

Retrieving the Tradition

A COMMENTARY
ON JOHN PAUL II'S
DOMINUM ET VIVIFICANTEM

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“Being fulfilled by God’s Holy Spirit through renunciation, through making space, through becoming poor, is the only mode in which we can come to know God as he is in truth: the Love that can be thought only as a reciprocal ‘self-giving’ in which nothing is held back.”



1. COMPLETION OF A TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

Dominum et vivificantem, the encyclical presented by Pope John Paul II on the Solemnity of Pentecost in this liturgical year 1986, is manifestly the completion of a project that bears a trinitarian structure. His first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis* (March 1979), concerned Jesus Christ the Son of God as the center point both of our faith and of our ecclesial task in and for the world. It is first of all through Jesus that we find access to “his and our Father” (*Dives in misericordia*), as we are granted to know the Father’s mind through the Son’s Incarnation, life, and death on the Cross. Out of this death the Holy

Spirit, who is also the Spirit of the Father, will be breathed into the disciples on Easter, and on Pentecost will empower the whole Church for her missionary task to all peoples of the world and to every single person. The Spirit is the theme of this third encyclical.¹

This finale comprises ideas that were carefully prepared in both the earlier writings, ideas that circle continually around the unity between God's work in creating and redeeming or around the natural dignity of man as perfected by grace. Such ideas flow out of the heart of the Gospel, but no less out of the heart of the recent council, which is frequently cited in the document, and finally out of the heart of the Holy Father himself. These three sources, from which both this and the preceding encyclicals stream forth in all their plentiful richness, are not in the least to be separated from one another in these texts. In this way, we find concretely confirmed here what the Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei verbum*) had asserted in a central place—namely, that “sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls” (10).

2. A REVIEW OF THE ENCYCLICALS ON “THE REDEEMER OF MAN” AND “THE MERCY OF GOD”

A look back at the respective encyclicals on God the Son and God the Father is instructive, for doing so allows us to situate rightly the decisive purpose and distinctive claims of the encyclical on the Holy Spirit. The first of these documents especially provides a key for this task.

1. The English translation published by the Vatican of passages from John Paul II's encyclicals have been modified only in cases where these differ significantly from the German translation quoted by Balthasar. Following Balthasar's own practice in this piece, quotations from the encyclicals will be cited by listing in parentheses the number of the section in which it appears. The following abbreviations will accompany the first instance in every series of citations from a given work: *RH* for *Redemptor hominis*, *DM* for *Dives in misericordia*, *DV* for *Dominum et vivificantem*.—Trans.

Redemptor hominis establishes the following: “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it” (10). The weak and guilty man, “who wishes to understand himself in his own depths,” only fathoms these depths if he will “with his life and death, draw near to Christ,” for “in the mystery of redemption man becomes newly ‘expressed’ and, in a way, is newly created” (10). Christ is concerned with just this—that is, with each person—in his work of salvation. In his Incarnation he “has united himself with each man” (13); the Good Shepherd cares about “all mankind.” He can never be regarded for himself, however, for he is essentially “the revelation of the Father” and only by virtue of “the outpouring of the Holy Spirit” (9) does he accomplish his work. This work consists in communicating to created and fallen man “the dignity of divine filiation through the grace of the Holy Spirit” (18), insofar as Christ, on the one hand, reveals the Father’s love as “mercy” (9), and, on the other, breathes forth the Holy Spirit on the Church once he has been resurrected. It was this Spirit whom he promised to the disciples in his Farewell Discourses, so that now “the power of the Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit, the fruits of the Spirit,” can have their effect “in man,” even as they must be implored perpetually anew. And “this invocation addressed to the Spirit to obtain the Spirit is really a constant deepening of the self into the full magnitude of the mystery of the Redemption, in which Christ, united with the Father and with each man, continually communicates to us the Spirit who places within us the consciousness of the Son and directs us towards the Father”(18). That Jesus has atoned for all mankind tells us that his Spirit too, who “blows where he wills” (12), is already active in every man, even as this Spirit has been given above all to the Church, so that he can effect his work of mission in each person and among every people (“with a unique assistance of the Holy Spirit” [12]). Every Christian is thereby infused with “that breath of life that comes from Christ,” and the Church as a whole receives from the crucified and risen Christ “the same divine influences, inspiration, and strength of the Spirit” (18) that already vivified the whole earthly life

of Jesus.² The roles played by the Eucharist, confession, prayer, devotion to Mary—who is indeed in a special way the dwelling-place of the Spirit (cf. 22)—are all discussed in connection with this encounter. An expression that will recur in each of these encyclicals like a leitmotiv appears here: the concrete person, who has been in principle redeemed by Christ and in principle always already secured by the Spirit, “is the way for the Church” (14), and through the Church he will experience the significance of this “state of having-already-arrived” [*Schon-erreicht-Sein*] and the bearing it has on his life. Redemption and the sending of the Spirit are universal, but the Church as “sacrament” must lead humanity to the true center of this event.

