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First Advent Sermon

I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

1. The Innovation after the Council

With the celebration of the 50th year of the end of the Second Vatican Council, the first “post-conciliar” period comes to a close and a new one begins. If the first period was categorized by problems relating to the “reception” of the Council, this new period will be characterized, I believe, by the completion and integration of the Council—in other words, by re-reading the Council in the light of the fruit it produced while also highlighting what was lacking in it or only present in a seminal phase.

The major innovation in theology and in the life of the Church after the Council has a specific name: the Holy Spirit. The Council had certainly not ignored the Holy Spirit’s action in the Church, but it had spoken of it almost always “in passing,” often mentioning him but without emphasizing his central role, not even in *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. In one conversation during the time that we were together on the International Theological Commission, I remember that Father Yves Congar used a striking image in this regard: he spoke of a Holy Spirit who is sprinkled here and there throughout the texts like sugar sprinkled on top of pastries without, however, being part of the recipe itself.

Nevertheless, the thaw had begun. We can say that the intuition of St. John XXIII about the Council as “a new Pentecost for the Church” found its actualization only later after the conclusion of the Council, as has so often happened in the history of the Councils.

In the coming year, the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Church will occur. It is one of the many signs—the most noticeable because of the magnitude of the phenomenon—of an awakening to the Holy Spirit and charisms in the Church. The Council had paved the way for this reception, speaking in *Lumen* *gentium* of the charismatic dimension of the Church alongside the institutional and hierarchical dimension and insisting on the importance of charisms.[[1]](#footnote-1) In his homily for the Chrism Mass of Holy Thursday in 2012, Benedict XVI affirmed,

Anyone who considers the history of the post-conciliar era can recognize the process of true renewal, which often took unexpected forms in living movements and made almost tangible the inexhaustible vitality of holy Church, the presence and effectiveness of the Holy Spirit.

Contemporaneously the renewed experience of the Holy Spirit stimulated theological reflection.[[2]](#footnote-2) Soon after the Council, treatises on the Holy Spirit multiplied: among Catholics, that of Yves Congar,[[3]](#footnote-3) of Karl Rahner,[[4]](#footnote-4) of Heribert Mühlen,[[5]](#footnote-5) and of Hans Urs von Balthasar[[6]](#footnote-6); among Lutherans, that of Jürgen Moltmann,[[7]](#footnote-7) of Michael Welker,[[8]](#footnote-8) and many others. On the part of the magisterium there was the encyclical *Dominum et vivificantem* (*On the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World*) by St. John Paul II. In 1982 on the occasion of Sixteenth Centenary of the First Council of Constantinople in 381, that same Supreme Pontiff sponsored the International Congress of Pneumatology at the Vatican, and its proceedings were published in two large volumes called *Credo in Spiritum Sanctum*.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In recent years we have witnessed a decisive step forward in this direction. Toward the end of his career Karl Barth made a provocative statement that was in part a self-criticism. He said that in the future a new theology would be developed, the “theology of the third article.”[[10]](#footnote-10) By “third article” he of course meant the article in the creed about the Holy Spirit. His suggestion did not fall on deaf ears. It has given rise to the present theological current that is precisely named the “Theology of the Third Article.”

I do not think that such a current aims to substitute itself for traditional theology (and it would be mistake if it did); rather it is meant to come alongside of it and reinvigorate it. It proposes to make the Holy Spirit not only the object of one treatise, pneumatology, but also the atmosphere, so to speak, in which the whole life of the Church and all theological research unfolds—for the Holy Spirit is the “light of dogmas,” as an ancient Church Father described him.

The most complete treatment of this recent theological current is a volume by scholars that appeared in English this last September called *Third Article Theology*.[[11]](#footnote-11) Beginning with the great tradition of the trinitarian doctrine, theologians from various Christian Churches offer their contributions to this book as an introduction to a systematic theology that is more open to the Spirit and more responsive to current needs. As a Catholic, I too was invited to contribute to the book with an essay on “Christology and Pneumatology in the Early Centuries of the Church.”

2. The Creed Read from Below

The reasons that warrant this new theological orientation are not only dogmatic but also historical. In other words, we can understand what the theology of the third article is and what it aims for if we keep in mind how the actual Nicene-Constantinopolitan symbol came about. That history clearly points to the usefulness of examining that symbol “in reverse” at some point, that is, starting from the end instead of from the beginning.

