

The Holy Spirit, as God

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In contemporary Western Christian thought, a theology of the Spirit is most frequently expressed in the context of a new search for religious freedom. The Spirit is seen as justifying either institutional change, or a religion of personal experience, or spiritual phenomena known as "pentecostal." Unfortunately, traditional Western systematic theology, medieval or reformed, provides little material or context for an organic and integrated theology of the Spirit. It remains rather speculative as to the identity of the "Giver" and, therefore, its interpretation of "gifts" is frequently quite arbitrary. Here perhaps lies one of the reasons for contemporary theological *desarroi*.

In the Christian East, the theology of the Spirit has also found little systematic development. However, some basic points of reference are found in the great trinitarian disputes of the fourth century which lead to the affirmation of the Spirit's *divinity*, as the third *Person* of the Trinity, and also in the interpretation of human salvation and ultimate destiny in terms of *deification*. These points of reference are therefore of central importance for the Orthodox interpretation of both scriptural and traditional data on the Holy Spirit, as they are expressed in the liturgy of the church, the experiences of the saints, and the life of the Christian community.

In short compass, it would obviously be impossible for me to attempt a truly systematic presentation of pneumatology. I will limit myself to the basic trinitarian and anthropological frames of reference, which lead to my understanding of the Spirit as God, and then draw some theological implications for our own concerns today.

I. The Trinitarian Dimension

It has been often noted that East and West differ in their approach to the mystery of the divine Trinity. The West takes for granted God's unity and approaches his "trinity" as a matter of speculation, while the East starts with a living experience of the *three* and then moves to affirm their equal divinity, and therefore, their unity. Thus, the Greek Cappadocian fathers of the fourth century were accused of tri-theism, because "the groundwork of (their) thought lay in the triplicity of equal hypostases (persons), and the identity of the divine *ousia* (substance) came second in order of prominence to their minds."¹

This difference of approach to the trinitarian mystery is not a philosophical one. It is based on a fundamental interpretation of the New Testament by the Greek Fathers who understood the Christian faith itself as primarily a revelation of divine *persons*. The Christian faith for them is first of all an answer to Jesus' question, "Whom say ye that I am? . . . The Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:15-16) The authority and effectiveness of Jesus' actions, as well as of his teachings, depend upon his personal identity. Only God himself can be the *Savior*, only God overcomes death and forgives sins, only God can communicate divine life to humankind. And the same approach is valid for their interpretation of Jesus' sending of "another" comforter from the Father—the Spirit. The primarily personal revelation of God is discovered by the early Greek Fathers not only in the classical trinitarian formula—the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19, or the three gifts personally qualified in 2 Corinthians 13:14 ("the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father, and the communion *κοινωνία* of the Holy Spirit") but also in the Spirit speaking personally to Philip, (Acts 8:29) to Peter, (Acts 10:19; 11:12) to the Church of Antioch, (Acts 13:12) to the apostolic

council of Jerusalem ("it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us"). (Acts 15:25) The Spirit is understood here as a presence, distinct from that of Jesus, but possessing the same divine sovereignty.

It is therefore understandable that the insistence by the Cappadocian Fathers on this personal (hypostatic) distinctiveness could lead them to a trinitarian system in which their enemies saw tri-theism. They were ready to run that risk in order to preserve the biblical understanding of a living and acting God, fully independent from the impersonal idealism of Greek philosophy. Even the Nicæan formulation of "consubstantiality" was long suspect in the East—and not only among the Arians—of being both unbiblical and too philosophical. It was finally accepted, but only in combination with the traditional (origenistic) reaffirmation of the three distinct *hypostaseis* in God.

The struggle against Arius, who accepted the distinction but not the substantial co-equality and co-sovereignty of the divine persons, was about the nature of salvation. This is particularly evident in the writing of Athanasius. It immediately and necessarily involved not only the person of Jesus Christ, but also that of the Spirit through whom the Son of God became man in the bosom of Mary, and through whom also, until the parousia, he is present in his body, the church. It is in writings by Athanasius—his *Letters to Serapion*—that one finds the first elaborate patristic argument defending the divinity of the Spirit. It is the same soteriological approach that one finds in the other major fourth century treatise on the same subject: the *De Spiritu Sancto* of St. Basil of Caesarea. Both Athanasius and Basil consider the saving activity of the Spirit accessible to the Christian experience, as being necessarily effected by God himself. Since the *personal* character of the Spirit is taken for granted, the evidence of the Spirit's divinity is there to see.