Dives in misericordia, which presents the whole depth of God’s paternal love, speaks less often and less thematically about the Holy Spirit, but one senses that this unfolding of the innermost heart of the Father also has in mind the Spirit “who proceeds from the Father” (Jn 15:26). At the core of this work stands the declaration not only that the Incarnate Son is the revelation of the Father’s love to the world (*DM*, 1), but that his surrender to the Cross and God-forsakenness, his having “been made sin” (7), brings to light the whole depth of this love as mercy for mankind in its guilt. Already the parables that Jesus tells—of the lost son (5–6), the lost drachma, the shepherd searching for his lost sheep (3)—disclose the Father’s love as mercy, which gives back to the lost one who has made himself unworthy his full, supernatural dignity by endowing him with the freedom of grace. Once more this concerns the inseparability of “theocentrism and anthropocentrism” (1). And again this fatherly mercy that is efficacious in the Son’s surrender is held to be universal, “open to each and every individual” (7), for which reason Christ can place “the least” on the same level as “his brethren” (8). What Christ gives to the Church on Easter is the Spirit of forgiveness (“whose sins you forgive . . .” [8]), which is why no task falls more urgently to the Church than—beyond securing mere “justice”—living this Spirit of forgiveness, proclaiming and carrying out among men a culture of forgiveness. Through the Church’s fulfillment of this task, Son and Spirit reveal the everlasting presence of

2. “The aim of every service in the Church . . . is to keep up this dynamic link between the mystery of redemption and every man” (*RH*, 22).

the forgiving, loving Father. This encyclical too closes with the exhortation to prayer; the more the world at present forgets the meaning of mercy, “the more the Church has the right and the duty to appeal to the God of mercy ‘with loud cries’” (15).

3. AN INITIAL OVERVIEW

In his introduction to *Dominum et vivificantem*, the pope indicates further motives that prompted the composition of his third encyclical. He mentions the writings of his predecessors, quoting in particular Paul VI, who after the close of the Second Vatican Council called for “a new study of and devotion to the Holy Spirit, precisely as the indispensable complement to the teaching of the council.”³ He also notes the commemoration, celebrated in 1981, of the First Council of Constantinople, in which the divinity of the Holy Spirit was defined. Here he refers to “the heritage we share with the Eastern Churches,” but also to the situation the world faces at the dawn of the new millennium, which moves him to serious reflection, in the light of the Holy Spirit, on the phenomenon of a global flight from God, Christ, and the Church. Finally, he shows that this third work is, as it were, implicit in the other two: the trilogy on the trinitarian God comes here to a close. This final work is itself a whole that has been arranged in three major parts. We can designate the first part as ecclesial, the second as cosmic or panhistorical, and the third as anthropological (in the sense used by the pope).

The *first part* deals with the revelation of the trinitarian God to mankind, a revelation, however, that can only be understood by the believer in the Church as a gift that has been received from the risen Christ and is exhibited in the holy and missionary Church. The giving is performed by God, who, in himself three-in-one (*DV*, 28), lays bare his mysterious inner essence to the world (11–14) in such a way that the paternal Origin sends forth the Son and the Spirit, named “the Father’s two hands” by St. Irenaeus, into the world of man. The Messiah promised in the Old Covenant, from now on the Redeemer of all men, is, in keeping with Isaiah’s prophecy, most intimately

3. Paul VI, General Audience (Vatican City, 6 June 1973).

bound up with the Holy Spirit: the Spirit lets him become man, accompanies the whole of his acting and even his dying (as will later be presented in detail [40–41]), and finally, once the Son has completed his earthly task, this same Spirit inspires the Church (20–24), inaugurating the age of the Church pervaded by the Spirit’s power (25–26).

The *second part*, which we have spoken of as cosmic or panhistorical in theme, may be the most original and, for many readers, the most surprising. But it is also the most difficult to follow because, though supported to be sure by many scriptural and conciliar texts, it offers at the same time an insight into John Paul II’s personal understanding of the Catholic faith. The heading “The Spirit Who Convinces the World Concerning Sin” (Jn 16:8) specifies the larger subject of this section. “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me” (Jn 16:7–9). Whoever reads this passage from the Gospel in this context will likely catch in this “convincing” only a judgment of the world, a condemnation that the Spirit as advocate of the (persecuted!) Church will bring to the world’s awareness. Yet, throughout this whole section, the pope instead understands this “convincing the world”—that is, of its sinfulness—as fundamentally positive, for the uncovering of sin is the presupposition for, and indeed the first act of, God’s mercy. It is in this sense that we should take the following verse from St. Paul: “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. . . . When anything is exposed by the light it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light” (Eph 5:11–13). St. John expresses a similar thought: “For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God” (Jn 3:20–21). On this basis, the Holy Father can interpret the claim that the Spirit convinces the world concerning its own sin as an indispensable step in the event of the world’s redemption, indeed as itself a crucial deed of divine mercy. This mercy is trinitarian, for the Spirit’s work of bringing clarity to the world presupposes the Father’s abandon

in “handing over” his Son for the world’s salvation, and also the mission of the Son, who purifies the conscience of man through the blood of his Cross. That this trinitarian opus does not signify an automatic, collective salvation of mankind must be emphasized: each person in his freedom always retains the possibility of refusing the work of divine love that has been realized for the sake of all men—the sin against the Holy Spirit.

