

YOUR LIFE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

What Every Catholic
Needs to Know and
Experience

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Revised edition of *Hearts Aflame: The Holy Spirit at the Heart of Christian Life Today*, originally published by Servant Publications, Ann Arbor, Michigan
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The Word Among Us Press, 9639 Doctor Perry Road, Ijamsville, Maryland 21754
www.wordamongus.org
11 10 09 08 07 1 2 3 4 5
ISBN: 978-1-59325-105-5

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Cover design by Adam Moroschan

Nihil obstat: Reverend James Dunfee
Censor Librorum
Imprimatur: Most Reverend Gilbert I. Sheldon
Bishop of Steubenville
June 19, 1995

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Made and printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schreck, Alan.

Your life in the Holy Spirit : what every Catholic needs to know and experience / Alan Schreck. -- Rev. ed.

p. cm.

Rev. ed. of: *Hearts aflame*. c1995.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-59325-105-5 (alk. paper)

1. Spirituality--Catholic Church. 2. Holy Spirit. 3. Catholic Church--Doctrines.

I. Schreck, Alan. *Hearts aflame*. II. Title.

BX2350.65.S37 2007

231'.3--dc22

2007020982

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Introduction

When I was in college, someone gave me a small pocket edition of the New Testament. The translation was not the best, but one day I came across something in it that stopped me in my tracks. It read, “Does your life in Christ make you strong? Does his love comfort you? Do you have fellowship with the Holy Spirit?” I had to admit that for me, the answer at the time was no—and I certainly had no idea what it meant to “have fellowship with the Holy Spirit.”

Like most Catholics, I knew that the Holy Spirit was the third person of the blessed Trinity. I knew that I had received the Holy Spirit in my baptism, and more fully in the Sacrament of Confirmation. Although I accepted what the church taught about the Holy Spirit, that teaching didn’t make too much difference in the way I lived. I rarely thought about it.

I believe that many Christians view the Holy Spirit in much the same way. He seems mysterious and unimportant to their faith and everyday lives. Some Christians even consider people who focus on the Holy Spirit and his activity to be unbalanced, emotional enthusiasts who are on the fringe of the church.

Yet if one were to ask these Christians, “Is the Holy Spirit important?” they would likely respond, “Of course. The Holy Spirit is God!”

How do we explain this paradox? I think that while most Christians have some clear idea of the person and work of the Father and the Son, and thus find it possible to have a relationship with them, the same is not true of the Holy Spirit. The typical Christian’s notion of the Holy Spirit and his work is often vague and muddled.

This book is intended to help people come to a better, clearer understanding of the Holy Spirit and to help them discover the difference the Holy Spirit can make in their

lives. I hope to “introduce” or “re-introduce” you to the Holy Spirit, so that you might come to know the Spirit, or know him better, and grow in your fellowship with him.

The First Step

The first step is to realize that the Holy Spirit is at the “heart” of God and of the gospel, the “good news” of Jesus Christ. Of course, the Bible contains plenty of good news that Christians can benefit from and rejoice in: the revelation of God’s love, his law, his wisdom, and the stories and testimonies of the faith of God’s people through the centuries. All of this and much more comprise the good news of biblical revelation.

But what is at the heart of the Bible and the gospel of Christ? It is God’s revelation of himself! The height of Christian revelation is this:

- God is the Father, the source of all good, who created you, loves you unconditionally, and wants you to know him and relate to him as “Abba,” your dear and beloved Father;
- God, in the person of Jesus Christ, is the Word or Son of the Father, who became human to reveal the loving Father and to show the Father’s love by his words and deeds—especially by dying to atone for our sin, that we might live eternally with God in the joy of heaven;
- God is the Holy Spirit, through whom God lives within us, revealing to us the truth about the Father and Jesus and all the truths they desire us to know, and empowering us to live and to follow the way of Jesus and the Father, by which we receive the gift of eternal life.

The heart of the gospel is the truth about God himself. The truth about God is that he is one God in three per-

sons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christianity declares that to be fully alive is to be “reborn” by the gift of Jesus Christ through faith and baptism, and from there to grow in knowledge and love of God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As St. Cyril of Jerusalem put it,

Now real and true life is none other than the Father, who is the fountain of life and who pours forth his heavenly gifts on all creatures through the Son in the Holy Spirit, and the good things of eternal life are faithfully promised to us men also, because of his love for us.¹

The importance of discovering the full truth about God, with the Holy Spirit at the heart of the mystery of the Trinity, was accentuated by Pope John Paul II in his apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (As the Third Millennium Draws Near). To prepare for the celebration of the two-thousand-year anniversary of Christianity, the pope called upon Catholics to ponder “the mystery of the Trinity and the continuation of the Son’s mission in the mission of the Holy Spirit.”² Concerning the Holy Spirit, he wrote,

The Church cannot prepare for the new millennium “in any other way than *in the Holy Spirit*. What was accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit ‘in the fullness of time’ can only through the Spirit’s power now emerge from the memory of the Church.”

