Opinion
NCR Voices



A stained-glass window depicting the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Mary and the apostles is seen during a confirmation Mass May 5, 2022, at Holy Family Church in Queens, New York. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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In 1957 a Dutch theologian named George Johan Sirks published an article in the Harvard Theological Review provocatively titled: "The Cinderella of Theology: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit." Sirks observed that some theologians had begun referring to the Holy Spirit informally as the "Cinderella of theology" because of the Spirit's forgotten focus in theological reflection and research. Like the would-be princess of the fairy tale, the Holy Spirit had been overlooked and ignored, even as the proverbial stepsisters of God the Father/Creator and Jesus Christ received abundant attention.

The popular evangelical pastor Francis Chan even described the Holy Spirit as the "forgotten God" for similar reasons.

While some people might find such tongue-and-cheek characterizations of the absence of sustained pneumatology (the study of the Holy Spirit) distasteful, I cannot help but think that what Sirks, Chan and others — like the late Vatican II theologian and Dominican Fr. Yves Congar or more recently in the work of historical theologian Elizabeth Dreyer — are getting at is still sadly true. Most people do not focus much thought or energy on the third person of the Trinity.

Numerous factors — historical, practical and theological — have combined to facilitate the Spirit's diminishing profile in everyday prayer life, pastoral ministry and academic theological reflection.

One is the difficulty most Christian women and men have in envisioning the Holy Spirit. As theologian St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson summarizes well in her classic text *She Who Is*, "While the Son has appeared in human form and while we can at least make a mental image of the Father, the Spirit is not graphic and remains theologically the most mysterious of the three divine persons."

It doesn't help that the biblical images we have drawn from in the tradition, both in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, strike some people as either vague or literally invisible (breath, wind) or fantastical or even silly (the form of a bird, floating tongues of fire). Scripture and tradition both give us ample support for proclaiming belief in the Spirit, but little by way of concrete resources that most Christians can easily embrace and understand.

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In addition, many of those few Christians who do prioritize the Spirit in prayer and reflection are often located in niche worship communities.

For example, in Protestant circles, it is typically those in Pentecostal churches who regularly talk about the Holy Spirit most directly and openly. In Catholic circles, focus on the Holy Spirit in worship has been frequently tied to the charismatic renewal movement of the last half century. In both cases, some of the religious affectivity, styles of prayer and worship, and discussion about the Spirit within these communities can strike other Christians as different or even strange. This may be part of why mainstream Christian thought about and discussion of the Holy Spirit has been so limited.

One more consideration arises from the prevalence of individualism in our culture today. This may seem unrelated to some readers, but if the operative way of evaluating the world and moving through it is focused on one's own agency to the exclusion of acknowledging interdependence, is preoccupied with developing one's own "brand" and social media identity, and runs the risk of solipsism, then the active work of the Holy Spirit as the divine source of communion and interconnection can easily be overlooked or ignored.

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The Holy Spirit is the unifier, the divine bridge that crosses the divide of time and space to bring together the communion of saints and unite us, through baptism, to one another in Christ. But attitudes reflecting a belief that we are just independent monads moving through life according to our own will and initiative alone discourage seeing and recognizing the divine presence within and among us as the "Lord, the giver of life," which the Nicene Creed reminds us.

As I wrote four years ago in NCR, I believe that factors such as these have real practical and pastoral consequences — often devastating ones. I termed this tendency to forget or ignore this aspect of God's presence in the church and world " Holy Spirit atheism." And in the years since I first began thinking about how the Spirit is often relegated in thought and prayer by many church leaders and ordinary Christians alike, I have only found myself more and more convinced of this lacuna in public theology.

I believe that we need to focus more attention on the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we profess belief in "The Holy Spirit, the Lord the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets." But do we understand what that means? We need to consider not only what it means to think about and talk about the Spirit theologically, but also look at what implications exist for our daily lives and pastoral ministry, and what this means for the church and world more broadly.

In response to what I have named here, I am focusing the next several of my columns on the Holy Spirit. This series is intended to explore the Christian understanding of the Spirit with particular attention given to why this aspect of our faith is significant for Christian discipleship. Additionally, I will look at ways we can think creatively and accessibly about God the Spirit, drawing on historical and contemporary resources that help provide greater context and illustration for modern seekers and believers. Finally, I hope that this series of reflections on the Holy Spirit invites greater reflection and discussion among Christians today so that we might all proclaim that, indeed, we *do believe* in the Holy Spirit, not just in the

words of our creed but in the manner of our lives.

Read this next: How can we get to know the Holy Spirit — and what pronoun should we use?

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