

My friend Ernie has two teenaged children who are not shy when it comes to asking challenging questions about things religious. He told me, on one of our walks, of a time a couple of years ago when his daughter, Alice, had asked him about Pentecost and the Holy Spirit. Ernie said he'd explained that Pentecost celebrated the descent of the Holy Spirit and that many folks thought of it as the birthday of the church, since that's when the disciples first began to proclaim the gospel publicly. Alice had been OK with that, but then the conversation took a different turn and went like this:

“Just what *is* the Holy Spirit, anyway, Dad?” Alice asked, “I’ve been wondering about that for a while now. I can understand having a loving relationship with the Father. He’s kinda like you on one of your good days. Same with Jesus; he looks like us. So it’s easy to pray to God like that, but the Holy Spirit? Sometimes I feel like I’m being asked to have a loving relationship with electricity. I just wish he had a human face.”

Ernie chuckled and said: “Sounds like you might be receiving an invitation to turn a corner in your relationship with God, Alice. You know, we all grow through a period when we’re young in which God looks very much like our parents or other human authority figures. As we mature, we’re invited to go deeper. Part of what we begin to experience is that God is closer to us than we’d ever imagined, and that God is also a lot more different from us than we’d ever imagined. It can actually get pretty uncomfortable. Sounds like you’re bumping up against that.”

“You’re right,” Alice said. “How do I pray to someone I can’t imagine?”

“Well, try praying for the grace to pray without having to imagine anything,” Ernie suggested. “Can you picture yourself gently allowing the Holy Spirit to pray within you without any commentary or direction from you?”

“How would I know I’m praying?” Alice asked, puzzled. “What would be in my mind?”

“Everything,” Ernie said, “and absolutely nothing at all.”

“You just hurt my brain, Dad,” Alice said. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s the experience of contemplative prayer, of which the Desert Fathers spoke centuries ago, Alice,” Ernie told his daughter. “Like the Eucharist, it’s a pure gift of God. It’s a depth of awareness of God’s loving presence that needs no words; that’s simply given and never attained by anything we think or do. It’s the unmediated experience of the Holy Spirit. Aside from the Eucharist, there is no deeper form of prayer.”

Alice gave her Dad a quiet, puzzled stare, but one that invited him to say more.

“Let me go deep, Alice,” Ernie told her, “just for a little bit, and then we’ll come back up for air. As Jesus said in one of the gospels somewhere, there are some things you might not understand right now, but later on you may experience something amazing in your prayer life and suddenly remember ‘Whoa, that’s what Dad told me about years ago.’”

Grabbing one of his theology books, Ernie turned to the discussion of “spirit” and carefully paraphrased for Alice what he read: “Spirit is the presence of being to itself...a presence [in which what you and I call history comes to be]. This presence [is] the [unfathomably infinite depth] of being [... It’s] the mystery [of origin and existence. It’s definitely not an object like ordinary objects we perceive with our senses] and [it’s] certainly [never] at [anyone’s disposal to alter or manipulate].”¹

“That kind of language might help you understand why you’re having trouble visualizing the Holy Spirit, Alice,” Ernie said, closing the book. “Your spirit and mine is that which is emerging through the fabulous gift of our existence, as we become who we are continually being created to be by God, together in the Eucharistic community of love we call the Body of Christ. God’s Holy Spirit is the agency or the power by which that happens.”

Ernie then told me could see from his daughter’s expression that she was still puzzled. Something within him just then urged him to share a story with Alice that he had never

¹ *The Encyclopedia of Theology: The concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner, The Crossroads Publishing Company, New York, NY, 1991, p. 1622

told her before. He chuckled and wondered out loud for me to listen and tell him if I thought it had been the Holy Spirit. We both knew the answer before he even began.

He'd leaned closer to his daughter, Ernie said, and confided, "You know, Alice, awareness of the Holy Spirit's real presence and action in our lives is so much more significant than merely having command of the special words and theological concepts we use to describe it. Just reading that stuff to you now reminded me that mom and I experienced a moment when we saw you for the first time, just after you were born, in which we both suddenly realized something new about existence itself."

"It was like receiving a wordless little gift from you, or God, or both of you. Afterwards, we found our hearts so full of wonder and kindness, love and compassion. It was almost as if the Holy Spirit had descended upon us in that moment and blessed us with an insight into what life's all about that we could never have come up with on our own. We couldn't stop talking about it, even to this day."

Ernie told me Alice had looked at him with raised eyebrows and said: "Wow, Dad, that's deep. I can see what you're talking about a little, but I'm pretty sure I'm not there yet." "You'll get there too, eventually, in the way God knows is best for you, Alice," Ernie had said. "No one can make the dawn appear at midnight. I will tell you though that it changed everything for mom and me, including what we understood about the Eucharist."

"If your experience turns out to be at all like mom's and mine, you'll come to see as we do that those who appropriate the Eucharist and live in harmony with the Holy Spirit actually begin to look and act differently from the rest of folks. You told me earlier that you wished that the Holy Spirit had a human face, remember? Well, so does the Holy Spirit it seems and it's pretty clear the face he would like to show to the world is Himself, the love of God, radiating out from your face and mine."