

The Holy Spirit in the Catholic Life

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I'm going to begin this talk with a provocative new theological insight, which could form the basis of a new systematic approach to the doctrine of God. Here goes: I believe that the evidence of Scripture and Tradition indicates that God the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, is British. That shouldn't be too outlandish a claim. After all, the Son of God, Second Person of the Trinity, is Jewish.

Why do I think the Holy Spirit is British? Well, because he's not one for a lot of fuss. He works hard and achieves great things in creation, in salvation history and – as we'll see – in the life of the Church and her members, but he prefers to be kept out of the limelight. No press please. He would be rather embarrassed, I daresay, to be the subject of the Beverley Festival this summer – and might grudgingly allow it only provided it doesn't happen too often.

The theologians call this aspect of his character 'Divine self-effacement.' That quality of the Holy Spirit whereby he does not want to draw attention to *himself*; for the whole of his being and the whole of his doing (which in God, of course, is the same thing) is to draw people *to the Father through the Son*. To glorify the Father in the Son. To make known the Father in the face of the Son. And the equivalent dynamic in the opposite direction: to communicate what is the Father's, through the Son, to the world. To bear the Father's word, love, and grace through the Son to the faithful. Nothing in the ordinary economy of God's relationship with the world in creation, redemption, or consummation terminates in the Spirit: it is all directed to the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ. Like any self-respecting Brit, the Holy Spirit does not want attention concentrated on him – not even on his work. He has been likened to a floodlight illuminating a glorious cathedral: by the light's power we see the glory of the gothic architecture – it would be absurd to focus attention on the floodlight rather than on that on which it is trained. The Holy Spirit does not even want prayer and praise directed to him in isolation from the First and Second Persons: he will only be 'worshipped and glorified,' we confess in the Creed, '*with the Father and the Son.*'

In considering the Holy Spirit in the Catholic life – the title I was given for this talk – we're faced, therefore, with something of a paradox. The Holy Spirit is intimately involved in every aspect of our Christian lives – as individuals and as the Church – and if he isn't, then all we're left with is dressing up and playacting. We shouldn't take the Holy Spirit for granted for what he does in us and in our midst. And yet, in a sense, the Holy Spirit *wants* to be 'taken for granted': he facilitates the personal and corporate spiritual life of the faithful, but is never himself its focus or end. To use another analogy, what this talk invites us to do is to lift up the bonnet of the Catholic life, and have a butcher's at the engine. Most of the time, we should be content to sit in the passenger seat and enjoy the ride without needing to know how it all works underneath.

There are some things this talk won't touch on. Because its focus is the Catholic life, I have taken that to mean primarily what the Holy Spirit is doing *now* in the hearts of God's people and in and through the ministry of the Church. In other words, I will not be touching on the Holy Spirit's place in the immanent Trinity, and I will take his coequal deity and Personhood for granted. I have written and spoken before on the *filioque* – that interpolation in the Western version of the Creed that confesses that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son* (*filio* [son] *que* [and]): but again, that isn't part of what we'll cover this afternoon. (The short version of that debate is: the Western Church was theologically correct but ecumenically out-of-order). We will also not deal with the Spirit's prominent role in sacred history: from creation to the Prophets, from the incarnation to Pentecost. Again, a short version of that story is that every act of God to create, rescue, restore, and glorify is trinitarian: the Father initiates, the Son acts, the Spirit perfects. The Spirit hovered over the virgin earth to perfect creation, overshadowed the Virgin Mother to perfect incarnation, and blew upon the virgin Bride the Church to perfect the kingdom.

Nature and grace

To begin to approach the question of the Holy Spirit's presence and work in the Christian life, we need first to rehearse the relationship between nature and grace in Catholic thought.

