

Mystery without limits: The Holy Spirit in Art

For almost all Christians before the twentieth century, art and worship were the central vehicles for communicating the Christian story. Religious paintings, stained glass windows and sculpture, decorated prayer books and missals, music and liturgy shaped the collective and individual imagination of the believer. They nurtured faith and educated what was predominantly an illiterate Christian Church.

In traditional fine art the Holy Spirit was depicted in a number of ways:

- a) nearly identical figures that represent the three persons of the Trinity
- b) a pure white dove emanating rays of light
- c) an angel or messenger
- d) a flame or fire, as water, a cloud or bright light
- e) as a seal, a hand or finger pointing or counting

Artists have rarely tried to portray the Holy Spirit as a mighty wind or breeze despite there being references to this imagery in both the Old and New Testaments. The challenge for artists was not to reduce the Holy Spirit to a variety of attributes only but to reveal its mystery and purpose by meaningful analogy and figurative expression. The divine has to connect with the human while simultaneously transcending it.

With this in mind, we'll explore the Holy Spirit in three different contexts; each conveying a unique interpretation from which to reflect and pray. These are through an angel inspiring a saint, the action of the Spirit during Holy Communion and an abstract interpretation of Pentecost painted onto a school desk.



The Vision of St Jerome. Domenichino.

Before 1603. Oil on canvas.

National Gallery, London

St Jerome (c.342 – 420 AD) was born in Dalmatia and moved to Rome as a teenager where he became a Christian and prepared a translation of the New Testament from Greek into Latin. He continued this work in Bethlehem, translating most of the Old Testament into Latin from Hebrew. Together, these translations became known as the Vulgate. St Jerome believed that his work was a direct result of the Holy Spirit and produced a vast collection of commentaries and other writings that had great influence on Christian theology. With support from his friend St Paula he established monasteries for men and women but lived alone in a cell in Bethlehem. He also spent four years as an ascetic, praying and fasting in the Syrian desert which is represented in this painting.

Domenico Zampieri, called Domenichino, (1581 - 1641) was an Italian artist and painter of classical landscape.

The Vision of St Jerome

Mediaeval and Renaissance images of St Jerome derive their iconography from the Golden Legend¹ and its sources. So, in the legends about St Jerome a number of events were appropriated into paintings of him. These include, as we see in Domenichino's rendition here, St Jerome in the wilderness, accompanied by a tame lion from which he pulled a thorn from its paw. In gratitude the lion faithfully guarded and assisted St Jerome. Incorrectly, it is recorded that St Jerome was 'ordained a cardinal-priest in Rome'. Therefore, he is usually dressed as a cardinal with a red cape and red flat-top cardinal's hat which we also see here. The hat is set aside as a token of humility since St Jerome left Rome and its temptations, and partially covers the skull to the right. The skull being a symbol of mortality and the opposite of vanity.

As a Scripture scholar, St Jerome is always surrounded by books. He receives divine inspiration from the Holy Spirit in the form of an angel at the top left of our painting. The angel is barely clothed in billowing coral fabric in order to show movement and flight. The angel points upwards to heaven with its right hand, and with its left hand, blesses and inspires St Jerome to bridge the human and the divine. The muscular, ageing St Jerome, transfixed by the younger angel, presses his fingers onto his translation – this is a spiritual dictation in process.

The two figures almost mirror each other with their corresponding robes and parallel gestures. They are little and large. The angel, airborne and higher, draws St Jerome's mind towards God while the disciplined saint keeps his hands firmly on the translation. He's almost holding down the words just to make sure he understands the Holy Spirit correctly.

A Watchful Lion

To add to this curious vision (visions being a blend of the natural and supernatural), the prostrate lion keeps very quiet and still, its head slightly cocked for sounds. Staring directly at the viewers - you and me, he ensures that no one disturbs this sacred encounter.