The Spirit, in fact, makes present in the Church of every time and place the unique revelation brought by Christ to humanity, making it alive and active in the soul of each individual. . . .

In our own day too, the Spirit is *the principal agent of the new evangelization*. Hence it will be important

to gain a renewed appreciation of the Spirit as the One who builds the kingdom of God within the course of history and prepares its full manifestation in Jesus Christ, stirring people's hearts and quickening in our world the seeds of the full salvation that will come at the end of time.³

Obviously, any form of Christianity that omits or neglects the Holy Spirit (or any member of the Trinity), or that ignores the importance of a relationship with him, is sorely deficient. Christian tradition affirms that the persons of the blessed Trinity are perfectly equal and one, though not identical. The Holy Spirit is at the heart of God. As St. Augustine said, the Spirit is the very love binding together the Father and the Son in perfect unity. He is also the love binding us to God (see 1 John 4:13) and to one another in God (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Ephesians 4:3-4). Love is an expression of the heart, and the Holy Spirit is the deepest, fullest expression of God's "heart"—of God's love (see Romans 5:5). To encounter the Holy Spirit is to encounter God, for "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

As the letter to the Hebrews puts it, "Our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29)—a fire of holiness and purity, and a fire of consuming love. It is little wonder that when the Holy Spirit first descended on the disciples of Jesus, he was described by St. Luke as "tongues of fire" resting upon the apostles (Acts 2:3). Their lives and hearts were set aflame with the living presence of God, coming to dwell within them (see 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). Only then was the church of Christ born.

A gospel without the Holy Spirit at the heart is not the gospel of Christ. A Christian life without the Holy Spirit at the heart is not fully Christian. This movement into the fullness of life can happen only as the Holy Spirit takes his right-

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ful place in our hearts. And so every person, every Christian, can benefit from coming to discover (or to discover more fully) the person of the Holy Spirit and his work. We can rejoice in the new relationship we have with God and with each other in the Holy Spirit. May we come to thank God even more fully for his infinite love and wisdom in revealing himself and giving himself to us in his Holy Spirit!

CHAPTER ONE

Who Is the Holy Spirit?

Many articles and books have been written about the Holy Spirit as the invisible, shy, mysterious, or even missing person of the blessed Trinity. This is not surprising if we consider the names and images for the Spirit of God that we find in the Bible.

“Spirit,” for example, comes from the Hebrew *ruah*, which is literally translated “breath” or “wind.” Invisible and free but also life giving, alternately gentle and serene, or powerful and howling—all this is implied in this meaning of “spirit.” “Spirit” is appropriately chosen as a name for the third person of God. We do not see the Spirit, but he is life. His presence and voice can be as gentle as a spring breeze or as forceful as a hurricane. He is the *Holy Spirit*, because he is God—the one who *is* holy—totally unlike and infinitely above all else.

The very word “spirit” makes the Holy Spirit difficult to picture in our minds. Other images of the Spirit in Scripture are somewhat more concrete, and each one highlights different truths about him.¹

The Holy Spirit is portrayed as *living water* flowing from the believer’s heart (see John 7:38-39; Ezekiel 47:1-12; Isaiah 44:3-4; 55:1; 58:11; Revelation 22:1-2). This image reveals the Spirit as God’s life-giving refreshment, cleansing and healing.

The Holy Spirit is represented as a *dove* that descended upon Jesus (see Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10, 3:33; John 1:32). This image evokes the memory of God’s covenant with Noah and represents the beginning of a new covenant that surpasses

the old. The dove is a sign of the peace and purity of the Holy Spirit, which he gives to those who receive him.

The Spirit is presented as the *tongues of fire* at Pentecost (see Acts 2:3). He is also the *radiant, purifying fire* manifested in the prophets—among them, Elijah, John the Baptist, and, ultimately, Jesus, who came to “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Luke 3:16). Jesus said, “I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled” (Luke 12:49).

