



THE PLACE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

*insights from the teaching of
St Basil the Great*

What place does the Holy Spirit have in our Christian lives? But then, is it actually *we* who give Him, give Her place? Is (S)He not rather the One *in whom* we find ourselves to be? *

The Spirit is as elusive as the wind, for after all wind and spirit, in the bible languages, come from the same root. Jesus himself used the analogy when speaking with Nicodemus (John 3:8). The wind blows freely and we cannot track it down. Likewise birth in the Holy Spirit is beyond rational description and human organising. We may predict a hurricane and take precautionary steps but we cannot tame or divert it.

So the Holy Spirit is a powerful force, a totally free agent, coming in a mighty, rushing wind and flames of fire, as at Pentecost. But she is also a gentle breeze and a tiny, almost silent whisper, such as the prophet Elijah was granted to perceive on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:9-13). Above all perhaps, the Spirit is for us a deeply personal divine influence of life-giving love and strengthening – so pure that she pervades everything

* Human categories of male or female fall short here, since the Persons of the Godhead are obviously beyond both. However, intimations of the feminine within our human awareness of the Holy Spirit have sometimes been experienced within the revealed Christian Tradition. Thus it is not inappropriate, on occasion, to use the feminine pronoun in reference to the Spirit – without of course letting the pendulum swing too far.



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and, as a breath of the power of God passes into holy souls . . . (Cf. Wisdom 7:22-30 where Wisdom has been seen by some to represent the Holy Spirit as well as Jesus the incarnate Word of God).

Yet how can it be that the Spirit of God should somehow stoop to dwell in our hearts, contract his omnipresence and localise himself? Equally how was it that ‘the Word was made flesh and came to live among us’? We cannot say how in either case. We can only believe and wonder. Jesus himself actually made the promise of the Spirit’s indwelling in his final words to his disciples just before his passion, as recorded in the gospel of John:

I will pray to the Father and he will give you another Counsellor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth . . . You know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you (John 14:16-17).

Even our own experience suggests the proximity of the Spirit – (S)He who takes what belongs to Christ and shows it to us, thus leading us back through Christ to the Father. Yet the Spirit herself remains elusive, totally self-effacing. While sensing her presence deep within, guiding and prompting us, we also know ourselves somehow to be immersed in and surrounded by her. We are hard put to it, like St. Paul, to know which way round it really is, we in the Spirit or the Spirit in us: ‘You are in the Spirit if the Spirit of God really dwells in you’ . . . (Romans 8:9 foll). All this, we dimly sense, is a pale reflection of the inner life of the blessed Trinity (mutual inherence, circumincerssion), a mystery which we are not called upon to fathom but to contemplate and to which we yield ourselves in faith.

Actually it took a few hundred years for the first followers of Christ to reach some degree of consensus concerning the Person and role of the Holy Spirit. While battles were raging over the question of Jesus and in what sense he could be termed both human and divine, the Holy Spirit was left, apparently, in the background, though of course in reality that could not be so since no-one can even begin to say that “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). He, the Spirit, was the

Through him hearts are lifted up, the weak are taken by the hand, those advancing are perfected.

All along it is the Spirit who sanctifies us, gradually changing us into his likeness so that we too become spiritual, lit up by his light, and in turn enlightening others:

He, shedding his bright beams upon those who are cleansed from every stain, makes them spiritual by their communion with himself. And as clear, transparent bodies, if a ray of light fall upon them, become radiant themselves and diffuse their splendour all around, so souls illuminated by the indwelling Spirit are rendered spiritual themselves, and impart their grace to others.

We are destined then to become all spiritual – we in the Spirit, the Spirit in us, and all of us in each other in Him – yet without ceasing to be ourselves, for it is *communion* in the Spirit, not absorption. Basil shows us that all good gifts, all that we might hope for can be ours in the Holy Spirit, even to oneness with God himself, our final destination:

Thence comes . . . the understanding of mysteries . . . the distribution of gifts, the heavenly life . . . unending joy, abiding in God, likeness to God, the utmost of our heart’s desires, - the being God.

Not giving place to the Spirit would therefore be foolish indeed, if not impossible, since her place is everywhere.

to holiness since he chooses to make his abode in us, and dare we then defile his sanctuary?

Perhaps we have put the cart before the horse. Maybe we should have spoken earlier, as St. Basil does, of some of the necessary preparations we need in order to make ourselves at least a little less unworthy of being ‘the place of the Holy Spirit’. In section 23 of the same treatise Basil first shows that the spatial imagery he is using should not of course be taken literally:

Now the relationship existing between the Spirit and our souls is not one of local proximity, for how can you bodily-wise draw near to the incorporeal?

And how we might add, can we really **make** a place in ourselves for the Holy Spirit or how immerse ourselves **in** him? The answer not unsurprisingly, is that we must look at our manner of life, our responsiveness to God’s grace, which alone enables us to begin to grow in true holiness. We are made in God’s image and through sin that image has been defaced. The situation must therefore be remedied. We can only approach the Spirit, St. Basil claims, by being purified from our shame. Then, he tells us:

Will he, like the sun, when thy sight is purged, show thee in himself the image of the invisible. And in the blessed vision of the image thou shalt see the ineffable beauty of the archetype.

This is dense theology in which Basil is implying that just as the light of the sun enables us to see so, if our sight is pure enough, the light of the Holy Spirit will reveal Jesus, the image of God, to us. Then in Jesus (the image) we perceive God the Father himself ie the archetype, or reality depicted by the image. (Cf. John 14:8 & 9).

