

*'That they all may  
be one'*



## Guidance by the Spirit – Augustine Baker

*“The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit”.*

Thus Jesus spoke to Nicodemus in the familiar words of St. John’s Gospel (Chap 2 verse 8).

The Spirit is as elusive as the wind, mighty in strength or gentle as the whispering breeze. He comes in fire and flame or in the still small voice. But come he does, to the Christian believer, the gift of the Father through Jesus, himself the anointed and Spirit-filled One. All that we know of Jesus, and hence of the Father, comes to us in the Holy Spirit. And yet who can describe him as he really is? (Ecclesiasticus 43). To sin against him is, frighteningly, the unforgivable sin (Matt. 12: 31-32). We are not therefore free to disregard him but, happily, once having felt his all-holy presence and guiding hand we weep copious tears at the merest indication that we have grieved him and we are heard, in Christ, for our godly fear.

This is how it is meant to be, but so often in the Western Church over the years we have slighted or ignored the Holy Spirit. And now, latterly, by contrast, we see him where he is not, his name trips lightly off our tongues and we attribute our own hidden urges or the promptings of false spirits indiscriminately to him. We play with fire unawares. But it has not been so for everyone. Here and there in every generation there are found men and women of great holiness and prayer. Their very lives and witness point to the overmastering influence of the Holy Spirit who graces them. If we are willing to co-operate with that same grace, it is possible even for us, under their guidance, to find genuine fellowship in the Holy Spirit once more, individually and corporately.

The Holy Spirit is present, deep within us, as our constant companion and guide, as Jesus himself promised. If we are blind to this, our Christian faith and life is truncated. We have lost a large share of our inheritance. This was as true in seventeenth century Europe as it is now. Dom Augustine Baker, a Benedictine monk from Wales, spent his life during those years of Catholic persecution partly on the Continent and partly in Britain. He seems to have been especially raised up to restore to the post-Reformation Church of his day that deep awareness of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual. His teaching is profoundly relevant as we shall see.

Baker's main purpose is to teach us to pray, not anyhow and selfishly but contemplatively and in depth. We are to expect to meet the Living God. When we draw aside to do this and look into ourselves we are confronted straightway with a dichotomy. As Christians we are searching for God and for the good. Instead there is a duality within which Baker speaks of as the two internal guides. (Cf *Holy Wisdom: First Treatise, Second Section Chap.1*) These guides are Nature itself and secondly the Holy Spirit. Nature (our natural human instincts, desires and aspirations) is, alas, corrupted since the Fall and so is found to be at odds with the influence of the Spirit. We hardly need to be told about this warfare if we are honest. With St. Paul we know that left to ourselves we can never actually do the right thing to perfection, however much a part of us wants to. Something, which Paul calls the law of sin, intervenes (Romans 7: 21-23). Baker describes how our natural instincts and the influence of the Holy Spirit are striving for the mastery. They are easily distinguishable:

*. . . the spirit of corrupt nature only teaches us such things as are for the present pleasing or profitable to our carnal desires or sensual and secular designs, but pernicious to the soul or spirit . . . the light of nature runs into endless errors and labyrinths, all which lead us from God . . . On the other side, the Spirit of God . . . teaches us that our happiness consists in forsaking such a wandering guide, and treading paths quite contrary . . . renouncing pleasures and commodities so far as they are a hindrance to our knowing of God and spiritual things.*

So at once we see that having the Holy Spirit as our guide is no soft option. **We** have a work to do, in keeping with the universal teaching about our faith through the ages. It all begins with

self-discipline, the purgative way, which means co-operating with God when he shows up our sinfulness to us and offers us a share in his work to put it right.

