

"Jesus makes us truly free"

In his 5 June general audience, Pope Francis continued catechetical cycle on how the Holy Spirit guides the People of God through salvation history, speaking about freedom.

06/05/2024

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In today's catechesis, I would like to reflect with you on the name by

which the Holy Spirit is called in the Bible.

The first thing we know of a person is the name. It is by his name that we address him, that we distinguish him, and remember him. The third Person of the Trinity also has a name: He is called the Holy Spirit. But “Spirit” is the Latinised version. The name of the Spirit, the one by which the first recipients of revelation knew Him, by which the prophets, the psalmists, Mary, Jesus, and the Apostles invoked Him, is *Ruach*, which means breath, wind, a puff of air.

In the Bible, the name is so important that it is almost identified with the person himself. To sanctify the name of God is to sanctify and honour God Himself. It is never a merely conventional designation: it always says something about the person, his origin, or his mission. This is also the case with the name *Ruach*. It

contains the first fundamental revelation about the Person and function of the Holy Spirit.

It was by observing the wind and its manifestations that the biblical writers were led by God to discover a “wind” of a different nature. It is not by accident that at Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles accompanied by the ‘roar of a rushing wind’ (cf. *Acts 2:2*). It was as if the Holy Spirit wanted to put his signature on what was happening.

What, then, does His name, *Ruach*, tell us about the Holy Spirit? The image of the wind serves first of all to express the *power* of the Holy Spirit. “Spirit and power” or “power of the Spirit” is a recurring combination throughout the Bible. For the wind is an overwhelming force, an indomitable force, capable even of moving oceans.

Again, however, to discover the full meaning of the realities of the Bible, one must not stop at the Old Testament, but come to Jesus.

Alongside power, Jesus will highlight another characteristic of the wind: its *freedom*. To Nicodemus, who visits Him at night, Jesus say solemnly: “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (*Jn 3:8*).

The wind is the only thing that absolutely cannot be bridled, cannot be “bottled up” or put in a box. We seek to “bottle up” the wind or put it in a box: it’s not possible. It is free. To pretend to enclose the Holy Spirit in concepts, definitions, theses or treatises, as modern rationalism has sometimes attempted to do, is to lose it, nullify it, or reduce it to the purely human spirit, to a simple spirit. There is, however, a similar

temptation in the ecclesiastical field, and it is that of wanting to enclose the Holy Spirit in canons, institutions, definitions. The Spirit creates and animates institutions, but He himself cannot be “institutionalised,” “objectified.” The wind blows “where it wills,” so the Spirit distributes its gifts “as it wills” (*1 Cor 12:11*).

St Paul will make this the fundamental law of Christian action. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (*2 Cor 3:17*), he says. A free person, a free Christian, is the one who has the Spirit of the Lord. This is a very special freedom, quite different from what is commonly understood. It is not freedom to do what one wants, but the freedom to freely do what God wants! Not freedom to do good or evil, but freedom to do good and do it freely, that is, by attraction, not compulsion.

In other words, the freedom of children, not slaves.

Saint Paul is well aware of the abuse or misunderstanding that can be made of this freedom. To the Galatians he writes, “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as a pretext for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (*Gal 5:13*). This is a freedom that expresses itself in what appears to be its opposite, it is expressed in service, and in service is true freedom.

We know well when this freedom becomes a “pretext for the flesh.” Paul gives an ever relevant list: “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these” (*Gal 5:19-21*). But so too is the freedom that allows the rich to

exploit the poor, an ugly freedom that allows the strong to exploit the weak, and everyone to exploit the environment with impunity. And this is an ugly freedom, it is not the freedom of the Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, where do we draw this freedom of the Spirit, so contrary to the freedom of selfishness? The answer is in the words Jesus addressed one day to His listeners: “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (*John 8:36*). The freedom that Jesus gives us. Let us ask Jesus to make us, through His Holy Spirit, truly free men and women. Free to serve, in love and joy. Thank you.
