

“Praying in the Holy Spirit” Spirituality and Pneumatology

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Abstract

While “praying in the Spirit” may evoke “charismatic” prayer, this paper argues that from a scriptural point of view it defines all Christian prayer as having the Holy Spirit as main subject, who leads us to pray and prays in us, by showing us *to whom*, *how* and *for what* we should pray. This has implications for spirituality and pneumatology. On the one hand, prayer is to be understood as much more than the extension of our human desire towards God: it means entering into the divine will, the divine life, and the relations between Father, Son and Spirit – and relating to each in a different way. This actually helps to catch the essence of charismatic prayer as well, which is precisely letting the Spirit pray in us: charisms and “enthusiasm” are an expression of this and are in their right place when they are referred to it. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit manifests itself as a unique type of divine person, which acts and speaks in and through others. The paper contends that this economical specificity needs to be re-elaborated on the level of the immanent Trinity in a novel way: the divine names of *Ruah* and *Pneuma* allow us to conceive the Spirit as the most intimate Breath which the Father breathes (spires) into the depths of the Son.

“Praying in the Spirit” evokes scenes of people praising with their hands in the air, swaying back and forth, ecstatic expressions pasted on their faces. It belongs to the vocabulary of rabid Charismatics or Pentecostals. I will argue in this paper that it is actually a quite accurate characterization of a trait specific to all Christian prayer: only in and through the active operation of the Spirit is prayer actually possible. The stake is, on the one hand, the nature of prayer, which is not an extension of our desire, but entering into the activity, will, life and relations of “another” – a divine other. *En passant*, this should help assess the true essence of Charismatic prayer, which is not to be found in emotions or charismatic gifts but precisely in what it has in common with all Christian prayer, namely to let the Holy Spirit be the primary subject of prayer. On the other hand, it is also

sheds light on who is the third person of the Trinity: its mode of operation in prayer reveals the uniqueness of its personhood, of its way of being a divine person, in comparison with the Father and the Son. This makes us enter relatively uncharted territory, since classical pneumatology does not fully take this specificity into account. I will argue that we need to re-elaborate our understanding of the Spirit by using as a starting point the divine names of *Ruah* and *Pneuma*. There will be a blind spot, however: it would be necessary to also reflect on the pray-er’s human activity and freedom, but this will just not be possible in the limits of this paper.

I will start with a scriptural study of the occurrences of “praying in the Spirit” and closely related lexes in the New Testament. It is a biblical notion after all, and the scriptures will give us a sound basis. Then I will proceed with a reflection on the consequences of the teaching of the scriptures for our theological understanding of prayer. I will finish with the pneumatological implications.

I. Scriptural Foundation: Letting the Holy Spirit pray in us and for us

In the New Testament, “praying in the Spirit”, *en pneumati*, is not very frequent, since out of over 200 references to prayer it occurs explicitly in six texts, with four more quasi synonymous occurrences. However, most of these concern fundamental teachings on prayer, and, especially, they cover all forms of prayer: request, thanksgiving and praise, and worship – adoration that usually involves the body. Prayer *en pneumati* is found mainly and in its clearest form in the first category, which is also, in the Bible and in most religions, the primary meaning of prayer: *proseuchè* (Eph 6.18; Jude 20–21; 1 Cor 14.14–15; Rom 8.26) means to ask, to request or beg – for something or for forgiveness. In a very intensive form, as in case of distress, it can be expressed by *krazein*: “to cry out” or “call out” (Rom 8.15; Gal 4.6).¹ It can also be extended to asking for others, i.e. to intercession, *deomai* or *entunchanein* (Eph 6.18; Rom 8.26–27). *En pneumati* is also found in the case of prayer of worship, i.e. *proskunèsis* (Jn 4.23–24). The access given to the Father *en heni pneumati* in Eph 2.18 is understood by most exegetes in a liturgical sense, so it can be assimilated to worship. Surprisingly, thanksgiving and praise (*eucharistein*, *eulogein*, *exomologesthai*), and the closely related “singing” (*adein* or *psalein*), are more rarely done “in the

¹ To “cry out” has this meaning in the Old Testament: “I cried aloud to the Lord, and he answered me” (Ps 3.4); see also Ex 22.23; Ps 17.6; 18.6; 30.2; 34.17; 88.2,9; 107.13 (see J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible*, 33, *Romans*, Doubleday, New York-London-Toronto-Sydney-Auckland, 1993, p.501).

Spirit”, but in Lk 10.21 Jesus exults in the Holy Spirit. Two other expressions related to thanksgiving and blessing God are very close: *tô pneumatî*, i.e. through/with the Spirit (1 Cor 14.16-17), and *pneumatikos*, i.e. spiritual, or better: “pneumatic”, because it means “from the Holy Spirit” (Eph 5.18; Col 3.15b-17).