Adam's fault, as Baker graphically describes it, consisted in not attending to the teaching of the Holy Spirit and in trying to insert his own ideas instead. So it is that **we** find these two spirits at work in us. Until Christ came we were at a loss to feel the presence of the Divine Spirit within. We had wilfully turned our back on him. But now, as followers of Christ, to quote Baker again:

*The new heavenly teacher, the Holy Spirit, is freely given us by means of the divine word and sacraments; it being a new divine principle imprinted in our spirits, raising them to God, and continually soliciting us to walk in his ways. (Ibid.)*

The Holy Spirit, then, is bestowed on us in the Church, through the word of Scripture and by means of the Sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist in particular. We should note that Holy Communion implies not only receiving the body and blood of our crucified and risen Lord, wonderful though that is, but in consequence of that, necessarily means that we also receive there the grace of the Holy Spirit. In the power of the same Spirit we are sent out to live eucharistically, to live in love, service and self-sacrifice, the purgative way that Baker has shown to us. Initially, of course, we receive the Holy Spirit at baptism. Baker stresses this too but knows also that in our weakness we easily fall into sin and seem to turn our back on this priceless gift. But still there is the grace of repentance where the Spirit continues his work:

*The gift of the Holy Ghost . . . is conferred on all in baptism, and being afterwards smothered or extinguished, is renewed by penance, prayer etc. and cherished or increased by the worthy use of the holy Eucharist and other virtuous practices of a Christian life.*

(Ibid.Chap.6)

He goes on to describe (in technical theological language) how the presence of the Holy Spirit, and our awareness of him, becomes habitual, or as we might put it 'second nature'. In other words the Holy Spirit's influence is gradually taking precedence over our fallen human nature. Hence, eventually, Baker suggests, we shall know the Holy Spirit to be truly within us, cleansing, sanctifying, directing. However, it is God's work and we rely on his grace. We are not to expect to be **always** consciously aware of the Spirit or that he will **always** be, as it were, actively at work, just as a poet, though always a poet does not write poetry without ceasing or

a musician compose music unendingly. The Spirit prompts us through people and events, through a sermon or a book as the case may be. Ours it is to be alert and act upon the felt influence, otherwise even the presence within us of the Third Person of the blessed Trinity will bear no fruit.

But if the human response is **total** the effect **can** be spectacular. It is in the strength of the Spirit that martyrs brave death and intercessors plead before God oblivious of the cost. Baker in fact likens the gift of the Spirit to the one talent which in the gospel parable is given us to trade with:

*This fundamental grace, therefore, is that talent or stock that has God's image on it, and not Caesar's, which God bestows upon every one in baptism, etc. to trade withal (Ibid.)*

Until the will co-operates, the talent of the Spirit is as it were wrapped in a napkin and buried in the ground. Though everything is grace our willingness of response is all the same crucial. The Spirit within us, Baker says, is also:

*. . . that very small but divine seed of which the Evangelist speaks, which being cast in our hearts, by labour and cultivation produces many and precious fruits: this is that leaven, which, being enclosed in the three faculties of our souls [ie our memory, understanding and will], as in three measures of meal, doth disperse its virtue throughout the whole mass. (Ibid.).*

So the Spirit is at work secretly within us. Sometimes, as we have already observed, he makes use of outward things and people however, though remaining himself the ultimate source of all our advancement in our journey to the kingdom. It is he whom we must note:

*. . . in all good actions, and especially in the internal ways of the spirit which conduct to contemplation and perfection, God alone is our only master and director; and creatures, when he is pleased to use them, are only his instruments. So that all other teachers . . . or rules prescribed in books etc. are no further to be followed or hearkened to, than as they are subordinate and conformable to the internal directions and inspirations of God's Holy Spirit, or as God invites and moves us to have recourse unto them, by them to be informed in his will, and by him enabled to perform it. (Holy Wisdom: 'Two Internal Guides').*

So then, in matters concerning the deeper levels of prayer in particular, the Spirit leads the way for director and directed alike: *'It is God only that teaches both the teacher and disciple, and his inspirations are the only lesson for both'*. (Ibid.) Moreover, we can know with certainty when it is truly the Spirit who inspires us since he not only invites but enables. Grace and strength are indeed given to **all** of us Christians by the Spirit, Baker reminds us, if we are in good faith, in order to enable the resisting of temptations and good to be done.

