Suggested Readings


Sanders, E.P. *The Historical Figure of Jesus.* London and New York: Penguin Press, 1993.

Chapter 18

A Job Description for the Holy Spirit

Some Catholics who do not like Vatican II tell a story of when Pope John XXIII died and went to heaven. Peter brought him through the gates and began introducing him to various personages. When the pope was introduced to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit appeared momentarily puzzled and then, after a flash of recognition, looked slightly embarrassed. The Spirit said, “Oh, yes, yes, that's right. You know, I did receive the invitation you sent me to that council, but I'm sorry, I just couldn't make it.”

This story illustrates more than just the vicious humor that Catholics can revert to when they feel their faith has been threatened or diminished. It also illustrates more than the deep feelings of resentment that some Catholics harbor toward the council. What this story most reveals is the Catholic belief that it is the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit that guides the church on the proper path. If someone thinks the church is straying from the path, the absence of the Spirit can be cited as the reason.

Catholics, like most other Christians, believe in three persons in one God. The church is not based solely on a belief in God the Father, nor is it based solely on the teachings of Jesus. The church finds its origins also in the encounter with the resurrected Christ and in the experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. It is the Spirit who transforms the lives of individuals, who inspires people in praise of God, who guides leaders in making intelligent decisions, and who accompanies the church in its journey toward truth and holiness. The Spirit is also the presence of God to be encountered through the people and events of the world.

Catholics today experience the resurrected Christ and the reception of the Spirit in a way that is, perhaps, not so unlike the experience of the original
The Church Emerging From Vatican II

This Chapter

I raise these points because in my classroom experience I have found many students, both Christian and non-Christian, to be thoroughly confused by the concept of the Holy Spirit. To address this confusion, I have formulated a job description for this least familiar person of the Trinity.

Some job descriptions have the purpose of letting an employee know what is expected of him or her; that is not my purpose here. Another common function of a job description is to communicate to others what it is that a person does. I have seen this happen in a parish. Parish council members sometimes wonder what it is that particular employees—such as a pastoral associate or a director of religious education—do. The job descriptions provide this information. In this chapter, I will furnish a job description that attempts to reflect the various functions attributed by Catholics to the Holy Spirit. This material relates to chapter five of Lumen Gentium.

Summary Job Description—Holy Spirit

Be the presence of God working through people.

Former Work Experience

- Participated in the creation of the world. (God’s breath, sometimes symbolically identified as the Holy Spirit, is involved in the creation of the universe and particularly in the creation of human beings, when “God blew into his nostrils the breath of life” [Genesis 2:7].)
- Has spoken through the Prophets (as recited in the Creed).
- Inspired the entire Bible.
- Was the one through whom Mary conceived Jesus (Matthew 1:18, Luke 1:35).
- Descended upon Jesus at his baptism (Mark 1:9–11).
- Was the one whom Jesus promised to send to his disciples (John 15:15–16:15).
- Participated in the resurrection of Jesus (Romans 1:4).
- Empowered the disciples on Pentecost to spread the gospel in continuance of the saving mission of Christ (Acts 2:1–4).
- Has worked in the lives of Christians to bring forth the fruits of holiness (Gal 5:22).
- Has guided the major decisions made by church councils. (When the apostles choose a replacement for Judas, they invoke the guidance of the Spirit [Acts 1:16]. When later they meet in council in Jerusalem to settle a dispute between Peter and Paul, they announce their conclusion as “the decision of the Holy Spirit and not of us” [Acts 15:28]. Even such a crucial decision as which books to include in the Bible was made at an early council. According to Catholic belief, then, the Holy Spirit has guided not only major decisions, but also the evolution of the tools and authoritative structures by which decisions are to be made. These include the councils, the Scriptures, the Tradition, the threefold office of bishop, priest, and deacon, and the papacy.)
- Has functioned as the source of holiness and renewed life throughout the history of the church (LG 4).

Current Task: Transform the Lives of Individuals

The Holy Spirit has the job of transforming the lives of those who open themselves to God. Many theologians today speak of such life transformation in terms of “conversion.” Conversion refers not just to deciding to become religious or to changing denominations, but to a lifelong process of growth in faith. Bernard Lonergan has distinguished three types of conversion: reli-
gious, moral, and intellectual. In Lonergan’s perspective, each type of conversion is rooted in the work of the Holy Spirit, for religious conversion is the most basic type from which the others flow.

