



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Articles:

- 📖 The Spirit's "Supreme and Fiery Force"  
(*Pentecost*, pp. 52-66)

### Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Tracing the Spirit through Scripture  
(*Pentecost*, pp. 83-88)
- 📖 Who is the Holy Spirit?  
(*Pentecost*, pp. 89-93)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# The Spirit's "Supreme and Fiery Force"

Always a pioneer, Hildegard of Bingen is one of the first writers to include illustrations with her text, not as "mere decoration" but as integral to her theology. The importance to her thought of the Holy Spirit—the "supreme and fiery force"—is most evident in these brilliant miniature illuminations.

### Prayer

Father, through your Holy Spirit  
you create us and sustain us.  
Open our hearts and minds to your presence now  
as your Spirit moves among us.  
Pour your divine love into our hearts  
that we may live in harmony with one another.  
We pray in the name of Jesus,  
and through your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Scripture Reading: John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

### Reflection

For the twelfth-century Benedictine abbess and sage, Hildegard of Bingen, "doctrine was an ongoing divine 'encounter,'" notes Carmen Acevedo Butcher. "Beginning in early childhood, her visions animated doctrine throughout her life, and her orthodox faith—fed daily through *lectio divina* Bible meditation and liturgical prayer—nurtured her mystical consciousness."

Butcher traces Hildegard's reflection on the Holy Spirit through four of her illuminations. "Hildegard knew the art of illumination and probably supervised the design and creation of these in her own scriptorium at the new abbey of Rupertsberg," she explains. "What the miniatures lack in formal polish is more than compensated by their bright colors and numinous designs."

- ▶ *THE VISIONARY* depicts the sources of Hildegard's theology: as the Holy Spirit's five tongues of Pentecostal inspiration penetrate the roof, Hildegard is framed by pillars representing the Old and New Testaments, and assisted by her friend Volmar. Nearby text describes her 'writer's block': "As I started this task, I looked to the living Light, asking, 'But what should I write down?' and that Brightness commanded, 'Be simple. Be pure. Write down what you see and hear!'"
- ▶ *ON THE ORIGIN OF LIFE* presents the Holy Spirit as a winged female figure, Caritas (or, Love). In Hildegard's *Book of Divine Works*, Caritas boldly asserts "I am the supreme and fiery force who kindled every living spark" and "I am the fiery life of the essence of God" and "I am Life, whole and undivided—not hewn from any stone, nor budded from branches, nor rooted in virile strength; but all that lives has its root in Me." Heinrich Schipperges explains this Trinitarian image: "The figure of Love, surmounted by fatherly Goodness, carries the Lamb, symbolizing tenderness. Love has exerted itself and produced the creation, which it now protects with its encircling wings while trampling evil underfoot." In a companion miniature below, a flame of divine inspiration descends to Hildegard's upturned face.
- ▶ *THE BLUE CHRIST* is a vision of the Trinity. Hildegard writes, "You see a bright light, which without any flaw of illusion, deficiency or



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deception designates the Father; and in this light the figure of a man the color of sapphire, which without any flaw of obstinacy, envy or iniquity designates the Son, Who was begotten of the Father in Divinity before time began, and then within time was incarnate in the world in Humanity; which is all blazing with a gentle glowing fire, which fire without any flaw of aridity, mortality or darkness designates the Holy Spirit, by Whom the Only-Begotten of God was conceived in the flesh and born of the Virgin within time and poured the true light into the World."

- ▶ *THE EGG OF THE UNIVERSE* "visualizes the universe as a cosmic egg where God, humanity, and nature enjoy the interrelatedness of interdependency," Butcher writes. The human home is in the center, surrounded by stars and planets, refreshed by winds, and enfolded within a ring of shining flame that "signifies God's Spirit holding the cosmos together with all-embracing divine love, bathing the world in the celestial fire that incubates new life."

In these amazing images drawn from Hildegard's visions, we can glimpse the truth that is sung in her music: "Spirit of fire, Paraclete, our Comforter, You're the *Live* in *alive*, the *Be* in every creature's *being*, the *Breathe* in every *breath* on earth. ..."

### Study Questions

1. In these images, how does Hildegard depict the Spirit inspiring her (and, by extension, other theologians) to write?
2. What familiar biblical features of the Spirit does Hildegard weave into these images? What elements surprise you?
3. What do you learn from these miniature illuminations about the Holy Spirit's role in the Trinity?
4. Hildegard's "basic premise is Augustinian: God is merciful and creation is good (if fallen)," Carmen Acevedo Butcher writes. "She improves, however, on Augustine in her persistent articulation of a glass-half-full, God-is-love theology." How is this outlook evinced in these illuminations?

### Departing Hymn: "Holy Spirit, Ever Dwelling" (vv. 1, and 3)

Holy Spirit, ever dwelling  
in the holiest realms of light;  
Holy Spirit, ever brooding  
o'er a world of gloom and night;  
Holy Spirit, ever raising  
those of earth to thrones on high;  
living, life-imparting Spirit,  
you we praise and magnify.