1.1 The guiding force of the Spirit inspires the whom, the what and the how of prayer

What does praying *en pneumatî* mean?² In general, in the New Testament, doing something *en pneumatî* signifies being led or controlled by the Spirit: “[Simeon] by (*en*) the Spirit came to the Temple” (Lk 2.27); “[Jesus] was led by (*en*) the Spirit into the wilderness” (Lk 4.1). It also means to be inspired by the Spirit to say or understand something, as in the inspiration of the Psalms: “David himself said by (*en*) the Holy Spirit” (Mk 12.36; see also Mt 22.43 or Acts 19.21). Doing something *in* the Spirit actually means the Spirit is doing something *in* us. This is why Galatians 4.6, where the Spirit is the subject crying in our hearts, fully belongs to the occurrences of praying in the Spirit.

In the specific case of prayer, the Holy Spirit is doing at least four things. Firstly, it is leading the pray-er to pray, as exemplified by Jesus in Lk 10.21 and explained by Romans 8.14: “those who are led by God’s Spirit”. In Rom 8, being led by the Spirit does not concern only prayer, but prayer is clearly part of it. *Agasthai* can have a wide range of meanings, such as letting another open up the way, or being guided – as the people of Israel in the desert – or even being driven and controlled by a compelling force one has surrendered to (see 2 Tim 3.6). Whatever the exact meaning, there is clearly an active dimension of the Spirit that leads us to start praying – which is in itself miraculous, as our experience shows – and guides us during the praying.

Secondly, the Spirit inspires us about *whom* we should pray to and gives access to him. Rom 8.15 asserts that the Spirit makes us cry out: Abba! Father! And Galatians 4.6 asserts that it is the Spirit itself who cries this out. The Aramaic expression “Abba” is a direct reference to the prayer of Jesus (cf. Mk 14.36). Prayer

² The reflection in this section is based on the following commentaries: J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible, Romans*; J. D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 38, *Romans 1-8*, Word Books, Waco, 1988; R. J. Bauckham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 50, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Books, Waco, 1983; M. Barth, *The Anchor Bible, Ephesians 1-3*, Doubleday, New York, 1974; R. E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible, The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, Doubleday, New York, 1966, pp.180-181; F. Lestang, “Paul et l’Esprit-Saint”, unpublished lectures.

en pneumati signals a transfer of his prayer to the Christian: praying means entering into Jesus’ prayer, into his relation with the Father. The same idea is manifest when Eph 2.18 states that “in one Spirit” we have “access to the Father”: the unique Spirit enables the pray-ers to enter in communion with God as Father. Jn 4.23 probably echoes this, since to worship God “in Spirit and in truth” means to worship him as Father in Jesus-Christ.

Thirdly, the Spirit inspires us about *what* to pray for and, fourthly, in *what way* we should pray. Rom 8.26 says both in a rather contorted way: “that which we are to pray for as we should, we do not know”. *What* to pray means what to ask for: John Chrysostom explains that we do not know what is truly useful for us and for the Church without the Spirit, while Augustine, followed by Aquinas and Calvin, suggests that the “sighs” inspired by the Spirit are directed towards eternal life that we cannot desire fully without the Spirit.³ As for the *way* we pray, Aquinas underlines that without the Spirit we have no fully “just desires”, i.e. desires according to the order of charity.⁴ Contemporary exegetes insist more on the fact that only the Holy Spirit can adapt our prayer to the eschatological period we are in: the Christians, who belong to two epochs, need to be trained to desire in a new way.⁵ Both *what* and *how* are related, because only when we pray according to charity and in the perspective of the new eschatological dimension do we know what God’s will is and thus what to pray for.

1.2 Universality, intertwined subjects, Trinitarian dimension

Three further comments will complete the picture of what praying in the Spirit means and of what is at stake. First of all, the fact that request, thanksgiving and worship can all three be *en pneumati* shows that it expresses what Christian prayer is *tout court*. Actually, some exegetes consider prayer *en pneumati* to be prayer in tongues (*glossai*), because 1 Cor 14.14 equates one with the other. They also base themselves on Origen’s comprehension of the “unutterable

³ See Ioannes Chrysostomos, *The homilies of S. John Chrysostom ... on the epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, Parker, Oxford, 1841, 251-252; P. F. Landes (ed), *Augustine on Romans, Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans, Unfinished Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Scholar Press, Chico, 1982, p.27; Th. Aquinas, *Super Epist. Ad Romanos*, VIII, *lectio* 5; D. W. Torrance, Th. F. Torrance (ed), *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries, The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1980², pp.177-178.

