

OVERWHELMED BY GOD'S LOVE, EMPOWERED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

HANS KWAKMAN MSC

IN THE LAST issue of *Compass* (Summer 2014, pp.3-7) we reflected on Jesus' experience during his early years in Nazareth. I noticed how Jesus' heart was shaped by a deep concern with the suffering of people. Through observation and prayer, he realized that a lot of suffering was totally unnecessary and contrary to God's will, primarily caused by a false understanding of God's will. Jesus noticed that the poor and the sick themselves were powerless in coping with their suffering, and that the spiritual leaders did not at all support them in carrying the burden of life. On the contrary, people were taught that severe illnesses and dire poverty were a punishment from God.

Jesus felt himself sent to reach out to the people in need. However, he did not immediately take action to lighten people's burden. He needed more time to prepare himself in finding the right way to carry out his mission. Therefore, Jesus entered into the desert for a time of reflection and discernment. In the desert, he met John the Baptist.

Jesus shows his solidarity with the crowd. On one occasion, Jesus joined the crowds near the River Jordan. Many people came to listen to the preaching of John the Baptist and to receive baptism from his hands. Mark notes: 'From all Judea and Jerusalem crowds of people went to John. They told how sorry they were for their sins, and he baptized them in the Jordan River' (Mark 1: 5). According to Luke, even the soldiers and tax collectors came to listen to John (Luke 3: 12-14). While standing in the middle of people from various social classes and backgrounds, Jesus

waited for his turn to be baptized.

We should not be too surprised finding Jesus among the crowd waiting to be baptized. When still living in Nazareth, he had also joined the village community in their prayer services in the synagogue. Now too, he joins the men and women, in search of a renewal of life, once again showing his solidarity with the crowds. Moreover, Jesus himself was still in search of a clearer understanding of his vocation. Therefore, he too came to listen to John's preaching, and asked to be baptized, just like the others. The evangelists report that Jesus had a great admiration for John the Baptist (Matt. 11: 7-15; Luke 7: 24-30).

Jesus' Vision

Luke records that after having been baptized, Jesus was praying. While praying, he received a vision. He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove coming down upon him. At the same time he heard a voice from heaven, saying: 'You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you' (Luke 3: 21-22). At the moment Jesus heard his Heavenly Father saying: 'You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you,' he felt himself totally overwhelmed by profound love. He was captivated by the words he had heard: God is my Father and I am his beloved Son! I am dear to his Heart! And this declaration of love was accompanied by a pouring out of the Spirit. In the depth of his heart he experienced a new power in life. It was the power of divine love.

For us too, it is important to notice, that the Father does not only declare his love for

us through words, for example words spoken in Holy Scripture or in our hearts. The Father also declares his love for us through a pouring out of the Spirit of love in our hearts. God's love is never expressed by words alone, but always reinforced by the gift of the Holy Spirit, empowering us from within, enabling us to experience love and to become a loving person by giving love.

Jesus Praying

The evangelist Luke has turned the story of Jesus' baptism into an episode of prayer. In his whole Gospel, Luke connects the central moments of Jesus' life and ministry to Jesus withdrawing himself to pray: Luke 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28-29; 11:1; 22:32, 39-46; 23:34, 46. Both in his Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke also emphasizes that the Holy Spirit is given to Jesus' followers in response to prayer. Well known is Jesus' saying, 'As bad as you are, you still know how to give good gifts to your children. But your heavenly Father is even more ready to give the Holy Spirit to anyone who asks' (Luke 11:13).

Luke clearly underlines that to carry out our mission in a productive way, we need to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. And this empowerment is the fruit of prayer. Also in the Acts of the Apostles, before being filled with the Holy Spirit, Luke notes that the first community in Jerusalem, including the Apostles, Mary the Mother of Jesus and his brothers, 'gathered frequently to pray as a group' (Acts 1:14 with 2:1-4. See also 2:21 with 2:39; 4:23-31; 8:15-17; cf. 22:16).