There are, perhaps, five different ways of understanding the relationship between nature (the created world in its ordinary course) and grace (the saving and sanctifying, gratuitous initiative of God). The Anabaptist tradition might be described as having something of a *gratia contra naturam* view (grace *against* nature): a dualistic view that separates entirely the spiritual from the material, the eternal from the temporal, and ends up with a world-denying outlook that starts to sound like Gnosticism. The opposite view, *gratia instar naturae* (grace *equals* nature) is sometimes associated with the liberal tradition: it identifies what is going on in the world with what God is doing, and therefore is consistently world-affirming and can start to sound like Pelagianism or even pantheism. Between these two extremes, we locate both the position of both the magisterial Reformers and the Catholic tradition. The Lutheran account might be described as *gratia iuxta naturam* – grace *alongside* nature. Here, nature (including both creation and civil society) and grace (including Scripture, the gospel, and the Church) are interdependent twin tracks for the revelation, glory, and providence of God. They head in the same direction and are coordinated in the divine will and economy, but are yet separate and distinct. The Reformed tradition, particularly as it developed in the work of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, has been described as *gratia intra naturam* (grace *within* nature), whereby the fallen realm of nature is in the process of being redeemed and recreated from within by virtue of the incarnation and the sovereign Spirit.

The classical Catholic view is *gratiam perficit naturam* (grace *perfects* nature). The actual phrase stems from Question 1 in Thomas' *Summa Theologica*, in which he wrote, "grace does not abolish nature but brings it to perfection." In context, Aquinas was seeking to justify why and how the insights of pagan philosophers such as Aristotle could be faithfully incorporated into a Christian worldview. It is not that Aristotle, representing 'natural' reason and commenting enlighteningly on the natural man and the natural world, must be ignored or his ethics and metaphysics anathemised: instead, Aristotle and other wise pagans can get the Christian *yea far* in pursuit of the truth, while grace (including particularly in this context special revelation – i.e. Scripture and Tradition) is nonetheless required *on top* for the believer to come to the *fulness* of truth concerning themselves and the world in which they subsist. Though in that context the argument had particular application to how to relate to the insights of pagan philosophers, the idea that grace perfects nature or acts to 'elevate' nature from a lower to a higher plane is more broadly part of a worldview emphasising what we might call the sacramental character of nature in the first place (the natural world as an instrument of God's presence, revelation, and blessing) and of a view of the Fall that emphasised how the graced nature of creation was neither unaffected nor obliterated by sin and its effects. All the world is God's – all truth is God's, and the truth is one (hence true philosophy cannot ever be contrary to revelation). Nature is inherently *good*: on the sixth day, God saw that creation was 'very good'; and in the Son of God taking on human flesh, the inherent goodness of the natural order was reaffirmed and redeemed. Nature, then, remains capable of, longing for, and a means of grace. It is neither the instrument only of evil (*gratia contra naturam*), nor is it – after the Fall – to be identified with grace (*gratia instar naturae*). It is not merely *coordinate* with grace along a separate track (*gratia iuxta naturam*), but nor is it infused with grace throughout (*gratia intra naturam*). The metaphor here is of a building with two stories: the upper realm of grace presupposes and builds on the lower realm of nature. In this synthesis grace perfects, supplements, fulfils and completes nature.

What's this got to do with the Holy Spirit in the Catholic life? Well, in a word, everything. I think as we pop the bonnet of the Christian life and peer in, we'll notice that it is the Holy Spirit who takes our human activity and transforms it into a spiritual reality by layering his grace upon our nature.

The Giver of Life

We can trace the role of the Spirit in the Christian life by following through the articles of the Creed.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life

The Holy Spirit is the Giver of Life. That is true of his work in creation, when it was the Breath (that is, *ruach*, elsewhere translated 'Spirit') of the LORD breathed into the man formed from the dust of the ground that made him a living being. The Spirit is the giver of physical, natural life. But grace perfects nature: it is the Spirit who also according to his free and sovereign will breathes *spiritual* life into the raw material of unbelieving natural humanity. That was Jesus' teaching to Nicodemus ("No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit") – and it is the teaching of the catholic Church. This spiritual life given by the initiative and movement of the Holy Spirit is *faith*, and the Spirit's gift of faith – and through faith participation in the divine life – is the *first*, gracious, and necessary ground of the conversion of the heart to the Father through the Son. The Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it rather poetically: 'To be in touch with Christ, one must first have been touched by the Holy Spirit' (CCC 683).

