## Part 4: The Holy Spirit: He or She?

I have discussed how Mary reinforces the dignity of women and the reasons the Church uses masculine pronouns to refer to the persons of the triune God while insisting that the use of those pronouns has nothing to do with claims about God's gender. With this reflection, we will focus on the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Trinity. Given that the topic can quickly become "too much to bear" given its complexity, I will be as brief and "painless" as possible.

The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity, consubstantial with the Father and the Son, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Person of the Holy Spirit is the bond of love between them that unites both the Persons of the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is the gift of love eternally exchanged between the divine Persons.

The Spirit's procession from the Father and the Son reflects this personal, willful act of divine love at the heart of the Trinity. Since the love between the Father and the Son is a decision, it is an act of the will that can be exercised only by persons,[1] in this case, the Person of the Father and the Person of the Son. The love between the Father and the Son is an exchange of persons so intimate, dynamic, and life-giving that it generates the third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Remember, only a person can love, necessitating that the love between the Father and the Son generates, in this case, the Third Person of the Trinity.

By analogy, the love between a husband and wife generates a third person, the child, who embodies the love between the spouses and, simultaneously, the mutual love between the spouses and the child. The love between a husband and wife is an exchange of persons that does not produce something but someone. In this way, the family mirrors the interior life and dynamic of the Trinity.[2]

Why is the Holy Spirit not given a proper name like the Father and the Son? Saint Cyril of Alexandria teaches: 'The Holy Spirit is the one [who] ... pours forth from God the Father, through the Son, and shows us his existence, in the image of the breath of the mouth.'"[3] St. Cyril's analogy of the Spirit as the "breath of the mouth" leaves no question about how intimate is the relationship between the three divine persons of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit's procession from the Father and the Son, as the "breath of love" between them, is a central aspect of the Spirit's identity. The Spirit's role is to manifest and communicate divine love rather than have a distinct, personal, proper name.

The Catholic Church teaches that each of the three persons of the Blessed Trinity is to be referenced with masculine imagery. Masculine imagery and pronouns have theological meaning. It is not because God is male but because these masculine terms convey essential theological truths about God the Father's relationship to the other Persons of the Trinity and creation. As the Catechism explains, the term "Father" indicates that God is "the first origin of everything and transcendent authority" as well as "goodness and

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[1] *Mysterium Filii Dei*, Mystery of Faith - On the Doctrine and Worship of the Eucharist, Pope Paul VI 1965, https://www.papalencyclicals.net/paul06/p6myster.htm.

[2] The Catholic Church teaches that whenever we make a positive statement about God, we must also negate or deny the human limitations implied in the statement. We know all too well how we sinful beings fail to live up to the ideal of marriage and family life that God puts before us. Still, we get glimpses of what that can look like which are enough to keep us striving to make it a reality whenever we can.

[3] *Catechism of the Ukranian Catholic Church: Christ-Our Psacha,* Synod of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, 2016, #97

loving care for all his children."[4] Furthermore, using masculine imagery to explain God's relationship to creation protects God's transcendence so that God is not identified with his creation. (For a more thorough consideration of this point, see the preceding reflection, "*God, our Father or God, our Mother?",* pages 3-4.)

The above are the main reasons the Church uses masculine imagery when speaking of the Trinity, including the Holy Spirit. In light of this, some may wonder why there is a discussion about the gender of the Holy Spirit. There are several reasons, and the following are not listed in any particular order, nor are they meant to be all-inclusive.

First, the grammatical gender of the word spirit in the Greek translations of the Old and New Testaments does not necessarily reveal the grammatical gender of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit in Greek is alternately described using masculine, feminine, or even neuter pronouns, depending on the context. In Hebrew, the word for Spirit is ruach. In Aramaic, the word for Spirit is rucha. Both rucha and ruach are grammatically feminine, so female pronouns are sometimes used when those words refer to the Spirit. That is not the case when speaking of the Father and the Son.

This has led theologians, biblical scholars, and other writers to explore the implications of this in understanding the role of the Third Person of the Trinity. Remember, God is neither masculine nor feminine, but using masculine images helps us understand certain things about God. Some believe that exploring feminine language only associated with the Holy Spirit may lead to a designation of the Third Person as being best identified using feminine pronouns.

For example, the Holy Spirit is compared to a merciful mother in the Syrian liturgy. "One of the Syrian fathers, writing about the year 340, said that the man who does not marry gives honor to God, the Father and the Holy Spirit, his mother."[5] From one of the homilies of Makarios, we hear, "After the fall, man did not look upon the true Heavenly Father or the good, gentle and kind mother, the grace of the Holy Spirit, nor the sweet and long poor brother, the Lord."[6] He also uses a powerful metaphor comparing God's immanence to a mother's relationship with her child in the womb: "The reason you don't see God [is] not that God isn't visible... [it's] for the same reason that a baby in its mother's womb can't see its mother... not that the mother isn't present, the mother is omnipresent. The mother completely envelops the child."[7] Finally, St. Maximilian Kolbe observed: "The nature of the union of the Holy Spirit and Mary consists in the union of wills. Mary identifies so thoroughly with the will of God that one can speak about a quasi-incarnation of the Holy Spirit." This reflects how feminine imagery (through Mary) helps express God's immanent presence."[8]

