

“THE FLESH IS OF NO AVAIL”:  
THEOLOGY OF THE BODY AS NECESSARY  
TO UNDERSTANDING LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

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“Modernity has not become secularized because it has relied too much on what is earthly, but rather because it has expected too little of it.”



“It is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail” (Jn 6:63). This statement by Jesus could be used today to justify the cultural changes with regard to the body and sexuality. What we need, someone could say, is not “a theology of the body” that limits our activities and prevents us from expressing our true “self”; what we need instead is a “theology of love,” which thus, without the obstacle of the body, becomes more authentic, more pluralistic, more open and merciful in dealing with the other. The body is the place of wearisome judgments; the Spirit, which is love, opens us up to freedom.

What are we to say in response to this claim? In order to understand Jesus’ statement it is necessary to understand that, in Scripture, flesh and spirit always go together. It is true that gender ideology regards the flesh reductively, thus eliminating one essential element of human experience: its original receptivity

that allows us to recognize an origin that has generated us. Yet the way in which contemporary culture understands the concept of spirit, and therefore the idea of spirituality and the identification of what is properly human, is no less problematic. In these pages I intend to develop a concept of spirit that corresponds to the biblical tradition and reinforces our need for a theology of the body.

We can start by contemplating a torso of Apollo that is found in the Louvre, which inspired Rilke to compose a sonnet. We do not see the face of this torso, the poet says, but the sparkling of his unknown eyes is preserved in his other members. If that were not so, “the curve of his chest” could not dazzle us, “nor could a smile glide along the slight turn of the loins to the center where man generates.” If there were no vision and will in this body, “it would not gleam like a predator’s pelt, and it would not break out of every edge like a star: for there is no place in it that does not see you. You must change your life.”<sup>1</sup>

These verses testify not only to aesthetic contemplation: the one who looks at the statue knows that he is called to enter into a relation with it; the torso not only lets itself be looked at but also looks at us from all its curves. And from this exchange of looks proceeds an invitation, a request to make life greater, to live up to the call that we have heard: “You must change your life!”

Rilke’s poem fascinates us by the connection that it establishes between body and consciousness, body and action, body and invitation to a fuller life. This synthesis is very far from our modern view, according to which it is difficult to unite the flesh to freedom and knowledge, which belong instead to the specific sphere of the spirit.

The reason for this division is found first of all in our concept of the body: inert matter, determined by the blind laws of nature, incapable of containing a meaning that might illumine the steps of human beings. However, the difficulty of finding common ground for spirit and flesh is problematic also when we seek to overcome it from the other side: our concept of spirit. Modernity considers “spirit” to be pure mind, self-conscious-

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1. See Rainer Maria Rilke, “Archaischer Torso Apollos,” in *Der neuen Gedichte anderer Teil (1908)* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 2006), 483.

ness, which is impervious to the greatness and the weight of bodies. From this perspective, the spirit that animated the look of the Apollo in the Louvre could not have left on the torso its imprint of light nor its call. This enables us to recognize that the understanding of the body as subject is possible only if an adequate vision of the "spirit" is developed at the same time.<sup>2</sup>

"*Du musst dein Leben ändern*," "you must change your life." It almost seems that this request, which emanates from the body, is addressed to modern man, who is isolated in the sphere of thought so as to protect his own life from any contingency whatsoever, thus eliminating the dramatic character of existence. You must change your life because it has become a game of mirrors, without risks and without encounters, without paths that allow it to grow and to attain fullness. In order for this change to be possible, it is necessary to understand in another way what spirit is and what its relation to the flesh is.

This question is of crucial interest to theology, inasmuch as spiritual experience cut off from the body is situated at an abstract, unreal level that cannot be communicated to others and ultimately is reduced to the private sphere. In this way, though, the spirit, closed in on itself, is closed off from God too, who is regarded externally as foreign to the most intimate aspiration and desire of the human being. Modernity has not become secularized because it has relied too much on what is earthly, but rather because it has expected too little of it. Someone who wants to realize the openness of the human spirit toward the divine does not need to elevate it; instead he must, so to speak, humiliate it, bring it closer to the humus of the flesh, so as thus to open it from within to something greater.

