

CHAPTER SIX

• HOLY POWER, HOLY PRESENCE: THE HOLY SPIRIT •

Come, Creator, Spirit,
visit the souls of your own;
fill with heavenly grace
the breasts that you have created.
You who are called Paraclete,
gift of the most high God,
living water, flame, charity
and spiritual anointing;
You who are sevenfold in your gift,
finger of God's right hand,
you who were rightly promised by the Father,
enrich our throats with speech.
Inflame the light of our senses,
pour love into our hearts,
the weakness of our bodies
strengthen with lasting power.
Drive the enemy far back,
and at once grant us peace;
with you going ahead of us,
may we avoid all harm.
Through you may we know the Father
and recognize the Son;
and may we always believe
in you, Spirit of both. ⁸

How much my life would change for the better if I memorized this prayer and began each day praying it! The metaphors in this hymn get our theological senses in tune. Imagining the Spirit as the finger of God's hand is a Trinitarian statement about the mutual cooperation of the Father and the Spirit. We find out about who we are as children of God in the statements about God giving us the Spirit who brings grace and charity into our lives. The Spirit is imagined as water, fire and oil—what associations do you make with these very earthy elements? This prayer allows us to pray about our deepest desires—inspired speech, alert senses, loving hearts, strong bodies, safety and peace. Finally, it attests to the belief—first articulated in John's Gospel (14:25–26; 16:13)—that the power of the Spirit enables us to know about, and live out of, God's saving love.

Theologians often lament that the Holy Spirit has been neglected in the tradition. Words like amorphous, faceless, forgotten, upstaged, vacant, unclear and invisible pop up everywhere. Theologian G.J. Sirks compares the Holy Spirit to Cinderella (the one who does all the hard, dirty work in the cellar and gets no recognition for it).⁹ Kilian McDonnell has called for a renewed awareness of the Spirit through what he calls “pneumatological affirmative action.”¹⁰ But the Spirit is more present than we may think. For it is only through the Spirit that we come to know God, live our faith life with love and intelligence, and make all things new.

Most often the Spirit is imagined as a dove or as tongues of fire. In many cultures, the dove was used to symbolize a messenger from the divine realm, or the free flight of our spirits to God in death or ecstasy. The plaintive call of the mourning dove symbolized love and fertility. In other cases, the dove represented reason, virtue, purity or peace. You may remember the story of the flood in which Noah sends out a dove from the ark to see if the flood has receded (Genesis 6:1–12). In the New Testament, the dove shows up as the vehicle of Mary's impregnation at the Annunciation. Thus in a real sense, the Spirit is a source of

the Incarnation (Luke 1:26–8). The dove is also the bearer of the message at Jesus' baptism that the Father was well pleased with him (Luke 3:21–22). And at Pentecost, the apostles and disciples in the Upper Room receive the Spirit in the form of wind and tongues of fire (Acts 2:1–4).

The Spirit is particularly important to laity, and in a distinctive way, to women. Vatican II gave birth to an age of the laity. It is a challenge to develop a more horizontal, inclusive way of structuring the church when it has long been accustomed to locating power at the top. Women and all other marginalized groups have a special responsibility to open themselves to the Spirit, to participate in, and contribute to, a renewed pneumatology (theology of the Holy Spirit). We extend the discrete event of confirmation throughout our entire lives by asking for gifts and fruits, and risking ourselves to use them for the common good. It is not surprising that Pentecostalism is one of the fastest growing Christian movements in the world. Christians all over the world long for and experience the power of the Spirit's work within individuals and communities.

The idea that the Spirit does have a distinct, personal face has been used to support and encourage the gifts of laity. The anonymity of the Spirit is interpreted to mean that the Spirit assumes the face of every Christian who allows the Spirit to work within her. Through the Spirit, we have the potential to be witnesses to the face of God. In addition, it is in and through the Holy Spirit that we are able to know God, that God is able to know us, and that we are able, in grace, to live and love in godly ways. The Spirit is the force through which we become extensions of the communitarian love of the Trinity.

In the New Testament, the Greek words for *energy* and *dynamism* point to the positive force for good that we possess because of grace, the work of God in the world. In most cultures, power is associated with men and carries negative connotations. Power is dangerous and corrupting and has great potential to become sinful. But it is important for

women to recall that the Christian tradition associates the Holy Spirit with activities that involve good power in which we are invited to partake.

The Spirit is the power that enables reconciliation, allowing us to forgive small and even great offenses; the power that invites us to live our lives intelligently as well as lovingly; the power to serve others. The Spirit casts out the fears that bind us and prevent us from living in the freedom of the daughters and sons of God (see Romans 8:14). The Spirit guides the church as it struggles to be faithful to gospel values; the Spirit is the Comforter, the bond of love between the Father and the Son; the power that gives us the courage to name and face up to our sinfulness. Persons benefit from this Spirit power in ways dependent on their personalities, history, family and particular context.

Two operations of the Spirit are of special importance to women in the twenty-first century. The first is prophecy, the divinely inspired energy that confronts the status quo and points the community in new, more godly, directions. In the past, women called by the Spirit to confront evil and preach conversion were particularly suspect, and were often silenced or even killed because of their perceived “emotional” susceptibility to evil spirits. Stereotyping and silencing women’s prophetic voices need to be roundly confronted. Women, whose rich perspectives have been obscured and rejected in the past, are called to step forward, to open themselves to the voice and courage of the Spirit. The church and the world need women’s voices more than ever.

Prophets usually meet a bad end. People will not like us if we speak the truth to power. Fear of losing status, power, possessions or reputation, blocks the Spirit. We go to great lengths to preserve the illusion that things are not *really* as bad as we think. We are called by the Spirit to keep two images before us—a mutilated world torn by war, famine, torture, illness, violence and poverty (the majority of its sufferers being women and children); and the image of the apostles freed by the Spirit from fear, timidity and hiding into confident preachers of the gospel.