Religious conversion is an other-worldly falling-in-love with God. It involves getting in touch with the love of the Holy Spirit that floods our hearts even prior to our being aware of it (Romans 5:5). In other words, Lonergan believes that every human being is filled at the core with the love of God through the Holy Spirit. To be religiously converted is to open ourselves to this love. Lonergan also draws upon Ezekiel 36:26 to describe religious conversion: It is what happens when God rips out our heart of stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh. Many people can point to select moments in their lives when religious conversion took place; many cannot. All who are religiously converted, however, are engaged in a lifelong journey of growth.

Moral conversion refers to the process by which a person stops making decisions solely according to self-interest and seeks instead to do what is truly good. We grow through various stages of motivation for being good, from compulsion, to social acceptance, to principles, to the need to be an authentic person who acts out of love for God and others.

In Lonergan’s analysis, intellectual conversion is very technical. It involves getting in touch with the process by which one knows things, thereby becoming adept at sorting out various levels of consciousness and various dimensions of reality. For our purposes, intellectual conversion can refer to the gradual process by which one grows in an appreciation of the complexity and multidimensionality of reality, including its transcendent dimensions. That is, the intellectually converted person is one who neither confuses religious language with scientific description nor reduces everything religious to the level of the material. The intellectually converted person has a grasp of how symbolic language can function to put one in touch with the deeper dimensions of human existence.

That the Holy Spirit will transform the lives of individuals who follow Christ is central to the teaching of Paul in the New Testament. The way that Paul spoke of such transformation has been codified in the tradition as the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit. Instead of a life based on fear, resentment, and self-pity, the follower of Christ displays “love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness, and chastity” (Galatians 5:22–23). Other traditional gifts and fruits of the Spirit found in Paul include self-control, wisdom, ability to make good decisions (counsel), piety, moral

sought for themselves; they are more the qualities that people find themselves possessing as they struggle to follow Christ.

Current Task: Inspire Groups in Prayer and in Decisions
In Alcoholics Anonymous there is a belief in a “group conscience.” Individuals are free to express whatever opinions they want to at meetings, no matter how profound or how ridiculous. The recovering alcoholics trust that the group itself will be guided by a higher power such that the overall message of the meeting will express the will of a loving God (though not all alcoholics use the term, “God”). What an individual says is simply a personal opinion; what comes through the group is a power greater than any one individual and that draws upon the experience, strength, and hope of all who are present.

Catholics have traditionally believed that one of the jobs of the Holy Spirit is to act as a kind of “group conscience” when Christians are gathered in prayer or engaged in decision making. This belief is reflected in the following traditional prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit
Fill the hearts of your faithful
And enkindle in them the fire of your love.
Send forth your Spirit
And they will be created
And you will renew the face of the earth.

Many Catholics today believe that the Holy Spirit is currently engaged in a broad-scale renewal of the Catholic Church through small groups. Liberation theologians in Latin America point to the workings of the Spirit through base Christian communities that engage in both the reading of Scripture and in political activity. Those involved in the charismatic renewal point to signs of the Spirit in healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues. Groups of women activists, the Cursillo movement, various prayer groups, Renewal groups, parish councils, and other parish committees, all point to the activity of the Spirit in their midst.

Current Task: Guide the Church as a Whole
Catholics have traditionally believed that the church is indefectible; that is, that the Holy Spirit will protect the church from straying from the true path. Indefectibility is based in part on the Catholic interpretation of Matthew 16:18, when Jesus says, “And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not pre-
vail against it." "Peter" means "rock" in Aramaic, and so Jesus is portrayed as using a pun in communicating his guarantee of the church's steadfastness through all of time. This line is often read in conjunction with John 16:13: "But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth."

Indefectibility should not be read as a guarantee that the church will never make a mistake or have to reverse itself on a teaching. History offers too many examples to the contrary. It means, rather, that the church is to be relied upon as the continuation of Christ's saving presence and work on earth. The church might make some mistakes (as in the rejection of Galileo's theories) or its members might engage in horrendous activities (the mass slaughter of Jews and Moslems during some of the crusades), but in its most important teachings and its sacramental ministry it continues to be guided by the Holy Spirit. In a basic sense, the Catholic can trust the church and its teachings.

On an institutional level, the Holy Spirit is believed to have some influence in the election of popes, the selection of bishops, the decrees of councils, and, in general, all teaching, leadership, and sacramental ministry. If Jesus promised that the Spirit would be with us, we can expect to experience that presence in these areas. Current disputes about how bishops are selected involve debates about where the voice of the Spirit can most clearly be heard.

