

Short exegesis on the Holy Spirit

How to listen to the Holy Spirit when He talks to the heart.

Pentecost

2015

SYNOPSIS:A short catechesis on the Holy Spirit, covering His procession from the Father, the various symbols for the Holy Spirit, and the important scripture text which tells us not to "quench the Spirit", and about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Then we get to the best part, the best a pastor has to give his flock. We discuss how the Holy Spirit communicates with us, and how to listen to and "feel" our heart, and this "understanding that is within us" will teach us all things, and guide and help us in everything. We must learn to know when our heart is cold, or warm, enlarged or shriveled up, soft or hard. This is a skill which we must learn; we can speak a little bit about it, but only God can teach us.

In the Name of The Father, and of The Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today a great and holy day. It is very difficult to speak about it in a sermon from the Scriptures because the Scriptures that describe the coming of the Holy Spirit are only the beginning. They only describe the event, but the Holy Spirit truly gives us Life. Without the Holy Spirit, we would have no Life, no Knowledge of God. We would not be able to do one good thing. So we should understand a little bit about the Holy Spirit.

I thought what I would do today is sort of a little catechetical primer on the Holy Spirit. Certainly I will not cover everything and certainly it will be a little bit eclectic because I'm a little bit eclectic. After that, I want to tell you the most important thing that I know how to tell you as a pastor about the Holy Spirit. It is the most practical thing, but it's not an easy thing; it's not a kind of thing such that you can just follow directions and you can have it happen like baking a cake. But it is the most important thing that I can tell you about the Holy Spirit.

It's a skill that you can learn if you try to learn it because I've learned it a little bit. And the more I read from the Neptic Fathers that I've been reading lately, the more I realize how little I've learned. But indeed, I've learned a little and I'll tell you what I've learned.

So, let's talk about the Holy Spirit. Let's start at the beginning, the *non-beginning* beginning, when **God was** and there was nothing else. The Holy Trinity has revealed Himself to us: He is Father without beginning, and the Father has a son Who is eternally begotten of The Father, so His *beginningless* beginning is in The Father, but before all things. And the Holy Spirit proceeds from The Father.

Now there are examples, but we won't go into them right now, things about a sun or a river, things that can give you some understanding of the Holy Trinity. What we need to know about the Holy Trinity is that we don't know anything about the Holy Trinity *unless He reveals Himself to us*, unless we are able to receive what He reveals.

God is a manifest fact. *He is the only fact in the universe.* He is the only thing in the universe, if you can call God a thing, that is *alive in and of itself*. Everything else is alive because He chooses for it to be alive. If He removes His Hand, it would instantly not only not be alive, but wink out of existence entirely. So God's Hand is upon all things, even upon those things we call dead because they have not ceased to exist.

And the Holy Spirit is an equal, not part of God - that's the wrong way to say it because God is not in parts - God is simple and undivided - He is an equal hypostasis of God, an equal Person, if you will, of God. God is three Persons undivided, equal in their Godhead, differing with each other in only one way that has been revealed to us

and we don't even understand that. And that is that God the Father is Father, He is Father of the Son who was eternally begotten of Him for all ages, not created, not made, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from Him eternally.

And that is **all** we understand about the Holy Trinity in terms of facts about Him. And the only way we learn about the Holy Trinity is to **become like Him**. There's no book learning that you can have to understand the Holy Trinity. You can read about the Orthodox Faith, from St. John Damascene, and you can understand a few things, certainly terminology. You can read St. Basil the Great. But to understand the Holy Spirit, you have to become like Him. To understand the Holy Trinity, you have to become like Him.

Let's talk about some symbols of the Holy Spirit and a little bit about what is said in the Scripture about Him.

In the account that we heard today¹, the Holy Spirit was manifested first in a rushing, mighty wind and then in tongues of fire that set upon each of the disciples' heads. Those are two of the symbols of the Holy Spirit.

Fire: because the Holy Spirit cleanses and illuminates. But He also burns. He also roots out passion.

Wind: because, according to our Lord, the Holy Spirit is like the wind that goes where it will². When He was speaking of Nicodemus, He was speaking of this. The Holy Spirit goes where He wills. He can go anywhere He wants. And in fact, He is everywhere that He wants to be all at the same time. Just as we don't understand the wind, why the wind goes here and then there, so we do not understand why the Holy Spirit goes here and then there, and is everywhere, and He manifests to some and not to others, and some understand Him and some do not.

The Holy Spirit is also symbolized by water. The Lord said, in fact we have the account of it today³, that out of His belly shall flow forth rivers of living water. That's speaking of The Spirit. Water also cleanses. Water gives life and without water there is no life on earth. The Holy Spirit gives life.

