

The Holy Trinity

“Come, Holy Ghost, Creator Blest” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #498, 499)

For more than a millennium, in a dizzying array of translations, the church has cherished this ancient Latin hymn attributed to Rhabanus Maurus (776-856) as a means of coming into deeper communion with the person and purpose of the Third Person of the Trinity.

Nonetheless, for many of us the Holy Ghost remains the most mysterious of the three, perhaps because Spirit’s work is so vast. Yet it is through the Holy Spirit that we are drawn into communion with God and through which the church has come into being and is sustained. “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him,” Martin Luther writes in the familiar words of *The Small Catechism*, “but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.”

Archbishop of Mainz during the decade preceding his death, Rhabanus is regarded as the first important German theologian. The hymn’s bracing theological truths make the argument for his authorship compelling, while Martin Luther’s KOMM, GOTT SCHÖPFER (based on the chant “Veni, Creator Spiritus”, with later modifications) renders it more accessible for congregational use.

Stanza 1 is an ardent prayer for the Holy Spirit to abide in our hearts. In stanza 2 we address ourselves with a passionate cry to “the fount of life, the fire of love, the soul’s anointing (“sweet anointing” is closer to the Latin) from above.” In stanza 3 we praise the Spirit as the bearer of the “graces sevenfold” from Isaiah 11:2 (the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord; the seventh, piety, occurs only in the *Septuagint* and thus is omitted from modern translations). In these graces we acknowledge the Spirit as “God’s almighty hand” who is imbued with the fiery power to proclaim God to the entire world.

Stanza 4 is central to our redemption. Here we grasp the light and love imparted by the Spirit as the means by which we are redeemed from our brokenness: “The weakness of our mortal state / with deathless might invigorate.” Stanza 5 begs for release from our captor, the “wily foe,” and confesses the Spirit as our shield from evil. And in stanza 6 we plead for deeper knowledge of the Trinity and of the Holy Ghost as proceeding from the Father and the Son, so that we may forever praise and proclaim God as Three in One, which positions us perfectly for the doxology in stanza 7.

Dare we sing these words and take their bold truths to heart? Or do we opt for texts that are bland and superficially reassuring? The Christian life is a demanding one at every turn. Only hymns such as this can strengthen us for the journey.

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Come, Holy Ghost, Creator blest,
and make our hearts your place of rest;
Come with your grace and heavenly aid,
and fill the hearts which you have made.

To you, the Counselor, we cry,
to you, the gift of God Most High;
The fount of life, the fire of love,
the soul's anointing from above.

In you, with graces sevenfold,
we God's almighty hand behold
While you with tongues of fire proclaim
to all the world his holy name.

Your light to every thought impart,
and shed your love in every heart;
The weakness of our mortal state
with deathless might invigorate.

Drive far away our wily foe,
and your abiding peace bestow;
With you as our protecting guide,
no evil can with us abide.

Teach us to know the Father, Son,
and you, from both as Three in One
That we your name may ever bless
and in our lives the truth confess.

Praise we the Father and the Son
and Holy Spirit, with them One,
And may the Son on us bestow
the gifts that from the Spirit flow! Amen.

Text: Attributed to Rhabanus Maurus, 776-856; translation by Edward Caswall, 1814-78, alt. It is in the public domain.

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music, Concordia University Chicago. It may be downloaded and printed for local use.]