Let's apply our nature/grace paradigm to what is going on. It is possible in the realm of nature for someone to have some *knowledge* of in what the Christian faith consists: anyone could do an RS GCSE or learn what Christians believe from a comparative religion textbook. Seventeenth-century scholastics would describe this as *notitia* (having an accurate notion). Perhaps some, still in the realm of nature, might come a stage further: they would not only know what the content of faith is, but think it may well be true. This might be designated as *assentia* (assent). But even this kind of knowledge is not *faith*: indeed, as the apostle James writes, in this sense the demons believe, and quiver! They both know the stuff and they know it's true; but they do not have *faith* like the faithful do. The Holy Spirit, then, is necessary to 'grace' *notitia* and *assentia* so that it becomes *fiducia*: the gift of faith – of personal trust in and obedience to the God who saves. Grace perfects nature: the Holy Spirit transforms knowledge into faith.

Something similar could be said of the other theological virtues. The Holy Spirit takes up and transforms our natural dissatisfaction with the way things are, our longing for a future we sense we were once promised, our determination that good will prevail and justice will be done, into *hope* – the perfection and completion of our natural yearnings. The Holy Spirit transforms that creational vestige of our being made for Another and for each other – expressed naturally through friendship, family, and romance – into *love* (or *charity* if you prefer). When the Spirit works within us, he turns our natural characteristics into his Fruit: happiness into joy, equanimity into peace, endurance into patience, empathy into kindness, quietness into gentleness, restraint into chastity and so on. These theological virtues are not achievable by our own natural strength: that's why we pray for them – for instance, in the Collect for Quinquagesima – "Send thy Holy Ghost and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues." That which we are by nature – whether from our physiological makeup or from the formation of experience – becomes by the Spirit's unction spiritual *fruit* that bears a harvest for God and nourishes others. Similarly, the Spirit commandeers our natural talents and skills that they may become his gifts and charisms for the building up of the faithful. Intelligence becomes wisdom, boldness fortitude, loyalty piety. In all these ways it is the Holy Spirit acting preveniently and pre-eminently in the souls of the faithful, taking up our natural thought, desire, and will into the realm of grace.

This is one perspective on his work as the *Spiritus Sanctus* to *sanctify* the faithful: gradually by the gifts of grace and the cooperation of the graced will to conform believers to the image of the Son and fit them for the life of heaven: bringing the life of the new creation into the heart and will of the faithful. Those who have received Christ in faith and baptism are made Christians: Christ means 'anointed one', and 'ian' is the diminutive form of the word. Originally meant as mockery, the followers of the Way became known as Christians – 'little Christs' – with first-century scoffers not knowing that their insult had stumbled upon a precious spiritual truth: those who believe in Jesus become 'Christians' – little Christs, sharing in *his anointing*. He was supremely anointed by the Holy Spirit, and at Pentecost, he poured out upon the Church his Spirit to anoint the faithful. We Christians, little anointed ones, share in his triple Spirit-anointed office of prophet, priest, and king, and are *being sanctified* – made holy by the Holy Spirit. I like to picture it as a pyramid of flute glasses in a Ferrero Rocher advertisement: the champagne is poured into the top glass so that it overflows and trickles over and down the pyramid. The

flute of Christ was filled to the brim in the incarnation; but at Pentecost, the champagne now flowed down the pyramid from Christ to the rest of the Church. We are just the Nth layer down of flutes at the bottom, with the Spirit still being poured out from heaven through Christ upon his Church. The champagne of the Spirit cleanses, renews, and fills our lives.

Who has spoken through the prophets

Next, we believe in the Holy Spirit *who has spoken through the prophets*.

