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**The Spirit Moving Over The Great Deep:
The World's Thirsts, Our Response**
Stephen Bevans, SVD

*Spirit, Spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness, calling and free
Spirit, Spirit of restlessness, stir [us] from placidness, wind, wind on the sea*

You moved on the waters, you called to the deep,
Then you coaxed up the mountains from the valleys of sleep
And over the aeons you called to each thing
Wake up from your slumber and rise on your wings

You swept through the desert, you stung with the sand,
And you goaded your people with a law and a land
And when they were blinded with their idols and lies
Then you spoke through your prophets to open their eyes

*Spirit, Spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness, calling and free
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You sang in a stable, you cried on a hill;
Then you whispered in silence when the whole world was still,
And down in the city, you called once again,
When you blew through your people on the rush of the wind

You call from tomorrow; you break ancient schemes;
From the bondage of sorrow the captives dream dreams;
Our women see visions, our men clear their eyes;
With bold new decisions your people arise

*Spirit, Spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness, calling and free
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My reflection this morning is about the Holy Spirit, about that Spirit of gentleness and restlessness who moves over the waters of the Great Deep, stirring up the thirsts of the world, and calling us to join her, as Christians and religious, to slake those thirsts. A first part will reflect on the Spirit who stirs up those thirsts. A second part will outline several of those thirsts. A third part will reflect on how the Spirit calls Christians to join her mission of slaking those thirsts, and a fourth and final part will suggest that we as

¹ James K. Manley, "Spirit of Gentleness," found at http://southwood.typepad.com/southwoodlutheran/2007/05/spirit_of_gentl.html.

religious women and men can play a particular part in that thirst-slaking mission of the Spirit.

The Thirst-Giving Spirit

We live, as Karl Rahner has insisted, in a world of grace.² From the very first moment of creation—what scientists now call the Big Bang—grace has been present in the world through the inspiring, cajoling, persuading power of the Spirit, moving over the waters of the Great Deep, coaxing “up the mountains from the valleys of sleep,” calling each thing to “wake from your slumber and rise on your wings.” The Spirit has been actively present in the whole of history, from the formation of the gases and elements and molecules, to the emergence of life in all its forms, to the gropings of human beings to express their intimations of her presence in various religions. She has been actively present, however, as Elizabeth Johnson puts it, not as a monarch, but as a lover. “... the Spirit, more mobile than any motion, blows throughout the world with compassionate love that grants nature its own creativity and humans their own freedom, all the while companionship through the terror of history toward a new future.”³

The Spirit was fully present in Jesus of Nazareth, whom Kathryn Tanner calls “the key to how the Spirit works.”⁴ From the moment of his baptism in the Jordan, she poured herself on him like anointing oil, to bring good news to the poor, liberty to captives, healing to the blind, and mercy to sinners (see Lk 4:18-19). Mark Oakley speaks of Jesus as “God’s body language.”⁵ It might be just as appropriate to speak of him as the *Spirit’s* body language as well. The Spirit, the “*fons vivus*,” the “living fountain” from the Great Deep that the *Veni, Creator Spiritus* alludes to, was poured forth on Jesus’ disciples “on the rush of the wind,” and has been with us ever since.

That same active, cajoling, persuading, healing presence at the first nanosecond of creation is with us now. As Elizabeth Johnson so beautifully expresses it, “wherever we encounter the world and ourselves as held by, open to, gifted by, mourning the absence of, or yearning for something ineffably more than immediately appears, whether that ‘more’ be mediated by beauty and joy or in contrast to powers that crush, there the experience of the Spirit transpires.”⁶ It is in these experiences that we are drawn to the

² See the essays in Leo J. O’Donovan, ed., *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner’s Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1995 [originally published in 1980]).

³ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 159.

⁴ Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 158, quoting Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 275.

⁵ Mark Oakley, *The Collage of God*, Second Edition (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2012), 25, 27.

⁶ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 124-25.