These images stand like beacons, beckoning us to pray for courage, discern and become voices for justice, freedom and truth.

It is hard work to discern the difference between authentic revelation that genuinely renews church and world and self-serving movements that betray the Spirit's truth. It takes guts to speak out and stand up for the good. Thus, we pray not to become faint of heart or ignore the Spirit's call for justice. The Scriptures warn us not to quench the Spirit (see 1 Thessalonians 5:19; Ephesians 4:30). We know that the stories of prophets inevitably include an initial response of fear to the Spirit's call. But we also believe that the Spirit has the power to cast out the fear that kills our spirits and stifles our work for justice.

A second important gift of the Spirit for women is the Spirit's promise to make all things new (see Revelation 21:5). For those who have spent most of history living on the "underside"—the marginal, the oppressed, the voiceless—it is imperative to hope and trust that the Spirit has the power to transform the world. This hope motivates us to roll up our sleeves and work toward new beginnings. These fresh starts may be as small as a slight attitude adjustment within our own hearts, or as large as helping to change a law or assist women who need help at crucial turning points in their lives.

Life without the power to change course is a form of hell. To be resigned to second-class citizenship for women, persons of color, the poor, the elderly, the ill is a life none of us cares to live. Imagine not being able to start over, offer or receive forgiveness, renew a broken relationship, get a new job or watch the flowers come up in the spring. The Spirit is associated with transforming hearts and minds. A woman in a spirituality group spoke about how the Spirit empowered her to overcome a "learned helplessness" she had been taught as the only female child in her family. The Spirit is the vehicle by which we leave off the old self bound by sin, slavery, fear and egoism, and embrace the new, open to grace and freedom and love (see Romans 6:6; Ephesians 4:22; Colossians 3:9).

In their diversity and particularity, women are called to collaborate with the Spirit and with each other. The Spirit demands that we place our particular gifts at the service of the specific needs and sufferings of women at this moment in history.

[W]e also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (Romans 5:3–5).

We know well that this passage from Paul about suffering can no longer be used to tell women to suffer in silence against their wills. The Christian tradition has been misused by emphasizing, even glorifying, suffering as redemptive in situations that only increased oppression. Women in abusive marriages are told to “tough it out”; slaves were told that their condition was the will of God; many grew up thinking that if it didn't hurt, life must not be worthy. Rather, this passage from Romans reminds us of the superabundance of God's love poured into our hearts and into the world through the Spirit. Indeed, we can call upon the Spirit to heal the wounds of the wrongful suffering inflicted upon women simply because they are women. As we work to right the ills of the world, we need to keep in view images of abundance—Niagara Falls, huge vats of wine poured out, a sudden summer rainstorm, the swells of the ocean—to remind ourselves of the magnificent, magnanimous pouring out of the Spirit's gifts upon us.

Many metaphors for the Spirit are related to *life*—wind, breath, water, fire, service, risk, reconciliation, love. To have and to be Spirit means to be alive in every aspect of life—personal, professional, spiritual, intellectual, cultural, sexual, ecological. Spirituality has to do with the *eros* or longing of the universe, the potential for holy power and presence beyond our finite existence. We are free to embrace and develop spirit, to detach our restlessness and anxiety from consumer

instincts and reattach them to love. Ronald Rolhesier reminds us:

Long before we do anything explicitly religious at all, we have to do something about the fire that burns within us. What we do with that fire, how we channel it, is our spirituality, whether we want one or not, whether we are religious or not.¹¹

What a gift that we are free to use the words “Holy Spirit” to name our deepest hopes and joys, our comfort in suffering and failure, the push to have courage and take risks, the joy of renewal. Presupposing that we are made in God’s Trinitarian image, the Spirit names what we want for ourselves—who we want to become—in our most sane, honest, loving and grace-filled moments. The Spirit provides the energy for action that has the common good of all in view, especially the poorest among us.

In the northeast corner of France, early in the eighteenth century, Jean-Pierre de Caussade, S.J., gave a series of conferences on the spiritual life for a group of nuns. At the conclusion of these lectures, de Caussade reminded the nuns that through faith, Jesus continues to live and work among us through the Holy Spirit.

We are in an age of faith; the Holy Spirit no longer writes gospels, except in our hearts; saintly souls are the pages, suffering and action the ink. The Holy Spirit is writing a living gospel with the pen of action, which we will only be able to read on the day of glory when, fresh from the presses of life, it will be published. O what a beautiful story! What a beautiful book the Holy Spirit is now writing! It is in press; not a day passes when the type is not being set, the ink not applied, the pages not being printed.¹²

With modifications to accommodate our computer age, de Caussade’s analogy for the Holy Spirit as one who writes a living gospel reaches out to us across the centuries. Consciousness of the Spirit’s lively presence grows slowly and in different ways: The Spirit visits in prayer; conversations about the Spirit take place; the Spirit is recognized in

compassionate action for justice; sermons are heard; books and articles are written and read. The sheer variety of encounters with the Holy Spirit quickens us to attend to the particular shape this holy power takes in our lives and world, and then to know about, and be accountable to, the long history of our ancestors' experiences of Spirit.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. When you hear the word *power* what comes to mind? What positive or negative associations do you have with this term? What happens when you link the idea and practice of power with the Holy Spirit?
2. In the Christian tradition, the Holy Spirit is most often represented with a dove. Is this an adequate image for you? Identify two or three fresh images that perhaps more adequately reflect the being and role of the Holy Spirit in your life.
3. Take a moment to reflect on the major fears in your life. What happens when you allow the breath of the Spirit to blow through them?