⁴ See Th. Aquinas, *Super Epist. Ad Romanos*, VIII, *lectio* 5.

⁵ See M. A. Chevallier, *Souffle de Dieu, Le Saint-Esprit dans le Nouveau Testament*, II, Beauchesne, Paris, 1990, pp.375-376.

sighs” of Rom 8.26 as being glossolalia.⁶ Conversely, J. Fitzmyer makes 1 Cor 14.14-17 an exception, because he understands it as opposing prayer in the spirit and prayer with the mind (*nous*).⁷ I tend to agree with the *via media*.⁸ On the one hand, praying in the Spirit may include tongues, because 1 Cor 14.14-17 does not reject glossolalia but holds together both types of prayer. On the other hand, it is often much wider: the *alaletos* sighs in Romans cannot be identical to *lalein* (speaking) in tongues. Actually, tongues are not the question. The main point is that without the Spirit showing us who, how and what to pray for, prayer is just impossible, as Chrysostom had rightly perceived: “If the Holy Spirit did not exist, we the believers would not [even] be able to pray to God.”⁹ Praying in the Holy Spirit is not a type of prayer; it is simply Christian prayer.

Another central aspect is the extent to which the activities of the Holy Spirit and the pray-er are deeply intertwined, without ever completely merging. On the contrary, the Spirit is definitely acting from within, from deep inside. In Rom 8.27 (“he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit”) the sense of immanence is very intense: since the *kardia* is the hidden centre of the person, the source of his/her decisions and thoughts, which only God knows, one can understand that the Spirit is hidden in the inner recesses of our mind and emotions to the point that it is hidden from us as well. Moreover, we sometimes wonder who is praying, the pray-er or the Spirit. In the Rom 8.15, the pray-er cries in the Spirit, while in Gal 4.6, the Spirit itself cries in our hearts. In Eph 6.18 we are to intercede in the Spirit, but in Rom 8.26-27 the Spirit itself intercedes for us. Finally, the Spirit makes itself almost human, by asking, crying or sighing. Aquinas, for example, refuses to take this literally: God cannot lack anything, so he cannot ask; and even less can he sigh or groan as a passible creature. So the meaning is that the Spirit inspires *the pray-er* to sigh and groan...¹⁰ The text is crystal clear, however: the

⁶ See Origen, *De oratione*, 4 (PG 11, 45, 428); *In Ep. Ad Roman.*, 7, 6 (PG 14, 1120). This is a widespread position, held by Pentecostal, Catholic Charismatic and mainstream authors alike: see G. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence, The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, Hendrickson, Peabody, 2009, pp.581-586; F. Lestang, “Paul et l’Esprit-Saint”, unpublished lectures, 6; J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible, Romans*, p.519.

⁷ See J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible, Romans*, 518-519; *The Anchor Bible, First Corinthians*, pp.515-519.

⁸ See J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit, A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Mich., Eerdmans, 1997², pp.245-246.

⁹ John Chrysostom, *Sermons on Pentecost*, 1, 4 (quoted by S. Coakley, “Church of England Doctrine Commission, ‘Charismatic Experience’” in E. F. Rogers (ed), *The Holy Spirit, Classical and Contemporary Readings*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2009, p.79).

¹⁰ See Th. Aquinas, *Super Epist. Ad Romanos*, VIII, *lectio* 5.

Spirit is doing the sighing. The Spirit is “shouldering” our weakness, it is making itself “human” for us.

However, the pray-er and the Spirit are not fused together: Paul clearly considers that there are two actors. On the one hand, praying *en pneumati* is not contrary to using human faculties. It involves them, and the more the better, especially if we understand what is happening. According to 1 Cor 14.14-17, praying in the Holy Spirit is good, but praying with the Spirit *and* with our mind (*nous*) is better. On the other hand, the Spirit’s transcendence is irreducible. Though we are called to use our minds, we still understand neither tongues nor the sighs and intercession of the Spirit in us (see Rom 8.26-27; 1 Cor 14.14.16). “The Spirit itself bears witness *with* our spirit (*tô pneumati hêmôn*)” (Rom 8.16) rather than *to* our spirit¹¹ This underlines the fact that both the pray-er and the Holy Spirit act together to bear witness through the utterance: Abba! Father! in a fascinating form of deep and intimate intertwinement of two distinct subjects.

Finally, prayer *en pneumati* does involve not only the Holy Spirit, but is Trinitarian. Jude 20–21, for instance, has a distinctly Trinitarian structure: “pray in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ”. In Romans 8.15 the Spirit is a “Spirit of sonship”, which makes us cry “Abba! Father!” and in Gal 4.6 God the Father sends “the Spirit of his Son”. Even more explicit is Eph 2.18 since the access given in the Spirit is to the Father through (*dia*) Christ Jesus.