In reality, the concept of spirit as something opposed to matter, not contaminated by any earthly contact whatsoever, is foreign to Scripture.<sup>3</sup> In the New Testament what is spiritual is explained in terms of the concrete encounter of the disciples with the Risen Lord, who has returned to live in a glorified body (1 Cor 15:44; Rom 1:4, 8:11). The Spirit mediates the encounter

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2. This connection has already been identified by Gustave Thils in his *Théologie des réalités terrestres* (Louvain: Desclée, 1946), 1:86.

3. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 3:1ff.

with Christ, allowing the disciples to experience it deeply, to abide in Jesus and to allow him to abide in them (*communicatio Christi* [communion with Christ], as St. Irenaeus calls the Spirit<sup>4</sup>), opening up a new sphere of relations with his brethren in the one Body.

From this Paschal summit our gaze contemplates all the orbits of the universe and all moments in history. Flesh and spirit can enjoy such a unity in the fullness of time only if they have traveled from the beginning on a voyage of mutual penetration; otherwise the final cohesion would be a violent imposition. The biblical vision thus invites us to follow an ascending path that describes the presence of the Spirit in every moment and in every surrounding of the great chain of living things. There is continuity between the infusion of life-breath into Adam and the definitive granting of it, when Jesus breathes on his disciples and says to them: “Receive the Holy Spirit” (Jn 20:22; cf. Gn 2:7). This is how Tertullian had perceived it; he explains why God speaks in the plural when he creates man, saying “let us make”:

For with whom did He make man? and to whom did He make him like? [The answer must be,] the Son on the one hand, who was one day to put on human nature; and the Spirit on the other, who was to sanctify man. With these did He then speak, in the Unity of the Trinity, as with His ministers and witnesses.<sup>5</sup>

In order to analyze the theme of the relation between flesh and spirit, we must not lose sight of this Paschal perspective. Only when this is our point of departure is there a clear opening to the ascending voyage that begins with the most basic human experience, which is the presence of man in the world (1), so as to see that the way toward transcendence opens up precisely in this encounter: this means the spirit of man as a participation in the divine Spirit (2), whose presence is shown above all in personal relations and embraces the whole universe and all of history in a dynamic process (3). This process reached its culmination

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4. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses* III, 24, 1 (Sch 211,472); ANF 1:458b.

5. Tertullian, *Adversus Praxeas* 12, 3 (CCL II, 1173), ANF 3:597–627 at 606b–607a.

in the life of Jesus and in his resurrected flesh, from which the Church springs; here the Spirit reveals the apex of his relational capacity, allowing us to see his face as Person-Gift (4).

### 1. SPIRIT AND PRESENCE IN THE WORLD

As we said, we will not search far from matter for what is spiritual. Instead we will begin from the precise point at which man is inserted into his surroundings. The body, according to the perspective of Merleau-Ponty, is our way of having a world.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, our incarnate condition situates us among things, hosted by them and tending toward a deeper encounter with them. The incarnate human being knows himself only to the extent that he knows and interacts with what surrounds him. "I am myself plus my circumstance," that is, the things that are around me, as Ortega y Gasset has written.<sup>7</sup>

Well then, this primordial presence appears to us to be in harmony with our inmost being, and this very fact is part of man's most original experience: the organs function as one; things are within easy reach; the world appears like the natural extension of our ego. How is this so, if the flesh, by itself, seems incapable of reflecting this equilibrium? On this subject Hans-Georg Gadamer speaks about the "enigma of health."<sup>8</sup> By this he means that illness, regarded as friction between the various bodily dynamics and a continual disequilibrium with external realities, is what one would necessarily expect, looking at the body from outside. On the contrary, health—the fact that our presence in the body enjoys an initial harmony—seems mysterious, inexplicable if the body is considered in isolation. The incarnate condition of the human being makes possible his active manifestation in the world, but does not ensure the living tie

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6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012).

7. José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*, trans. Evelyn Rugg and Diego Marin (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 45.

8. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*, trans. Jason Gaiger and Nicholas Walker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

with the setting that surrounds him. The body contains impulses and forces, but not the secret of channeling them in a healthy way. All this goes beyond the body, and if we possess it, it is thanks to a certain initial miracle, almost an original grace that is impossible to grasp, the importance of which is perceived clearly only when this grace is lost.

