

CHRIST'S PRESENCE TODAY

The mystery of Christ unfolded in history—Incarnation, glorious Passion, Resurrection—and yet it is always present and reaches us in our everyday reality. “The Good Shepherd,” writes Francis, quoting John’s Gospel, who takes care of us after having given his life for us, is always with us until the end of time. Furthermore, we must turn toward him; bind ourselves to him in order to create a true fraternal community.¹³ Even if his presentation is not a systematic one, Francis, with penetrating intuition, points out the four ways by which Christ is present to us today.

He is first of all present in the community assembled in his name. “Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”¹⁴ We dwell in Him, and His words—*spirit and life*—dwell in us and give us life. His words—his gospel message—which are also life-giving and dynamic words of the Spirit¹⁵ and whose infinite riches must be discovered in gladness and joy,¹⁶ save us at the same time as the sacrament of the Body and the Blood of Christ.¹⁷ They are, by this very fact, the second location of the Lord’s presence. By making an effort to be open to his words, to understand them spiritually, and to live them out, we encounter and honor the Lord himself.¹⁸

The Eucharist—celebration and communion—is the privileged moment for the actualization of Christ and his mystery. The eucharistic celebration, the rite along with the material elements of bread and wine, is the only presence available to our senses of Jesus Christ, incarnate, dead and risen. The Son of God abases himself and is made available to our faith each day just as when he incarnated himself. In these elements so ordinary as to be banal, he comes to us daily under

humble appearances. His presence in the sacrament manifests his humility—his kenosis—as well as that of the Father “who accepts each day that His unique Son comes down *from the bosom of the Father* upon the altar in the hands of a priest.”¹⁹ Francis never forgets that the one who humbles himself in the anonymity of the Eucharist is the Lord of the universe, God and Son of God, no longer mortal but living and glorified for eternity.²⁰

Finally, today, as in his great eucharistic prayer on the night of his Passion (John 17), Christ continues revealing the name of the Father to us as well as praying for us. This “priestly” prayer of Christ is quoted three times in Francis’ writings. He retains the demands in our favor that the Son addresses to the Father: unity, joy, preservation from evil, knowledge of the love of God for us, and participation in the destiny of the Son and his glory.

THE PATHS FOR THE EXPERIENCE OF CHRIST

But how can one discover, beyond words and the material signs, the reality of the living Lord? How can one experience him?

This question is raised in the first *Admonition*, which is a brief veritable treatise of spiritual knowledge. A path is traced: it begins with the knowledge of the Son “according to the Spirit and divinity” to reach, through the Spirit who dwells in the faithful, the invisible Father. We begin first of all by approaching what was or remains visible of Christ: humanity, flesh, sacrament—in other words, what one can see and grasp. But this is only the surface; to enter into the reality, we must allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit who grants us “spiritual eyes.” We are then introduced to the very interior of Christ and he reveals to us, by his divine and human nature simultaneously, the face of the Father. The path of the knowledge of Christ leads us, in the Spirit, to attain the depths of the Father.

The summit of spiritual experience is admirably described in the text addressed not to the brothers, but to Christians living in the world.²¹ When they pursue the gospel path with tenacity, the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon them and will make a home and a dwelling place within them. They will then share in the Trinitarian communion: the Spirit makes of them sons and daughters of the celestial Father; spouses, brothers and mothers of Jesus Christ, Son of the Father. They are by that very fact brothers and sisters of Jesus; even more, they become spouses—a mystical theme *par excellence*—when the Spirit unites the faithful soul to Christ. By their faith and their works, they become mothers of Christ, carrying him in their hearts and giving birth to him for the sake of the world. The “mysticism” of Francis boldly proposed for all believers, is to be sure Christocentric, but

always within a Trinitarian perspective; it is the Spirit who makes of us sons and daughters of the Father, and brothers, spouses and mothers of Jesus.

THE SPIRIT PARACLETE

And *the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon* all those men and women who have done and persevered in these things and it will make a home and a *dwelling place in them*. And they will be the children of the heavenly Father, Whose works they do. And they are spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are spouses when the faithful soul is united by the Holy Spirit to our Lord Jesus Christ. We are brothers, moreover, when we do the will of His Father Who is in heaven; mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; and give Him birth through a holy activity, which must shine before others by example.

—*The Second Letter to the Faithful*²²

When in his principal texts Francis sketches a comprehensive vision of God the Father and his work, one always finds the presence of the Spirit next to and adjacent to the Son. The Spirit, the holy one, the Paraclete, the defender and consoler, is often called “the Spirit of the Lord” as if to stress the links to the Father and the Son. Fire, light, breath, inspiration, gratuitous gift of God and Spirit is above all “the Holy love” with which the Father loves us. It is to the Spirit primarily that we can apply the qualities that Francis attributes to God: *tender, modest, beloved, friendly, accessible, innocent, exquisite, lovable, delectable, desirable*.