Yet it is rather like the chicken and the egg – which comes first? How **can** we have pure enough vision to see without first being purified by the Spirit? We cannot put ourselves right. Basil knows the paradox and quite simply states that it **is** the Holy Spirit who brings it all about:

Interpreter all the time, in his unassuming way, and inevitably the moment arrived when his influence began to be recognised for what it permanently is. He was vindicated, against all opposing viewpoints, as fully divine, the third Person within the blessed Trinity. One of the pioneers and strongest advocates of the divinity of the Holy Spirit in the age of the Church Fathers was St. Basil the Great (c.330-79), bishop of Caesarea and brother of St. Gregory of Nyssa. A man of deep prayer and theological insight, Basil was granted an understanding of the Person and working of the Holy Spirit, both within the mysterious and hidden life of the Trinity itself *and* also within the world of time and space, in the whole of creation as well as in the hearts and minds of individual believers. It was no new revelation but rather the full flowering of what had been dormant in the pages of Scripture until the time was ripe. St. Basil in fact turns consistently to Scripture to validate his teaching. His insights thus remain foundational for a right understanding of and communion in the Holy Spirit. Not surprisingly he throws considerable light on the concept of the Spirit in relation to place. Paragraph 62 of his *Treatise on the Holy Spirit* leads us to the heart of the matter. He begins by taking the bull by the horns:

Though it may sound paradoxical, it is none the less true that the Spirit is frequently spoken of as the place of those who are being sanctified.

How indeed **can** we speak of the Spirit as place, aligning One who is so volatile with something static and confined? Is it not to demean him? Basil asserts the contrary: ‘Nor will this figure of speech appear to degrade the Spirit’, he says, ‘but to glorify him’. He then goes on to illustrate from Scripture how often material images (or ‘bodily’, as he terms them) are used to signify spiritual realities. This is true of the word ‘place’ as well. Psalm 31 verse 2, for example, asks of God: ‘*Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me!*’ What more concrete ‘place’ can we think of than that as a metaphor for God. And then St. Basil goes on, immediately, to speak of the ‘vision’ of himself graciously granted by Yahweh to Moses, as recorded in Exodus chapter 33 verses 18-23. Humans, in actual fact, cannot ‘see’ God in his actuality, they would somehow be overwhelmed into nothingness. Only God’s grace

and mercy could enable continuance in being. This is symbolised by Moses being hidden by God in the cleft of a rock so that he sees only the back of God after the fullness of his glory has passed by:

And the Lord said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by" (vv 21-22).

The Rock or place for Toplady, as we know well from his much-loved hymn, 'Rock of Ages cleft for me' was the wounded body of Jesus on the cross. The 'place' for Basil, is the Holy Spirit:

*With respect to the Spirit, "Behold, there is a place by me, and stand thou upon the rock". What other meaning can we give to **place** than vision in the Spirit, into which Moses entered, and then could see God clearly manifesting himself to him? This is the proper place for true worship.*

The Holy Spirit, St. Basil is telling us, is the means, or milieu by and in which we are enabled to perceive and 'understand' the nature of God. He is our faculty of vision. We need to be *in* the Spirit therefore even to begin to think of offering worship to God.

Nor did St. Basil invent this latter concept of worship in the Spirit, or read it into the Exodus text arbitrarily. Jesus himself clearly tells us 'where' we must be in order to worship God as we should:

'Take heed to thyself', we read [Basil says], 'that thou offer not thy burnt offerings in every place, but in the place which the Lord thy God shall choose.' (Deuteronomy 12:13,14) What is a spiritual burnt offering? The sacrifice of praise (Psalm 50: 14). And in what place except the Holy Spirit do we offer it? Where did we learn this? From the Lord himself, who

said, 'The true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth'. (John 4:22)

So it is that our worship of God, our prayer, our communing with him, is always '*in* the Holy Spirit'. We can no doubt ourselves find numerous texts in Scripture to substantiate this – not least that Jesus himself was anointed by the Spirit at his baptism, that he rejoiced *in* the Holy Spirit as he thanked and praised his heavenly Father on behalf of his disciples (Luke 10:21). And looking again at what St. Paul has to say in Romans Chapter 8 we recognise that our feeble attempts at intercession are taken up by the Holy Spirit, who prays in us, and we in him (verses 26 & 27). This is why we speak of the fellowship, or communion of the Holy Spirit (Cf. 2 Corinthians 13:14, where the familiar 'fellowship of the Holy Spirit' can also be translated as 'participation in' that same Holy Spirit).

St. Basil also recognised the 'place' of the Spirit as the ground where believers meet up with one another. Following on from his reference to worshipping the Father in spirit and truth we read:

This was the place that Jacob saw when he said, 'The Lord is in this place' (Genesis 28:16), so that the Spirit is truly a place of the saints, and the saint is a place proper for the Spirit.

We have thus come round full circle and meet the same paradox that we recognised at the start. Somehow or other we are ourselves 'in' the Holy Spirit yet he also dwells in us. Basil continues:

. . . the saint is a place proper for the Spirit, since the saint offers himself that God may dwell in him, and is called a temple of God.

So that is alright, we feel. It is all to do with the saints, those specialised people with gifts and achievements well beyond anything we aspire to. Yet we should pause. The saints, in New Testament language, are ordinary believers like you and me, sinners on the way to salvation. In baptism we *have* received the Holy Spirit. We *are* meant to be aspiring