Thus Baker encourages us to expect to be guided inwardly by the Holy Spirit, to receive insight into God's will for us, our personal 'call' as he terms it. But we must be clear about the nature of this inspiration:

*This divine call you must not esteem to be an audible, sensible or whispering voice, as you would imagine to hear with your ears, but it is an illumination of the understanding or a motion of the will by God, or a necessity caused or permitted by God from without . . .*

(From the treatise, *Discretion*).

It is all intensely personal and Baker warns us frequently that we must not spend time looking at others, trying to discover and then merely copy **their** particular way to God. Neither must we believe that everything we read in books is meant for us and is therefore to be slavishly followed. These are the areas of guidance and discernment that we must grow in. Mistakes will be made, but we can pick ourselves up again. It is here especially that we shall initially need the help of a like-minded spiritual director who knows how to let us go when the time is right. In the long-run **self**-direction in the ways of prayer becomes imperative. *"I think it impossible"*, Baker says, *"for another man (unless he be extraordinarily illuminated for it) to teach a soul in particulars; but she must observe herself, and if she hath not the discretion to do so, I know not how she will be able to hold a right course"* (Ibid.).

Paramount though contemplative prayer might be in Father Baker's teaching he is also concerned with outward activity and 'the performance of good works'. Most obviously the Spirit directs us on that score too. Back now to 'Holy Wisdom' (Sect.2, Chap.6).

*There is none that hath a good will and seeks God in sincerity of heart but is capable of such a guidance by the light communicated to souls by the Holy Spirit; so that the duty of attending to and obeying it has place not only in a contemplative, but also in the exercises of a devout active life; for doubtless such likewise have a supernatural light answerable to*

*their state, by which they are enabled to perform their actions with much purity of intention.*

However, whether we are gifted with contemplative prayer or are called to a life of much external busyness in the service of Christ, the root of all our prayer and activity is the same, namely charity, or love. Anything that is done with mixed motivation is tainted. Baker knew that most of us pray in some form or other and the insights received then and the resolutions made do in some measure at least influence our way of life. All the same Baker notes that for Christians like that “*their actions are stained with great impurity of intention, and a mixture of natural and sensual interests. The reason is*” he adds, “*because imagination and passion being yet very predominant in them, do push them hastily to perform their actions without sufficient reflection and consulting their internal teacher . . .*” (Ibid.).

Discretion, that is a prudent and wise heeding of the Spirit’s guiding counsel, is thus none other than the Christian virtue of charity itself, which, quoting Baker again, as divine light “*teaches us to love nothing at all but God*” and to conform all our`actions to this end. He is bold enough to say “*According to the measure of charity, so is our measure of divine light*”. The Holy Spirit is love and it is in that heavenly fire that we receive the light of guidance:

*If charity be but warm and imperfect, our light in particulars is obscure . . . but if charity be inflamed, how great is the LIGHT that the HEAVENLY FIRE casts! Not a step we set forward but we see the way perfectly before us, and can avoid all the uneven, rough, miry or crooked steps in it, and so run apace without stumbling, delaying or declining, so approaching daily nearer to the end of our heavenly race. (Ibid.)*

Such an end is highly desirable, but can we really believe Baker? Can we, in our day and age, weave our way through the many pitfalls we spoke of at the beginning and truly know the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit within ourselves without being deceived? Yes, but we have to know the cost and be consistently in earnest. It is no game we are about. Baker can have the last word here:

*Believe me, dearly beloved, the grace of the Holy Ghost is not so easily gotten as you persuade yourself that it is. Yea, he must be very pure, and it behoveth that he have utterly gone forth and out of himself, in whom the Holy Ghost is to work properly, and according to his greatness; and the man must take heed that he do not unwisely cause*

*any impediment to his operation, by that man's own unjust arrogation of those gifts of the same Holy Ghost . . .*

(From the Treatise: *Doubts and Calls*, part 3).

Mercifully there is space for repentance all the same:

*But yet, if that he shall find himself guilty or faulty in this point . . . let him, converting himself to God in his interior . . . out of his heart confess himself to be guilty and . . . He will restore him to his former health in soul, if he with all humility do submit himself unto Him . . . (Ibid.).*

May God grant us the grace of humility and then of courage, to open ourselves wholly to the fire of his guiding Spirit.

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