From a Catholic perspective, the most profound thing that could be said of any church community is that the Holy Spirit can be found working among its members. This is precisely what the Catholic Church said in Lumen Gentium about Protestant churches: "...we can say that in some real way they are joined with us in the Holy Spirit, for to them too he gives his gifts and graces whereby he is operative among them with his sanctifying power" (LG, 15).

Often movements in the church are attributed to the work of the Spirit. Many people today point to the explosion of lay ministries, the developing body of Catholic social teaching, the ecumenical movement, and the tendency toward more sharing of authority as evidence of the Spirit's work. Some liberal theologians are fond of claiming that in these days the Spirit prefers to work from the bottom up, moving the church through its people.

It is even said that the Holy Spirit is behind the current shortage of priests. People who reason this way foresee the resulting changes in church structure, such as the need to rely more and more on the laity, as ultimately good things in harmony with God's plan. Personally, I stay away from interpretations such as these. Maybe the Holy Spirit is behind the priest shortage and maybe the Holy Spirit is not. It is at least as likely that the shortage of priests is the result of people not listening to the Spirit as vice-versa.

This brings us to an important point: Not everything attributed to the Holy Spirit is from the Holy Spirit. The Catholic tradition has had to fight unbridled enthusiasm that sees the Spirit in everything, just as it has had to fight complacency that is inattentive to the Spirit's workings. An old Buddhist saying illustrates the need to be cautious about claims to religious authority: "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him." Why? Because the person claiming to be Buddha has got to be an imposter. I would not suggest killing everyone who claims that the Spirit is working through them or that they are the one most capable of interpreting the Spirit; I will simply encourage the dictum that all spirits are to be tested.

There is no single, clear formula for the testing of spirits. For starters, I would suggest asking the following: Does a particular claim align with the best of my religious tradition? Does it square with empirical facts? Does it find harmony with my own religious, moral, and intellectual conversion? Does it seem to continue to make sense as I live with it? Does it draw me outside of myself toward a new appreciation of others? A list of such questions could go on and on.

Current Task: Be the Potential for God's Love in All Human Beings

Many Catholic theologians, among them Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner, speak of the basic orientation of all human beings toward the transcendent mystery whom Christians know as God. All people are drawn in self-transcendent motion in the direction of goodness, truth, and love. No matter one's religion, even if one has no religion at all, everyone is capable of growing in the direction of God when one moves beyond selfishness to embrace higher values, openness, honesty, and loving human relationships. These theologians are further inclined to attribute this orientation to the presence of the Holy Spirit in all human beings, whether people call it that or not.

For this reason, many Christians who engage in interreligious dialogue draw upon the concept of the Holy Spirit to talk about what is authentic in all of the religions of the world. Only Christianity sees God in Christ. Some religions do not expressly believe in a God. It is the Holy Spirit, understood as the presence of the divine within us, that seems to provide the best starting point for a dialogue (though, of course, most religions do not call this divine presence the "Holy Spirit").

Summary

In this chapter we have reviewed the workings of the Holy Spirit in individu-
als, in groups, in the church, and in the world. It appears that the Holy Spirit has a lot of work to do. Yet the Catholic tradition expresses full confidence in the power of God. What we need to worry about more is our own willingness to listen to the promptings of the Spirit and make them a reality in our lives.

One part of the Spirit’s job that I failed to mention is the element of surprise: The Spirit blows freely in astonishing ways. I believe that Vatican II is an example of this. I disagree with that minority of Catholics who thought the Spirit absent from the unanticipated wonder of Vatican II; that happens to be one of the main places that I look for the entry of the Spirit into the world of today.

In the next chapter we will examine the life of religious brothers and sisters who take vows and form communities.

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Section Six
Religious

19. Religious Communities
20. Liberation Theology and Church Community
21. Liberation Theology: Critiques and Appraisals

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For Further Reflection

1. Do you find the concept of the Holy Spirit to be more helpful or more confusing?
2. Does the Holy Spirit have a function in your own prayer life?
3. Are you able to use the concept of “conversion” in talking about your own life-journey?
4. Have you ever experienced a “group conscience” that seemed to be greater than the sum of the individuals present?
5. How is the concept of the Holy Spirit important for the Catholic Church?

Suggested Readings