



The Holy Spirit

by Father Michael Harper

As we joyfully follow 'The Way' we will discover that the Holy Spirit is always there, inspiring and guiding us. We cannot escape his presence and divine influence. When next time we look at the subject of the Church, He will be there too, and the same can be said for the talks on the Divine Liturgy and the Sacraments in general. We can understand why the Lord Jesus Christ spoke so much about Him – preparing his disciples and the future Church for his coming. We see this particularly in St John's Gospel 15:26 to 16:15.

In this passage Jesus speaks to his disciples about the coming of the Holy Spirit. He says that He will 'bear witness to me' (John 15:26). Later on He says, 'He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.' (John 16:15). We see here the ever elusive character of the Holy Spirit for He is not in the business of glorifying Himself, but only Christ. He works to bring people to Christ, not to Himself. He wants people to concentrate their attention and affections on Christ, not on Himself.

Also in John 16 Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit 'will come to convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement' (John 16:8). In the West we live in a world that has lost its moral compass. The Holy Spirit is sent by Christ to restore it.

Jesus also tells the disciples that He will come to guide the Church into all truth (John 16:13). What more could you want! How important it is for us to understand and fully accept and trust his ministry.

In these passages the word Christ uses to describe the Holy Spirit in the older English translations is 'Comforter', though in modern translations it is more often rendered 'Counsellor'. It is the English translation of the Greek word *Paraklete*. The English word 'comfort' has changed its meaning through the centuries, and so many generations of English people have grown up falsely to see the Holy Spirit as the One who comforts us when we are experiencing trouble rather than the One who strengthens us in conflict with 'the world, the flesh and the devil'.

The principal role of the Holy Spirit is to strengthen us for action not so much to support us when things are not going well, although He does that also.

For well over a thousand years Orthodoxy has survived and still thrives in the heartlands of Islam. More recently it has had to face the most cruel and vicious persecution of all time, from Communism. A major factor in its success has been the presence and power of the Holy Spirit at the heart of the Church. So let us look at the Orthodox Church's understanding and experience of the Holy Spirit.

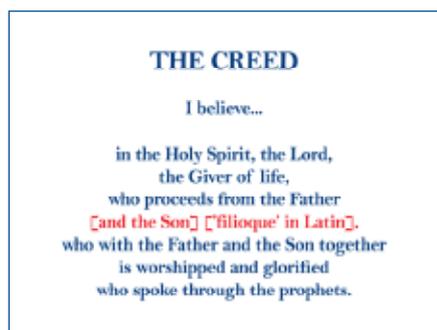
We must avoid the mistake of thinking that the Holy Spirit first came on the stage at Pentecost. Actually his work is mentioned in the second verse of the Bible: ‘The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters’ (Genesis 1:2). He is also said to have filled Bezalel (an artisan in the Old Testament) ‘with the Spirit of God, with ability, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship’ needed for the construction of the sanctuary (Exodus 35:31-36:2); He is said to have strengthened Samson (Judges 15:14), inspired David (Matthew 22:43) and moved the prophets (2 Peter 1:21).

To have a proper understanding of the Holy Spirit and his work in our lives it is absolutely vital that we always refer to the Holy Spirit as ‘He’ and not ‘it’. He is a Person who is said to speak (Acts 13:2), to will (1 Corinthians 12:11), and can be grieved (Ephesians 4:30). We must never think of Him, as some do erroneously, as just an abstract ‘influence’.

The Trinity

The key in many ways to the Orthodox understanding of the Holy Spirit is the prominence given to the Trinity in its life and ministry. Not only is this seen in the words and actions of the sacraments, but also in the fact, for example, that the priests always swing the censer three times, we bow and reach to the ground three times when reverencing the holy icons, and those of us following the Russian custom greet each other with three kisses.

The Holy Spirit like the other Persons of the Trinity has no beginning and no end, and is distinct from and co-equal with the Father and the Son.



Visual Aid 1: The Filioque Clause

A profound example of this honouring of the Holy Spirit by the Orthodox is shown in the ‘*Filioque*’ controversy. In the sixth century the western Church began to change the Nicene-Constantinople Creed by inserting the words ‘and the Son’ after the clause about the Holy Spirit that He ‘proceeded from the Father’. But we see the Orthodox Church defending the original wording of the Creed and by so doing protecting the co-equal nature of the Persons of the Trinity.