In the New Testament, “praying in the Holy Spirit” means praying under the guiding force of the Spirit who inspires in us the whom, the what and the how. It is not a specific type of prayer, but the way all Christian prayer should be, whether one asks, gives thanks or worships. *En pneumati*, prayer is “performed” by two deeply intertwined but distinct subjects: the Holy Spirit and the pray-er. But the Spirit in the depths of our hearts opens to the Son and the Father. Now that the scriptural meaning of praying in the Spirit is established it is possible to reflect on its theological implications, both on prayer and on the person of the Holy Spirit.

II. Theology of Spirituality: Praying in “another” than oneself

Working out the consequences of, in particular, the active role of the Holy Spirit and the Trinitarian dimension of praying *en pneumati*, will offer a deeper understanding of Christian spirituality as letting “another” be the subject of our prayer. This will also give the

¹¹ See J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible, Romans*, p.501.

opportunity to assess the relation between “praying in the Spirit” and Charismatic prayer.

2.1 To enter through the “otherness” of the Holy Spirit into the divine will, relations and life

Prayer is not an activity that the pray-er does by himself/herself but that is done in him/her and with him/her, of course, but truly by another. And this other is none less than the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ and of the Father.

This means, first of all, that to pray implies a form of surrendering of our will to the Holy Spirit. Since we do not know what to ask for nor how to ask, we are to let go of our perception of our needs, let go of our wishes and enter into the desire and will of another (divine) person. Congar underlines the fact that to pray is not only to “extend” our desire and our request to a superior being more capable than we are of fulfilling them, but to let our desire be transformed, to let God’s will become ours: “At that point, God is recognized as God. To truly pray means to let God be God rather than an extension given to our own short arms”.¹² Congar adds that it is the opposite of the prayer expressed by the French nobleman and soldier, La Hire: “Lord, do now for La Hire what La Hire would do for you if you were La Hire and La Hire was God”. He also refers to the theological-psychological analysis of J.-Cl. Sagne, a Dominican *confrère* but also a member of the Chemin Neuf community. A “desire” becomes a “request” when it is addressed to another, and as such is the recognition of the otherness of the other. Paradoxically, however, this process is fulfilled by giving up one’s need altogether. Sagne transposes this on a spiritual level:

What is at stake in prayer is to be able to desire God’s desire, to desire what God desires and let God desire in us. This occurs in particular when our desire is not satisfied, when we need to confess what we lack The Spirit educates our desire, expands it and adjusts it to God’s desire by giving it the same object.¹³

Of course, this movement is not self-evident or done once and for all. The main examples of prayer offered by the Scriptures are the psalms, which sometimes lead the pray-er to enter into God’s will but quite often they also express the so human emotions of fear, anguish, anger, desire of revenge, violence On the one hand, God asks us to enter into his will; but, paradoxically, on the other

¹² Y. Congar, *Je crois en l’Esprit-Saint*, Cerf, Paris, 1995, p.383.

¹³ J.-Cl. Sagne, « Du besoin à la demande, ou la conversion du désir dans la prière », *La Maison-Dieu*, 109 (1972), pp.87-97; Y. Congar, *Je crois en l’Esprit-Saint*, p.384.

hand, all these natural desires can be caught up in prayer, especially when we face extreme situations of distress or suffering. Now this also corresponds to an aspect of the Holy Spirit's action in us, namely his capacity to shoulder the weakest and darkest dimensions of our existence, to be more "human" than we are.¹⁴

In a way, even more than entering into God's desire and will, prayer introduces the pray-er into the Holy Spirit's "prayer" to the Father: the Spirit is calling out to the Father and addressing his sighs to God. The Trinitarian aspect of praying *en pneumatikē* shows that praying actually means being inserted into the sphere of the divine relations between Father, Son and Spirit. Prayer is not only something happening between God and me but it is much wider, it predates me: something is already going on between Spirit, Son and Father, and the Spirit enables me to join it. This is why Paul underlines the fact that we do not understand, and why Chrysostom asserts that prayer is impossible without the Holy Spirit: we are entering into another dimension, that of the divine life. It should not be surprising, then, that praying is so difficult. To paraphrase Barth's "Only God can speak about God"¹⁵: only God can speak to God (and enable us do the same).

