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# The Swiss Observer

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## THE MIRACLE OF WHITSUN

*And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. (Joel 2, 28)*

by  
PASTOR ULI STEFAN

One of the first theological discussions that I ever had to conduct took place in the colourful setting of the Italian Riviera. We had managed to assemble for our morning debate despite the tempting morning sun. It was a lively, even passionate, discussion. The words "Faith", "God" and "Holy Spirit" were uttered in the heat of the debate—until someone raised the troubling question: "What exactly is the Holy Spirit? What is this 'thing' we are talking about all the time?" The discussion circle was silent. No one could think of a satisfactory answer. But the sun was waiting for us and we decided that the time had come to refresh ourselves on the golden beaches.

Now our theological discussion was probably typical of all theological discussions on the Holy Spirit! Because the Holy Spirit cannot, and indeed may not, be circumscribed by words.

"And it came to pass . . ." The Scriptures say of the Holy Spirit only that it "happens"—and that it will happen. It comes to us, transforms us and sets us in motion. It "happened" on that day at Whitsun, when men separated by language, origin, nationality and culture assembled to seek the will of God and discover the treasure which they shared in common. The Jewish theologian Nicodemus received the same answer the night he came to see Jesus in secret to engage in a high theological discussion: Your theoretical knowledge will not bring you an inch nearer to God. It is only when the Holy Spirit inspires you into a new life that something essential has happened to you.

The Holy Spirit belongs to those things which are destroyed when one only talks about them. It is like the shimmering wings of a butterfly. Try to capture them with the fingers and they are destroyed because they are so delicate. But the Holy Spirit also belongs to those things which are too vast

to be grasped by the hands. A snow storm has *us* in its hands rather than the opposite. And this is perhaps all we can say of the Holy Spirit: It is something most vulnerable and at the same time most powerful! This is why the Bible is so remarkably imprecise over the Holy Spirit. It is a central force that drives men like a storm. It is a soft wind which one can hear, but not know whence it comes and whither it is going. It is a fire which burns and gives light, which warms and destroys. It is something as calm and pure as a dove which flies in from above. Wind, Fire, a Dove—these are the images with which the Bible speaks of the Spirit, which is disclosed to us therefore as a secret. There is no way of forcing this secret, but the Spirit reveals itself to us. Neither is there any way of demonstrating this theoretically. One can only accept to embark on a *new* experience. How can this come about?

If one wishes to be sun-tanned, one must walk out in the sun. If one wishes to learn how to swim, one must take a first plunge. Now if the Holy Spirit is as real as water and the sun and revealed to us of its own will, then there must be a time and a place where we are more likely to meet it. The 3,000 men who were moved on this first Whitsunday had a fundamental experience on that occasion of a *sermon*. I don't believe for a minute that the sermon which led to this mass conversion was either heart-rending,

eloquent or even interesting. And worst of all, it seemed to be a rather lengthy sermon, over 20 minutes long. And yet 3,000 men were moved. A "bull's eye"! They were so well "hit" that they asked themselves in distress: "Men, Brothers, what are we to do?" And the answer to this was: "You must renew your lives!"

A man can be considered happy when he has given up finding faults with other people only and to belittle them in consequence. He is on the best way to becoming a "new man" when he no longer only adopts principles slanting to the right or to the left, when he doesn't harden up in old habits, when he doesn't become a prisoner of his cherished world conceptions, but goes straight on the road to find God. But to embark on this well defined road under the guidance of the Holy Spirit requires a lot of work on oneself and on the circumstances of life. We should not expect the living action of the Holy Spirit to be manifested primarily in exalted spiritual experience. When a soldier is invested in an outdoor ceremony while he freezes in a biting wind he won't necessarily have great patriotic feelings. But this investiture nevertheless means that he is ready to surrender his life, that he is prepared to follow orders down to the small details of his daily life. And indeed, when a person follows the Holy Spirit, he has committed himself to following the Word of God in an act of sober and joyful obedience!