The *third part* bears the title “The Spirit Who Gives Life.” This section attends to the Spirit’s action in each person and in all mankind, which as a whole stands in conflict with God and therefore with itself. Here is mentioned the resistance and refusal that God’s entire saving action encounters—already in Israel, and yet intensified in the sending of the Son, who will be “the sign of contradiction” (55). With Christ the struggle between “flesh” and “spirit,” as Paul describes it, emerges in all its sharpness, and this apparently in increasing measure the longer that world history advances. Augustine already spoke of the opposition between the two cities—that of God and that of the devil—but only in our “post-Christian” age does the phenomenon of a theoretical and practical atheism come to be organized as a system on a global scale. Here we find that “a true and proper materialism, understood as a theory which explains reality and accepted as the key-principle of personal and social action, is characteristically atheistic” (56). According to such a theory religion can only be an “idealistic illusion.” And subsequently the many symptoms of our technical civilization will show themselves to be “signs and evidence of death,” to the point of mankind’s “self-destruction.” All of these symptoms are new within the scope of world history, and they demand from the Church a more intense struggle to live out the principle of “the spirit” against “the flesh,” along with reflection on all her inner sacramental and existential powers.

This encyclical too closes with a striking passage on prayer, here especially prayer to the Spirit, who “helps us in our weakness” by bolstering the impotence of our prayer through his “inexpressible groanings,” which the Father, who hears these out of the depths of our own hearts, knows how to interpret (65). Further, Mary’s intercession is regarded—in accord with the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, where Mary prays in the midst of the disciples—as the center point of efficacious prayer, as Mary’s motherhood is held together with that of the Church (66).

This is prayer with an eschatological character, directed precisely toward the turn of the millennium. “The Church with her heart which embraces all human hearts implores from the Holy Spirit . . . the joy which is the fruit of love, and therefore of God who is love” (67). “Peace too is the fruit of love: that interior peace, which weary man seeks in his inmost being; that peace besought by humanity, the human family, peoples, nations, continents.” Since such peace “passes in the last analysis through love,” the Church looks toward him who is in his very substance “the love between Father and Son”—that is, the Holy Spirit (*ibid.*).

This brief overview may serve to guide the reader through this lengthy text, with its many citations from the council, above all from *Gaudium et spes*. The reader should not forget that the whole of this work moves within the sphere of the unfathomable mystery of the Holy Trinity, whose abysses open themselves on all sides and yet withdraw themselves utterly from the beaten paths of man. The cornucopia overflowing here testifies to the superabundance of God’s gifts, so that, as in a kaleidoscope, new aspects, constellations, and perspectives continually unfurl.

All that can be offered in what follows is an indication of discrete focal points and principal themes that run through the whole, which perhaps may facilitate understanding but will by no means adequately reproduce the aforementioned intersection of motifs.

4. GOD’S LOGIC

John Paul II’s surprising statement concerning “the most profound ‘logic’ of the saving mystery contained in God’s eternal plan” (11) refers to the mystery that the divine Trinity wills to open and communicate itself to the world and that this impartation leads in an orderly way from the world’s creation to its redemption in Jesus Christ. And this is all the more evident inasmuch as the redemption accomplished by the Son “in the dimensions of earthly history” requires a final step—that is, inasmuch as “according to the divine plan, Christ’s ‘departure’ is an indispensable condition for the ‘sending’ and the coming of the Holy Spirit.” God can only share himself most intimately

with man if the exteriorly graspable form of Jesus has been withdrawn. One would like to have, to hold fast, to grasp for oneself, but the events of Easter show that whenever Jesus is to be kept on earth he withdraws: Magdalene at the tomb should not “touch” him; he promptly disappears from the disciples on the way to Emmaus so they may know him; Thomas, who would handle his wounds, is reprimanded. In place of having him for themselves, they must let him depart and let themselves be sent to their brothers—instead of grasping, they are to receive the blessing of faith. With this act of letting Christ depart the final step of the divine logic is realized: only to the degree that out of our riches we become poor do we create room in ourselves for God to enter, which he does in the person of the Holy Spirit, who now dwells within us more interiorly than we do ourselves (54) and who precisely in his incomprehensibility can be himself the nearness of the forever ungraspable God. It is toward this communion that the whole of God’s plan is structured, so that it can be said that the Holy Spirit “is the source of all God’s salvific activity in the world” (*ibid.*). He is not only the one through whom Jesus Christ the Redeemer becomes man, but he is already from the beginning the one “who as love and gift ‘fills the universe’” and “penetrates everything and gives it life from within” (*ibid.*).

Being fulfilled by God’s Holy Spirit through renunciation, through making space, through becoming poor, is the only mode in which we can come to know God as he is in truth: the Love that can be thought only as a reciprocal “self-giving” in which nothing is held back. This love not only abides between an I and a Thou (Father and Son), but, as the ungraspable exuberance of this face-to-face, as its fruit, *is* himself a Person (just as, in a distant image, the love between man and woman is fruitful). In God, “personal love is the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the Father and the Son. Therefore, he ‘searches even the depths of God’ (1 Cor 2:10) as uncreated Love-Gift . . . from which derives as from its source (*fons vivus*) all giving of gifts vis-à-vis creatures (created gift)” (10). St. Paul can thus say in a summary fashion, with an expression that bears as much on the natural order of creation as on the graced order of redemption, “God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5).

