

Donal Dorr

The Holy Spirit at work in the Life of Each of Us

One of the most encouraging texts in the Scriptures is: *The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.* (Romans 5:5) What a pity, then, that most of us living in the Western Church are so focused on Jesus that we often do not pay sufficient attention to the work of the Holy Spirit in our own lives, in the life of the Church, and in the wider world. Many good Christians seem not to have learned to invite the Spirit to speak and move in their hearts.

People who are spiritually sensitive often have a sense that their deepest movements of inspiration, challenge or consolation come from some power that is greater than themselves. We can believe that these movements that well up from the unconscious into our conscious awareness may often be gifts from the Holy Spirit.

St Paul assures us that the Holy Spirit gives us a great variety of gifts. (1 Corinthians 12:3–11) The Spirit touches and moves at a very deep level within us, helping us in our weakness and praying in us 'with sighs too deep for words.' (Romans 8:26) And the Spirit sets us free from fear and joins with our own spirit in declaring that we are God's children. (Romans 8: 15-16)

LOVE

Our faith tells us that the Spirit is not just the source of the love we experience but actually is God's love – a share in God's own life. This is a love that is not the result of our own efforts; it is a pure gift from God. It is a love that we can at times experience – it warms our hearts. In recent centuries mainstream Christians have tended to play down this 'felt' aspect of God's love. They were suspicious of the excessive spiritual exuberance of Pentecostals. But the charismatic movement has helped Catholics to recover and value such spiritual experiences.

We should normally expect to have some awareness of the Spirit's presence and of the

'fruits of the Spirit'. These are spiritual feelings such as joy, inner peace, gentleness and patience. At times, of course, we may not have any vivid experience of these life-giving gifts. But even then we are not in dire straits so long as we are aware of missing them. Feeling their absence, we long to recover them and examine our behaviour to see whether we have done something – or failed to do something – that caused us to lose them.

Love is the greatest of all God's gifts to us humans, and it comes in different forms. It is present when two people fall in love with each other, in the love of adults for their children and grandchildren and of children for their parents and grandparents. And, of course, one special gift which the Holy Spirit gives us is a deep love for God. We should welcome and treasure each form of love as a unique and inestimable gift of the Holy Spirit. Our love for God is not in competition with any love we have for people or any other creature or activity – unless we turn that reality into an idol. There is need for a careful discernment to ensure that one's attraction to a particular action or object or way of life springs from the uncontaminated depths of one's heart.

DISCERNMENT AND GUIDANCE

The Gospels offer us a picture of Jesus often spending the whole night in prayer. During those hours of contemplation, he opened himself more fully to the inspiration of the Spirit. It was the Spirit who guided him in adapting his missionary approach in accordance with each new situation. The Spirit let him sense when 'his hour' had come to go to Jerusalem and pose a direct challenge to the oppressive powers, knowing that this meant laying down his life. (John 12:23-25; Luke 9:51)

St Paul points out that the gift of discernment is one of the many gifts which are passed on by the Spirit to us, the followers of Jesus. (1 Corinthians 12:10) We must listen for the inspiration of the Spirit in a prayerful attitude of openness and waiting. This requires the freedom of spirit which comes from

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a willingness to let go of our own prejudices and plans.

In his document *Gaudete et Exsultate (Rejoice and Be Glad)*, paragraphs 166–75, Pope Francis offers us a very helpful reflection on discernment. He says that discernment ‘calls for something more than intelligence or common sense.’ (GE 166) ‘Even though it includes reason and prudence, it goes beyond them, for it seeks a glimpse of that unique and mysterious plan that God has for each of us, which takes shape amid so many varied situations and limitations.’ (GE 170) He goes on to say: ‘It is not a matter of applying rules or repeating what was done in the past, since the same solutions are not valid in all circumstances and what was useful in one context may not prove so in another.’ (GE 173)

HOW TO LISTEN FOR THE SPIRIT

Many people find that a helpful way to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit is to sit contemplatively beside the sea or a river, or to walk quietly in woodland or on the hills. At times like these we often feel deep peace and at the same time feel re-energised, and we may even experience a surge of creativity. We can believe that this is our own personal share in the energy of the creative Spirit of God, who animates the whole universe.

Another situation in which the Spirit often touches and moves us is when we engage in a process of faith-sharing. At times one can have a palpable sense of the inspiration of the Spirit, either in one’s own deep personal sharing or in some insight shared by one of the other participants. On some occasions one can have a similar experience through dialogue with somebody from another culture or religion – a flash of Spirit-inspired insight from wellsprings of spiritual wisdom and experience that are quite different from our own.

Pope Francis frequently insists that people who live in poverty are a particularly important ‘channel’ through which the Spirit communicates with those of us who are more highly educated. We must set aside any sense of superiority we may have and become willing to listen respectfully to poor people. They may have had little schooling but are often people with whom the Spirit has shared the gift of spiritual wisdom. Francis says: ‘They have much to teach us.’ (*Evangelii Gaudium* 198) ■

Fr Donal Dorr is a theologian, a writer and a priest of St Patrick’s Missionary Society and lives in Dublin, Ireland. For a more detailed treatment of this topic see chapter 16 of Donal’s new book, *A Creed for Today* published by Veritas in Ireland (see page 18) and Orbis Books in the USA.