The Holy Spirit is the presence of God displayed in the *cloud* of glory overshadowing Moses on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 24:15-18). The cloud also appeared at the tent of meeting (see Exodus 33:9-10); it led the Jews wandering in the desert (see Exodus 40:36-38); it was with Solomon as he dedicated the temple (see 1 Kings 8:10-12). This image of a cloud or overshadowing presence symbolizes the fact that the Holy Spirit is God’s presence with his people. We see the image of the cloud in the New Testament, too. The Holy Spirit “overshadowed” the Virgin Mary so that she could conceive and give birth to Jesus (see Luke 1:35). Later, the Spirit’s presence became visible in the form of the cloud that overshadowed Jesus at the mount of the transfiguration (see Luke 9:34-35) and at his ascension into heaven (see Acts 1:9).

The Holy Spirit is the preeminent and priceless *gift* of God. St. Thomas Aquinas taught in his *Summa Theologiae* that apart from the proper name, “Holy Spirit,” the names that most fully and describe the Holy Spirit are “gift” and “love.” Jesus gave his followers the gift of his own body and blood in the Eucharist. What greater gift could he give? Yet Jesus indicated that something wonderful was in store for them—a gift he could not give until he was glorified on the cross and had departed from this world. He seemed to speak with excitement and enthusiasm about this gift, even

implying that it would be better than his own physical presence: “It is to your advantage that I go away” (John 16:7). St. Peter recognized this quality of the Spirit, for at Pentecost, he promised that those who believed in Jesus would receive “the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

Oil is another biblical image that symbolizes the Holy Spirit and his work. The prophets of the Old Testament used oil to anoint kings, to set them apart and strengthen them for leadership. Today, the church uses oil to anoint Christians in baptism, confirmation, and other sacraments. In each case, the anointing with oil represents and brings about the blessing and strengthening of the Holy Spirit. It is Jesus, the Messiah or the Christ, “the anointed one,” who confers the Holy Spirit on those who are anointed. The *seal* of the Spirit is a similar symbol of being set apart and blessed by the gift of the Holy Spirit (see John 6:27; 2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:13, 4:30).

The *laying on of hands* is also a symbol of the Holy Spirit’s being conferred. Jesus blessed many people in this way (see Mark 6:5; 8:23; 10:16), and on a number of instances, the apostles also conferred the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands (see Acts 8:17-19; 13:3; 19:6).

The Holy Spirit as a Person

Breath, wind, water, dove, fire, cloud, gift, oil, and the gesture of imposing hands over a person—reviewing this catalogue of biblical images, it is easy to understand why Christians find it hard to have a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit, why they tend to view the Spirit as a mysterious force or power. It is difficult to have a personal relationship with wind or fire! But as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter, the *Catechism*) indicates, these are only symbols of the Holy Spirit, not the Holy Spirit himself (see

694–701). They represent important aspects of the Spirit’s identity and work, expressing attributes of a person who does not have a human face.

But Scripture presents us with some other titles and images of the Holy Spirit that introduce us to the Holy Spirit as a *person*. This is fortunate, because the Holy Spirit *is* a person, just as the Father and Son are persons.

In his Last Supper discourse in the Gospel of John, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit in terms that are uniquely personal. Because of Jesus’ humanity, the apostles had come to know him in a very personal way as their teacher and friend. But when Jesus talked about leaving them to return to the Father, the apostles feared that someday they would be left alone, abandoned, or “orphaned” by God (see John 14:18). To reassure them, Jesus explained that he would send *someone else* in his place: “I will pray the Father, and he will give you *another* Counselor, to be *with you* forever” (John 14:16, italics added). And when Jesus observed that sorrow had filled the apostles’ hearts, he insisted, “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send *him* to you” (John 16:6-7, emphasis mine).

Jesus characterized the Holy Spirit as a person when he referred to the Spirit with a personal pronoun—“him.” Moreover, by describing the Holy Spirit as “another” like himself, to be “with” the apostles, Jesus implied that the apostles would have a relationship with this “new” counselor that was similar to the personal relationship they had with him. St. Luke, as well, treats the Holy Spirit as a person, when he explains that the Spirit can be “lied to” and “put to the test” (Acts 5:3, 9).

Who Is This Paraclete?