The crude wooden cross on the bottom right is diagonally opposite the angel. This indicates St Jerome's faith and Jesus' own journey from death to resurrection. It is the only element of the picture that is vertical: faith stands upright. Faith inspires St Jerome's sacrificial path indicated not just by his roughly-hewn stone seat and table, but the far distant horizon of Italy from whence he studied and from which a new light shines forth as he translates the Scriptures into Latin.

The vista is a typical Italian landscape probably late afternoon nearing dusk in which this cave will be dark. In the Principal Works of St Jerome, he states:

¹ A re-written collection of saints' lives by Jacobus de Voragine (1231-98, Archbishop of Genoa); writing before 1267, achieved a dominance in later Western hagiographical literature. About 900 manuscripts of his Golden Legend survive. From 1470-1530 it was the most often printed book in Europe.

“My eyes are growing dim with age and to some extent I share the suffering of the saintly Isaac: I am quite unable to go through the Hebrew books with such light as I have at night, for even in the full light of day they are hidden from my eyes owing to the smallness of the letters.”

This is not a one-off meeting with the Holy Spirit. Angels are believed to have visited Jerome regularly to help him with his commentaries, and presumably with his eyesight.



Jacques Iselin – The Elements of the Holy Communion.

1963. Oil on canvas.

Oxford Brookes University. From the Methodist Art Collection.

Jacques Iselin (1933 - 2003) was a Swiss painter.

Let us turn to the Gospels as we consider the institution of the Lord's Supper and its symbols. These vary slightly in Matthew, Mark and Luke. In John 6 there is only a detailed discourse by Jesus on the meaning of the miracle of the loaves and fishes and reference to a final supper in John 13 just before Jesus washes his disciples' feet.

Matthew 26:26-30 - The Institution of the Lord's Supper

²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."²⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you;²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.²⁹ I tell you, I will never

*again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."*³⁰ *When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

Sharing in the bread and wine / body and blood has been central to Christian life and worship since the earliest followers of The Way. Its symbols have been depicted in art since the 2nd century catacomb drawings and are:

Bread - the basic food of physical life, so the Eucharistic bread is the food of spiritual life. At the Last Supper, Jesus took a loaf of unleavened bread and said, "*Take and eat, this is my body*" (Mt 26:26; Mk 14:22; Lk 22:19). The bread is blessed by Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus fed the 5,000 with a basket of five loaves (Mt 14:17; Mk 6:38; Lk 9:13; Jn 6:9), and he fed the 4,000 with a basket of seven (Mt 15:34; Mk 8:6).

Fish - part of Jesus' feeding miracles (Mt 14:17; 15:34; Mk 6:38; 8:6,7; Lk 9:13; Jn 6:9), and part of Jesus' lakeside meal with his disciples after the Resurrection (Jn 21:9).

The symbol of the fish to denote Jesus has been used since the 2nd century as the letters of the Greek word for fish 'ichthys' translate as "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour".

Grapes and wine – used by Jesus at the Last Supper to represent his blood, the blood of the covenant he made with the world, and shed on our behalf, for the forgiveness of sins (Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20).

A cup or chalice - the vessel for the wine-become-blood at the Last Supper as Jesus handed it around to his disciples. (Mt 26:27; Mk 14:23; Lk 22:17, 20).

The Altar - where the Last Supper has traditionally been celebrated and is a symbol for the self-offering of Jesus.

The Spirit's Outpouring

When we consider this striking abstract painting by Iselin, at first glance it seems to be a rectangular blaze of fire. Predominantly reds, oranges, mandarins and yellows fight for our attention. Their angles are deceptive, so while we initially see the colours and forms as geometric shapes, the longer we look the more we notice the curves and arcs. This is a painting that dances before our eyes.

Then appear white tones and blue hues to temper the heat. A hint of green and dash of pink add to this crucible of colours. Is this a stained glass window radiant with the new dawn light, a flash of priestly vestments or a summer's mosaic? To keep us grounded, Iselin adds grey and black outlines, curves and cylinders to contain the Spirit's outpouring. Depths recede and images emerge, while counterpoint and contrapuntal motion compete at the edge. In this surrender to the centre, foreground and background meet at the point of no resistance. This is the Lord's Supper in the modern gaze.