However, the Spirit being what is deepest and most mysterious in God, even these attempts at description fall short. Spirit is what is inexpressible in God. Rather than stammer a few words that fall short of describing his being, Francis will indicate throughout his writings the dynamism of the Spirit, the activities or, as he calls them, his *operations*.

THE OPERATIONS OF THE SPIRIT

These operations of the Spirit are multiple and varied; they are at work in God as well as in the men and women in whom the Spirit dwells. We must be attentive to what Francis says of the Spirit; once we understand what he means and allow the Spirit to act in us, we learn the essence of what he means by “the spiritual life” as well as the essence of Franciscan “spirituality.”

The Spirit, Saint Paul tells us, probes the depths of God (the Father). He is the only one who knows them (1 Corinthians 2:10–11). Francis catches a glimpse of the role of the Spirit within God. God is Spirit, no one has ever seen God, and one can only know him in the Spirit.²³ Thus it is the Spirit who sees God, who represents in some way the visibility of God and then communicates it to those on whom he finds rest. Moreover, the Spirit is the one who makes the Word of God come alive; the words of Christ himself, the Word of the Father, are equally words of the Spirit and therefore possess a dynamic life.²⁴ And with the Son, coming from and dependent on the Father as he is himself, the Spirit is the one who celebrates and is the cantor of the Father from whom he emerges.²⁵

What occurs in the perpetual outpouring from within the Trinity finds expression in the history of salvation. With the Father, who has the initiative, the Spirit and the Son intervene in creation, in the redemptive Incarnation²⁶ and are active in the celebration of the Eucharist.²⁷

As for the life of the faithful believer, his “operations” are constantly animated by the energies of the Spirit. The believer is born again in the water and by the Spirit,²⁸ and it is the Spirit that makes the believer acknowledge and confess the divinity of Christ.²⁹ Without

him it is impossible “to see and to believe, according to the Spirit and the divinity, that the body and the blood of Christ is in the Eucharist, and above all to receive him in truth,” for, as Francis writes strongly, “it is the Spirit which dwells in the faithful who receives these most holy mysteries.”³⁰

The Spirit’s main activity in humans, so to speak, is the “prayer of a pure heart.” According to Jesus’ words, which Francis quotes three times, one must adore the Father *in Spirit and in truth* (John 5:23–24). The Spirit, the only true adorer of the Father, who alone probes the depths “with fearsome awe,” teaches men and women what adoration means. He is, according to Francis’ expression, the “Spirit of holy prayer and devotion,” that is to say the one who stirs the hearts of men and women to desire and to search for God and teaches them true spiritual worship which consists in obedience and service (devotion).³¹ Also, we must desire the Spirit’s presence more than anything else and leave room for his activity in us. The first fruit of his operation will be the prayer of a pure heart, then humility, patience and at its summit, the love of enemies.³² For it is the work of the Spirit to push love to its absolute limits.³³

The Spirit accompanies men and women on their spiritual journey that starts with the acknowledgment of our miserable state, continues with the discovery of the plan of God for us and culminates in how it is put into action. The intervention of the Spirit is necessary to enable us to follow the footsteps of Jesus, the Beloved Son, and attain the Father, the Most High and thus share in the glorious life of the Trinity. Only the Spirit can accomplish that which we are incapable of achieving through our own efforts and our own strength: the purification of the ambiguities that dwell in us, the light of a complete knowledge and, finally, a love set ablaze. Thus one must pray to be “interiorly purified, interiorly illuminated and set ablaze by the fire of the Spirit.”³⁴

Already in this life for the faithful who follow the path of the gospel, the fulfillment of the work of the Spirit occurs when he rests upon the faithful and they are introduced to the intimacy of the Father and the Son. This experience which is proposed for all—and which is realized first of all and fully so in Mary³⁵ as well as in the Poor Sisters of Saint Clare³⁶ is in some way the summit of the operations of the Paraclete. As in John's Gospel, which ascribes to the Father and the Son, "we will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14:23). Francis ascribes first of all to the Spirit. When the latter rests upon the faithful, as he did on the messianic figure in Isaiah (11:2), on Jesus at his baptism (John 1:32) and on those who suffer (1 Peter 4:1), he makes a home and a dwelling place and opens access to the Trinitarian life. In a daring and innovative way, Francis presents the role of the Spirit in mystical union under a nuptial form. The Spirit is the bond that unites the faithful soul to Christ in order to enable it to become a spouse: and moreover, he is the spouse of the Virgin Mary and also of the Poor Sisters.

One can now better understand the frequency with which Francis uses terms such as "spiritual" and "spiritually." According to Francis, someone is spiritual when one is under the influence of the Spirit and follows his promptings. To act spiritually means to discern, to judge according to the Spirit, in order then to incarnate it in one's daily life.

Such is the vision, traced in broad strokes, which Francis has of the Father Most High, his Beloved Son and the most Holy Paraclete³⁷—a vision that inspired him and on which his life was based and on which ours must also be based.