The Holy Spirit as Paraclete

The Gift of John—s Gospel

by Raymond E. Brown, S.S.

When Christians think of the Holy Spirit, echoes of catechism answers often come to mind: the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, one in divine substance with the Father and Son. But that Trinitarian doctrine was not defined until the fourth century, and in the first days of Christianity the picture was far less precise, especially in regard to the personhood of the Spirit.

As for the witness of the New Testament, part of the difficulty is that the concept of "spirit" has many facets: the human spirit, angelic spirits, evil spirits and so on. In addition, the Greek word for "spirit," pneuma, which can also mean "wind, breath," is neuter, so that in passages dealing with the Holy Spirit, the pronouns are literally "it, its." Finally the roles attributed to the Spirit are varied: It is like the mighty wind that moves the apostles to preach at Pentecost; it gives life; it cries out in our hearts; it is the source of charisms or special powers.


In John alone the Spirit has the title Parakletos, the gender of which is masculine, requiring personal pronouns. (Elsewhere in the New Testament the term Paraclete is featured only in 1 John 2:1, and there it refers to Jesus.) The Paraclete Spirit is described in five passages, all in Jesus—long discourse at the Last Supper, often accompanied by the designation "Spirit of Truth," which also is peculiar to John.

As we shall see, the Greek parakletos has different connotations and therefore is difficult to translate. St. Jerome, faced with divergent older Latin renderings, decided to settle for transliterating as paracletus in his Vulgate Latin, and "Paraclete" is still the best choice for an English translation.

Aspects of the Paraclete

Literally parakletos means "one called alongside," particularly one called to help in a legal situation: a defense attorney. A forensic or courtroom atmosphere can be seen in words like "Advocate" and "Counsellor," also used to translate parakletos. Actually there is a legal tone to some of what Jesus in John says about the Paraclete; yet the picture is more exactly that of a prosecuting attorney. Jesus is going to die on a cross—in the eyes of the world judged guilty and convicted. Yet after his death, the Paraclete will come and reverse the sentence by convicting the world and proving Jesus—innocence (16:8-11). He will show that Jesus did not sin; rather the world sinned by not believing in him. He is the one who is just or righteous, as shown by the fact that he is not in the grave but with the Father. The judgment by his enemies in putting him to death did not defeat him; ironically it defeated his great adversary, the Satanic Prince of this world.
In a famous passage from the Old Testament Book of Job (19:25), Job knows that he will go to death judged guilty by all because of the sufferings visited on him; yet he knows that his vindicator lives, namely, the angel who will stand on his grave and show to all that he was innocent. That vindicating spirit has the role of a paraclete, and Jesus now looks for the Holy Spirit as his Paraclete.

Yet there is another role for "one called alongside." Sometimes those who are suffering or lonely need to call in someone to console and comfort them. This aspect of the Paraclete is caught by the translation "Comforter" or "Consoled" (as in Holy Comforter, and the Consolator optime of the Latin hymn to the Spirit). In the context of the Last Supper Jesus—disciples are sorrowful because he is departing; the promise that someone just like Jesus is coming to take his place is consoling.

Nevertheless, the Jesus of the Last Supper who prepares his disciples for the coming of the Spirit is also realistic. The world will hate the disciples who have received the Spirit of Truth (15:18-19) that the world cannot accept because it neither sees nor recognizes that Spirit (14:17). The disciples will be expelled from the synagogues and even put to death (16:2-3). Yet because Jesus is with them, they can have peace. "In the world you will have trouble; but take courage, I have conquered the world" (16:33).

The Paraclete as Another Jesus

A major emphasis in the Johannine presentation of the Paraclete is the likeness of the Spirit to Jesus that enables the Spirit to substitute for him. (That is why the Paraclete Spirit cannot come until Jesus departs.) Both come forth from the Father; both are given or sent by the Father; both are rejected by the world.

The Johannine Jesus claims to have nothing on his own; whatever he does or says is what he has heard or seen with the Father (5:19; 8:28, 38; 12:49). The Paraclete will speak nothing on his own; he will take what belongs to Jesus and declare it; he will speak only what he hears (John 16:13-15).

When Jesus is on earth and the Father in heaven, whoever sees Jesus has seen the Father (14:9). When Jesus has gone to the Father, whoever listens to the Paraclete will be listening to Jesus. In short what Jesus is to the Father, the Paraclete is to Jesus. Thus in many ways the Paraclete fulfills Jesus—promise to return.

In one extraordinary passage (16:7) Jesus says that it is better for his disciples that he go away, for otherwise the Paraclete will not come to them. In what possible sense can the presence of the Paraclete be better than the presence of Jesus? Perhaps the solution lies in a major difference between the two presences. In Jesus, the Word became flesh; the Paraclete does not become flesh. In the human life of Jesus, visibly, at a definite time and a definite place, God—s presence was uniquely in the world; and then corporally Jesus left this world and went to the Father. The Paraclete—s presence is not visible, not confined to any one time or place. Rather the Paraclete dwells in everyone who loves Jesus and keeps the commandments, and so his presence is not limited by time (14:15-17). The presence of God as the Paraclete means that there are no second-class citizens: The Paraclete is just as present in the modern disciples of Jesus as he was in the first generation.