Only the Holy Spirit can bring all these elements together and transform them for our salvation. Only the Spirit can turn Christ's sacrifice into gift so that the individual details, if you look closer, or take a step back, become the perfect offering. The white chalice stands at the heart of this painting but can you spot the loaf of bread, and a slippery fish trying to escape? Discipleship is never easy... Now follow the window or is it a doorway, is that a person kneeling beyond?

By abstracting the conventional elements of the Last Supper in such a dynamic way, Iselin invites us to reflect more deeply about what constitutes Communion. In revising the

traditional representations of wine and bread on such a large scale we are liberated to go further in our faith and embrace the material and the spiritual in new dimensions.

This miracle of love brings together the Spirit's blessing on all our meals that we offer in God's name.



Dennis Hawkins – Pentecost 1

1962. Relief. Oil on wood panel.

Oxford Brookes University. From the Methodist Art Collection.

Dennis Hawkins (1925-2001) was a British abstract painter and printmaker.

Pentecost is the festival when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Greek word *pentekoste* means "fiftieth" and was borrowed from Greek-speaking Jews who used the phrase to refer to the Jewish 'Festival of Weeks' (*Shavuot* in Hebrew).² Pentecost is regarded as the birthday of the Christian Church, and the start of the Church's mission to the world since according to the Acts of the Apostles, the apostles suddenly found themselves speaking in other languages, enabled by the Holy Spirit:

"And when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. All of a sudden, a sound came from heaven, like a strong wind, filling the house where the people had gathered. Something like tongues of fire rested on their heads. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them the ability to speak" (Acts 2: 1-13).

² This comes from Leviticus 23:16, which instructs people to count seven weeks or "fifty days" from the end of Passover to the beginning of the next holiday in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scripture.

The Power of Pentecost

Pentecost was an event, but the actual experience was transcendental, making an abstract depiction of Pentecost very compelling to an artist. Traditionally, Pentecost has been portrayed as a dove and/or with tongues of fire above the disciples' heads. Therefore, this interpretation enables us to appreciate the more elusive qualities of the Holy Spirit by minimising any tangible elements.

This painting has confident colour and texture. Pentecost was a confident and decisive moment in the disciples' lives. Filled with the Spirit they were commissioned to go out and spread the good news. In this Spirit-led confidence came the birth of the Church.

Yet is this image actually a painting? Hawkins used some old wood from a disused school desk to create most of the surface. By using non-conventional and non-representational imagery in the elevation of horizontal and vertical bands with carefully chosen colours, the glowing white circle is allowed to shine. Framed and yet not contained, this idea of the Spirit is daring and bold.

For Hawkins, the circle represents not just the Holy Spirit itself but the energy of its light - emerging out of the wood. It is active as well as indicative. He has painted this circle without neat edges - the Spirit cannot be defined or detained by us. It goes where it wills. By intensifying its centre and blurring its parameters we gauge its power but not its direction.

Unlike our previous painting this artist uses mostly muted colours to convey the Spirit's arrival. This is a Pentecost for individual awakening – an unexpected realisation or moment of enlightenment. The circle's calming presence is heightened by the soft orangey, tan, and white vertical lines. Then comes a thick black horizontal band protectively guarding the circle from above creating visual stability as well as structure to the form. Might this allude to the stability of the Church and to Christian belief?

A Spirit to be shared

Jesus could have eaten his last supper on his own and the Spirit could have descended upon the disciples when they were alone. While there are times when the Holy Spirit touches us as individuals, the fact that Jesus and the Holy Spirit were given to a gathering of believers is not incidental. It underpins the centrality of the Church in God's work in the world. The Church's mission is not an addition to that of Christ and the Holy Spirit, but is its visible expression: in its whole being and in all its members, the Church is sent to proclaim, bear witness, make present, and spread the mystery of the Holy Trinity.