

Veni, Sancte Spiritus:
Receiving the Flame of Divine Love
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The Descent of the Dove

When God raised Jesus from the dead, he restored the hopes of the movement gathered around Jesus. They were ready to help turn things around. So they were a bit put off when Jesus started talking about “going back to [his] Father.” They asked him, “So, is now the big moment, then? Are you going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?” Jesus did that annoying Jesus thing and answered, “Don’t you worry about what time it is. This is the important bit. You’re going to receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you’re going to be my witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”¹ Don’t you hate it, when someone texts you back, and tells you everything except the answer to the question you asked? And while the disciples waited for a more specific answer, they had to look over their shoulders for the same rulers that killed Jesus.

Jesus had promised his band of followers that when he went away, he would send them someone called “the Comforter.” He would do this so that they would not be “left as orphans.”² The Comforter, he said, would teach them everything that they needed to know. Pentecost marked the fulfillment of that promise. After the Ascension of the Lord,

¹ Acts 1:1-10.

² John 14:25-31.

God would no longer be with them in the flesh, but in the Spirit. Jesus' departure kicks off the next phase of the Kingdom project.

So a few days later, the disciples of Jesus see the Kingdom come. The Spirit of the Holy One of Israel descends upon them in power... and they're all accused of day-drinking.³ The Israelite celebration of Pentecost - the Feast of Tabernacles - had brought back from the Diaspora, Jews of almost every known language and nationality. The Holy Spirit comes to the community of Jesus, and catches everyone up in the ecstatic praise of God. In this outpouring of joyful thanksgiving, people who are separated by language and culture and diverse experiences, all understand one another's speech. People who did not expect to speak or listen to one another are caught up and brought together in this act of worship that Jesus inspired.

“We Believe in the Holy Spirit”

Christians profess faith in the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is not a riddle or a math problem, but a mystery. This is the Church's way of speaking about the relationship that Jesus of Nazareth had with God. This matters to us a great deal, because the foundation of our worship here is the conviction that the Holy Spirit gives us the same relationship with the Father that Jesus himself enjoyed. The Holy Spirit is “the go-between God,” who relates us to the Father of Jesus in a new way. He is the Spirit of Adoption of whom St. Paul wrote. He is the Spirit who cries out to God from within the depths of our being,

³ Acts 2:13.

“Abba, Father.”⁴ It’s really something much better than day wine: it’s an entirely new way of being human.

The Holy Spirit is “the Lord, the giver of life,” who relates us to the Father of Jesus. In this action, people who did not expect to speak or listen to one another are brought together as sisters and brothers. We discover that the Triune God is neither far off, nor solitary. When we pray, the Holy Spirit prays in us: God reaches out to God.⁵ This is why the baptized need not fear that their prayers are not impressive enough catch God’s attention, or that they don’t have the right “religious feeling.” When you were baptized, you were anointed as a sign of the Spirit’s work. When you were confirmed, the bishop prayed for you to receive the Holy Spirit in power, for ministry in the Kingdom, and to enable you walk in holiness of life.⁶ Perhaps the bishop prophesied over you. Maybe she prayed over you in unknown tongues. Maybe not. In any case, the rites of the Church reflect this reality: you have been put into the place of Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit prays to the Father, making use of your heart, mind, and tongue. This is why the Holy Spirit, the comforter, is himself the basis of Christian mysticism.

Even now, as we gather for Eucharist - as we make our thanksgiving - when we ask the Holy Spirit to transform bread and wine, we ask him to keep transforming us. We ask him to “sanctify us

⁴ Romans 8:12-17.

⁵ Romans 8:26-30.

⁶ “Strengthen, O Lord, your servant *N.* with your Holy Spirit; empower *him* for your service; and sustain *him* all the days of *his* life. Amen.” See “Confirmation, with forms for Reception and for the Reaffirmation of Baptismal Vows,” in *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 418.

also,”⁷ to make us holy, to give us power to live like Jesus Christ, the model of this new humanity.⁸

Biblical Images

I offer now three biblical images that indicate ways in which the Holy Spirit descends and catches us up, and enfolds us into the life of the Triune God.