In the first place, this refers to the doctrine of inspiration – that the Holy Spirit is the one divine author speaking the word of God through the forty or so human authors of the Bible. A classic text is 2 Peter 1:20-21:

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

But the Spirit's speaking through the prophetic word is not only an historical datum, but a living reality in the Church and in the Christian today. For the Spirit is not only involved in inspiration 'at source' but also in *illumination* 'at our end.' Without the Spirit at work in our hearts we would hear the words of the Scriptures as so many religious thoughts by so many old dead men. Perhaps interesting, perhaps not – but not essentially different from any other book. And our evidence for that is that that is exactly how the Scriptures *are* read and received by so many. But for those who have the Spirit of Christ, the Scriptures are the living and active word of God: word of the Father, revealing the Son, in the power of the Spirit. Think of how the Book of Hebrews introduces a quotation from a Psalm of David (written therefore over thousand years before the epistle to the Hebrews was penned): "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit *says*" – not 'as the Holy Spirit *said*' – "as the Holy Spirit *says*, 'Harden not your hearts'" (Hebrews 3:7). Because it is the word of the Spirit, because the Spirit is God, and because the Spirit is still doing his work, the Scriptures he inspired and illuminates remain a *present* word. When teaching ordinands the doctrine of Scripture, I say it's a bit like a pulley system, with the cog of the Spirit at the source unspooling the word of God *and* the cog of the Spirit at end gathering it in. It's powered at both ends (you can probably tell I know little about pulley systems). The believer steps into the flow of the Spirit's revelation. If you hear the voice of God in the human words of Scripture, that is only because the Holy Spirit has infused your heart and soul.

The Spirit speaks in other ways apart from Scripture. What is it that distinguishes the 'democracy of the dead' from the living Tradition of Christ's Church? Only the Holy Spirit, active in the councils, the Fathers and Doctors, and the worship of the Church through the centuries. Jesus promised that the Spirit would lead the apostolic Church into all truth: do we dare believe that that promise has been fulfilled? The Spirit, as God, transcends all space and all time: it is he who preserves and guarantees the faith of the apostles through millennia and across the world. If it were left to mere natural men and women to keep alive apostolic faith and worship, the Church would have apostatised and perished within a generation.

What is it that distinguishes a lecture from a homily? (Polite answers only please!). We joke, but again it is surely the Holy Spirit: why would anyone spend ten minutes of the Lord's Day listening to me pontificating about my blessed thoughts concerning the world? But if the Spirit is active in my words and my flock's hearts, the faithful will witness the every-week miracle of hearing the words of God on the faltering lips of a man: despite all my limitations as a preacher, they can hear a word in season that strikes to the heart and effects real change in the thought, word, and deed of the faithful through the week.

What is it that distinguishes rote repetition of mere human words from sacred liturgy as the *leit urges* – the *work of the people* of God – actualising and achieving something in the assembly of the saints? The Catechism puts it this way: when faith meets with the unction of the Spirit, "liturgy becomes the common work of the Holy Spirit and the Church."

The Spirit speaks through Scripture, through sacred Tradition, through the faltering homilies of priests, through the liturgy, and finally, the through the internal experienced as the Christian conscience. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit "to convict of sin, of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment" (John 16:8). What is it that

distinguishes a natural moral sense (vestige of the natural law written upon the fleshly heart) from reverent fear of God and a conviction of sin that drives us to confession and in faith and humility to seek absolution on the basis of Christ's merits? Only the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete: giver of the gift of true repentance, the Father's answer to our petition to 'Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.' And the Spirit guides our conscience towards the good as well as away from evil. That 'still small voice' that we heed when we do good, even and especially when doing so is hard and costly: that voice is the whisper of the Spirit who is taking hold of our inner moral compass and bringing it up into the life of the Son who resisted temptation and learnt obedience.

