

The Holy Spirit: Who On Earth Is She? For Home Retreat, 31 October, 2020.

Come Holy Spirit ...

We know that the Blessed Trinity is three distinct persons, each of whom is equally God – even though there is only one God. What I could never understand was, if they are all equal, how can it be when Jesus so often talks about his Father as if the Father was much more important than himself. And he promises that after him will come the Spirit who will tell us much more than he has been able to.

The breakthrough for me was reading Fr Henry's translation of Romans 12.10 in the New Jerusalem Bible, St Paul's definition of love: love is living as if other people are more important than oneself.

Because St John tells us that God is love. So, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are indeed one God, but three different, but equal, persons loving each other to bits. In other words, each living as if the other two are more important.

Like any couple who are in love with each other, their love overflows on to other people. If you think back to your childhood friends whom you liked to play with and to visit their homes, you may well find that there were a couple of loving parents in that home. Their love for each other overflowed not only into having children and then loving them but also onto anyone who came into their home and, often, more besides.

It is the same with the God, the Trinity: they created the world, and people in it whom they could love. Even when we often reject their love, they never stop loving us.

Because we had lots of strange and inaccurate ideas about God, one of them, Jesus, emptied himself of his Godness (St Paul tells us in Philippians 2) to become human like us and show us what God's love is like. The Father showed his love by trusting his Son to us; Jesus showed his love by trusting his life to us – and what did we do with it? So what about the Holy Spirit?

When I used to teach Physics, we used a film clip with the Fourth Form, when teaching them about energy, which showed a series of Vox Pop interviews asking different people how they imagined energy, because you can't see energy – you can only see its effects. One old lady, stopped in the street by the interviewer answered: "Well, it's your get-up-and-go, in'it?"

Well, perhaps that's a beginning, with the Holy Spirit.

Right back at the beginning of creation, Genesis 1 & 2, refer to the divine wind and God's breath, breathing life into the world.

The Gospels repeatedly refer to Jesus being moved or motivated by the Spirit. And Jesus promises that after he has left the earth, he will send his Spirit to us. It was the Spirit who energised and empowered Jesus, because Jesus had emptied himself of his Godness, And that same Spirit now energises and empowers us. In my naïve and simple way, I like to think of the Holy Spirit being fully occupied empowering Jesus to preach and work healing miracles, because Jesus had emptied himself of his Godness, and so the Holy Spirit would only become available to empower us, after Jesus had gone back to heaven.

Earlier in St John's gospel, Jesus refers to himself as the source of living water and John explains that the living water he is referring to is the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps it is not for nothing that the name of the Scottish spirit, whisky, is from the Gaelic for 'water of life'. Indeed, when the Apostles received the Spirit at Pentecost and started talking in different languages, people thought they were drunk.

It was 50 days after Jesus was glorified in his Resurrection and, later, ascended back into heaven, at Pentecost, that the promised Spirit comes upon the Apostles, sounding like a rushing wind and appearing like tongues of fire, both of them symbols. All of them are images of energy, but there is more than energy here. We recognize this when we talk of a person or a football team acting with spirit. It's more than energy that is driving that person or team. Perhaps it's similar to when we talk of a person having 'drive'.

Wind is invisible: we can only observe its effects on the trees bending in the wind; or if we stick our hand out of the window of a car going at speed, we feel something that we cannot see.

And so it is with the Holy Spirit. We cannot see the Spirit. What we can see are the effects. St Paul refers to them in Chapter 5 of his letter to the Galatians. We know them as the fruits of the Holy Spirit and we notice that they are all aspects of love, of living as if the other person is more important than oneself. They are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Jesus makes himself available to us in the Blessed Sacrament. How do we receive the Holy Spirit?

You can't 'catch' – lay hands on – the Holy Spirit, Jesus told Nicodemus: "The wind blows wherever it pleases; you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. That is how it is with all who are born of the Spirit."

Baptism and Confirmation particularly, give us the Spirit, but in fact, all the sacraments which, we remember, bring us grace: they make real what they are signs of, namely grace, that is, our loving relationship with God. One reason for the Holy Spirit being known as the Go-between God.

But we make room for the Holy Spirit in ourselves whenever we make room for prayer, whenever we take the trouble to set aside time for prayer. All the spiritual masters tell us that the sign that prayer is working, is not how close we feel to God, nor how holy we feel or even whether we feel that our prayer time was well spent. They say that if we have been faithful to our daily times of prayer, no matter how empty and pointless it may seem, then, if we look back over the past month or so and are absolutely honest with ourselves, we will find that in some area of our life or other, we have become more tolerant, more joyful, generous or peaceful, and we have begun to exercise some self-control. We have been showing some of the fruits of the Holy Spirit that St Paul mentioned without necessarily being conscious of it. But we have definitely changed, we have in fact become more Christlike. Not completely: it is a life time process. But there is someone – perhaps whom we used to find really irritating - whom we find that we are more able to put up with.

We must also remember that when we find it very difficult to pray we do not need to worry because, in Romans 8, St Paul assures us that the Spirit prays on our behalf, when we can't find the words or feel helpless.

Jesus told us that he was the Way to the Father. We can't see or even imagine God. But the Apostles could see and hear him, and we can learn of, and get to know, the historical personage of Jesus, who is still available to us in the Blessed Sacrament. But he also promised us that the Holy Spirit he would send to us would be our way to the Father, our Advocate – which is what Paraclete means – the Go Between God.

The Holy Spirit, the Go-between God, works best in groups. It was to the group of the Apostles that the Spirit appeared at Pentecost. So the Holy Spirit enables effective communication not only

between us and God but also between people, and not just with the gift of tongues of different languages. The Holy Spirit helps us to listen, to be in receive and accept mode.

This is why it is a good thing to murmur a prayer to the Holy Spirit at the beginning of an exam when we hope to communicate effectively with the examiner or at the beginning of a meeting: to facilitate good converse between the participants. It is a good prayer at the beginning of a football match, that the team spirit, that enables differently skilled players to co-ordinate and co-operate unselfishly and efficiently, may be the Holy Spirit.

And that is the other manifestation of the Holy Spirit: the charisms or special gifts of the Spirit. These are different to the fruits that I mentioned, which are for all of us. The charisms are tailor made and are different for each of us.

St Paul talks about the different charisms of preaching, of prophecy, of teaching, of healing or even of tongues. The latter is distinct from the gift of languages; it is a faculty of gabbling apparent nonsense that can be an aid for some people of becoming less self-conscious in their prayer.

The test of all these special individual gifts, St Paul tells us, to see if they really are of the Spirit, is whether or not they build up community – just as real team spirit does. If we become prima-donnas or boastful about our gifts then they are not of the Spirit.

I said that we have to make room for the Holy Spirit. We are told that there is one sin that will not be forgiven and that that is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. This doesn't mean using the phrase 'Holy Spirit' as a swear word. It means looking the Holy Spirit in the face, recognizing who and what the Holy Spirit is and refusing to accept the Holy Spirit. This most frequently happens in the context of forgiveness: refusing to accept the forgiveness of the Holy Spirit. Remember the phrase in the words of Absolution in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, what Pope Francis might have rechristened the Sacrament of Mercy "... and has sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins ...". Forgiveness, as I have pointed out before, is the hardest part of loving, both in offering forgiveness and also in accepting it. So the rejection of the Holy Spirit can't be forgiven, not because it is a really serious sin, but because it is part of our relationship of love with God and relationships have to be two way; even God can't force love on us: he gave us free will so that we could love and decided to accept his love.

The Holy Spirit is with you always.

Glory be to the Father