

# The Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church



## The Trinity: Three Persons in One God

We begin every holy sacrifice of the Mass, which commemorates the Passion and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ as celebrated at the Last Supper the night before He died for our sins, with a citation from St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians 13: 14, "**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.**" The central mystery of the Catholic faith is that God is a Trinity, three divine persons in one God (one substance or essence). The second ecumenical council at Constantinople in 381 A.D. confessed the faith of the Apostles when they said, "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father." The great fourth century Doctor of the Church, St. Athanasius, expressed it this way in his creed, "Now this is the Catholic faith: We worship one God in the

Trinity and the Trinity in unity, without either confusing the persons or dividing the substance; for the person of the Father is one, the Son's is another, the Holy Spirit's another; but the Godhead of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal their majesty coeternal."

## God's Plan is the work of the Three Persons in Him

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us that, "The whole divine economy [God's plan for mankind] is the common work of the three divine persons. For as the Trinity has only one and the same natures so too does it have only one and the same operation." The Holy Spirit is present throughout salvation history from Genesis to Revelation. Thus, the Holy Spirit is said to be amongst Moses and Israel when they crossed the Red Sea and when the Angel Gabriel came to our Blessed Mother, he said, "**The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, hence the Holy offspring to be born will be called Son of God.**" When Mary followed the direction of the Spirit and visited her cousin Elizabeth, St. Luke tells us, "**When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting the baby leapt in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and cried out in a loud voice, 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. . .'**" St. Peter confessed in Mt 16:16, when Jesus asked him who he was, "**You are the Christ the Son of the Living God**" and Jesus assured him these words came from the Father, undoubtedly by the Holy Spirit. The Catechism also notes, "Everyone who glorifies the Father does so through the Son in the Holy Spirit; everyone who follows Christ does so because the Father draws him and the Spirit moves him" (see John 6: 44; Rom 8: 14). St. John writes us "**that God is love and that he who abides in love abides in God.** God can be likened to an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who has destined the Body of Christ to share in that exchange.

## The Last Days of Jesus Bring the Promise of the Holy Spirit

In His last discourse with His disciples, given in the 14th chapter of John, Jesus says, "Anything you ask in my name I will do. If you love me and obey the commands I give you, I will ask the Father and He will give you another **Paraclete** [Advocate, like Jesus] to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept, since it neither sees Him nor recognizes Him; but you can recognize Him because He remains with you." He goes on to say that "**the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name will instruct you in everything.**" Nothing of what Jesus taught would be lost. It would be preserved first in sacred, oral Tradition and then much of it written down in the New Testament, which is a part with the Old Testament, of sacred writing. Together, flowing from "**the same divine well spring**" they form the deposit of faith, which with the help of the Holy Spirit, has been preserved in the Catholic Church since the time of Jesus.

### **The Holy Spirit is the Sanctifier**

The Holy Spirit is the sanctifier, who was sent by the Father and Son to complete the work of the Son. He makes "holy." As Pope John Paul II has written, "Having accomplished the work that the Father had entrusted to the Son on earth (John 17:4), on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was sent to sanctify the Church for ever, so that believers might have access to the Father through Christ in one Spirit" (Eph 2: 18). The Church has always taught that we receive the Holy Spirit through the sacrament (a sharing in the life of God; an outward sign that produces grace in us) of Baptism. The waters of Baptism signify the cleansing of our soul of original sin [which all humans inherit from Adam and Eve, our first parents]. St. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, tells us that we are sealed with the Holy Spirit in our baptism. This reality is signified by the holy oil which is traced on the forehead of the person being baptized in the form of a cross. The sacrament imparts an indelible character. God's life comes to us and makes us "**children of God**" and "**heirs with Christ.**" St. Peter makes the comparison to the waters which saved Noah from physical death, proclaiming that in the spiritual realm of our soul, "**baptism now saves you**" (1 Peter 3:21). The Spirit also imparts the gifts of faith, hope and charity, enabling us to grow in our relationship with God and with one another.

### **The Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist**

The Holy Spirit is active in the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist. When he appeared to the Apostles on the evening of Easter, Jesus breathed upon them and said, '**Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained**' (John 20:22-23). Our Holy Father has written that the outpouring of the Spirit was the great gift of the Risen Lord to his disciples on Easter Sunday. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us, "The Church is the Body of Christ. Through the Spirit and his action in the sacraments, above all the Eucharist, Christ, who once was dead and is now risen, establishes the community of believers as his own Body." The priest at every Mass prays the *Epiclesis* in which he begs the Father to send the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, to transubstantiate [changing the substance without affecting the accidents, namely the physical appearances of bread and wine] the bread and wine offering into the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ. St. John Damascene writing in the eighth century, "You ask how the bread becomes the Body of Christ, and the wine . . . the Blood of Christ I shall tell you: the Holy Spirit

comes upon them and accomplishes what surpasses every word and thought . . . Let it be enough for you to understand that it is by the Holy Spirit, just as it was of the Holy Virgin and by the Holy Spirit that the Lord, through and in himself, took flesh." **The Sacrament of Confirmation**

