

## RESPONSE TO JOHN R. SACHS

I would like to begin by thanking Randy Sachs for opening this conference with a paper that both treasures elements of our recent past—Vatican II and Karl Rahner—and also is directed toward a more self-consciously Spirit-oriented future. He is hopeful that the Holy Spirit will open both the discipline of theology and Church life to other persons, other religions, other worlds of meaning. The examples he draws from Rahner—universal transcendental revelation, categorical mediation in the history of religions, the universality of the Spirit and the normativity of Christ, interreligious dialogue, ecumenism, charisms in the Church—reveal many of Rahner's insights into the identity of the Spirit. The appeal to Rahner is instructive, too, as it helps us realize that one need not be on the standard list of "pneumatologists"—Yves Congar, Heribert Mühlen, Hans Urs von Balthasar, et al.—to have a theology of the Spirit at work, or indeed, to be "doing" pneumatology. There is a vast difference between *talking about the Spirit* and *doing theology in the Spirit*. To talk a lot about the Spirit does not necessarily constitute a theology of the Holy Spirit, nor a Spirit-animated theology.

I would like also to express my own personal joy that the Holy Spirit is the focus of this conference. Certainly the theology of the Holy Spirit is the most sublime and difficult of all theological topics, for good reason. The divine Spirit is ineffable as God is ineffable. Indeed, what has confounded Christians throughout the ages is the defining characteristic of the Spirit: the fact that the Holy Spirit *cannot* be defined, or examined directly, because the Spirit is the "self-effacing" one. To try to speak directly of the Spirit amounts to attempting what theologians have always known to be virtually impossible: to speak of the very essence of God, or, better, to speak of the very heart of God which is love, Love being the proper name of the Spirit, according to Thomas Aquinas and many others. Strictly speaking, therefore, the Spirit is not an "object" for theological reflection, any more than God can come under our direct scrutiny. Rather, the challenge is to discover what it means *to do theology in the Spirit*. There we have some hope of actually doing theology, and actually conveying something true of the Spirit.

Sachs treated many topics that rightly deserve examination. I will reflect on two issues central to his paper: discerning the Spirit's activity in the Church, and the tension between the normativity of Christ and the universal availability of the Spirit. I will end with a few remarks on the context in which we pray together, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*.

## DISCERNING THE SPIRIT IN THE CHURCH

Probably all would agree that the Church is always in need of reform, and at the same time, that the Spirit is guiding the Church to its proper end. Yet there is a tendency to proceed as if one knows already what a church animated by the Spirit should be like. Consciously or not, each of us is continually discerning which people, which documents, which church practices and traditions are, or are not, "of God," which ones are, or are not, inspired by the Spirit. Yet it is a great leap to go from that basic perspective to the assumption that one's own political or ecclesiastical program happily coincides with the Holy Spirit's own plan for the Church. Two examples, both of which Sachs mentions, illustrate this point.

First, *authority in the Church*. Authority in the Church belongs *only* to the Holy Spirit, and derivatively to those through whom the Spirit authentically speaks. I agree with Sachs when he writes, "Because the Spirit is present and active in all believers, one should presume, and indeed history shows, that there will always be a great variety of gifts and traditions."<sup>1</sup> Since the Spirit is in fact "present and active in all believers," then all members are capable of discerning the Spirit. But I do not see how his next sentence follows: "the pastors and teachers of the official Church have the responsibility to discern the Spirit's gifts among the People of God and the authority to implement these gifts for service in the Church's ministry."<sup>2</sup> First, there is no "official" Church, only one Church. The Church may have officials in it, but this does not guarantee to them a special ability to discern the Spirit's gifts. Every baptized Christian potentially speaks with the authority of the Holy Spirit. There is no reason why all baptized Christians, filled as they are with the Spirit, cannot also discern the Spirit's gifts. Indeed, the Christian community as a whole has ultimate responsibility to say who will act on its behalf.

It remains unclear, from the perspective of a theology of the Spirit, why or how only a few in the Church can speak officially, with the authority of the Spirit. It is circular to say that the Holy Spirit designated from the very beginning certain structures, offices, and official charisms; that only those who occupy these offices can receive official charisms; that only a tiny portion of believers can occupy these offices; that those who hold the offices have been told by the Holy Spirit that only they can occupy these offices; that their certainty comes from the fact that they occupy those offices; because this is what the Holy Spirit has decreed. Any special claim that just a few believers have been divinely ordained to be the exclusive bearers of the authority of the Spirit, or are the only ones who can discern among true charisms, must be established not just by

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<sup>1</sup>John R. Sachs, "Do Not Stifle the Spirit: Karl Rahner, The Legacy of Vatican II, and Its Urgency for Theology Today," *CTSA Proceedings* 51 (1996): 31.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

assertion and not just ecclesiology, but pneumatologically: Who *is* the Spirit, who *is* God, if this arrangement is divinely preordained, essential, immutable?

