



## The Holy Spirit: In the Experience of the St Teresa of Avila

Emmanuel Kaniyamparampil OCD

In 1614, Peter Paul Rubens, the famous Flemish painter, painted the beautiful painting of St Teresa of Avila with the Holy Spirit fluttering over her as dove. This painting is in accordance with the vision that St Teresa of Avila describes in her autobiography.<sup>1</sup> On the eve of Pentecost 1563 the Holy Spirit appeared to her in the form of a brilliant dove with wings like mother-of-pearl. It is marvelous to see St Teresa wearing the habit of the Carmelite order, kneels with her hands held out in ecstasy, transfixed by the dove.

Certainly, St Teresa lived an intense experience of the Holy Spirit. And she speaks about it in the context of her raptures or special mystical experiences. Here we shall briefly study St Teresa's profound experience of the Holy Spirit in order to see what we can imbibe for our prayer life from this great mystical Doctor of Prayer.

### **1. Lord, Give me that Water**

In her book of *Life* chapter 30, 19, St Teresa says that she recalled several times the words of our Lord to the Samaritan woman in Jn 4, 15: "... 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty ...'." She says that she is very fond of this Gospel passage. And she liked to drink from the fountain of the Lord; she often begged the Lord to give her that water. Again, in *The Way of Perfection* 19, 2 ff., she says that prayer is to thirst for the water that the Lord offers.

Now, we know well that water, in the Bible, is a preferred imagery of the Holy Spirit. In prayer, it is the Holy Spirit who satisfies the thirst of the soul for God. Being in the Holy Spirit means being immersed in God, as the Spirit Himself is God. Higher experiences of prayer stages are nothing but being filled with the Holy Spirit.

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Life* Ch. 38, 9 ff., quoted here below, note 14.

Without the Holy Spirit no one experiences God and God's love. Today, in the light of the biblical imagery of water we can rightly say that the Holy Spirit is the Living Water from heaven.

St Teresa had understood this truth and, therefore, she had explained that the true living water is from heaven which the Lord brings to the soul to drink and to enjoy the true love of God.<sup>2</sup> However, here we do not find St Teresa identifying explicitly the Holy Spirit as the Living Water. Nevertheless, as we are going to see in this article, St Teresa's deeper experiences of the love of God are filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit and she recognized it too.

Moreover, we must remember that St Teresa did experience the Holy Spirit fully without having used an explicit language on the Holy Spirit. So, when she speaks of her thirst for the living water, we can understand it as a great desire for the Holy Spirit.

## **2. Come, Holy Spirit**

Growth in prayer is a gift of the Holy Spirit. God gives the soul many gifts and favors while the soul takes courage to do things out of love of God. The soul may not realize this; but an experienced spiritual director can discern the soul and its progress to God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In fact, St Teresa had such an experience. As she mentioned in *Life* chapter 24, it is the spiritual director who assured St Teresa that her experiences are from the Spirit of God. The spiritual director led St Teresa further to greater perfection. He asked her for more and total detachments, like abandoning friendships that are not harmful, but are not helpful for pleasing God. But St Teresa could not understand it fully. It was at this point that the spiritual director told St Teresa to commend the matter to God for some days and to recite the hymn *Veni Creator* so that God might give her light about the better course of action. Now as a result of this invocation to the Holy Spirit St Teresa was led, for the first time in her life, into a rapture in prayer, a great favor of God. St Teresa wrote about this event as follows:

One day, having spent a long time in prayer and begging the Lord to help me please Him in all things, I began the hymn; while saying it, a rapture came upon me so suddenly that it almost carried me out of myself. It was something I could not doubt, because it was very obvious. It was the first time the Lord granted me this favor of rapture. I heard these words: "*No longer do I want you to converse with men but with angels.*" This experience terrified

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *The Way of Perfection* 19, 4.

me because the movement of the soul was powerful and these words were spoken to me deep within the spirit;<sup>3</sup>

And, St Teresa writes immediately about the effect of this special favor of God as follows:

These words have been fulfilled, for I have never again been able to tie myself to any friendship or to find consolation in or bear particular love for any other person than those I understand love Him and serve Him; nor is it in my power to do so, nor does it matter whether they are friends or relatives. ... *From that day on I was very courageous in abandoning all for God...* .<sup>4</sup>

Here we can very well interpret that this great courage to abandon all for God was thanks to the special intervention of the Holy Spirit as the Saint was praying in a special way to the Holy Spirit Himself. In fact, she narrated it in the context of her special prayer to the Holy Spirit. To say more, we do not find any further explanation of this as coming from the Holy Spirit by St Teresa.

