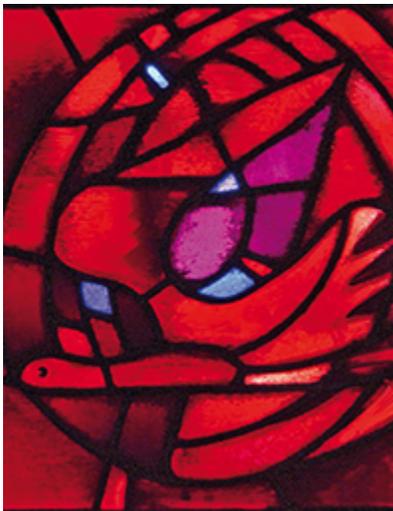


Apostle of the Holy Spirit

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Among the forgotten Christian mystics it is impossible not to remember Blessed Elena Guerra, the events of whose life are particularly surprising. Indeed, although mystics have frequently been misunderstood and impeded (if not actually condemned to be burned at the stake, like Margherita Porete), Elena Guerra instead obtained great recognition from Pope Leo xiii, to whom she addressed many letters. She was thus a figure appreciated from a theological point of view but whose spirituality did not penetrate the Church's fabric, for it is true that few knew her and her many small works and spiritual treatises had poor dissemination.



Born into a noble family in Lucca in 1835 and from her youth conditioned by delicate health, she discovered joy in spiritual things early on. Misunderstood for her mystical experience, she remained faithful to that special mission which had been assigned to her and which was the golden thread of her existence: to bring the Holy Spirit to the heart of Christian life. "Adoration of the Holy Spirit", she wrote, "has always been very ardent in my heart, even though no one had

recommended him to me, and in spite of the fact that I did not know any reading that would have been able to teach me of him". At first she thought of an association, the "Spiritual Friends", whose aim would be to share an authentic Christian life through friendship. In 1872 she founded a lay institute dedicated to St Zita, Patroness of Lucca, for the free education of girls, which later became the religious congregation of the Oblates of the Holy Spirit. Gemma Galgani was one of her pupils. At the height of the 19th century, while the spirituality of the Cross and penance prevailed, there is no doubt that the Holy Spirit's revelation of himself as divine love assumed a prophetic value: "In God love is always perfect and therefore it is sustained, eternal... and this love is the Holy Spirit, who works all miracles of charity". Blessed Elena's mystical experience finds expression in this clear delineation in so far as the Holy Spirit revealed himself to her as love in action, love that in loving teaches how to love: "The beautiful work of inflaming hearts with love of God belongs to this same Love. Love came and man loved". Jesus kindled love in the hearts of the Apostles when "He sent them the Holy Spirit, that is, the substantial and personal Love of God himself". One does not rely on the will but rather on yielding which allows the Holy Spirit to work and to transform. "The world lacks truth and love because it has... distanced itself from the Spirit of God... Everyone admits that the world is on its way to total ruin..., but what can we do to accelerate the necessary return of the Spirit of God to the hearts of men and women?". In 1870 the capture of Rome sanctioned the Church's loss of temporal power once and for all. Elena intensified her appeal to the Holy Spirit, seeing in this a return to the beginning of the Apostles' preaching. But despite her determination and tireless endeavours to involve other people, she did not feel understood. In 1895 she wrote her first letter to Leo xiii: "Most Holy Father, only you can ensure that Christians return to the Holy Spirit, so that the Holy Spirit returns to us... I would like to ask you, for love of God, not to hesitate to recommend this common prayer". This is an urgent, pressing matter. The destiny of the world can now be read only in this salvific key: "All the benefits of redemption are of infinite excellence, but what fulfills and crowns them all is the infusion of God's Spirit in his creatures". A little later the Pope answered with the Brief *Provida matris charitate*, in which he introduced a festive period of prayer to the Holy Spirit between the Ascension and Pentecost. Elena, encouraged, wrote 13 letters to the Pope between 1895 and 1903. In 1897, after her fifth letter, Leo xiii answered with his Encyclical *Divinum illud munus*, an important treatise on the Holy Spirit, in which light is shed on the action with which he works in the Apostles

and in humanity and on how he pours out his gifts. The last official act of the Pope in response to Elena's constant solicitations was to be the Letter *Ad fovendum in Christiano populo* addressed to the bishops of the whole world in 1902. With it he encouraged them to renew their faith, trusting in the Holy Spirit.