Closely related, though in the opposite direction to hearing God's voice in our hearts, is the Spirit's work in our prayer. What is it that distinguishes natural wishes and desires from intercessions and petitions? Only the Holy Spirit. It is because God has poured the Spirit of his Son into our hearts that we are able to call upon God as Father. God is our Father not by nature (by nature, spiritually speaking we are 'children of wrath' says the apostle): God is our Father by grace – by the Spirit 'gluing us' to the Son through faith and baptism so that what is true for him alone by nature (he is the *only begotten* Son) becomes true for us by grace (we become sons of God by adoption). The 'grammar' of prayer is trinitarian: to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. We get discouraged in prayer when we slip into thinking of it as a merely human, natural activity. But if we remember that the Holy Spirit takes up our worries, longings, and desires and presents them in Christ to the Father as fragrant and pleasing incense then we will be encouraged to persevere in prayer, knowing that because of the Holy Spirit *more is going on* than we can appreciate by our mind and senses: indeed, 'infinitely more than we can ask or imagine'. And, more encouragingly still, when we don't know what to pray or how to pray, the Spirit *intercedes for us* with groans too deep for words: we may be like babes who have not learnt how to express what we need and what is making us cry – but the Spirit as Mother knows us deeply and petitions the Father on our behalf.

One holy catholic and apostolic church

The article on the Church – that 'we believe one holy, catholic, and apostolic church' – is not within the section corresponding to the Third Person of the Trinity by accident. For again, what is it that distinguishes a self-help group with a common interest in religion from the assembly of the saints gathered around the Altar and Throne of heaven? The Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit that makes the body of believers *holy*: for the Spirit is the sanctifying Spirit – his name is his work! The Holy Spirit is at work in our midst as the Church militant now, but also will purify the Church Triumphant as the Bride to present her perfect to Jesus the Bridegroom at the eschaton. It is the Spirit that makes the Church catholic, *kata holos* – 'in accordance with the whole' – united in one Spirit to the one Mediator, such that the Body of Christ is one across all space and through all of time, through every language and nation and culture: one catholic Church in the Garden of Eden, in Jerusalem and Rome in the first century, with an outpost in York this afternoon, in the celestial City when Christ returns. And it is the Spirit who safeguards the Church's apostolicity: ensures that it can never forsake the faith 'once for all delivered to the saints' by the apostles' spoken and written word, calls it ever back to the apostolic pattern of life, witnesses to the apostolic tradition of worship in word and sacrament, and sustains its apostolic life and character through holy orders in the apostolic succession.

One baptism for the forgiveness of sins

We also believe in 'one baptism for the forgiveness of sins,' again in connection with the Third Person of the Trinity. For it is only by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit that natural creatures become sacraments of the Church.

What distinguishes a rinse in a bath from the laver of regeneration in Baptism?

What distinguishes an embrace from spiritual strengthening and anointing in Confirmation?

What distinguishes bread and wine from the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist?

What distinguishes regret, remorse, and resolve from true contrition and absolution in Penance?

What distinguishes an ointment from healing Unction?

What distinguishes an institutional, managerial hierarchy of teachers and social workers from Holy Orders?

What distinguishes carnal coupling from the icon of Christ and his Bride in Holy Matrimony?

By now you will be able to anticipate the sevenfold answer: the Holy Spirit – who takes up natural creatures, natural dispositions, human words and actions – and transforms them into *supernatural* means of grace. Every sacrament is composed of form and matter – *words* appointed by Christ and his apostles and carrying divine sanction and authority, and some natural *stuff* acquired, made, or willed by us: the Spirit binds the two elements together (that is the nature of the sacramental bond) and thereby elevates what is going on down below to a spiritual reality in the heavenlies – or, in another complementary (not necessarily competing) perspective, brings a spiritual reality in the heavenlies down to bear upon an earthly exchange.