That fact is particularly important when we consider one of the principal activities of the Paraclete. The Paraclete is "the Spirit of Truth" who supplies guidance along the way of all truth (16:13). The Johannine Jesus had many things to say that his disciples could never understand in his lifetime (16:12); but then the Paraclete comes and takes those things and declares them (16:15).

In other words, the Paraclete solves problems by supplying new insights into a revelation brought by Jesus. When God gave the Son, divine revelation was granted in all its completeness: Jesus was the very Word of God. Yet on this earth that Word spoke under the limitations of a particular culture and set of issues. How do Christians of other ages get God—s guidance for dealing with entirely different issues? The Paraclete who is present to every time and culture brings no new revelation; rather he takes the revelation of the Word made flesh and declares it anew, facing the things to come.

The Role of the Paraclete in Christian Life

The Gospel of John took final written form about the end of the first century A.D. This was a time when several churches were developing an external teaching magisterium or authority to guide those under pastoral care. For
instance, a speech in Acts 20:28-31 stresses the role of the presbyters of Ephesus in protecting the faithful from strange perversions of truth.

The Pauline pastoral epistles also envision presbyter-bishops who hold on to the true doctrine they have been taught (Titus 1:9) as a criterion for judging what is valid in any new approaches.

John, however, would place emphasis on the indwelling Paraclete, the guide to all truth, given to every believer, so that 1 John 2:27 can say in reference to the Spirit, "The anointing that you received abides in you; and so you have no need for anyone to teach you." There has been a tendency in Christian history to allow one or the other of these approaches to dominate; but as the sole approach each one has drawbacks.

Teachers whose only strength is to hold on to the tradition may tend to regard all new ideas as dangerous. The Spirit is a vibrant guide and would seem better adapted to face the things to come. Yet when two believers who claim the guidance of the indwelling Paraclete disagree, often neither can acknowledge the possibility of being wrong, and so they tend to split irreconcilably.

In the liturgy before the feast of Pentecost the church reads Acts alongside John, and thus implicitly reminds itself that guidance for Christians involves an interplay between external instruction by well-grounded teachers and internal movements of the Paraclete. Both factors are essential to enable the church to combine valid tradition and new insights.

Another issue affecting Christian life at the end of the first century was the gap caused by the death of the eyewitness generation who constituted the living chain between the churches and Jesus of Nazareth. For the Johannine community the full impact of this issue would have come with the death of the Beloved Disciple, the eyewitness par excellence (19:35; 21:24), a death that occurred seemingly just before the Gospel was put in final form. How would the Johannine community survive without its principal living link to Jesus?

The concept of the Paraclete/Spirit offered an answer to this problem. If the Beloved Disciple had borne witness to Jesus, it was not solely because of his recollections. After all, the disciples had seen Jesus and not understood (14:9). Only the post-resurrectional gift of the Spirit taught the disciples the full meaning of what they had seen (2:22; 12:16); and their witness was the witness of the Paraclete speaking through them (15:26-27).

In particular, the profound reinterpretation of the ministry and words of Jesus effected under the guidance of the Beloved Disciple and now found in the Fourth Gospel was the work of the Paraclete. Indeed, the Beloved Disciple was in a figurative sense an "incarnation" of the Paraclete. And the Paraclete would not cease activity when these eyewitnesses had gone, for he dwells within all Christians who love Jesus and keep his commandments (14:17). The Paraclete is the link of future generations to Jesus so that in an essential way later Christians are as close to Jesus as were the earliest Christians.

A third issue is the anguish caused by the delay of Jesus—second coming. In the period after A.D. 70 the expectation of Jesus—return began to pale. It had been associated with God—s wrathful judgment upon Jerusalem (Mark 13), but now Jerusalem had been destroyed by Roman armies and Jesus had not yet returned. In particular, Jesus—return had been expected within the lifetime of those who had been his companions (Mark 13:30; Matthew 10:23). Some in the Johannine community had expected his return before the death of the Beloved Disciple (John 21:23); yet this death was now imminent or even a reality, and still Jesus had not come back. That the delay caused skepticism is seen in 2 Peter 3:3-8 where the answer is given that no matter how long the interval, the coming will occur soon, for with the Lord a thousand years is as one day.

The Johannine answer is more profound. The evangelist does not lose faith in the second coming but emphasizes that many of the features associated with it are already realities of Christian life (judgment, divine sonship, eternal life). And in a very real way Jesus has come back during the lifetime of his companions, for he has come in and through the Paraclete. The Johannine Christians need not live with their eyes constantly straining toward the heavens from which the Son of Man is to come; for, as the Paraclete, Jesus is present within all believers: their Advocate, their Consoler, their Guide to all truth.

Raymond E. Brown, S.S., is Auburn Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies, Union Theological Seminary, New York. He has twice been appointed a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, by Pope Paul VI in 1972 and by Pope John Paul II in 1996. His A Retreat With John the Evangelist will be published by St. Anthony Messenger Press in Fall 1998