

# THE DIVINE KINSMAN

By JAMES QUINN

A MIGHTY WIND is blowing through the world, fresh, invigorating, cleansing. It is the pentecostal gale of the Spirit. The Spirit is seizing and shaking the Church, quickening her to a new sense of the Spirit's power. The surge of life within the Church is reminding her of the highly personal activity of the Spirit, and especially of his charismatic gifts.<sup>1</sup> Will this renewed awareness of the Spirit lead on to a renewed theology of the Spirit? There is every sign that it will. The next great movement of theology may well centre on the holy Spirit.

Today's (and more particularly tomorrow's) theologian of the Spirit must do far more than work over old ground. He must survey afresh, from the new perspective of the Second Vatican Council and in the light of tomorrow's world, the whole range of the supernatural, the traditional domain of the Spirit, and at the same time establish the relation of the Spirit to the world of nature and its destiny. The holy Spirit is not less catholic than the Church, and especially in the important new sense in which the Church is now seeing herself as catholic, that is, as universal in her love, compassion and service.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, a synthesis on the holy Spirit is a *summa* of theology. Every statement in theology is in the last analysis a statement about the holy Spirit, just as it is also a statement about the Father and the Son.

Theology is essentially one, simple with the divine simplicity itself. It is not merely a synthesis of statements about God, or even an unending series of progressively more accurate statements about God. It is a living reality, a shared life. At the same time, we must remember that finite minds have always only a finite grasp of divine truth. The light of divine truth filters through a spectrum, diffracted into its many individual splendours. It remains, however, possible, and is always desirable, for theological language (and, in particular, the language of liturgical prayer) to retain something of this luminous quality.

Ideally, theology should speak a language that is simple, direct

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<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, n 12, § 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, n 1.

and personal. Any statement that it makes should be clear, relevant and coherent. It should be possible to gather from it its relation to, and its dependence on, the whole body of revealed truth. Theological language should be a help, and not a hindrance, to the free flow of communication between God and man, between priest and people, between catechist and catechumen, between separated christians.

That, of course, is an ideal. Difficulties in communication are legion, and arise from many sources. Here we examine very briefly and inadequately two sets of difficulties in communication that arise in the use of words in connection with the holy Spirit. First: words in constant use tend to lose the sharpness of their original minting. Here we select the words church and grace. Second: words transplanted from one context of culture to another tend to undergo a subtle shift in meaning. Here we look more closely at a possible original meaning of the word Paraclete.

Theology naturally develops its own shorthand. Words like church and grace carry the weight of a whole theology of the salvific work of Christ and (what is immediately relevant here) the activity of the holy Spirit. Instead of clarifying the personal, intimate relationship between the holy Spirit and the Church, they may by over-use conceal it. 'The Church dispenses grace': this is a shorthand expression which could give the impression of a church leading a life of its own, independent of the holy Spirit, and distributing too a largesse of its own that is totally unrelated to the holy Spirit. Experience shows how disturbing this kind of shorthand can be to the protestant mind. Less apparent to us is the disturbing effect it may have on our Catholic apprehension of the holy Spirit.

Yet the holy Spirit is the very soul of the Church's life and action.<sup>1</sup> It is at this point, *viz.*, in language about the relation between the holy Spirit and the Church, that this kind of compression brings its greatest dangers: of depersonalizing a living theology, and of forming habitual attitudes that see it as an abstraction rather than a living communion with God. The mystery of the Church, for all its institutional character, cannot be imprisoned in an impersonal formula; still less can the dynamic, overflowing vitality of the Spirit.

What is at stake here is not so much orthodoxy as its properly balanced expression: not truth but language about truth. The concepts of church and grace are biblical concepts, classical in

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, n 7, § 7.

theology and utterly indispensable. What has happened is not a degeneration of language but an impoverishment of the mental attitudes that lie behind language. What is needed therefore is not a new language but an enriched theology, and a carefulness in expression that pays special attention to the personal and dynamic activity of the holy Spirit within the Church. The Church is an institution, but not primarily. It is above all else the *ecclesia caritatis*, the communion of love whose bond is the holy Spirit animating the body of Christ. What the Church does is always and absolutely in union with, and in dependence on, Christ and the holy Spirit. The Church is the covenanted sphere of mission of the holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the exalted Son to dwell and be active within it.

