

Who Is the Holy Spirit?

by Elizabeth A. Johnson

Who is God? A typical Catholic woman or man would probably answer this question by referring to God the Father and to Jesus Christ. A few might talk of God as Mother. Only the rare person would answer, "the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit is the forgotten God among Catholic Christians, especially in the Western world.

To downplay the Holy Spirit is to diminish our sense of God's presence and activity among us in the world today. For the Holy Spirit is *God's own self in outreach to the world*. The Holy Spirit is God's presence and activity among us. The Holy Spirit is God, continuously drawing near and passing by to vivify, renew and love us and the whole of creation.

Our faith is greatly enriched as we begin to remember the Spirit's role in the world and in our lives. This *Update* will explore three areas where we can renew our understanding of the Holy Spirit: 1) our everyday encounter with the Spirit, 2) what Tradition teaches about the Spirit and 3) the Holy Spirit in the Bible.

Everyday encounters

The most familiar place we encounter the Spirit is in our public and private prayer. The Eucharist addresses prayer "to the Father, through the Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit," and private prayer



ILLUSTRATION
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sometimes takes this same form. But the Spirit is not limited to explicitly religious moments such as these. For the Spirit is "the Lord and giver of life," as we proclaim in the Nicene Creed at Mass. This means that the Spirit is first and foremost the Creator Spirit who creates, empowers and fills the whole world with life.

At every moment the Spirit sustains every place, every moment, every creature, the whole interconnected community of creation itself. I would like to highlight three major encounters with the Holy Spirit: nature, personal relationships and society.

The Spirit in nature. The Spirit of God is present and active in the natural world itself—in the new life of spring; in the flourishings of summer; in the harvests of autumn; in the storms of winter; in the diversity of plants and animals. Every fresh morning, every star at night, speaks of the Creator Spirit who pervades the world with creative power, giving rise to all manner of systems and species.

In recent years we have become aware that the human race, with its polluting and consuming ways, threatens the very survival of the earth's life-systems of air, water and soil—along with the survival of many other fellow creatures. Remembering the Spirit makes us realize that wasting the earth is a sin against the very creativity of God. That remembrance energizes us to be responsible stewards of the great treasure, creation.

The Spirit in relationships. We also encounter the Spirit in the personal world of human relationship, especially love relationships. Scripture connects love with the Spirit. As the apostle Paul says, "...God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). A Christian prayer expresses this by exclaiming, "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love." Wherever human beings come together in love, the Holy Spirit is present and active in and through their love.

At their deepest level these human encounters mediate an encounter with the Spirit of God who is Love. This includes love between man and woman, parent and child, friend and friend, minister and people. Wherever creative love enriches

life, the Spirit is present and operating.

The same is true when a person graciously loves himself or herself. If you enter into the love of God for yourself, knowing your wondrousness as a creature, forgiving yourself the way God forgives, then you have an encounter with the Spirit. This type of generous self-love is a gift of the Spirit that enables you to give the gift of love to others.

The Spirit in the social world. We encounter the Holy Spirit in the building up of society. The Christian prayer quoted above goes on, "Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created; and you shall renew the face of the earth." That prayer refers to more than the world of nature. Our social world also needs renewal.

Some of our economic, political and cultural social systems are ravaged by our sinfulness, greed, injustice. These systems damage persons caught up in them. The Spirit, as the biblical prophets proclaimed so eloquently, is especially present and active in those struggling against the mistreatment of the poor, the use of violence and oppression against the widow and orphan. We encounter the Spirit in all those who resist these evils and do the work of justice and peace.

Opportunities for encountering the Spirit are as broad as the world itself. We cannot confine the Spirit to sacred moments or sacred places. To be sure, the Spirit is present in our prayer and worship. But the Creator Spirit pervades all of life and may be encountered in all of creation: natural, personal and social.

The Holy Spirit in Tradition

We speak of the Holy Spirit as the third person of the blessed Trinity. Yet our words are inadequate in the presence of divine mystery; words can only point to the mystery. Analogies, images and metaphors are the best we limited humans can do in our efforts to say anything about the Trinity.

