Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



The campfire that burned during a retreat with young people from the village. (Marjorie Guingona)



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"*The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*"

—*John 3:8*

It was a cloudy late afternoon when I decided to pitch our new tents together with my young retreatants. My excitement was somewhat diminished, for the overcast skies could ruin our outdoor activity if it rained.

Nevertheless, we went ahead and after a quick dinner, huddled together in a semi-circle and began calling on the Spirit from the north, south, east and west to light our fire, while chanting: "Come, come, light up the fire, come, come, join in the ring." As we lit the fire, the logs burst into golden tongues of flaming fire while the evening breeze gently blew in all directions. We marveled at the sight of its sparks dancing like fireflies in the darkness.

As we silently watched the fire burning brightly, the dark clouds simply vanished into thin air, clearing the night skies wide open for the stars to glisten brightly from the heavens. Then we began to listen to each other's stories, the joys and pains, the struggles and triumphs along life's journey.

I was moved by how these young people could seem so vibrant and joyful despite experiences of loss, deprivation, abandonment and even abuse. I felt their struggles and difficulties of growing up in the far-flung barrios — walking miles and crossing rivers just to get to school. I rejoiced as they shared their triumphs, hopes and dreams. The glowing fire seemed to burn away all the fears and negativities they were keeping inside their wounded hearts.

I reflected that fire has the power to gently heal and restore. It is like a spiritual alchemy. Thomas Ellison describes spiritual alchemy at TheCollector.com as "an ancient philosophy that uses the metaphor of transforming metals into gold for attaining spiritual enlightenment. It is used to achieve contentment, harmony, and awareness by liberating one’s essence from one’s acquired personality."

And so, as they shared their pains and losses, it was as if they were going through the first stage of spiritual alchemy, that is, the black phase of "calcination." According to Ellison, "the color black represents chaos, that which is hidden and

buried, and the material of the unconscious. It also refers to the *Materia Prima*, which is the idea in occult sciences that all matter in the universe emerged from an original, primitive base." As Ellison writes, this stage has been likened to St. John of the Cross' *Dark Night of The Soul* that describes the journey of the soul to union with God.

Their stories — of brokenness to wholeness, of betrayal to trust — must pass through the crucible of fire. "Yet He knows the way I have taken; when He has tested me, I will come forth as gold (Job 23:10)." In the darkness, their hushed voices were like echoes resonating with the whole of the Mother Earth crying out for healing and protection, for care and attention in the face of the environmental degradation our world is now facing.

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There is an urgent need to respond to this climate emergency. Professor Stefan Rahmstorf of Potsdam University says, "We are in a kind of climate emergency now. … It is becoming more and more urgent. Time has almost run out to get emissions down." As the Climate Emergency Declaration states online:

> The future of human civilization, and the survival of the precious ecosystems on which we depend, now hang in the balance.
>
> We have experienced the hottest year on record in 2015, and an alarming global temperature spike of more than 1.5°C of warming in February 2016. Our Great Barrier Reef and the ancient Tasmanian forests are being destroyed by global warming.

As we chanted "*Ako yuta, kalayo, tubig, hangin, Espiritu!*" (I am earth, fire, water, wind and Spirit!") we remembered that we are all interconnected in this great and wondrous tapestry of life here on earth and beyond the vastness of the universe. We stayed on until only the dying embers of the fire was left and sleep was beckoning us to end our long day.

A few days after the girls happily ended their nature retreat, I was disheartened once again as heavy rains battered our village on the night before Pentecost Sunday. Nonetheless, I braved the rain — walking along the muddy trail to reach our barrio chapel, not really expecting to see anyone but just to spend a quiet time

alone before the Blessed Sacrament. Moments later, I was surprised to see the children and youth arriving soaked by the rain shower. Only a few had umbrellas and so they ran as fast as they could in the dark to reach the chapel just to be there for the Pentecost vigil.



The children and youth pray during the Pentecost vigil. (Marjorie Guingona)

I was so moved to see them — wet yet smiling and eagerly waiting for our prayer vigil to start. It turned out to be a very solemn evening with about 25 of them in

silent adoration with candlelight and soft music. Seeing them on bended knees with hands clasped, quietly talking to the Lord edified my wavering faith: "Blessed are the pure of hearts for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8).

Yes, Pentecost came alive in this remote little mountain village! It was certainly a time filled with joy, vitality and new life of the Holy Spirit as clearly manifested by God's *anawim*, his little ones. The rain didn't dampen their spirits for they evidently hungered for the Lord in their lives, despite their reality of material poverty and scarcity. They humbled me and have inspired me to guide them in the best way I can, especially in the absence of a priest who can attend to their sacramental life in this local church. Their joyful presence challenges us adults to be on fire too with the Holy Spirit especially when this fire seems to be flickering and dying to the bare embers.

We caught a glimpse of how the disciples in the Acts of the Apostles experienced the power of the Holy Spirit "for suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house" (Acts 2:2). Likewise, tongues of fire rested on each of the disciples and "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:4). After this, they were never the same again, for they were overflowing with zeal and passion to preach the good news of salvation by performing miracles, healings and signs and wonders. The wind and fire were two notable signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit all throughout the account of the Acts of the Apostles.

Yes, we are a Pentecost people! May the wind and fire of the Holy Spirit continue to ignite our faith lives with renewed ardor and passion just like the disciples in the Acts of the Apostles. May it blow in unexpected places, in unknowing strangers and in our ordinary day-to-day lives, calling us to journey on together as God's people towards the realization of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21).