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BEWARE — The Holy Spirit!

Part 1

Anthony Gittins CSSp

*“Come Holy Spirit.
Fill the hearts of your
faithful and kindle in us the
fire of your love. Send forth your
spirit and we shall be created, and
you will renew the face of the earth.”*

The Holy Spirit is particularly difficult to imagine, perhaps because the Spirit is not ‘incarnate’ – embodied as Jesus was. We identify with Jesus because he is a human person like ourselves, who interacts with other people.

But the Holy Spirit is also a person, although unlike us, a divine person: so I will speak of “he” or “she” rather than “it.”

But still, the Spirit remains elusive. We can’t see him/her directly; only through his/her actions. The Holy Spirit is a transformer.

The book of Genesis describes the Spirit brooding on the face of the waters, bringing to birth the whole of creation like a hen sitting on eggs day and night until they hatch and burst with life. She is rather like a cosmic mother. But she is also a disturber who speaks through wind and fire, often with messages we don’t want to

hear.
But we
ignore or
repress them
at our peril.
Remember St.

Stephen just before he was stoned? The last thing he said was, “Do not muzzle the Holy Spirit.” We muzzle animals to stop them growling or creating a disturbance. But that’s exactly what God’s Spirit is supposed to do! His job is not to keep quiet but to turn things over, to transform the world. Then we remember our Christian history – we recall plenty of times where the Church made tremendous efforts to put the lid on and keep things quiet.

And yet we still say, “Come Holy Spirit.” Well, if we keep the Holy Spirit in a box or if we muzzle her, she is immobilized or at least silenced.

We must encounter, engage with – and not try to avoid the Holy Spirit. But how; where, when, and through whom does God’s Spirit disturb? I suggest a handful of persons or groups that are channels through whom the Holy Spirit moves us, challenges us, and calls us to a serious response: to conversion.

Identifying the prophets of today

First, the Holy Spirit speaks through the prophets. When we recite the Creed, we claim to believe in the Holy Spirit “who has spoken through the prophets.” But the question arises: is this all in the past; is it all finished; or is it still happening?

We know what happens to prophets. When Jesus comes to his own community, people are nice to him at first, but then they turn against him. With foreboding and a heavy heart, he says: “Prophets are never accepted in their own country.” Why is this? Because

prophets say things lots of people don’t want to hear. Prophets call to conversion, and that’s too much of a challenge, too personal.

But the prophet’s essential responsibility is to speak God’s truth – to challenge, but also to offer forgiveness and hope; to call institutions and individuals to greater integrity and courage – to a more authentic way of living the faith they profess.

Sadly – because most people want a quiet or reasonably comfortable life, and because prophets are really marginal and speak with a “God’s eye view of things,” they tend to be persecuted or killed or at least not listened to. People want to get on with their own life.

So, how does the Holy Spirit speak to us today? Are there any prophets around? It’s easy to identify dead

The loudest prophetic calls sometimes come, not through words, but through the actions of people’s lives.

prophets like Mother Teresa or Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr. or Archbishop Romero. But what about people like us, here and now? Prophets are never absolutely sure whether they are speaking God’s truth or just listening to an echo of their own voice. And it’s the same for anyone in the Church today – even Pope Francis. Everyone must try to determine whether their voice is prophetic or the voice of delusion or self-importance. It’s a very, very delicate issue. I won’t specifically name prophets in my time, but I know dozens of them in the Church, many of whom have been dreadfully, dreadfully treated.

Our job is to try to identify who speaks with the voice of authentic prophecy today. Of course, you don’t always need to open your mouth to be prophetic:

prophetic witness is really a way of speaking with your mouth shut. Remember St. Francis: “Proclaim the gospel always – if necessary use words.” The loudest prophetic calls sometimes come, not through words, but through the actions of people’s lives.

If we think that there are no prophets today, we are turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to the Holy Spirit, because they are everywhere. Our job is to identify and listen to them. Find out who are speaking God’s truth, who will not disappear, who are being attacked, who are ready to pay with their lives.

Jesus, the Word: the voice of the Holy Spirit

Second of course, but really the prime example, is Jesus, the Word: the voice of the Holy Spirit. We sometimes say Jesus sent the Holy Spirit. But really it’s the other way round: the first sentence of the bible says the Spirit was breathing over the chaos, before time began, shaping it into creation; and in the fullness of time, the Spirit sent Jesus, through Mary, and later appeared at Jesus’ baptism, at the Transfiguration, and, of course, at Pentecost.

At his first appearance in the synagogue Jesus says, “The Spirit of God is upon me and has sent me,” to continue God’s eternal mission ‘on earth, as it is in heaven’. Jesus is the spokesperson of the Holy Spirit.

But is the Holy Spirit speaking today? Through Jesus we have the gospel – and not just the words of the gospel, but his witness and example. Anybody can pull out a phrase here and there to justify exactly what they want to do. But it’s not just the words of Jesus that matter: it’s his whole

just the end of his life; it's his whole life. "Sac" + "fice" means "doing what is holy." The Holy Spirit speaks through Jesus' entire holy life. But what have we heard? What have we understood? And what are we doing about it?

means that nobody is excluded. But our church is still far from being what Jesus calls it to be. So let's spend a minute listening to what the voices of women have to tell us.

