



The Solemnity of Pentecost Year A

Ecclesiastical Millinery *'Tongues as of fire'*

Homily by Fr Robbie Low

I have never pretended to be an expert in ecclesiastical millinery but my limited knowledge, biretta, canterbury cap, mitre, was hugely and alarmingly expanded on my first ever HCPT pilgrimage to Lourdes more than a dozen years ago.

Assembling for the great Trust Mass in the acoustic and aesthetic nightmare that is the vast brutalist concrete bunker of the underground basilica, I was dressed in straightforward simple vestments for the Mass. It appeared that I was almost alone in not sporting some outrageous form of headgear and viewed with some suspicion by the assembled priestly headbangers in their liturgically advanced 'titfers'.

It was part of that excited rush to convince the young that we were really able to relate and it was my first Catholic exposure to the persistent use of the 'F' word. FUN.

'We are really fun guys', was the message intended, I think. It was not a message I sought to incarnate personally. I had told our group that our motto would be, 'Pray hard – Play hard'. When we worship it's 'full on and deep as we can go.' When we party, we rock the joint.

Over the years and largely due to Bishop Mark and the Cardinal, the 'silly hat' brigade has reduced to a small recalcitrant subsection but the memory got me thinking about what is worn in church and its significance, especially on this great Feast of The Fifty Days, The Pentecost.

Historically the Pentecost is one of the three major Jewish feasts. The Feast of the Unleavened Bread – attached to Passover and the foundational liberation of the Hebrew people. The Feast of Harvest – Pentecost. And the Feast of Succoth, the Feast of Booths when Jews build an outdoor shelter and live in it for that week as a reminder of their times of wilderness wandering on their way to the Land of the Promise.

So Pentecost is a Harvest Festival when, fifty days after Passover, the fruits of the field are brought and offered. It is ten days after the Ascension of Jesus Christ and, in Christian understanding, is the moment when the 'paraclete', the advocate, the spokesman, the one who is sent to be alongside those who are 'called', descends upon the Apostolic band and, once more, Our Lady giving them the gifts they will need to convert the world and transform an obscure Jewish sect into the Universal Church.

From the moment of that Harvest until the present day the Church has depended for her existence and mission upon this openness to the Holy Spirit of God. On the Day of the Pentecost, that transforming arrival was described by St Luke, in Acts Ch 2, as like a rushing and violent wind that filled the whole house. It is an image of the breath of God that animates the otherwise lifeless body and informs it of its purpose. And also, as if that were not terrifying enough, there appeared to them fiery tongues which, descending, sat upon them. This is no ordinary sitting for it uses a word that implies, sits down with authority, 'cathedra',

and from which we get the English word 'cathedral' , the seat of the bishop, the Apostolic successor in our time.

And, having been breathed through by the Holy Spirit and anointed with fire, the tongues then translate the common and divided languages of Fallen Man into the universal language of the Gospel. In a moment, the pride and division of Babel is overturned and the Way of unity of Man with God and with his fellow Man is re-opened.

The fire of love for God is re-kindled on the altar of our hearts

Back, then, to hats. Briefly.

The hat that the Bishop wears, the Mitre, is intended to remind us of both these enormous and formative events – the gift of the Holy Spirit – and its implications for us. As to Our Lady years before, He will enable us, like her, to bear Christ into the world and present him to the nations. They will remind us of the divine energy blazing in our minds, inspiring us in the quest for the eternal.

Of the purifying fiery holocaust of our sin and the power of the Apostolic absolution, given by Christ to His Apostles and administered on their behalf by the priests of the Tradition.

Of the flickering light of our consciousness of our origin and our end.

Of the burning love on our hearts for Jesus and the eternal flame that goes before God's people in the darkest night on the wilderness wanderings of this life, on the desert highway to the Promised Land.

Without this understanding, the Bishop's Mitre might just be seen as part of a medieval pantomime wardrobe for men who like dressing up.

Instead we see in it the proclamation of the birth of the Universal Church, the Apostolic authority on which she rests, the sign of the charism of leadership, the guarantee of the inspiration of the Presencer,

the power of reconciliation, the awesome responsibility of the wearer, the Gospel mandate for Mission and the Divine light and energy that has fired and fuelled the Church for two millennia.

Unlike some other examples mentioned earlier....It is not just a 'silly hat.'