The divine identity of the "Comforter" is, therefore, a basic coordinate of the Christian idea of salvation. It is reflected not only in the theological tradition of the Christian East, but also, very prominently, in its liturgy. A prayer addressed personally to the Spirit, "O Heavenly King," is the initial act of every liturgical action in the Orthodox Church. The sacraments and, more particularly, the sacrament of the Christian *koinonia* itself, i.e., the Eucharist, culminate in an invocation of the Spirit. Hymnology, especially that of the feast of Pentecost, proclaims the same relationship between the Spirit's acts and his divine identity:

The Spirit bestows all things; it appoints prophets; it consecrates priests; it gives wisdom to the simple; it turned fishermen into theologians; it gathers together the whole assembly of the Church; O Comforter, consubstantial and co-reigning with the Father and the Son, glory to Thee.

We have seen the true light; we have received the heavenly Spirit; we have found the true faith, worshipping the undivided Trinity, who has saved us.

In the text of the Nicæan Creed, in fact the Creed adopted at the Council of Constantinople in 381, the divine identity of the Spirit was defined in terms of his "procession from the Father." This definition is in accordance with the theology of the Cappadocian Fathers who saw in the *person* of God, the Father, the very "origin of the Godhead." It is precisely as God that the Spirit "proceeds from the Father" directly, while creatures are not direct products from the Father, but come into being through the operation and mediation of the Logos. Thus, the proclamation of the Spirit's "procession from the Father" is equivalent to the proclamation of his pre-eternal divinity.

At this point, it is easy to discern the difference of approach to the mystery of the Trinity between the Greek Fathers of the fourth century and the Latin West. In trying to define a doctrine of salvation, the Latin West became preoccupied with the issue of justification by faith, its relation to human "works" and

produced systems explaining the very process of salvation, i.e., the Anselmian doctrine of satisfaction. The personal divine identity of Christ and the Spirit, though an intellectual necessity—"only God Himself can fully satisfy divine justice"—became in fact a peripheral issue, rather than a matter of direct Christian experience, grounded in the Gospel itself and providing the *starting point* of all theology. This development was itself based upon a doctrine of God which tended to relativize the *personal*, or trinitarian life of God, and approach him first as one single essence, while considering the persons as internal "relations." There is no doubt that this approach to God, popularized by St. Augustine, is, to a degree, responsible for the fact that so many Christians today are practical deists. Venerating God as a single "Heavenly Father," they tend to view trinitarianism as a mere speculation. In such a context, there is no real place for a theology of the Holy Spirit except in terms of "gifts," unrelated to the internal life of God.

These obvious differences of perspective between East and West constitute the background of the famous controversy on *Filioque*. As is well known, the "Nicæan" Creed, which was adopted as a solemn confession of faith by the universal church at its ecumenical councils of the fourth century, was interpolated locally in Spain (sixth century). The interpolated text was adopted throughout Carolingian Europe (eighth through ninth centuries) and, in spite of strong objections by contemporary Roman popes, it was transformed into a tool of anti-Greek polemics by Charlemagne. The interpolation consisted in an insertion of the words, "and from the Son" (Latin: *Filioque*) in the text of the creed, so that the paragraph which originally affirmed the procession of the Spirit "from the Father" (simply quoting John 15:26), now read: "(I believe) in the Holy Spirit, Lord, Giver of Life, who proceeds

from the Father and the Son." Eventually, under German pressure, the church of Rome itself accepted the interpolation in spite of violent reactions by Greek theologians, particularly Photius (ninth century), who were not objecting against the idea that the gifts of the Spirit—in the "economy" of the Incarnation—were granted through Christ, i.e., through the Son, but against the Augustinian reduction of the hypostatic, personal life of the three Divine Persons, to mere "relations." Photius considered the Latin understanding of God as "modalistic" ("Sabellian," or "semi-Sabellian").