It is evidently in the light of her own experiences that St Teresa taught her sisters to pray and progress in prayer. Thus we find her explicitly inviting her sisters to consider the Holy Spirit in prayer seriously. While commenting on the prayer “Our Father” in her book of *The Way of Perfection* chapter 27, 7 she wrote:

... the Holy Spirit must be present between such a Son and such a Father, and He will enkindle your will and bind it with a very great love.<sup>5</sup>

St Teresa wrote these words at the end of her first reflection about who the heavenly Father is and that such a great and loving Father has given us His own Son. Here she introduces immediately a beautiful thought about the Holy Spirit. For St Teresa, loving the Father and the Son must pass through the love of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit who enkindles the human will with deep love, there cannot be a true experience of the Father. In fact, whenever St Teresa experienced the Holy Trinity, she noted that it all began with an enkindling of the Holy Spirit who is experienced in the form of a dove or cloud.<sup>6</sup> And, these two symbols of the Holy Spirit are well attested in the Gospels.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> *Life* chapter 24, 5. Italics added. English tr. from Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol. One (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2001), pp. 160-161.

<sup>4</sup> *Life* ch. 24, 6-7. Italics added. English tr. from Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol. One (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2001), p. 161.

<sup>5</sup> English tr. from Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol. Two (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2001), p. 140.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *The Interior Castle* VII, 1, 6; *Spiritual Testimonies* 13, 4.

<sup>7</sup> See Mt 3, 16; 17, 5.

St Teresa really understood the role of the Holy Spirit in a person's spiritual progress to God. She thus considered the Holy Spirit as a mediator between soul and God. Hence we read in her *Meditations on the Song of Songs* 5, 5:

It seems to me the Holy Spirit must be a mediator between the soul and God, the One who moves it with such ardent desires, for He enkindles it in a supreme fire, which is so near.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, these words of St Teresa come all on a sudden in the context of her reflections on the love of God. No further explanation is added about the Holy Spirit. However, these few words reveal her profound knowledge of the Holy Spirit and His action in the soul. For St Teresa, the Holy Spirit is the one who always moves the soul with ardent desires for God. When the soul is under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the soul is set on the fire of God's love; the soul is nearer to God.

### **3. Holy Spirit Lord, Continue to Enkindle me with the Love of God**

According to St Teresa, and as she experienced in her spiritual life, the function of the Holy Spirit is to transform the person to that marvelous love of God. Without the Holy Spirit the love of God can never reach its perfection in our life. St Teresa explained this truth in a rapid manner while developing her understanding of the Soul's union with God in prayer in her book *The Interior Castle*. In its Fifth Mansion she deals with the question of soul's union with God through an imagery of the ugly silk worm being transformed into a beautiful butterfly. There she writes as follows:

This silkworm, then, starts to live when by the heat of the Holy Spirit it begins to benefit through the general help given to us all by God and through the remedies left by Him to His Church, by going to confession, reading good books, and hearing sermons, which are the remedies that a soul, dead in its carelessness and sins and placed in the midst of occasions, can make use of.<sup>9</sup>

According to St Teresa, the efforts of the soul to die to self by getting rid of self-love and attachments of the earth by deeds of prayer, penance and obedience<sup>10</sup> bear fruit only when the Holy spirit touches the soul and transforms it through its heat, that is the ardent love of God. Mere detachment may be of no use, unless it is replaced and transformed by the presence and love of the Holy Spirit who attaches a soul to God Himself. Here we can remember Rom 8, 14, although it is not referred to by St Teresa, that "if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

---

<sup>8</sup> English tr. from Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol. Two (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2001), p. 249. Italics added.

<sup>9</sup> *The Interior Castle* V, 2, 3: English tr. from Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol. Two (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2001), p. 342. Italics added.

<sup>10</sup> See *The Interior Castle* V, 2, 6.

Furthermore, St Teresa explains in her *Soliloquies* (her meditations or exclamation to God in prayer) that the enkindling love of the Holy Spirit is what changes a soul to enter deep into God's presence and union with Him. Hence we read:

O my soul: Consider the great delight and great love the Father has in knowing His Son and the Son in knowing His Father; and *the enkindling love* with which the Holy Spirit is joined with them;<sup>11</sup>

According to St Teresa, if the Holy Spirit is like the bond of love between the Father and the Son, the same love is indispensable for the soul to reach God. Moreover, that same love of the Spirit must be the joy and delight for the soul too. It is in learning to enjoy the Holy Spirit that the soul reaches to union with God.