Second, the predominance of masculine images for the Blessed Trinity has had the unintended consequence of communicating that being masculine is superior to being feminine. We have definite masculine imagery with the Father and the Son. Now, that is not because God is intrinsically masculine. Instead, masculine imagery is used because this helps us understand certain aspects of the divine nature. Therefore, the Church uses the masculine pronoun "he" when referring to the Holy Spirit. Again, that does not imply that all three persons of the Trinity have a male gender since God transcends gender. It

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[4] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #239.
[5] Rolheiser, Ron, O.M.I., podcast, *Spiritual Journey Exploration*.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Rolheiser, Ron, podcast, *Walking in Light and Walking in Darkness.*
[8] Anne Marie of Jesus, O.C.D., podcast, Trinity Talks: *Mary, Icon of the Holy Spirit*.

explains how the Persons of the Trinity relate to each other and protects certain truths about that relationship, the divine nature, and the relationship with creation.

Third, the Holy Spirit has no personal or proper name like the Father and the Son. Instead, the third person of the Trinity has a title. That is because the Spirit's procession from the Father and from the Son has no proper name, unlike the Son's generation from the Father. The Third Person of the Trinity is the mutual love between the three Persons of the Trinity because only persons can love.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit had long been regarded as the forgotten person of the Blessed Trinity.[9] The faithful were content with praying to the Father and the Son with little reference to the Spirit. With the Second Vatican Council, more attention was given to the Person of the Holy Spirit. That opened the door to more theological studies about the Holy Spirit in the West, which had been lacking compared to the Eastern Orthodox Church, where the Spirit has played a vital role in theology, liturgy, and popular piety. This development has led to new interest in better understanding the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity.

Fifth, we live in an age that is more sensitive to past and present discrimination against and marginalization of women in society, as well as toxic masculinity, misogyny, patriarchy, and male violence. Some theologians and others are asking if the current use of masculine language can be expanded to include the feminine. That thinking is bolstered by the intimate involvement of the Holy Spirit in the life of the mother of Jesus, the Son of God. Consequently, some think that Mary reveals or expresses the feminine aspect of God that they believe is proper to the Holy Spirit. As an aside, that becomes problematic when we describe Mary conceiving Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, which we ordinarily associate with being masculine.

Pope Paul VI wrote in *Marialis Cultus*, "It is sometimes said that many spiritual writings today do not sufficiently reflect the whole doctrine concerning the Holy Spirit. It is the task of specialists to verify and weigh the truth of this assertion. Still, our task is to exhort everyone, especially those in the pastoral ministry and theologians, to meditate more deeply on the working of the Holy Spirit in the history of salvation and ensure that Christian spiritual writings give due prominence to His life-giving action. Such a study will highlight the hidden relationship between the Spirit of God and the Virgin of Nazareth and show their influence on the Church. From a more profound meditation on the truths of the Faith will flow a more vital piety."[10]

That leads to the reflection: *Mary, Icon of the Holy Spirit*. The Catholic Church sees Mary as the preeminent "icon" or visible representation of the Holy Spirit's work in salvation history, especially when speaking about the Incarnation and the birth of the Church. Her feminine qualities and roles as the Mother of God and the Mother of the Church serve as a window through which we can better glimpse and contemplate the Spirit's work in the Church and the world.

Current Church teachings do not affirm that Mary reveals the feminine qualities of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit reveals through her the dignity of all women. The Spirit affirms those qualities we associate with being feminine as suitable, worthy, and necessary to contemplate the Spirit's action in the Church and the world. They do not imply a feminine dimension or gender within the Holy Spirit any more than

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[9]" A greater awareness of the Holy Spirit has been growing within the Catholic Church in this (20th) century. Leo XIII's encyclical on the Holy Spirit (1897) began this recovery of the Holy Spirit, sometimes referred to as the "forgotten God." Vatican II, as Paul VI frequently pointed out, made 258 references to the Holy Spirit. Frisk, Sr. M. Jean, *The Holy Spirit and Mary*, https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/h/holy-spirit-and-mary.php.

[10] *Marialis Cultus*, Pope Paul VI, 1974, #27.

God the Father or God the Son implies a masculine or gender dimension in the Godhead. Again, God transcends any references to gender. Masculine and feminine imagery for God are not inherent characteristics of the uncreated God. The Church's use of both masculine and feminine imagery is ultimately an anthropomorphic[11] way of speaking about the mystery of God.

Remember what I said earlier? God's attempt to communicate with us is comparable to humans communicating with a slug! We should not be surprised if language about God leaves us scratching our heads, with a headache, or both!

Let me conclude this reflection with this thought. St. Augustine, perhaps the most influential Father of the Church after St. Thomas Aquinas, lived in the third and fourth centuries. One day, he had a vision. A child on the beach had dug a hole in the sand into which he was emptying his pail of ocean water. Augustine sees this and asks what he is doing. The child replies, "I am trying to fill this hole with the entire ocean." Then the thought came to St. Augustine that it is just as impossible to fill this tiny human mind of his with the ocean that is the divine mystery."

A large portion of humility mixed with a healthy portion of wonder and awe is necessary when seeking to fathom the inner life of God, who will never fit nicely into our preconceived ideas, no matter how hard we try. That will be abundantly clear should we be found worthy of heaven and drawn into the beatific vision.

[11] Anthropomorphism is ascribing human form or characteristics to a being or thing not human.