

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE HOLY SPIRIT

(Catechism nn. 683-747)

The Spirit of YHWH

Having expressed the Church's faith in God the Father (Catechism n. 198-421), and in Jesus (Catechism n.422-682), the Catechism in Chapter Three reflects on the statement of the Creed: 'I believe in the Holy Spirit'(n.683-747). For the additional material that came out of the Council of Constantinople, see the previous chapter. We are affirming our faith in the Spirit of God as experienced by Jesus: our faith in the bond of communion between Jesus and the God whom he addressed as 'Father'.

To speak of the Spirit is to speak of the mystical dimension of religious experience. As disciples of Jesus we believe we are gifted with Jesus' own Spirit 'poured into our hearts'(Romans 5:5), revealing God as Love and inviting and enabling us to share Jesus' own communion with God.

Before contemplating the Spirit of Jesus, let us reflect on some key texts from the Hebrew Scriptures. We begin with the opening verses of the Book of Genesis:

'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters (Genesis 1:1-2).

Some scholars suggest that the author is speaking only of a 'mighty wind'. Others see a reference to God's Spirit breathing over chaos to bring order and life.

There is no ambiguity in the second text:

'YHWH God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath [spirit] of life; and the man became a living being' (Genesis 2:7).

Human beings are what we are because there is more to us than the dust of the earth. We live because God breathes God's Holy Spirit into us. The same is true for all living creatures:

'They look to you to give them their food in due season ... When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground (Psalm 104:27-30).

The destruction of Jerusalem and the deportations of the leading citizens to Babylon, led many to the edge of despair. It appeared that the people of Judah were to suffer the same fate as the people of Israel a century before. The prophet Ezekiel declares that God will again breathe God's Spirit into the people and restore them to life:

'I will cause breath ('Spirit') to enter you, and you shall live.
I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you,
and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live;
and you shall know that I am YHWH ...
Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man,
and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord YHWH:
Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain,
that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me,
and the breath came into them, and they lived,
and stood on their feet, a vast multitude' (Ezekiel 37:5-10).

The Catechism (n.712) quotes the following statement from Isaiah. It refers to the Messiah, and so is realized fully in Jesus:

‘The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and courage, the spirit of knowledge and piety. His delight is in the fear of the Lord’ (Isaiah 11:2 in the Greek Version).

It is this Spirit that filled the heart of Jesus, and from the fullness of his own communion with God Jesus shared this Spirit with his disciples.

Luke has Jesus choosing the following statement from Isaiah (61:1-2) as expressing his understanding of his mission (see Catechism n. 714):

‘The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour’ (Luke 4:18-19).

In Jerusalem on the final day of the New Year Festival, Jesus exclaimed:

‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said: Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’

John comments:

‘He said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:37-39).

What does John mean: ‘As yet there was no Spirit’? Obviously from the beginning and throughout his ministry Jesus shared with others the Spirit that bound him in a communion of love with God. However, the fullness of this love could only be given when Jesus’ life had reached its climax: when he was embraced by God in the complete life of the resurrection. Only then could the fullness of his Spirit be poured out from his heart to ours. This is the fullness of divine love that Jesus promised at the Last Supper:

‘I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever’ (John 14:16).

‘The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you’ (John 14:26).

We are reminded of Jesus’ words to the woman at the well in Samaria:

‘The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life’ (John 4:14).

Our reflections turn now to Jesus’ ‘hour of glory’, to Calvary where, surrounded by people who were not listening to grace, he was cruelly murdered. We see him continuing to pour out God’s love, the Spirit of his love-communion with God. John writes:

‘Jesus said: “It is finished”. Then he bowed his head and gave up his Spirit ... One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out ... As Scripture says: “They will look on the one whom they have pierced” (John 19:30, 34, 37).

Benedict XVI

John's community returns to this scene in the First Letter of John in which they insist that there is more to being a disciple of Jesus than water and the Spirit. We must embrace our crucified Lord in his self-giving on Calvary. We must not try to bypass 'blood':

'There are three that bear witness to Jesus: the Spirit and the water and the blood (1John 5:7-8).

From his prayer Jesus knew that his mission from God was to set the world ablaze by opening people's hearts to welcome the fire of God's Spirit (Catechism n.696):

'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!' (Luke 12:49).

I am reminded of the words of Father Jules Chevalier, the Founder of the Religious Society to which I have the privilege of belonging (the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart). In his Book on the Sacred Heart, published in 1900, he wrote:

'From the heart of Jesus pierced on Calvary, I see a new world coming forth: a great and life-giving world, inspired by love and mercy; a world that the Church must perpetuate on the whole earth.'

Jesus was true to his promise. After his death and resurrection, his followers experienced a profound mystical awakening. They were fired by Jesus' own Spirit in their communion with God and in carrying out the mission given them by Jesus. In his first encyclical *God is Love* (n.19), Pope Benedict XVI wrote:

'By dying on the Cross—as Saint John tells us—Jesus “gave up his Spirit” (John 19:30), anticipating the gift of the Holy Spirit that he would make after his Resurrection (cf. John 20:22). This was to fulfil the promise of “rivers of living water” that would flow out of the hearts of believers, through the outpouring of the Spirit (cf. John 7:38-39). The Spirit, in fact, is that interior power which harmonizes their hearts with Christ's heart and moves them to love their brethren as Christ loved them, when he bent down to wash the feet of the disciples (cf. John 13:1-13) and above all when he gave his life for us (cf. John 13:1, 15:13).

