



(Unsplash/Hudson Hintze)



by Daniel P. Horan

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

January 26, 2023

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

As I mentioned in my last [column](#), I'm focusing a series of columns on the Holy Spirit over the next few weeks. Next I want to invite us to consider how and where we are to find the divine presence of the Holy Spirit.

When reflecting on where to begin getting to know the Holy Spirit in the introduction to their edited volume, [The Holy Spirit: Setting the World on Fire](#), theologians Fr. Richard Lennan and Nancy Pineda-Madrid write: "Developing a heightened sensitivity is the first step. The Holy Spirit's movement in our lives, and in the world, is often elusive, not readily discerned."

They note that:

The Holy Spirit meets us where we are. In our experiences of joy and serenity, guilt and distress, wonder and awe, pain and anger, the Spirit is present. The Spirit remains present in all that comprises our life's journey; closer to us than we are to ourselves, and the source of strength for our "inner being" (Ephesians 3:16). What is more, the Spirit continually invites greater life, animating our present. The Holy Spirit indwells our bodies and makes our very lives and living possible, empowering us with the grace of Christ. In being with us, the Holy Spirit is and remains sympathetic to our life situation and circumstance. For our part, we, like the prophet Elijah, need to learn how to pay attention, to deepen our awareness of the Spirit's presence.

What is at stake here is a matter of attunement, of learning to see and hear and experience God's presence in our lives and world anew. This latter point about experience is essential. Both the late theologian Dominican Cardinal Yves Congar and, more recently, the late Protestant theologian Clark H. Pinnock have emphasized the experiential nature of knowing the Holy Spirit.

Congar begins his magisterial three-volume study [I Believe in the Holy Spirit](#) with experience as the methodological starting point for the study of the Spirit. Drawing first on the experience of God's self-disclosure received and passed down by the human authors of sacred Scripture, Congar notes that our "experience of the Spirit

has continued since then." He calls us to attend to how God continues to draw near as Spirit, but that we are too often caught unawares and miss.



A painting on a Catholic church's ceiling depicts the Holy Spirit descending upon the apostles. (CNS/Octavio Duran)

Pinnock likewise picks up on the theme of the Spirit's [seeming elusiveness](#) and how we must adjust our outlook and attunement. "For all theological topics, Spirit is one of the most elusive. Knowing the Spirit is experiential, and the topic is oriented toward transformation more than information."

That the knowledge of God as Spirit is experiential may be one of the sources of resistance many have when it comes to reflecting on, praying to or even remembering the Holy Spirit. Western Christian practices and conversation often centers on the intellectualization of faith rather than the embodied, corporeal,

sacramental reality that must be *experienced* and lived out.

Likewise, that the Spirit draws close to us in our own imperfection, creatureliness and messiness—as the *ruach Elohim* ("breath/spirit of God") does with the *tohu wavohu* (chaos, disorder, void) of creation in opening verses of Genesis — can be something that makes some Christians uncomfortable. If one's image of God is static, immutable, impassible, then the idea that God not only draws close but *indwells* in us and the rest of creation can be unsettling.

If one's image of God is static, immutable, impassible, then the idea that God not only draws close but *indwells* in us and the rest of creation can be unsettling.

[Tweet this](#)

This is also a reason why so many Christians may be closet believers in Docetism, a heresy that claims that Jesus of Nazareth was not *actually* fully human but only fully divine, appearing or pretending to be human during his life, ministry and death. In both cases — what we might call "[Holy Spirit atheism](#)" and Christological Docetism — such Christians want a God that conforms to their ideas of what constitutes divinity and not the actual God who reveals Godself in the Word made flesh and the word of Scripture inspired by the Spirit.

But the Holy Spirit defies much of our preconceived notions of God. The Spirit is dynamic, unpredictable, immediate, creative, empowering and life-giving. This last point is emphasized by theologian and St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson.

"In the words of the Nicene Creed, the Spirit is *vivificantem*, vivifier or life-giver. This designation refers to creation not just at the beginning of time but continuously: the Spirit is the unceasing, dynamic flow of divine power that sustains the universe, bringing forth life," Johnson [said in the 1993 Madeleva Lecture](#).

The Holy Spirit is, indeed, the source of all life and the one who "renews the face of the earth" ([Psalm 104](#)). When we come to recognize that the Holy Spirit is pure gift, as St. Augustine makes clear again and again in his classic treatise [De Trinitate](#), we

can begin to let go of our willful ignorance of God's vivifying power and presence in our lives, while also embracing the truth of God's nearness.

Advertisement

With this in mind, we may begin to recognize the activity of God's Spirit in our lives and the world around us through our experience. Finite and imperfect as each of us are, we all have the capacity for recognizing the gift of divine presence among us. We just need to attune ourselves to the Spirit's presence. Each breath we take, every experience of love we encounter, our very existence as part of a radically contingent creation — these are just a sampling of the ordinary moments in which the indwelling presence of God as Spirit can be recognized when we are attentive to the movement of divine love in our experience of the world.

I also want to say a word about divine pronouns. How should we refer to the Holy Spirit?

Let it be stipulated that God is beyond any concept of creaturely sex and gender. As a matter of theological truth, we must all agree to that. However, despite the orthodox claim that God is neither male nor female and that whatever gendered language one invokes in reference to God will always fall short, it is striking how upset, threatened and defensive some people get at the suggestion that we could (and should) also use feminine language for God.

While there are plenty of theological and scriptural reasons why God the Creator can be referred to by either male or female pronouns, and despite the near ubiquity of masculine references such as Father and the historical person Jesus of Nazareth that provides a strong rationale for male references to the eternal word, I am among the many theologians in the Western and Eastern churches who embrace "she" as an appropriate reference to the Holy Spirit.

This is supported by longstanding traditions that goes back to the Hebrew and Syriac words for the Spirit, as well as the theological reflections of early Eastern and Western theologians. As Congar [noted](#), "there is no lack of feminine characteristics

in the God of biblical revelation, and these are emphasized by the vocabulary of Scripture itself." And Johnson has made some of the most clear and compelling arguments in this regard in her now-classic [*She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*](#).

There is not enough space here to rehearse the dozens of great Christian saints and mystics who throughout history have used feminine imagery to describe God generally and the Spirit specifically. Suffice it to say that my choice to refer occasionally to the Holy Spirit as She is grounded in orthodox, scriptural, theological reasoning. Such pronoun usage also helps us recall that God cannot be reduced to one gender or category but is the source of and relates to all life, gender expressions, creaturely experience and diverse realities in this world.

[Read this next: Beyond birds and flames: Let's think of the Holy Spirit as jazz music](#)

A version of this story appeared in the **March 3-16, 2023** print issue under the headline: How can we get to know the Holy Spirit — and what pronoun should we use?.