

TRANSFORMED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

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Once there was a married couple who had a five-year-old son; they did a lot of outdoor activities together, such as bike-riding, and they were constantly emphasizing to their son the importance of wearing a safety helmet while on a bicycle. One summer day they went for a walk in the country, and came upon a sign saying “Naturist Camp.” They thought it said “Naturalist Camp,” but it didn’t; it said “Naturist”—meaning a nudist colony, or a camp for people not wearing any clothes. The family continued walking, but then, coming toward them, were some bicycle riders—and they were completely naked. The parents quietly started to turn in the other direction, hoping their son hadn’t noticed, but it was too late. In an excited voice he shouted, “Mom, Dad, look! Those people aren’t wearing any safety helmets!”

Sometimes we see only certain things. We have our own perspectives, based on our customs, habits, and outlooks, and as a result, we might overlook something very obvious. That’s OK if we’re ever in a naturist camp (though I can’t think of any good reason why we might be), but for life in general, we might miss out on something very valuable and important—especially from a religious perspective. It’s the Holy Spirit Who can help us broaden our vision, notice what matters, and see things as they truly are—and, in the process, change the direction of our lives and transform us as persons.

The great Protestant evangelist Dwight L. Moody was always talking about the need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Someone once asked him, “If you were filled with the Holy Spirit at Baptism, why do you need to be refilled so often?” Moody answered very humbly and honestly, “Because I leak.”

When it comes to God’s grace, I think it’s safe to say that all of us leak. We waste opportunities, we ignore God’s gifts, we neglect our responsibilities, we fail to grow in holiness, and we sin—both through our human weakness and through our deliberate choice. God gives us His grace, but we leak. The good news is that God’s ability to keep on filling us is infinitely greater than our ability to lose or waste what He gives. God can keep on refilling us again and again, by giving us the gift of His Spirit. God the Father creates us, Jesus the Son redeems us, and God the Holy Spirit sanctifies us. To sanctify or make holy is another way of saying “renews” or “transforms.” Through the Spirit, we are made new; we are re-made in God’s image and likeness, restored to grace and enabled to live as children of God. This is something wonderful and glorious.

A young married couple was facing their first winter in a new home. As the outdoor and indoor temperatures became cooler that fall, they turned on the furnace—but nothing happened, so they called a heating and cooling company. The serviceman came out and quickly diagnosed the problem. The couple was afraid it was going to be something difficult and costly to repair, but to their great relief, the repairman told them they simply

needed a small, inexpensive part for the igniter—that is, the switch which allowed the furnace to turn itself on and off automatically as needed. The furnace was quite capable of producing enough warmth, and the electrical supply was more than adequate; only one simple thing was required, and then everything would be all-right. So it is with many Christians who wonder why their spiritual lives are often cold or dreary. They believe in the power of God and in the merciful and loving presence of Jesus. Quite often what's missing, however, is the spark or igniting power of the Holy Spirit (*Tony Evans' Book of Illustrations*, p. 154)—and if that's the case, we simply need to be more aware of and responsive to the Spirit's presence in the world around us and in our own hearts.

The Holy Spirit is able to bring energy and grace to both the spontaneous and routine experiences of life. By way of analogy, the human body has solid elements—namely, our skeletal structure—and also softer elements, such as our flesh, muscles, and organs. Each set is incomplete without the other. Each set also represents an aspect of the Church. We have a hierarchy or structure, but if the Church is *only* leaders with rules and procedures, it's nothing more than a skeleton with no life in it. We have a community of faith, but without leaders and rules, this community will soon collapse—just as a body cannot live without a skeleton. Both aspects are necessary for life—and when it comes to combining these elements in the Church, the Holy Spirit is the unifying principle.

The same thing is true in our individual lives. We are creatures of habit; we need to have a routine, and to follow a certain schedule. Society depends on this. If we call a bank or store to ask how late they'll be open, we're not told, "Well, it depends on whether or not it rains this afternoon; if it's a nice day, we're going to close early so our employees can go out golfing or fishing." If we're on vacation and we call the closest parish to ask what time Sunday Mass is, the priest or secretary answering the phone isn't going to say, "What time can you get here?" There has to be a reasonable, reliable routine, so that our communities, and the larger society, can function efficiently. That's just part of human nature. The Holy Spirit works within this routine, rewarding us for our fidelity and making our day after day efforts fruitful in the long run. The Spirit works through the established hierarchy and the customs and procedures of the Church, bringing order out of chaos and breathing life into what otherwise would be a dried-up skeleton.