The Spirit is also the energy that transforms the heart of the ecclesial community, so that it becomes a witness before the world to the love of the Father, who wishes to make humanity a single family in his Son. The entire activity of the Church is an expression of a love that seeks the integral good of man: it seeks his evangelization through Word and Sacrament, an undertaking that is often heroic in the way it is acted out in history; and it seeks to promote people in the various arenas of life and human activity. Love is therefore the service that the Church carries out in order to attend constantly to human sufferings and needs, including material needs.'

Luke offers a dramatic and highly symbolic portrait of Jesus' gift of his Spirit in his Acts of the Apostles:

'Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability' (Acts 2:2-4).

Paul witnesses to the same reality. We would do well to reflect upon his teaching:

‘God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying “Abba!” (Father)’ (Galatians 4:6).

‘The person who is united to the Lord becomes one Spirit with the Lord’ (1 Corinthians 6:17).

‘The Spirit of God dwells in you’ (Romans 8:9).

‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us’ (Romans 5:5).

‘The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness and self-control’ (Galatians 5:22-23).

The Spirit’s gifts are given with a view to the carrying out of the mission of Christ, and are effective because empowered by the creating energy of God.

‘There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit ... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for a good purpose’ (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

Paul’s teaching on the Holy Spirit is rich. He writes:

‘It is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment’ (2 Corinthians 1:21-22).

‘The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit’ (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

Paul speaks of the Spirit of Jesus praying within us:

‘The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God’ (Romans 8:26-27).

And he prays:

‘May the Father grant that you be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Holy Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith as you are being rooted and grounded in love’ (Ephesians 3:16-17).

Since to speak of the Spirit is to speak of the mystical dimension of religious experience, perhaps poetry and music are the best way to open ourselves to the mystery of the Holy Spirit. We might listen to the Carmelite mystic, John of the Cross (Catechism n.696):

1. O living flame of love
that tenderly wounds my soul in its deepest centre.
Since you are not oppressive now, finish your work if it be your will;
tear the veil of this sweet encounter.

John of the Cross

2. O sweet cautery!
O delightful wound! O gentle hand! O delicate touch!
that tastes of eternal life, and pays every debt!
In killing you have changed death to life.
3. O lamps of fire!
in whose splendours the deep caverns of feeling,
once obscure and blind, now, so strangely exquisite,
give forth warmth and light to their Beloved.
4. How gently and lovingly
you stir in my breast where in secret you dwell alone;
and in your sweet breathing filled with good and glory
how delicately you swell my heart with love!

The Church offers us the following Sequence for the Feast of Pentecost. It is attributed to Stephen Langdon (of Magna Carta fame. Died 1228):

Holy Spirit, Lord of light,
from the clear celestial height, your pure beaming radiance give.

Come, Father of the poor,
come with treasures which endure, come, light of all that live!

You, of all consolers best,
you, the soul's delightful guest, such refreshing peace bestow.

You in toil are comfort sweet;
pleasant coolness in the heat; solace in the midst of woe.

Light immortal, light divine,
visit now these hearts of thine and our inmost being fill.

If you take your grace away,
nothing pure in us will stay, all our good is turned to ill.

Heal our wounds, our strength renew;
on our dryness pour your dew; wash the stains of sin away:

Bend the stubborn heart and will;
melt the frozen; warm the chill; guide the steps that go astray.

We pray you, we who evermore
you confess and you adore, with your sevenfold gifts descend:

Give us comfort when we die;
give us life with you on high; give us joys that never end.

The following hymn expresses a profound sentiment of longing:

1. O breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew,
that I may love what You would love, and do what You would do.

2. O breathe on me Breath of God until my heart is pure,
until with You I have one will to do and to endure.
3. O breathe on me Breath of God till I am wholly Yours,
until this earthly part of me glows with Your fiery cause.
4. O breathe on me Breath of God, so shall I never die,
but live with You the perfect life of Your eternity.

We conclude our reflections with Augustine's words, challenging us to return to our heart. It is there in the mystical experience of communion with Jesus and with God that we 'taste' the Holy Spirit' who is the union of love that binds the heart of Jesus to the Heart of God, and is the gift of the exalted Jesus to us his disciples. The Holy Spirit is God's life in which we share, and the promise of an eternity of communion:

'Return to the heart! Why are you running away from yourself?
Why are you getting lost, outside yourself, entering on deserted ways?
You are wandering aimlessly. Come back! To where?
To the Lord! It can be done quickly! Return immediately to your heart!
Exiled from your own self you wander outside.
You fail to know yourself, you who want to know the source of your existence.
Come back! Return to the heart ...
See there what you can learn about God, for the image of God is there.
In your heart dwells Christ.
In your heart you are being renewed after God's image.'

As already noted in the previous chapter, to the simple statement of the Nicene Creed ('I believe in the Holy Spirit'), the Council of Constantinople added:

'the Lord, the giver of life, proceeding from the Father, to be worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son, who has spoken through the prophets' (Catechism n. 245).

It is time for us to reflect on the Christian teaching of the Holy Trinity.