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, Luther and other reformers rejected the sacrament of Confirmation. In the early Church the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation were given at the same time to adult converts. This blurred the distinction in the Reformers mind of the two distinct sacraments. But Scripture is clear. Christ promised the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, (John 14:15-21) who would enable His disciples to testify to the truth (John 15: 6) and the fulfillment came after nine days of prayer at Pentecost. After Peter and the Apostles received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, some of the crowd asked, "What shall we do?" Peter said, "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:37). We see this sacrament in Acts 8: 14-17, where Peter and John impose their hands on the previously baptized Samaritan. This sacrament gives us the **gifts of the Holy Spirit**, which are **wisdom, understanding, counsel fortitude, knowledge piety and fear of the Lord (cf. Isaiah 11: 2-3)**. In the sacrament of Confirmation we become soldiers of Christ, sealed in the Spirit to become witnesses in a mature way to Christ's gospel. As a symbol of this new strength in the Spirit, bishops in the Middle Ages used to give the candidate a light slap on the cheek, as a symbol that we must be ready to give up our lives for the faith, as so many others have in the past. St. Paul writes, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3: 17-18). We are intended to reflect the glory of Christ in our lives by striving for personal holiness, which can only be achieved through God's **grace**. Thus the sacrament seals us in His love and service and by cooperating with His work within us, our lives bear the fruit of the Spirit, namely love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness and chastity (Gal 5:22).

### The Power of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit enables us as Christians to become fruitful members of the Body of Christ, which is the Church. The mystical Body of Christ that St. Paul writes about in Scripture consists of the Old Testament and New Testament Saints in Heaven as well as the baptized Christian followers of Our Lord here on earth, the Church. As St. Paul notes, we, the Church, are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses in Heaven (Heb 11). The Holy Spirit dwelling within us can and does transform our lives, the Church and the world. St. Paul also urges that, "We live by the Spirit." We do this when we renounce ourselves, the more we "walk by the Spirit." (Gal 5:25). This power is not confined to the sacraments. There is an experience sometimes referred to as the "**Baptism of the Holy Spirit**." As St. Thomas Aquinas notes the Holy Spirit can be given or sent to us to indwell us and "make us new." This begins at our Baptism, but the Spirit can be given or sent after this according to St. Thomas, who wrote, "The is an invisible sending [of the Holy Spirit] also in respect to an advance in virtue or an increase of grace . . . Such an invisible sending is especially to be seen in that kind of increase of grace whereby a person moves forward to some new act or new state of grace: as, for instance, when a person moves forward into the grace of working miracles, or of prophecy or out of the burning love of God offers his life as a martyr, or renounces all of his possessions, or undertakes some other such

arduous thing." Christ's promise of another Paraclete, an Advocate, was fulfilled on Pentecost for the Apostles and Mary, who had been praying fervently for nine days. This extra measure of the Spirit seems to have been conferred in other places in the Acts of the Apostles (e.g., Acts 4:31; 19:1-7). The Holy Spirit then can "make us new" when we surrender to God and serve Him with our whole heart, thus aiding our personal holiness (without which no man can see God) and the work of the Church. This, however, does not take the place of sacramental Baptism or Confirmation, but rather is a way of opening ourselves up further to the life in the Spirit. This may be experienced by an overwhelming sense of the presence and love of God, or a sense of being filled with joy and peace. In Scripture, we see it was accompanied at times by the gift of speaking in tongues. As the Catechism says, "The moral life of Christians is sustained by the gifts of the Holy Spirit" which make us more willing to be led by the Spirit. St. Paul wrote, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God . . . If children, then heirs, heirs with God and fellow heirs with Christ" (Rom 8:14, 17).

### The Spiritual Gifts

The Spiritual gifts are powerful instruments of the work of the Spirit in the Church. St. Paul wrote, "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit. There are different gifts but the same Spirit; there are different ministries but the same Lord; there are different works but the same God who accomplishes all of them in everyone. To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one the Spirit gives wisdom in discourse, to another power to express knowledge. Through the Spirit one receives faith; by the same Spirit another is given the gift of healing, and still another miraculous powers. Prophecy is given to one; to another power to distinguish one spirit from another. One receives the gift of tongues another that of interpreting the tongues." St. Paul goes on to say, "We all drink of the same Spirit . . . we don't all have the gift of tongues, set your hearts on the greater gifts . . ." (1 Corinthians 12: 3-11). What Paul was referring to he makes clear, namely **love**. Love is the greatest gift of all. But what about the gift of tongues? Must I speak in tongues to be Christian? Paul says, "If I speak in human tongues and angelic as well, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and, with full knowledge, comprehend all mysteries, if I have faith great enough to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Cor 13: 1-2). As to tongues, Paul notes that a man speaking in tongues "is talking not to men but to God. No one understands him because he utters mysteries in the Spirit. The prophet on the other hand, speaks to men for their upbuilding . . . He who speaks in tongues builds up himself, but he who prophesies builds up the church" (1 Cor 14: 2-4). Those with the gift of tongues are counseled to pray for the "gift of interpretation" so that others might benefit. St. Paul concludes, "but in the church I would rather say five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue. . . . The gift of tongues is a sign, not for those who believe but for those who do not believe, while prophecy is not for those who are without faith but for those who have faith" (1 Cor 14:18, 22).

### Conscience is a Man's best friend

Let's remember St. Paul's injunction that if Christians who live in the spirit find another in sin, they should "gently set him right, each of you trying to avoid falling into temptation himself" (Gal 6:1). We have not only to carry our own responsibility but help carry the burdens

of others. Then he adds, "Make no mistake about it, no one makes a fool of God! A man will reap only what he sows in the field of the flesh, he will reap a harvest of corruption; but if his seed ground is the spirit, he will reap everlasting life" (Gal 6: 7-8). Concluding the sixth chapter of his letter to the Galatians, Paul said, "Let us not grow weary of doing good; if we do not relax our efforts in due time we shall reap our harvest." In his letter to the Ephesians he urges us, "At every opportunity pray in the Spirit, using prayers and petitions of every sort. Pray constantly and attentively for all in the holy company" (Eph 6: 18).

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