

THE HOLY SPIRIT OF LOVE

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GOD, St John says uncompromisingly, 'is Love'.¹ But whenever the truth of God's absolute transcendence is stressed, our approach to him would seem to be by the 'negative way' – the imaginative and emotional must be emptied out; even our ideas about him must be left behind. To speak, then, of God as loving or claiming love would seem quite meaningless. Yet it is said that no atheist tribe has been discovered, nor one that is totally devoid of cult, even though this cult may, out of awe, be directed to something inferior to their god. Even the Hebrews refrained from using the Name of God; and our own fellow-countrymen have been apt to substitute 'Providence', 'One above', the 'Deity' for the forthright word 'God'.

We prefer to approach our subject slowly, and ask, first, what the average man means by 'spirit'. He talks of a spirited, or spiritless, performance; or says that a club, for instance, is ill equipped but that its spirit is excellent, or splendidly equipped but that a bad spirit prevails there; or that its long dead founder's spirit still animates his successors. All this implies the existence, or intensity, of a kind of life different from and more important than what can be materially assessed. These human uses of the word are not alien to the Scriptural account of God and his activity.

The Hebrews never formulated a 'philosophy' about God, but as time went on, in spite of their hankering after 'idols', their belief both in God's transcendence and activity in their regard became ever clearer. God was invisible, but had 'revealed' himself, to Abraham and Moses and the prophets. Since man could not come into direct contact with God, the 'angel' of God was often substituted for the Name itself of God.²

However anthropomorphic the language used about God, we do not think that at any time the Hebrews thought of God as

¹ Jn 5, 8.

² In a very few passages of the Old Testament man is described as communing with God 'face to face'. (Cf. Gen 32, 30; Exod 33, 11; Deut 5, 4; 34, 1). But even here the encounter is expressed by symbol; and in the remarkable passage Exod 33, 20–23, we see the writer striving to denote the exceptionally close vision of God by Moses which yet was short of direct contemplation.

confined to Ark, or Tabernacle or even Temple, though his presence might be in some way concentrated there and his power radiating thence.¹ Psalm 138 superbly expresses God's infinity:² it was consistent that no image should be made of him.

But God is *active*; he creates, and preserves and does so through his Spirit. In the very first chapter of Genesis he breathes upon chaos, and order takes form, and gradually living creatures come to exist and finally Man. And in the second chapter, God is described as breathing life into the clay image that he had moulded, and again, Man comes to be. The life of the world depends on this breath of God: the Psalm shows God as turning his face away – and life perishes; he breathes again, and the earth is renewed.³ The Hebrews did not see in this 'breath' or Spirit of God a 'Person'; but we who do, recall that in our own Creed we name the Holy Ghost as precisely, 'he who makes alive', *vivificans*.

Further, in the Creed we say that he 'spoke through the prophets'. Who were these? We read that they were at first called 'seers';⁴ but their rôle was to *speak* – the Spirit of the Lord plunged on to them, they hear, and speak they must. They did not merely (or usually) predict, but proclaim. Evidently there was every chance of self-deception, as there is among any enthusiasts even today, especially when the fervour is collective. Hysteria is contagious. And also, the 'false prophet' might deliberately be a man who e.g. wished to flatter a king. Moreover, given the Hebrew habit of assigning everything directly to its 'first cause', God could be said to 'send a lying spirit' into all the king's prophets.⁵ True 'inspiration' prophetic or private, had its characteristics. We read of the spirit of counsel, or knowledge, or understanding, but this concerns rather the intellect and the consequence of God-fearing behaviour. I do not think a 'spirit of love' is mentioned. It is of course untrue to regard the Old Testament as lacking in love, though God's love is usually 'selective', i.e. directed towards the Chosen People: the whole of Psalm 103 is to the praise of his fatherly love 'towards them that fear him, who keep his covenant and obey his commandments'. (Would the Psalmist have said that *including* the Gentiles?)⁶ So too in Jeremias: 'I have loved thee with an everlasting love',⁷

¹ Cf. Solomon's prayer when his temple was finished: 1 Kg 8, 22ff; 2 Par 6, 22ff.

² Ps 138, 7 ff.

³ Ps 103, 29-30.

⁴ 1 Sam 9, 9.

⁵ 1 Kg 22, 22-3.

⁶ Psalm 86 certainly foretells the gathering of pagan nations into God's ultimate Sion. But neither 'spirit' nor universal 'love' are explicitly mentioned in it.