"fons vivus" that is the Spirit, the *"fons vivus"* that awakens our thirst. Mary Oliver articulates this experience wonderfully in her poem entitled "Thirst":

Another morning and I
wake with thirst
for the goodness I do
not have. I walk
out to the pond and all
the way God has
given us such beautiful
lessons. Oh Lord,
I was never a quick
scholar but sulked and hunched over my
books past the
hour and bell; grant
me, in your
mercy, a little more
time. Love for the
earth and love for you
are having such a
long conversation in my
heart. Who
knows what will finally
happen or
where I will be sent, yet
already I have
given a great many
Things away, expect
ing to be told to pack
nothing, except the
prayers which, with this
thirst, I am
slowly learning.⁷

Thirst is a grace. It is evidence of that "yearning for something more" that is the sign of the presence of God's Spirit. Karl Rahner calls this the "supernatural existential"—that longing for Mystery that is "naturally" ours by grace.⁸ Mark Oakley describes the Spirit "as both 'Comforter' and 'Disturber.' It is the same God," he writes, "who instills peace and energy who also instills from time to time a sense of loss and the consequent renewed desire to seek [God's] face, even in the deepest shadows. Graceful irritants are placed in the soul in order to nurture its growth."⁹ We live in a world of grace, a world that is graced with deep thirsts that only the Spirit, the *"fons vivus,"* only the Christ, the

⁷ Mary Oliver, "Thirst," in *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 69-70.

⁸ See, for example, Karl Rahner, "On the Relationship between Nature and Grace," *Theological Investigations* 1 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961), 297-317.

⁹ Oakley, *The Collage of God*, 11.

“living water” (see Jn 7:39) who gives the Spirit, can help us recognize and help us quench.

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The Thirsts of the World

What are these thirsts that God’s Holy Spirit gives to the world through grace? There are many, and we can only reflect on a few in this section. Here I would like to propose only four thirsts that arise out of the Great Deep over which the Spirit moves, and I can only reflect on them briefly and suggestively. They are the thirst for the water of integrity, the thirst for the wine of hope, the thirst for the nectar of justice, and the thirst for the elixir of beauty.

The Water of Integrity

All day I face the barren waste
Without the taste of water—cool water.
Old Dan and I with throats burned dry
And throats that cry for water—
Cool, clear water.

These are the opening words of a famous cowboy song, “Cool Water,” made popular in the 1940s and ‘50s by the legendary Sons of the Pioneers and Marty Robins. There’s nothing quite like cool, clear water. Janet reminisced yesterday about the mountain springs above Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and how that cool—maybe even cold—clear water slaked her thirst. I remember hiking in the mountains with friends in Austria and holding out a glass jar—it had to be glass, not plastic!— under a waterfall and drinking the most wonderful water I had ever tasted.

Cool, clear, plain old water. In a world filled with the lack of integrity, authenticity, honesty—and filled with what Jesuit leader Adolfo Nicolas names “global superficiality”¹⁰—this is the drink we crave to slake our thirsts. How much better our world would be if we had trustworthy politicians, honest women and men engaged in business, church leaders of real holiness and authenticity, communications media that uphold the values of truth. Instead we are often confronted with regimes like those in Syria or South Sudan, heads of greedy multinational corporations, prelates who prefer watered silk trains and palatial apartments to simple, apostolic living, or pundits who twist and hide the truth on talk shows and blogs. In these days we are appalled at the corruption in the New York State prison system—and probably those in many other states besides, or by remarks of presidential candidates regarding Latino immigration in our country. In May I was in Australia, and the church there is reeling—like our own US church and the Irish church from years of sexual abuse by clergy and religious. Pope

¹⁰ Adolfo Nicolas, “Depth, Creativity, and Learned Ministry: Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today,”

<http://www.scu.edu/scm/winter2010/shapingthefuture.cfm>.

Paul VI's words, echoed by Pope Francis as well, ring so true: these days people "thirst for authenticity"; they do not listen to teachers, but to witnesses, and if they listen to teachers at all it is because they are witnesses.¹¹

This is why leaders and figures of transparency are so refreshing and important to people today: women and men like Nobel Peace Prize winners Malala Yousafzai, Aung San Suu Kyi, and Nelson Mandela; holy people like Oscar Romero, Helder Camara, and Dorothy Day; contemporary prophets like Sandra Schneiders and Joan Chittister; or church leaders like Joe Tobin, Luis Antonio Tagle, or Pope Francis. These men and women have been raised up by the Spirit to help us recognize our deep thirsts. These women and men offer long drinks of the cool, clear water of authenticity, the authenticity for which the world thirsts.

