

Reflections

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Spirit Holy: Dove and Water

The most appropriate language for speaking about the Holy Spirit – because of his mysterious nature – is that of symbols and images. The Holy Spirit escapes mathematical definition. It lends itself to the imagination, poetry and metaphor.

The Dove. It is the image most known and most traditional. Why did HE choose the dove as his symbol? The reasons of the theologians are not convincing. It seems to be more a matter of poetry than of theology.

“You are like a dove that hides in the crevice of a rock. Let me see your lovely face and hear your enchanting voice” (SGS 2, 14). The entire book of the Song of Songs is a poem of love, and love likes to express itself in metaphors. And thus the dove becomes tenderness, innocence, simplicity. It is easy to approach her, she is not frightened, she does no harm. Those same traits are spontaneously applied to the Holy Spirit. Thus we idealize the dove so that she may adjust more to the divine model she represents. There are fortunate animals!

The dove appears at the end of the flood. Noah sends her from the ark to see if the earth is dry. The first time she returns without finding a place to alight. On the second attempt, she returns with an olive branch in her beak. And on the third attempt, she no longer returns (GN 8, 8 – 12). The dove was loyal on returning with the green message, and was intelligent in not returning when she saw she could remain in the recovered land. That loyalty and intelligence of the dove applies well to the Holy Spirit. It knows when to come and when to leave.

Since then, the dove with the olive branch has been a **symbol of peace** between Heaven and earth, confirmed with the rainbow so that there may be no more floods and humanity will no longer be in danger.

Learned Rabbis also see the dove in creation: “the Spirit of God was moving over the water” (GN 1, 2). They compare the dove which flies over the original waters of creation with the dove that flies over the conquered waters of the flood.

The dove, symbol of the creative Spirit, proclaims after the flood a second beginning, a second creation. And, finally, the dove over the waters of the Jordan (MT 3, 16). It represents the coming of the Spirit of God over Jesus, at the moment of his Baptism, at the beginning of his public life. It evokes the new creation, the new world which Jesus inaugurates in the power of the Divine Spirit. And thus, in humanity’s great moments, the dove is present, reflecting to us something of the Holy Spirit.

Water. Another symbol is water. “Jesus stood up and said in a loud voice, ‘Whoever is thirsty should come to me and whoever believes in me should drink. As the scripture says, ‘Streams of life-giving water will pour out from his side.’ Jesus said this about the Spirit which those who believed in him were going to receive” (JN 7, 37- 39).

There can hardly be a most beautiful and most meaningful image for the Spirit of God than living water, clear, free, joyful. The Jewish community which had formed in the desert knew the value of water and considered it a true gift from Heaven. And it is not strange that rivers are sacred in many civilizations. And neither is it strange for the sea to speak to us of God, if we contemplate it in silence. The Holy Spirit refreshes and gives life, cleans and sanctifies, it carries away and makes fruitful. And baptism is the sacramental sign of the new birth. In that sense, the letter to Titus says (TITUS 3, 5): “He saved us. It was not because of any good deeds that we ourselves had done, but because of his own mercy that he saved us through the Holy Spirit who gives us new birth and new life by washing us.” The last book of the Bible, Revelation, ends with the call of the Spirit to the Spouse, summoning to the prophetic appointment: “Come, whoever is thirsty; accept the water of life as a gift, whoever wants it” (22, 17). The water of the Spirit who quenches the thirst of the soul and gives eternal life. Our daily appointment with the living water must become an appointment with the Spirit who moves the waters of creation and redemption.

Questions for reflection

1. Which is my favorite symbol of the Holy Spirit? Why?
2. Do I relate water with the Holy Spirit?
3. How can I increase my relationship with the Holy Spirit?

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