

# The transforming work of the Holy Spirit in the personal life (II)

## 3. Be alert: the Holy Spirit within and the “spirit of the age” around

At this stage we need to answer a frequent question: what is the difference between the *personal growth* pursued by human sciences (psychology, philosophy, sociology) and the *spiritual change* operated by the Holy Spirit? Is there any difference? This question has profound implications because it points out the dangers we face in the process of transformation. Our change is heavenly operated but it does not occur in a heavenly realm, it occurs in a world that pressures us with its own idols. Such idols may become a hurdle in our process of transformation.

Many people today long for change in their lives. In fact a certain kind of *personal growth* has become one of these idols of our time. A popular motto is: develop your full potential and reach *your best life now*. These are the secular messages we hear every day.

This is why we need to pay attention briefly to another sort of spirit, “the spirit of the age”<sup>1</sup>. Paul called it «the pattern of this world» (Rom. 12:2 NIV) and, not by chance, it is also known as the “*zeitgeist*” (the ghost of the time). As the *Holy Spirit* works *within us*, we must be alert to the *secular spirit around us*. It behaves like a seducing force that entangles and deceives us with dreams of self-fulfilment and happiness.

The spirit around can hinder the inner transformation performed by the Holy Spirit. Therefore we need to be aware of the pressure coming from the secular worldviews. Paul and Peter often warn us in their epistles of the need to be alert. Discerning the *zeitgeist* is not a luxury reserved for a few intellectual Christians, it is a requisite for all believers in order «to keep oneself from being polluted by the world» (Jas. 1:27 NIV).

The divine change is radically different from the one offered by the secular worldviews. They differ *in their starting point* and *in their goal*. Remarkably the sort of change *preached* by the world is a mirror of its values and idols. Its starting point is “*my rights*” and it revolves around the *ego*; it is a *selfish* approach. We could summarize it in three statements, each of them reflecting an idol:

- My right to be myself: the idol of *individualism*
- My right to be happy: the idol of *hedonism*
- My right to self-fulfilment: the idol of *personal success*

The transformation of the Holy Spirit is just the opposite. The starting point is not *my rights*, but *my needs*, it revolves *around Christ*, not around *myself* (Gal. 2:20); its aim is not to *feel happier* every day, but to *be holier*. It can be summarized also in three

<sup>1</sup> For a further study of this issue see Ravi Zacharias and Vince Vitale, *Jesus among secular Gods*, Faith Words Books, New York, 2017

sentences which reverse the previous ones, a sort of antidote to the seduction of the world's values:

- My need to become like Christ
- My need to be holy
- My need to fulfil God's will for my life

I will know that the Holy Spirit is doing its work properly within me when my longing and my prayer is not anymore “to pursue my own dreams”, “to master my own life”, “to make a name for myself”, “to be independent and self-sufficient”, but to imitate the Servant King and bring glory to God. Then, by so doing, I find true happiness and deep self-fulfilment, I am endowed with a deep well-being that no human worldview can provide. In a word, I come to experience that *the Holy Spirit within* is far more desirable than *the spirit around*.

#### **4. The limits and frustrations of transformation: different tools with one purpose**

At this point you may say, “this is all very encouraging... but **change is not always possible**, at least total change”. So our last question is **How far?** Are there any limits to this transformation?

We need a **balance between idealism and realism**. This is very important for us to grasp. Why? The life of faith is constant tension between two states: we are not the same as we were before, but neither are we yet what God intends us to be or what we ourselves long to become. **We are no longer... but we are not yet.** The work of the Holy Spirit in us is not free from this *tension of faith* that affects almost all areas of Christian life. This is a feature of the Kingdom of God here on Earth, present but not complete, it is Heavenly but not Heaven.

So we need to be careful with unrealistic expectations or super-spiritual approaches to faith. There is indeed a lot of triumph in our transformation, but there is no place for triumphalism. We are indeed *new creatures*, but we are still *«jars of clay»* (2 Cor. 4:7 NIV).