The Orthodox position is based on John 15:26: ‘But when the Counsellor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, *who proceeds from the Father*, he will bear witness to me.’ Metropolitan Kallistos comments, ‘Christ sends the Spirit, but the Spirit proceeds from the Father, so the Bible teaches. What Orthodoxy does not teach, and what the Bible does not actually say, is that the Spirit proceeds from the Son’.¹ Later he writes, ‘Many Orthodox regard the *Filioque* as dangerous and heretical. Filioquism confuses the persons, and destroys the proper balance between unity and diversity in the Godhead.’

The oneness of the deity is emphasized at the expense of His threeness; God is regarded too much in terms of abstract essence and too little in terms of specific personality.² Not all Orthodox are agreed, and within Orthodoxy there are some more moderate opinions on this subject.

The Orthodox emphasis on the Trinity has preserved in the Church the importance of the work of the Holy Spirit in believers and in the world – an emphasis which has tended to be neglected in many churches.

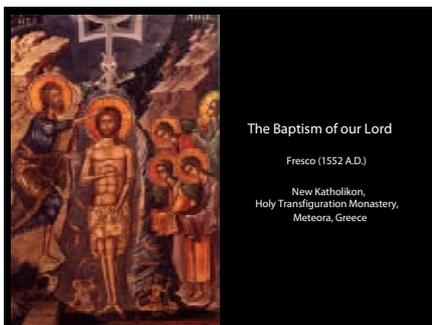
The Incarnation

It is most important for us to see the action of the Holy Spirit in the Incarnation of Christ. His action is mentioned in two of the Gospels. In Matthew we read: ‘Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his Mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit’ (Matthew 1:18). And a little later we read that the angel of the Lord says, ‘That which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit’ (Matthew 1:20). Then in Luke, Mary is told: ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God’ (Luke 1:35).

The wording of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed also declares that Christ was ‘incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary’. The Orthodox Church has always emphasized the Incarnation and the work of the Holy Spirit in the conception of Christ in the womb of the Theotokos, the God-bearer.

Theophany and Transfiguration

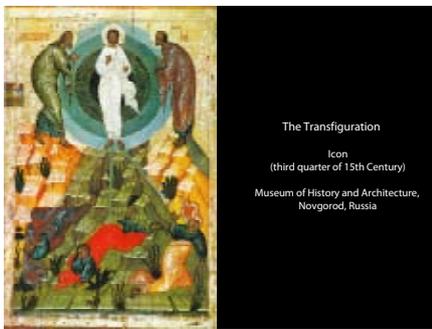
Both the Feast of Theophany and of the Transfiguration of Christ have a prominent place in the Orthodox Church. They were events in the life of Christ at which the Holy Spirit played an important part.



Visual Aid 2:

Fresco of the Baptism of our Lord

Theophany is the name given to what in the West is called Epiphany. In the West the liturgical focus is on the visit of the Magi to Christ after his birth in Bethlehem. But in the East the focus is on the baptism of Christ in the river Jordan, which is an event which has never been given the same emphasis in the West. The most important aspect of Christ’s baptism is the manifestation of the Trinity – the voice of the Father *and* the coming of the Holy Spirit as a dove on Christ. In the Early Church, Christ’s baptism was seen as the pattern for Christian baptisms. Thus the sealing of the Holy Spirit was always an integral part of true baptism.