In the logic of divine redemption, then, things do not merely take place one after another: once Christ departs, then the Spirit comes. It is rather the case that the Spirit “will come not only *after*, but *as a result* of the Redemption Christ accomplishes through the will and action of the Father” (8). If redemption has already been realized through the Son’s perfect surrender on the Cross—a surrender to the Father’s will for the sake of all mankind—this total surrender of the Son that has been liberated by the Spirit (as the created representation of the Father’s total surrender of himself to the world) must in the end be shared with and “poured out into” us, so that we may not only believe in an external, inconceivable mystery, but may ourselves be inwardly penetrated by this mystery and understand what love is, what God is, and finally what it is to be at all. And only if we are fulfilled in this way by the Spirit of the trinitarian God can we join the Apostles in understanding the meaning of our existence as mission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). For not only ourselves but all persons are meant to have a part in the miracle of love that is the divine life (cf. 9)—*this* is God’s “logic.”

5. CREATION AND REDEMPTION

One idea that runs through all three encyclicals, and is already expressed in Sacred Scripture with a decisive clarity, is that the world is created in Christ and the Spirit for the sake of man’s redemption and his participation in the divine life. Since God knows from eternity that his weak creature would fall into guilt and flee from him, he can only take the dramatic risk of creating the world if there is someone to stand as a pledge of the creature’s salvation and return. The “lamb without blemish or spot, Christ, was already destined before the foundation of the world” (1 Pt 1:19–20) to render this guarantee. He was not “coerced” by the Father, but freely offered himself in love (“no one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down” [Jn 10:18]), so that by virtue of “redemption through his blood,” we could be “destined” to be the Father’s “sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will” (Eph 1:5–7). Therefore, the whole masterwork of creation, as the

pope never tires of recalling, is always already directed toward the revelation of the Father's love in the Cross of Christ and in the outpouring of the Spirit into the heart of man, so that there is no other valid meaning to human life, and no other valid way for man to understand himself, than as created for the mystery of love.

The Trinity is already hiddenly present in the first verse of Genesis: God (the Father, "Creator of heaven and earth") speaks his creative Word (the Son), through whom all things come to be, "and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the deep," out of which God through his ordering and separating brings forth a beautiful world ("*kosmos*" in Greek means order and adornment). The Trinity will, however, also direct the course followed by the history of man (who himself was created in the image of the trinitarian God): Yahweh (the Father) acts through his Word (to Abraham, on Sinai, through the prophets), and "doubtless, the Holy Spirit was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified" (DI, 25, citation from *Ad gentes*, 4). The Word of God that was spoken in the beginning "is also the eternal law, the source of every law which regulates the world and especially human acts" (DI, 33), a law which man can recognize and know in the "most secret core and sanctuary" of his personal conscience. A "principle of obedience vis-à-vis the objective norm" that is anchored in the event of creation is "profoundly imprinted" on this conscience. And when at last the Holy Spirit convinces the world of its sin, this does not come upon man as something foreign and surprising, for here "the Spirit of truth comes into contact with the voice of human consciences" (44). Something of this is traceable in all the religions of mankind, albeit with greater clarity in the Old Testament.

This universality, which, rooted in creation, is realized through the Old Covenant unto the eschatological events of the Cross and the outpouring of the Spirit, is the precondition for the way in which the life and death of Jesus, which seem to be isolated happenings, already carry within them a significance that bears on the whole of the created world and all of history. "For, since Christ died for all, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact *one*, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this Paschal Mystery" (53). And even

more directly, “Since God ‘wishes all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Tim 2:4), the Redemption includes all humanity and in a certain way all of creation. In the same universal dimension of Redemption the Holy Spirit is acting, by virtue of the ‘departure of Christ’” (64). Here, finally, it is necessary to recall a truth that was expounded at length in the encyclical on divine mercy (*DM*, 14) and that is presupposed here: along with the dignity of the human person come rights and therewith the demand for justice, which must in every case be honored and sufficiently acted upon. However, the ultimate meaning of justice, and the ultimate possibility of realizing justice in the world, is love, and thus divine forgiveness and, in the Holy Spirit, mutual forgiveness among human persons. Justice exists only for the sake of love, and it is accomplished without compromise in the works of love, as becomes perfectly clear in the expiatory suffering of the Cross. “A world from which forgiveness was eliminated would be nothing but a world of cold and unfeeling justice, in the name of which each person would claim his or her own rights vis-à-vis others” (14).