Who is responsible for this unexpected conjunction—health as “silence of the organs”—for these relations that shelter us in the world and for the lives that conveniently open up in it? Here we see the first sign of that *spiritual principle* that animates human life, which we intend to describe. We will call “spirit” the artisan of this invisible harmony, the agent that confers an original symphonic concord on our presence in the world and among others.

Thus we are in agreement with the images with which the classical world, and particularly the biblical world, illustrated the significance of “spirit”: the air that enters into the lungs, the oil that is rubbed on the muscles, the water that washes the clay. All these images are derived precisely from the mystery of the incarnate condition: they reveal an original presence and harmony that allow for the action of man among things. According to them, what is spiritual must not be sought in the isolated depths of the conscious being, established without considering the world and others, but is to be discovered only by a decisive immersion in the setting that surrounds and embraces us.

Of the images that represent the spirit, the one used most often is breathing. Note the connection, present in many languages, between spirit and respiration, air, breath (in Latin *spirare*, in Greek *pneuma*, and in Hebrew *ruah*).<sup>9</sup> Breathing signifies the body’s continual exchange with the environment. There is no better term to express the relation of dynamic harmony between man and his world. Breathing is similar to nutrition because it indicates participation in the world. However, unlike food, it occurs imperceptibly, habitually, so continuously that it cannot be interrupted even for a few minutes. In this way it better expresses the ultimate, invisible, and ungraspable foundation that is right at the basis of a human being’s presence and action among things.

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9. See Erwin W. Straus, “The Sigh,” in *Phenomenological Psychology: The Selected Papers of Erwin W. Straus* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 242–43.

The connection between life and breath belies the widespread notion of a living being as an autonomous, self-moving entity.<sup>10</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg takes as an example the image of the candle, whose light burns by dint of a reserve of wax, to explain how life does not exist by itself but is derived from a preceding source of energy, as though it continually has the need to receive itself from the world.<sup>11</sup> This continual dependence is what allows life to unfold, develop, grow. Let us reaffirm that the transcendence indicated by the term "spirit" consists not in a distancing from earthly coordinates but rather in deepening the organism's presence among things.

Respiration can therefore be used as a symbol to summarize the concept of "spirit" as the principle of harmony between man and his surroundings. We insist: the spirit is not only a principle of internal unity, but the support of the bonds that unite a human being to the world, revealing a primordial origin and welcome among things and launching him beyond himself. Yes, what is spiritual designates the human being's internal equilibrium, but it does so inasmuch as it depends on a broader, relational equilibrium between man and his surroundings. This helps us to grasp the difference between the concepts of "spirit" and "soul." While the soul has as its point of reference the organic body and the unity that a human being has in himself, the spirit touches more explicitly on the relational opening of the human being toward horizons that are always beyond, and only from this perspective does it define his interior harmony.

In this context it is necessary to refer to a key structure of man's incarnate condition: affectivity. Unlike consciousness, which separates itself from the world by knowing and knowing itself, affectivity does not begin with a distance, but with the reciprocal presence of man and of his surroundings; it denotes a primordial alliance on which the distinct notion of self and of others then matures.<sup>12</sup> Affection, therefore, does not perceive the other outside of me, but captures the tie that unites us and

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10. See my "Mary and the Truth about Life," *Anthropotes* 23 (2007): 101–30.

11. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Geist und Bewusstsein," *Theologie und Philosophie* 79 (2004): 481–90, at 483.

12. See Paul Ricoeur, "Fallible Man," in *The Philosophy of the Will*, vol. 2, trans. Charles Kelbley (Chicago: Regnery, 1965).

forges a common world, by way of a primordial symbiosis. This is why the maturation of personal consciousness does not consist in a progressive perception of the isolated self, but in a process of deepening the ties that unite us to things and to others.

Consideration of this affective sphere is essential to an anthropology of the heart. By “heart” we mean the body as “my own body,” that is, belonging to personal identity, inasmuch as the body opens up the person to the world to discover a path that comes from others and leads to others, with ever more far-reaching perspectives. In this way an anthropology of the heart is the first step toward overcoming the dialectic between inside and outside, between consciousness and objective world. The heart, indeed, is situated at the same time on the surface and within, since it arrives at the depths of the person through the relations that connect him with his surroundings.