Of course, entering the divine life and Trinitarian relations cannot but transform the pray-er. As S. Coakley puts it: "Into that ceaseless divine dialogue between Spirit and 'Father' the Christian pray-er is thus caught up, and so transformed, becoming a co-heir with Christ".¹⁶ This explains in a deeper way what it means for the Spirit to make us enter into Jesus' prayer to his *Abba*; it explains why Paul names it "Spirit of sonship": entering into this relation actually conforms us to Christ and makes us daughters and sons of the Father. Prayer is intimately bound to the process of adopted sonship or divinisation-deification that is the whole of salvation and of the Christian life. It expresses it and contributes to it by plunging us in a more conscious manner into the life-giving and transforming relations between Father, Son and Spirit. This is why Christian spirituality tends to consider that prayer is not reserved for specific moments in a life, but should become permanent, as is testified by the Pauline invitations to "pray at all times" (Eph 6.18) and to "pray continually" (1 Thess 5.17). Prayer is related in a deep and intense way to salvation and is thus co-extensive with the whole of our existence.

¹⁴ I am grateful for Professor Eamon Duffy's comments on this point, which have led me to offer a more realistic and in a way more humane conception of prayer than only conforming one's will to God's.

¹⁵ K. Barth, "Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie", J. Moltmann (ed), *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie*, I, München, 1966², p.207.

¹⁶ S. Coakley, "Living in the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: Trinity, Prayer and Sexuality" in E. F. Rogers (ed), *The Holy Spirit*, p.46.

2.2 Prayer in the Holy Spirit and Charismatic prayer

Though “praying in the Spirit” is simply Christian prayer, it is often strongly associated with Charismatic forms of prayer. Now that we know more precisely what it is, we are better equipped to understand whether or not it characterizes Charismatic spirituality.

Uncovering the true essence of Charismatic prayer is crucial, because it is not obvious. Many would say that the main characteristic is the place given to emotions and their free expression, others would opt for returning to charismatic gifts. I believe that the true centre is exactly what has been developed so far about prayer *en pneumatikē*, and that our study helps us to distinguish it from these more visible but more superficial aspects. It is a prayer led and inspired by the Spirit, where God is an active partner, or even the main subject, and into which the pray-er must enter as in a new and all-encompassing dimension for his/her life. An excellent sociological and theological study on *Charismatic Experience* by the Church of England Doctrine Commission pinpointed that “people had in a new way found prayer to be a ‘two-way relationship’, not just talking to God, but God (the Holy Spirit) already cooperating in one’s prayer, energizing it from within, and no less responding to it, alluring once again, inviting one into a continuing adventure”. This is an articulate expression of what in Charismatic circles is often called a “living relation” with God. The same study adds that prayer had become “a uniting thread in one’s life, ‘an all-encompassing relationship’, so that prayer became no longer one activity (or duty) amongst others, but the wellspring of all activities”.¹⁷

However, the scriptural and theological comprehension acquired so far also helps to avoid a risk inherent to the centrality of the Spirit’s active participation, namely the difficulty of dealing with dryness and failure. If God is acting, then shouldn’t prayer always be elating? Shouldn’t it always receive an answer? Not quite: if praying in the Spirit means surrendering the pray-er’s will and desires to the “another”, it certainly also implies that prayers will not be answered in the way the pray-er wishes and expects at the start.

Furthermore, once the essence of Charismatic prayer is clarified, it is easier to assess its other dimensions, which find their right place in relation to the centrality of God’s action. Charismatic gifts are legitimate and fruitful when they are considered not in themselves only, but as the most visible and, so to say, concentrated expressions of a prayer in which the Spirit prays in us, guides us and inspires us. As for the emotional dimension, if the Spirit takes hold of our

¹⁷ Church of England Doctrine Commission, “Charismatic Experience” in E. F. Rogers (ed), *The Holy Spirit*, p.71.

whole being and works in the hidden depths of our heart, this will naturally lead to an integration of our feelings in our relation to God. More importantly still, what seems to be emotional should sometimes be better understood as “enthusiasm” in its etymological meaning of divine inhabitation, i.e. an expression of surrendering to the Spirit’s activity in us as to a superior force. Quite significantly, echoing the Pentecostal experience, Eph 5.18 likens being full of the Spirit to being drunk: “Do not get drunk with wine . . . but be filled with the Spirit”, i.e. choose the better type of drunkenness.¹⁸ In both cases however, Paul’s exhortation to truly welcome “prayer in the Spirit” but also to complete it with prayer “with the mind (*tô noi*)” (1 Cor 14.15) should help to avoid exaggerations and preserve the full role of the pray-er: it truly is an act with two actors.