In the encyclical on the Spirit this order is shown to be fulfilled insofar as Jesus on Easter breathes the Spirit, as his first and all-encompassing gift, upon the Church, who is herself the fruit of his saving act. It is for this reason that she, the Church, has the power to forgive sins (*DV*, 22–25). The cultural and political consequences of this thoroughly Christian outlook are nearly incalculable, especially when one considers that the “leavening” of worldly tasks and abilities through the Spirit of Christ—every legitimate distinction of Church and State notwithstanding—leads to consequences that in prior periods of Christian history could only imperfectly come to the fore, but with the current de-Christianization of the world present themselves all the more forcefully.

6. FREEDOM

Everything to be said about human freedom follows directly what has been said above. Man, as God’s creature and image, has been endowed with freedom, with the “capacity for a personal relationship with God, as ‘I’ and ‘you’” (34), which is the foundation for

his reception of a new and deeper freedom—after his enslavement by sin—through the Holy Spirit. But the fact that man is a person, and therefore possesses a unique “greatness and dignity,” does in no way exempt him from his creaturehood. His own freedom will be all the more authentic the more closely he participates in his Creator’s absolute freedom. However,

God the Creator is the one definitive source of the moral order in the world created by him. Man cannot decide by himself what is good and what is evil—cannot “know good and evil, like God.” In the created world God indeed remains the first and sovereign source for deciding about good and evil, through the intimate truth of being, which is the reflection of the Word, the eternal Son, consubstantial with the Father. (36)

Because he is not the Creator of being, and because the good is given with “the intimate truth of being,” man’s presumption “to be an independent and exclusive source for deciding about good and evil,” entails a rejection of the Origin of the only true good, “a closing-up of human freedom in regard to God,” and is thereby the erection of a “counter-truth,” which as such can only be a “lie” (37). Not out of an error in thought or calculation, but out of its innermost essence, an “atheistic ideology” robs man of “his own humanity” (38), which includes both the truth of who he is and his real freedom.

Only insofar as man receives “the Spirit of truth” (Jn 16:3) and “of freedom” (2 Cor 3:17) will he be set free for actual freedom—that is, for participation in God’s absolute freedom. Hence Paul’s many admonitions to live according to “the Spirit” and not according to “the flesh.” In these texts, “there is a superimposing and a mutual compenetration of the ontological dimension (the flesh and the spirit), the ethical (moral good and evil), and the pneumatological (the action of the Holy Spirit in the order of grace)” (55). Created freedom as such already has the ability to choose between good and evil, between living in accord with the divine order of love (“Spirit”) or with its own egoism (“flesh”). And if the person falls into such egoism, only the Spirit of God can set him free again.

This is not immediately obvious to man. For he reasons that, if he has freedom to turn himself away from God and

to prefer his own ego, he also has the freedom turn away from himself back to God. This opinion has been definitively rejected by the Church as heresy (Pelagianism): he who chooses himself for his “god” falls thereby into slavery, into a compulsion out of which he cannot extricate himself apart from God’s graceful intervention. Natural freedom, and natural existence itself, is already a *gift*—hence, something that man can indeed disdain and throw away, but, having done so, cannot take back up into his own possession by himself.

To decline God’s gift means at the same time to divorce oneself from his free bond with his creation, heightened in the Old Testament to God’s actual covenant with Israel, and this breach of the bond, as the deepest offense against God, cannot be healed from the side of man. Because God has decisively bound himself to man in freedom, and this out of his gracious love, the rejection of this commitment can only be an “offense against God” (39). This idea gives us insight into the reason behind one of the most astonishing utterances in the encyclical, to which we now turn.

7. THE PAIN OF GOD

Without reservations the pope makes his own a claim that remains controversial among theologians today. If the Holy Spirit convinces the world concerning sin, he lays bare at the same time the innermost essence of suffering. Should this exposure of sin, it is asked, “not also reveal the pain, unimaginable and inexpressible, which on account of sin the Book of Genesis in its anthropomorphic vision seems to glimpse in the ‘depths of God’ and in a certain sense in the very heart of the ineffable Trinity?” To be sure, says the pope, there is no pain in God that springs out of lack or need. But does not Scripture speak of God’s “repentance” for having created the world (Gn 6:5–7)? And still more deeply it speaks of “a Father who feels compassion for man, as though sharing his pain. In a word, this inscrutable and indescribable fatherly ‘pain’ will bring about above all the wonderful economy of redemptive love in Jesus Christ” (39). In relation to this one may not overlook the fact that the Father was the first “to surrender” his Son out of love for the world (Jn 3:16), and that this

would be unthinkable if the cry of the abandoned Son on the Cross did not touch the heart of the Father. The condemned heresy of “Patripassianism” had something entirely different in mind—namely, that the Father and Son are a single person, so that the Father himself suffered the Cross. We of course lack any sufficient words for the way in which God’s heart is touched by the offense of sin. But already Origen had risked saying (astounding as this was for a Greek), “Even the Father is not without suffering.”⁴ John Paul II’s words on the Father’s pain are a direct consequence of his remarks on divine compassion. “In man, mercy includes sorrow and compassion for the misfortunes of one’s neighbor” (39)—how could this not be an image of something that has its prototype in God? But in God such pain can only be a modality of his love, which wills to reestablish unity with mankind.

