

Among the reasons President Clinton won the election last year was his promise to place more women and people of color into positions of influence formerly dominated by white males. People disagree over his success, but he has kept the issue alive. Admitting that our culture represses the talents of many will gradually make us a better people. 217 years after the founding of our nation, as great as our country is, we have a president who still must realize for us concepts like freedom and equal opportunity.

The more sublime our goals, the longer they take to realize. Jesus commanded some high ideals: teach all nations, and baptize them, but frail humans need time to complete the task.

Today's first reading gathers the closest disciples, women and men, in an upper room between ascension and Pentecost. They know the ideals, but they're not doing much. They seem to be waiting for some inspiration. Eventually it comes, but for a time they sit in that incubator of a room, giving the gospel a chance to hatch.

The church today on some issues, still sits in that incubator. I'll give just one example: gender-inclusive language. Our prayers, readings, and hymns at Mass still use the word "man" to refer to "men and women," even though English has changed on this point. Years ago Star Trek invited us to boldly go where no man has ever gone before; now we go where no one has ever gone before. The language has changed in newspapers, commercials, and popular speech. But it hasn't completely changed in church. It's like we're sitting in that upper room waiting for the inspiration to make things different.

We have a new catechism in the Catholic Church, a remarkable compendium of church teachings. It doesn't break new ground, but it collects in one place a summary of what we believe. The problem is it's only available in French and Italian. The English version is being held up right now because American and Roman translators disagree over gender-inclusive language. The English translation will probably follow the others by about a year. The pain this creates for us has the power to transform us into a better church. Many have grown impatient, believing that the church has left that upper room but missed out on the message we were supposed to hear. Personally, I doubt it. I believe our church will always follow what the Holy Spirit directs us to do, and that on language and many others issues we're still in the upper room waiting on tongues of fire to help us get out. If we hold our ideals and remain open to the Spirit, a wonderful future lies ahead.