It is normal therefore that in Scripture the heart, a “heart of flesh” where life opens up to interpersonal bonds, should be the preferred place for the presence of the spirit as the dynamism that harmonizes a human being’s life with the world and with others. We can say that the spirit, which blows where it will, wants to breathe precisely in the sphere of the heart. The heart is the place where a human being, without knowing whence the spirit comes or whither it is going and therefore respecting the freedom of its presence, inwardly hears its voice to follow its ways. The spirit, from this perspective, does not touch the human being at the highest point of his mind, but precisely in the depths of his relations with the world and with others. And thus the binomial heart-spirit offers us the key to a renewed anthropological vision.<sup>13</sup> Integrated into this polarity is the concept pair body-soul, which thus always appears in the broad daylight of the relations between man and the world. To speak about heart and spirit means to frame the question about man in light of the constitutive ties of his identity and the openness of human life to what is beyond it. In this way unity (unity between inside and outside, low and high) is always found at the origin, “on this side” of any dualism, and the question about God’s transcendence appears in a different light. We turn to this question now.

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13. See Carlos Granados, *La nueva alianza como recreación: estudio exegético de Ez 36, 16–38* (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2010), 161–75.



## 2. SPIRIT AND TRANSCENDENCE

We described the spirit as the agent of harmony between a human being and his surroundings. Precisely because this encounter opens up very broad horizons, we can see here the action of the Spirit of God: "When you take away their spirit, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your Spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the earth" (Ps 104:29–30). In the human being this action of the Spirit has a unique breadth in the horizons that open up and a special depth in the ties that are established. To speak about man's spirit, therefore, is to speak about man's relation with God.

The Bible shows us this in the text of Genesis 2:7, when it presents Adam transformed into a living soul by the breath of God. This intervention, in the second Creation account, is the equivalent of what the first account tells us about the image of God (Gn 1:26–27). We can say that, thanks to this breath, man is in relation with God, is capable of dialoguing with him and of representing him in the world, prefiguring the covenant. This presence of the Spirit, we should note immediately, is dynamic, given that it includes a movement of going forth and returning. The first movement is the fundamental one: God is the one who infuses into Adam his breath, so as to give Adam life in his image and likeness.<sup>14</sup> Hence a journey of man toward God begins always impelled by the Spirit: life is revealed as a call to a transcendent fullness.

The phenomenon of respiration that we spoke about earlier reveals in man this unusual opening. Think for example of the human capacity for language. Respiration, which is accomplished in the body, finds its own adequate rhythm when the *logos* is spoken, and the characteristic feature of the *logos* is to seek to express "the whole," the complete horizon of the vital journey. There is no human respiration that does not tend toward the word, that does not find therein its fullness; nor is there any word that can be pronounced without breath. Therefore Paul Beauchamp is able to say that "the word springs from the harmony between body and spirit," whereas a cry proceeds from their dis-

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14. See my "Anatomía del corazón cristiano," in José Granados and Carlos Granados, *El corazón: urdimbre y trama* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 2010).

harmony.<sup>15</sup> God himself, before creating with his word (Gn 1:3), poured out his breath upon the waters (Gn 1:2). Breath, in man, always tends toward the word; man's encounter with his world is thus situated in the larger perspective of the totality and opens up as a path of fullness.

Respiration reveals, furthermore, something that goes beyond the word, so to speak. Think, for example, of certain typically human phenomena: breathing interrupted by a sigh or broken up in laughter or weeping. The essays on this topic by Helmuth Plessner are famous. In laughter and weeping, respiration takes on a different rhythm that escapes the control of the will; it seems that the harmony between the body and the mind that guides and directs it is broken up.<sup>16</sup> These events could be described as the breakdown of man's specificity, of the self-control that set him above other animals. Nevertheless, this description is not accurate: indeed, we are dealing with reactions that are specific to man, the only animal that weeps and laughs, reactions in which the person is revealed precisely as such. Laughter and weeping therefore contradict the idea that man's humanity consists solely in the mind's control over the body, given that in this case the typically human response is precisely the breakdown of the harmony. It is as though a higher logic of opening toward transcendence were being established in laughter and weeping. Plessner maintains that this is an example of man's "eccentricity," of his living outside of himself, always pointing toward a place beyond.

