept alive against the hope of the world, kept sharp in hope of the Kingdom that is coming, like the lamps of the wise bridesmaids who await the wedding feast.

Pentecost Today

We celebrate today as a Solemnity, because no-one is barred from this gift of God, this mighty force for the unchaining of the human spirit. As all humanity was created in the Spirit, all human beings are ready to reflect his glory in their multitudinous ways. His coming is intimate to us, immediately finding our shape and our history, and gilding them with bright fire, as he makes creatures eloquent of their Creator, and reminds us we are redeemed. We should ask him to grace our eyes, so that we can be taken with this shining, and held by the fascination of this

fire, as it converts the dull world into the
bright Kingdom of God.

Fr Philip