

Catholic

UPDATE

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Who Is the Holy Spirit?

ELIZABETH A. JOHNSON

Who is God? A typical Catholic woman or man would probably answer this question by referring to God the Father and to Jesus Christ. A few might talk of God as Mother. Only the rare person would answer, “the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit is the forgotten God among Catholic Christians, especially in the Western world.

To downplay the Holy Spirit is to diminish our sense of God’s presence and activity among us in the world today. For the Holy Spirit is *God’s own self in outreach to the world*. The Holy Spirit is God’s presence and activity among us. The Holy

Spirit is God, continuously drawing near and passing by to vivify, renew, and love us and all of creation.

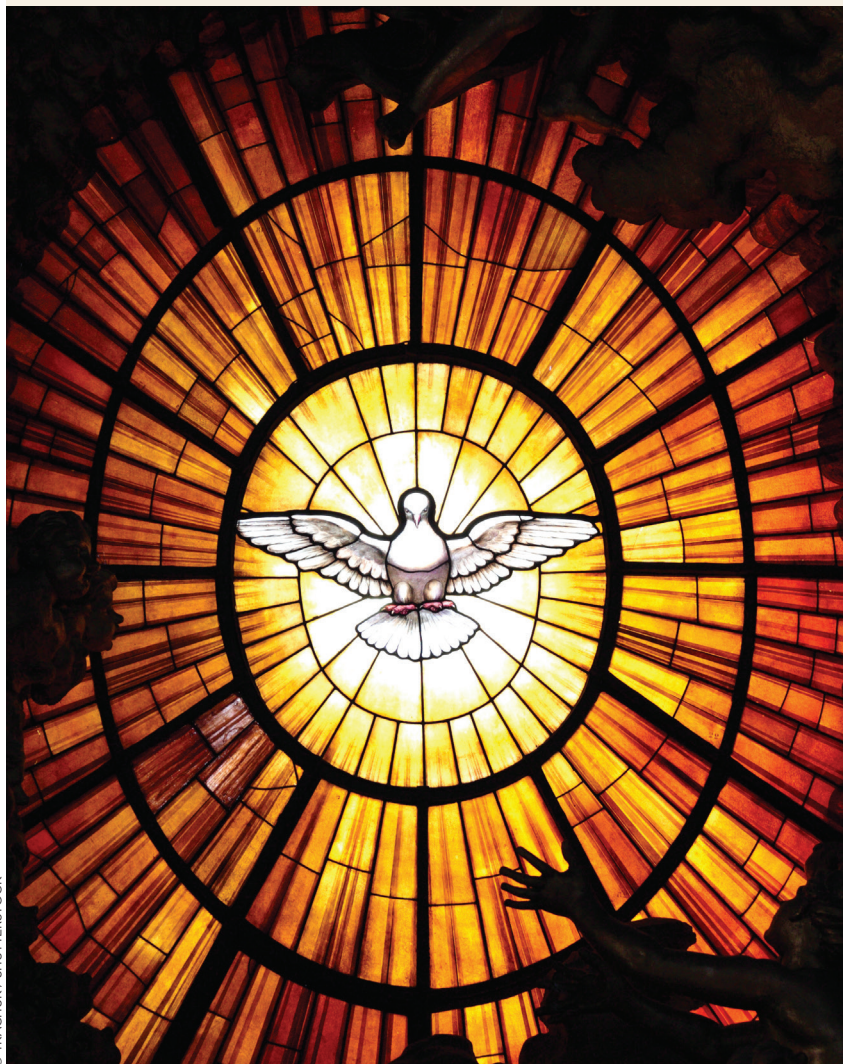
Our faith is greatly enriched as we begin to remember the Spirit’s role in the world and in our lives. This Update will explore three areas where we can renew our understanding of the Holy Spirit:

- our everyday encounter with the Spirit;
- what Tradition teaches about the Spirit; and
- the Holy Spirit in the Bible.

EVERYDAY ENCOUNTERS

We encounter the Spirit in our public and private prayer. The Eucharist addresses prayer to the Father, through the Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Private prayer sometimes takes this same form. But the Spirit is not limited to explicitly religious moments such as these. For the Spirit is “the Lord, the giver of life,” as we proclaim in the Nicene Creed. This means that the Spirit is first and foremost the Creator Spirit who creates, empowers, and fills the whole world with life.

At every moment, the Spirit sustains every place, every moment, every creature, the whole interconnected community of creation itself. I would like to highlight three major encounters with the Holy Spirit: nature, personal relationships, and society.



The Spirit in nature. The Spirit of God is present and active in the natural world itself—in the new life of spring, the flourishings of summer, the harvests of autumn, the storms of winter, the diversity of plants and animals. Every fresh morning, every star at night, speaks of the Creator Spirit who pervades the world with creative power, giving rise to all manner of systems and species.



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In recent years, we have become aware that the human race, with its polluting and consuming ways, threatens the very survival of the earth's life—systems of air, water, and soil—along with the survival of many other fellow creatures. Wasting the earth is a sin against the very creativity of God. Remembering the Spirit energizes us to be responsible stewards of the great treasure, creation.

The Spirit in relationships. We also encounter the Spirit in the personal world of human relationship, especially love relationships. Scripture connects love with the Spirit. As the apostle Paul says, “the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:5). A Christian prayer expresses this by exclaiming, “Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love.” Wherever human beings come together in love, the Holy Spirit is present and active in and through their love.