Holy Spirit, ever working  
through the Church's ministry;  
quick'ning, strength'ning, and absolving,  
setting captive sinners free;  
Holy Spirit, ever binding  
age to age and soul to soul  
in communion never ending,  
you we worship and extol.

*Timothy Rees (1874-1939)*

*Suggested Tunes:* IN BABILONE or NETTLETON

# The Spirit's "Supreme and Fiery Force"

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To study Hildegard of Bingen's miniature illuminations for insight into the Holy Spirit's role in our discipleship.
2. To consider how images of the Holy Spirit in Scripture interact in Hildegard's visions.
3. To discuss the Holy Spirit's role within the Trinity.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Pentecost (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Holy Spirit, Ever Dwelling" locate one of the familiar tunes IN BABILONE or NETTLETON in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Poem

In Hildegard of Bingen's book of theological visions, *Scivias* (short for Latin *Scito vias Domini*, "Know the Ways of the Lord"), God says, "[I]f you love Me, I'll hug you to Me. I'll warm you with Holy-Spirit fire." This embracing fire informs Hildegard's songs, like this beautiful one addressed to the Holy Spirit, which is suffused with biblical imagery:

You soar, sustain, and stir,  
climb, dive, and sing  
Your way through this world,  
giving life to every beating  
heart.

You never end.

You keep circling, crossing over us  
on three wings—  
one speeds through heaven,  
one holds the earth together with a kiss as light as dew,  
and one whispers over, under, and through our lives.

We praise You, Wisdom!

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer in the study guide aloud.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

On the occasion of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit's descent on the disciples is described with the remarkable images of a mighty wind and tongues of fire, it is appropriate to study how those and other biblical images of

the Spirit are employed in theological reflection. Carmen Acevedo Butcher guides us to the visions, poetry, and miniature illuminations of the Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179). Hildegard was declared a “Doctor of the Universal Church” by Pope Benedict XVI in 2012, in culmination of a long process that evaluated her theological work as helpful to all Christians. The four miniatures discussed here are in the public domain. They are published in grayscale in the *Pentecost* issue of *Christian Reflection*, but are available in color on the Internet. Download and print the color images for members to study.

Members may want to compare Hildegard’s insights on the Holy Spirit with other theological reflection. Point them to the books reviewed in “Tracing the Spirit through Scripture” and “Who is the Holy Spirit?” for sources in the Bible and church tradition.

### **Study Questions**

1. In the companion miniature below *On the Origin of Life*, three flames of inspiration pour onto Hildegard, who is poised at her writing desk to record her visions on wax tablets. She is flanked by members of her religious community, a nun standing behind her and her friend Volmar seated at his desk in the next ‘room.’ Similarly, in *The Visionary* five tongues of fire descend to Hildegard, who is seated in the convent with a writing tablet on her lap; Volmer looks in from an adjoining space; the pillars represent the Old and New Testaments. Both images highlight the special nature of Hildegard’s inspiration, but they are interpreted in a community, and others assist her in recording and developing her thoughts; *The Visionary* emphasizes the role that Scripture plays in interpreting them.
2. Form three small groups to study *On the Origin of Life*, *The Blue Christ*, and *The Egg of the Universe*. Members may find biblical images of wind or breath (blowing at creation, giving life to creatures, roaring down from heaven at Pentecost), fire (pouring in orange-red flames or streams from above onto her head, not originating in her head), and bird-like elements (wings, nests, etc.). The integration of the Spirit into the Trinity derives from Scripture interpreted by the Church. Various elements of these images might surprise members: for instance, Christ is sky-blue (the color of God’s love in Hildegard’s visions), and is not obviously male or female; the Spirit is personified as a fiery red woman (in Latin, the common words for Love, Wisdom, and Spirit would be feminine gender).
3. The Holy Spirit may be personified (*On the Origin of Life*) or not (*The Blue Christ* and *The Egg of the Universe*) in the images, but in each case the Spirit links the Father and the Son. As Love and creating Wisdom, the Spirit has feminine, nurturing qualities for Hildegard. The Spirit extends from the Trinity to guide human beings and to envelop all creatures.

Invite members to study the miniatures as you read aloud the entire song that begins “Spirit of fire, Paraclete, our Comforter” (*Pentecost*, 60-62). How do the words of this song lead them to notice particular features of the images?

4. While God’s judgment on evil is on clear display in *On the Origin of Life*—the figure of the Spirit, or Caritas/ Love, stands triumphantly on the glowering Serpent/Satan—these images highlight the love that unifies the persons of the Trinity and binds them to the creation. The symmetrical compositions, the recurring patterns, and the calm stances of the figures of the Trinity all suggest that God’s order and nurturing care undergird the universe.

### **Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.