

Bread of Life: Bishops' teaching series

6: The work of the Spirit (*epiclesis*) - Bishop Jan McFarlane

Over the past few weeks we've been exploring together various aspects of the Eucharist: life in unity, thanksgiving, remembering, sacrifice and presence; and this week we're considering **the work of the Holy Spirit** - the one described by Charles Wesley as 'the Divine Remembrancer' in his hymn, "*Come, thou everlasting Spirit*":

Come, thou witness of his dying;
come Remembrancer divine,
let us feel thy power, applying
Christ to every soul, and mine.

So, as in this session we seek a greater understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist, we look back at the **New Testament** and then we consider the **teachings and tradition** of the Church down the centuries; calling to mind John Paul II's call to "*breathe with both lungs*" - that is, to learn not just from the Church in the West but from the Church in the East too.

So, beginning with the **New Testament**, we remember how in John's Gospel (John 14:26) Jesus tells the disciples that it's the promised Holy Spirit who, "will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."

And then in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, we see that promise fulfilled as the Holy Spirit works in the infant Church - bringing into being a living, breathing fellowship of believers who, "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (NRSV).

The part of the Eucharistic Prayer in which we call on the Holy Spirit is referred to by the Greek word '*epiclesis*' - which simply means '*invocation*' - calling upon God and particularly calling upon God the Holy Spirit - to be present and active amongst us.

The roots of the *epiclesis* seem to lie in **Jewish prayers** of blessing and thanksgiving: these often contained a direct plea to God to continue his work among his people.

But from early times, the Holy Spirit is called upon directly in prayer: "Come Holy Spirit" - and this develops into a request to God to send the Spirit on his people.

And certainly by the third Century, in the early rite of the theologian Hippolytus of Rome, in *Apostolic Tradition*, the Holy Spirit is **invoked** .

We see within the Eucharist a prayer for the Holy Spirit to descend on the elements - the bread and the wine - and although the prayer doesn't specifically ask that the bread and wine be changed into the body and blood of Christ, this would seem to be clearly implied through the whole eucharist prayer. The Holy Spirit is asked to descend on the elements for the purpose of our communion with Christ.

Now in the **Eastern Church**, from the middle of the fourth century onwards a more defined pattern emerges. The Holy Spirit is invoked *in order to change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ*: and the purpose of the Holy Spirit's action on the elements is so that those who receive the bread and wine may share in communion with Christ. In the Eastern Church from the earliest times, it's the invocation of the Spirit which is particularly emphasised as the 'key moment' of consecration: the key moment when the bread and wine become Christ's body and blood. .

In the **Church in the West**, the role of the Holy Spirit was given *much less emphasis*. In the Western tradition it's the institution narrative which marks the moment of consecration - and the petition for the consecration is placed before the institution narrative itself (rather than in the second half of the prayer as we know it today) - and without explicitly referring to the Holy Spirit at all. The Holy Spirit is given a back seat in the West.

It was down to **Thomas Cranmer** in his first English *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) to combine the two traditions: bringing together East and West.

Thomas Cranmer desired fervently to restore Holy Communion to the people - and to do so in their own tongue. And so Cranmer looked back to the early Church's great Doctors of the Faith and also to the early Greek liturgies as he wrote his own liturgy.

In 16th century **Europe** the debates over the nature of the real presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine were feisty, to say the least! So in the West we have the words of institution: "This is my body: This is my blood" being stressed exclusively as the exact moment of consecration; and the Eastern tradition of the role of the Holy Spirit in making real the changes to the bread and wine pushed gently to one side.

And so in his first *Prayer Book of 1549* Cranmer restored the *epiclesis* - the invocation of the Holy Spirit over the elements:

"Hear us, O merciful Father, we beseech thee; and **with thy Holy Spirit and word** vouchsafe to bless and sanctify these thy gifts, and creatures of bread and wine, that they may be unto us the body and blood of thy most dearly beloved Son, Jesus Christ."

"With thy Holy Spirit and word." By using those words - and by putting this passage *before* rather than *after* the words of institution, Cranmer was cleverly able to bring together the traditions of both East and West - and to keep open the question over the actual moment of consecration.

But across Europe, the debates raged on, and in the end Cranmer gave way. In his Prayer Book of 1552 the whole petition had disappeared - and instead we find a prayer for *fruitful reception* of the bread and wine: reflecting Cranmer's own theology of the Eucharist:

"grant that **we receiving** these thy creatures of bread and wine...may be partakers of his most blessed body and blood."