Contemporary Orthodox theologians, particularly Karsavin and Lossky, have expressed the opinion that the *Filioque* dispute is at the very root of ecclesiological differences between East and West. In Western "papal" ecclesiology the presence of the Spirit, i.e., a divine presence which restores and enhances a person's *free* response to God, is fully subordinated to the ecclesiastical institution, based upon a "vicar" of Christ. Whether or not one accepts this scheme, which may appear as somehow artificial, it is certainly true that essentialistic deism hardly allows for any real theology of the Spirit as an active, personal, and guiding presence in the church community and in the personal life of the Christian. The "gifts of the Spirit" tend to be understood within the framework of individual or group psychology, for which there can be no ecclesiological or theological framework.

In any case, in order to understand the Orthodox approach to pneumatology, one has to start with the divinity of the Spirit as that was established in the great anti-Arian controversies of the early church. Then one must accept a trinitarian theology which presupposes that the personal identity of the Spirit is understood absolutely, together, of course, with the doctrine of consubstantiality, preserving the essential unity of the Godhead.

II. The Anthropological Dimension

As we have noticed in the first part of this chapter the main patristic argument for the divinity of Christ and the Spirit was soteriological, because salvation itself was seen as "deification" (*theosis*). Obviously only God can "deify." The argument is exemplified in the famous formulae found in almost identical words in Irenaeus ("The Word became man, so that men could become God," *Adversus Haereses*, V, *praef.*), and in Athanasius ("He was made that we might be made God," *De Incarn.* 54), which are applicable to both the "economy" of the Son and to that of the Spirit.

The patristic idea of deification was sometimes identified as pantheistic. It was assumed that it suppressed the necessary distinction and distance between God and creation, and that it reflected a spirituality which suppressed the integrity of the *humanum*. However, most contemporary patristic scholars would disagree with such an evaluation. The very word, deification (*theosis*), was used previously by Greek philosophers in a non-biblical and non-Christian context, but its use by the Greek Fathers and in the entire Orthodox tradition was based on the theology of the "image of God" within personality, and its various equivalents, i.e., upon a *theocentric* idea of humanity which cannot be adequately expressed in Western categories of "nature" and "grace."

Using a terminology very closely connected with St. Paul's, Irenaeus considers an individual to be "composed of a body taken from the earth, and a soul which receives the Spirit from God." (*Adv. Haer.* 3, 22, 2) "If the Spirit is wanting to the soul," he continues, "man is being left carnal, shall be an imperfect being, possessing indeed the image of God in his formation, but not receiving the similitude through the Spirit." (*Ibid.*, 5, 9, 1) Not only is the Holy Spirit, paradoxically, considered as a component of true humanity, but

Irenaeus also very specifically connects the Spirit with the "similitude." He interprets the similitude both as distinct from the "image," and as the "perfection of the individual, granted through the Spirit, provided one presents a free response to God's calling and presence. The individual is not a static and "closed" being. One is given the free task of perfecting oneself, and the role of the Spirit is to "seal" and direct one's ascent to God, so that this ascent may be in conformity with the divine, unending, limitless aim which God has set as one's destiny. The Spirit is not the bestower of "supernatural" gifts—additions to an otherwise "natural" human existence. He not only grants forgiveness and justification, he makes one become fully human.

This theocentric anthropology, so clearly expressed already in Irenaeus (second century), will always be taken for granted by Greek patristic writers. The term, "deification," which does not yet appear as such in Irenaeus, will later become standard; it will designate "communion" with God. That communion is one's destiny since the individual's creation is according to God's "image and likeness." That has been made impossible, however, because of sin and death which "reigned" (Romans 5:14) over humanity until the coming of Christ, but it is now made accessible again by the power of the Spirit sent by Christ from the Father. It will find ultimate fulfillment in the age to come.

This basic and central role of the Spirit in defining what the individual is, and how one participates in the saving act of God in Christ not only presupposes the divinity of the Spirit as third Person of the Trinity, but also has direct implications for spirituality and ecclesiology.

Since "deification" is not only a free gift of the Spirit, but also requires one's cooperation, it is inevitably a dynamic process. It implies graduation and

stages of communion with God. It implies a religion of *personal experience*. The monastic literature of the Christian East is particularly rich in its understanding and description of the various degrees of spiritual progress. One of the classics of Eastern monastic spirituality, written by St. John, abbot of Sinai (seventh century), even bears the title of *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. It is a systematic, spiritual, and psychological analysis of one's road to the direct vision of God.