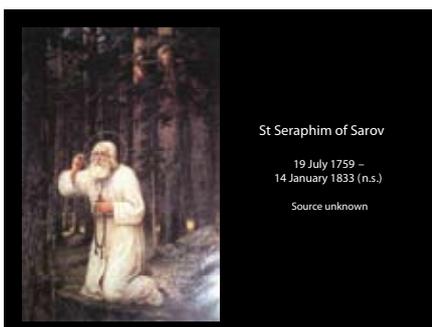


Visual Aid 3: Icon of the Transfiguration

As far as the Feast of the Transfiguration is concerned – the Orthodox Church has given it great prominence from the fourth century AD, whereas in the Latin West it appeared first in the ninth century AD and only fully in the fifteenth. The late Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, once wrote, ‘Orthodoxy has a much greater grasp than we in the West of the significance and meaning of the Transfiguration ... The East has instinctively honoured the transfiguration and dwelt upon the meaning with special warmth and tenacity ... Nowhere is the ethos of the East far from the themes which the Transfiguration embodies’.³ The Orthodox see again in this incident the Trinity: as Jesus is transfigured, the disciples hear the voice of the Father, so similar to what happened at Christ’s baptism; and the cloud that overshadowed them is seen as signifying the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We should also note the immensely important contribution of St Gregory Palamas (1296-1359). He argued that Christians can and do experience the divine light. He sought to answer the question: how can humans know God and the God who is by nature unknowable? He answered this by teaching that we know the *energies* of God, but not his *essence*. Metropolitan Kallistos writes, ‘God is Light, and, therefore, the experience of God’s energies takes the form of Light. The vision ... is not a vision of some created radiance, but of the Light of the Godhead itself – the same light of the Godhead which surrounded Christ on Mount Tabor.’⁴

Thus the Orthodox see the Transfiguration not only as an experience that Christ received – but as something we can experience ourselves.



Visual Aid 4: St Seraphim of Sarov

One immediately thinks of the story of St Seraphim of Sarov and his encounter with Nicholas Motovilov. St Seraphim taught that the true aim of the Christian life was the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God, and this was the subject of their discussion in the forest. They were both to be transfigured:

‘Then Father Seraphim took me very firmly by the shoulders and said: “My son, we are both at this moment in the Spirit of God. Why don’t you look at me?”’

“I cannot look, Father,” I replied, “because your eyes are flashing like lightning. Your face has become brighter than the sun, and it hurts my eyes to look at you.”

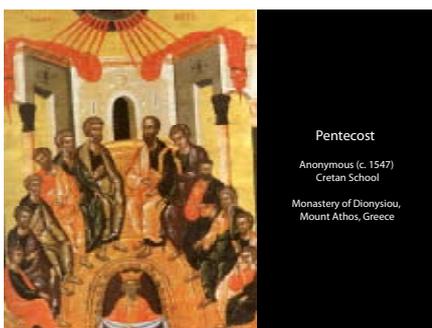
“Don’t be afraid,” he said, “at this very moment you yourself have become as bright as I am. You yourself are now in the fullness of the Spirit of God; otherwise you would not be able to see me as you do.”

Then bending his head towards me, he whispered softly in my ear: “Thank the Lord God for his infinite goodness towards us ... But why, my son, do you not look me in the eyes? Just look and don’t be afraid; the Lord is with us.”⁵

Motovilov then described a blinding light that spread for several yards lighting up not only St Seraphim, but the whole snow-covered landscape. The reported conversation ends with these words from St Seraphim, which are deeply charismatic in their essence, “When the Spirit of God comes down to a man and overshadows him with the fullness of His presence, then that man’s soul overflows with unspeakable joy, for the Holy Spirit fills with joy whatever He touches ...”.⁶ Metropolitan Kallistos describes this experience as the brightness which is nothing less than the uncreated energies of God – the light which spreads round them is identical with the divine light which shone around our Lord at his Transfiguration on Mount Tabor.⁷

In the Orthodox Church there are numerous examples of this light being seen on the dead bodies of saints. For example, after the death of St Sergius of Radonezh the saint’s face is said to have gleamed like snow, not as the face of a dead man, but with a living radiance, or as the face of an angel.

It would take a very long time to record all that the Church Fathers have written about the Holy Spirit, but it is important to notice one in particular, St Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), who laid great stress on the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church and the individual believer. He particularly emphasized the gift of tears as an evidence of the Spirit’s action in the believer.



Visual Aid 5: Icon of Pentecost

Pentecost

We now come to the immensely important event, the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, which is remembered every year on Pentecost Sunday, one of the most important Feasts in the Orthodox Calendar.

