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Holy Spirit

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Holy Spirit

When I was a child, "Holy Ghost" was a term that was used when referring to God as the source of creativity throughout creation and of all inspirations in human life. I was much pleased when "Spirit" was substituted for "Ghost," replacing a word that was associated in popular imagery with frightening or negative images of beings that were hostile to humans. Spirit, as, for example, in "school spirit," seemed to indicate a reality that was neither physical nor merely a product of thought or imagination. And "Holy Spirit" seemed to me a far better verbal indication of a loving God acting within us rather than someone akin to a ghost.

When I was ordained a priest, I was delighted that my first Mass was on Pentecost, the Sunday that celebrates the Holy Spirit's inspiration of the people who had been disciples of Jesus, enabling them to overcome doubt and fear and to begin living as a community of belief and love. At that time and still today, I experience joy in considering movements of Spirit as a way to understand God's personal and immediate presence in and with people, as distinct from the feelings elicited when only considering mere human organizations or political entities. People, of themselves, can become violently protective of ideologies, whether religious or political, but when Spirit is involved, the power of love enables humans to transcend even fierce opposition, and to seek peaceful unity in all manner of diversity.

Attaching the word "Holy" to "Spirit" does not mean that we should think that there exists a complete separation between, for example, "school spirit" and a Spirit associated with God. Almost everything that is complementary to the movement of love participates in the direct and personal activity of God within us. We know what we mean when we call persons and things "holy," distinguishing them from whomever and whatever we consider ordinary. But, from another perspective, the Holy Spirit, as the personal presence and action of God's love, can inform and transform any situation in which we accept the inspirations offered us. The saying, "joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God" might help us to recognize that many of our ordinary experiences are truly holy.

Love is not a material or physical thing, nor is it only a feeling or a sentiment. We give and receive love, but in our experience, especially when love is accompanied by even the gentlest sense of joy, we might recognize that there is more to love than what we humans are capable of by ourselves. If we think of Holy Spirit not as something but as Person who has direct access to us at all times, who exercises this power always and only for our benefit, and never to control us, our experiences of love can rightly be seen as holy, as inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Whenever we pray, "Come, Holy Spirit," we are making the choice to open ourselves to experiences of love.