Let me explain what I mean. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan symbol reflects the Christian faith in its ultimate phase after all the council clarifications and definitions were completed in the 5th century. It reflects the order reached at the end of the process of formulating the dogma, but it does not, however, reflect the process itself, faith in the making. In other words, it does not correspond to the process by which the faith of the Church was actually formed historically, nor does it correspond to the process by which someone arrives at faith today, understood as a living faith in a living God.

In today’s creed one begins with God the Father and Creator and moves on from him to the Son and his redemptive work, and finally to the Holy Spirit operating in the Church. In reality, the faith followed a reverse path. It was the Pentecostal experience of the Spirit that brought the Church to discover who Jesus was and what his teaching was. With Paul and above all with John we reach the point of ascending from Jesus to the Father. It is the Paraclete who, according to Jesus’ promise (see Jn 16:13), leads the disciples into “all the truth” about himself and the Father.

Basil of Caesarea summarizes the development of revelation and of salvation history this way:

The way of the knowledge of God lies from One Spirit through the One Son to the One Father, and conversely the natural Goodness and the inherent Holiness and the royal Dignity extend from the Father through the Only-begotten to the Spirit.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In other words, on the level of creation and being, everything comes from the Father, goes through the Son, and reaches us through the Spirit. However, in the order of redemption and conscious awareness, everything begins with the Holy Spirit, goes through the Son Jesus Christ, and returns to the Father. We could say that St. Basil is the real initiator of Third Article Theology! In the Western tradition this is expressed concisely in the final stanza of the hymn “Veni creator.” Addressing the Holy Spirit, the Church prays,

*Per te sciamus da Patrem*

*noscamus atque Filium,*

*Te utriusque Spiritum*

*credamus omni tempore.*

Oh, may Thy grace on us bestow  
the Father and the Son to know;  
and Thee, through endless times confessed,  
of both the eternal Spirit blest.

This does not in the least mean that the Church’s creed is imperfect or that it needs to be reformulated. It cannot be other than what it is. However, what is sometimes useful is to change our approach to reading it so as to retrace the path by which it was formulated. There is the same contrast between the two ways of approaching the creed—as a finished product or in its process of formulation—as there is, on the one hand, between leaving St. Catherine’s Monastery early in the morning and personally climbing Mount Sinai and, on the other hand, reading the account of someone who climbed it before we did.

3. A Commentary on the “Third Article”

With this in view, I would like to offer reflections on some aspects of the Holy Spirit’s action in the three meditations for Advent, beginning precisely with the third article of the creed that pertains to him. The article includes three great affirmations. Let us start with the first one that says,

1. *“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.”*

The creed does not say that the Holy Spirit is “the” Lord (just above in the creed we proclaim, “I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ”!). “Lord” (in the original text, *to kyrion*, neuter!) indicates here the nature, not the person; it says *what* the Holy Spirit *is* but not *who* he *is*. “Lord” means that the Holy Spirit shares in the lordship of God, that he is in the category of Creator, and not the category of a creature. In other words, he has a divine nature.

The Church reached this certainty based not only on Scripture, but also on her own experience of salvation. The Spirit, wrote St. Athanasius, cannot be a creature because when we are touched by him (in the sacraments, in the word, in prayer), we experience entering into contact with God in person and not with his intermediary. If the Spirit divinizes us, it means that he is God himself. [[13]](#footnote-13)

Could we not say the same thing in the symbol of faith in a more explicit way, defining the Holy Spirit purely and simply as “God and consubstantial with the Father” as was done for the Son? Certainly, and this was the criticism of the definition quickly leveled by some bishops, including Gregory Nazianzus. However, for reasons of expediency and peace, saying the same the thing with equivalent expressions was preferred, attributing to the Spirit, in addition to the title of “Lord,” the *isotimia*, that is, equality with the Father and the Son in being adored and glorified by the Church.

The description of the Spirit as *“the giver of life”* is drawn from various passages in the New Testament: “It is the Spirit that gives life” (Jn 6:63); “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:2); “the last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor 15:45); “the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life” (1 Cor 3:6).

Let us ask three questions here. First, what kind of life does the Holy Spirit *give*? The answer: divine life, the life of Christ. A supernatural life, not a natural super-life. He creates the new man, not Nietzsche’s superman with his “pride of life.” Second, *where does he give us this life*? The answer: in baptism, which is in fact represented as a “rebirth in the Spirit” (see Jn 3:5), in the sacraments, in the word of God, in prayer, in faith, and in suffering that is accepted in union with Christ. Third, *how does* the Spirit *give us life*? The answer: by making the works of the flesh die! He gives us that life through a death. “If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live,” St. Paul says in Romans 8:13.

