

ORTHODOX BOOKLETS

Basic substantial teaching on what Orthodox Christians believe



4

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Orthodox Parish of St Bega, St Mungo and St Herbert
Fr John Musther, 16 Greta Villas, KESWICK, Cumbria CA12 5LJ
www.orthodoxcumbria.org.uk

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THE HOLY SPIRIT

There are two possible approaches to speak of the Holy Spirit. The first approach would be through the things he has done. So we would say

- he has created the church,
- he has created tradition as the life of the church,
- he has brought into being the scriptures and the liturgy
- he has sanctified countless people in the way of holiness and made them saints;
- he gives gifts to us all;
- he is bringing the whole creation into the kingdom of God.

At the same time he is a person of great mystery. He never draws attention to himself. His desire is to see that the Father and Son are constantly glorified by the whole creation. From this perspective we see how 'self-effacing' the Spirit is.

The Holy Spirit is, with the Father and the Son, the third person of the Trinity. He existed, as God, before anything was created. It was through him that all things came into existence. When we understand that we can begin to see everything that has been created as an exceptionally beautiful gift of God.

However Jesus said that the world cannot receive the Holy Spirit, and that it cannot see him or know him. 'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to

be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you'. John 14.16-17

This is a strong statement. It does not mean the Holy Spirit is not working in the world. He is. But the world cannot see this. Only those who have already left the world behind, and who have already detached themselves from the world, and who refuse to live by the spirit of the world, can receive him. Only they can tell the difference between the Holy Spirit and the spirit of the world.

This is important. Many talk about the Holy Spirit. They talk about him because they think they can see him in what they feel from time to time or because they think they can do things they could not do before. However we have to be very careful here.

Jesus said 'if you love me you will keep my commandments'. The capacity to obey Jesus is an infinitely more reliable indicator of the reality of the Holy Spirit than what may happen from time to time in our feelings. Profound change in a person in terms of holiness is infinitely more reliable an indicator of the work of the Holy Spirit than the possession of gifts which can so easily be perverted by self-glory. We should not be fooled: the spirit of the world and the Spirit of God can not and do not mix. Even the world senses that.

For a person to be made like Jesus by the Holy Spirit, for a person to be truly united to Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit, the power and control of the self in that person has to be radically shifted. A person cannot claim

to be full of the Holy Spirit if he or she is full of self. The task of the Holy Spirit is to empty the human creature of the energy of self and fill it with the divine energy of Jesus.

We have to understand what is important here. There are wonderful gifts of the Spirit. But these things only truly find their place when the person is effectively united to Jesus in his or her being, and when the gifts flow from the control of the Holy Spirit in the person thus sanctified.

Our priority must always be to walk in the way of holiness. For that we must repent with all our heart of all the distortions which the self and the world have brought about in us. This takes a long time. But we cannot properly talk about the Holy Spirit until this work is largely done.

When Jesus says that his disciples will know the Holy Spirit and that he and the Father will dwell in them, such knowledge and indwelling is not superimposed from the outside. The Holy Spirit is not an adjunct pulling strings from on high. Rather, the Holy Spirit has a work to do on the inside, namely to disarm the control of the self and to change the mode by which the person acts so that the Spirit himself directs the human heart. Orthodox have always made clear that this happens only by a union of the divine energies with the human energies in the way of holiness. Any other mode of understanding of trying to understand the working of the Holy Spirit will always be rather superficial and should be avoided.

The heart of the matter here is the mode of perception.

Perception of the work of the Holy Spirit which proceeds by use of the human intellect is doomed. It will be

abstract and without real knowledge that comes through experience. Further, any way which speaks of the Holy Spirit in terms of grace as being somehow a 'thing' acting on the human person will only be muddled. Grace is the action of the divine energies of God himself. When he is at work in the human being there is no 'thing', called 'grace', there is only the direct activity of God himself. The Spirit works and 'dwells' in the human being through the union of persons divine and human. This comes about by obedience and the sanctification of the human person in union with the divine persons of the Trinity.

