

Who is the Holy Spirit? What does She do?

Introduction:

I love the hymn 'Enemy of Apathy' (640 in *Celebration for Everyone*). It is the only hymn in the hymn book which dares to speak of God as 'She'. Is it consistent with Catholic doctrine to speak in this way? Of course it is. Because God is not a creature and does not need to reproduce, God is not sexed – and so is neither male nor female. Today God is "She".

This is not just playing with words. God is beyond language, so all our language about God 'breaks down'. We have to rely on metaphors to speak of the Unspeakable.

1. The Holy Spirit is God

The early church wondered what had happened to them when they received the Holy Spirit. They wondered what this unexpected enabling power was. Was it an experience? A power, one of many that were believed to inhabit the invisible world, like an angel, but better? The Church had to think about that question for four centuries, and then became convinced that the Holy Spirit was – yes – a spiritual power, the power of love, and so on, but more than that, She was actually God. Why? She was so closely identified with Love, with the giving and receiving of love, that She was Love itself. Since God is Love, the Spirit is so much Love that she is part of God's very Being.

2. What does She do?

a) brings life

She brings life. The second verse of the Bible describing the earth when it was 'without form and void' says 'the Spirit of God *hovered* over the surface of the water'. When we think of 'hovered' we think of hovercraft or noisy drones. When the Spirit hovers She is silent – like a bird, like the dove that appears at Jesus' baptism.. You don't know She is there. And then silently and mysteriously, She 'mothers' creation, and there is light. There is love.

And speaking of mothering, here is how one mother described her role:

You must be exceptionally stable yet ridiculously responsive to the needs of those around you; must be willing to trail after your loved ones, cleaning up their messes and compensating for their deficiencies and selfishness; must work twice as hard as everybody else; must accept blame for a long list of family problems; must have a knack for shaping young minds...; must have high tolerance for babble and repetition; and must agree, when asked, to shut up, fade into the back ground and pretend you don't exist.

Some of us here have been pregnant. How mysterious is that! A mere man, I'm not going to romanticize what I know nothing about, but I would like to commend those feminist theologians who say that nurturing a child in the womb and feeding the child at the breast is perhaps the deepest spiritual experience they can ever have. They share in God's work of creating, or nurturing. They are literally giving and sustaining life, which is what God's Spirit does.

b) enables love

The Holy Spirit enables us to love, especially when we are disinclined to do so. Some of us have cared for our elderly parents and seen them into the next life. How hard and exhausting is that! How did we have the strength to do that? We use the word 'care' for the devotion to the needs of other people, and this can often be unpleasant, and with little or no obvious reward. And usually it is women who do it. Yet how is God to show Her love for us except through people who will act *for* Her, on Her behalf? We know that *God* is Love through the love we receive, and may be in a position to give, and this love is God's Spirit, operating in the most personal and intimate way in our lives.

c) brings peace

The Holy Spirit is the bringer of peace. There are two accounts of the giving of the Holy Spirit in the Bible. Today we read them both. The dominant one is in Acts – Day of Pentecost. The other one is in John's Gospel, where on the day of Christ's resurrection (the first Easter Sunday) Jesus breathed on the frightened disciples and said 'Peace be with you'. Then he said 'Receive the Holy Spirit'. In contrast to the ways of war and violence, the Spirit of God is always in search of peace. That is what She does. The films my grandsons watch and the computer games they play are mainly about graphic violence, death and conquest of space; far from the Spirit of God's love of life, and harmony and beauty. (Parents can't entirely protect children from the culture around them, and in the care they give over setting limits and drawing boundaries, they need courage and wisdom.)

We need peace between our race and our environment. President Trump has decided to withdraw the USA from the Paris Accord on climate change. No nurturing of creation here, only violence against the delicate fabric of creation without thought for tomorrow's neighbours and the harm we are doing them already (Trump is a deeply troubled man who needs our prayers).

d) overcomes difference

The Holy Spirit overcomes difference. We heard the long list of different languages and nationalities who were present at the first Pentecost. How could they possibly understand one another? When the Holy Spirit empowers us, She helps us to understand and communicate with people who are very different from us. The language of love is a language we can all speak. It breaks down barriers – as Luke records, 'all of us hear them telling in our tongues the great things God has done'.

e) is active everywhere

Peter at Pentecost quotes an OT verse – 'I will pour out my Spirit on all mankind'. 'Your sons *and your daughters* shall prophesy'. She won't be confined to churches, or to Western nations, or even the Christian religion. As Jesus said 'The Spirit blows where She wills'. Wherever there is a sincere seeking of God; wherever love is enabled, peace is sought, difference is overcome, there She is – hovering – the silent power who is God's very self.

f) gives gifts

St Paul wrote, 'The harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control'. These are gifts from the Spirit but they are not confined to Christians. She spreads them everywhere, but Christians can name Her because we associate this 'harvest' with the very life of Christ Himself, shared with us, given for us.

These are half a dozen things the Holy Spirit does. I could have mentioned how in some Pentecostal churches, the love of God is experienced in *ecstasy* through the Spirit; or how She is sometimes portrayed as the fire that burns away those elements of our lives that do us no good; or how, as Quakers find, She is most present when we are quiet and still, waiting on the Word She speaks. For the Holy Spirit is God, and She will find us in a variety of loving and unexpected ways.