The difference between weeping and laughter, according to Plessner, is not that one refers to sorrow and the other to pleasure and happiness. Indeed, there are situations of joyful weeping and desperate laughter. The real distinction is in their different ways of expressing man's relation with transcendence: in weeping the interior of man opens up to what is beyond him, whereas in laughter his exteriority toward the world and others is referred to something transcendent. Breathing, the symbol of

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15. Paul Beauchamp, *L'un et l'autre Testament. II: Accomplir les Écritures* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 28.

16. Helmuth Plessner, *Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior*, trans. James Spencer Churchill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1961).

the presence of the spirit in man, is expressed here as a surplus, as a reference of man to what is beyond himself, precisely through these bodily manifestations that are beyond the direct control of the will. United with the pronouncement of the word as a search for meaning, laughter and weeping teach us that the whole can be said only if it is understood within the framework of a superior logic to which man responds. And we see once again that the spirit's task is not to subjugate corporeality, but to reveal in it a new prospect of relations.

These signs that are joined with breathing (the word, laughter, weeping) show us that man's spiritual sphere is characterized by his openness to transcendence. Adam, after receiving the breath of the Creator, can inhale and exhale in God's own rhythm, open to his own totality. Consequently, if spirit is relationship with God, then the spirit of man is both human and divine; man's spirit is the divine Spirit insofar as the latter is capable of embracing the human spirit and eliciting its response.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, even if we talk about the spirit of man, we can capitalize the term, because it refers to the transcendent relation that unites him to God.

Together with Barth we can say that man exists "because he has spirit," and that having spirit means "man is not without God, but [always] by and from God." Barth does not situate the spiritual component on the same plane as the difference between body and soul, because the spirit indicates precisely the transcendence, the infinite difference of God himself. For this reason, Barth adds, whereas we can say that man *is* body and soul, we must say that man *is not* spirit, because the Spirit does not belong to him. It would be more accurate to say that man *has* spirit, because he received it from Yahweh; or even better, man "is had" by the Spirit, given that the Spirit is the context on which he rests and is sustained.

For my part, I would insist on the fact that the Spirit brings us into relationship with God through our openness to the world and to others. Hence, instead of using, as Barth does, the concept pair "body-soul" and then adding the transcendent dimension of the "spirit" with God, I prefer the binomial "body-

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17. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), III/2:344–66, esp. 344 and 354–56.

spirit,” which allows us to see the human being as a relational being and to discover the action of the divine Spirit in all the ties that define what is human, so as to integrate then, within the concept pair heart-spirit, the dimension body-soul. In this way an *analogy of love* can be developed that turns out to be more or less foreign to Barth’s view.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. SPIRIT AND INTERPERSONAL ENCOUNTER

If man’s life is relation with the world, this world is always populated by personal presences and is constituted in relation to them. This is why the body’s openness to its surroundings is directed not only to nameless objects, but is always based on personal ties, which make concrete and disclose the transcendence to which the person is called. And it is precisely in personal relationships that the spirit encounters the field of action in which to establish and weave its harmony.

The biblical view serves for us as a basis for this concept of spirit. If the Spirit’s task is to open up the prospect of the covenant with Yahweh, this covenant becomes palpable in relations among human beings. Ezekiel speaks to us, for example, about a new heart and a new spirit (Ez 36:16–38), thus insisting on the relation between the heart and the Spirit of God (“my spirit”). This newness is indicated also by the images of removing “the heart of stone” and replacing it with “a heart of flesh.” In this sense the newness of the spirit can be described as a return to the beginning and a new creation, given that the flesh is the original element from which man was formed.

What does this “heart of flesh” mean more specifically? We are talking about a heart that recognizes the relationships bestowed in the body. This is why to shut oneself off from a neighbor is to hide from one’s own flesh (Is 58:7). Indeed, from the dawn of Creation, Adam’s carnal existence was recognized as the source of relationships: the first man welcomes Eve, “flesh of [his] flesh” (Gn 2:23). Although Ezekiel 36 talks about a new

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18. See Livio Melina, “Analogia dell’amore,” in *Matrimonio, familia y vida: Homenaje al profesor Augusto Sarmiento*, ed. Enrique Molina and Tomás Trigo (Pamplona: Eunsa, 2011), 69–77.

heart and a new spirit, a parallel passage by the prophet describes the new heart as "one heart." This is an expression that we find also in Jeremiah: here, besides the one heart of men there is also "one way" (Jer 32:39), in other words, one common origin and destination.