This monastic spirituality inevitably had close neo-Platonic parallels. The risk of transforming Christianity into a de-materializing and de-personalizing escapism was a very real one. However, the most prominent leaders of Eastern monasticism succeeded in providing an antidote to the "platonizing" temptation. This antidote was found in a biblical theology of the body and in sacramentalism. The condition and basis for an authentic Christian experience was seen in baptism and the eucharistic communion. The point is made with particular clarity in the writings of an anonymous fourth-century writer who uses the pseudonym of "St. Macarius." It is interesting that his insistence on defining the Christian faith in terms of *personal experience* of the Holy Spirit, and the explicitly biblical character of his spirituality, endeared him to John Wesley who translated his writings into English.² "Macarius" also ranks among the most popular spiritual writers of the East and is noteworthy for his persistency in defining the Christian experience in both sacramental and pneumatological terms.

By analogy of faith, the Divine Spirit, our Advocate, who was sent to the apostles and through them drawn down upon the only true Church of God at the moment of baptism, this Spirit in various manifold ways accompanies every man who comes to baptism in faith.³ When God created Adam he did not give him bodily wings like the birds, but prepared for him in advance the wings of the Holy Spirit—the wings he desires to give him in the resurrection—to lift him up and carry him wherever the Spirit wishes. (*Hom. 5:11*)

It is possible to taste in Christianity the grace of God: Taste and see that the Lord is sweet. (Psalms 34:8) This tasting is the dynamic power of the Spirit manifesting itself in full certitude in the heart. The sons of light, ministers of the New Covenant in the Holy Spirit have nothing to learn from men; they are "taught by God." (John 6:45) Grace itself engraves the laws of the Spirit on their hearts (*Hom. 15:20*)

The references to a conscious "certitude" of communion with the Spirit and the quotation from John 6:45 on the immediacy of the Spirit's teaching are very characteristic, not only for Macarius, but for the entire tradition of Eastern spirituality. St. Symeon, the New Theologian (eleventh century), will be one of the most explicit spokesmen of this "prophetism of holiness." Tasting, experiencing God in the Spirit, as light, as joy, as truth, is the personal goal of each Christian. This experience is *accessible* to one in this world as an anticipation of the Kingdom to come. Each Christian, therefore, has access to the fullness of revelation and knowledge. One does not have to "learn from men." One enjoys the gift of the Spirit which was given through baptism.

Whether one labels this understanding of the Christian gospel "mystical" (the Christian East is often called "mystical" but the word is misleading in its Western connotations) or "eschatological," it is clear that it has important *ecclesiological* implications.

It is a fact that the Orthodox East, while recognizing the teaching responsibility of the ordained ministry, particularly bishops, also admits the *saints* as authoritative witnesses of truth. Historical examples of doctrinal conflicts between bishops, on the one hand, and popular opinion, frequently led by monks, on the other, are quite numerous. The solitary struggle of St. Maximus the Confessor, a simple monk, against an almost universally recognized "monothelite" establishment (seventh century) is the best known. The episcopal ministry implies teaching responsibility, but all

forms of institutional *infallibility* are formally excluded. The priestly and prophetic functions are both necessary to the church. Both are maintained by the same Spirit. The Spirit created the apostolic ministry at Pentecost. The Spirit maintains the church through history and also grants gifts to the entire people of God, to the saints and prophets, those living witnesses of God's presence in the world.

The mystery of the church consists precisely in that its various ministries find an ultimate unity in *the Spirit, as God*, in whom all contradictions and tensions are resolved, particularly the tension between freedom and authority. Christian freedom is not reducible to a freedom of choice between good and evil, or between various alternatives of earthly behavior. It is, first of all, the possibility to be *fully human*, i.e., to be in full possession of one's life and one's potentials, to be liberated from the powers of mortality and evil. Now, as we have seen in the theological anthropology of St. Irenaeus—also shared by the later patristic tradition—to be fully human means to be in communion with God, or to have fully restored in oneself the third and highest component of humanity, the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is why Gregory of Nyssa (fourth century) identified the "image of God" in one with *freedom*. In fact, he is in full agreement with Irenaeus on this point, since "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2 Corinthians 3:17)