Small beginnings may have important consequences. A false emphasis in language damages the wholeness of theological statement, and may create a dangerous mental attitude. We may, for example, identify the Church too closely with its jurisdiction: legalism then may drive out the Spirit. This is the mentality of the scribes. Or we may over-stress the fact that the Church is a way of life, indeed *the Way*: outward observance may then take precedence over the inner spirit. We have then created the formalist mentality of the pharisees. Or we may see the Church as the kingdom of God on earth, and forget that authority is given for humble service, that the power of the Spirit is also a ministry.<sup>1</sup> This is the triumphalist mentality. Law and Spirit, outward conformity and inner spirit, authority and service: all are necessary for the fulness of the Church's life in the Spirit, but they must all be held in equilibrium.

The same point may be illustrated by contrasting two statements:

Where the Catholic Church is,  
there is Jesus Christ (and the holy Spirit).  
Where Jesus Christ is (and the holy Spirit),  
there is the Catholic Church.

A false emphasis on the first, with an unconscious denial of the second, can lead to a subordination of Christ and the holy Spirit to the Church, and the way is opened to legalism, formalism and triumphalism. The second statement, which is, of course, basically a quotation from St Ignatius of Antioch, writing to the smyrnaeans, corrects the balance of the first, and is in fact the new emphasis of Vatican II. (I still remember vividly the surprise and delight of a

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 1, 8, 25.

distinguished reformed theologian from behind the iron curtain when I used this second statement to underline the new outlook of Vatican II; it was so completely different from his own idea of what Catholic ecclesiology implied). This second emphasis has always to be complemented by the first; but it is worth noting how well it commends itself to the eastern churches as well as to the churches of the reformation for its assertion of the primacy of Christ and the holy Spirit over the Church, which is also sound Catholic doctrine.

To take the second example: grace can come to be thought of, not as the power of the indwelling Spirit but as a mechanical aid to salvation. 'I firmly resolve by the help of thy grace never to offend thee again, and carefully to avoid the occasions of sin': the prayer is eminently orthodox. But it is in fact 'by the help and activity of the holy Spirit' that we avoid sin. The constant use of the phrase may tend to obscure the intimate, personal activity of the Spirit in the daily lives of christians.

The Church is never an abstraction; it is always a community of persons living by the life of the holy Spirit, made one by him, guided by him dynamically, intelligently and lovingly. Grace is, and must be seen to be, and must be said to be, the gift of the indwelling holy Spirit (*donum increatum*, the uncreated gift) as well as the power and love of the holy Spirit within and among us (*donum creatum*, the created gift of grace). The Church of Christ lives by the life of the holy Spirit of Christ, visible indeed only to the eyes of faith, but one with the Church, indwelling in it, protecting and guiding it, the source of all its activity. The relation between the holy Spirit and the Church, between the holy Spirit and the christian, is a personal one, or rather a community relationship between two communities of persons: the divine community of the blessed Trinity and the human (but supernatural) community of love which is the Church. The bond of love which unites them is the holy Spirit.

Theology is renewing itself by a return to the living spring of renewal: the holy Spirit indwelling in the Church, and speaking through the scriptures. The theology of the holy Spirit is itself sharing in this general movement of renewal. It is becoming more biblical, more personal, less abstract. This is the kind of renewal in keeping with the new age of the Spirit that we are entering in the world of Vatican II.

We turn now to examine the word used by our Lord to describe the Spirit whom he was to send upon the Church: the Paraclete. This mysterious title, generally translated as advocate or counsellor,

may well have a more distinctively biblical, certainly a less legal, meaning than these renderings suggest. We will explore, in the form of a meditative reflection, the context in which the word was first uttered.

Our Lord first used the word in his sublime discourse at the last supper, recorded for us by St John in chapters fourteen to seventeen of his gospel.

I will ask the Father  
and he shall give you  
another Paraclete  
that he may abide with you for ever,  
The Spirit of truth  
whom the world cannot receive  
because it seeth him not  
nor knoweth him.  
But you shall know him  
because he shall abide with you  
and shall be in you.  
I will not leave you orphans:  
I will come to you.<sup>1</sup>

The occasion, the celebration of the passover meal (or a meal which was celebrated with the ritual overtones of the passover meal), was a solemn one: a religious banquet, a Jewish gathering charged with the weight of history and Israel's most profound spiritual experience. The guests of the Master had come together in obedience to Israel's law. They were assembled to commemorate, indeed to live through once again, the greatest event in Israel's history. They had foregathered as representatives of their people to look back through the mists of the centuries to the first stirrings of their national consciousness. They had come to celebrate the liberation of their ancestors from the bondage of Egypt, a liberation that was the pledge of the divine friendship that would be redeemed on Mount Sinai when God would mould them into the people of his predilection.

The thoughts in the mind of Christ moved, however, on an altogether higher plane. He had come, not merely to look back on past events but to give them their true meaning, a new meaning that would last for all time. He had come as to the fulfilling of a

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 14, 16-18.

long-cherished purpose to celebrate this meal as the inauguration of a new and transcendent chapter in the long history of God's love for his people.

He had come to give the pledge of the new covenant, from which would be fashioned the new family of God, a new people of his choice, incorporating indeed the chosen people of old, but reaching out to embrace the whole of mankind. The people so soon to be fashioned by him into God's new people would be a family closely knit together, not now (as with the former people) by ties of kinship in the human sense, but by the still more intimate bond of the indwelling holy Spirit. The Israel of old was a people deeply conscious of the bond of blood, and still more of the marriage-bond that united them to Yahweh through the covenant of Sinai. Yet even this profoundly religious family spirit of Israel was to be transcended and fulfilled in a marvellously personal way in the new and greater covenant of Pentecost.

The gathering for the passover meal was traditionally a family occasion. As we read the chapters in which St John records for us with such love and pathos the discourse at the last supper, we sense the pervading family spirit as Christ reclines at ease among his chosen friends in those last precious moments before he enters alone into his agony. As we listen, we catch the accents of One deeply moved by this intimate family gathering. He has come with desire to this family meal which he has provided not only for these, his dearest friends, but 'for them also who through their word shall believe in me'.<sup>1</sup> His desire is to give himself for – to give himself to – the whole company of his brethren, his mystical body.

He gives the pledge of his love in a family meal. He is the master of the household who provides the food and drink. He has brought to the moment of its fulfilment the family festival of the Church, to be celebrated in his presence throughout the ages until he comes again. He speaks to his apostles as to his chosen friends, no longer servants and creatures only, but brethren and friends. He breaks to them, as gently as only he knows how, the sad news that he is going to leave them and be removed from their sight. He thinks only of them, not of the lonely passion into which he is about to enter. He knows their need, and the need of every generation within the Church.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, 20.

I will ask the Father  
and he shall give you  
another Paraclete  
that he may abide with you for ever.

Another Paraclete: Christ himself is a Paraclete. So too is the holy Spirit. The simplest, most personal, most biblical explanation of this title is that it means 'one who is appealed to' for help, on grounds of kinship. For the Jews the first appeal for help is always to the nearest kinsman. The nearest kinsman, the *go'el*, had a solemn and sacred duty to respond to an appeal for help, especially where it was made on behalf of a widow or an orphan.<sup>1</sup> God himself was the *go'el* of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Three simple but profoundly theological truths lie hidden in this explanation. Christ is our kinsman. The holy Spirit is the kinsman of Christ. The holy Spirit is also our kinsman.

The Paraclete is the divine kinsman, the befriender of the Church. (This is in fact Mgr Knox's translation). Christ is the bridegroom who, by his return to the Father, will leave on earth a widowed bride, his Church. The children of the Church will be orphaned. A widowed bride needs protection; her children need a friend. The Church will stand in need of a befriender, one to whom she can turn with perfect confidence for the help that she needs. Her appeal for help is made on the most urgent and compelling of all grounds, the ground of kinship. To compensate for his absence in visible form, our Lord will send a kinsman of his own, who will look after the orphaned family of the Church with no less love and tenderness and loyalty than our Lord himself.

This new kinsman is the holy Spirit, the befriender of the Church. He is the kinsman of Christ, because he is, like Christ, true God of true God. He is our kinsman too because he is one with us in the deepest of all relationships through his indwelling by grace. He comes into our hearts in order to make us all kinsmen of each other. It is he who enables us to address the Father as our Father.<sup>3</sup> The holy Spirit makes us all one family in Christ, the most closely knit family of all, the supernatural family of the Church. And the kinsman does not fail his own.

Within a family there are no secrets kept from its members. So it is within the family of the blessed Trinity: the Father does not keep

<sup>1</sup> Cp Ruth 4, 2-6.

<sup>2</sup> Eg Isai 43, 1-3.

<sup>3</sup> Gal 4, 6.

secrets from his Son. The full and intimate knowledge of Father and Son is also shared by the holy Spirit:

When he, the Spirit of truth, is come,  
he will teach you all truth.  
For he shall not speak of himself:  
but what things soever he shall hear  
he shall speak.<sup>1</sup>

As there are no secrets withdrawn from the full and intimate communion between Father and Son, so there are no secrets kept hidden by them from the holy Spirit. Nor does the Paraclete keep any secrets from his kinsmen.

This is the truest picture of the Church: of a supernatural family of God, united by the most intimate and personal of all bonds, the indwelling Spirit of God, the befriender of his kinsmen.

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 16, 13.