

The Presence of the Holy Spirit in History

by St. Seraphim of Sarov

The Holy Spirit's presence is not always apparent, but it can be known through seeking the truth, practicing virtues, and being open to its guidance.

Scripture: Genesis 3:10, Job 27:3, Isaiah 1:18, Matthew 11:12, Luke 17:21, John 1:16, John 7:39, Revelation 7:9

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Divine Grace"

Description

St. Seraphim of Sarov explains the importance of recognizing the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, emphasizing the need to return to the simplicity of original Christian knowledge and seek communion with God. He delves into the significance of the Holy Spirit's role in the creation of Adam and Eve, highlighting how their disobedience led to the loss of divine grace. St. Seraphim also discusses the restoration of grace through Jesus Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, and the ongoing struggle to maintain and grow in grace through repentance and virtuous living.

Transcript

"Father," said I, "you speak all the time of the acquisition of the grace of the Holy Spirit as the aim of the Christian life. But how and where can I see it? Good deeds are visible, but can the Holy Spirit be seen? How am I to know whether He is with me or not?"

"At the present time," the elder replied, "Owing to our almost universal coldness to our holy faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and our inattention to the working of His Divine Providence in us, and to the communion of man with God, we have gone so far that, one may say, we have almost abandoned the true Christian life. The testimonies of Holy Scripture now seem strange to us; when, for instance, by the lips of Moses the Holy Spirit says: 'And Adam saw the Lord walking in Paradise' (cf. Gen. 3:10), or when we read the words of the Apostle Paul: 'We went to Achaia, and the Spirit of God went not with us; we returned to Macedonia, and the Spirit of God came with us.' More than once in other passages of Holy Scripture the appearance of God to men is mentioned.

"That is why some people say: 'These passages are incomprehensible. Is it really possible for people to see God so openly?' But there is nothing incomprehensible here. This failure to understand has come about because we have departed from the simplicity of the original Christian knowledge. Under the pretext of education, we have reached such a darkness of ignorance, that the things the ancients understood so clearly, seem to us almost inconceivable. Even in ordinary conversation, the idea of God's appearance among men did not seem strange to them. Thus, when his friends rebuked him for blaspheming God, Job

answered them: 'How can that be when I feel the Spirit of God in my nostrils?' (cf. Job 27:3). That is, 'How can I blaspheme God when the Holy Spirit abides with me? If I had blasphemed God, the Holy Spirit would have withdrawn from me; but look! I feel His breath in my nostrils.'

"It is said that Abraham and Jacob saw the Lord and conversed with Him in exactly the same way, and that Jacob even wrestled with Him. Moses and all the people with him saw God, when he received the tablets of the law on Mount Sinai from God. A pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire, or in other words, the evident grace of the Holy Spirit, served as guides to God's people in the desert. People saw God and the grace of His Holy Spirit not during sleep, in dreams, or in the excitement of a disordered imagination, but truly and openly.

"We have become so inattentive to the work of our salvation, that we misinterpret many other words in Holy Scripture as well, all because we do not seek the grace of God and in the pride of our minds, do not allow it to dwell in our souls. That is why we are without true enlightenment from the Lord, which He sends into the hearts of men who hunger and thirst wholeheartedly for God's righteousness or holiness.

"Many explain the part in the Bible, God breathed the breath of life into the face of Adam the first-created, who was created by Him from the dust of the ground, it must mean that until that moment there was neither human soul nor spirit in Adam, but only the flesh created from the dust of the ground. This interpretation is wrong, for the Lord created Adam from the dust of the ground with the constitution which the holy Apostle Paul describes: May your spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:23). And all these parts of our nature were created from the dust of the ground, and Adam was not created dead, but an active being like all of God's animate creatures living on earth.

"The point is, that if the Lord God had not breathed afterwards into his face, this breath of life--that is, the grace of our Lord God the Holy Spirit Who proceeds from the Father, rests in the Son and is sent into the world for the Son's sake--Adam would have remained without the Holy Spirit within him. It is the Holy Spirit who raised Adam to Godlike dignity. However perfect, he had been created and superior to all the other creatures of God, as the crown of creation on earth, he would have been just like all the other creatures, though they have a body, soul and spirit, each according to its kind, do not have the Holy Spirit within them. But when the Lord God breathed into Adam's face the breath of life, then, according to Moses' word, Adam became a living soul (Gen. 2:7), that is, completely and in every-way like God, and like Him, forever immortal. Adam was immune to the action of the elements to such a degree that water could not drown him, fire could not burn him, the earth could not swallow him in its abysses, and the air could not harm him by any kind of action whatever. Everything was subject to him as the beloved of God, as the king and lord of creation, and everything looked up to him, as the perfect crown of God's creatures. Adam was made so wise by this breath of life, which was breathed into his face from the creative lips of God, the Creator and Ruler of all, that there has never been a man on earth wiser or more intelligent, and it is unlikely that there ever will be. When the Lord commanded him to give names to all the creatures, he gave every creature a name which completely expressed all the qualities, powers and properties given it by God at its creation.

"As a result of this gift, of the supernatural grace of God, which was infused into him by the breath of life, Adam could see, understand the Lord walking in Paradise, comprehend His words, understand the conversation of the holy Angels, the language of all beasts, birds and reptiles and all that is now hidden from us the fallen and sinful creatures. All this was so clear to Adam before his fall. The Lord God also gave Eve the same wisdom, strength, unlimited power, and all the other good and holy qualities. He

created her not from the dust of the ground, but from Adam's rib in the Eden of delight, the Paradise which He had planted in the midst of the earth.

"In order that they might always easily maintain the immortal, divine and perfect properties of this breath of life, God planted in the midst of the garden the tree of life with fruits endowed with all the essence and fullness of His divine breath. If they had not sinned, Adam and Eve themselves as well as all their posterity could have always eaten of the fruit of the tree of life and so would have eternally maintained the vivifying power of divine grace.

"They could have also maintained for all eternity the full powers of their body, soul and spirit in a state of immortality and perpetual youth, and they could have continued in this immortal and blessed state of theirs forever. At the present time, however, it is difficult for us even to imagine such grace.

"But through the tasting of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil--which was premature and contrary to the commandment of God--they learnt the difference between good and evil and were subjected to all the afflictions which followed the transgression of the commandment of God. Then they lost this priceless gift of the grace of the Spirit of God, so that, until the actual coming into the world of the God-man Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God was not yet in the world because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:39).

"However, that does not mean that the Spirit of God was not in the world at all, but His presence was not so apparent. It manifested only externally, and only the signs of His presence in the world were known to mankind. Thus, for instance, many mysteries in connection with the future salvation of the human race were revealed to Adam as well as to Eve after their fall. For Cain, in spite of his impiety and his transgression, it was easy for him to understand the voice which held grace and divinity, though convicting words. Noah conversed with God. Abraham saw God and His day and was glad (from John 8:56). The grace of the Holy Spirit acting externally was also reflected in all the Old Testament prophets and saints of Israel. Afterwards, the Hebrews established special prophetic schools where the sons of the prophets were taught to discern the signs of the manifestation of God or Angels, and to distinguish the operations of the Holy Spirit from the ordinary natural phenomena of graceless earthly life. Simeon who held God in his arms, Christ's grandparents Joachim and Anna, and countless other servants of God continually often had various divine apparitions, revelations and heard voices, which were corroborated by evident miraculous events. Though not with the same power as in the people of God, nevertheless the presence of the Spirit of God also acted in the pagans who did not know the true God, because even among them, God found the chosen people. For instance, there were the virgin-prophetesses called Sibyls who vowed virginity to an unknown God, but to God, the Creator of the universe, the all-powerful ruler of the world, as He was conceived by the pagans. Though the pagan philosophers also wandered in the darkness of ignorance of God, yet they sought the truth which is beloved by God. Because of this, God-pleasing seeking, they could partake of the Spirit of God. It is said, that nations who do not know God, practice by nature the demands of the law and do what is pleasing to God (cf. Rom. 2:14). The Lord so praises truth that He says of it Himself by the Holy Spirit: Truth has sprung from the earth, and justice has looked down from heaven (Ps. 84[85]:11).

"So you see, your Godliness, both in the holy Hebrew people, a people beloved by God, and in the pagans who did not know God, there was preserved a knowledge of God--thus, my son, a clear and rational comprehension of how our Lord God the Holy Spirit acts in man, and by means of our inner and outer feelings, one can be sure that this is really the action of our Lord God the Holy Spirit, and not a delusion of the enemy. That is how it was, from Adam's fall, until the coming into the world of the Lord Jesus Christ, in

the flesh.

"Without this perceptible realization of the actions of the Holy Spirit which had always been preserved in human nature, men could not have possibly known for certain whether the fruit of the seed of the woman who had been promised to Adam and Eve had come into the world to crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15).

"At last the Holy Spirit foretold to St. Simeon, who was then in his 65th year, the mystery of the virginal conception and birth of Christ from the most pure Ever-Virgin Mary. Afterwards, having lived by the grace of the All-Holy Spirit of God for three hundred years, in the 365th year of his life he said openly in the temple of the Lord that he knew for certain through the gift of the Holy Spirit that this was that very Christ, the Savior of the world, Whose supernatural conception and birth from the Holy Spirit had been foretold to him by an Angel three hundred years previously.

And there was also St. Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, who from her widowhood had served the Lord God in the temple of God for eighty years, and who was known to be a righteous widow, a chaste servant of God, from the special gifts of grace which she had received. She too announced that He was actually the Messiah Who had been promised to the world, the true Christ, God and Man, the King of Israel, Who had come to save Adam and mankind.

"But when our Lord Jesus Christ accomplished the whole work of salvation, after His Resurrection, He breathed on the Apostles, restored the breath of life lost by Adam, and gave them the same grace of the All-Holy Spirit of God as Adam had enjoyed. But that was not all. He also told them that it was better for them that He should go to the Father, for if He did not go, the Spirit of God would not come into the world. But if He, the Christ, went to the Father, He would send Him into the world, and He, the Comforter, would guide them and all who followed their teaching into all truth and would remind them of all that He had said to them when He was still in the world. What was then promised was grace upon grace (John 1:16).

"Then on the day of Pentecost He solemnly sent down to them in a tempestuous wind the Holy Spirit in the form of tongues of fire which alighted on each of them and entered within them and filled them with the fiery strength of divine grace which breathes as with dew and acts with gladness in souls who partake of its power and operations (Acts ch. 2). And this same fire-infusing grace of the Holy Spirit which is given to us all, the faithful in Christ, in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, is sealed by the Sacrament of Chrismation on the chief parts of our body as appointed by the Holy Church, the eternal keeper of this grace. It is said: 'The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.' On what do we put our seals, your Godliness, if not on vessels containing some very precious treasure? But what on earth can be higher and what can be more precious than the gifts of the Holy Spirit which are sent down to us from above in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism? This baptismal grace is so great and so indispensable, so vital for man, that even a heretic is not deprived of it until his actual death; that is, till the end of the period appointed on high by the providence of God as a lifelong test of man on earth, in order to see what he will be able to achieve (during this period given to him by God) by means of the power of grace granted to him from on high.

"And if we were never to sin after our baptism, we should remain for ever saints of God, holy, blameless, and free from all impurity of body and spirit. But the trouble is that we increase in stature, but do not increase in grace and in the knowledge of God as our Lord Jesus Christ increased; but on the contrary, we gradually become more and more depraved and lose the grace of the All-Holy Spirit of God and become sinful in various degrees, and very sinful people. But if a man is stirred by the wisdom of God, which seeks

our salvation and embraces everything, and if he is resolved for its sake to devote the early hours of the day to God and to watch in order to find His eternal salvation, then, in obedience to its voice, he must hasten to offer true repentance for all his sins and must practice the virtues which are opposite to the sins committed. Then through the virtues practiced for Christ's sake, he will acquire the Holy Spirit Who acts within us and establishes in us the Kingdom of God. The word of God does not say in vain: The Kingdom of God is within you (Luke 17:21), and it suffers violence, and the violent take it by force (Matt. 11:12). That means that people who, in spite of the bonds of sin which fetter them and (by their violence and by inciting them to new sins) prevent them from coming to Him, our Savior, with perfect repentance for reckoning with Him. They force themselves to break their bonds, despising all the strength of the fetters of sin--such people at last actually appear before the face of God made whiter than snow by His grace. Come, says the Lord: Though your sins be as purple, I will make you white as snow (Is. 1:18).

"Such people were once seen by the holy Seer John the Divine clothed in white robes (that is, in robes of justification) and with palms in their hands (as a sign of victory), and they were singing to God a wonderful song: Alleluia. And no one could imitate the beauty of their song. Of them an Angel of God said: These are they who have come out of the great tribulation and have washed their robes, and have made them white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:9-14). They were washed with their sufferings and made white in the communion of the immaculate and life-giving Mysteries of the Body and Blood of the most pure and spotless Lamb--Christ--Who was slain before all ages by His own will for the salvation of the world, and Who is continually being slain and divided until now, but is never exhausted (in the Sacrament of Communion). Through the Holy Mysteries we are granted our eternal and unfailing salvation as a viaticum to eternal life, as an acceptable answer at His dread judgment and a precious substitute beyond our comprehension for that fruit of the tree of life of which the enemy of mankind, Lucifer, who fell from heaven, would have liked to deprive the human race. Though the enemy and devil seduced Eve, and Adam fell with her, yet the Lord not only granted them a Redeemer in the fruit of the seed of the woman Who trampled down death by death, but also granted us all in the woman, the Ever-Virgin Mary Mother of God, who crushes the head of the serpent in herself and in all the human race, a constant mediatrix with her Son and our God, and an invincible and persistent intercessor even for the most desperate sinners. That is why the Mother of God is called the "Plague of Demons," for it is not possible for a devil to destroy a man so long as man himself has recourse to the help of the Mother of God.

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