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The Wine of Hope

Those TV images from Cairo's square,
a friend who waits for mortal word,
curbside-piled belongings of eviction,
spiritual biographies so vulnerable,
news of trafficking for sex and sweat,
unanswered notes a puzzlement,
wayside bombs and robot drones,
and—no symbol now—the waning polar ice.

Holding hands, we risk our way across
to cheer and weep, protest and mourn
as, wary of each revelation of the heart,
we balance on the thin tensility of hope.¹²

Cecily Jones's poem chronicles only a few of the horrors and terrors of our time, but they are enough to tempt us to real despair. If we add what has been going on in the church, especially its leaders' treatment of US women religious in the last decade, that despair

¹¹ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN), http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html, 68, 41; see Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#_ftn118, 150.

¹² Cecily Jones, SL, "Thin Ice on Mary's Lake, February, 2011," in *Mostly for Promise. Poems by Cecily Jones, SL* (Nerinx, KY: Hardin Creek Press, 2013), 9. See the poem as published in ed. Margaret Cain McCarthy and Mary Ann Zollmann, *Power of Sisterhood: Women Religious Tell the Story of the Apostolic Visitation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2014), 166.

becomes even darker. As Barbara Blesse has written, the turmoil and confusion of our time is like a great tsunami, often so systemic and all-encompassing that we are overwhelmed by its power.¹³ Despair, writes Ruth Gendler in *The Book of Qualities*,

is overworked and overwhelmed. She has a heart condition. In her dreams the war is everywhere. She is not lying or exaggerating. Still, it is difficult to be around her. There is no arguing with her. She is persuasive, eloquent, and undeniably well-informed. If you attempt to change her mind, you will come away agreeing with her. She has stopped listening to music.

She has also probably stopped drinking wine. But in the midst of despair, on that thin ice that Cecily Jones writes of in her poem, the Spirit is blowing over the great deep and offering us the wine of hope to quench our thirst. This is the wine that calms our nerves and gives us the anger and courage, as St. Augustine would say,¹⁴ to stand together “on the thin tensility of hope.” It is the wine that helps us recognize the truth of the Mayan text: “they can cut all the flowers but they cannot hold back spring.” María Elena Martínez writes that these words “teach us to sing in the darkness. When all the sadness that is part of life feels so overpowering, we can take in simple joys, we can claim tenderness, and bask in the warmth of the sun.”¹⁵

The wine of hope that the Spirit offers us is, of course, dangerous. If we drink too much of it we might become tipsy with that dangerous counterfeit of hope: optimism. Hope demands discipline, and as I have said, anger and courage. It has a “thin tensility.” As Regina Bechtle writes,

You will need a sturdy heart,
a torch to fire the gloom
as the way plunges deeper

Thirst for the wine of hope. This is what the Spirit offers us in this difficult, dark time that tempts us to despair.

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The Nectar of Justice

O God, you call for justice, for goodness, never greed!

¹³ Barbara Blesse, “Imagining Possibilities and Unearthing Options,” *The Occasional Papers. Leadership Conference of Women Religious* 44, 2 (Summer, 2015): 30.

¹⁴ The phrase attributed to Augustine is that hope has two beautiful daughters, anger and courage. See Addie Lorraine Walker, “Theological Reflection on the Visitation: ‘Were Not Our Hearts Burning within Us?’” in ed. McCarthy and Zollman, *The Power of Sisterhood*, 162.

¹⁵ María Elena Martínez, “Living from the Great Deep Is Our Vocation,” *The Occasional Papers*: 15.

You seek a world of fairness, where all have what they need—
Where all have food and water, and homes in which to thrive
Where all have hope and laughter, and joy to be alive!¹⁶

In 1976, famed preacher and theologian Walter Burghardt wrote a small book entitled *Seven Hungers of the Human Family* in connection with the International Eucharistic Congress that was held that year in Philadelphia in that year.¹⁷ One of the hungers on which he reflected was the hunger for freedom and justice, and this is certainly one of the *thirsts* of the world as well: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice” (Mt 5:6).

Burghardt begins his essay on justice by asking whether there really is “oppression, slavery, injustice in the world,” and answers the question, saying that “the answer stares you in the face, from the pages of history and from the front page of each day’s newspaper.”¹⁸ He wrote those lines forty years ago, but they are as true today as they were then.