The opposition of flesh-spirit expresses, in contrast, the flesh closed off from God and from one's own brother. This is the heart of stone, a heart without compassion and heedless of the covenant. Jesus' rebuke to the Pharisees in Matthew 19:8, when they ask him about the legality of divorce, can be read in light of their lack of mercy: a hard heart does not recognize the unity of the flesh that bonds Adam and Eve.<sup>19</sup>

Within this union of the whole People, family experiences are the privileged place in which the spirit is revealed and transmitted. We see this strongly in the tie of father to son. In 2 Kings 2:9, Elijah gives Elisha a twofold share of his spirit: the expression "double portion" referred to the inheritance that the father left to his firstborn son (Dt 21:17), and Elisha calls his master "father" at the moment when it is bestowed (2 Kgs 2:12). What the father gives to the son, what binds him to him—his name, his mission, his inheritance—all this can be summed up as giving his spirit. The spirit in this case is the spirit of filiation, the spirit that enables the unique bond that is formed, in the flesh, between father and son. In this way also the paternal-filial relationship tends to transcendence. Recall that in Genesis 5:3, Adam begets a son in his image and likeness, in relation to the divine image that he had received, which is mentioned in Genesis 5:1.

Biblical and patristic insights help us to define more precisely the *spiritual* dimension of human life, the place where the Spirit of God enters and acts. We have already seen how his presence is necessary to explain the presence of man to his world. The body connects the person to things and to others and opens him up to the encounter with them. However, openness to the world can inspire fear, a sense of abandonment. For this reason it is necessary for a higher light, which cannot be derived simply

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19. In Is 61:1ff, the Spirit of Yahweh brings about the unity of the People and joins the covenant (cf. Is 63:11; Is 59:21; Hg 2:5). In Zec 12:10 the Spirit is defined as a Spirit of grace and consolation. On the passage Mt 19:3–9, see Luis Antonio Sánchez-Navarro, "Mt. 19,3–9: una nueva perspectiva," *Estudios Bíblicos* 58, no. 2 (2000): 211–38.

from being in the flesh, to illumine the incarnate condition and its dynamism, sweeping away the ambiguities.

This is precisely where the experience of interpersonal love comes into play: only someone who discovers love, only someone who enters into its range of action, understands the meaning of corporeality. From that moment on, existing in the body no longer means being thrown into a harsh world; corporeality discloses, instead, that life is not an isolate, that one can belong to others and live for others, and that in this way life becomes greater and more fulfilled. An example: the sexual impulse situates man in the world, drives him further on, makes him needy and continually searching. If we consider it in isolation, the phenomenon may seem to cause uneasiness, as an obscure enigma. The encounter of love clarifies, though, the goodness of this dimension of life, the blessing that is hidden in sexual difference. Thanks to it we can enlarge our world, transforming it into a shared world, grow in the new union of love, and establish fruitful covenants that transmit new life. Love has filled with meaning corporeal dynamisms that remain in the dark without it, yet in its light become the vehicle of happiness and a cause for gratitude.

This relation between body and love, this need of the body to be in contact with love so that its tendencies might acquire some meaning, clarifies the action of the spirit on the flesh. The spirit, as bond of love, is at work in personal relationships, revealing the depth of them, and through them it pervades the flesh, illuminates it, and clarifies its language. It is helpful to speak once again about the binomial “heart-spirit.” The heart is man’s incarnate condition inasmuch as it is open, through affectivity, to personal ties and projected, on the basis of them, toward mystery; for its part, the spirit is, so to speak, the force field of love, the magnetism that harmonizes and orders the affective world, revealing at the same time its depth.<sup>20</sup> From this perspective the connection between the spirit and the flesh can be understood dynamically and must undertake the mediation of time, until it arrives at the fullness of history in Christ and the Church.

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20. For more on the image of the spirit as a force field, see Wolfhart Panzenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:382ff.

#### 4. THE FULL ACTION OF THE SPIRIT: JESUS AND HIS CHURCH

The point of departure for the disciples' reflection on the Spirit is, as we have indicated, the Paschal experience. The reign of the Risen Lord in the power of the Spirit (Rom 1:4) reveals him as the Son of God with authority: only the one who is fully the Beloved Son can receive this superabundant richness of the Spirit; only he gives the Spirit without measure (Jn 3:34). In the light of Easter, the rest of the Master's life becomes clear for the disciples. He who possessed the Spirit so perfectly must have experienced his action from the beginning. The gospels testify to this work of the Spirit upon Jesus and speak about the Spirit's descent upon the Jordan, at the moment of Jesus' baptism.