*b)* *. . .* *Who Proceeds from the Father (and the Son), Who with the Father and the Son Is Adored and Glorified”*

Let us now move on to the second great affirmation of the creed about the Holy Spirit. Up to this point the creed has told us about the *nature* of the Spirit but not yet about the *person* of the Spirit. It has spoken of *what* *he is* but not *who* he is. It has also spoken to us about what the Spirit and the Father and the Son have in common—the fact of being God and giving life. With this present affirmation, however, we move on to what distinguishes the Holy Spirit from the Father and Son. What distinguishes him from the Father is that he *proceeds* from him. (The one who proceeds is other than the one from whom he proceeds!) What distinguishes the Spirit from the Son is that he proceeds from the Father not by generation but by *spiration*, a breathing forth. To express this in symbolic terms, he is not like a concept (*logos*) that proceeds from the mind but like a breath that proceeds from the mouth.

This is the pivotal part of the article in the creed because it is intended to define the position that the Paraclete occupies in the Trinity. This part of the creed is known primarily for the problem of the *Filioque* that for a millennium was the main point of disagreement between the East and the West. I will not spend time on this problem because it has been discussed more than enough and also because I spoke about it myself in this setting during Lent last year in treating the points of agreement on faith between the East and the West. [[14]](#footnote-14)

I will limit myself to highlighting what we can retain from this part of the symbol that enriches our common faith, setting aside theological disputes. It tells us that the Holy Spirit is not simply a “poor relative,” so to speak, in the Trinity. He is not “a way that God acts,” an energy or a fluid that permeates the universe like the Stoics thought. He is a “subsistent relation” and therefore a person.

He is not so much “a third person singular” as he is “a first person plural.” He is the “We” of the Father and Son.[[15]](#footnote-15) To express this in a human way, when the Father and the Son speak of the Holy Spirit they do not say “he”; instead they say “we” because he is the unity between the Father and the Son. Here we can see the extraordinary fecundity of St. Augustine’s insight in which the Father is the one who loves, the Son is the one loved, and the Spirit is the love that unites them, the reciprocal gift.[[16]](#footnote-16) The belief of the Western Church that the Holy Spirit proceeds “from the Father and the Son” is based on this.

The Holy Spirit, nevertheless, will always remain the hidden God, even if we can know him by his effects. He is like the wind: no one knows where it comes from and where it will blow, but we can see the effects of its passing. He is like the light that illuminates everything around it but remains invisible.

This is why the Spirit is the least known and least beloved of the three Persons, despite the fact that he is Love in person. It is easier to think of the Father and Son as “persons,” but that is more difficult for us to do with the Spirit. There are no human categories that can help us understand this mystery. To speak of the Father, we have the assistance of philosophy that deals with the First Cause (the God of the philosophers); to speak about the Son, we have the human analogy of a father-son relationship, and we also have the history of the Word becoming flesh. However, to speak of the Holy Spirit we have nothing but revelation and experience. Scripture itself speaks of him almost always by using symbols from nature: light, fire, wind, water, perfume, the dove.

We will fully understand who the Holy Spirit is only in Paradise. There we will live a life that will have no end, in a deepened understanding of him that will give us immense joy. He will be like a very gentle fire that will inundate our souls and fill us with bliss, like when love fills a person’s heart and that person is happy.

*c) “. . . Who Has Spoken through the Prophets”*

We have now come to the third and last affirmation about the Holy Spirit. After we have professed our faith in the life-giving and sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit in the first part of the article (the Spirit is the Lord and the giver of life), now his charismatic action is also mentioned. Regarding this action, there is one charism that is mentioned, the one that Paul holds to be the most important, namely, prophecy (see 1 Cor 14).