⁷ Jer 31, 3.

and 'I remember, concerning thee, the kindness of thy youth – How thou wentest out after me into the wilderness. In a land not sown'.¹ But we are justified in discerning depth below depth in many of the prophecies, if only because our Lord takes up the great prophecy of Isaias, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me'² and applies it to himself and his mission.³

The words spoken by Isaias and quoted by our Lord make a firm bridge between the older and the new, definitive Testament. Yet, when we have crossed it, how different is the atmosphere that we breathe! We are still confronted with the mystery of Creation. 'When' and why did the Eternal and Infinite freely create this finite world, and in it, Man? Israel would never have asked those questions. We – using, as we must, human language – reply that God, who is Love, could not of course gain by creation, but wished that his beauty and love should be reflected in and shared by as many and as much as possible, and that Man should be united with him as closely as possible, and freely willed to raise him to a supernatural plane, so that he should see and love God more intimately than unaided human nature ever could. Since God's love was to enter the world by every cranny, so to say, we are not forbidden to think that the supreme method of uniting the human with the divine, the Incarnation, would have taken place even had man not sinned. But sin he did, and that is why fallen man caused the Incarnate to suffer and to die and thus to redeem him. 'While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us';⁴ and 'we love him because he first loved us'.⁵

The whole of our Lord's life was 'governed' by the Holy Ghost, to whose Coming upon Mary the Incarnation itself was due.⁶ His mission was inaugurated by the descent of the Spirit on him at his baptism; and then, full of the Holy Ghost, he was led by the selfsame Spirit to be tested in the wilderness.⁷ And it was 'in the power of the Spirit' that he returned to Galilee.⁸ But since no one will suggest that the presence and power of the Holy Ghost were withdrawn from him at any time, every act and word in our Lord's life must be interpreted in terms of love. Now our Lord made it clear that he himself was the centre of the Message that he preached. The Synoptists are full of the words: 'Follow *Me*'; 'He that loveth

¹ Jer 2, 2.

² Isai 61, 1-2.

³ Lk 4, 18.

⁴ Rom 5, 8.

⁵ 1 Jn 4, 19.

⁶ Lk 1, 34.

⁷ Lk 4, 1; cf. Mt 4, 1; Mk 1, 12.

⁸ Lk 1, 14.

father or mother . . . more than *Me*'; at the final judgement it was he who should be the Judge. In St John's Gospel he says: '*I am the Way, the Truth and the life; no man cometh to the Father save through Me*'.¹ What, then, must have been the dismay of the Apostles when our Lord told them that he was leaving them! But, as St Augustine said: *Non amat et deserit*: 'He does not love, and then desert'. No wonder our Lord insisted that he would provide a substitute for his visible presence, though could the Apostles feel there *could* be an adequate one?

I will ask the Father, and He shall give you another Paraclete, that He may abide with you for ever, the Spirit of truth . . . He shall abide *with* you, and be in you.² The Paraclete, the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you everything and will remind you of everything that I have said to you.³ When the Paraclete cometh, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceedeth from the Father, He shall give testimony of Me.⁴ It is expedient for you that I go. For if I go not, the Paraclete will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you . . . (and) when He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into the whole truth.⁵

The Vulgate itself does not try to translate 'Paraclete', which literally means 'called to (one's) side'. A Greek, on trial, might call e.g. a weeping mother, wife, desolate children – not as official witnesses, but to stir emotions on his behalf. The exact Latin translation, *advocatus*, meant almost 'counsel for the defence', inappropriate here. 'Comforter' does not befit the rôle of the Paraclete, nor does Mgr Knox's 'One to befriend you'. Certainly the Holy Spirit was to be a 'stand-by', a companion and comfort when Jesus would no more be visibly there. But above all he was to be authoritative, a Master who would both recall and guide. Truth is his objective, and was to 'remain' so – favourite word of St John's. But if love is not specifically mentioned here as a mark or gift of the Spirit, every allusion to the Paraclete is made within the parting conversation of our Lord which is all love. The Father and the Son love one another; the Father sends the Spirit; the

¹ Jn 14, 6.

⁴ Jn 15, 26.

² Jn 14, 16–17.

⁵ Jn 16, 7; 16, 13.

³ Jn 14, 26.

Son asks for him; the Son himself imparts him.¹ How, then should the Spirit *not* be one of love?