The implications of New Testament teaching on praying *en pneu-mati* are quite rich for the field of theology of spirituality. The fact that God himself is at work gives a very specific perspective on prayer. Rather than petitioning a Superior Being in some particular moments for what we perceive to be our wants and needs, prayer is a continuous process of entering into God’s will, inner life and Trinitarian relations - and to be transformed by them. More than a certain type of human activity it is “one act in two actors”. This is also the true centre and essence of Charismatic prayer. Perceiving that may help the Charismatic Renewal to understand itself better and thus to better contribute to the whole Church. A spirituality’s vocation is to centre on one of the fundamental dimensions of prayer, which it has not invented, but which is hers to nurture, so as to remind the others that it is part of their DNA as well. Charismatic prayer should thus help all spiritualities to rediscover that prayer is fundamentally “in the Spirit”.

III. Pneumatology: Ruah-Pneuma, a unique way of being a person

The scriptural teaching on “praying in the Spirit” has consequences not only for our comprehension of spiritual life but also for our understanding of the Holy Spirit itself. What does it mean for the Holy Spirit as divine person to be so immanent and transcendent, to be fully itself while being so deeply intimate and intertwined with the person of the pray-er? Actually this points to a general characteristic of the third divine person that covers more than its role in spirituality: the Holy Spirit is a person in a totally unique way, in a way that is

¹⁸ On enthusiasm in Pauline literature, see also E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, Grand Rapids, Mich., Eerdmans, 1980, p.226; J. D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary, Romans 1-8*, p.450.

different from the Father and the Son – or, to put it another way, the notion of divine person is analogous.

This is already being developed in contemporary pneumatology: it has been alluded to by Rahner and Balthasar, and B. Sesboué has expounded it especially with regard to the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ The Holy Spirit is the less “personal” of the three divine hypostases, it is “anonymous”, a “personal being” or an *Überperson*, rather than a person as such. This comes from the fact that while the Son has a human face and the Father will be seen “face-to-face” in eternal life (1 Cor 13.12), the Spirit is “faceless”.²⁰ Indeed I have chosen to speak about the Spirit as an “it” from the beginning of this paper. The names and metaphors for it are not taken from the human world but of nature: breath, wind, water, fire, a dove or a force (*dunamis*). Interestingly enough, most of these elements are capable of penetrating other realities and becoming interior to them. The Spirit is considered a person because it speaks and it is quite active and dynamic. There is, however, no true dialogue with it: the Father and the Son never address themselves to it, while human beings only listen to its inspiration or invoke it. The Spirit speaks and acts only through and in others – as we have seen above with the immanent, intertwined activity of the Spirit in prayer – and it has no personal words and deeds, since it always refers to what the Father and Son have said and done.²¹ Of course, Christ also shows the Father, but he makes the Father appear by *appearing*; the Spirit makes Christ appear by *disappearing*. There is no “face-to-face” relation with the Spirit, whether for us or for the Father and the Son. By way of consequence, the personal self of the Holy Spirit is not a substantial, solid self, an *ad se* with a clear-cut form, but it is, so to say airy, atmospheric, liquid. The Spirit finds its identity by being out of itself in others. In an ecstatic, almost erotic way, it can be in another and the other in it.²²

¹⁹ See K. Rahner, *The Trinity*, Crossroad, New York, 1997, p.11 n.6; H. U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic, Theological Logical Theory*, II: *Truth of God*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2004, p.148; III: *The Spirit of Truth*, 2005, pp.109-110; 115-116; 144; 174; 217-218; B. Sesboué, “La personalità dello Spirito Santo nella testimonianza biblica, nella teologia trinitaria recente e nell’esperienza storica della Chiesa e degli uomini”, S. Tanzarella (ed), *La personalità dello Spirito Santo, In dialogo con Bernard Sesboué*, San Paolo, Milano, 1998, pp.21-60.

²⁰ See B. Sesboué, “La personalità dello Spirito Santo”, pp.25, 38; H. U. von Balthasar, *The Spirit of Truth*, pp.110-111, 115.

²¹ See B. Sesboué, “La personalità dello Spirito Santo”, pp.25-27; K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 1, T. & T. Clark, Edinburg, 1975, §12, p.453.

²² See S. Coakley, “Living in the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: Trinity, Prayer and Sexuality” in E. F. Rogers [ed], *The Holy Spirit*, p.50.

However, these authors set themselves on an economical level, while I believe it is necessary to understand the Spirit’s specific personhood on an intra-Trinitarian level, because the economy manifests the *theologia*, which in turns founds the *oikonomia*. What does it mean for the inner life of God that one divine person is “faceless” and “airy”? What does it mean that the Spirit is deeply “inside” and “intertwined”, not only in human beings, but in the Father and the Son; that it is “itself” through and in them? My methodology will be to develop the eternal relation of the Spirit to the Father and the Son by staying as faithful as possible to the economy that reveals it. I will argue that the best way to do this is to fully unravel the determinations contained in the main name given to the third hypostasis in the Scriptures, namely *Ruah* and *Pneuma*. More than any other notion used to grasp who the Holy Spirit is, it corresponds to the characteristics brought light so far.