Thus, we see that, indirectly St Teresa points out the truth that without the Holy Spirit and his enkindling love, the transforming love, every effort of a human soul for perfection may go in vain. The ascetical practices and the efforts to change oneself, namely the moral behaviors of a human person, find effect and bear fruit only by the transforming love with which the Holy Spirit enters that person's life.<sup>12</sup> The presence of the Holy Spirit must be continuous in the life of the soul on the path of perfection and union with God.

#### **4. Holy Spirit Lord, Lead me into Heaven**

St Teresa had her exceptional spiritual experiences in the higher levels of prayer. However, the very extraordinary visions of heavenly secrets or great blessings she received were on the occasion of the Pentecost. Thus she understood that the Holy Spirit is the one who leads the soul into the mysteries of heaven. The Saint says that through such a great blessing that she received from the Holy Spirit a *remarkable fortitude of soul* is created in her<sup>13</sup>; and that she is strengthened in her spiritual life. We can remember that fortitude is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.

It is interesting to listen to what St Teresa writes about this very vivid and spectacular experience of the Holy Spirit in her life, a unique experience of the Holy Spirit, on the eve of Pentecost on May 29, 1563:

---

<sup>11</sup> *Soliloquies* 7, 2: English tr. from Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol. One (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2001), p. 380. Italics added.

<sup>12</sup> This insight of St Teresa's spiritual realization can be further exploited in Moral Theology as today's moral theologians discuss how to recover the guidance and gifts of the Holy Spirit in the moral obligations of a Christian. See for example, Charles E. Bouchard, "Recovering the Gifts of the Holy Spirit in Moral Theology," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002), pp. 539-558.

<sup>13</sup> See *Life* 38, 8.

One day on the vigil of Pentecost I went to a secluded spot after Mass where I often prayed, and began to read about this feast in a volume by the Carthusian. Reading of the signs beginners, proficient, and the perfect must have in order to recognize whether the Holy Spirit is with them, it seemed to me that by the goodness of God and insofar as I could make out *He was not failing to be with me*. I praised Him and remembered that once before when I read the passage I really lacked everything; I had realized this very clearly, just as now I understood the opposite about myself. So I knew that what the Lord had granted me was a *great favor*. Thus I began to consider the place I had merited in hell on account of my sins, and I gave much praise to God because it didn't seem I recognized my soul by the change I saw. While I was reflecting on this, a great impulse came upon me without my understanding the reason. It seemed my soul wanted to leave my body because it didn't fit there nor could it wait for *so great a good*. The impulse was so extreme I couldn't help myself, and it was, in my opinion, different from previous impulses; nor did my soul know what had happened, nor what it wanted, so stirred up was it. Although I was seated, I tied to lean against the wall because *my natural power was completely gone*.

While in this state I saw *a dove over my head*. It was very different from doves on earth since it didn't have earthly feathers, but the wings had little shells that gave off *great brilliance*. *It was larger than a dove*. It seems to me I heard the noise it made with its wings. It fluttered about for the space of a Hail Mary. My soul was already in such a condition that in losing itself it lost sight of the dove. The spirit was quieted by *so good a guest*; for, in my opinion, a *marvelous favor* like this should have frightened and disturbed it. And when it began to *enjoy the guest*, the *fear was taken away* and the *joyous quietude* began while the soul continued in rapture.

The glory of this rapture was extraordinary. I remember for the rest of Pentecost so stupefied and stunned I didn't know what to do with myself, or how I had the capacity for so great a *favor and gift*. I neither heard nor saw, so to speak, but experienced *wonderful interior joy*. I noted from that day the *greatest improvement* in myself brought about by a *more sublime love of God* and much *stronger virtues*. May He be blessed and praised forever, amen.<sup>14</sup>

Here we understand that St Teresa had her direct experience of the Holy Spirit and that she could identify it as from the Holy Spirit Himself. We shall analyze the contents of Teresa's marvelous words explaining the experience of the Holy Spirit and its effects as quoted above. This will help us to see more clearly what exactly her experience of the Holy Spirit was and the effects it produced in the soul.

First of all, the Saint says that the presence of the Holy Spirit with the soul is a *great favor*; a *great good*; a *marvelous favor*; a *gift*. Indeed, the Spirit of God and His gifts must be received as a gift from above. St Teresa understood that by the reception of this gift of the Holy Spirit, her natural power is replaced with a *divine power*. The

---

<sup>14</sup> *Life* ch. 38, 9-11. Italics are added. English tr. from Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol. One (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2001), pp. 259-260.