The union of love through obedience cannot be substituted by a union of love through feeling. Jesus warns his disciples of this mistake. 'Many will call upon my name, many will cast demons out in my name but I do not know them'.

Love and union are a reality of will. This is hard for people to understand today. The prevailing climate understands love in terms of emotion and feeling. But neither emotion nor feeling are enough to hold us on a straight and difficult path, let alone one of constant self-loss. The human will of which we speak is not that of some hard and resolute taskmaster. The human will proper is constituted by a unified functioning of all that is in us at the hands of God, and which, being unified, can hold to the straight path of self-loss and obedience to the divine will in all things. That is why we cannot say we love God and not obey him in all respects. Even to say we love him and yet disobey him in one thing is not enough. Above all, as the letter of John makes clear, we cannot say we love God while we hate any of his creatures. As Jesus made clear, our love must embrace even our

enemies.

Such love is possible. It comes from God as the human person surrenders his or her whole being to the work of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit himself makes us truly one with Jesus through obedience.

When we understand this, we might think 'this is impossible'. It is at this point we begin to see the glory of the Holy Spirit. Quite simple he can make us obedient to Jesus in all respects through the way of holiness.

This indicates the priority of our life as Christians. Nothing takes precedence over holiness through obedience. Any other priority indicates that we have not yet understood the Gospel of the Lord Jesus.

Orthodox call on the Holy Spirit frequently, and in particular,

when we begin to pray together or on our own.

We ask him to lead us in spirit and in truth. We ask him for obedience. We say

'Blessed art Thou, O Lord, teach me Thy statutes.

Blessed art Thou, O Master, make me to understand Thy statutes.

Blessed art Thou, O Holy One, enlighten me by Thy statutes'.

We do not seek anything else from the Holy Spirit.

We can perceive the reality of the Holy Spirit in our lives only in so far as we obey Jesus and become one with him.

How then do we obey Jesus? In truth we cannot. Try as hard as we might and we will discover we cannot do it. No one, no not even one, has ever obeyed Jesus by doing the commandments one by one to the end.

Each one of us learns to obey Jesus by failing to obey him completely. We try to obey, we try to obey harder, we try harder still, but we always fail. We learn to obey only through repentance, through failing to obey and understanding that only if we surrender our whole heart to him so that he can cleanse it, can the Holy Spirit do that amazing work by which he changes the self, uniting and transforming it by his indwelling, can the miracle of obedience come about. The Holy Spirit alone can disable the self, remove its proud control and implant all the virtues of Christ in us. We are only obedient because he himself does the work in us.

This truth can be called the secret of the church, the secret of tradition and of the saints. Yet how many Christians are there who do not know the secret? They strive, they perform, they do all sorts of things, but the work is their own strength and not that of God. Jesus himself spoke of this 'secret of the kingdom', and of how some shall hear and see and some will not.

If we are to do the will of God, if we are to seek it and love it with our whole heart the Holy Spirit will not allow us to have our way. He will not allow us to make a Jesus according to our own understanding or make of the church something it is not, or confuse the will of God with our own will, or produce our own understanding of scripture.

That is why it is so important for Orthodox to be the

church which has always been,

- one with the apostles,
- one in communion,
- one in faith and practice,
- one in the holiness of the saints.

That is why tradition properly understood is so essential for Orthodox because tradition is the life of Christ and of the Holy Spirit in God's one and only church.

That is why Orthodox emphasise the unchanging nature of tradition, of liturgy, of the interpretation of scriptures, of repentance, prayer and holiness because this tradition, liturgy, etc is the only one that has produced the saints, or as you might say produced the fruit. Orthodox do not want anything else but the goods, the truth, and nothing counterfeit will do.

Who are we kidding? Do we think that by founding another church, having 'our own' understanding of scripture and doing things another way we will be fully obedient to Jesus? No, not at all. It is impossible. We will only reproduce the self. We will not have the life of the Holy Spirit.