3.1 Breath (*Ruah-Pneuma*): the new old name of the Spirit

Developing a name is actually what the Church Fathers did to understand the first and second hypostasis. Being named “Father” and “Son”, it is coherent that the first “generates” the second by communicating its substance to it. This process is a way of spinning out the metaphor of fatherhood and sonship. Of course, it may be shocking to speak of a metaphor in relation to the names of Father, Son and *Ruah-Pneuma*, but Barth, for instance, underlines the fact that all human words, even the revealed names of God, are inadequate. However, among them all, these personal names offered by the Scriptures are the least inadequate.²³ We are thus allowed to “spin” them, to develop their contents, as long as we also understand the fundamental limitation of this process. Now I believe this course has only been hinted at with the Spirit. Eastern theologians have cautiously declared that the procession of the Spirit is “unknown”.²⁴ Western theology has actually developed other metaphors – love and gift – but, surprisingly, not the main scriptural name.

The first signification of both *ruah* and of *pneuma* is wind or breath.²⁵ Now breath is one of the most interior and intimate realities

²³ See K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I, 1, §8, pp.339-340; §9, pp.372-373.

²⁴ See Y. Congar, *Je crois en l’Esprit-Saint*, p.577 n.41.

²⁵ See P. Beauchamp, J. Zumstein, A. Dettwiller, “Esprit Saint, A, Théologie biblique”, J.-Y. Lacoste (ed), *Dictionnaire critique de théologie*, pp.404-405; J. Guillet, “Spirito”, X. Léon-Dufour (ed), *Dizionario di teologia biblica*, Marietti, Casale Monferrato, 1976, pp.1229-1231. M.-A. Chevallier consistently prefers the name “Breath” to “Spirit” to translate *Pneuma* so as to avoid “semantic distortions” (*Souffle de Dieu. Le Saint-Esprit dans le Nouveau Testament*, I, Beauchesne, Paris, 1978, p.5).

of any living being. It permeates in a certain way the whole body to offer it life and movement. Moreover, though without it the body would be inanimate, in itself it is insubstantial and “airy”. Without the being it fills, it would be dispersed, it would have nowhere to rest. Furthermore, breath can be exhaled: something from the deepest regions of our being can also be the most exterior. As such, breath is immanent and transcendent, and much more so than other “exterior” dimensions of my being, such as skin. Finally, it is possible to breathe it out into another being, whether a balloon or another person, as in mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Now the Scriptures tell us that God the Father has a Breath, with which he gives life and inspires. This can be developed or “spun” on an inner-Trinitarian level as a deep-seated, interior respiration, something intimate and pervasive. This Breath is exhaled, breathed out into the only “other” in God, the second hypostasis, to become something deeply intimate in this hypostasis, which will belong to it without being identical to it. There is an *interior intimo meo* in the Trinity! While the Father posits the Son as a substantial reality so to say “outside” of himself, the Breath is not posited, it is inside the other two, rather than “in front” or “facing” them. In both Father and Son, the Breath moves and circulates – in a way it is more dynamic than the other two – but has no fully autonomous activity, since its movement comes from being exhaled and inhaled (or at least received). It is “alive” and gives life and movement, but to another than itself. All this corresponds to the manifestation of the Spirit in the economy.

Developing the name of *Ruah-Pneuma* is also corroborated by the importance that classical Trinitarian theology gives to the procession as a fundamental dimension in the personal identity of the divine person: whether one says that the Son is Son because he is generated by the Father (Bonaventure), or that his procession is a generation because he is Son and the Father is Father (Aquinas), there is a clear link between the type of procession and who the person is.²⁶ Now, in Western theology, the procession of the third person is named *spiratio*, i.e. breathing, exhaling. In that case it is quite coherent to understand a person as primarily a Breath: generation “produces” a Son, spiration produces a Breath.

Of course, this process is legitimate not only if it corresponds to the Trinity revealed in the economy, but it must be applied very cautiously: the ascent from economy to immanence absolutely needs to contain a robust apophatic dimension, i.e. to be accompanied by a purification of the metaphor similar to the one applied in the

²⁶ See E. Durand, “Le Père en sa relation constitutive au Fils selon saint Thomas d’Aquin”, *Revue Thomist*, 107 (2007), pp.47-72.

progressive comprehension of the persons of the Father and the Son. For example, one would have to be extremely rigorous in purging the notion of breathing from any spatio-temporal dimension: it is co-eternal with the existence of the Father and the generation of the Son; and indwelling or expiring are only spatial images of what are actually relations between the persons – as is the notion of perichoresis, for instance.