But why Pentecost? When announcing the Holy Spirit’s coming, Jesus Christ answered this important question in three principal ways:

To empower the Church for evangelism

We have already referred to the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit as recorded in the Old Testament, most importantly in Creation, and made it clear that Pentecost was not the

arrival of the Holy Spirit for the first time – far from it. But the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was the inauguration of a whole new dimension: it was the beginning of the New Creation. God’s actions before Pentecost were, to put it in the words of Christ, only for the ‘lost sheep of the House of Israel’. After Pentecost the audience became the whole world. The Gospel was to be proclaimed to the Gentiles as well as the Jews, and on all six continents not just in the Middle East.

The disciples were told by Christ after his Resurrection to do nothing until the Holy Spirit came. He told them to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, ‘you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 1:4-5). And a little later Christ told them, ‘You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth’ (Acts 1:8).

Before the Church could begin its historic mission, it had to receive the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Christ was not asking the Church to do anything He had not done himself, for before He began to teach and heal He was baptized in the Jordan by John the Baptist, and the Holy Spirit came upon Him as a dove.

As St Irenaeus points out, the Apostles did not commence to preach the gospel or to place anything on record until they were endowed with the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit.⁸

Did Pentecost work? Assuredly, for by the end of the day queues were forming for baptisms – in total over 3000 people. Not a bad start for beginners! And it was to continue. St Luke, who according to the early church historian Eusebius, and St Jerome, was converted in Antioch, wrote the Acts of the Apostles which tells the story of how the Church spread from Jerusalem to Rome in one generation. There are those who think the book should have been called ‘The Acts of the Holy Spirit’.

We also need to remember that Pentecost was a Church experience – by no means restricted to the Apostles – because all the Church was gathered in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, including Mary, the Mother of God, for all of them were to be involved in the mission of the Son of God.

In the Vespers service on the feast of Pentecost, we sing about the action of the Holy Spirit:

*The fishermen He turned into theologians,
He holds together in unity the whole structure of the Church;
One in essence and one in throne with the Father and the Son,
O Paraclete, glory to Thee.*

To lead the Church into the whole truth

We have already mentioned the words of Christ in John 16 that the Holy Spirit when He came would ‘guide’ the Church ‘into all the truth’. It certainly has always needed this. One of the most popular icons of Pentecost displays not just the Apostles but actually includes St Paul, who certainly was not present on this occasion. But the icon rightly reveals the

importance of the Apostles and what soon became known as ‘the apostolic doctrine’, to be faithfully preserved and taught by successive bishops of the Church. So we can see that through Pentecost, the gospel has spread to the ends of the earth and the truth has been preserved to this day.

To unite the Church

Some of the early Church Fathers saw the fascinating link between Pentecost and the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 7-9). When the people built the Tower of Babel they did so without the blessing of God. God’s judgement on them was to confuse the languages of the world so they could not understand each other. But on the Day of Pentecost this changed and the comments of the crowd were: ‘Each of us [is] hearing in his own native language’ (Acts 2: 8). Babel was reversed.

Evangelism is meaningless if it is not undertaken in the language of the people. This is just as true today. Evangelism still has to be in a common language. Pentecost changed the confusion to unity. It is important also to see that St Paul forbade speaking in tongues without interpretation when the Church was assembled, so that the hearers would be edified (1 Corinthians 14:13-28).

At Pentecost the Christians were ‘all together in one place’ (Acts 2:1). The Holy Spirit wonderfully creates and sustains Christian unity in the Church. St Paul writes about ‘the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (Ephesians 4:1-6). As with the Tower of Babel, when Christians turn away from God and do their own thing, without the guidance and blessing of the Holy Spirit, confusion reigns.

One of the hymns of Pentecost underlines this:

*When the Most High came down and confused the tongues,
He divided the nations:
But when He distributed the tongues of fire
He called all to unity.
Therefore, with one voice we glorify the All-Holy Spirit.*

The Holy Spirit brought unity to those early Christians; it is said that they ‘had all things in common’ and ‘were of one heart and soul’ (Acts 2:44 and 4:32). So let us now turn to the Church and see how the Holy Spirit acts in her.

The Holy Spirit in the Church

Holy Baptism

The Orthodox Church has been the only Church to continue the early practice of Christian baptism as the three-fold immersion of the candidate in water, followed immediately by Chrismation symbolizing the reception of the Holy Spirit and His Sealing; and followed then by the candidates receiving their first communion. The Holy Spirit is active in the whole baptismal process.