To understand what we mean by the Spirit, I find it helpful to go back to the theology of the first centuries of the Church. During this patristic era, theologians were thinking about the meaning of the Christian mystery of God for the first time in a systematic way.

Some called the Spirit "the hand of God reaching out to the world." Others spoke of the Spirit as the finger of God, based on Jesus' saying, "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20). These two images, hand and finger, suggest that the Spirit does not refer to God in isolation from the world or beyond it, but reaching out to it.

Using a biblical image, St. Augustine (354-430) used the experience of fire to speak of the Trinity. He said, "Fire cannot burn without its brightness and its warmth." In this image fire represents the Father; the brightness of the fire shining into the world symbolizes Jesus Christ; and the warmth of the fire is the Holy Spirit, the love poured into our hearts. This image helps us to see that the Trinity is a very special way of speaking about the one God: God is *beyond us*, *with us* and *within us*.

Other early Christian writers also used images of the natural world to speak about God. Tertullian, a second-century theologian, used the sun as a metaphor. There is, he said, the sun in the heavens (the Father), the sunbeam coming to earth (Christ) and the point of light where the sun connects with the earth and brings us light and warmth (the Spirit). Note that the Spirit is the sun *influencing* the earth, changing it with its light and warmth.

Tertullian also described the triune God by using the image of a river. It has a source (Father), it flows outward (Christ) and it irrigates land and helps to bring forth vegetation (the Spirit). Again, the image points to the Spirit as the one who produces the final, fruitful effect.

Finally, Tertullian also used the analogy of a plant with its parts, "root, shoot and fruit." Plants have a hidden root not obvious to the naked eye (the Father), a shoot coming out of the ground and into the world (Christ) and the plant itself bringing forth leaves, fruits and seeds (the Spirit).

All three analogies—the sun, the river and the plant—point to the mystery of the Trinity, with the Spirit represented as God who actually arrives and has an effect.

These images of the Holy Spirit from our tradition tell us about a God who draws near to the world, who dwells in