If sin caused suffering, now the pain of God in Christ crucified acquires through the Holy Spirit its full human expression. Thus there is a paradoxical mystery of love: in Christ there suffers a God who has been rejected by his own creature: “They do not believe in me!”; but at the same time, from the depth of this suffering—and indirectly from the depth of the very sin “of not having believed”—the Spirit draws a new measure of the gift made to man and to creation from the beginning. (41)

To understand the sense in which “the Holy Spirit is present in the sacrifice of the Son of Man” (40), we must turn here to the interpretation given in Hebrews 9:14, according to which Jesus “offered himself without blemish to God,” doing so precisely “through the eternal Spirit.” Just as in the Old Testament fire from heaven consumed the oblation offered by man, so here “the Holy Spirit is the ‘fire from heaven’ which works in the depth of the mystery of the Cross. . . . [He] comes down, in a certain sense, into the very heart of the sacrifice which is offered on the Cross. . . . He consumes this sacrifice with the fire of the love which unites the Son with the Father in the Trinitarian communion” (41). Hence, in the oblation of the Cross the whole triune suffering over the sin of the world becomes a single flame

4. Origen, *Homilies on Ezekiel* 6, 6. Cf. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 26, 5.

of love that consumes all: both the lamb of sacrifice and the guilt of those who crucified him and thereby gave extreme offense to God. And this Fire, the Holy Spirit, who consumes the pain of offense in the pain of the Cross, can then come upon man as the gift and pledge of reconciliation with God and of a new and now indissoluble covenant.

8. THE ENIGMA OF A HEIGHTENING CONTRADICTION

However, precisely because God has offered to man this ultimate possibility, man's refusal can also dramatically intensify to an ultimate extreme. Here we must deal again with the central and indeed most important section of this work, "The Spirit Who Convinces the World Concerning Sin" (27–48).

This "convincing" means first of all a salutary disclosure of things hidden from the beginning of the world: the wound being uncovered before the physician. The "original disobedience," the "root of all other sins," the "enigma of iniquity," is only perceived truly through Christ's "obedience unto death" (33). And the Spirit exposes the full extent of this hostility, which breaks forth in all its radicality at the very point where mankind refuses and condemns its God-sent Redeemer (27). But the work of redemption involves saving man through deposing the prince of the world, Satan (Jn 12:31), and thus through letting a "judgment" be passed "that has as its purpose the salvation of the world, the salvation of man" (27). The "salvific economy of God in a certain sense removes man from 'judgment,' that is from the damnation which has been inflicted on the sin of Satan, 'the prince of this world'" (28). This is undoubtedly the right interpretation of the statement in John 16:11. It is also true that with this "judgment" of Satan the world as a whole is intended, as here the "universality of the redemption" (29) comes to expression. Thus Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, can proclaim on Pentecost the good news of this liberating judgment to all the nations (30). God has turned the fate of the world around, so that man too must now turn himself around. The Spirit's "convincing concerning sin" is indeed persuasive by virtue of the forgiveness it offers, but our conversion is needed in order for us to be convinced of sin (31). This, however, depends in turn on the

acknowledgment of Jesus' deed on the Cross, to which the Holy Spirit now testifies before the world.

But will mankind let itself be convinced by this act of God? The exposure of sin through the Holy Spirit does not restrict itself to Pentecost, but will perdure through the history of the world as witness that God's love is greater than the sin of man. Christ "bears witness that in human history sin continues to exist. Yet sin has been subjected to the saving power of the Redemption" (44). The Spirit "'convince[s] concerning sin' always in relation to the Cross of Christ," doing so even by letting the conscience of man, who has to suffer from the "sting" of remorse, "share in the pain of the Cross," for which reason "the suffering of the conscience becomes particularly profound, but also particularly salvific" (45). This is clarified in a weighty statement: "The laborious effort of the human heart, the laborious effort of the conscience in which this 'metanoia,' or conversion, takes place, is a reflection of that process whereby reprobation is transformed into salvific love, a love which is capable of suffering" (45).

Yet the fateful question arises once more: will mankind let itself be convinced of the importance of this conversion in the Cross and in the Spirit? The answer will have to be: less and less. "The refusal to accept the salvation which God offers to man through the Holy Spirit, working through the power of the Cross" will grow deeper and more common (46). Precisely this is the unforgivable, "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit," the "radical refusal to accept this forgiveness, of which [the Holy Spirit] is the intimate giver." Hence the depiction that follows of the most extreme dangers to our world that come from this "resistance to the Holy Spirit" (56). Hence too the ever-fiercer persecution of the Church who in the Holy Spirit proclaims God's message of peace. It is unrealistic to describe this hour the world faces before the new millennium in terms other than this dramatic mutual heightening of Yes—"the persecuted Church"—and No. The Kingdom of God proclaimed by the Church in the Spirit by no means establishes itself in a straight line, but only under the intensifying, though blessed, persecution of the Church, who through this experience receives the confidence to journey on Christ's world-redeeming way of the Cross.