But who is this person that Jesus promised to send to the apostles in his place—this person whose coming would be so wonderful that Jesus would say, “It is to your advantage that I go away”? The Bible describes the Holy Spirit as an “actor”—that is, as a person who acts. Different English translations of John 14:16 use the terms “counselor” (RSV), “paraclete” (NJB), and “advocate” (NAB, NRSV, JB—from the Latin term for paraclete, *ad vocatus*) for the action of the Holy Spirit. The Greek word *parakletos*, translated as “counselor” in the Revised Standard Version, literally means “one who is called to one’s side,” and therefore “one who is at one’s side.” And, the Holy Spirit is clearly the person Jesus sent to be at the side of his followers after he left them. And yet, the Spirit is more than just a companion. In a footnote to John’s gospel, the New American Bible explains further that

the Greek term derives from legal terminology for an advocate or defense attorney, and can mean *spokesman, mediator, intercessor, comforter, consoler*, although no one of these terms encompasses the meaning in John. The Paraclete in John is a teacher, a witness to Jesus, and a prosecutor of the world. He represents the continued presence on earth of Jesus who has returned to the Father.²

The Counselor that Jesus prayed for is a *teacher* who will continue the instruction of the church begun by Jesus. “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will

send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:25, 26; see also John 16:12-15).

The Holy Spirit is also a *witness to Jesus*, because he is the “Spirit of truth” who must testify to the full truth about Jesus. “But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me” (John 15:26). The first letter of John says that “the Spirit is the witness because the Spirit is the truth”; it also speaks of three witnesses to Jesus: “the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree” (1 John 5:7, 8). The Holy Spirit is the person who is on the witness stand before the world to testify to the whole truth about God. And as we shall see, everyone who possesses the Spirit also becomes a witness to Jesus. St. Paul declares that “no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, ‘Jesus be cursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3).

John continues this legal metaphor or image of the Paraclete when he speaks of the Holy Spirit as the *prosecutor of the world*: “And when he [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment” (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit prosecutes or convicts the world of sin. But, at the same time, we might say that the Holy Spirit is the defense attorney for Christians when the world attempts to condemn them for their faith in Christ. (In fact, “defense attorney” is another good translation for the word “paraclete”; it is virtually synonymous with “advocate” and “counselor.”) Jesus alluded to this action of the Holy Spirit as the Christian’s advocate:

When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious how or what you are to answer or what you are to say; for

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the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say. (Luke 12:11-12)

The Acts of the Apostles illustrates the truth of Jesus' promise many times. It shows Peter, Stephen, Paul, and others boldly defending their faith in Jesus Christ before Jewish courts, Greek thinkers, and Roman governors and kings, through the work of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:14-33; 4:8-21; 5:27-32; 7:1-56).

In fact, the Acts of the Apostles portrays the Holy Spirit's activity to such an extent that some people say it might also rightly be called the "Acts of the Holy Spirit." Throughout this book of Scripture, the Spirit is busy speaking (see 10:19; 13:2; 21:11; 28:25), consoling (see 9:31), sending people forth (see 13:4), deciding (see 15:28), warning (see 20:23), prompting (see 21:4), and even "snatching" Philip from one place to another (see 8:39)! He prevents Paul and Timothy from preaching the message in the province of Asia: when they came to Mysia and tried to go into Bythnia, "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them" (Acts 16:6-8).

In the Acts of the Apostles, just as elsewhere in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is presented as a person who is in an active, personal relationship with the disciples of Jesus.

Christian tradition provides another point of departure for exploring the question, "Who is the Holy Spirit?" From it we learn that the Holy Spirit is a person of God, the third person of the blessed Trinity. In A.D. 325, the church articulated its belief in the Holy Spirit in the Nicene Creed. In A.D. 381, at the Council of Constantinople (a council whose authority is recognized by Catholic, Orthodox, many Protestant and other Christians), the bishops of the church expanded this creed.

This council provided a response to a controversy that had arisen in the church of the fourth century about whether the

Holy Spirit was fully God and really equal to the Father and the Son. In response to these questions, some great works on the Holy Spirit had been written in the Greek-speaking East by fathers of the church such as St. Basil the Great, St. Athanasius, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Gregory of Nazianzus. The result was the Council of Constantinople's affirmation of the full divinity of the Holy Spirit; it added this section to the Nicene Creed, which Catholics and many Christians profess today:

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets.³

Clearly, the early church recognized the Holy Spirit as a person whom we may address as “Lord,” and whom we worship and glorify along with the Father and the Son.

Relating to the Holy Spirit

Jesus' way of presenting the Holy Spirit made it evident that his followers were supposed to relate to the Spirit as a teacher, a counselor, a consoler—as someone who would help and guide them in their daily lives as Christians. In the Acts of the Apostles, we saw that Christ's followers were in a dialogue with the Spirit, who actively directed and assisted them in their missionary activity. They knew the Spirit as the gift of Jesus and the Father to help guide and strengthen them, and they knew how to call upon the Spirit for his assistance. May we hope for the same experience?

