

The Work of the Holy Spirit

Among many Christians today there is a renewed interest in the Holy Spirit and his work. Unfortunately, this has also led to some misunderstandings and divisions. Words such as “charismatic renewal,” “neo-Pentecostal movement,” and “baptism in the Holy Spirit” are foreign and unsettling to many Catholics and to many Protestants as well. And yet, this charismatic or Pentecostal movement claims to be a work of God’s Holy Spirit, and has shown considerable ecumenical promise in its ability to draw Christians together to worship and share their lives across denominational lines. At the same time, this movement also has given rise to new ecumenical problems and misunderstandings.

In light of this situation, I think it is important to investigate the current trend of interest in the Holy Spirit in light of the Catholic understanding of the Spirit and his work among Christians.

But there is a more important reason for paying attention to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit brings life to everything that Christians do and believe and reveals their true meaning. Without the Holy Spirit, prayer is no more than meditation on ultimate reality or just “navel-gazing,” the sacraments are empty, meaningless rituals, Church leaders are merely bureaucrats or moralists, the Bible is just another great literary work, and the Christian life is observing a set of rules, fulfilling certain ideals by one’s

own effort. Only with the Spirit is it possible to understand what Christianity is about. Through the Holy Spirit, the Bible is perceived as God's inspired Word in human language, Church leaders carry on the mission of Jesus Christ by his authority and commission, the Christian life is marked by God's guidance and empowering, and prayer and the sacraments become personal encounters with the living God. This is why the Holy Spirit is essential to the Christian life, as Catholics understand it.

A good place to begin is a statement of the Second Vatican Council concerning the Holy Spirit's work:

When the work which the Father had given the Son to do on earth was accomplished, the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost in order that He might forever sanctify the Church. All believers have access to the Father through Christ in the one Spirit (Eph 2:18). He is the Spirit of life, a fountain of water springing up to life eternal (Jn 4:14, 7:38-39). Through him the Father gives life to men who are dead from sin, until at last he revives in Christ even their mortal bodies (Rom 8:10-11).

The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful as in a temple (1 Cor 3:16, 6:19). In them he prays and bears witness to the fact that they are adopted sons (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15-16, 26). The Spirit guides the Church into the fullness of truth (Jn 16:13) and gives her a unity of fellowship and service. He furnishes and directs her with various gifts, both hierarchical and charismatic, and adorns her with the fruits of his grace (Eph 4:11-12; 1 Cor 12:4; Gal 5:22). By the power of the gospel, he makes the Church grow, perpetually renews her, and leads her to perfect union with her Spouse. The Spirit and the Bride both say to the Lord Jesus, "Come!" (Rv 22:17). Thus the Church shines forth as "a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."¹

We have previously discussed the work of the Holy Spirit in leading the Church into the fullness of truth (Jn 16:13), which Catholics call the gift of infallibility. But what about the statement, “The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful as in a temple” (see 1 Cor 3:16, 6:19; Eph 2:21-23)? What does it mean that the Holy Spirit dwells in the Church and in each Christian? How does the Spirit come to dwell there? What difference does his presence make? These questions can serve as a framework for our study of the Spirit and his work.

The Holy Spirit: God’s Gift to Each Christian

The Holy Spirit is God’s greatest gift to each Christian. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have received from God?” (1 Cor 6:19). Jesus said that it was good that he was to depart from his apostles because unless he departed, he could not send them his Holy Spirit, who would bless them, empower them, and lead them into the fullness of truth (Jn 16:7-16; Acts 1:8).

How does he come to dwell within us? The Catholic Church emphasizes that a person becomes a Christian and first receives the Holy Spirit through belief and baptism. Belief is essential for a mature Christian to receive the Spirit. The Letter to the Ephesians teaches: “In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph 1:13). Concerning baptism, the apostle Paul noted that “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...” (1 Cor 12:13), and “he [God] saved us...by the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Ti 3:5). Paul rejoiced that Jesus had lavished the Holy Spirit upon each believer (Ti 3:7) as a “pledge” or “first fruits” (see 2 Cor 5:5; Rom 8:23) of the eternal life we hope to receive when we appear before the judgment seat of Christ. For Paul, the Holy Spirit was so important that he

could say: “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (Rom 8:9). A person who has not received the Holy Spirit is not yet a Christian.