The Holy Spirit is the dove of God’s peace. When the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism, he appeared in the form of a dove.⁹ When Jesus breathed the Spirit upon the Apostles, he first gave them his peace.¹⁰ The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of adoption, the maker of peace with God and with one another.

When the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, and brings God’s peace, he begins to clear our minds. We begin to see both ourselves and the people around us as we really are: loved and desired by God. We see ourselves as daughters and sons of the Most High, reconciled to God and one another in Jesus Christ.

⁷ “Holy Eucharist, Rite II: Eucharistic Prayer A” in *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 363. Nerds will enjoy knowing that liturgists call this the “double epiclesis,” because the presider asks for the Spirit twice: first on the gifts, and then upon the people.

⁸ St. Paul taught that Jesus is a second Adam, following his trope of renewal and recreation of humanity (Romans 5:12-17 and 2 Corinthians 5:16-21). Some ancient Christians even referred to themselves as a "third race." This meant that they were no longer Jews or Gentiles, but Christians. Cf. Ephesians 2:11-22.

⁹ This is attested in the baptism account of all four Gospels.

¹⁰ John 20:19-23.

We pray: “Come Holy Spirit. Come in power, and enlighten our vision, to see the world as it really is.”

The Holy Spirit is the oil of God’s healing. The same Spirit who moved upon the waters in creation moves upon us in an act of re-creation. When biblical Israelites and ancient Christians prayed for healing, they anointed themselves with oil.¹¹ We make special prayers for this regularly in the chapel, using oil consecrated by the bishop. We ask the Holy Spirit to heal our bodies and our minds. We ask him, out of his love, out of utter gratuitousness, to give us the things we need for this new life. In the Church of Christ, we learn to ask the Lord for what we need. Some of us need physical healing. Some of us need emotional healing. Some of us are learning to trust people, after living long lives of mistrust, and with good reason. Some of us are learning to forgive, and to turn away from bitterness and anger. Some of us are learning to serve, after living lives of defensiveness and insecurity. We learn new ways of seeing, and new ways of acting over time. We need healing, and supernatural courage to live out this new way of being human. The Comforter Spirit is patient, even as he interrupts our old patterns of living.¹²

We pray: “Come Holy Spirit. Come in power, and anoint us for healing. Restore our bodies, our hearts, and our minds.”

¹¹ James 5:13-18. See “Ministration to the Sick,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 543ff.

¹² For a short introduction to the Spirit’s ministry of healing, see Raniero Cantalamessa, “The Healing Power of the Spirit,” in *Sober Intoxication of the Spirit: Filled with the Fullness of God* (Cincinnati: Servant Books, 2005), 94-113.

The Holy Spirit is the flame of God's love. The Spirit is the consuming fire of Sinai and Pentecost.¹³ The mediating Spirit - the go-between God - is a flame of love that burns away our impurities, and impels us to the worship of God and the care of one another. You see, when Christians worship, we're not trying to muster warm devotional feelings about God. But when we put ourselves in this place, and we offer ourselves by joining the Son of God in the worship he offers the Father. The celebrant bids, "Lift up your hearts!" As we reply, "we lift them to the Lord," the Spirit catches us up in adoration. The act of Christian worship provides the conditions by which our hearts might catch flame.

In the same way, we do not imagine that love for our fellow Christians, our neighbors, and our enemies comes by trying to muster pleasant, religious feelings about them. Rather, we set ourselves to serve them with good will. The Holy Spirit gives us gifts for this ministry of service, to bring people into the Kingdom, to enter this new way of being human. He gives gifts of knowledge, wisdom, healing, prophecy, and faith. As we grow up in that faith, we look for ways to use our gifts of nature and of grace for the building up of the Body of Christ. We start looking upon others to judge them a bit less, and to pray for them a bit more. These acts of obedience provide the conditions by which our hearts might catch flame.

We pray: "Come Holy Spirit. Come in power, and engulf our hearts with love for you and for your people."

¹³ Hebrews 12:28-29. 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. 1 Peter 4:12-13. James 4:7-10.

Today on the feast of Pentecost, we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, the mediating presence of God, who gathers us up into the divine life. He teaches and empowers us as part of the renewed humanity, which joins with Christ in his self-offering to the Father. Here we encounter the flame of divine love that brings peace with God and healing for the world.

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For Further Reading:

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