Repentance understands this. Only those who have tried to obey Jesus and failed understand this. Only those who have discovered the limits of the self understand this. They have discovered by experience that the self only gives death. The self and all its understanding cannot give life. Only God the Holy Spirit is the giver of life. The self may give a semblance of knowledge, or an appearance of truth but this proves to be only a wisdom

of one's own conceits. The Holy Spirit has to face the self with the truth of Jesus: 'the one who seeks life will lose it; the one who lose his life for Jesus' sake will find it. This truth is an absolute. We can never got around it. We cannot displace the law of the Holy Spirit. The choice is death or life. We must accept life on God's terms and not be taken in by the deceit of the self.

In God's way, in the way of holiness, everything begins with humility and poverty of spirit. But the self never wants these. For with them there is no alternative whatsoever for the self but to die. The self does not like the choice: die and you will live; repent and you will find life. For that takes faith; and faith extinguishes the 'options of the self'. There is no option but the option of God.

We learn only as we tread the way of repentance. As we tread it the truth becomes clear. The death of the self even becomes highly desirable. It becomes the very means to life.

The Holy Spirit teaches us all this. However the world does not want it. That is why the world can never give us the truth. The world cannot receive this because it shuts out the truth. The self will never find this on its own understanding, because its own understanding is simply that of the world.

We are dealing here with the mysterious realities of the spirit. We cannot work it out, except by following Jesus and obeying the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit convicts us of who is in the right, of who runs the world and of exactly what sin is. Sin is everything that is separate from God, from his life, and

from his truth. In the end there is absolutely no point in trying anything else. We must give in, we must repent, and then we shall have mercy and peace.

What an amazing person the Holy Spirit is who can do all this. We cannot see him. He blows where he wills. And yet he can show us everything. Jesus said 'he will lead you into all truth'.

We cannot work him out. We cannot plot his path in our minds. We cannot deliver him into our own hands. We cannot grasp him in any way whatsoever. Yet, if we will, he takes us, he leads us, and shows us unerringly every step of the way.

The individual as individual will never understand this. The Holy Spirit wishes us to experience the communion of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Trinity functions by the same laying down of life for each other which is inculcated for the church if we are to live in communion with him and with one another. What would life be like if Christians lived like this? They would not give the 'self' to one another. They would give to each other only the love which God himself puts in them to give to one another. In this case the individual is no longer determined by what separates him from everyone else. He becomes a person who has life by virtue of the fact that he constantly lays down his life for another. When this becomes habit, built into the heart by the Holy Spirit, the person is well on the path to being transformed from glory to glory; until he receives the ultimate glory which God shall bestow on him, in the communion of all the saints alive in Christ before the throne of heaven.

'By their fruits you shall know them', said Jesus. The list

of the fruits of the Holy Spirit in Galatians is well known. The context is also clear. This is not the result of moral improvement but because 'they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts'. The self has died, it has been vanquished and overcome. This is not due to self-effort, still less by self-suppression. Any asceticism inflicted in that way is destined to fail.

Asceticism, directed by the self to enhance its sense of goodness, worth or superiority, defeats itself. Paul says 'let us not desire vain-glory' - for that is what such asceticism is. 'If anyone thinks of himself as somebody when he is nothing he deceives himself'.

Obedience comes about, as we have said, not by obedience but by repentance. Repentance has to base itself on honesty and reality. We are nothing – even when we have become obedient. Obedience never takes away the fact that we are sinners. We can never accomplish anything. The saint remains a sinner at the highest level of sanctity.

This makes no sense to the human mind trying to understand things rationally. Only the one who has walked by the Spirit and therefore lives by the Spirit understands how these things can be. The way of holiness requires us to go by the way of not-knowing to the natural mind. We cannot know how these things make sense until we have abandoned every such attempt. Then when heart and mind have become completely still under the Holy Spirit, he gives us true knowledge of things 'not seen or heard' by the mind of man.

The disciple has to learn that, as he stands humbly and

in poverty of spirit before God in abiding and heartfelt repentance, Christ holds him in the victory of his Cross and Resurrection. The victory is Christ's, the glory is his, and he effectively communicates them to the faithful disciple. The self dares not lay claim to anything because he knows that in that moment he will fall. The disciple who lives in the victory dares never utter a word that it is due to him. Only the deepest humility, the complete throwing away of the self, can maintain unerring progress in God.

Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, humility, temperance, these are qualities of the Spirit only when they have been so to speak built into the human heart by the Spirit. Self-consciousness about them is not possible. We cannot both look at God and at the self at the same time.

The gifts of the Spirit are like the fruits in this respect. I have seen many people profess to have a word of knowledge, a prophecy, a gift of healing and the like. But these things frequently have the self as their source. This is obvious, in the first place, when what is said does not come to pass. It is obvious also when much useless verbiage attends them. It is likely also when the person does not possess the gift of contemplation.

Contemplation is the gift that is bestowed on a cleansed and unified heart. From such a heart the person may look up to God in prayer, without word, and devoid of all image and imagination, and behold him. When this gift has become steady and strong, God can direct the movements of heart and mind without any interference from the thoughts and feelings of the self which otherwise disrupt and extinguish it. The fruit of contemplation is

therefore a steady track record of daily obedience to God. It is in this context that the fruits and the gifts of the Spirit can best be seen.

Contemplation is the most significant act of the Holy Spirit in us.

Contemplation is not possible without effective union with Jesus. Contemplation is the fruit of long discipleship in the way of holiness.

Contemplation is that to which the living tradition of holiness in the church down the ages leads. Today the word is often bandied about and much abused. Outside the context of the living tradition the use of the word is bound to have become tainted.

The highest gift of contemplation is to see the Light of Christ himself. That Light has always shone upon the church, however few may have knowingly seen it. That Light itself bestows the mind of Christ. Jesus said quite clearly 'The pure in heart shall see God'. Blessed indeed is the man who has that gift.

I remember well meeting one who had it. His words were food to a hungry soul, the sight of him a marvel to behold; the slow and gentle manner of his words and actions had such a profound effect upon all who met him. He is now with the saints of God. What feeling is aroused when I recall that such a miracle is no longer with us and I can see him no more. But the very memory of him brings makes me exclaim: what a gift, O what a marvel of the Holy Spirit.

Such saints still exist on earth today. I am in no doubt at all about that. They have existed in each and every generation from the beginning, from the day of

Pentecost. In them it is as though the Holy Spirit holds up for all to see a prism of the glory of Christ, an icon in which all can see the face of Christ.

But the stronger wonder is that the saint of God has power on earth. It is truly an unearthly feeling to realise that we can live under the loving care and mercy of a saint and receive his blessing. That is another marvel to behold. But only the Holy Spirit can show us.

This brings us to the word deification. People find it hard to connect with the word because it appears to be something rather remote to them. This is understandable. People may talk about saints but they find it hard to overcome a somewhat ingrained 'them and us' attitude: 'it's alright for them but it is not quite us'. We have to overcome this. First it is right to have a certain boldness before the saints – to befriend them and ask them humbly for their prayers and assistance. We must grasp that what Christ gives them is on offer for us. We must make the connection: discipleship leads to deification. We must refrain from the nasty habit of mentally excluding ourselves from what God will do if only we let him. The end of the work of the Holy Spirit is most surely deification. Only when we understand that the Holy Spirit wants us to make us in the likeness of God, that is, in the likeness of Christ, that we truly get the greatest measure of his work.

Having now understood the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to us as human beings we can now to see that all those other things he does are all part of his one work. He created the church, he created tradition as the life of the church, he brought into being the scriptures and the liturgy so that he could sanctify human beings and make

them like Christ and bring the whole creation into the kingdom of God.

The Booklets

- 1 Who is God?
- 2 Who is Jesus?
- 3 Why the Church?
- 4 The Holy Spirit**
- 5 What is Salvation?
- 6 What is Tradition?
- 7 Why Liturgy?
- 8 The Interpretation of Scripture
- 9 Knowing the Will of God
- 10 The Way of Holiness
- 11 Living, Dying and Departed
- 12 The Saints