Paul’s teaching, then, implies that the Holy Spirit is normally first given to individuals through belief and water baptism. The Acts of the Apostles also particularly associates the sending of the Spirit with baptism. Peter, in his speech on Pentecost, exhorted those who believed in Jesus to: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). The relationship between being baptized in water and receiving the Holy Spirit is also seen in Acts 8:37-39, 9:17-18, 10:44-48, 11:15-17, 19:1-7. Baptism and the sending of the Spirit are meant to be inseparable. Acts records that if a person were baptized and did not receive the *fullness* of the Holy Spirit, the apostles would pray and lay their hands on them, begging God to send his Holy Spirit in greater measure (Acts 8:14-17). The Catholic sacrament of confirmation originates from this practice. Other New Testament texts that show how baptism and the sending of the Spirit are related include Matthew 28:19, Ephesians 4:4-5, and John 1:25-34; 3:5.

These Bible passages are the basis for the Catholic teaching that a person becomes a “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:19) through water baptism. Water baptism is not the only time or way that the Holy Spirit comes to live in a person, but the New Testament indicates the importance of being “baptized into Christ” (Rom 6:3), and thus being “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph 1:13).

Are Catholics “Born Again” or “Spirit-filled?”

Many Christians today say that a person must be “born again,” “Spirit-filled,” or “baptized in the Holy Spirit” in order to be saved. Catholics and other Christians often ask

what the Catholic Church teaches about this because these terms do not originate in Catholic teaching and theology. The simple answer is that the Catholic Church basically affirms the reality and truth of what these phrases point to.

Let us first consider the term “born again.” It comes from Jesus’ words in John 3: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew [or “born from above” or “born again”], he cannot see the kingdom of God... Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:3, 5). Catholics believe that they are first born again of water and the Holy Spirit when they receive the sacrament of baptism. Therefore, a person who has been validly baptized has been “born of water and the Spirit” and can attain salvation.

However, Catholics also believe that baptism only *begins* the work or mission of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. The Spirit also comes in new and deeper ways in the other sacraments of the Church, and through the fervent and expectant prayer of Christians. Salvation, as we have seen, is a lifelong process that depends upon continually living in the power of the Holy Spirit and by the Spirit’s guidance. Catholics do not believe that it is enough to be “born again” once (say, in baptism) and depend upon that fact alone for salvation. Paul stresses that it is those who *live* according to the Spirit of God who will attain salvation, “...for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Rom 8:13-14).

The Fruit of the Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the continual guide and source of strength for the moral life of a Christian. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* entitles the first section of its “Life in Christ” teaching on morality: “Man’s Vocation: Life in the

Spirit.” In his letter to the church in Galatia, the apostle Paul indicates that the mark of truly “born again” Christians is that they do not live according to “the flesh” (carnal desires that are opposed to God’s will), but according to the Spirit: “...walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal 5:16). So as to avoid any confusion, Paul lists the “works of the flesh” that lead to death (Gal 5:19-21), and contrasts them with the “fruit of the Spirit” that leads to life:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.
(Gal 5:22-25)

Again, Paul stresses that Christians must persevere in “walking by the Spirit” to the end of our lives in order to be saved: “For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart” (Gal 6:8-9).

Thus the person who is truly “born again” and “Spirit-filled” is not necessarily the one who has had an extraordinary experience of the Holy Spirit at some point (though this is a blessing), but the person who lives and “walks” by the Holy Spirit; who has put to death the “works of the flesh” and manifests the “fruit of the Spirit.” This is what it means to be a “new creation” in Christ Jesus—“the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17).

Catholic tradition has always emphasized that the Holy Spirit clearly manifests his presence in the life of the truly “born again” Christian through the fruit of the Spirit, and

that God leads a person to salvation who continues to live by the Spirit until life's end.

“Baptized in the Holy Spirit”

Many Catholics today are claiming to be “baptized in the Holy Spirit,” and are testifying to others that this has made a great difference in their lives. Because this is a potential source of controversy and misunderstanding among Catholics, not to mention among all Christians, we should determine what it means to be “baptized in the Holy Spirit,” and inquire whether this conforms to true Catholic theology.

