

## **“Nuptial Pentecost”:**

### ***Theological Reflections on the Presence and Action of the Holy Spirit in Christian Marriage***

**By Julie McCarty**

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Try this experiment sometime: Ask a Catholic couple with a good, stable relationship how the Holy Spirit helps them with their marriage. Ask several couples. Next, ask a priest, pastoral minister, or even a theology professor how the Spirit is present in the sacrament of marriage. If your results resemble mine, chances are the reactions to these questions will range from puzzlement to a thoughtful, silent stare. After a time, you may receive a vague reply about God being the “third partner” of the marriage.

Whether working with engaged couples in a parish marriage preparation program or talking with seasoned married couples in my parish, I am often struck by how little awareness there is that marriage is a *spiritual* way of life, a means both for inner transformation of oneself and for outer transformation of the world. When a parish committee working on long range goals for “family ministry” suddenly awoke to the idea that *ministry* is, for them, something to be done inside their own homes and not just on church property, bells and whistles went off. They expressed surprise in the realization that listening lovingly to their spouses or reading stories to their children were forms of *ministry*. They began to connect the sacraments of the home (forgiving each other, breaking bread together, caring for each other in sickness) with the Church’s seven sacraments.

The excitement that this group felt came from seeing that *spiritual* or holy things were happening in their lives at home, and not just at church. The realization that they were loving God through loving their families made them understand they were not second-class citizens in the kingdom of God.

Marriage is called “sacrament,” a word grounded in the word “sacred,” or “holy.” Yet, it is my belief that we have yet to uncover the theological riches embedded in marriages that are permeated with the living love of Christ. We Catholics still subconsciously think of celibacy as the way of holiness, and marriage as a concession to human weakness, a fleshy, worldly affair. Yet, I believe that the path of religious celibacy is only as holy as a given person makes it. The

same can be said of marriage. There are those who marry and live destructive lives, and there are those with marriages steeped and overflowing with sanctity.

Marriages that are truly *sacramental* contain a good deal of theological meaning that has yet to be fully explored. Far from being a “lesser state,” marriage has its origins in God’s own creativity when the Creator designed man and woman to be harmonious partners. (The disharmony between the sexes erupted after sin entered the scene and the blaming game began.) The redemptive work of Christ that restores us to grace also works to heal the brokenness between the sexes in the sacrament of marriage (Evdokimov, 32).

Yet, in our theology of marriage, we have virtually overlooked the presence and the action of the Holy Spirit in any genuinely *Christian* marriage. We relate marriage to the Father’s creative action, or to the sacrificial love Christ has for the Church, but we have yet to ponder the rich meaning of the Spirit, dwelling in the hearts of Christian spouses by virtue of their baptism.

Keeping in mind that the persons of the Trinity work together, how does the Spirit help couples to live marriages permeated with the love of God? After a brief theological grounding, this article explores three images of the Spirit: the Spirit as “bonding agent” (principle of *communio* in marriage), the Spirit as “breath” (life-giver in marriage), and the Spirit as “fire” (sanctifying agent in marriage). These images lead to new insights that contribute to our theology of marriage and have practical implications for pastoral ministry.

### ***The “Nuptial Pentecost” in the Wedding Liturgy***

Traditional theology texts on pneumatology or sacramental theology—or even very current ones—generally lack any specific references to the dynamic action of the Spirit in Christian marriage. Nevertheless, a careful examination of Christian marriage rites reveals that this idea was not completely unknown.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the wedding ceremony culminates in the crowning ceremony, during which the priest places crowns (garlands or gold crowns) upon the heads of both the bride and the groom. Among the many spiritual meanings associated with the crowning, theologians identify this moment as the *epiclesis* (invocation of the Spirit) of the sacrament (Congar, 269; Evdokimov, 153; Petras, 232-234). Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov

describes the crowning as the “nuptial Pentecost,” outpouring of the Spirit for the good of this particular couple:

In the Gospel, every work of Christ reaches completion in glory; its fulfillment is manifested and glorified by the Holy Spirit. Standing in the presence of Christ, the betrothed receive the glory that achieves the establishment of their unique being, and the priest raises them to this glory through the invocation (*epiklesis*) of the sacrament: “O Lord our God, crown them with glory and honor.” This is the effective moment of the sacrament, the time of the nuptial Pentecost, the descent of the Holy Spirit making a new creation. (153)

In the Coptic marriage rite, this “nuptial Pentecost” is also evident in the anointing of the bride and groom with oil. Here, the prayers and songs describe the oil as the “oil of sanctification for your servants.” Gifts associated with this “oil of holy spirits,” are many, among them truth, justice, purity, beauty, happiness, strength, and “renewal and restoration in body, soul and spirit” (Searle and Stevenson, 70, 92-93). This anointing of the couple is “a sign that marriage is a Christian vocation, and therefore an extension of baptism” (Stevenson, “The New Marriage Rites,” 180).

In the Western Church, the need for the assistance of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of marriage was not completely unknown. Kenneth Stevenson notes that in medieval Europe, some Northern rites interspersed prayers from the Votive Mass of the Trinity with prayers of the nuptial mass. A similar interplay of the Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit and the marriage rite occurred in some French and Spanish dioceses. In fact, the Metz rite (local to a bilingual area of France) of 1543 ends with the song *Veni Creator (To Join Together, 204)*.

Italian theologian Carlo Rocchetta relates that the “Mass of the Holy Spirit” was allowed in pre-and post-Tridentine times as *preparation* for the sacrament of marriage. Rocchetta also observes that some rituals “referred to a form of *epiclesis* or invocation of the Spirit to be made over the wedding rings, [and] at other times there was reference to a blessing with the laying of hands on the heads of the spouses to evoke the consecrating action of the Spirit” (175).

## *The “Nuptial Pentecost” in the Modern Catholic Church*

The Holy Spirit’s role in marriage has been quietly seeping into the collective church consciousness in recent years. The Vatican II teachings on marriage include a subtle reference to the Spirit’s presence in marriage in *Gaudium et spes (The Church in the Modern World)*, using the phrase “spirit of Christ,” a phrase that theologian Yves Congar notes is Vatican II shorthand for the Holy Spirit (167). In a section dealing with marital love, the spouses are described as consecrated for marriage and “penetrated with the spirit of Christ” (n. 48).

One sometimes finds reference to the wedding *epiclesis* in newer church writings. In his 1981 apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio (The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World)*, Pope John Paul II notes that “...the Holy Spirit who is poured out in the sacramental celebration offers Christian couples the gift of a new communion of love that is the living and real image of that unique unity which makes of the Church the indivisible Mystical Body of the Lord Jesus” (no. 33). In the pope’s 1994 *Letter to Families*, he refers at least four times to the *epiclesis* of the wedding ceremony (nos. 4, 7, 11, 20). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches “in the *epiclesis* of this sacrament [marriage] the spouses receive the Holy Spirit as the communion of love of Christ and the Church. The Holy Spirit is the seal of their covenant, the ever-available source of their love and the strength to renew their fidelity” (no. 1623).

The *epiclesis* to which the *Catechism* refers is found in the *Ordo Celebrandi Matrimonium* (Order of Celebrating Marriage), the officially approved, revised marriage rite of 1991. Although not yet available in English, this rite reveals a renewed awareness of the pneumatological dimension of marriage. Jan Michael Joncas gives us these rough translations of the revised nuptial blessings:

**Form A:** “...send forth upon them the grace of the Holy Spirit, so that, with your love diffused in their hearts, they may remain faithful in the conjugal covenant.” (219)

**Form B:** “Upon these servants of yours (N. and N.) we pray, extend your [right] hand and pour out the power of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. . . .” (223).

**Form C (Version 1, 2):** ““May your copious blessing come down upon this bride N., Lord, and upon her partner for life, N., and may the power of your Holy Spirit inflame their hearts from above. . . .” (225)

[**Form C, Version 3, and Form D** involve a lay presider and therefore do not contain an explicit *epiclesis*.]

Theologians Michael Joncas, German Martinez, and Carlo Rocchetta have determined these nuptial blessings contain “explicit *epicleses*,” that is, we are asking the Holy Spirit to pour out gifts upon this bridal couple, for the good of their marriage (Joncas, 220, 223, 226; Martinez 129; Rocchetta 176).

The inclusion of explicit *epicleses* in the current rite indicates that we believe that the Holy Spirit acts in sacramental marriage. Keeping in mind that marriage is an ongoing process flowing beyond the wedding day, how is the Spirit a dynamic part of the couple’s daily married life?

### ***The Nuptial Pentecost in the Daily Life of Married Couples***

Theologizing about the role of the Holy Spirit in marriage is a task that has barely begun in the Western Church (Rocchetta, 175). Because of this, I propose that certain parameters be drawn for venturing into this new territory.

First, when I use the term *sacramental marriage* in this article, I am referring to marriages in which both partners are baptized and actively engaged in following Christ. This is not to imply that the Spirit is completely absent in other marriages; rather, it is to provide a starting point for theological reflection.

Second, when I speak of “marriage,” I am not talking about the wedding day, but rather the couple’s relationship, with its own historic unfolding in time, tentatively initialized in courtship, formally entered into on the wedding day, tested and deepened in the years that follow.

Third, nothing written herein is meant to imply that the Spirit works apart from the other two persons of the Trinity. It is only for the sake of theological meditation that we are looking at the Spirit distinctly.

Fourth, it is worth noting that any comparisons between created things (the images of “bonding agent,” “breath,” and “fire”) and the Holy Spirit will not by any means exhaust the

richness of the Spirit. The Fourth Lateran Council reminds us that our comparisons between created realities and God will always fall short of the awesome mystery of God.

Finally, as Patricia O’Connell Killen and John de Beer explain in *The Art of Theological Reflection*, images can help us discover new meanings. As they note, when images are considered in the light of Scripture, tradition, and life experience, new discoveries and ideas for active, positive steps emerge.

### ***The Spirit as the “Bonding Agent” of Christian Marriage***

A bonding agent is something that gathers two or more objects together, like glue, a cord, or a ligament. The Holy Spirit is the “bonding agent” of the Church, the love that gathers us together into one ecclesial Body of Christ. However, this “bonding” is not a side-by-side type of gathering, but rather an inter-penetration of persons that exist in *communio*. This type of bonding agent penetrates and permeates the persons being gathered, like the liquid ingredients in a cake mix penetrate and gather all the dry ingredients into one batter to be baked. As *Lumen Gentium* reminds us, the Holy Spirit is the principle of communion, the person of the Trinity sent forth as crowning act of Christ’s paschal mystery to draw together the followers of Christ into one ecclesial Body of Christ (n. 13). This *communio of persons* is a unity that protects and fosters a healthy diversity of gifts and cultural expressions, maintaining a harmonious balance between the uniqueness of the human individual while creating a healthy communal whole.

The Christian tradition has often portrayed the Spirit as the bond of love or *nexus* that exists in the pure, mutually-giving and mutually-loving relationship of the Father and the Son (Congar, I. 85-90). One example of this is found in Augustine’s reflections upon the idea that God is love in Scripture (i.e., I Jn. 4:8). He reasons that love between two persons is a kind of “coupling,” and that love cannot exist without the *other*. This coupling of two brings about the third reality of “love.” Augustine relates his reflections on Lover-Beloved-Love to the Trinitarian Father-Son-Spirit, with the Spirit as the one who is the *nexus* or *bond of love* (Augustine, 255).

The Spirit that bonds the ecclesial community together also works to unite husband and wife, the “domestic Church,” into a *communio of persons*. Pope John Paul repeatedly refers to marriage as a *communio of persons*, a phrase that carries with it the theological understanding of *communio* as a unity that is not uniformity and does not destroy the distinctive quality of the

human person, and *person* as one who discovers true identity in relationship with others.

Marriage therapists Patrick and Claudette McDonald emphasize three important aspects of marriage: “I” (my distinct self), “You” (my spouse), and “We” (our shared self). In healthy marriages, the “We” that is the unified married couple does not destroy the healthy “I” and “You” of the marriage. Marriage is a constant interplay of these three realities (McDonald and McDonald, 71-76; Law and Law, 97-108).

Heribert Mühlen observes that the Holy Spirit can be associated with the “we” of the “I-Thou” relationship of the Father and the Son, and this Spirit is also associated with the “we” of the Church community, and the “we” of husband and wife in marriage (27-29). Carlo Rocchetta describes this “communion in difference” as a “synthesis” that the Spirit brings about in marriage:

The Spirit is poured out on the spouses so that they may be in a position to realize themselves in a communion that avoids two potential but opposite dangers: that of eliminating differences, beginning with the man-woman specificity, or that of sharpening the differences and so shattering the communion. The Spirit wants to mould the marital community as communion in the image of the Trinity... (179).

The Spirit is the “bonding agent,” the One bringing about true *communio* over the long haul, as couples negotiate the ever-changing waters of “good times and bad.”

### ***The Spirit as the “Breath” of Christian Marriage***

Breath is critical for human life. Without air, without breath, we die. In the Gospel of John, when the Risen Christ appears to the disciples, he “breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the holy Spirit’” (20:22). In the book of Acts, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost is described as accompanied by “a noise like a strong driving wind” (2:2). This association of the Spirit with breath, blowing, or wind, signifies a dynamic energy that is a life-giving force (Theological Commission, 31). Like the breath of God that brought the first earthling to life from the clay, the coming of the Spirit *animates* believers, giving them new life in Christ.

The Holy Spirit, the “Lord and Giver of Life,” breathes life into the marital community in at least three ways: the Spirit animates the marital relationship, the Spirit is present in giving life to children, and the Spirit brings life to the larger community through the sacrament.

First, the Spirit breathes life into the relationship of this particular couple. Rocchetta calls the Holy Spirit the “invisible protagonist” of sacramental marriage (174). This silent Advocate encourages the couple to make good choices about their relationship from the moment of initial meeting. The Spirit inspires little acts that nurture the life of the conjugal relationship: the tender caress, the squeezed hand that says “I’m support you,” and the flowers that say “I’m sorry.” We sometimes say of marriages that end in divorce that the relationship “died.” Sacramental marriages are animated by the breath of the Spirit.

Healthy marriages are not turned inward in a type of joint self-centeredness. The abundant life of the conjugal relationship normally overflows into the creation of children, when not impeded by biological circumstances. Gaillardetz and Lawler remind us that this fruitfulness of marriage is much more than mere biological reproduction; it involves not only procreation but the ongoing, demanding commitment of nurturing this new life with generativity. (102-103; 103) The Spirit strengthens parents for this ascetical feat of love.

This generativity is not limited to the confines of the home. The superabundance of love found in sacramental marriage pours beyond the family, in generous acts towards others in the community. While infertile couples may perhaps have more time and energy to devote to acts of charity and justice, all married couples are called to community outreach. As Gaillardetz says, “a spirituality of marriage would be horribly defective if it did not recognize the generativity of marriage as a call to mission and service in the church and world” (103).

### ***The Spirit as the “Fire” of Christian Marriage***

The image of “fire” in Scripture often signifies the purifying, transforming, and mysterious presence of God. Moses experiences God’s presence in the burning bush. The Lord’s “breath sets coals afire; a flame pours from his mouth” (Job 41:13). “For the LORD, your God, is a consuming fire...” (Deut. 4:24). In Isaiah’s vision, the burning coal from the altar of the Lord purifies his lips for the mission of prophesizing (Isaiah 6:7). John the Baptist proclaims that

the Messiah will “baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire” (Mt. 3:11, Lk. 3:16). The letter to the Hebrews reminds us: “For our God is a consuming fire” (12:29).

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ brings about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, in the appearance of “tongues of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them” (Acts 2:3). The frightened, insecure disciples, hiding behind closed doors, are *transformed* by this spiritual “fire” to go forth, boldly proclaiming the Gospel despite persecution and suffering.

In sacramental marriage, the Spirit transforms the ordinary relationship of a man and woman who “like” and “love” each other into a Christian marriage that is increasingly permeated with God’s presence and action. If monks choose monastery living because it helps them draw close to God, Christian *believers* choose marriage because conjugal love is also a path to holiness. All are invited to saturate their lives with the kenotic love of Christ, that is, the love that empties self for the sake of others. The Spirit, called the “Sanctifier,” works to sanctify the spouses. St. John Chrysostom reminds us that Christ addressed his Gospel words to all people, not just monks, and it follows that

...the monk and the layperson must attain the same heights [of holiness], and if they fall they inflict the same wounds upon themselves... You are entirely mistaken if you think that there are certain things required of seculars, and others for monks... they will have the same account to render. . . . And if any have been hindered by the marriage state, let them know that marriage is not the hindrance, but their purpose which made ill use of marriage. Use marriage *chastely*, and you shall be the first in the Kingdom of Heaven...(Evdokimov, 67)

When open to the Spirit’s work, marriage itself contains the necessary elements for becoming holy. Opportunities to practice Christian virtues abound. Christian marriage allows for the practice the evangelical counsels of poverty (detachment from material things), chastity (right use of sexual giftedness), and obedience (loving, mutual deference for each other) (McCarty, 84f ). Interaction with spouse and children encourages ongoing *metanoia* through the daily deaths-to-self for the sake of another, bringing with that its own asceticism (Gaillardetz, 62f). Gaillardetz explains: “my relationship with my wife and my children is indeed the spiritual

‘place’ wherein I will work out my salvation” (62). He goes on to explain that salvation is, of course, a gift of God, and yet, it is up to us to respond to grace, to put forth the necessary human effort. Marriage is “...a mystery in which, by the working of the Holy Spirit, one man and one woman sacrifice their own lives to become one flesh and are united and divinized by God’s love...” (Petras, 231)

One sometimes hears the phrase the “gift of celibacy,” but we can also speak of the “gift of marriage” as a gift given by the Spirit for the good of the marital partners and the good of the Church (Rocchetta, 174f). Pope John Paul asserts that “it is extremely urgent to *revive awareness of conjugal love as a gift*” (“Revive Awareness,” 9). This conjugal love—perhaps begun as mere physical attraction—will mature over the years, deepening and expanding as the Spirit purifies and sanctifies the couple, like gold that is “tested by fire” (I Peter 1:7). The expression “golden anniversary” is most appropriate: the couple of fifty years has had their love tried, tested, and purified in the crucible of married life by the Spirit, transformed into the deep, ecstatic communion of Trinitarian love.

### ***‘Nuptial Pentecost’: Pastoral Implications***

These reflections invite us to consider practical ways to foster awareness of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in Christian marriage.

Regarding the wedding liturgy, those given the authority to provide us with the revised rite of marriage in English are encouraged to complete this task so we may all benefit from the explicit *epiclesis* of the sacrament. Liturgists might consider the use of appropriate songs, such as Marty Haugen’s “Send Down the Fire,” Bob Hurd’s “*Envía Tu Espíritu*,” Taizé Community’s “*Veni Sancte Spiritus*,” or David Haas’ “Send Us Your Spirit” during the wedding liturgy. Homilists could include the pneumatological dimension of marriage in their reflections. The Hispanic custom of the *lazo* might be encouraged as a sign of the two-yet-oneness of marriage. Joncas and Stevenson suggest the wedding rite of the future might be enriched with the anointing of the couple with chrism (Joncas, 237; Stevenson 197).

Marriage preparation and enrichment programs might be redesigned to include discussion of the Spirit’s active presence in marriage.

Theologians and pastoral ministers need to look for ways to gather the experiences of married couples for the further development of the theology of marriage.

Given enough time, perhaps when couples are asked, “How does the Holy Spirit help you build a strong marriage?” they will readily respond, based upon experiential awareness: the Spirit makes us one without destroying our personhood, the Spirit brings life, and the Spirit sanctifies our conjugal love.

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