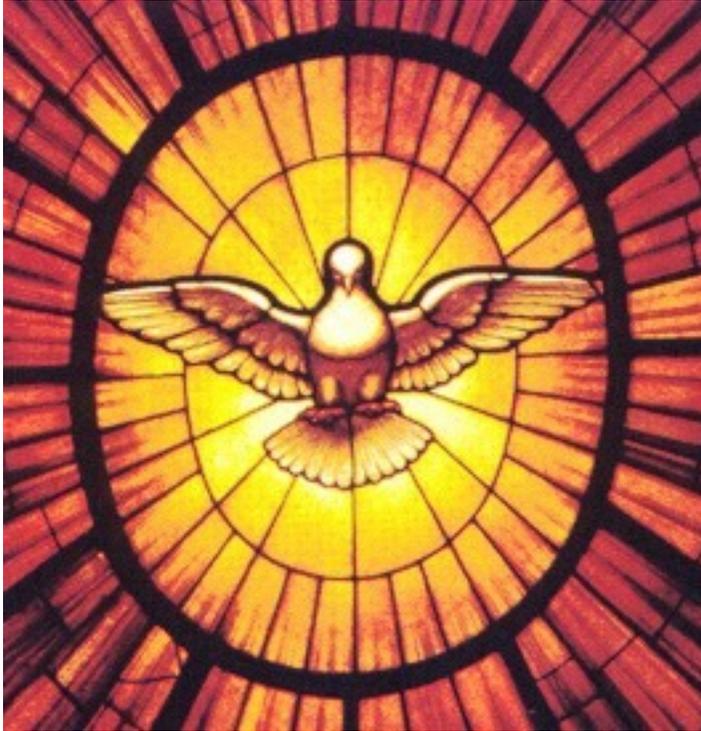


FIRE SYMBOLIZES THE TRANSFORMING ENERGY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT'S ACTIONS

IMAGES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT



“This fullness of the Spirit was not to remain uniquely the Messiah’s, but was to be communicated to the whole messianic people. On several occasions Christ promised this outpouring of the Spirit, a promise which he fulfilled first on Easter Sunday and then more strikingly at Pentecost.” (CCC 1287)

We poor creatures, “married as we are to our senses”, need images in order to mediate to our minds the presence of God. As Father Karl Adam states in his classic, *The Spirit of Catholicism*, “God’s revelation makes use of human instruments, the infinite of the finite; the ineffable and the transcendent is clothed in visible forms and signs.” In order to draw closer to the Holy Spirit it is helpful to present to our mind images that represent or mediate to us the Holy Spirit’s presence and activity in our lives. Relying on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, this note discusses some of the common symbols of the Holy Spirit that assist us in calling to mind and sensing His presence in our lives. These symbols are: fire, air, wind, water, the dove, and oil.

1. THE SYMBOL OF FIRE



Comment: The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states:

“Fire. While water signifies birth and the fruitfulness of life given in the Holy Spirit, fire symbolizes the transforming energy of the Holy Spirit’s actions. The prayer of the prophet Elijah, who “arose like fire” and whose “word burned like a torch,” brought down fire from heaven on the sacrifice on Mount Carmel. This event was a “figure” of the fire of the Holy Spirit, who transforms what he touches. John the Baptist, who goes “before [the Lord] in the spirit and power of Elijah,” proclaims Christ as the one who “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” Jesus will say of the Spirit: “I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled!” In the form of tongues “as of fire,” the Holy Spirit rests on the disciples on the morning of Pentecost and fills them with himself. The spiritual tradition has retained this symbolism of fire as one of the most expressive images of the Holy Spirit’s actions. “Do not quench the Spirit” (696).”

2. THE SYMBOL OF AIR



“Then [Jesus] breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’ ”
(John 20:22)

Comment: Father Faber draws heavily on this image, stating:

“Then I pictured Him [the Holy Spirit] as if He were the view-less air, which I breathed, which was my life as if the air were He, going into me and coming out, and He a Divine Person, sweetly envious of the Son, sweetly coveting the Sacred Humanity which He Himself had fashioned, and coming into the world on beautifullest mission, seeking to be as near incarnate as He could be without an actual incarnation; and it was so near that he seemed almost human, though unincarnate. And this was the clearest view I ever could see of that Divine Person. May he forgive what I have written of Him... and bear with me a little longer, till I have dawn my last breath in Him, and breathed it forth again as my first breath of another life, a fresh son newly born at the Feet of the Eternal Father (*Notes on Doctrinal and Spiritual Subjects*, Vol. 1, p.98)!” See note on symbols at the end of this post.