Second, *ordination (or, the nonordination) of women*. Alongside all the proposals and counterproposals that have been made on this issue, and prescinding for the moment from the supposedly Spirit-guided principle that the ordination of women is a topic that cannot be discussed, I see this question as at root a question of pneumatology, complicated, of course, by issues in ecclesiology, sacramental theology, and theological anthropology. How does the Spirit act in history? If we take *Inter insigniores* (1976) and subsequent papal documents on this topic at their word, then within Roman Catholicism the Holy Spirit apparently is unable to conform baptized women to Christ in such a way that women, too, represent Christ sacramentally. The Holy Spirit apparently is unable to act freely in a new pastoral situation because those who claim the Spirit for themselves have already reached the conclusion that the Holy Spirit cannot possibly intend a new ministerial structure. And the Holy Spirit, apparently, does not want to hear another single word about it. But has any of this really been established to be the will of the Holy Spirit? Conformity to the will of the Spirit has never meant replicating the same Church order in every era. What is the will of God's Spirit *today* regarding ordained ministry in the Roman Catholic Church?

Many believe that a concrete sign of fidelity to the Holy Spirit is total continuity with a long tradition of not ordaining women. The complementarity of women and men, and the unsuitability of women for public leadership roles, are seen as part of God's divinely decreed plan, presumably being carried forward by the Spirit. Others believe that ordaining women is the obvious will of the Spirit; the abundance of charisms bestowed upon women shows that the Spirit is doing something new in salvation history. Where does this leave us? These different conceptions of how the Spirit moves in history are instructive; intractable differences among anthropologies, ecclesiologies, sacramental theologies, amount, in the end, to profoundly different theologies of the Spirit. One emphasizes the "newness" and adaptability of the Spirit, the other, the continuity and fidelity of the Spirit to tradition. *Both are true of the Spirit*. The difficulty is to determine which view should prevail in a particular church.

As Sachs points out, the Roman Catholic Church "should not act unilaterally on the grounds that it lacks nothing of the good present in the other churches and is preserved from any error that may be present in them." The unity of the churches "does not demand uniformity in custom, opinion, rite, or dogma."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, and here Sachs and I agree completely, "...if it is the work of the Spirit in other Christian churches that has brought about the ordination of women or a growing change in the positive way that gays and lesbians are...welcomed...

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<sup>3</sup>Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 299.

then this should be a crucial datum for reflection on this possibility within the Roman Catholic communion."<sup>4</sup>

The issues of authority and ministry touch on the Church's discernment of a Spirit who is utterly free. Often we hear that "the Spirit blows where the Spirit wills." As I have argued elsewhere, if the freedom of the Spirit means total self-determination, autonomy, and self-sufficiency, then we cannot rely on the Spirit to lead and unify the Church, since the Spirit's freedom could mean that the Spirit is capricious, erratic, and unreliable. However, "the absolute freedom of the Spirit of God means that the Spirit is altogether consistent, dependable, and trustworthy as God, that is, as love. The Spirit moves freely, but moves always as God. The Spirit cannot act in any but a Godly way, since the Spirit is the Spirit of God. The signs and fruits of the Spirit are consistent with this: peace, charity, hope, generosity, and so forth."<sup>5</sup> The ultimate test of whether the Spirit is at work in a community and whether various teachings are founded in the Spirit, is the degree to which the Church manifests the gifts of the Spirit. To the extent that a teaching impedes the flourishing and variety of gifts of the Spirit, that teaching is rightly suspect.