Indeed, the synergy that came into being between Elena and Leo xiii brought light to the epochal passage of transition which the Church and humanity were going through, but of course the times were not ripe for a prompt response. Instead, the prayer of invocation to the Holy Spirit spread from the end of the 19th century in North American Protestant communities, far from the ecclesial hierarchy, through the so-called "Pentecostal" Movement, called subsequently, from 1963, "Charismatic Renewal" and only recognized by the Catholic Church and by the Orthodox Church in 1967. As Elena wrote to the Pope, "I have ardently desired for so many years that the faithful should unanimously reunite, in order to return to the Holy Spirit and to bring about with ceaseless prayer a beneficent renewal of the face of the earth". At the end of her life she experienced a period of great bitterness and loneliness: "The poor servant of the Holy Spirit has carried her work forward even in the midst of so many betrayals... letting her arms be bound without rebelling, and, folding her hands, devoting herself to the loftiest form of adoration and of the acceptance of God's will... this is the transformation of humble inactivity into perfect action". In 1959, a few decades after her death on 11 April 1914, Elena was beatified by Pope John xxiii as the "Apostle of the Holy Spirit".

Elena's prophetic inspiration, accepted and divulged through the Pope's authority, certainly prepared for an advent: the era of the Holy Spirit. It brings to light the action which the Third Person of the Trinity carries out in history and which, through the humanity of the Son, is poured out upon the human race powerfully, to its maximum. This is also treated by Leo xiii himself in his Encyclical *Divinum illud munus*: "The Holy Ghost is the ultimate cause of all things, since, as the will and all other things finally rest in their end, so he, who is the Divine Goodness and the Mutual Love of the Father and the Son, completes and perfects, by his strong yet gentle power, the secret work of man's eternal salvation". If the era of the Father is the time of the Law and the era of the Son is the time of Love, the era of the Holy Spirit is the time of the expansion of love in which all will be called, through mercy and forgiveness, to a consoling and maternal vision of God. Jesus' Baptism is in the "Holy Spirit and in fire", the disciples are sent to baptize "in the

name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". The Spirit of God descends in the Son to pour himself out on humanity. The Consoler liberates human beings from the spirit of the world by drawing them to himself, providing for their every need with care and tenderness. In the centre of Elena Guerra's spirituality is placed the rebirth of the Holy Spirit which starts with Baptism: "When I had barely emerged from my mother's womb, you, Lord, embraced me and washed me with the water of Baptism, making me your daughter.... Reborn through water, we must be reborn in the Holy Spirit. You alone, Lord, can make me understand and put into practice this blessed rebirth... so that my life may be a continuous communion, an uninterrupted rebirth and growth in the Holy Spirit". *Being reborn in the Spirit* refers to being "born anew" from on high, to which the Johannine text refers (cf. John 3:3-8), and this makes us think of the Holy Spirit as a luminous embrace which is poured out to welcome and regenerate the whole of humanity.



Elena made herself the spokeswoman of a new time pressing on the threshold of the world: "To inaugurate tangibly in the Church, the true house of adoration, a universal 'Upper Room'. In this way the faithful will be united with the Mother of God who prayed ardently in the Upper Room of Jerusalem and will be able to implore and beg the Holy Spirit, through a ceaseless *Come*, for the longed-for renewal of the face of the earth".

Thus the poetic fulcrum is the vision of this universal "Upper Room" which refers to a new Pentecost. Just as after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit Mary and the

Apostles came out of the Upper Room to go to the people, so the Church is called to open herself universally to the world to pour out the fire of love. From the reality of a community which creates belonging unfolds the perspective of a universal communion. The term "Church" alludes to the community (Hebrew: *qahal*; Greek: *ekklesia*), but the adjective "catholic" conveys the right vision. The Apostles could disperse among the peoples because they were united in the Spirit. Through the humanity of the Son the Spirit of God causes the closed walls of belonging to collapse. There is communion only where the spirit is one: "We were all baptized into one Body... and all were made to drink of one spirit" (1 Cor 12:13).

The inspiration of the *universal "Upper Room"* looks to the Church as a reality of communion founded on one spirit and which, for this very reason, as Pope Francis never tires of repeating, can be transformed into a Church moving out, going towards the peripheries. It is not institutions and organizations which guarantee unity, but the power of the Holy Spirit. More than a century after Elena's words, we can wait no longer. The times demand it. Globalization, conflicts and contradictions are such as to make it obvious that there is no way other than that of the Spirit: words and good reasoning are no longer of use. We need the silence that quietens every voice and enables us to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Elena still illuminates us: "Remember (the Holy Spirit says to the soul), that I like to entertain myself among friends and in my living temple I long for silence".

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