



Lenten Study 2021 – Week 3: The Holy Spirit and the Body of Christ

Being a member of St. Luke's, and a baptized member of the body of Christ means being a disciple, one who is learning to live life in the Kingdom among us, each with our own unique gifts, story, role and relationships as we learn, work and grow together in faith. Being a community of disciples is a team sport.

There are no spectators or those who are just along for the ride, we all have responsibility for our own life of faith and how we live it together. Reciting prayers, as we might letters on an eye chart or receiving sacraments like we might take vitamins does nothing to give us the life of grace we are called to in faith. It takes our engagement, our reflection, our relationship and love in action one with another and together to with our neighbours.

Theological scholar Nicholas Afanasiev has gone to great lengths to emphasize that Christianity is a religious community that does not actually have a concept of 'laity' in the way that such a term has usually come to be understood today. Baptized Christians have all been inducted into the "royal priesthood," and the Church in its entirety is a "kingdom of priests." Those who we call 'the clergy,' as opposed to 'the laity' are merely those who have been called out by the people to preside over certain roles of service (roles of the diaconate, presbyterate, and episcopate) in relation to specific tasks on behalf of the priestly community.¹ This is of course where we derive the orders of deacon, presbyter, and bishop, and these ministries are important gifts to the Church, but the priestly character of the collective Body of Christ resides in all who are baptized. God has a mission of reconciliation to all creation of which you are made a minister, together with all the baptized, through your own baptism and gift of life in Christ by the Spirit.

Participation in the royal priesthood of Christ is the place of all who are baptized. We are not all called to the same role in the same way but are called to be ourselves and who we are becoming in faith in the midst of our communities and relationships. Jesus didn't call those first disciples because he thought he would need their skills as fishermen and neither did they leave those skills entirely behind but all of who they are became directed through their life as disciples of Jesus as he taught them about the Kingdom and how to live it among them.

Being a disciple; a minister of reconciliation and a member of the royal priesthood of Christ, doesn't mean qualifying for a job title or putting to use your special skills for the work of a parish (though those may be good things to do). It's how you live the whole of your life in relationship with God and your fellow disciples.

What does your baptism mean to you?

Do you have stories about your baptism and those who prayed with and for you at it?

What difference does it make to you to think of yourself as a minister of Christ or part of a "royal priesthood"?

God has a mission, completed in Jesus that is at work in and through us by the gift of the Holy Spirit. When have you most felt part of that mission or closest to the work of the Spirit?

1 Nicholas Afanasiev, *The Church of the Holy Spirit*, (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).



Mary the Mother of Jesus

The Holy Spirit Will Come Upon You

It is Mary's partnership with the grace of God which embodies for the first time the New Covenant community. As the one whose body knit together Christ's body, we could even say that, for a time, she was the whole of the Church itself in her person. It is for this reason that she has sometimes been called the Mother of the Church – a title replete with reflective significance.

We do not have very much in the way of clear indication about Mary's role in the early Church after the resurrection of her son. What we do know, at least, is that she remained intricately connected to the apostolic circle, and indeed seemingly exercised a ministry of prayerful leadership with them: "When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James,

and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers" (Acts 1:14). Depictions of Mary from the Roman catacombs show her sitting in the centre of the apostles with her arms outstretched in the posture of prayer. While her unprecedented place in salvation history was of course unique to her as a historical person, many have heard themselves called to model their own lives and ministries after her. Indeed all Christian discipleship could be said to follow the example of Mary at least in some degree or form.

It is in the Annunciation to Mary in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke where the unique connection between the ministry of Mary and the person of the Holy Spirit is made most clearly in Scripture. The Angel speaks to Mary and reveals to her the promise that she is to carry and give birth to the Messiah, the Son of God. Upon asking how this miracle will be so, Gabriel replies that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35). Importantly, this phrase 'come upon you' is the same one that is used by Jesus in Acts 1:8 when he leaves the disciples with the promise of Pentecost, and again by Peter in Acts 11:15 as he explains to the church in Jerusalem how it was that uncircumcised Gentiles came to also be speaking in tongues. Mary is the first person to receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in this proto-Pentecostal way, and the qualifier "overshadow" seems to suggest in a superabundant way. That it is Mary's song, the Magnificat, which overflows from her as the initial response to this – with all of its unparalleled prophetic utterances about God turning the world upside down – stands as evidence of this (Luke 1:46-55). Part of the Mary's character of discipleship is found in this special receptivity to the voice, power, and creativity of the Spirit of God, and of the courage to name it and deliver it into being in creation. Mary was someone who was

uniquely formed and empowered by grace to receive in advance from the Holy Spirit that which others were not yet able to bear (John 16:12-15). Indeed, for this reason, some Orthodox liturgical sources compare her to the burning bush encountered by Moses in the book of Exodus at the beginning of his unique call within salvation history. In this allegorical sense Mary too, like the bush, is a creature in need of the same salvation won by her son as all of us, but nevertheless, she is one that God enflames with a unique manifestation of the presence of the Spirit in the world without her being burned up and consumed in the process. Those who are called to minister as Mary did often appear to others as spiritual 'thin places,' where the distance between them and the presence of the Spirit of God seems just a little bit shorter than in others. If you are blessed to know such a person, you know that they are a great gift to the Church.