At the same time, the Holy Spirit works outside the established channels, upsetting our routines and giving us experiences of grace at unexpected times and places. The Spirit is *highly* unpredictable and *gloriously* uncontrollable. A chance encounter, an unexpected word from someone, a surprise opportunity, a remembrance of something long forgotten, a strong emotion suddenly coming over us for no rational or logical reason, can all be fingerprints of the Holy Spirit, or the wrapping paper of His gifts. No matter how holy and wise we become, no matter how spiritually and religiously productive we are, no matter how many great things we're doing in God's Name each day, there are far more possibilities and blessings waiting for us than we can ever imagine. It's the Holy Spirit Who shakes us up, and Who causes some cracks to appear in our well-ordered routines, so that additional graces and blessings may enter in. One of the favorite sayings or blessings of the late Bishop Schoenherr of Detroit was "May the Holy Spirit *disturb* you." Because of the way God works, being disturbed by the Holy Spirit *is* a blessing.

The Church has always taught that we pray to God the Father, through Jesus the Son, in the *unity* of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the Unifier, linking us together with other believers, linking our prayers with those of the universal Church, even linking our prayers with those of the angels and saints in Heaven. The Spirit is also the Unifier in terms of bringing together faith and actions.

The Holy Spirit helps us turn belief into practice, making our faith real—a lived experience as opposed to an intellectual one. We can talk about loving our neighbor, but it isn't always easy to do. In fact, it's impossible on our own—we need the Spirit's help. We can talk about the need to discern God's will and answer His call—but how do we actually figure out what we're supposed to do in this particular, concrete situation? On our own, we're just guessing. It's only through the Holy Spirit that we're truly discerning and acting upon God's will for us. We can claim that we're willing to die for our faith, if need be, and we might mean this quite sincerely—but if that moment ever arrived, would we actually be able to make that sacrifice? Not on our own; only the gifts of the Holy Spirit would make it possible for us to stand firm.

Let me ask several rhetorical questions:

- How many of you have mystical experiences, or visions of Jesus and Mary, on a regular basis? . . . Probably few of us—at least, not every day or not very often.
- How many of you, most of the time, or perhaps all of the time, have what you'd call uneventful or ordinary days? . . . Probably all of us.
- How many of you experience these ordinary days as holy days of grace and peace and love? . . . Maybe some of us—but *all* of us can, through the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit turns ordinary experiences into moments of grace. When we think of being holy or saint-like, we tend to assume this means performing heroic deeds or bearing great burdens or seeing the world around us through the eyes of God. Sometimes this is the case—but the Holy Spirit is able to do great things in routine settings and in unlikely surroundings, with ordinary people like us—even when we don't feel particularly holy or spiritual at that given moment. This means we're *all* capable of spiritually great things; it's simply a matter of opening ourselves to the Spirit as much as we can.

Everything good that's happening in the world right now—literally *everything*—is because of the Holy Spirit. We pray that the Spirit will renew the face of the earth, and in many ways this is already happening, one person at a time. Quite a few people can speak of profound religious experiences they've had, times when they've felt God's presence and were overcome with a strong love for Him and their neighbors, times when the beauty and wonder of Heaven broke into their lives for a brief moment—and not just in holy and religious settings like shrines and churches, but in their own, everyday surroundings. There are indeed ways in which the Holy Spirit is renewing the face of the earth—and quite often this process is taking place through each one of us, and in the apparently routine and unexceptional events of our daily lives.

When you get up on Sunday morning to go to Mass, even though you'd rather sleep in, the Spirit is working through you. When you bite your tongue and keep quiet instead of saying something rude or unkind to a person who irritates you, you're cooperating with the Spirit, making the world a little better place. When you spend time with someone who needs company or sympathy or advice, you're allowing the Holy Spirit to influence that person through you. When you contribute money to charity, or do volunteer work in your community, or forgive someone who offended you, or try to console someone who's grieving, or simply cheer up and encourage people by your loving and caring attitude, the Holy Spirit is using you as an instrument of grace—probably without you even being aware of it. As a priest, I find from time to time that people thank me for something I said or did which they found very moving or helpful—when in fact, I didn't think I was being very helpful or useful at all; sometimes I don't even remember the incident they're thanking me for. That's proof—at least in my mind—that any success I have as a priest isn't mine, but comes from the Holy Spirit. You can probably think of examples of this dynamic in your own life—instances when everything seemed wrong, but somehow worked out for the best, and times when you felt you had fumbled the ball, but later found out that, with God's help, you had actually scored a touchdown.