Could the fact that Jesus needs the Spirit possibly signal something lacking in him, which would be anomalous in the Son of God? On the contrary, Christ alone, as Son of God, can reunite in himself the various gifts that the prophets had been able to sustain only fragmentarily. This completely overturns the adoptionist suspicion that hovered around the explanation of the Lord's Baptism in the early centuries of the preaching of the Gospel. In Jesus the ideal conditions for that abundant outpouring of the Spirit converge. Indeed, he who is now present is the Son of God, who has a thoroughgoing relationship with the Father, receiving everything from him and accomplishing everything in him. And the Son came to dwell specifically in the flesh, the place in which the earthly world opens up to the action of the Spirit.

According to the first patristic exegesis, the phrase "Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water" cited in John 7:38 does not refer directly to the believer, but to Jesus, and the prophecy will be fulfilled only in the Paschal event.<sup>21</sup> John adds that "as yet the Spirit had not been given" (Jn 7:39). Why this absence? The Spirit, obviously, existed before, but was not yet ready to bestow himself fully on the flesh of man. This will occur only at the end of Christ's life, after he has acted upon the totality of his hours, taking upon himself the whole human story of Jesus.

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21. See Hugo Rahner, "Flumina de ventre Christi: Die patristische Auslegung von Joh 7,37.38," *Biblica* 22 (1941): 269–302, 367–403.

Only when the Spirit concludes his work in the Son can he pour himself out again on Christians. The Spirit that the Christian receives is therefore not pure spirit without any contact with matter, because if that were so, a human being could not assimilate him; rather he is the Spirit who has already dwelt in the flesh of Christ and can harmonize the biography of the disciple with that of the Master. We see once again that in order to draw near to the Spirit it is necessary to accept the flesh fully—in this case the flesh of Jesus in his passage through history.

We can say that a new sphere of the Spirit's presence and action upon the body is appearing now in the world, a sphere inaugurated by Jesus: his origin from the Father, the mission that opens up before him, the brotherhood that unites him with men and that he builds up through them, his spousal gift of self on the Cross and its fruitfulness. All this occurs in the sphere of the Spirit who, after having enabled Jesus to perform his works, presents himself now as the proper sphere of Christian life.

The relation between flesh and spirit is extended in the Church, the Body of Christ, into which Jesus has breathed the Spirit (Jn 20:22). Again it happens that the Spirit remains bound up with what is concrete, in space and time. St. Irenaeus underscores the parallel between the first outpouring of the divine breath into Adam and the definitive presence of the Spirit in the Church, the Body of Christ.<sup>22</sup> Just as the flesh is the natural place for the divine breath, so too the Church is the sphere in which the Spirit works.

The Letter to the Hebrews refers to the Holy Spirit as "eternal Spirit," by virtue of whom Jesus offers himself on the Cross (Heb 9:14). What does the adjective "eternal" mean in this context? Albert Vanhoye shows that the author is thinking of the perpetual fire that burned near the altar and was used in many sacrifices of the Old Covenant. The permanence of the fire was meant to express something that appears impossible to man: an embrace of all times, extending from all eternity and for forever the sacrifices and, in them, communion with the eternal God.<sup>23</sup> This is a weak reflection of divine eternity; weak because divine

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22. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* III, 24, 1 (SC 211, 472); ANF 1:458b.

23. Albert Vanhoye, "Esprit éternel et feu du sacrifice en He 9,14," *Biblica* 64 (1983): 263–74, at 270.



eternity is not attained by mere extension in time; instead it is about the eternal today of God, about his complete dominion over time. The Letter to the Hebrews says that this connection with eternity, which was intended but not achieved by the multiple sacrifices, is precisely what has come about in Jesus: one sacrifice, offered with the fire of the Holy Spirit, extends to all times, and not as a mere repetition. The work of the Spirit in this case makes contemporaneous with every point in history the unique offering that Jesus made of himself. It is as though the Spirit could tie the ages together, in their continual dispersion, and bring them all to a crucial point, where all that matters happened, so as to be able to save them, in other words, to make them eternal.

