

**The Holy Spirit:
God's creative and creating Presence
Reflection #1 of 3**

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*As we prepare for the Feast of Pentecost (2023),
Fr Michael offers three reflections on the Holy Spirit in our lives.*

Introduction – take off your shoes!

When Moses encountered God on Sinai, a promise was given to him: “I will be with you” – see Exodus 3:12. Moses replied: “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” – see Exodus 3:13-14 – NRSV.

The name ‘revealed’ in Exodus 3:14 has the four Hebrew letters *YHWH* and is therefore often spoken of as the Tetragrammaton – literally ‘the four letters’. It is normally rendered in English as *Yahweh*. To this day scholars debate over both the precise etymological and the theological meanings of the Tetragrammaton, though all seem to agree it has something to do with ‘being’.

On June 29, 2008, the Congregation for Divine Worship issued a directive that the use of the word ‘Yahweh’ in the Roman Catholic liturgy should be dropped in faithfulness to the Hebrew tradition and the practice of the early Church.

When we attempt to speak of God, we are walking on sacred ground. “Take off your shoes”! – see Exodus 3:5. Take off the “shoes” of preconceptions, expectations, presumptions and assumptions. Let God be God – beyond names and images, beyond our understanding and absolutely beyond our control!

The Exodus revelation says to us: “I shall be there as who I AM shall I be there”.

Speaking about God

Fr Austin (“The Doc”) Woodbury SM, who began the Aquinas Academy in 1945, used to say that, when we speak about God, we must remember that our descriptions are “likey”, “notty” and “morey”. That is, whatever we say carries the qualifications, “like this”, “not this”, “more than this”.

Thus, if I say, “God is love”, I must not forget that I am actually saying something like, “If you want to understand God think of love, but God is not love as we understand it, God is so much more than anything we can think or imagine”.

Language about God is like a lookout. We stand there, look towards the horizon and contemplate what we can never fully know, name or understand.

Listen to the advice of some of the greatest Catholic thinkers:

St Augustine: *If you are able to understand what you are saying about God, it is not God* (Sermon, LII, vi, 16).

St Thomas Aquinas: *It is impossible for any created intellect to comprehend God (even) by the revelation of grace we cannot know of God what he is, and thus are united to him as one unknown* (Summa Theologica, I, q12, a7 & a13, ad 1).

Meister Eckhart: *No man can see God except he be blind, nor know him except through ignorance nor understand him except through folly* (Raymond Blakeney, Meister Eckhart, Harper Torchbooks, 1941, 200).

Our speech about the Holy Spirit

So, when we talk of the Holy Spirit, we should “take off our shoes”. Let it be understood from the outset that we are standing on a lookout, gazing towards an horizon. Inevitably we use metaphors and symbols, rituals and gestures and – above all – silence, to keep us looking towards the divine horizon.

We must be careful, therefore, that the language we use does not get in the way of the faith that we seek to understand and express.

One of the metaphors used throughout the Bible to describe God’s creative and creating Presence, is that of “breath” or “spirit” or “wind”. We find the metaphor right at the beginning of the Bible:

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a **wind from God** swept over the face of the waters* (Genesis 1:1-2).

The New King James Version (NKJV) has, “the **Spirit of God** was hovering over the face of the waters”. The New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) has, “a **divine wind** sweeping over the waters”, adding the footnote: “This is not a reference to the Spirit of God and his part in the creation. The creation was effected by the ‘word’ of God, vv. 3 seq. or by his ‘act’, vv. 7, 16, 25, 26.”

This scholarly disagreement – between the NKJV and NJB – is a reminder to us that we are not dealing here with definitions or arguments that close off alternative ways of thinking or stop us gazing towards the divine horizon. We can safely choose either of these points of view. Personally, I favour the NKJV interpretation.

One of the accounts of the creation of human beings – again near the beginning of the Bible – uses the same metaphor:

*the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and **breathed into his nostrils the breath of life**; and the man became a living being (Genesis 2:7 – NRSV)*

Here are some further examples of this metaphor being used to describe God’s creative and creating presence:

*Psalm 104:30 – When you send forth **your spirit**, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground (NRSV).*

*Job 33:4 – The **spirit of God** has made me, and **the breath of the Almighty** gives me life (NRSV).*

*Ezekiel 36:26 – A new heart I will give you, and **a new spirit** I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh (NRSV).*

The same metaphor to describe God’s creative and creating Presence is used in the Christian Scriptures where it is generally called the Holy Spirit. Luke, who identifies it with the “power from on high”, gives us good examples:

*Luke 1:35 – The **Holy Spirit** will come upon you, and **the power of the Most High** will overshadow you (NRSV).*

*Luke 24:49 – I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with **power from on high** (NRSV)*

*Luke 4:14-15 – Then Jesus, filled with **the power of the Spirit**, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone (NRSV).*

*Acts 2:1-4 – When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like **the rush of a violent wind**, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with **the Holy Spirit** and began to speak in other languages, as **the Spirit** gave them ability (NRSV).*

In the light of this biblical use of the metaphor – “breath”, “wind”, “spirit” – to point to God’s creative and creating Presence, we speak of *the Holy Spirit*, one of the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity. So, in the Creed, we say: “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets”.