The Holy Spirit is able to use us in our brokenness and inadequacy, helping things click or fall into place in a way that could never have happened if we had been on our own. The Spirit is the Master of Surprises, the Creator of Stories with Happy Endings, and the Conductor of a Vast Symphony of Grace in which each of us has a unique, beautiful, and irreplaceable role to play. These are different images of the Spirit which may be helpful and appealing; there's another one which occurs to me—one which I'm guessing you'll find somewhat surprising. If the Church is a giant kindergarten, the Holy Spirit is the Perfect Kindergarten Teacher. I'm not being disrespectful in using this image (though maybe a bit playful); I really think there's some truth to this analogy. Consider what you might find in a kindergarten classroom: chaos, noise, laughter, shouting, crying, spills, messes, fun, learning, sharing, friendship, and joy. Some of the children are little angels; some of them are naughty; all of them are cute and lovable and potentially delightful. These wonderful little darlings can be headstrong, helpful, inattentive, confusing, and eager to please; kindergarten can be a wonderful place that at times can drive you crazy. Everything I've said can also be true of the Church, and of each individual parish.

I've always admired kindergarten teachers who, through some minor miracle, are able to make everything work and run smoothly, uniting their students in a shared effort of love and learning, of peace and joy. That—if we allow it—is what the Holy Spirit does with and for us. The Spirit uses our efforts to produce something wonderful, even if we're being a little bit naughty or self-centered, even if we can't quite color within the lines, even if we need to have the directions repeated half-a-dozen times before we finally pay attention or understand, even if we ask silly or irrelevant questions, and even if we need an occasional time-out. The Holy Spirit keeps everything in order, helping us learn life's lessons and making it possible for us to graduate into God's Kingdom. Jesus said we're supposed to become like little children in order to enter the Kingdom—and so the image of the Church as a kindergarten, and the Holy Spirit as our Teacher, might—in some profound, silly, or radical way—just hit the target perfectly.

Kindergarten students, of course, can't stay there indefinitely; they have to move on to first grade, then, over the coming years, go through the rest of elementary school, junior high, high school, and perhaps college and even graduate school—while preparing themselves to accept and fulfill the adult responsibilities of life. So it is with us in terms of growing in our faith. Jesus challenges us to take up our cross each day and follow after Him, and the Holy Spirit gives us the knowledge, wisdom, courage, and other spiritual gifts needed to be faithful to our calling and thus fulfill our mission in life.

What are some of the ways the Holy Spirit transforms us? What are some of the signs the Spirit is truly at work in our lives? One author (Dave Nodar, in *Discover Christ*) offers these particular points. (1) The Holy Spirit can help the love of God come alive for us, giving us a profound personal conviction that our Heavenly Father loves us uniquely and personally, and that Jesus Christ offers and seeks an intimate and life-changing relationship with us. (2) Through the Holy Spirit, we become deeply aware of our own personal sinfulness and, more importantly, of God's willingness and, indeed, eagerness to forgive us and cleanse us perfectly and completely of our guilt and shame. (3) The Holy Spirit gives us the power and strength we need to live out and even share our faith in routine, and especially challenging, circumstances. (4) As the Holy Spirit's influence grows in our lives, we become more open to spending time in prayer, Bible reading, and receiving the Sacraments; we increasingly find the fulfillment of spiritual duties as not just something we *have* to do, but something we *need* and *want* to do. (5) We also feel a greater need and desire to praise and thank God—in particular, by praying spontaneously and from the heart, and wanting to express our gratitude to the Lord and glorify Him by what we say and do. (6) The Holy Spirit will help us root out vices and bad behaviors, and replace them with virtues and good habits; also, we'll find a deeper satisfaction in acting righteously. (7) Through the Spirit, we will realize more deeply that we are members of God's family, and in need of the support of our brothers and sisters in Christ; Christian community will become a higher priority in our lives. (8) As we progress in faith and virtue, we'll become more aware of the spiritual gifts we've received, and of our need to use them in building up the Body of Christ, the Church.

These are all wonderful promises; in order to let them unfold in our lives, however, we have to overcome the obstacles of doubt, fear, and unworthiness. Instead of thinking “Well, maybe that's true for others, but not for me,” we must choose to believe that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are available to *anyone* who seeks them—including us. Instead of fearing that if we open ourselves completely to the Holy Spirit, we'll lose control of our lives and be forced to do something way beyond our comfort zone, we must remember that God, in His infinite love, not only knows what is best for us, but is also immensely gentle and patient with us. Instead of using our undeniable unworthiness as an excuse to limit our response to God's call, we must rely on the truth that God's grace can make us worthy, and that—with the single exception of the Blessed Virgin Mary—*every* human servant of God and instrument of His grace has been a sinner in need of forgiveness.

While there's no good reason for us to act as “naturists,” there's every reason to expose ourselves to the warmth and light of the Holy Spirit. As long as our hearts are open, the Spirit is capable of doing wonderful and amazing things in our lives—so let's prepare ourselves for an adventure, buckle up, and enjoy the ride!