

Mass of the Holy Spirit

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Jesus boldly declares in this Gospel story that the Spirit of God is with him, and that Spirit sends him out to the poor, the oppressed, the sightless and the suffering. “Yea” for Jesus! What about us?

I return now to a theme that I alluded to in my opening comments. We are not here this afternoon to invoke some elusive ghostly presence who is – I don’t know – somewhere other than here, with us, now. True, this Spirit cannot be put into a Petri dish and studied, nor laid out on a table and dissected, nor weighed on a scale; but then neither can love, integrity or faithfulness. But those qualities are no less real for that reason, and we are dreadfully impoverished when they are absent from our lives.

Let one more eloquent than I make the point. In the novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, a character named August explains to a young girl named Lily the significance of a ritual regularly celebrated by her community that centers on an image of Mary. This passage artfully expresses the mysterious presence that is the heart and soul of every human being and the focus of our liturgy:

“Listen to me now, Lily, I am going to tell you something I want you to always remember, all right?”

“Mary is not some magical being out there like a fairy godmother. She’s not the statue in the parlor. She’s something inside of you.”

“All those times your father treated you mean, Mary was the voice in you that said, ‘No, I will not bow down to this. I am Lily Melissa Owens, I will not bow down.’ Whether you could hear the voice or not, she was in there saying it.”

“When you’re unsure of yourself...when you start pulling back into doubt and small living, she’s the one inside you saying, ‘Get up from there and live like the glorious girl you are.’ She’s the power inside you, you understand?”

“And whatever it is that keeps widening your heart, that’s Mary, too, not only the power inside you but the love. And when you get down to it, Lily, that’s the only purpose grand enough for human life. Not just to love – but to persist in love.”

“Whatever keeps widening your heart.” “Whatever tells you to live like the glorious person you are.” “The power inside of you.” “Love” – not really “Mary” but the Holy Spirit whom we invoke at this liturgy. Whether we listen to that voice or not, the Spirit is within each one of us, saying over and over again, “persist in love.” Today we pray together that we may heed that voice – not those other seductively deceptive voices that speak exclusively of wealth, power,

appearance and status but serve only to fracture our communities and erode our humanity. We pray for the wisdom and the courage to heed that voice from deep within which calls us to be bigger than we think we are; to reach out to those who do not have what we have, to walk with the lame and weep with the sorrowing. How we name that voice – whether conscience, integrity, true self, Tao, torah, human decency, Mary or Holy Spirit – is not as important as that we listen to that voice above all others.

Let me conclude with another illustrative example. A recent graduate from another Jesuit university wrote this about his volunteer service experience during college:

With minimal training, I was thrown into a setting in which I felt completely out of place, very uncomfortable, and forced to face not only poverty, but the extreme suffering, sorrow, and loneliness of those in a low-end hospice care facility. During my first visit, I was paired with an 85-year-old woman suffering from Alzheimer's, whom I visited for the seven months preceding her death.

My experience overwhelmed me with a sense of utter futility. I could not cure diseases or stave off death, nor could I suddenly make her family and caretakers care about her as a person, rather than treat her as a burden or just another patient. In the face of sickness, loneliness, and imminent death, I longed to help her in some meaningful way but found myself helpless to do so. In this setting, however, I found within myself a sense of compassion and a capacity to love that I had never experienced before. The most I could offer her was myself – someone to be with her and love her to the end of her life. Even though she never remembered me from one visit to the next, I learned from her what it meant to love others in their suffering and sorrow. The experience demanded considerable reflection, struggle, and awareness of another's suffering – breaking free from the superficiality of thought relationships and experiences that permeate our culture.

August in *The Secret Life of Bees* gave the name “Mary” to that young man’s compassion, to his capacity for love and for being with the suffering and sorrowing woman, the energy to free himself from superficiality. Christians call that internal power or voice “Holy Spirit,” and thereby acknowledge and celebrate that it is of God and therefore eternal and never ending. As the voice of God, it – and only it – is completely trustworthy. Jesus was perfectly responsive to that interior voice/power we name Spirit or grace, and that same Holy Spirit led Jesus through death to the fullness of life that is every human being’s God-given destiny.

At this liturgy let us celebrate the one true God of Abraham, Mohammed and Jesus, the God whose Holy Spirit is the heart and soul of our humanity and our only sure path to complete fulfillment now and forever.