This link between baptism in water and the sacrament of Chrismation, which has always been practised in the Orthodox Church down the ages, can be clearly seen in the Acts of the Apostles. In Acts 8, initiation for some baptized Samaritans was completed by Peter

and John through the laying on of hands when they received the Holy Spirit. In Acts 9, Saul of Tarsus was both baptized in water and filled with the Holy Spirit. In Acts 10, Peter goes to the house of Cornelius where there is a Gentile Pentecost – followed by water baptism. In Acts 19 there is an encounter with twelve disciples of John the Baptist. They receive Christian baptism followed immediately by the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The only difference with today is the laying on of hands for the receiving of the Holy Spirit which was practised in those early days. As the Church grew and spread it became impossible for the Apostles and their successors, the bishops, to do all such baptisms. So instead, they blessed the oil so that the priests could do it in their place.

The Eucharist

The Orthodox Eucharist, or Divine Liturgy as the Orthodox themselves call it, is full of references and prayers to the Holy Spirit. For most of the year the service begins with a prayer to the Holy Spirit. *‘O heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, who art everywhere present and fillest all things, the treasury of good things and Giver of life: come and abide in us, and cleanse us from every stain, and save our souls, O good One.’* This service is always a divine happening. Metropolitan Kallistos describes it as a continual miracle; in the words of Nicolas Cabasilas, ‘This is the final mystery, beyond this it is not possible to go, nor can anything be added to it’.⁹ It is the sacrament of the Kingdom in time and beyond time.

When the incense is blessed in the service the priest offers it to God *‘as a savour of spiritual sweetness’*. He goes on to say, *‘and send down upon us in return the grace of thine all-holy Spirit’*.

Then if there is more than one priest at the service, a dialogue takes place:

Pray for me, brother(s) and concelebrant(s).

*- May the Holy Spirit descend upon thee and the power of the Most High overshadow thee;
May the same Spirit serve with us all the days of our life.*

There is a fascinating Russian tradition, by which the following words are spoken by the priest just before the *Epiklesis* (the invocation of the Holy Spirit): *‘O Lord, who at the third hour didst send down upon thine apostles thy Holy Spirit: take not the same from us, O good One, but renew him in us who pray unto Thee’*.

Then comes the great moment when the actual *‘epiklesis’* (invocation) is prayed by the priest: *‘Send down thy Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts here spread forth’*. And shortly afterwards the priest prays to God to change the gifts *‘by thy Holy Spirit’*. It is important to notice that the priest asks for the Holy Spirit to come upon the people to bless them, as well as upon the gifts to change them into the Body and Blood of Christ.

In the Liturgy of St Basil, which is always used during Lent and at other specific times during the year, there are even more references to the Holy Spirit. At this point, for example, the priest prays *‘Unite all of us to one another, who become partakers of the one Bread and Cup in the communion of the Holy Spirit’*. And in another place the Holy Spirit is asked to *‘speedily destroy uprisings of heresy’*.

Alexander Schmemmann (a modern Orthodox scholar) sees the whole service as a transformation. He writes, ‘In the Liturgy each of its parts, each solemn ceremony, each rite is transformed by the Holy Spirit into *that which it is*: a real “symbol” of what it

manifests.’¹⁰ What is happening in the service is what happens in our lives too. We are being transformed by the Holy Spirit, a process called ‘theosis’, into the likeness of Christ, into real Christians. Paul in 2 Corinthians writes of the veil being removed, so that ‘we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit’ (3:18).

And finally, in a most important moment, when the priest places the part of the ‘Lamb’ (the centre of the loaf he prepares for holy communion) which is marked ‘IC’ into the chalice, he says, ‘*The fullness [of the cup of faith] of the Holy Spirit*’, and a little later when he pours the warm water into the chalice, he says, ‘*The warmth [of faith full] of the Holy Spirit*’.

All of this should convince us of the vital ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist of the Orthodox Church. He is invoked over and over again, and is fully present to bless all those who are at the service.

The Spirit-filled Church

We have just seen that the Holy Spirit plays a crucial part in the two major sacraments of the Church, the sacrament of Baptism by which we enter the Church and become members of Christ’s Body, and the sacrament of the Eucharist, by which we are strengthened, united, and renewed for our daily pilgrimage in the Way.