In regard to the prophetic charism, the article mentions only one of its manifestations by the Holy Spirit: he “has spoken through the prophets,” that is, in the Old Testament. This affirmation is based on various texts in Scripture but in particular 2 Peter 1:21: “no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

4. An Article to Complete

The Letter to the Hebrews says, “God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb1:1). The Spirit has not, therefore, ceased speaking by means of the prophets; he did so through Jesus and still speaks today in the Church. This point and other gaps in the symbol were gradually filled in by the practice of the Church without the need to change the text of the creed because of it (as unfortunately happened in the Latin world with the addition of the *Filioque*). We have an example of this in the epiclesis of the Orthodox liturgy attributed to St. James that prays as follows:

Send . . . your most *Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who is seated with* *you, God and Father, and with your only-begotten Son*; he rules with you consubstantially and coeternally. He *spoke through* the Law, *the Prophets*, and the New Testament; he descended in the form of a dove upon our Lord Jesus Christ in the Jordan River, resting upon him, and descended on his holy apostles . . . on the day of holy Pentecost.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Anyone who tries to find everything in the article about the Holy Spirit, is going to be disappointed. This fact demonstrates the nature and the limit of every dogmatic definition. Its purpose is not to say everything about a tenet of faith but to draw a perimeter within which every affirmation about that doctrine must be placed and that no affirmation can contradict. In this case, there are the additional factors that the article was formulated at a time when the reflection on the Paraclete was just beginning and, as I said above, contingent historical circumstances (the emperor’s desire for peace) led to a compromise between the parties.

We are not, however, left with only the words in the creed about the Paraclete. Theology, liturgy, and Christian piety, both in the East and the West, have clothed in “flesh and blood” the succinct affirmations of the symbol of faith. In the sequence of Pentecost of our Latin liturgy, the intimate personal relationship of the Holy Spirit with every individual soul, which is not mentioned in the symbol, is expressed by titles like “father of the poor,” “the light of the heart,” “sweet guest of the soul,” and “greatest comforter.” The same sequence addresses a series of prayers to the Holy Spirit that are particularly beautiful and responsive to our needs. Let us conclude by proclaiming them together, hopefully seeking to identify among them the one that we feel we need the most.

*Lava quod est sordidum,  
riga quod est aridum*,  
*sana quod est saucium.*

*Flecte quod est rigidum,  
fove quod est frigidum,  
rege quod est devium.*

Wash that which is sordid  
water that which is dry,  
heal that which is wounded.

Make flexible that which is rigid,  
warm that which is cold,  
rule that which is deviant.

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English translation by Marsha Daigle Williamson

1. *Lumen gentium* (*The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*), no. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Klaus Heitmann and Heribert Mühlen, eds., *Erfahrung und Theologie des Heiligen Geistes* (Munich: Kösel, 1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, trans. Geoffrey Chapman (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p. 73ff; original, 1979-1980 in French. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Karl Rahner, *The Spirit in the Church*, trans. J. G. Cumming (New York: Crossroad, 1985); original, 1977 in German. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Heribert Mühlen, *Der Heilige Geist als Person: Ich—Du—Wir* [The Holy Spirit as a Person: I-You-We] (Munich: Aschendorf, 1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Creator Spirit*, vol. 3, *Explorations in Theology*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993); original, 1967 in German. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), pp. 180-197; original, 1991 in German. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 1994), pp. 40-44; original, 1992 in German. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jose Saraiva Martins, ed., *Credo in Spiritum Sanctum*, 2 vols. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Karl Barth, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher,” in *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 278, and *Karl Barth’s Table Talk*, trans. John D. Godsey (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Myk Habets, ed., *Third Article Theology: A Pneumatological Dogmatics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, XVIII, 47, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8, p. 29; see *De Spiritu Sancto*, XVIII, 47 (*PG* 32, 153). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See St. Athanasius, “First Epistle to Serapion,” in *The Letters of St. Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, 1, 24, trans. C. R. B. Shapland (London: Epworth Press, 1951), p. 61ff; see also *PG* 26, p. 585. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Raniero Cantalamessa, *Due polmoni, un solo respiro. Oriente e occidente di fronte ai grandi misteri della fede* ( Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2016), pp. 51-66 (French trans. *Deux poumons, une seule respiration*: *Vers une pleine communion de foi entre Orient et Occident* [Nouan le Fuzelier, France: Editions des Béatitudes, 2016], pp. 49-64). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Mühlen, *Der Heilige Geist als Person: Ich—Du—Wir*. The first person to describe the Holy Spirit as the “divine we” was Søren Kierkegaard, *Diary*, 2A 731, April 23, 1838. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See St. Augustine, “On the Trinity,” Basic Writings of St. Augustine, vol. 2, ed. Whitney J. Oates (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), p. 790. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For the “Anaphora of St. James,” see Anton Hänggi and Irmgard Pahl, *Prex Eucharistica:* *Textus e variis liturgiis antiquioribus* *selecti* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1968), p. 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)