Jesus taught us to relate to the Father as “Abba.” The apostles and disciples—Peter, Mary and Martha, the “beloved disciple,” and all the others—learned to relate to Jesus with

warmth and friendship, each in his or her own way. How shall we imagine the person of the Holy Spirit in order to relate to the Spirit with the same depth of love and intimacy that we can have in our relationship with Jesus and the Father?

Recall the meaning of the term “paraclete”: one who is called to be at one’s side, a companion, a friend. Then, remember that, in John’s gospel, Jesus says that in some ways the Holy Spirit will be even closer to the apostles than he was—as a teacher, counselor, and witness within their hearts. On the basis of those characterizations, I would like to suggest a personal image of the Holy Spirit that embodies all that he is and does for us: the Holy Spirit is “the friend closest to our hearts.”

Granted, this is not a biblical image, but it is found in the fathers of the church. St. Cyril of Jerusalem taught that “the Spirit comes with the tenderness of a true friend and protector to save, to heal, to teach, to counsel, to strengthen, to console.”⁴ The *Catechism* describes the Holy Spirit as “the interior Master of life according to Christ, a gentle guest and friend who inspires, guides, corrects and strengthens this life” (1697).

Our friend the Holy Spirit is close to our hearts in order to set them aflame with love for God and with zeal to witness to our faith. He is close to us to convince us of our sin and to cleanse and purify our hearts. He is a friend strengthening us with virtues and gifts for the good of others and the church.

But most of all, this image of the friend closest to our hearts reminds us that the Holy Spirit is someone with whom we can speak and relate in an intimate, personal way. This image does not force us to put a “face” on the Holy Spirit, for he is a friend who is *within* us. It would be impossible, as well as unnecessary, to attempt to picture what the Spirit of God looks like as the gentle guest of our souls. We can simply speak to the Holy Spirit as that divine person who

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dwells within us, who is God's love poured into our hearts (see Romans 5:5).

Just as we come to the Father and the Son in prayer, then, we can also pray to the Holy Spirit. The *Catechism* poses the question, "Since he [the Holy Spirit] teaches us to pray by recalling Christ, how could we not pray to the Spirit, too? That is why the church invites us to call upon the Holy Spirit every day, especially at the beginning and end of every important action" (2670).

Our conversations with the Holy Spirit need not be lengthy or involved. As well as expressing the beautiful formal prayers of the church to the Holy Spirit, we may simply use short "aspirations" such as "Come, Holy Spirit"; "Holy Spirit guide me, give me wisdom"; "Spirit of holiness, show me my sin; help me to make a good confession"; or "Holy Spirit, give me patience." And, in times of urgent need or temptation, a simple "Help" will do! Anyone who has ever struggled with the formulation of a prayer can surely appreciate the Holy Spirit, for as St. Paul taught,

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27)

God dwells in the hearts of Christians, and so the Holy Spirit is there, praying with us and for us and in us.

As Jesus assured his followers, Christians have not been left alone, desolate, or orphaned. Called to the side of Jesus' followers, the Spirit has become our teacher, advocate, counselor, consoler, and friend. He is a sort of second

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Emmanuel—"God with us"—but even more profoundly, God *within* us. As St. Paul put it, we actually become "temples of the Holy Spirit" where God resides and abides (see 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19).⁵

Every image, however, is limited. Christians would miserably domesticate the Holy Spirit if we *only* thought of him as the divine friend within us. We cannot think of Jesus only as our brother, without recalling that he is also the omnipotent Lord of the universe and the final just Judge of the living and the dead. So too we must keep in mind that the Holy Spirit is also the majestic power of God pictured as tongues of fire and clouds of glory. He is the "breath" by which the whole universe was created and is held in being, and by which the dead, dry bones of Israel were raised up into a mighty, living army of faith (see Ezekiel 37). He is as incalculable and as free as the wind (see John 3:8); and, while he blesses and strengthens, he also convicts the world of its sin (see 16:8).

Out of pure love, like Jesus, the Holy Spirit condescends to come to our side from his heavenly might and glory; yet this friend remains the omnipotent and utterly holy God whose majesty and power we cannot even begin to conceive. The miracle is, like the miracle of the incarnation of the Son of God, that this divine person is not distant and impersonal. He has been sent into the soul of each Christian to live and remain as in a temple, to be the friend closest to our hearts—a fountain of refreshment and strength within us, the living water flowing from us and welling up to eternal life.