But the ministry of the Holy Spirit extends to each member of the Body of Christ not only when they are in Church, but also at home and at work throughout the day and night. We are to be full of the Holy Spirit throughout our lives.

Metropolitan Kallistos and others use the phrase ‘becoming what we are’. What then are we? We are children of God. We are sealed with the Holy Spirit. We are partakers of divine grace. We are saved. In the *Homilies of St Macarius* we are told, ‘Each of you has been anointed with heavenly Chrism, and has become a Christ by grace; each is a king and prophet of the holy mysteries’.¹¹

But the ‘becoming’ is much harder. Metropolitan Kallistos writes: ‘As pilgrims on the Way, then, it is our purpose to advance from the stage where the grace of the Spirit is present and active within us in a hidden way, to the point of *conscious awareness* when we know the Spirit’s power openly, directly, with the full perception of our heart ... the Pentecostal spark of the Spirit, existing in each one of us from Baptism is to be kindled into a living flame. *We are to become what we are*’. [*italics added*]¹²

Let us look for a moment at how St Paul sees the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

In the **Epistle to the Romans** he wonderfully describes the Holy Spirit’s gift of love: ‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, which has been given to us’ (Romans 5:5). He reminds us of the way the Holy Spirit leads us: ‘For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God’ (Romans 8:14). He writes also about the ‘Spirit of sonship, and by him we cry “Abba, Father”’; Paul speaks of the Spirit Himself ‘bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God’ (Romans 8:15-16). He tells us that ‘the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness’ (Romans 8:26).

In the **Epistle to the Galatians** St Paul gives us the classic list of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Galatians 5:22-23).

In the **Epistle to the Ephesians** he urges them to 'put on the whole armour of God' and it includes 'the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God' (Ephesians 6:17); and he goes on to urge them to 'pray at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication' (Ephesians 6:18).

These are just a few of the references in St Paul to the work of the Holy Spirit in us. But we need also to remember the important writing of St Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 about the gifts of the Holy Spirit and how they operate in the community. The Orthodox Church does not make a sharp distinction between the gifts and the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Father Lev Gillet writes about this: "The Greek Fathers used as almost synonymous the words "gifts" (*doreai*), "powers" (*dynameis*), "energies" (*energeiai*) and "charisms" (*charismata*). Greek Christian thought always seems reluctant to introduce rational analysis in the realm of pure grace."¹³

The gifts of the Holy Spirit have always had a place in the life of the Orthodox Church down the ages. Stories of healing and miracles are often recorded in the lives of the Saints. However, the gift of 'speaking in tongues' seems to have been rarely experienced.

The Orthodox Church has always had the Holy Spirit at the centre of its life and worship. As we have seen, its theology and particularly its sacramental teaching has always honoured and recognized the importance of the Holy Spirit. A Church or a person without the Holy Spirit cannot be called Christian.

We need to be grateful to God for the faithful witness in the Orthodox Church to the Holy Spirit from Pentecost onwards, but also to pray that we may all be filled with the Holy Spirit, so that He may make us strong witnesses of Christ, to change us into the likeness of Christ, and empower us to do the works of Christ.

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- 1 Timothy Ware (Metropolitan Kallistos), *The Orthodox Church* (Penguin Books: London, 1997), p. 212.
 - 2 Ibid., p. 215.
 - 3 Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (Longman Green and Co.: London, 1946), p. 135, p.137.
 - 4 *The Orthodox Church*, pp. 68-69.
 - 5 Cited in *The Orthodox Church*, pp.119-20. This conversation in the forest is recalled in Fedotov, *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality*, pp. 273-75.
 - 6 Ibid., p.120.
 - 7 See Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, revised edition (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press: Crestwood, New York, 2002), p. 127.
 - 8 *Against Heresies*, Book 3, Chapter 1.
 - 9 Cited by Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 109.
 - 10 Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist, Sacrament of the Kingdom*, (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press: Crestwood, New York, 1987), p. 222.
 - 11 Cited by Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 99.
 - 12 Ibid., p.100.
 - 13 Father Lev Gillet, *Orthodox Spirituality* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press: Crestwood, New York, 1987), p. 71.