First, what does it mean to be “baptized in the Spirit?” The phrase itself is biblical. John the Baptist prophesied that Jesus “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit...” (Mt 3:11; Mk 1:8; Lk 3:16; see also Jn 1:33). In the account of Jesus' Ascension to the Father in Acts, Jesus promised his disciples, “...before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5). The fulfillment of this prophecy began with the sending of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples at Pentecost.

Catholics have often associated being “baptized in the Holy Spirit” with water baptism, and we have seen that the Bible does relate the two. However, the Catholic Church has never claimed that the work of the Holy Spirit is limited exclusively to baptism. Again, the Bible, especially the Acts of the Apostles, implies that it may be necessary to pray that a baptized person receive a greater outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Catholic understanding of the sacrament of confirmation affirms this. Confirmation is the Catholic Church's official prayer for the Holy Spirit to empower a person to spread the gospel, to live a fervent Christian life, and to share more fully in the mission and ministry of the Church.

The Catholic Church also teaches that the Spirit of God can enter a person's life in a new way if the person

simply prays for this with expectant faith. Sometimes, as in the case of Paul, God sends his Spirit to a person even without their prayer or faith. The receiving of the Holy Spirit in a new way, usually as a result of earnest, expectant prayer, is what many Christians today call being “baptized in the Holy Spirit.” Nothing in official Catholic teaching denies the possibility or the importance of this. On the contrary, some of the greatest Catholic saints have urged Christians to continually ask God for a fuller outpouring of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The well-known Catholic prayer to the Holy Spirit implores God to send the Spirit to “fill the hearts of your faithful,” to “enkindle in them the fire of your love,” and to “renew the face of the earth.” At the opening of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII called upon all Catholics to pray: “Renew your wonders in our time, as though by a new Pentecost....”² Both Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II have endorsed and warmly supported the various movements in the Catholic Church that have focused on the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in lives of Christians.³

In summary, although Catholics may not necessarily use the same terminology as other Christians, the Catholic Church proclaims the importance of the Holy Spirit in the life of each Christian and the Church.

“Baptism in the Spirit” and Catholic Theology

Catholic theologians have reflected on the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and have discussed some important questions about how “baptism in the Spirit” is related to other forms of God’s action among his people. Some Catholic theologians have proposed other terms to describe this work of God: “renewal of the Spirit,” “release of the Spirit,” “new outpouring of the Spirit,” and others. The reason for these proposals is to acknowledge that “baptized in the Spirit” is a biblical term that probably

should not be used to describe one particular type of experience of the Holy Spirit. To speak of “*the baptism in the Spirit*” is even more misleading if it implies that there is only one event in a person’s life that could be properly called by that name. God can pour out the Holy Spirit in a new and significant way many times in a person’s life if God wishes. The first time that this happens to a person is often the most dramatic because it may be experienced by the person as a totally “new thing.” Thus people speak of “*the baptism in the Spirit.*” But God certainly can and does pour out his Holy Spirit many times in a person’s life, often in response to faith-filled prayer.

Theologians have also examined the relationship between being “baptized in the Holy Spirit” and the sacraments, especially baptism and confirmation. Some maintain that being “baptized in the Spirit” is actually a “release” or a “coming to consciousness” of the power of the Holy Spirit who already has been given fully to the believer through the sacraments of the Church. Fr. Francis Sullivan, S.J., refers to St. Thomas Aquinas’ teaching on the subject:

The two key words which for St. Thomas express what happens when the Holy Spirit is given or sent to us are *inhabitation* and *innovation*, the Holy Spirit dwells in us, in such a way as to *make us new*.

Now, of course, in Catholic teaching this takes place initially at the moment when we become Christians, when we are “born of water and the Spirit” (Jn 3:5). But St. Thomas also asks the question whether we can speak of a sending of the Spirit to a person in whom he is already indwelling, and if so, how this is to be understood.⁴

When asked whether we could speak of a *new* “sending” of the Holy Spirit to someone in whom the Spirit was already indwelling (through the sacraments, for example), St. Thomas replied: