THE UNION OF GOD:
UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN CATHOLICISM

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INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental doctrines in Christianity is that of Trinity. Since it assumes the existence of three persons in one unity, the outsiders mistakenly understand it as a polytheist belief. Indeed, all Christians have a faith that these three persons refer to one God who reveals Himself as: (1) the Father; (2) the Son or Jesus or “Lord”; and (3) the Spirit.1 Therefore, there is a need for a deep explanation to provide a right understanding on the issue, particularly to those who are non-Christians.

This paper is to elaborate the relationship between these three persons of God as found in the doctrine of Trinity. Due to the limited space of this paper and the interest of the author, the discussion focused on the third person of God whom Christians call it as the Holy Spirit. For the reason of giving a deep explanation, I put weight on the discussion on the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit according to Catholicism.

HOLY SPIRIT AS DEFINED

The term ‘spirit’ in the Old Testament “comes from a Semitic root, rūḥ, which, in cognate language, signifies ‘to breathe’, ‘to blow’.”2 The main meaning of the term is “air in motion as wind or breath, and the general idea which is common to nearly all its usage is power in manifestation or energy.”3 This air or

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3 P. vam Imschoot, “Spirit or God,” in A. van den Born (ed.),
wind in the Old Testament is believed to come from God. That is why in it the Spirit is referred as “God’s Spirit” or “Yahweh’s Spirit.” Thus, in the Old Testament, God’s Spirit means “a divine power active in the word, or rather God Himself insofar as He is acting in man and in the universe, in history and in nature.” From this definition, it can be concluded that the Spirit Itself is God’s Spirit by which God acts in this world.

In the New Testament, the Spirit means the other Helper who comes from the Father and is different from Allah the Father or The Son, while the word “Holy” attributed to the “Spirit” is meant to indicate “all that is consecrated to God or attributed to Him is called Holy.”

The explanation above shows that the naming of the third person in Trinity, which is seen in the Old Testament, differs from that in the New Testament. However, according to the Catholic Church, both of the names in principle refer to the same person, as explained in the Encyclopedia of Theology: “the Old Testament does not speak of the Holy Spirit but of the “Spirit of God (Yahweh)”, whereas the New Testament uses the “Holy Spirit”. However, there is no difference in meaning.”

THE DOGMA OF THE HOLY SPIRIT: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The dogma that the Holy Spirit is the same God as the Father and the Son, was for the first time introduced during the Constantinople conciliation in 381 as a reaction to the belief that rejects the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Far before that, i.e. as found in the Old Testament and the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is believed to be God. Also, in the first century Christian scholars such as St. Clement of Rome and St. Ignatius of Antioch, said that the Holy Spirit is God.

Then, Tertullian from the Eastern Church said that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son. Gregory asserted Thaumaturgus the union of the three person of God. In 325, Nicea conciliation was held wherein the goodness of the Holy Spirit was not firmly asserted. In the conciliation, it was only mentioned that “and we believe in the Holy Spirit.”

As a consequence, there is a different opinion on the divine characteristic of the Holy Spirit, particularly in Egypt in 358 and several years later in Little Asia. The opinion, under the influence of the fired Bishop Constantinople, Macedonius and his followers, suggested that the Holy Spirit ‘was simply a creature, a servant of the Son, one of ministering spirits, differing only in degree from the angels.”

The opponents of the goodness of the Holy Spirit, are well known also as Semi-Arians, subordinationists (since they subordinated the position of the Holy Spirit and refused the claim that the Holy Spirit consists of the same substances as the Father and the Son), or especially as the Macedonians.

The opposition took place until the time when Constantinople conciliation, known as the second ecumenical conciliation, was held in 381. During the conciliation, the godness of the Holy Spirit was formally announced: “and (I believe) in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life; who proceeds from the Father (and the Son) who together with Father and the Son is

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adored and glorified: who spoke through the prophets.”

In 447, the local synod in Spain (Toledo) produced a fundamental formulation as the origin of the Holy Spirit. It says:

“We believe that...the Spirit is the Counsellor, who is not the Father Himself, nor the Son, but proceeds from the Father and the Son. Therefore, the Father is unbegotten, the Son is begotten, the Counsellor is not begotten, but proceeds from the Father and the Son.”

From this formulation, it is clear now that the Western Church (Roman Catholic Church) hold an opinion that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, while Eastern Church holds that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son.

THE HOLY SPIRIT ACCORDING TO CATHOLICISM

The Holy Spirit as the third person in Trinity definitely has a relationship with the other two persons. According to the Roman Catholic Church, this ‘relationship’ becomes one of the fundamental doctrines in the Trinity dogma as perceived by their theologians when they understand the sequence of the three persons in Trinity.

As to this sequence, Roman Catholic Church explained that the Father begat the Son, and with the Son, the Father aspirated the Holy Spirit. From this we know that the relationship between Jesus and the Father is that of filiations, whereas the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Father is not clearly defined yet. St. Augustine attempted to explain this relationship. Referring to Mat. 10: 20 and Gal. 4: 6, and Rom. 5: 5, he said that the Holy Spirit is the Love of the Father and the Son altogether. He suggested further that we only know the existence of three persons, i.e.

He who loves His Son, He who loves His source, and their Love (The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit).

Then, in an effort to understand and explain the relationship between the Love, the Father, and the Son, the Roman Catholic Church suggested a theological term ‘spiration’ which means ‘is taken actively as the act of love and passively as the love proceeding, or the Holy Spirit.’ If ‘active’ aspiration means the act of the Father loving the Son and the act of the Son loving the Father, ‘passive spiration’ means the Love or the Holy Spirit Itself. In brief, the Holy Spirit is the Love between the Father and the Son or in another word, it is the union of the Father and the Son.

The Holy Spirit, who for the Catholic Church is the third person of God, is a person into the word by Allah. The sending of this Holy Spirit means that It is sent or ordered by God and, therefore, it leads to an assumption that God can be ordered. Responding to this problem, Roman Catholic Church maintained that the Holy Spirit is the third person of God, He nevertheless is neither the Father of God nor the Son of God. The Father of God as the source of anything has begotten Jesus and that is why He is called the Son of God (first sequence), and together with the Son of God, He aspirates or proceeds the Holy Spirit (second sequence). Therefore, according to Roman Catholic Church when we are speaking of ‘the sending of the Holy Spirit’, we have to consider its position in this sequence because each person who proceeds can be sent. Thus, the Holy Spirit as the third person of God can be sent into this world without reducing His omnipotence. For Roman Catholic Church, though the Father and the Son send the Holy

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18See Gal. 4: 6: “Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba,[c] Father.” 7 So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.”
Spirit, He (i.e. Holy Spirit) is not lower than both of them.²⁰

Speaking about the time when the Holy Spirit is sent into the world will lead us to the idea of Pentecost which, for Christians, is celebration of the day when Jesus Christ sent the Holy Spirit to His followers.²¹ According to the Roman Catholic Church, the Holy Spirit has existed before human beings knew Him because He is God. However, the way He exists and acts in this world is different from that before and after the resurgence of Jesus. Before the resurgence of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is present in this world as God’s Spirit moving and acting continuously and mysteriously, acting upon the prophets, the apostles, and the chosen people. However, He never lives eternally within human beings.²² After the resurgence of Jesus, precisely after the event of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is given to all human beings (i.e. the followers of Jesus) without any exception,²³ and from that day the Holy Spirit is present and living eternally within man and churches in the entire world.²⁴

The presence of the Holy Spirit in the day of the Pentecost is a very important even for Catholics. For its importance, Jesus said to His followers that it’s better for Him to go as the Holy Spirit will come after His death.²⁵ His presence is a realization that Jesus is really the Messiah and the Christ, as the prophets in the Old Testament have predicted it. Besides, the presence of the Holy Spirit, which is sent by God into the heart of every Christian, indicates that they are the sons of God.²⁶ Therefore, the presence of the Holy Spirit signifies the coming of a new world wherein God lives among the mankind. It also means that time of salvation desired by all Christians has been clear though still in hope,²⁷ meaning that it is a final and eschatological one.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in this world also means that the promise to sanctify and renew Israel people as mentioned in the Old Testament has been fulfilled.²⁸ Also, it announces the rise of a Jesus’ community that is later called Church. In the other world, the presence of the Holy Spirit for Christians is at once salvific, Messianic, and ecclesial.

CONCLUSION

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that in Catholicism the Holy Spirit is the union of the Father and the Son in the form of Love who is imminent in the created universe. The Holy Spirit is also God and is equal to the first and second persons of God, and therefore His presence as ordered by God does not mean that He is lower than the other two persons. The presence of Holy Spirit in this world means salvation, liberation, and the existence of Christian community (i.e. the followers of Jesus) that is later known as Church.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