Treasured and Pondered in Her Heart

Of course, every baptized Christian is called to become a 'spirit-bearer.' The historical Mary is not distinct from humanity in this, even if she may have been a preeminent example and therefore a continuing model. Indeed, this is confirmed by the fact that sometimes this same term is used in Eastern Christian circles as a synonym for the saints. But, in a more specific sense, the other place which spirit-bearer tends to be applied is as a descriptor for those who dedicate themselves to monastic life. Mary is a template for devotion and contemplation and the mysticism and asceticism which often go along with it.

Twice in chapter two of Luke's Gospel, we hear details recorded about Mary that give a small glimpse into the kind of person she was. After the arrival of the shepherds to see the child Jesus, and their report of visions about the coming Messiah, the narrative says that all who heard it were amazed. But this is the key phrase: Mary "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). A version of these same words reappears later in Jesus' childhood when Mary finds him in the Temple teaching the teachers of the Law. The boy explains that he had not gotten lost as people assumed, but rather that he has been exactly where he is meant to be – "I must be in my Father's house." Most of those who hear this explanation do not understand what he is trying to say, but Mary "treasured all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:49-51).

From these final lines, we can infer that the historical Mary was a person of deep contemplation and discernment. Indeed, we should probably not be surprised about this, as the fact that she "found favour" with God and was chosen by grace to partner with God's salvific plan through her participation in the Incarnation of God was surely not the product of an arbitrary drawing of straws. Whatever her life to that point may have been like, she was undoubtedly a person uniquely attuned to the voice and vision of the Lord and who had been well-formed in her faithfulness as a daughter of the people of Israel. That sort of holiness does not just happen by random accident; it is cultivated over many years, and prayer is the soil. As we see from later indications in Scripture, this special attunement to the movement of God in the world did not leave her after her pregnancy and the birth of Christ. Perhaps it even continued to be deepened in her throughout the remainder of her life.

One specific hint of her sensitivity to the Divine seems to be alluded to early in the life of Jesus, during a visit of Mary and Joseph to Jerusalem to present Jesus at the Temple to be circumcised and to make the customary offerings. There the two parents have been stopped by the prophet Simeon, an elderly man who has been waiting for the Messiah all his life and has been told that he will live just long enough to see it. He speaks to them, and the "Song of Simeon" which ensues rightly focuses on what the birth of this child means for Israel and the nations of the world. Yet this song also includes a message for Mary: "a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:35b). Like her son, Mary is to experience a portion of the weight of the sin and brokenness in creation which causes him to cry out on the cross. Yet, and nevertheless, she will stand at the cross and endure its pain with him, uniquely steadfast in her faith that this will not be the last word (John 19:25-27). Perhaps, therefore, we can imagine the maturing Mary as a woman who wrestles deeply in her innermost being with matters of faith and suffering and hope; as someone who, through a great trial, had formed within her the ability to manifest an un-anxious presence and prayerful calm among the disciples and leaders of the early church, even when the way forward seemed entirely unclear (Acts 1:14). This ministry of profound spiritual feeling and the careful discernment of it is another aspect of leadership of which the Church always has great need, and to which the life of Mary points.

You Shall Conceive and Bear a Child

It is also important to give some consideration to the Mary's ministry in connection with conception, birth, and motherhood. Before doing so, I want to recognize that these are experiences that are not common to the human experience – at least in terms of the biological realm – and I am aware that this can be a source of some lament and pain. I recognize the need to be sensitive about the use of these words with due consideration for the trigger they may be in some cases. I do believe, however, that, regardless of someone's gender and life circumstances, and the way these things may impact our perspectives on things like conception and parenthood, a wider experience of the generativity and procreativity of all human life, far beyond the merely biological, is something which humanity in all its diversity can identify with. I hope that this will make such maternal ideas more gentle and accessible topics of reflection.

I am struck by the reality that, within Mary's wide-ranging ministry as a member of the early community of faith, at the heart of it all was her experience of carrying a child within her for nine months, of going through the pain of labour, of nursing a child, teaching him to walk and talk, and so on. Not only does this tell us something important about the Incarnation, but I think it also adds additional layers to our understanding of Mary's gift to the Church in a maternal sense. To fulfill her vocation, Mary is called to take time, to make a space within herself, and to give of herself – her very body – to grow life for another Body. These things are part of what it takes to conceive and bear a child. And, in a metaphorical sense, these are also the vocations which all faithful followers of Jesus are often called upon to undertake themselves in many other ways as we seek to bring the presence of God into the world or to be the hands and feet of Jesus to serve those around us. Those who identify with the Mary in their faith and ministry will feel this especially deeply and model it uniquely for the rest.

Mary has a particular ministry of devotion to reflection, the discernment of spirits, and giving birth to the work of God in living forms. In a special way, the prophetic gifts of John require Mary's discernment to follow it. Running too fast is not always the best way; sometimes you need to slow down in a pregnant pause, ponder in your heart, and feel the piercing in your soul.

Are you, or have you met people who are close to "spiritual thin" places like Mary?
How could we "bear the Spirit" or attend to the voice and vision of the Lord?
What does it mean to you (or to St. Luke's) to serve as "Jesus' hands and feet"?