

LIVING IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

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Few expressions so succinctly summarize what is asked of us as Christians as does the expression: “to live in the Spirit.” Too often, however, this phrase is used in a way that is too pious, too over-charged with charismatic fervour, or too theologically abstract to have much meaning for ordinary people. It may well summarize Christian life, but it can also be little more than a very vague platitude. What does it mean “to live in the Spirit?”

St. Paul, in attempting to specify this, is anything but piously deluded or theologically abstract. Rather he speaks with a clarity that leaves almost no room for vagueness or false sentiment. He begins by a certain VIA NEGATIVA, telling us that, if in our lives there is “lewd conduct, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hostilities, bickering, jealousy, outbursts of rage, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factionalism, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like”, then we are not living in the spirit, pure and simple. Conversely, we are living in the spirit when, in our lives, there is “charity, joy, peace, patience, endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness, and chastity.” (Galatians, 5)

This is a valuable insight because, if we take Paul’s words seriously, we can never delude ourselves into identifying true life in the Spirit with what it is so often confused with, namely, false piety and over-privatized sentiment (in pious circles) and confrontation out of hurt, paranoia, and narrow loyalties (in both liberal and conservative circles). When the fruits of the Spirit are absent, irrespective of how spiritually confident and self-righteous we might feel or how right our cause might seem, then the Spirit too is absent. We must be clear about this.

The Spirit is present only when charity, joy, peace, patience, endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness, and chastity are deeply in our lives – and permeate the air around us.

The Holy Spirit, as classically defined in theology, is “the love between the God and Christ, the Father and the Son.” It is in meditating this concept that we come to some understanding of what it means to live in the Spirit. Let me try to elaborate on this by using an image, that of romantic love in its peak fervour.

Imagine a man and a woman who are deeply, passionately, and completely in love. What will characterize their relationship? Constant giving and receiving, resulting in an ever-deeper relationship and an ever intensifying gratitude – which will leave

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them both, daily, feeling ever more mellow, joyful, peaceful, mild, patient, chaste, and wanting to reach out and share with others what is so quickening in their own lives. Moreover, their love for each other will create, around them, an ambience, a climate, an atmosphere of charity, joy, peace, patience, mildness, and chastity. The movement of giving-and-receiving-in-gratitude between them will create a warm hearth where others will spontaneously come to seek warmth in a world which offers too little peace, patience, joy, and the like.

Such a relationship can be a modest indicator for what happens in the Trinity, of how the Father and the Son generate the Spirit, and what results from this generation.

- The Father constantly creates and gives life.
- The Son receives life from the Father and gives it back in gratitude.
- This then (as is true in all relationships wherein gift is received lovingly) makes it possible for the Father to give even more to the Son.
- As this flow of life, this giving and receiving, goes on, gratitude intensifies and an energy, a spirit, the Holy Spirit, is created.
- This Spirit, since it is generated by gratitude, naturally is a Spirit of charity, joy, peace, patience, goodness, long-suffering, mildness, faith, and chastity. It is then too a spirit that is naturally incompatible with idolatry, adultery, violence, gossip, factionalism, jealousy, rage, and infidelity.

When we meditate on how the Holy Spirit is generated, we are under less illusion as to what it means to live in the Spirit. To believe that we are living in the Spirit when our lives are not permeated by, and radiating, gratitude is to be dangerously deluded. We must be clear about this, lest, as poet William Stafford puts it: "Following the wrong God home, we may both miss our star."