Women have always been the life and the soul of the family and community, the peacemakers and healers. And from the very beginning of the Church, women were among the most faithful disciples, the first martyrs, and the first missionaries: the absolute mainstay of the church.

One of today's most respected theologians, Jurgen Moltmann, said, "Patriarchal sins against women are sins against the Holy Spirit." Yes, sins against women are actually sins against the Holy Spirit! Years ago, Thomas Reese, an American Jesuit, said, "There is serious risk the church will lose women in the 21st Century as it lost working class men in the 19th." Those prophetic words are already terribly

life, the totality of his example. This is how the Holy Spirit speaks to us.

Jesus' entire life is prophecy, if you like. It is a speaking, by the Savior, of God Creator and Holy Spirit. We talk of his sacrifice, and sadly we sometimes imagine that just refers to the Passion and Crucifixion. But his sacrifice is not

Listen to the voices of women and children

The third way the Holy Spirit speaks is through women and children. For Jesus, discipleship is radically inclusive and equal. The Holy Spirit is speaking to us today about that. We, in the church, are not radically inclusive, and we are far from radically equal. Ours is still far too much a male-dominated Church.

But Jesus is perfectly clear: men are not superior to women. Discipleship is not limited to men; anyone and everyone can be a disciple. Radical inclusion



Photo by Karen Bokma, PWS&D

dated: the church is hemorrhaging women every single day.

Women are often muted, as indeed are children. One of the greatest injustices is to silence the voices of those who want to speak the truth. To silence and marginalize women can be to silence the Holy Spirit of God. When she is silenced in this way, we should be very troubled.

How can we claim to be willing to be disturbed and transformed by the Spirit unless we understand our responsibility to listen to anybody and everybody equally? Equality and inclusion are essential to Jesus' discipleship. Women are speaking to the Church now as never before, sometimes through their muted voices. We need to hear and acknowledge not only what they say, but what they are prohibited from saying or what is erased from their voices.

Whoever silences another person is doing violence. So how can anyone silence someone else and still claim to be living the way of Jesus? Violent silencing and true Christianity are simply incompatible. So the third way to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit is to listen to women – and children too.

Children are more than half the population in many countries, where they are crying and sometimes screaming for justice – even though they are not always articulate or crystal clear.

The scandal of sexual abuse will not disappear from our Church, but, adding insult to injury, many children have been both traumatized and muted. They may be adults now, but their childhood was stolen. If the Holy Spirit has not reached us through the children and the information we have over the past 30 years, we will never believe the Holy Spirit speaks to us. Jesus said, in a breathtaking image: "It would be better for a millstone to be tied around the neck of anyone who scandalizes a child." Yet the voices of many children have been and are muted – silenced.

The words "infant" and "child" tell us a lot. Infant literally means 'one who has no voice', 'one who doesn't know how to speak'. And child is often identified as one who really has nothing seri-

ous to say. So, we don't listen to infants because they can't speak, or to children because they have nothing to say! But how can the Holy Spirit speak to us if we've already decided not to listen?

Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these." When the disciples said, "Get rid of the children," Jesus said, "No"! There is a great danger we might be more like those disciples than Jesus, who insisted: "Let the children come. Let the children speak."

To silence and marginalize women can be to silence the Holy Spirit of God.

So the Holy Spirit is speaking to us today through children too. Are we listening to their sometimes-muted voices? Not just in the context of sexual abuse, but in the voices of hunger, neglect, and even trafficking that children suffer daily all over the world?

Advocate for the poor

We come now to *the fourth group*: the poor. The poor are people who are below the mean line required for their own maintenance and survival. They struggle to survive below that. And, of course, the largest constituency of 'the poor' is again – women and children. It's an absolute affront to God's justice.

The Holy Spirit is trying to speak through them: justice is denied them, so the Spirit becomes their advocate. An advocate is an attorney, the defense counsel in a trial. The Holy Spirit speaks on behalf of those who have nobody to stand up to speak for them. So, when did we last hear the voice of a poor person – and recognize it as the voice of God's own Spirit?

The call to service

The fifth and final way God's Spirit speaks to us is by the call to service. Jesus said, "I will not call you servants anymore," because a servant is a slave, with absolutely no choice but to serve. Jesus said, "I will call you friends" – a very different kind of servant. The Greek word is "diakonos," from which, of course, we get Deacon. Jesus is saying, "I will call you "deacons" – and he's addressing the whole community of disciples, then and now.

Deacons live to serve, but they are not slaves; they are not forced. They act of their own volition, and because they want to be an expression of God's abiding justice.

So, how does the Holy Spirit speak to us today? She speaks wordlessly through the examples of service we can see if only we look. So let's look around. We all know people who are doing good because they choose to do so: to be compassionate, to go the extra mile, to love their neighbour as they believe God loves them. The "neighbour" is not just someone they know, or someone like themselves; it includes people they have not yet met, or who are different – like some women, or children, or the poor. They go out of their way. And the Holy Spirit is trying to inspire us by their example of unselfish service. ■

Part 2 of this article will appear in the Summer 2015 issue of *Spiritan*.