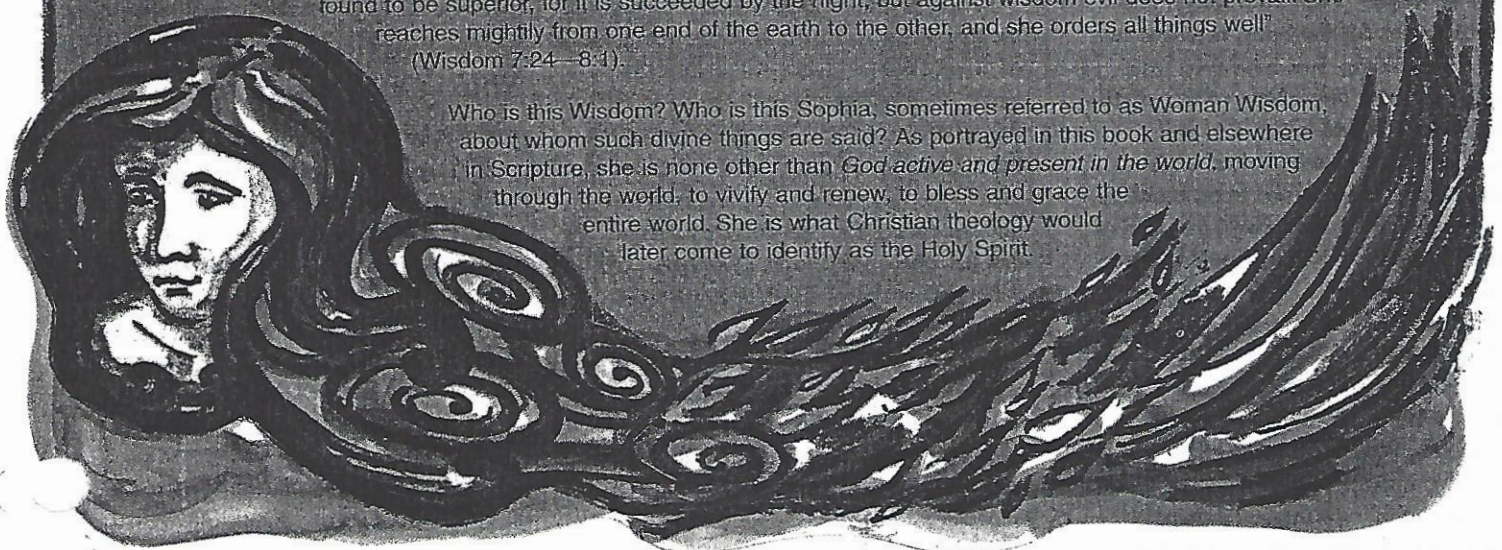
The HOLY SPIRIT and WISDOM

The Sacred Scriptures seem to be particularly open to speaking about the Spirit in female symbols. In the Book of Wisdom, for example, as well as in Proverbs and elsewhere, we have the great symbol of Wisdom. In Greek, the language in which the Book of Wisdom was written, the word for Wisdom is *Sophia*, a woman's name. Sophia remains an important image for Eastern Christians, whether Orthodox or Catholic.

In the Hebrew Scriptures this figure of Sophia is a powerful personification of *God in action in the world*. Consider how the following words from Chapter 7 of the Book of Wisdom resonate strongly with the Holy Spirit in Christian theology:

"For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. . . . Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; . . . She is more beautiful than the sun. . . . Compared with the light she is found to be superior, for it is succeeded by the night, but against wisdom evil does not prevail. She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well" (Wisdom 7:24-8:1).

Who is this Wisdom? Who is this Sophia, sometimes referred to as Woman Wisdom, about whom such divine things are said? As portrayed in this book and elsewhere in Scripture, she is none other than *God active and present in the world*, moving through the world, to vivify and renew, to bless and grace the entire world. She is what Christian theology would later come to identify as the Holy Spirit.



the world, who vivifies the world, who heals the world when it is damaged, who energizes and empowers the world. These images symbolize that God is intimate with us: so intimate, that, in the words of St. Augustine, God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. In sum, these images from our tradition speak of God the Spirit who dwells within all creatures with the divine power of life.

Biblical Images of the Spirit

Our Tradition, of course, is anchored in Scripture, where the Holy Spirit plays a prominent role. The most common biblical metaphors for the Spirit are wind, fire and water. Let us look at these three, and consider how some Christian writers have used these biblical images.

Spirit as wind. The Spirit frequently appears in wind-blown events: the wind blowing back the sea during the Exodus (Exodus 14:21-22); the wind blowing through the valley of the dry bones,

reconnecting them and breathing life back into them (Ezekiel 37:4-10); and the wind blowing through the house where the men and women disciples were gathered at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

One of the Bible's best depictions of the Spirit as wind comes in John's Gospel. Speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus likens the Spirit to wind: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (3:8). Jesus is saying that the Spirit is present among us, invisible and not under our control, but able to be glimpsed when we experience certain effects.

Spirit as fire. Like wind, fire has no definite shape: Fire is always changing, not able to be touched. While essential to humans, it is essentially dangerous. It appears in the sky as lightning, as the sun, as other stars, but even a candle's flame is deeply mysterious.

Scripture finds fire a worthy metaphor for God the Spirit. Moses

receives his call to lead the Israelites out of Egypt from the voice in the burning bush. At Pentecost, in addition to the sound of a mighty wind, tongues of fire appear over each person's head and all are filled with the Spirit.

This biblical notion of fire as a symbol for the Spirit shows up again and again in later Christian writings. Two beautiful examples come to mind. The fourth-century theologian St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote, "If fire passing through a mass of iron makes the whole of it glow, so that what was cold becomes burning and what was black is made bright, so too the power of the Spirit transforms hearts and minds, and indeed the clay of creation itself, so that what was cold and dark becomes bright and glowing." Note here that the coming of the Spirit doesn't damage or violate the creature, but transforms it into something more alive.

