

Acts 2 Background Information



The disciples received the New Law in that Upper Room. This is the primary significance of the reception of the Holy Spirit. The grace of the Holy Spirit is now the law that governs their lives, not the old Mosaic law. It is fitting that God would provide this new law and gift on a day in which all of the Jews gathered in Jerusalem. God has provided an outstanding opportunity to evangelize! “They were all filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:4). This is the fulfillment of many OT prophecies that referenced a day in which a new and everlasting covenant and law would be internally “written upon their hearts” (see Isa 2:2-4, Jer 31:31-34, Ez 36:26-27, Deut 30:5-6).

The proper effect of this Holy Spirit is a new heart. There are many gifts that come with this primary effect. The ability to speak in tongues is just one of them. This new heart has supreme demands of supernatural charity impressed upon it, so these gifts are given as aides to help further this cause of charity. They are not for self-glorification. This is very clear in St Peter’s speech. Peter quotes the prophet Joel almost verbatim in his epic speech (Acts 2:17-21; Joel 3:1-5). He speaks of God pouring out His Spirit upon His sons and daughters and working wonders in them. However, if you read carefully all of these glorious manifestations are directed towards the goal of conversion towards Jesus Christ crucified, which is properly speaking the goal of charity.

After his illustrious speech, many who heard it conceived a true sorrow for their sins and were “cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37). This phrasing is not insignificant. The OT prophecies mentioned above allude to images of a heart operation, in which one is cut open in order to receive a new spirit that results in a brand-new heart. The audience left to wonder what to do now, Peter responds with the answer of how to receive this new spirit. Peter proclaims triumphantly “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call.” (Acts 2:38-39). The sacrament of Baptism is where a person receives the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit that supplies the new heart. Pentecost was not the ordinary means, but rather the mystery that birthed the Church into existence so that it could begin its mission of offering the salvation of a new heart to “all nations, by baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19).