In the Acts the promise is kept. First, Pentecost shows the timid Apostles made into new men. The Spirit is their 'innermost', and the source of their energy, and their directive illumination, as St Peter learnt and taught.² And so constantly is the Spirit seen acting, urging, or restraining, that the Acts have been called the Gospel according to the Holy Ghost. And the first 'Apostolic Letter' to be sent out from Jerusalem begins: 'It has seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to Us'.³

When speaking of St Paul, we can sum up his teaching in the words: 'The Love of God which is poured out in our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit that was given us'.⁴ He insists that we are sons, not slaves, because God has 'sent the Spirit of his Son into (our) hearts, crying Abba, Father!'.⁵ Paul may have used part of his letter to the Galatians as a rough draft for his more thought-out and positive letter to the Romans, but it is the eighth chapter which is supremely to our purpose. For the first 13 verses he does allude to the necessity of rising not only above life according to the Jewish law (which could not save) but according to mere 'natural' wisdom; but in verse 15, he speaks definitely of the Holy Spirit:

As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received, yet again, a spirit of slavery resulting in fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption into son-ship, and in Him it is that we cry 'Abba, Father'. The Spirit itself joins with our own spirit in witnessing that we are children of God; but if children, then too heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if but we suffer along with Him that we may be glorified along with Him. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present state are not worth counting in view of the glory that is to be revealed in our regard. Yes, for Creation itself was enthralled to futility – not of its own choice, but by Him who so enthralled it, that it might hope. Yes, for Creation itself shall be freed from its destructive enslavement into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole of Creation joins in our groaning and is in travail along with us right up to now. And

¹ Jn 16, 14–15.

⁴ Rom 5, 5.

² Acts 10, 11.

⁵ Gal 4, 6.

³ Acts 15, 28.

not only it, but we too ourselves, who possess the first-fruits of the Spirit groan within ourselves awaiting our place as adopted sons, when our very body shall be ransomed . . . But the Spirit too itself joins hands with us to help our weakness: for what to pray for, or how, we do not know, but the Spirit itself intercedes for us with groanings that need no words, and He who searches the hearts knows what the Spirit means, for its intercession is according to the mind of God when it is on behalf of His chosen ones. For we know that for those who love Him God makes all things to work together for good.

Perhaps we can start with the last verse – God *makes* all things work together for good – not simply ‘all things work together . . .’, as though automatically. Recall again ‘the *love* of God, poured out into our hearts by means of the Spirit which He has given’. The initiative is always God’s. True, it is assumed that at least a minimum of receptiveness exists in us: the Spirit joins hands with our weakness. And once he has made his way more fully into us, *he* intercedes from *within* us not least when we are feeling we do not know how to pray properly. And God, who sees our innermost, sees *there* his Spirit who has no need of words to express what we would really want if only we knew it. But we dare not gloss over what St Paul says about the straining of *all* Creation towards the ‘far off divine event’. We dare not sigh: ‘He must be speaking poetically, metaphorically!’ Apart from such poetical flights being quite foreign to St Paul, we have no right to weaken his words because we do not ‘understand’ *how* inanimate Creation can share in a spiritual effort. Well, our effort is also towards the ‘ransom of our *bodies*’, which are material enough! *All* Nature is to be supernaturalized and glorified. No wonder that after this passage about the intercession of the Spirit mysteriously domiciled within us, and the Father making all things to co-operate for good for them who love him, St Paul hymns the invincible love of God through his Son:

What, then, are we to say to that? If God is for us, who is against us? God, who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him over for us all – how then shall He not freely give us all things along with Him? Who shall lay charge against God’s chosen ones? Shall God? but it is God who justifies us! Who shall condemn us? Jesus Christ – He who died – or rather, rose again and is at the right hand of God, and is pleading for us! Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall

affliction, or distress or persecution, hunger or nakedness, danger or the sword? And true it is, that 'for Thy sake we are put to death all the day long – we are counted as very sheep for the slaughter': but in all these things we more than conquer, through Him who loved us. Ah! I know well that neither death nor life, nor angels nor princes nor powers, nor things present or things to come, nor height or depth or any other thing created shall be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord.¹

St Paul wishes the whole of a Christian's life to be 'moved' by the Holy Spirit, with the result that there will be various manifestations of this – sometimes normal, sometimes exceptional. Thus:

No one can call Jesus 'Lord' save 'in' [i.e. under the impulse of] the Holy Ghost. There are differences of spiritual gifts, but one and the self-same Spirit; different forms of service, but the same Lord . . . Now the revelation of the Spirit is granted to each according to what is expedient. To one, God will give – by means of the Spirit – wise speech; to another to speak with insight, according to the same Spirit; to another, faith . . . to another the grace of healing, but in one and the self-same Spirit; to another, miraculous powers, to another, prophecy and to another, the discernment of [allegedly prophetic] spirits; to one, the power of speaking in different languages; to another the interpretation of these languages: but all these things one and the self-same Spirit sets to work, sharing out to each several man as He wills.²

True, St Paul is quite conscious that some of these 'gifts' are nobler – and safer – than others. As in the Old Testament days, men might be deluded in thinking themselves inspired prophets: speaking with 'tongues' might be unintelligible and even give scandal. Let the Corinthians therefore be eager for the greater gifts – and he breaks into that superb panegyric of supernatural Love (chapter 13) which soars high above 'tongues' even of angels; and above prophecy even should that include the fathoming of every mystery and every intuition. It shall outlast even faith and hope when we know God no more 'as by means of a mirror, dimly' – reflected in the most beautiful and truthful of created things

¹ Rom 8, 31–39.

² 1 Cor 12, 1–11.

and human thoughts – but even as we are known. That will be the Beatific Vision. Meanwhile, even in our poor human nature, the Spirit will produce a harvest of humbler results interior and exterior – love, joy, peace; kindness, generosity, purity . . . If we live by the Spirit, let our life be *actively* in him.¹

We cannot dwell here on the marvellous doctrine of the letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians in which he declares God's will to 'bring all things as to a head in Christ – things heavenly and things earthly':² 'Yes, all things He has placed under [Christ's] feet, and Him He has placed as Head supreme for the Church – that is His Body – the fulfilling of Him who is fulfilling Himself, fully, in all things'.³ This evolution is not mechanical nor inevitable, but due to our free co-operation with the free will of God, so that Paul prays to 'the Father from whom all family-hood in heaven or on earth wins its name', that:

He may grant you according to the measure of the richness of His glory to be powerfully strengthened by His Spirit in your inner self, so as to make Christ dwell by faith in your hearts; that in love you be rooted and founded, and be strong . . . to know the love of Christ that overshoots all knowledge – and be fulfilled according to all the fullness of God'.⁴

Thus is built up the Christ-fulfilled, the *Christus totus*; we see God's own love causing his Spirit so to flood the hearts of his beloved that they become the mystical Body of Christ and live by his life. And St John, in his vision of the New Jerusalem – all the world become City-of-God and his holy mountain; and at the summit was the throne of God and the Lamb, whence flowed the Holy Spirit, that river of life cascading down the jewelled terraces, and causing to grow on either side that Grove of Life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

Ecquando amabis? sighed the Stoic Seneca to the pagan world: 'Will you ever learn to love?' The same prayer was made by our Lord, and he has given us the power to answer it, if only we will. But our tragedy has been, and is, the inadequacy of Christian response to God's call, especially in the way of service. The Christian's love must always lead to service. When St John has said⁵ that our Lord had loved his own 'to the uttermost', he relates at

¹ Gal 5, 22–3.

² Eph 1, 10.

³ Eph 1, 23.

⁴ Eph 3, 16–21.

⁵ Jn 13, 1.

once his most humble act of washing his disciples' feet, and he says that he has given us an example: 'So ought you to wash one another's feet'. And St Paul, in prison, and hearing of rival preachers personally hostile to him, is ready to wish to die.

Ah, for me, life is Christ, and death but gain. But if bodily life means for me work and fruit – ah! what to choose I know not! I am gripped this side and that, for I am longing to set sail and be with Christ, which is far, far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your sakes.¹

'By this shall all men know that you are My disciples – that you have love one for the other'.² But look at the world – Christians included. How much love do we see? Well, the Church is unique, and the Holy Spirit guides it: and there are innumerable Catholics who do not worship idols but have sacrificed self, and love of money and of power, and doubtless till the harvest there will be weeds among the wheat. And doubtless what is evil is more noisy – and advertised – than holiness which is humble and hides itself and is uninteresting. But even when oppressed to misery-point by the condition of the world, we can apply even to that what Dame Julian of Norwich wrote long ago: 'What, wouldst thou know what was thy Lord's meaning in this thing? Love was his meaning . . . Hold thee therein'.

¹ Phil 1, 20–24

² Jn 13, 35.