He is also symbolized by the cloud. During the procession of the Jews, that long procession of forty years because of their disobedience, (it's only a two week trip by the way) the cloud by day would show them where to go.⁴ That was the Holy Spirit. Also the fire by night was the Holy Spirit showing them the way. And also, when Jesus was on Mt. Tabor with His three disciples, and showed Himself as He really is with the uncreated Light streaming from Him, the cloud came over them. And the cloud is the Holy Spirit.

Now, physically, a cloud, is not the Holy Spirit; it's a symbol. What do clouds do? If you've been flying in an airplane and you go through a cloud, you're completely enveloped by the cloud. You see nothing else but cloud. It fills all things. It is present everywhere. That is how the Holy Spirit is like a cloud.

We also symbolize the Holy Spirit by the dove⁵. A dove is a pure bird, it would not soil its nesting space and it's a clean bird. And of course, white has always been a symbol of purity.

These are the major symbols of the Holy Spirit.

I want to talk about a couple of things that the Scripture says and explain them, and then we will get to what is really the most important part. So, if you feel a little bit sleepy and bored, be sleepy and bored for the next couple of minutes and then wake up because I'm going to tell you the most important part in a couple of minutes. It's the hardest part to explain, too, but we'll see how we do.

The Scripture tells us to **"quench not the Spirit."**⁶ What does this mean? The Holy Spirit abides in us and enlightens us in all things. Anything good that you do is because the Holy Spirit has enlightened you and aided you. If you do anything bad the Holy Spirit will enlighten you, if you will listen, about your sin.

Quenching the Spirit is to *not listen* to the Holy Spirit. It is to do according to our own will and not according to His. That is the way of death. When we sin, there are always signs that we have sinned. I'll talk about those a little bit later because that's really the most important part

There is a term in the Scriptures that many people do not understand: "*Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit*".⁷ Some think that it is to commit suicide since this sin would be the last earthly act of a person. That's not blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is to **resist the Holy Spirit over the course of your life**. It is to not repent. We're all in danger of committing blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. We should all actually fear that sin. We should always repent of the things we do, or actually, not so much the things we do as *who we are*. You should repent of who you are. You should be a better person than you are. **That's the whole point to being a Christian, you should become better** because we're going to be in the presence of the Best. And that which is impure cannot bear being in the presence of Purity.

So the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is to not repent over the course of your life. At what point has the person committed blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? God knows this. I've known people that I don't think will ever repent. I think they've already committed blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. I can see this sometimes in their eyes. There's not life in their eyes. And they're going to live the rest of their life as a shell, no longer really as a human being because they have hardened their heart against God.

But even a person who appears to have done this can find their way, sometimes through terrible means that expose their sin. So the only One Who knows if a person has committed blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is God. And the only time that determination is made is after their death because God waits even until the end of life for someone to repent.

Now let's talk about the most important part, the pastoral part that I wish to impart to you.

It has to do with the command to "**Quench not the Holy Spirit**". It also has to do with the **purpose of life** as defined by my patron, St. Seraphim. Do you remember what he said? He says the purpose of life is the **acquisition of the Holy Spirit**⁸. So all of your life, you should be acquiring, much like a trader would acquire. You should acquire much like a miser would acquire and wants more and more money. You should want more and more of The Spirit.

And how do you acquire the Holy Spirit? **You take on His attributes**. We know many of His attributes, they're described in the Scriptures and by the symbols we mentioned and also by the prayer, "*O Heavenly King*."⁹ So let's look at that quickly and understand some of the things that we must do to acquire the Holy Spirit.

"*O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth*." We must live honestly, not just by telling the truth to people when they ask us something, but an *internal honesty with yourself and with God*. That's the hardest honesty. It's enough to be able to tell the truth to yourself. And The Spirit of Truth will help you to be able to tell the truth to yourself.

We say, "*Who art everywhere present and fillest all things*." So we should become everywhere present and filling all things. We can't do that like the Holy Spirit does. But everywhere we are, whatever we are doing, there is only one important thing on our agenda: To live as a Christian, to love our brother, to be like God. That is what I mean by being everywhere present. **It is being always in the moment of living according to God**. That's a hard thing, but it can be accomplished even in this world.

And then the rest of this prayer says, "*Come and abide in us, cleanse us of all our impurities and save our souls, O Good One*." I want to say something about the last part of that prayer in a moment¹⁰ because the need for last part of the prayer should eventually disappear.