In Luke's Gospel, John the Baptist speaks of Jesus as the one who, 'will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire' (Luke 3:16). That exactly happened on the day of Pentecost, when the gathered community 'saw what looked like fiery tongues moving in all directions, and a tongue came and settled on each person there.' And so, 'the Holy Spirit took control of everyone' (Acts 2:3-4). The pouring out of the Spirit is a gift of the Risen Christ, empowering



*Fr Hans Kwakman
MSC is a member of the
Cor Novum team for the
formation of
Spirituality of the Heart
in Issoudun, France.*

the disciples for their ministry. While praying, not once but many times, Jesus himself had been empowered with the Holy Spirit to carry out his mission. Now, as the Risen Lord, he has become the source of the Spirit for his disciples, gathered in prayer, by empowering them to carry out their mission.

Sharing his Experience with Others

Several times the evangelist Luke emphasizes that the power of the Spirit was 'with Jesus' and that Jesus 'was led by the Spirit' (Luke 4:1, 4.18; 10:21, see also 1: 35). The baptismal experience kept burning in Jesus' heart. The first words Jesus spoke in the synagogue of Nazareth, after returning from the desert, were: 'The Lord's Spirit has come to me...' (Luke 4:18). His entire ministry will be a continuous testimony to that unique experience of love. In fact, the 'Good News' announced by Jesus was not just a 'new teaching' (Mark 1: 27), but a new experience of a loving relationship with the Heavenly Father, called the Reign of God by Jesus. After his resurrection, it will become a new experience of the Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, as the great gift of the powerful love that fills our hearts.

Jesus was convinced that the declaration of love from his Father and the empowering by the Spirit was not only meant for himself, but for every human being. Therefore, Jesus desired to bring the Good News of God's empowering love to everyone. According to Jesus' vision, every human being could have this

powerful experience of being accepted and empowered as God's beloved son or daughter. If people really believed that 'Good News', they would feel strengthened both in ordinary life and in time of hardship. The Good News would provoke in their hearts trust in God's powerful loving presence. At the same time, they would feel empowered to deal with their own suffering and to accompany other people in their sorrow as well.

Our Baptism

In fact, Jesus' prayerful experience after his baptism reveals what already occurred at the moment of his incarnation as God's Son among us. The angel announced to Mary: 'The Holy Spirit will come down to you, and God's power will come over you' (Luke 1:35). At the moment of his conception, Jesus was already filled with the Holy Spirit. In the same way; from the moment of conception, the heart of every human being is enriched by the Holy Spirit. What took place at the Baptism of Jesus shows what also happens at our own baptism and confirmation. Our baptism and confirmation are the moments that we celebrate the powerful presence of God's Spirit within us. Baptism and confirmation are an invitation to integrate the Gifts of the Spirit in our lives and ministries.

Different Experiences of God's Love

Gratefulness to God for his love for us and for the Gifts of the Holy Spirit forms certainly a core element of a Spirituality of the Heart. The greatest favors of God's love are the Gifts of the Spirit, poured out in our hearts. St. Paul writes: 'The Spirit produces love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control.' (Gal 5:19-22) These gifts guide and strengthen us on a deeper level than our emotions are able to do. For example, the Holy Spirit equips people with the capacity to love someone sincerely, despite not being moved by

affection for the person in question. Thanks to the Holy Spirit, we are able to forgive, notwithstanding still feeling hurt. It is also the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to keep performing our ministry, in spite of feeling bored by what we are doing. Thanks to the gifts of the Spirit, we are able to take decisions for the benefit of others, not because of being driven by superficial emotions or shallow considerations, but because of being guided by the Spirit of wisdom and self-control.

