

THE PARACLETE (John 15:26-27)

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St. Peter's Church in Volo

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At the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles we read that before He ascended into heaven Jesus told the apostles that the Holy Spirit would come upon them. But it wasn't the first time He had spoken of this. On the night before He was betrayed, "Jesus said to His disciples: When the Paraclete comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, He, the Spirit of Truth, who comes forth from the Father, will bear witness about Me."¹ Now, during these nine days between the Ascension this past Thursday and Pentecost next Sunday, we like the apostles, are awaiting the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete.

The Greek word used in this passage, *paracletus*, is a difficult word to translate. Anyone that is familiar with translation knows that there is no such thing as a purely literal translation. Many words in every language have multiple meanings and trying to find the corresponding word in another language is not always an easy task. The original meaning of the word *paracletus* refers to a person "called to the side" of one in need of assistance. Contained within the meaning of this word are the concepts of defender, helper, counselor and mediator. This word isn't used anywhere in the Old Testament and in the New Testament it is found only five times in the writings of St. John. Four of them were spoken by Jesus during His Last Discourse in the Upper Room, from which we heard in today's gospel.

The Paraclete, as we know, is the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, but He has often been called "the Forgotten God"—perhaps, because He has never had a human face like God the Father and God the Son. He was the last Person of the Trinity to be revealed and has always been very mysterious. Although the soul of man has always yearned to grasp and understand the unseen realities of the spiritual world, the physical nature of our existence always prevents us from accomplishing this with any degree of success, so man has often turned to the creative impulses of art to help our senses see what was beyond our vision.

In a sense, God the Divine Artist has done this Himself through the Incarnation, by physically becoming a part of His creation so that man could actually see His Divine Reality in the flesh. But, although it was then relatively easy to make an image of God the Son, who had a physical body like each of us, man was still left with a problem of how to represent the Third Person of the Trinity. In the New Testament God the Holy Spirit appeared in ways that were very tangible to our senses but in ways that didn't help us think of Him as a Person.

The dove descending from heaven is the oldest and most common depiction of the Holy Spirit, and until the eleventh century, it was the only symbol used for the Third Person of the Trinity.² Its source is the account of Jesus' Baptism found in each of the four Gospels,³ and was so influential that in 536 a local council in Constantinople officially approved the use of a dove in depictions of the Holy Spirit. Next to the dove, the most common symbol of the Holy Spirit has been flames of fire, often shown as rays of light, which we have from the account of Pentecost.

But none of these images have ever attempted to give a true rendition of the Third Person of the Trinity because that would have been impossible. Instead, they were symbolic allegorical representations of a reality beyond our comprehension. Their purpose was not to produce a photographic likeness of the Holy Spirit, but as Pope Benedict XVI once wrote, “to lead us beyond what can be apprehended at the merely material level, to awaken new senses in us, and to teach us a new kind of seeing, which perceives the Invisible in the visible.”⁴

The Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, is a Person distinct from the Father and the Son, but yet of the same divine essence—Three Persons but One God. He is not, as the Mormons claim, one of three separate gods, or as the Jehovah Witnesses claim, only an exalted creature, along with the Son. No. He, in perfect union with the Father and the Son has always existed and always will.

The Holy Spirit, as the Father and the Son, is True God. He is the Lord and Giver of Life because through Him the Father brings forth life. He was present with the Father at the beginning of time, bringing about creation and breathing His life into it. He was present with the Father and the Son when man and the angels were created. At the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, before the consecration, the priest invokes the Holy Spirit because it is He, who gives “life” to the “dead” bread and wine, transforming them into the living Body and Blood of Jesus.

Just as there were early Christian heresies about the nature of Christ, there were also heresies about the Holy Spirit. St. Augustine fought them in his writings by helping develop the Church’s doctrine about the Holy Spirit and the role He plays in our lives. He wrote, that the Spirit is that, which is common to the Father and the Son. He is their shared holiness and love. He wrote that the Holy Spirit is the love that unites and binds the Father and the Son. But He is love, not as a thing, but as a Person, Love personified, shall we say.

We call the Third Person of the Trinity by His proper name, the Holy Spirit, because He is both Holy and pure Spirit. As we know from today’s Gospel, He is called the Paraclete and the Spirit of Truth. His name is also Love because He is love. We love as a movement of our will and it is often just a warm fuzzy feeling within us. Love is something that we do. It is that tendency in us to do something for someone because we want something good for that person. But the Holy Spirit is not an action or an emotion. He is Love in a concrete divine principle, which makes us capable of loving.

Finally, the Holy Spirit is called Gift, according to the nature of love, which consists in giving itself. St. Augustine wrote that the Holy Spirit is called “Gift” because “by the gift, which is the Holy Spirit, many particular gifts are bestowed on the members of Christ.”⁵ He is, therefore, a pure gift to us as the Love that binds and unites God to His Church.

The Holy Spirit is a pure gift of love to each one of us individually, dwelling within each one of us as in a living tabernacle. This indwelling corresponds to the gift of Sanctifying Grace that we have in us when we are not in a state of mortal sin and it allows us to enjoy the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Because the Holy Spirit is Love, He is the gift of charity that in turn makes our soul resemble Him. The Holy Spirit dwells within us much as Christ dwells within us each time we receive Holy Communion. But whereas Christ’s Eucharistic presence lasts only as long as the Host is physically present in our body, the Holy Spirit is pure spirit and His presence is not

contingent upon matter. He dwells within us like a burning flame, loving us with one single, unceasing act of loving. And He moves within us like a breath, which constantly fans that love, giving us new opportunities to respond to His love.

As we wait for the Feast of Pentecost a week from today, prepare yourselves for the coming of the Paraclete as the apostles did. Spend this week in quiet prayerful expectation, so that the Holy Spirit will find you ready to come and dwell in your heart.

¹ John 15:26.

² Appleton, Le Roy H. and Bridges, Stephen, *Symbolism in Liturgical Art* (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1959), 32.

³ Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32-33.

⁴ Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 133.

⁵ *De Trinitate*, vx.