Perhaps no one has captured the power of fire as a symbol for the Spirit better than Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th-century theologian. She has the Holy

Question Box

1. Where do we encounter the Holy Spirit?
2. What are the most prominent biblical metaphors for the Spirit?
3. What image for the Spirit is most meaningful for you? Why?

Spirit say: "I, the highest and fiery power, have kindled every living spark. I flame above the beauty of the fields. I shine in the waters. In the sun and the moon and the stars, I burn. And by means of the airy wind I stir everything into quickness with a certain invisible life which sustains all things: I, the fiery power, lie hidden in these things and they blaze for me." This is Hildegard's way of talking about the creative Spirit present at the heart of the world.

Spirit as water. This third image that Scripture uses for the Spirit is also essential for life. Water, too, has no definite shape, but is the nourishing matrix of all. Life on earth began in the seas and human life begins in the water of the womb. There is sap in the trees, blood in our veins, wine in our vessels and rain on the earth. Water and these liquids (which are basically water) signify the active presence of the Spirit refreshing us and gladdening our hearts.

Speaking through the prophet Ezekiel, God promises that the people will be renewed in the Spirit as if by a refreshing shower: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you....[A]nd I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:25-26). Instead of a hardened heart, God the Spirit gives us a fleshy heart—one that is alive, one that can feel.

Frequently, Scripture talks about the Spirit being poured out the way water is poured from a pitcher. In Joel, God says, "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;....Even on the male and female slaves I will pour out my spirit" (Joel 2:28-29). The New Testament account of Pentecost quotes this prophetic passage to proclaim what was indeed happening: The Spirit was being poured out (Acts 2:17-18).

Jesus promises the Samaritan woman the gift of the Spirit through the metaphor of "living water." Once she drinks this water, he tells her, she will never be thirsty again (John 4:14). Paul, too, uses this symbol, imagining that God's love overflows: "...God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). When I hear that, I think of a waterfall cascading.

Many post-biblical writers also speak of the Spirit as water. St. Cyril, in talking about the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, says: "Why did Christ call the grace of the Spirit water? Because by water all things subsist. Because water brings forth grass and living things. Because the water of the showers comes down from heaven. Because it comes down in one form but works in many forms: It becomes white in the lily, red in the rose, purple in the violets and hyacinths, different and varied in each species. It is one thing in the palm tree, yet another in the vine; and yet in all things the same Spirit."

These are wonderful images for the Spirit, the Spirit who is one, and yet brings forth many varied gifts. In Scripture, Paul makes the same point when he says, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and we were all

made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13). The point, whether in Cyril or Paul, is that for all of our diversity, the principle of unity in the Church, indeed in the entire cosmos, is the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit is like wind, fire, water. The Spirit is none of the above in reality, yet all of the above in terms of metaphor. Each one points to the nearness of God to us, to the intimacy of God to each of us, to all of us together, to the whole world. The Spirit is God with us, reaching out to the world, nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

Who is the Spirit?

The Spirit is simply God, present and active everywhere, pervading our life. This basic but profound reality bears repeating today, because so many do not experience God's nearness but think of God as quite distant. This is most unfortunate. For God is with us always and everywhere: past, present, in and out of religious settings.

Through the Spirit, the risen Christ is present with us everywhere and in every moment, as pervasive as the air we breathe, as the sun or the rain that comes down on us, as the wind that blows around us, as the life that flows through our veins. This is the God we are talking about when we speak of the Spirit. ■

Elizabeth Johnson, Ph.D., a Sister of St. Joseph of Brentwood (New York), teaches theology at Fordham University. This Update was adapted from the audiocassette set Remembering the Holy Spirit (St. Anthony Messenger Press), with the help of the author and the editor of Praying magazine, where an earlier adaptation appeared. Dr. Johnson's books include Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology, She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse (Crossroad) and Women, Earth and Creator Spirit (Paulist Press).

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