



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, May 1, 2011
The Second Sunday of Easter

*Festal Evensong
at 5:30pm*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Joel C. Daniels
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I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY GHOST
(Apostle's Creed Series, Sermon 12)

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

It is fitting that on this second Sunday of Easter we turn our attention to the beginning of the last section of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the Holy Ghost." Though we are, of course, still in the season of the celebration of the Resurrection, Jesus had told his disciples—promised his disciples—that the Spirit was coming. And after his resurrection, as we heard in this morning's reading from the Gospel of John, the risen Christ comes to his disciples, breathes on them, and says to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit," and by doing so sends them out to do his work, to carry on his mission of the forgiveness of sins.

It is this Spirit that we affirm in the Apostles' Creed, when we affirm that we believe in the Holy Ghost—the Church uses "Ghost" and "Spirit" somewhat interchangeably. The Apostles' Creed is fairly reticent on the subject of the Spirit, especially compared to its younger sibling, the Nicene Creed, which affirms all kinds of things about the Holy Spirit. In the centuries between the composition of the Apostles' Creed and that of the final version of what we know of today as the Nicene Creed, the status of the Holy Spirit, in relation to the Father and the Son, was the cause of incredible strife and division, and was the wedge that eventually drove apart the Eastern and Western churches.

When talking about the Spirit, it is difficult to stay focused: a doctrine of the Spirit intersects every other area of doctrine as well—including the clauses following it in the creed—about the Church, the saints, forgiveness, resurrection, and everlasting life. There is also something positively mystical about the Holy Spirit, something that eludes our putting it into words—perhaps that explains some of the contentiousness. The Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky once wrote that "The doctrine of the Holy Spirit (in contrast to the dazzling manifestation of the Son...), has the character of a secret, a partially revealed tradition."¹ The Spirit is not, of course, a literal secret, but it does feel that way sometimes.

One of the problems the early and patristic Churches had was trying to figure out how they should refer to what the Father, the Son, and the Spirit had in common, and so how they should then describe them. Were they the three "parts" of the Trinity? That didn't seem right. It's not like there's one big God, who then gets divided up to go do things. But you certainly wouldn't want to say that they are three separate gods who all work together: that's tritheism. That debate was still raging in the 12th century, which led a frustrated Anselm of Canterbury to say, "Can't we just call them the

¹ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 161.

three something-or-other of the Trinity?”² The answer is no, no we can’t, but spending any time at all with Trinitarian theology shows why the temptation would be there.

The Church decided that the Greek term that has been translated into English as “person” was the best way to say it: the three persons of the Trinity. This raises its own problems, only one of which is where that leaves the Holy Spirit. After all, it’s fairly easy to ascribe “personhood” to Jesus; historically, he was a literal person. It’s possible to ascribe personhood to God the Father, even if it’s a stretch, even if we know that God isn’t a person, person, the kind of person we meet on the street. But it seems a whole different matter to ascribe personhood to the Holy Spirit.

I think we can see this reflected in the fact that we don’t hear many prayers addressed specifically to the Holy Spirit: we pray to the Father; we pray to the Father, through the Son; we pray to the Son alone sometimes; but it’s much less frequent that we address directly the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, there’s certainly no mistaking the importance of the Holy Spirit for the lives of the faithful, past, present, and, I imagine, future, and for the outworking of salvation history that has been God’s plan from the beginning. All of salvation history is tied up in the work of the Spirit.

We can see this reflected in the fact that it’s the Spirit in a sense that stands at the Scriptural beginning and the Scriptural ending of the story about the life and work of Christ. If someone were to ask me to make a movie about the life of Christ, I think I would begin with the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she would bear a son. In the first chapter of Luke, we read, “And Mary said to the angel, ‘How shall this be, since I have no husband?’ and the angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.’” The Holy Spirit was the agent of the conception of the Son of God, and it is with the preparation for the birth of God that I would start my movie: and the Holy Spirit would play an integral, if invisible, role. What Gabriel announced there at the Annunciation was what Jesus would later say to his disciples, what we heard in this morning’s Gospel: “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

And it was clearly the Spirit that motivated Jesus’ ministry: Luke reports that his very first public appearance, as it were, after having returned from the wilderness, “in the power of the Spirit,” was in a synagogue in Nazareth, where Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, saying, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” just as the “Spirit of God” had descended upon him at his baptism. And it was the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead.

Then, of course, after the ascension of Christ to heaven, the Spirit was sent to the apostles on the day we call Pentecost. As promised, the loss of the historical body of Christ on Earth did not mean the absence of God: fifty days after the resurrection, the disciples all gathered together, “And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind,” says Luke, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was sent into the world; but not just sent, in general, as if amorously, but in particular—if Christ is a symbol of unity, we might say that the Spirit is a symbol of diversity. On that day of Pentecost, “there appeared to them tongues of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them.” And each of them, even in their particularity, were empowered to preach the Gospel in their own language, each “as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

The claim of the Church is that it is the one and same Holy Spirit that was operative with the people of Israel. Even before the presence of the Word made flesh, the Spirit fulfilled the purposes of the God by being spoken by the prophets and liberating Israel.

² Anselm, *Monologion*, in *Saint Anselm: Basic Writings* (Open Court, 1974), 142.

So I propose, as we try to figure out what the Holy Spirit is, exactly, we look at what the Holy Spirit does. And then, instead of deciding if that's the kind of thing a "person" does do, we ask ourselves if that's not the kind of thing a person should do, if it's not the kind of thing we should do. The Spirit carries out the work of salvation history. The Spirit heals those who are broken. The Spirit brings hope to the hopeless; love to the loveless; life to the lifeless. The Spirit empowers the community to preach the Gospel, to proclaim the forgiveness of sins, release to the captives, liberty for the oppressed.

This is the Holy Spirit we affirm in the Apostles' Creed. The Spirit whose work pervades every aspect of the life of the Church, both in our particular vocations as individuals, and in the common vow we take at our baptism. In the creeds, the hymns, and prayers—in all of our worship—we say along with that early Church: come, Holy Spirit, come.

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. *Amen.*