Nevertheless, **when change is not possible**, the Transformer continues His work anyway. There are no barriers for His power. **The Holy Spirit does not resign!** He performs its transformation in other ways. He uses different tools with the same purpose (Christ being formed in us). He does it in three ways:

- Controlling
- Moulding
- Providing grace to accept

Let us see two examples: our temperament and our past life.

#### ***Our temperament: controlling and polishing our genetic framework***

Temperament is the most genetic part of our character, being mainly determined by

inherited factors. We are born with a given temperament. While temperament cannot be changed, **it can indeed be moulded into the likeness of Christ and controlled by the Holy Spirit**. We cannot expect a drastic change in the genetic makeup of our person, but we can expect **the “polishing” work of the Holy Spirit**. Our realistic goal is to put the weaknesses of our temperament under His control so that it does not lead us to sin<sup>2</sup>.

Every temperament has its good side and its dark side. Notice that Jesus did not change the temperaments of the disciples after he had called them, not even after Pentecost. Peter, for example, continued to be an extrovert, spontaneous, impulsive person (even explosive sometimes!); the Holy Spirit did not alter his basic temper but he did polish and mould it. *Peter did not cut any more ears off after Pentecost!* While the new birth does not change temperament, grace helps us to live with it.

The Lord can use us not so much *in spite of* our weaknesses as *through* them.

### ***Our past: grace to accept our biographical baggage***

We cannot go backwards in life, we cannot change our past. This reality, however, should not cripple us nor be a source of discouragement. Some people invest a lot of their spiritual and psychological energy in trying to shake off the past. It is better to stop struggling against your past and accept that God uses you, *together with* your past, however painful or difficult it was.

**The Holy Spirit gives us new eyes to see our past in a new way.** We view our past not as an enemy any more, but as an ally. An ally is someone with whom you work, regardless of whether you like them or not, in order to achieve certain purposes. This is part of the newness of life. The divine Transformer relieves the burden of our painful past because He:

- Lightens its weight
- Enlightens its darkness
- Removes its sting

This is demonstrated to us in the lives of the patriarchs and of many of the heroes of faith. Joseph and the apostle Paul are two striking examples of **wrong past with a right life trajectory, a painful past but a fruitful life**.

Do you remember Joseph? «You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good» (Gen. 50:20 NIV), he said to his brothers. All their harassment on Joseph was the raw material God used to make a life story with purpose and fruit. Some of our past experiences may seem “garbage material” to us, but not to God. God is able to *recycle* everything in our life; there is no waste material in His eyes.

This is the secret of acceptance, **the conviction that God uses us not only in spite of our past but through it**. The Holy Spirit will give us the grace that is needed for this sort of acceptance, because ultimately true acceptance is not only an emotional process but a spiritual experience.

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed study of the influence of temperament and personality on our Christian life, see *Praying with the Grain*, Pablo Martínez, Monarch Books, 2012, specially chapters 1-3

Remember one thing: **God is the great specialist in recycling our garbage experiences** and turn them **into fruitful events**. Indeed this is part of the amazing work of the Holy Spirit in us.

**Conclusion:** I would like to close with an illustration that reminds us of the practical pastoral implications of our topic<sup>3</sup>. Imagine that while driving a car you come to a sign: “*Works on the road. Drive carefully. Be patient*”. This is exactly our situation here and now: while on this earth we are in the “works” part of the road, the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. The end of the “works” sign will be on the glorious day of Christ. Then no more works will be needed because we will be fully like Him.

In the meantime *drive carefully*: «Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace» (Eph. 4:2-3 NIV).

And when the path gets rough, don't forget that you are not walking alone. **The great Transformer is also the great Helper and Intercessor**. We are strongly encouraged because «the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans... the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God» (Rom. 8:26-27 NIV).

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<sup>3</sup> The original idea of this illustration was inspired to me by Billy Graham in his autobiography “*Just as I am*”, Harper One, Zondervan