We understand at this point, from the full experience of the presence of the Spirit in the Church, what constitutes the spiritual life to which man is called from the very first steps of his pilgrimage on earth. Recall the principal moments of our journey: spirit is the environment in which the encounter with the world comes about; it is the atmosphere that allows us to discover the other and to be united to him; it is the projection of life to transcendence. All this can be defined now, in terms of its fullness in Jesus and the Church, as the gift and the response to an eternal love. We can then give to the Spirit the names that St. Augustine used: *donum* and *communio*, in other words, the original gift of a personal love that is offered to us and makes us capable of corresponding to it so as to arrive at the fullness of a bond of communion.

All we have said allows us, finally, to clarify a misunderstanding that arises concerning the meaning of spirituality, a misunderstanding that is at the root of the separation of faith from life. We speak about spiritual life, spiritual fatherhood, spiritual fruitfulness, usually to refer to something vague, to something that at bottom is not real, given that it does not affect everyday life. Nevertheless, we have confirmed that the spiritual sphere is discovered only by deeper involvement with the corporeal sphere. To say that an experience is spiritual means that it inserts us more deeply among things and events so as to disclose the transcendence that they contain; that it helps us to live intensely the rhythm of the times, uniting past, present, and future in a coherent biography, which thus draws near to the eternal; that it

situates us in an interpersonal relationship, according to the coordinates of a primordial origin and a definitive destiny in God. For this reason we must say: the more spiritual an experience is, the more it leads us to live the body fully.

In his commentary on the gospel of Matthew, St. Chromatius of Aquileia offers us an original interpretation of a counsel of Jesus.<sup>24</sup> The Master warns us to be reconciled with our adversary while we are along the way, because otherwise he might turn us over to the guard upon our arrival (Mt 5:25). Who is this “adversary”? It cannot be the devil, because it would be absurd to seek to reach any agreement with him. Nor is it our neighbor, Chromatius says, because in many cases reconciling with him is not a positive thing, for instance when he is living in error and unwilling to abandon it.

Then comes the proposal of the bishop of Aquileia: the adversary is the Holy Spirit. Chromatius is thinking of the biblical contrast between flesh and spirit, which takes on a dramatic tone especially in St. Paul’s letters. The flesh, indeed, has desires that are against the Spirit and the Spirit has desires that are against the flesh (Gal 5:17). Therefore he is the one who wages war on us while we are journeying; he is the one with whom the Lord invites us to make peace.<sup>25</sup> Because, as Chromatius says, reconciliation is possible. Step by step along the way—and this is the challenge of Christian life—it is possible to arrive at harmony between the flesh and the Spirit.

“He who is alone is a poor man, because when he falls no one will lift him up.” Chromatius cites this proverb as a commentary on Jesus’ parable,<sup>26</sup> and applies it to the Holy Spirit, who will lift up the flesh from corruption on the last day. Someone who has the Spirit, we may say, has broken all isolation; he lives in communion; he finds himself welcomed by the other and oriented toward a response and a gift of self, through a relationship between persons, the ability to belong to each other mutually, the fact that life can be given and received, that

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24. Chromatius of Aquileia, *In Matthaeum*, Tract. 22 (CCL 9A, 300–02).

25. Is 63:10 talks about the Holy Spirit as the enemy of the People because of Israel’s rebellion; and Paul would say later, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (Eph 4:30).

26. Chromatius of Aquileia, *In Matthaeum*, Tract. 22 (CCL 9A, 302).

it can continue in others. Here we see the field that is open to the Spirit. Sinning against him cannot be pardoned (Lk 12:10) because it means sinning against the openness of life beyond oneself; it means not accepting the bond that joins us to the world, to others, to God, and closing the door, having become indifferent to love, to any company that could lift us up if we fall. Accepting the Spirit as neighbor means being able to lift ourselves up, even after the final destruction of death, when the flesh, as St. Irenaeus says, "forgetful indeed of what belongs to it, adopts the quality of the Spirit."<sup>27</sup> The breath that Rilke sensed while he contemplated the torso in the Louvre—"You must change your life!"—will become then a real gift. Life will be changed, in the fullness of the Body of Christ and of his Church.—*Translated by Michael J. Miller.* □

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27. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* V, 9, 3; ANF 1:535a.