However, the freedom given to one by "the Spirit of God" is not a freedom for anarchy. It is precisely when discussing the gifts of the Spirit that St. Paul also warns: "Let all things be done decently and in order." (1 Corinthians 14:40) The Spirit is the source of freedom and the principle of order in the church. The same Spirit inspires the prophets and guarantees the effectiveness and permanence of sacramental ministry. Thus, the Montanists who considered the church was to be

led by prophets, ultimately became a sect. But, on the other hand, a human institution which becomes an end in itself and claims infallibility is nothing but the demonic temptation described by Dostoyevsky in his "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor."

The true, "catholic" tradition of Christianity is the one where institutional and charismatic leaderships are able to *recognize in each other the same Spirit*. This mutual recognition and authentication is not simple coexistence, or simply a "creative tension," as between the divided powers of a democratic society. It is a common belonging and a joint communion with the Spirit as God. Clearly, throughout history there were conflicts between priests and prophets. It is noteworthy, also, that the Orthodox East never lost the sense of their distinctiveness. For example, the monastic communities and their leaders have traditionally been recognized as having a non-institutional, but a real authority in the church at large. The numerous challenges presented by monks to contemporary church establishments during the early Christian and Byzantine periods, as well as the witness of the "holy elders" (*starsy*) in nineteenth century Russia, to quote a more recent example, are all signs of a continuous recognition in Eastern Christendom of a charismatic leadership. That leadership at no time challenges the episcopal authority founded in the sacramental nature of the church. Neither the gift of episcopal ministry, nor that of charismatic leadership, if authentic, are created or humanly devised gifts. They are founded in one's participation in the same divine Spirit granted to the church at Pentecost, distributed in baptism, and always working at the "building-up" of the Body of Christ.

Conclusion

If the divinity of the Spirit is the very foundation of trinitarian theology, and also of the Christian under-

standing of salvation, there are other particularities in his existence which remain largely undeveloped in theological books but which appear both in Scripture and in the life of the church. The "Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2) at the very inception of creation.⁴ The Word, however, was the One *by whom* all things were made. (John 1:3) The Word (not the Spirit) "became flesh," yet it is because the Holy Spirit came upon Mary, (Luke 1:35) which heralded the beginning of a "new creation." And it is again the Spirit who makes Christ present in the midst of his disciples until he comes again. Every baptism is "sealed" by the Spirit who is also invoked at the celebration of the Eucharist "to make" the bread and wine, body and blood of Christ.⁵ The saints also, while they practice the permanent "Jesus prayer," define their life as a "collection of the Spirit."⁶

All these forms of the Spirit's presence and action follow the same pattern. The Spirit is inseparable from the Son, both preceding him and completing, or "sealing," the Son's action. But the Spirit never calls persons to himself, but to the Son, the God-man, the New Adam, the only One, in whom the "hypostatic union" took place—the full union of God and humanity. The role of the Spirit in salvation (and also in the internal life of God?) is "kenotic;" it is always directed to the Other. This "kenoticism" leads modern theologians to discern, in the Spirit, the feminine aspect of the "image of God" in personhood.⁷ Providing one avoids anthropomorphism and unhealthy gnostic speculation, one can find here the true theological basis for the image of motherhood, also applied to the church as Temple of the Spirit, or to Mary as the mother of the New Adam, head of the Body.

Thus, authentic pneumatology is always both trinitarian and "churchly." Without this foundation, the theological justifications of the "gifts of the Spirit"

risk becoming nothing more than rationalizations for passing fads.

Notes

1. G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1952), pp. 242-3.
2. John Wesley, *A Christian Library*, I, Bristol, 1749. On Wesley's admiration for Macarius, see, Albert C. Outler, editor, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 9, note 26; and pp. 274-5.
3. W. Jaeger, editor, "The Great Letter," *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954), p. 236.
4. The identification of the "Spirit of God" with the "Holy Spirit" is widespread in patristic exegesis.
5. Cf., text of the "epiclesis" in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom.
6. This was particularly the case of the celebrated St. Seraphim of Sarov (+1833).
7. Would this be supported by the fact that the Hebrew word for "Spirit" (*ruah*) is feminine?