3.2 On being a person – and back to praying in the Holy Spirit

The biggest difficulty with this comprehension of the person of the Holy Spirit is that it implies a very “weak” conception of its personhood: how we can relate to an insubstantial Breath circulating between Father and Son? How to conceive of the Trinity as of three equal hypostases? I believe this is actually no more difficult than with the classical names of Love and Gift, or the more biblical one of *dunamis*.²⁷ Moreover, it is exactly what we have been aiming for: it expresses on an intra-Trinitarian level the specific way of being a person that is manifested in the economy. All in all, the Spirit as the eternal Breath of the Father and the Son respects and gives an intra-Trinitarian foundation to its “facelessness” and its immanent-transcendent dimension in the economy.

In fact, rather than try to find common traits with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it would be more useful to develop the different facets of personhood in the Trinity, which each hypostasis expresses in a unique way. To be a person for the Father means to posit himself, to be source and end of Trinitarian life. The Son is a person by receiving himself, and in the Western tradition, by co-positing another. And we know the Spirit is the person who exists in, for and through others. This can shed light on the human person, even if the anthropological and divine notions of person are also only analogous to each other. A human person posits itself and accomplishes itself by creating and giving; but also by receiving and acting with others; and finally, in an essential way, by drawing back to let others be themselves, by inspiring them – and by ecstatically or “erotically” entering into the intimacy of the other and being itself in the other.

Finally, the way all three dimensions of divine personhood are truly specific may help to fully develop the Trinitarian dimension

²⁷ The name *dunamis*, although it is scriptural, was rarely taken into consideration by the Church Fathers precisely because it was too impersonal to ground the theology of a third divine person. Of the biblical names of the Spirit only the Johannine *Paraklētōs* is strongly personal, but it would take a complete study to understand how to develop its meaning on an inner-Trinitarian level and its possible articulation with *Ruah-Pneuma*.

of praying *en pneumatī* as shown in the scriptures. In prayer our relation to each person is different. The Father is source and end of our prayer: we praise him, beg him and entrust our lives to him. We listen to him as he proffers his Word. The Son has a human face; whereas we adore the Father in his mystery, we contemplate the Son in his humanity. He is our companion, whom we follow, dialogue with and to whom we try to conform ourselves. And the Spirit? As we know already, we pray in it or it prays in us: we neither adore nor contemplate it, but we invoke it and let it work in the hidden depths of our hearts. It does not speak in person but makes us hear the Father and his Word. It is the closest to us, but at the same time it disappears in front of the other two, so as to lead us, even propel us, towards them.²⁸ Of course, this dynamic quality of the Spirit reminds us that distinctions and specificities do not mean separation. On the contrary, though we relate differently to each person we can never relate to one only, since the Spirit, by making us plunge into the Trinitarian relations, brings us to the Son, through whom we access the Father.²⁹

Conclusion

The scriptural expression “praying in the Holy Spirit” definitely gives us a major key to understanding both Christian spirituality and the third person of the Trinity. Prayer is always *en pneumatī*, because it means letting the Holy Spirit pray in us, showing us to *whom*, *how* and *for what* we should pray; it means entering into the divine will, life and into the relations between Father, Son and Spirit – and relating to each in a different way. The Holy Spirit manifests itself as a unique type of divine person, which acts and speaks in and through others, because in the Trinity it is the most intimate Breath that the Father spires into the depths of the Son. Of course much still needs to be asked about the anthropological dimension of “praying in the Spirit”: what is the specific role of the pray-er, how is his/her own freedom and activity actually enhanced by the effective participation of the Spirit? This would be especially relevant when dealing with Charismatic prayer, where the human dimension may not always be fully recognised. I do hope, however, that this study may have at least helped both rabid, “drunk in the Spirit” (Eph 6.18), arm-waving “Charismatics” and sober, staid, *nous*-oriented “non-Charismatics” to

²⁸ See Basil, *Sur le Saint-Esprit*, Paris, Cerf, SC 17 bis, 1968², pp.412-413.

²⁹ For more on the differences and communion between the Trinitarian persons in our prayer, see E. Vetö, *Du Christ à la Trinité, Penser les mystères du Christ après Thomas d'Aquin et Balthasar*, “Cogitatio Fidei 283”, Cerf, Paris, 2012, p.454f.

better understand the centre of Charismatic spirituality and the gift it has to offer to the whole Church: the main subject of prayer is the Holy *Ruah-Pneuma* of God.

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