In fact, the difference between the spiritual metaphysics of a catholic and a Reformed understanding of the Eucharist is, in this respect at least, rather modest: for both believe that it is the Holy Spirit who gives divine power to human words in the celebration of the Sacrament and transforms the ordinary into a graced reality that 'transcends all human understanding.' The difference between them is essentially one of spiritual geography: a catholic will typically believe that the epiclesis of the Spirit calls down upon the elements here below the presence of Christ's body and blood; the Reformed receptionist believes that the Spirit acts in the terms expressed by the *sursum corda* – lifting up the hearts of believers so that through receiving bread and wine in the earthly assembly, the soul is communicating with Christ's body and blood in the heavenly sanctuary. In both understandings, it is the Holy Spirit who bridges the distance – spatial and temporal – between the Passion of the Lord and the resurrected, ascended and glorified body of Christ, and the faithful receiving his Body and Blood and all the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection here and now. The greater Eucharistic divide is not between the catholic and Calvinian metaphysics, but between those who believe that the Spirit *does something and effects something* through the creatures of bread and wine on the one hand, and those on the other hand who believe that what happens in the Eucharist remains on the plane of nature – a memorial, a sign of fellowship and mutual belonging, but nothing more. That's why most Anglo-Catholics are able with a clear conscience – indeed often with gladness – to use the Prayer Book's Communion liturgy: because its receptionist liturgy is resolutely *supernatural*, using *realist* language to describe the consecrated elements, because regardless of whether the Spirit takes us up to heaven or brings heaven down to us, through the bread and wine and by the Spirit's agency we communicate with Christ's body and blood.

If I had more time, I'd comment in similar depth on each of the other sacraments – especially Baptism, and also on Holy Matrimony – as a sacramental understanding of the latter has particular relevance to current debates in the Church of England pertaining to LLF, both in terms of liturgy and also in terms of clergy discipline.

Conclusion

I shall instead conclude by encouraging you to pray *Veni, Creator Spiritus*, 'Come, Holy Spirit.' This ancient hymn might seem slightly in tension with my earlier observation that the Spirit does not so much desire our particular devotion and attention but prefers to facilitate our knowledge and worship of the Father in the Son. Nevertheless, the words of the hymn do nothing more than ask the Spirit to do what he exists and loves to do:

*O may Thy grace on us bestow
the Father and the Son to know;
and Thee, through endless times confessed,
of both the eternal Spirit blest.*

*Now to the Father and the Son,
Who rose from death, be glory given,
with Thou, O Holy Comforter,
henceforth by all in earth and heaven.*

Within the context of the preeminent worship of the Father through the Son, a hymn of prayer and praise to the Spirit has its place – particularly so that we might glorify the holy, blessed, and undivided Trinity for his triune work for us and in us.

Given that it is the Holy Spirit who elevates the 'nature' of our religious and moral life into the 'grace' of catholic Christian living as individuals and as the Church, we ought to pray 'Come, Holy Spirit' for ourselves, for our priests and bishops, for our congregations, for the Church of England. Come, Holy Spirit, and turn the natural words of my homily into a graced revelation of your will for us in this time and place. Come, Holy Spirit and transform the pastoral visit I am about to make from the natural care of a friend into a graced means of spiritual encouragement and strengthening. Come, Holy Spirit and turn our congregation from a natural assembly of self-interested sinners into a graced station of the apostolic mission, fired by love of the lost and the glory of the gospel. Come, Holy Spirit, and anoint my parish priest, my bishop and father in God, with your unction that this natural man might bear a graced prophetic voice to the Church and world, a priestly ministry of drawing people into communion with God, and a kingly rule to care for, govern, and lead the flock of God through its earthly pilgrimage. Come, Holy Spirit, and breathe life and power into our prayers, that our natural murmurings of hopes and fears may become a graced seeking of your holy will and wisdom. Come, Holy Spirit, and rest upon the deliberations of our bishops and synods, that these all-too-worldly gatherings of men and women may become graced councils of spiritual discernment and courage.

Without the Holy Spirit, the catholic life is a hollow sham: it is natural man dressing up and playacting. With the Holy Spirit, our life is taken up into the realm of grace – very participation in the divine life.

*Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire
and lighten with celestial fire;
thou the anointing Spirit art,
who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart.*

*Thy blessed unction from above
is comfort, life, and fire of love;
enable with perpetual light
the dullness of our natural sight.*

Amen.