9. THE CHURCH AND MANKIND

The Church, precisely because she possesses her task of mission to the whole world, is thus called to a serious self-examination. The third section of the encyclical is especially concerned with this. Only after a meditation on the Church's place as she awaits the turn of the millennium (49–54), and another on the troubling symptoms of the widespread rejection of her offer of salvation (55–57), does the document turn within to “the reality of the inner man” (58). Here God the Father is invoked with the words of St. Paul: “That according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man” (Eph 3:16). The concluding reflection returns to the interior mystery between God and the Church, for this must be understood and accepted if the Church is to have any missionary impact at all on the world, including today's world. The pope's fundamental “apologetic” rests on this turn back to true inner resources. The Christian should not only think, but also live, the truth that the triune God wills to abide within him, the truth that “in the communion of grace with the Trinity, man's ‘dwelling place’ is broadened and raised up to the supernatural level of divine life. Man lives in God and by God: he lives ‘according to the Spirit,’ and ‘sets his mind on the things of the Spirit’” (58). He thereby comes to know what was already observed in *Gaudium et spes*, 24—namely, that a certain analogy exists between the unity of the divine Persons and the unity of the Church (*DV*, 59, 62); that this can serve “to sum up the whole of Christian anthropology” in which the true meaning of human freedom and liberation becomes intelligible; that finally the Church is no external society, but can only be understood in view of Christ's God-manhood, since she herself possesses a “divine-human constitution . . . , which enables her to share in the messianic mission of Christ” (61). Christ's departure and his sending of his Spirit upon the Church is at the same time his “new coming” to her and his mode of remaining with her “until the end of the age.” At this point it is appropriate to speak of the Eucharist, too, by means of which Christ indwells the Church “through the efficacy of the Holy Spirit” (epiclesis), whereby the Church as Body and bride of Christ is herself shaped “in Christ as a sacrament or sign and instrument of the intimate union with

God and of the unity of the whole human race” (63, quoting *Lumen gentium*, 1).

This final statement directs one’s gaze from the inner mystery of the sacramental Church back outward, lest the Church forget that God’s final end “is the redemption of all mankind and in a certain way all of creation,” so that therefore her mission in the Holy Spirit is aimed toward the salvation of the entire world. If the Church is “the sacrament of the unity of the whole human race,” then she is this by virtue of her own inner sacramental character, which will inevitably leaven the dough of the world through its instrumental efficacy. This efficacy is of its essence twofold, where both forms of the Church’s power work by virtue of the Holy Spirit. The one form is her active engagement in inner-worldly structures and their interests, while the other is her interior labor of prayer and renunciation. Along both paths the Church makes her way toward man, even to the inner heart of man.

10. PRAYER AND THE HEART

Like the previous two encyclicals, this third concludes with a powerful summons to prayer. Hence *Redemptor hominis* closes, “We feel not only the need but even a categorical imperative for great, intense and growing prayer by all the Church” (22). *Dives in misericordia* closed by challenging the Church: the more the world distances itself from God and thereby loses touch with the mystery of his forgiveness, the more the Church has “the right and the duty to appeal to the God of mercy ‘with loud cries’ . . . to cry out with Christ on the cross: ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do’” (15)—and to do this for the sake of every single person. The encyclical on the Spirit ends, like the final book of Sacred Scripture, with the unified prayer of “the Spirit and the Bride” who together call upon the Lord. “Prayer is also the revelation of that abyss which is the heart of man: a depth which comes from God and which only God can fill, precisely with the Holy Spirit” who “helps us in our weakness” and who “bolsters our impotence and heals our inability to pray” (65).

The Holy Father is aware of the groups and movements, ever more widespread today, that “are giving first place to prayer

and seeking in prayer a renewal of their spiritual life” so as to offer “a real contribution to the revival of prayer among the faithful” and thus to work against “man’s spiritual decadence” (ibid.). In view of this the Church may never lose sight of the Upper Room, in which she prayed for the Holy Spirit together with Mary, since Mary as “archetype” and “mother of the Church” is also, in the power of the Holy Spirit that has been given to her, the exemplar of the Church’s prayer.

Prayer flows from heart to heart: the heart of God and the heart of man. The Holy Father loves this word “heart” when understood in its biblical sense as the center of the inner man, the person. For him, man is always historical and incarnate, and his center is not his brain but his bodily-spiritual heart. The word “heart” shows up, therefore, right at the encyclical’s conclusion: “We wish to bring to a close these considerations in the heart of the Church and in the heart of man. The way of the Church passes through the heart of man, because here is the hidden place of the salvific encounter with the Holy Spirit” (67). The Spirit is presented here as the one who brings two hearts together—that of the Church, who seeks to find her way to the heart of every person, and that of man, in whom the Spirit always already lives as comforter, succor, and custodian of hope—and who must therefore be shed abroad in man’s heart for the Church’s message to resound [cf. Rom 5:5, KJV]. The unity of both hearts is, ultimately, already realized in the heart of Jesus (cf. *DM*, 13), whose divinely human heart beats for the world but has been emptied in death so that it might dispense the sacraments to the Church. The Holy Spirit accompanies and sustains the work of the Redeemer: “He takes from Christ and transmits to all, unceasingly entering into the history of the world through the heart of man” (*DV*, 67). He becomes the “Light of hearts” and “the ‘sweet Guest of the soul,’ whom the Church unceasingly greets on the threshold of the inmost sanctuary of every human being” (ibid.). For her part, the Church “implores with her heart which embraces all human hearts” that the fruits of the Spirit come upon all peoples, so that he can be present “in every conscience and every heart” and can fill the world “with love and joy” (ibid.).