3. THE SYMBOL OF WIND



Comment: The rushing wind at Pentecost (Acts 2:2) invokes this symbol. Every rush of wind, every breeze, can serve as a powerful reminder of the Holy Spirit.

4. THE SYMBOL OF WATER



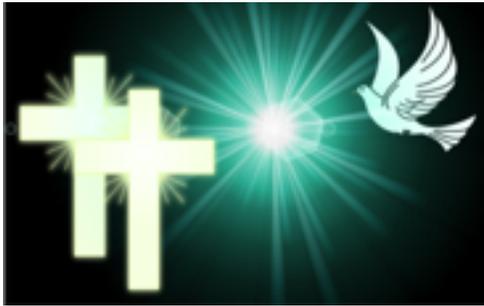
Comment: Water is a powerful image of the Holy Spirit, and most especially in the Gospel of John:

“On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, `Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” Now this he said about the Spirit,

which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” (John 7:37-39)

See also CCC 694. Just like we need water to live, so too do we need the Holy Spirit for spiritual life. We use water to cleanse and nourish us: these are images which draw us into the life of the Holy Spirit. We can also use Holy water in our homes.

5. THE SYMBOL OF THE DOVE



Comment: The peaceful dove is a wonderful image of the Holy Spirit. The CCC discusses the symbol of the dove in the following manner:

“The dove. At the end of the flood, whose symbolism refers to Baptism, a dove released by Noah returns with a fresh olive-tree branch in its beak as a sign that the earth was again habitable. When Christ comes up from the water of his baptism, the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, comes down upon him and remains with him. The Spirit comes down and remains in the purified hearts of the baptized. In certain churches, the Eucharist is reserved in a metal receptacle in the form of a dove (columbarium) suspended above the altar. Christian iconography traditionally uses a dove to suggest the Spirit (701).”

6. THE SYMBOL OF OIL



Comment: Oil can remind us that we have been anointed by the Holy Spirit by virtue of

our baptism and Confirmation. Blessed oils are sacramentals which we can use in our own homes. The CCC states:

Anointing. The symbolism of anointing with oil also signifies the Holy Spirit, to the point of becoming a synonym for the Holy Spirit. In Christian initiation, anointing is the sacramental sign of Confirmation, called “chrismation” in the Churches of the East. Its full force can be grasped only in relation to the primary anointing accomplished by the Holy Spirit, that of Jesus. Christ (in Hebrew “messiah”) means the one “anointed” by God’s Spirit. There were several anointed ones of the Lord in the Old Covenant, pre-eminently King David. But Jesus is God’s Anointed in a unique way: the humanity the Son assumed was entirely anointed by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit established him as “Christ.” The Virgin Mary conceived Christ by the Holy Spirit who, through the angel, proclaimed him the Christ at his birth, and prompted Simeon to come to the temple to see the Christ of the Lord. The Spirit filled Christ and the power of the Spirit went out from him in his acts of healing and of saving. Finally, it was the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. Now, fully established as “Christ” in his humanity victorious over death, Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit abundantly until “the saints” constitute – in their union with the humanity of the Son of God – that perfect man “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”: “the whole Christ,” in St. Augustine’s expression (695)

CONCLUSION:



These symbols of the Holy Spirit help us to image the invisible Holy Spirit. They are aids. The Holy Spirit is not air or water. We are not pantheists. However, God is present in nature by his power, presence and essence. Moreover, the Holy Spirit does truly indwell in our souls by sanctifying grace. *“Come Holy Ghost, Creator Blest, and in our hearts take up Thy rest.”*

Tom Mulcahy, M.A.

Photos: The lead image is a picture of a stained glass representation of the Holy Spirit as a dove from St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, circa 1660, by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (Public Domain, U.S.A.). The final image (immediately above) of Mary and the Apostles at Pentecost, by Fidelis Schabet, 1867 (photo image released into the public domain by the author per Wikipedia).