And this was retained in the *Book of Common Prayer* of 1662 where we're left to hunt for the *epiclesis*!

So, in the Book of Common Prayer there is no direct reference to the Holy Spirit in the prayer of consecration.

But *after* the people have received communion, Cranmer adds two prayers. The first asks that "all we who are partakers of this holy communion, may be filled with thy *grace* and *heavenly benediction*." The Holy Spirit is asked to bless the **worshippers** rather than the elements - and to make them one with Christ

The second prayer is one of thanksgiving in which God is thanked for the '*spiritual food* of the most precious Body and Blood' which has been received. For Cranmer, it's this *spiritual food* which makes us members of the Church. It's this *spiritual food* which sends us out to serve God in the world.

We then time travel through the centuries to 1971 and the famous ARCIC statement - - the 'Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission' - in which changes to Cranmer's prayers are tentatively adopted. ARCIC concluded and agreed that in the Eucharistic Prayer the bread and wine *becomes* the body and blood of Christ *by the action of the Holy Spirit*.

And so in the '*Alternative Services: Series 3*' service of 1971, we find an *epiclesis* on the **elements** before the institution narrative:

"*by the power of your Holy Spirit* these gifts of bread and wine may be to us his body and blood"

and then a **second** epiclesis on **those who are to receive** the bread and wine after the words of remembrance (the *anamnesis*):

"as we eat and drink these holy gifts in the presence of your divine majesty, *renew us by your Spirit*".

The **Alternative Service Book (ASB)** of 1980 (greatly missed by some of us!) kept this double *epiclesis* in three out of its four Eucharistic prayers and by the time we get to **Common Worship** we have just about every option imaginable:-

- Prayers A and B keep the ASB's double *epiclesis*
- Prayers C and E have a single *epiclesis* before the institution narrative
- Prayers D, F, G, H have a single *epiclesis* after the institution narrative - implying an Eastern rather than western view of consecration.

And so, in theory, everyone is content!

The theologian Anne McGowan in her book, '*Eucharistic Epicleses: Ancient and Modern*' (SPCK 2014) makes the point that the modern Eucharistic Prayers all feel very similar - thanks in part to co-operation and conversation between the different denominations; and thanks too to those who have reflected and studied to ever greater depths the ancient liturgical sources. But even so, we can still see the different traditions in the different liturgies. She sees this as a huge strength; helping us all to broaden our understanding and our appreciation of the Holy Spirit's role in the Eucharist.

So bearing all this in mind, I took a look at a couple of Anglican hymnbooks, and almost every hymn which mentions the Holy Spirit in the context of the Eucharist does so in terms of the Spirit's action on us as believers. I could only find two hymns which referred to the action of the Spirit on the elements - and we're back to Charles Wesley for the first:

'Come Holy Ghost, thine influence shed,
and realise the sign;
thy life infuse into the bread,
thy power into the wine.

Effectual let the tokens prove
and made, by heavenly art,
fit channels to convey thy love
to every faithful heart.'

Perhaps ultimately we return to our understanding of the word 'sacrament' as having its roots in the New Testament Greek word, *mysterion*, meaning mystery: using heart as well as mind as we consider God's action through our liturgy. A sort of 'kneeling theology' as I've heard it described.

In the words of the Russian Orthodox theologian, Vladimir Lossky, "there is no Christian mysticism without theology; but above all, there is no theology without mysticism."¹

The 17th century Anglican bishop, Jeremy Taylor moved away from the controversies over the Eucharist and he looked to the early Eastern teachers of the Faith, seeing Eucharistic presence as a mystery far beyond anything we can understand, and accepting it through faith and reverent awe.

And so we sing of the **mystery** of our eucharistic worship in the hymn '*We pray thee, heavenly Father*':

'Within the pure oblation,
beneath the outward sign,
by that his operation -,
the Holy Ghost divine -
lies hid the sacred body,
lies hid the precious blood,
once slain, now ever glorious,
of Christ our Lord and God.

Tis mystery all' and while we strive to understand, we acknowledge too there is much we simply do not know - but must simply accept through faith.

What we **do** know is that in the Eucharist we are somehow united with Christ through the power of the Spirit, in what Wesley refers to as 'heavenly art'.

And if we refuse to allow over-familiarity with the liturgy to dull our senses - and if we instead approach our Eucharistic worship with a determination to remain expectant and receptive to the action of God the Holy Spirit through the earthy elements of bread and wine: who can say what God might do in us and through us.

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¹ Vladimir Lossky *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press 1991