When one considers the meaning of “*miseri-cordia*,”⁵ which is praised as one of the principal divine attributes, we find this concept immersed in the very depths of God. This term gives the worn-out word “love” a living color, one that suffuses the triune God’s entire work of salvation and so addresses the heart of man directly (*DM*, 7: mercy as “love’s second name”). At the same time, it opens up the innermost meaning of being and therefore addresses not so much the brain as the most intimate depths of man.

Accordingly, all three encyclicals leave behind the solemnity and rhetoric usually associated with the Vatican, speaking in a refreshing way from heart to heart. This seems to be easier in the first two encyclicals than in the third, since the Holy Spirit is for many, including for many Christians, an incomprehensible stranger. But both great hymns to the Holy Spirit overcome this aversion, and John Paul II’s encyclical does so, too. We encounter here the “Father of the poor,” the “Giver of gifts,” the “Light of hearts,” without whose blessing “nothing in man is without fault,” indeed “nothing is in man” whatsoever (*DV*, 67).

It may make sense to dwell a bit longer on the tone of this conclusion. Not only those of other faiths but also Catholics often see in the Church’s “Magisterium” an impersonal institution that mainly occupies itself with conserving traditional teachings and giving moral advice to a more or less antagonistic world. That this “teaching office” could have anything to do with the heart is so inconceivable to most people that when a pope like the present one [John Paul II] vulnerably opens his heart before all peoples, preferring especially to do so before the poor, the ill, the uneducated, and the young, one thinks he catches the scent of well-calculated propaganda—like Judas before Mary of Bethany’s “waste” of the costly ointment. This is the price the pope must pay for going out to meet his widely dispersed flock—“why such waste?” Such penny-pinchers fail to understand the heart’s logic, which is the logic of the trinitarian God, the logic of the merciful Father, the logic of the poured-out heart of Jesus, and hence the logic of the Spirit who proceeds from both. From the beginning this divine logic of the heart has been handed over to

5. This Latin word for mercy expresses the same thing as the German (*Er*)-*Barm-Herzigkeit*.

the Church. Think here of Peter's words: "Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you" (Jn 21:17)—to him Christ's flock has been entrusted. One need only consider a figure like Gregory the Great to recognize that a pope governs not only with spirit and understanding, but with the blood of his heart. And who would deny that the great popes of our own century lived out this unity of heart and office, from St. Pius X to Paul VI, John XXIII, and John Paul I and II?

Divine love has become man in Jesus Christ and has revealed in him its true depths. Man can find rest in Jesus because he is "meek and humble of heart" (Mt 11:29), and because the end of his Passion was the opening up of his heart, out of which gushed forth the whole Church, whose objective dimensions—her sacraments, her proclamations, her offices—bear witness from this origin on to the divinely human heart. And Paul, in whose "heart the light of God has shone" (2 Cor 4:6) and whose "heart widens itself" for his communities (2 Cor 6:11), leaves to his followers not only a further office, but a "spirit of power and love and self-control" that will participate in the whole of Paul's journeying, persecution, and suffering (2 Tim 1:7, 3:10). The first centuries of the Church knew very well that the transmission of office is always also the transmission of the apostolic spirit and disposition of the heart. So Hippolytus says that the heretics would be refuted by no one other than "the Holy Spirit, handed on in the Church, since the Apostles received him first and passed him down to all those who possess the true faith."⁶ Ecclesial office always entails the presence of the Holy Spirit, who is delivered over to the Church out of the Father's mercy and the opened heart of Jesus. For this reason the institutional office is not only inwardly united to the charism of prophecy—that is, the exegesis of the words and will of God appropriate to each hour of the world—but also to the power of Christian hearts, which guide the universal Church from depths that have been broken open by the sins abounding in the world and in the Church. That which could be read off the opened heart of Jesus is also manifest in the heart of every good pope, bishop, or priest. "Without the shedding of blood," without a wounded heart, "there is no forgiveness" (Heb 9:22);

6. Hippolytus, *Philosophumena* I, preface.

without the surrender of one's own substance, there can be no ecclesial fruitfulness.

God's Holy Spirit cannot be divorced from the divinely human, opened heart of Jesus. Here we are once again presented with the convergence between "theocentrism and anthropocentrism" that structured the previous encyclicals. In the innermost depth of man lies his heart, in which his spiritual and bodily powers join in a higher unity. This heart is the center of his being, and if God wills to become man, man's heart will also be the center of divine revelation. This is the teaching of these three encyclicals, which for their part have their center in the heart of God. Here expression is given to the wondrous mystery that the Catholic Church can fundamentally be so human, so near the heart of man, simply because God himself dwells among us, opening his heart to us from within our own hearts. Within our own hearts—there, says the pope, is where the Holy Spirit lives and works.*—*Translated by Erik van Versendaal.* □

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