Last October I heard a talk by former Anglican Archbishop of New Zealand, David Moxon, who pointed out that there are currently twenty-nine million slaves—victims of human trafficking—in the world. This past year here in the United States we have realized that racism still lurks in our nation, as the killings in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Charleston have revealed. We all know the sad history of women’s rights in our world. I mentioned a few minutes ago Mustafa Yousafzai, the girl who had been shot for her advocacy of schools for girls in Pakistan. And that struggle for equality goes on today as well in our church, to which all of us in this room can sadly attest. Millions of women, men, and children have been displaced in their own countries or forced to migrate to other lands. We read about or see on TV thousands dying in our Southwestern deserts, in the Mediterranean Sea, or in the Indian Ocean west and north of Australia. One of our temptations to despair, as Cecily Jones points out in her poem, is the immense crisis of the earth, “our common home,” as Pope Francis puts it so powerfully in “*Laudato Si’*.”¹⁹

The Holy Spirit, however, is active in this unjust world, calling forth a thirst within women and men that can only be met by the nectar of justice. Nectar is the drink of the gods in Greek mythology. The thirst for the nectar of justice is the thirst to work with God’s Spirit in bringing about a world of justice and freedom, of equality and participation, of mutuality and liberation. It is a thirst that recognizes that “there is another world, but it is in this one,”²⁰ or as Greg Boyle expresses it powerfully, God’s

¹⁶ Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, “Oh God, You Call for Justice,”
<https://sojo.net/articles/new-hymn-justice>.

¹⁷ Walter J. Burghardt, *Seven Hungers of the Human Family* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1976).

¹⁸ Burghardt, *Seven Hungers*, 17.

¹⁹ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’* (LS),
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, especially 17-61.

²⁰ Paul Eluard, quoted in Mark Oakley, *The Collage of God*, 85.

“ways are not our ways, but they sure could be.”²¹ This is the thirst spurs on those who mourn those who have died in crossing the Arizona desert; those who protest yearly at Fort Benning, Georgia; those who attend the annual conferences of Call to Action. This is the thirst of our prophets like Martin Luther King and Dorothy Day. They all thirst for the nectar of justice.

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The Elixir of Beauty

The world is charged with the grandeur of God
It will shine out, like shining from shook foil
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this nature is never spent
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things
And though the black lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.²²

Gerard Manley Hopkins's famous poem speaks of beauty at the heart of God's creation—shining like light from shook foil, oozing forth like the ooze of oil crushed. But human beings have not respected this beauty. All is seared, bleared, smeared, and smudged by humanity's smell—or, in Pope Francis's powerful words, “the earth, our home, is beginning to look like an immense pile of filth.”²³ And yet, despite this, Hopkins says, that beauty is never extinguished, nature is never spent—“there lives the dearest freshness deep down things.” This is “because the Holy Ghost over the bent / world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.” The Spirit is over the world, in the world, offering thirsty souls the delicate elixir of beauty.

As Mary Lou Kownacki writes, “even the bleakest life needs the sustaining hope of beauty.” The thirst for beauty is one of the great thirsts of the world because “beauty uncovers the lie of violence, despair, and lack of hope and helps us imagine a world

²¹ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, (New York: Free Press, 2010), 155.

²² Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God's Grandeur,”
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173660>.

²³ Pope Francis, LS, 21.

beyond our present reality.”²⁴ We see this thirst being quenched by the elixir of beauty in projects of public art in ghettos and slums throughout the world, small oases of beauty in deserts of ugliness.²⁵ I remember breaking down in tears—on two separate occasions—when I saw the report on “60 Minutes” of how Gustavo Dudamel quenched the thirst for beauty of poor children in Venezuela as conductor of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra in that country. Mary Lou Kownacki writes about how the Benedictine community of Erie sponsored a Poetry Park and an Art House in an area of the city “of concentrated poverty, drugs, violence, and abandoned buildings,” and insists that “beauty in the lives of the poor is as important as bread on their tables.”²⁶ To allude to a famous quote of Dostoyevsky, it is drinking deeply from the delicate elixir of beauty that will save the world.²⁷

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The Church and the Thirsts of the World