The Gifts of the Spirit make us aware of the fact that 'love' is not only a superficial emotion, but a deeply rooted power in our hearts. The gift of the Spirit in our hearts is the fulfillment of God's promise through the words of the Prophet Ezekiel: 'I will take away your stubborn heart and give you a new heart and a desire to be faithful... because I will put my Spirit in you and make you eager to obey my laws and teachings' (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

God has planted his Holy Spirit right inside our hearts and the gifts of the Spirit, are the clearest sign of God's love for each of us. However, God's love does not necessarily result in a felt emotion or affection of love in our hearts. Every person will experience God's love in a different way, according to his or her own condition. But everyone may discover in him or herself an ability to give love, to serve, to forgive and to carry out responsibilities. Such a capacity is the fruit of the Spirit in our hearts.

Belief in God's Unconditional Love

Do we really believe that God loves us personally, with an unconditional love? That God takes delight in creating us every moment? Or do we belong to the people, who, because of being aware of their sinfulness, feel themselves unworthy of being loved by God? Do we feel as if we do not deserve to be loved by God? St. Paul's experience shows us what it means to be loved by God unconditionally, when he writes, 'God has shown us how much

he loves us—it was while we were still sinners' (Romans 5:8). St. John writes in his first letter: 'But even if we don't feel at ease, God is greater than our feelings, and he knows everything' (1 John 3:20). And his knowledge is not condemning but loving.

Darkness of the Heart

There are people who sometimes feel overwhelmed by God's love. That is a great gift. Other people however, may believe in God's love for them, but never feel ardently touched by God's love. Sometimes people are craving for a sign of God's love, but find themselves in total darkness. One recent example is Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta. For years she experienced a total darkness of faith. Once she wrote: 'Where is my faith, my trust? Even in the depths of my heart I experience nothing but emptiness and darkness.' Nevertheless, wholeheartedly she continued to serve the most destitute and needy people, empowered by the Gifts of the Spirit in her heart.

Doubting God's Love

Many people are not able to believe in a God of love, or doubt the existence of God, due to the great number of men, women and children, who become victims of natural disasters, violence and war. Moreover, people feel scandalized, because often violence is even carried out in the name of God and religion. Or people feel themselves severely traumatized in their private lives by a painful loss of a loved one or a terrible accident. They no longer feel capable of believing in the love of God for themselves, or they feel as if God does not care about the fate of humankind.

People's conscience guided by the Spirit Nevertheless, all people are animated by God's Spirit. Therefore, even those, who do not believe in God's love, are still doing the works of the Spirit. Many of them are still willing and able to reach out to people in need; they remain faithful to their family and their responsibilities. Think of the

humanitarian aid organization *Medicins sans Frontieres*. Such people live and act according to their conscience, often unaware of the fact that they are guided by the Spirit of God in their hearts. They draw compassion from the source of love in their hearts, not realizing that through their commitment to medical care in acute crises, it is God who manifests his care and love. As St. Paul said to the citizens of Athens, 'You have been worshiping 'the Unknown God' without even knowing it' (Acts 17:23).

Our Mission

Unfortunately, many people, both believers and nonbelievers, do not draw from the 'life-giving water flowing from deep inside' their hearts (John 7:38). They are not aware of the wealth of their hearts. It belongs to our mission to let people enjoy the riches hidden in their hearts. That means that first of all we ourselves enjoy and develop these Gifts of the Spirit planted in our hearts. Jesus' Heart was also shaped by the Holy Spirit and empowered by his Gifts.

St. Paul considered the gifts of the Spirit, particularly the gift of love, to be God's greatest gifts, superior to any other blessing (1 Corinthians 13: 1 and Galatians 5: 22-23). These gifts are the treasures of our hearts. They are often concealed as burning coals under the ashes of daily routine, bad habits, or unhealed inner wounds. The best way to become aware of these treasures in our hearts is, as Jesus shows us in Luke's Gospel, by praying. Through reflective prayer, we become aware of who we are. By accepting our weaknesses and shortcomings, we also begin to realize how much we need the powerful gifts of God's Spirit. Despite our wounds and pain, we will become attentive to the fact that we are a beloved son or daughter of God. As once to Jesus, God also says to us: 'You are my own dear son/daughter. I am pleased with you' (Luke 3: 22). And God is always 'ready to give the Holy Spirit to anyone who asks' (Luke 11:13).