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Seeking the Spirit in all walks of life

by Christine Schenk

Simply Spirit

In my inaugural column Jan. 23, I invited readers to share their own experiences of Spirit. Since Pentecost is Sunday, it seems a great time to share some of your heartfelt responses. There isn't room to print them all, but this sampling should satisfy the curiosity of anyone who's wondering if the Spirit is still alive and well in our world!

Jane Francisco writes: "Having lived in Philadelphia all my life, I went into a deep mistrust of our Catholic clergy after the priest scandals and wanted to remove myself from all of it. Mass, the sacraments, did not hold the same meaning, and I felt so alone and struggling with faith. Through a series of events, my husband and I packed up with my 90-year-old father and moved to Charlotte, N.C. We signed up in a local parish with 30,000 parishioners.

I begged God for a new beginning. I asked the Spirit to kindle in my heart the fire to live and love again my church. I really felt like I was testing Him. How could one ever find anything in a congregation this big? Then we met John McSweeney, our pastor, who welcomed us and told us to get to work because everyone in this parish has talent and treasure. We have seen the Spirit at work every day since. It was not until two years after we arrived that I happened to look up during Mass at one of the stained glass windows because the sun was shining through. You guessed correctly -- the beautiful Holy Spirit was shining on us. We are so very grateful."

A traveling business-mom writes: She is concerned about her 20-something daughter, the "love of my life," who frequently calls in a panic verging on hysteria over minor stresses. Her daughter has steadily resisted suggestions to seek counseling. After a recent episode, this worried mom writes: "I was flying home from a business trip and thinking about her, loving her and hoping that she will seek help. I found myself praying 'Please, God' so sincerely that the words came out aloud. Just an hour ago, my daughter

called to say she made an appointment with a psychiatrist because she thinks she needs help. Is the Spirit at work? I think so. I pray so."

Mercy Sr. Barbara Wheeley writes: "My experience of the Spirit is similar to yours. She has guided me through life, at times even with clear words in my head in response to a question. Always amazing to me."

Karen Davis writes: "My husband and I are Erie [Pa.] Benedictine oblates of 20-plus years. I do jail and prison ministry and always pray to the Holy Spirit for guidance in planning Bible study for the women in Warren prison. The Holy Spirit never ceases to come through. Often, the theme comes in my daily Benedictine Psalter reading of psalms or biblical texts for the day.

Then, more recently, I had a friend whose 84-year-old stepmom was in hospice and she invited me to go with her for a visit. I looked at my Psalter and prayed again for guidance in finding a prayer we could all say with her stepmom and siblings of various denominations (and no faith). This was my inspiration:

Psalm 20: May God answer you in time of distress; May God's name protect you. May you receive help and strength and be remembered for your offerings. May your sacrifices be found favorable. May God give you your heart's desire, fulfill every one of your plans.

I had difficulty praying it with them as the power of it hit me square! It was truly uplifting for the patient and the adult children. Her stepmother died the next day."

John Sevenoaks writes: "In the late '70s, I took part in an amateur dramatics production of the Passion play, held at the cathedral in Johannesburg. The music used in the production was taken from Leonard Bernstein's 'Mass.' On a Sunday evening after reading your Jan. 23 [column], our local radio station played "Simple Song" -- the first time I heard it in over 30 years. Coincidence? I don't think so. Given the title and these meaningful lyrics, what about a link at the bottom of the column for readers who are not familiar with them?"

Glad to oblige, John. Here's a link. And another to the "Mass" itself.

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Michael Diebold writes: "One of the simple joys I get to share is taking kids from the 'city' out to catch their first fish. I have a small lake on my farm, and I am always gratified and happy when a boy catches his first 'whopper,' usually a bluegill. I put one of these into verse:

"Simple Act"

Austin has hooked one.
I reach into the water
Grab his line
Hand him his first bluegill.

On a lake in another world
Hand touches water
Pulling in a drowning man
From certain death (me?).

Simple acts of kindness here

Get magnified there,
In another dimension,
Ours when we pass."

Rudolph W. Pierce, an 85-year-old retired ob-gyn, writes: "Several years ago, the wife of a rabbi referred to the Shekinah, feminine aspect of God. Indeed, the Holy Spirit [fits] very well this role to balance the maleness of the Father and the Son. Plants (botany), animals (zoology), and humankind have this dual aspect of sexuality, that is to say, the male and female, created by God as a gift us. Sharing a thought."

A religious sister writes: "From the start of the RCIA process after Vatican II, I have been involved, often as director but always at least as a team member. If anything shows the work of the Spirit, it is surely within RCIA groups. Last year, as we were discussing the Nicene Creed, I pointed out how so much space was given to Jesus Christ [compared to] the space allowed to the Spirit. This is understandable because of what was under discussion at the time it was formulated ... [but] this is surely the Spirit's time. If ever a new version of that creed be formulated (please God) a lot more thought and space should be given to the Spirit."

Vicky writes: "I am a social worker from Long Island, N.Y., (geriatrics, hospice) who is currently doing the 19th Annotation [Ignatian at home retreat]. My son is a Jesuit novice (yes, I'm a proud mom!) ... I very much identified with your descriptions in the article of closeness to the Holy Spirit, especially in light of the Spirit being "genderless," so to speak. ... To me, God the Father was a fresco on the ceiling of an old Irish church, and since my father was an abusive alcoholic, well, "father" was rather fraught.

But the Holy Spirit always seemed close, guiding, steering me to good, gently away from harm. I seemed to have a sense of that when I was young, and now, well, I do not hesitate or question when the Spirit prompts -- I just say, 'OK.' ... And I find that when I am in great need, it is the Spirit who gets the first alert! I wonder if this is true for women's prayer. ... I just wanted to say how you articulated so well the beautiful simplicity of the call from, and yearning for the Spirit."

And finally, Mary Baier sends a poem:

"Shekinah"

She'll dance
wherever she wants to.

Fact is
she dances everywhere.

No place
too dry or barren,
too old or abandoned
not to see her
flamenco!

There's the waltz,
of course,
in the crafted halls
of order.
But oh!

that flamenco.

And yes, this Sunday, let's join our dear, fiery, creative Spirit in dancing the flamenco!

Thanks for writing, everyone.

P.S. If you would like to share your experiences of Spirit, email me at cs3430@gmail.com and I'll do this again sometime.

[A Sister of St. Joseph, Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years.]

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