#### THE NORMATIVITY OF CHRIST AND THE UNIVERSAL AVAILABILITY OF THE SPIRIT

Sachs raises a question that naturally arises once we acknowledge that the Spirit is active both in the Church and outside, in all churches and religions and beyond. For Christians, the Spirit is always the Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ, yet the power, presence and activity of the Spirit are present in all religions. From the perspective of Christian systematic theology, one could ask whether what seems to be a choice between the normativity of Christ and the universal availability of the Spirit is a false choice. I suspect much of the problem has to do with the Christian habit of isolating Christ and the Spirit from one another, and from trinitarian doctrine in general. Christian efforts toward interreligious dialogue and comparative theology cannot dispense with Christ and hold on to the Spirit alone as a point of contact, any more than certain types of mysticism may be used to avoid the particularities of a religious tradition. Rahner himself showed that there are inclusive ways to interpret the absoluteness of Christ. Sachs astutely comments that "non-Christian religions . . . are not only genuine ways of salvation for their adherents but also necessary, revelatory elements in the ongoing history of Christianity's own understanding of the reality and meaning of God's self-communication through Jesus in the Spirit."<sup>6</sup>

In general, and *à propos* more than just comparative theology, we must remember that the Spirit never stands alone. In the enthusiasm to remedy our

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<sup>4</sup>Sachs, "Do Not Stifle the Spirit," 28-29.

<sup>5</sup>LaCugna, *God for Us*, 299.

<sup>6</sup>Sachs, "Do Not Stifle the Spirit," 26.

"forgetfulness" of the Spirit, we might find ourselves "singling out" the Spirit in an artificial way, as if the Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ exists by itself. With the exception of some early and recent Spirit Christologies, Christology has developed largely apart from trinitarian theology, and Christ more often than not has been considered independent of the Spirit. In addition, the long-standing practice of viewing divine persons from an "immanent" trinitarian perspective, largely disjoined from the presence and activity of the divine persons in the economy of salvation, is precisely what perpetuated the neglect of the Spirit within Western Christianity in the first place. Unless the relationship between *oikonomia* and *theologia* is properly understood, we are likely to "overhypothesize" the Spirit, as it were, making the Spirit into a discrete individual rather than an intrinsically relational person.

The Spirit never exists as an individual but only as a person in communion. This is the point of the trinitarian doctrine of God. The Spirit is always the bridge person: the One who *is* the loving union of Begetter and Begotten; the One who admits us into the life of the incomprehensible, ineffable God; who overcomes boundaries, differences, and divisions among all persons, divine or human; who unites all believers without vitiating differences or excluding diversity; who brings us into communion with God, with other persons and with all the goods and creatures of the earth. We do not worship the Spirit alone, but always "together with Father and Son." To speak otherwise of the Spirit does not highlight what is distinctive about the person and mission of the Spirit, but in the end depersonalizes the Spirit by making the Spirit stand out as a solitary figure, rather than as a unique divine person who would not even exist apart from relationship to other persons.

Finally, just as the Spirit must be thought of as a person defined in relationship to Christ, the reverse is also true. A Christ-based theology of the Spirit and a Spirit-based theology of Christ would, I feel confident, advance our understanding of both Christ and the Spirit, and at the same time obviate having to choose between them. Christian doctrine has been marked by the constant tendency to subordinate the Spirit to Christ, as if the Spirit were the third of a series. Today we might be tempted toward the opposite: to subordinate Christ to the Spirit by making the Spirit stand apart, or making the Spirit the only point of contact with other religions.

#### THE CONTEXT OF THEOLOGY OF THE SPIRIT: DOXOLOGY

I close with just a few words about the context in which our reflections may continue, namely, doxology, the praise of the God of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Doxology is more than established prayer forms; doxology is a whole form of life, a way of being in right relationship with God and with others. Doxology is not one among several options within theology; it is the precondition of theological speech, particularly any speech about God. The Spirit is the one who

inspires and activates our praise of God; the Spirit enables us to praise God, and to speak truthfully about God. The Spirit conforms theological statements to the ever-greater mystery of God.

Christian theology is possible only "in the Spirit." As Sachs says, "Theology is never simply about the Spirit, it is something done in the Spirit and by the Spirit."<sup>7</sup> How bold but how true! Yet who among us would dare to claim that our very inadequate theologies were "done by the Spirit"?! Why are we so reckless as to attempt to do theology at all? "The confidence to be a theologian comes not from the theologian but from the Spirit because the Spirit is both the source and criterion for speaking of God."<sup>8</sup> At its best, a theology of the Spirit functions indirectly or apophatically, similar to an icon, an image to be contemplated, a way to be brought into the Holy Presence, not a photographic likeness, not the mystery itself.

To return to the overall theme of Sachs' paper, doing theology *in the Spirit* is the only protection from "extinguishing the Spirit." We are all grateful to Sachs for arguing this so closely. May we together pray ceaselessly, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*.

CATHERINE MOWRY LaCUGNA  
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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>8</sup>LaCugna, *God for Us*, 365.