Holy Spirit has completely taken control of her soul, and she felt the stirring; a completely new experience. The Saint also explains that she saw a dove above her head and the explanations that she gave about the dove is marvelous and we do not find it elsewhere.

Again, St Teresa says that the Holy Spirit is a *good guest* within her soul and she felt the quietness with the arrival of this interior sweet guest from heaven. This made her experience a deep interior joy removing all fears and furnishing her with a great interior certainty. Here we can very well understand that joy is the fruit of the Spirit and that fear is the absence of the Spirit of God (Cf. Gal 5, 16ff.). Moreover, we read in Rom 5, 5: "... God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Truly, the Spirit is given to remain within us.

Through this unique experience of the Holy Spirit St Teresa noted also that a more sublime love of God has reached her soul. Great improvement has come in her spiritual life. That means, as she noted, stronger virtues are there in her life, thanks to the presence of the Holy Spirit in her life.

Thus, we find that St Teresa's unique experience of the Holy Spirit and the results that she mentioned are truly biblical. Prayer and spiritual life cannot improve without a touch of the Holy Spirit. This is the Pentecost experience of St Teresa. In fact, St Teresa remembered it again and again. She speaks of it in her *Spiritual Testimonies* no. 36, 5. Her desire then was how to please the Holy Spirit more and more through special services to Him. Doing something great for the Holy Spirit, for example, as she did in this case a vow of obedience to her confessor Fr. Jerome Gratian,<sup>15</sup> brought special happiness and satisfaction into her life. Although as St Teresa explained, she feared such a vow of obedience would curtail her freedom, the contrary only had happened. That is to say, she felt more freedom and inner light through this act of love to the Holy Spirit. Here we see how the special attention and service to the Holy Spirit can bear fruit rapidly and in marvelous ways.

## **5. Holy Spirit, Unite me with the Father and the Son**

Mystical union with God is experiencing the Most Holy Trinity in a special way. The Three Divine persons become a reality in the life of a mystic. With the special touch and presence of the Holy Spirit, St Teresa, the mystical Doctor of Prayer, began to reach the highest levels of Mystical union with the Holy Trinity. As she narrated in her *Spiritual Testimonies* no. 10, one day Jesus assured her and told her that:

---

<sup>15</sup> For details, see *Spiritual Testimonies*, 36.

... do not be disturbed of anything; rejoice in the good that has been given you, for it is very great; *my Father takes delight in you, and the Holy Spirit loves you.*<sup>16</sup>

It is thus very clear that what Jesus wants to do is to unite a soul with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit in turn comes to open the way to the Father and to the Son. And what does the Father do? He draws the soul to Himself and bestows the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is what St Teresa experienced. She speaks of this clearly in *Spiritual Testimonies* no. 21, 2:

... the Person of the Father drew me to Himself and spoke very pleasant words. Among them, while showing me what he wanted, He told me: "I gave you My Son, and the Holy Spirit, and this Blessed Virgin. What can you give me?"<sup>17</sup>

In fact this above experience of St Teresa occurred in the context in which she had the vision of Our Lady. Thus, we can understand how important is the powerful intercession and presence of the Beloved Mother Mary in one's life to experience the Three persons of the Trinity. Indeed, Mother Mary is the first and the best one who lived Three Divine persons as she is under the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit.

**To sum up**, we can say that St Teresa's prayer life took the new dimension of entering into that true love of God, that heavenly joy when she began to call intensely upon the Holy Spirit. In fact, once St Teresa stepped into the threshold of her mystical levels of prayer experience, it is the Holy Spirit who led her into its higher and highest echelons bringing her up to the mystical union with the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity (the mystical marriage, in the words of St Teresa).

As the biblical and mystical teachings of our spiritual tradition attest, there is no true God experience without the Holy Spirit. However, many do not seem to realize this and pray earnestly to the Holy Spirit. It is only in and through the Holy Spirit that we have any access to the divine milieu where the Trinitarian mystery is revealed to the soul. No love of God will get intensified in one's spiritual life without the Holy Spirit.

And, once the Holy Spirit touches the soul with His love, the soul is then on fire; it progresses rapidly to be with the Father and the Son and the Spirit Himself. The Holy Spirit is the God Who opens the soul to the realm of the Divine Itself. Through

---

<sup>16</sup> English tr. from Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol. One (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2001), p. 324.

<sup>17</sup> English tr. from Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol. One (Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2001), p. 330.



the Holy Spirit, promised and given by Jesus, the union with the Father is achieved.  
St Teresa's life is a fine witness to this truth of our Christian faith.