So, how do you acquire the Holy Spirit? *By thinking spiritually.* The Lord said to Nicodemus that that which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of Spirit is Spirit.¹¹ He's teaching a very important thing: to learn to live spiritually, and see the truth of everything, the **Actual Truth**, not the appearance of truth, but the essence of what everything is. Thinking spiritually tells us if something is good or is bad. And the only way to know the essence of something is to think spiritually. It is to have the Holy Spirit enlightening you in words that cannot be uttered in any language because the Holy Spirit speaks to the heart.

How do you listen to the Holy Spirit? **This is the best I can give you as a pastor. This is the most important thing I can say to you.** Like I said, there is no instruction manual for this. But it is the most important thing to learn.

You must learn to listen to your heart.

You must learn to feel your heart as much as if it was out of your chest and pumping in your hands. It's every rhythm. It's every move.

Now I'm not speaking of the physical organ. I'm speaking of the Holy Spirit communicating with your soul whose seat is the heart.

You must learn to look into your heart for everything you do. That's your first evaluation of whether something is good or bad.

So, when you encounter some situation, you should be able to look into your heart. You should feel your heart.

You should know

if your heart is hot or if it is cold,
if it's soft or if it is like stone,
if it is dark or if it is light.

You should feel the perturbations in your heart. That is the Holy Spirit speaking to you¹². That's the most important skill you can learn. And that skill can only be learned if you really pay attention. It's the only way to learn it. You must be focused on it.

So, in your daily life, you should always be listening to your heart because your heart is being spoken to by the Holy Spirit. And it will tell you everything you need to know.

There is one prayer, in the Presanctified Liturgy, it's a prayer that a priest says privately, and he mentions "the understanding that which is in us"¹³. This is not something that is sort of a 'new agey' sort of thing that people believe in, as if we have some sort of wisdom from some collective consciousness. That's all a bunch of malarkey. The *understanding that is within us* is the Holy Spirit enlightening us and you must listen closely to hear it.

A good friend of mine once said something and it applies well here: "You can't hear a conversation with someone when there's a train rushing through your head." I used to go walking on the railroad tracks on a certain job, when I had lunch and I wasn't that smart. Sometimes I would stand really close as the train would go by. It was unbelievably loud. The engineer didn't like it; he would blow his horn at me. A train is unbelievably loud when you're standing near it. If there's a train going through your head, you don't hear anything.

And if there's a train going through our heads, that's *our false motivations* : Our bad attitudes: Our laziness: Our unspiritual way of looking at things: Our shallow way of living. That's the train. And you can't hear the Spirit if you've got that train.

Remember when Elias heard God, and knew God was present?¹⁴ It wasn't in the earthquake or the flood or the fire. It was in that little still wind. You can't hear a still wind unless you're quiet. So he was standing quietly and God was Present. *You must learn to be quiet to hear God.*

I'm not talking about being quiet by not speaking. I'm not talking about being quiet by quitting your job and moving off to a mountain. **I'm talking about being quiet by listening to your heart.** You can be quiet in the midst of the city and you can be very loud in the desert. We must listen to our heart. And that is where the Holy Spirit speaks to us.

Try this. Some of you may not understand what I am telling you. I'm telling you the most important thing I can say to you because it's the way to have life. It's the way to have water springing up from the belly, that Living Water that refreshes everything and gives Life to everything.

Everything we do, we must look at spiritually. There is nothing that we do that we should not look at spiritually. If you cannot look at something spiritually, it's a good sign you shouldn't be doing it.

So learn to look into your heart. As I said to you, I can't explain to you how to do this. Only God can explain to you how to do this. But you must focus on this, desire this. That's basically what the prayer, "O Heavenly King," is saying. "Come and abide in us, cleanse us of all impurities and save our souls."

We're asking God, the Holy Spirit, to fill us, envelop us and lead us in everything we do.

We are much like a child who is always checking back to his mother or father. Is this right? Is this okay? Is this person safe? That's what children who have parents that are reliable, do. They're always checking with their parents. You can see that today, in the infants today. We should be like that. Everything that we do, we should be looking backwards to the Holy Spirit. Is this alright? Is this what I should do? Is this how I should think? Is this how I should be? Is this the person I'm supposed to be? Or, is this wrong? the Holy Spirit will tell you through your heart. Your heart will feel cold, or your heart will feel warm.

I think every single one of us has had some conflict with a person. I want to give you a concrete example. Unless there is a saint among us that is invisible to our eyes, every single one of us has had some conflict with a person, somebody that we just don't like very well. They haven't treated us well. They're a braggart or they're unkind or they're a loud mouth, and we just don't like them that much.