“No people are devoid of the inspiration of the Spirit,” writes Elizabeth Johnson.²⁸ All peoples of all times have been gifted with the thirst of the water of integrity, the wine of hope, the nectar of justice, and the elixir of beauty, and with many more thirsts about which time and space has not allowed me to reflect here: thirsts for love and relationship, for truth, for forgiveness and mercy, for deep understanding, for lasting peace. The Spirit, as *Gaudium et Spes* insists, in ways known only to the triune God finds ways of leading every woman and man—and indeed every creature into the Paschal Mystery.²⁹

However, through the amazing grace of God, some women and men, disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, have been anointed by the Spirit in a concrete and sacramental way to share and continue Jesus’ mission—begun by the Spirit from the first moment of time—

²⁴ Mary Lou Kownacki, “Overcoming Blight with Beauty: How One Community Is Helping Transform a City through the Arts,” *The Occasional Papers*: 10.

²⁵ See, for example, Maureen H. O’Connell, *If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2012); Sally Williams, “Ghetto Fabulous: The Murals of Haas and Hahn,” <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/9899749/Ghetto-fabulous-the-murals-of-Haas-and-Hahn.html>.

²⁶ Kownacki, “Overcoming Blight with Beauty”: 10, 11.

²⁷ The quotation is from Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*. It is quoted by Mary Lou Kownacki, “Overcoming Blight with Beauty”: 11.

²⁸ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 139.

²⁹ Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, 22.

of slaking the thirsts of the world. They have been gathered and sent as God's Church—God's holy People, the prolongation of Christ's body, the Temple of the Spirit—as the sacrament of the thirst-giving and thirst-quenching mission of the Spirit. This church does not *have* a mission; God's mission of thirst-giving and thirst-quenching has a church. In order to live this mission worthily, the church, like the God in whose mission it participates, practices what Roger Schroeder and I have termed "Prophetic Dialogue,"³⁰ an openness in contemplation to discover the thirsts of the world, and a determination in humility to work for the slaking of those thirsts.

Years ago Korean Cardinal Stephen Kim wrote that "only the Church which serves the cause of [the poor, the suffering, the oppressed] is the true Church of Christ."³¹ It can equally be said that the only true church of Christ is the church that strives for integrity, that offers hope, and that practices and cherishes beauty. And so the church needs constantly to pray:

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Religious Women and Men within the Church, and the Thirsts of the World

Within this communion-in-mission that is the church are women and men who live in and minister out of communities of consecrated and apostolic life. One of the main ministries of such women and men—and, historically, I believe, particularly women—is "to make interventions in the life of the church so that it will be reminded of its mission to live out the following of Christ."³² As such, this ministry is prophetic, a ministry "in obedience to the Holy Spirit," "invariably in tension with the prevailing institutional reality,"³³ and in this way stirring up the thirsts and offering quenching water, wine, nectar, and elixir to the entire People of God at the same time. "Ministerial religious life,"³⁴ as Sandra Schneiders names it, is lived out in deep dialogue with all Christians, so as to offer a word and actions of authentic prophetic truth, in this way naming and quenching the world's thirsts for integrity, hope, justice, and beauty. And so people of consecrated life must pray:

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³⁰ See, for example, Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

³¹ Quoted in Burghardt, *Seven Hungers*, 19-20.

³² Marcia Allen, "Living It Twice: Sources of Support and Inspiration," in ed. McCarthy and Zollman, *Power of Sisterhood*, 130. This quotation refers to the work of Johannes Baptist Metz and subsequently references that of Sandra Schneiders.

³³ Allen, "Living It Twice," 131.

³⁴ Patricia Walter, "Situating the Apostolic Visitation in Historical and Theological Context," in ed. McCarthy and Zollman, *Power of Sisterhood*, 41. Walter is quoting Sandra M. Schneiders, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Religious Women Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 7.

Conclusion

Naturally I could say much more, but let me briefly conclude by quoting and slightly adapting a stanza of a wonderful hymn written by Benedictine sister Delores Dufner, a hymn that I first heard at the funeral of a dear friend of mine, Kathleen Sullivan Stewart:

Pulsing Spirit, rippling river, source of mercy's tender might,
Gentle power, humble glory, subtle, ever dancing light:
Healing wisdom in us flowing, Now reveal our human worth.
Play beneath our muddied waters;
Come, renew and quench our thirsts.³⁵

³⁵ Adapted from Delores Dufner, "Pulsing Spirit." The original text is found at <http://www.scu.edu/scm/winter2010/shapingthefuture.cfm>.