And so, when we see them and they enter the room, our heart will tell us how we feel about them. Our heart will tell us when there's a darkening or if there's a coldness. That's a sign of sin. That's a sign of judgment, or jealousy, or of anger, or of remembering wrongs, or maybe of all of those things. The heart will tell you. All of us have experienced this. Perhaps someone has wronged us from years ago. If we think that we're over from what was done or that we have forgiven that person, then we find out that that person has remarried or has gotten a great job or some other such thing. What does our heart tell us then?

If our heart is glad for them, if our heart is warm and enlarged, then we know that we have repented of our sin. We no longer judge them, we no longer have any bitterness. But if our heart constricts, feels smaller and shriveled up like a prune, then we know that we have not yet forgiven them. And we are still filled with bitterness.

This example can be used in any other area of life. The basic principles to listen to your heart not so much with your ear, but you feel it. You feel whether your heart is warm or cold, whether it is soft or hard like rock, whether or not it is enlarged or whether or not it shriveled, whether or not it's light or it's dark. Evaluate your heart because the Holy Spirit is speaking to your heart.

As I said, this is the best I can give you. This is the most important thing I can say to you because this is the Way of Life.

May God help us to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to hear Him.

Amen.

(At the conclusion of The Divine Liturgy)

I wanted to add one thing that I forgot to say in the sermon. And that is, I told you that at the ending part of the prayer, “O Heavenly King,” Where it says, “Cleanse us of all our iniquities,” that part of the prayer we won’t say that forever because when we are in the Presence of God, we won’t have any need to say that anymore. We will be abiding in Him and He in us.

So, the Scripture, I was asking Reader David, there’s a Scripture that basically more or less says that in somewhat of a dark way, where The Lord asks us actually to stop praying. You know there’s a place where The Lord Jesus Christ actually tells us to stop praying. Did you know that?

It does not contradict what Paul says which is pray without ceasing. I couldn’t find the reference, but He says at that time, basically you are to stop praying. You stop asking when you have what you ask for.

So we continue to say, “O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, who art everywhere Present and fillest all things. Come and abide in us and cleanse us of all impurities and save our souls, O Good One.” We say this prayer because He does *not completely abide in us yet* nor are we completely pure yet. But there will come a time when He will completely abide in us. And at that time, we will no longer say that prayer. That’ll be in the next age.

Slava Bogy!

Priest Seraphim Holland 2015

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¹ Acts 2:1-11

² See John 3, the encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus. Read it all!

³ John 7:37-52; 8:12

⁴ Exodus 13:21-22 And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night: (22) He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, *from* before the people.

⁵ Mat 3:16-17 And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: (17) And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5:19 Quench not the Spirit.

⁷ Mat 12:31 Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy *against* the *Holy* Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men.

⁸ The Conversation of St Seraphim with Motovilov <http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/wonderful.aspx> "In acquiring this Spirit of God consists the true aim of our Christian life, while prayer, vigil, fasting, almsgiving and other good works done for Christ's sake are merely means for acquiring the Spirit of God."

⁹ "O Heavenly King" is a very common prayer used many times by Orthodox Christians: "O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, You are everywhere and fill all things. Treasury of blessings and Giver of life: come and abide in us, and cleanse us from every impurity, and save our souls, O Good One!"

¹⁰ Sometimes, in sermons, I forget things and do not fulfill my promises. The fulfillment of this promise was after the sermons and liturgy ended.

¹¹ John 3:5-6 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and *of* the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. (6) That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

¹² This partially explains what I am talking about: Rom 8:26 Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

¹³ First Prayer of the Faithful, in the Presanctified liturgy of St Gregory the Dialogist, Pope of Rome: "First Prayer of the Faithful:

"O God, great and worthy to be praised, who through the life-giving death of Thy Christ hast translated us from corruption to incorruption: Deliver thou all our senses from deadly passions; **setting over them as a good ruler the understanding that is in us.** Let our eye have no part in any evil sight; let our hearing be inaccessible to all idle words; and let our tongue be purged from unseemly speech. Purify our lips which praise thee, O Lord. Make our hands to abstain from evil deeds and to work only such things as are acceptable unto thee, establishing all our members and our minds by thy grace."

<http://www.orthodox.net/services/presanctified-liturgy-of-pope-gregory-the-dialogist.doc>

¹⁴ 1Kings 19:11-13 And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; *but* the LORD *was* not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; *but* the LORD *was* not in the earthquake: (12) And after the earthquake a fire; *but* the LORD *was* not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. (13) And it was *so*, when Elijah heard *it*, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, *there came* a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?