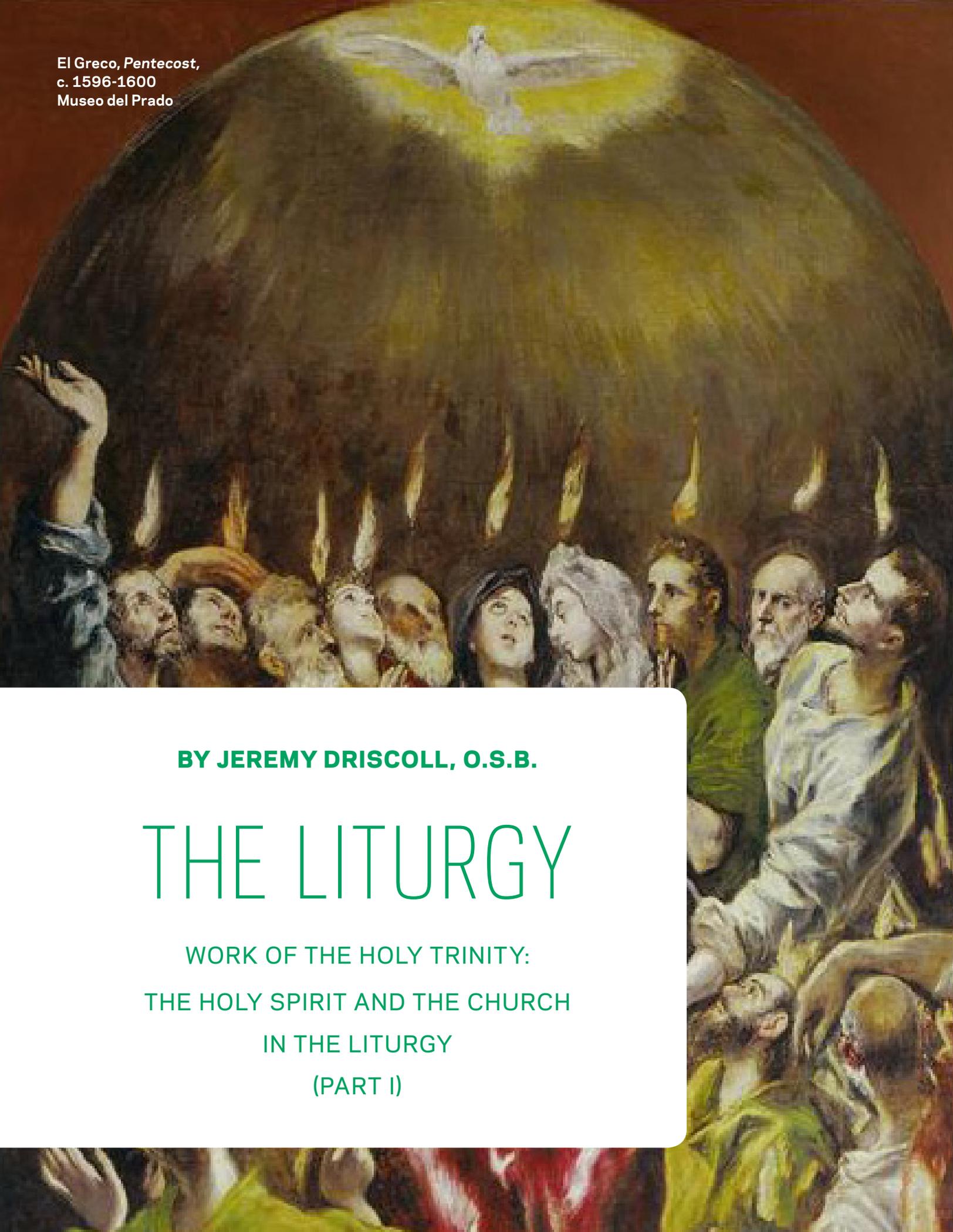


El Greco, *Pentecost*,  
c. 1596-1600  
Museo del Prado

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# THE LITURGY

WORK OF THE HOLY TRINITY:  
THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH  
IN THE LITURGY  
(PART I)





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In previous columns I commented on those parts of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that concern the distinct roles of the Father and the Son in the liturgy. In this present column I would like to begin to treat the section entitled “The Holy Spirit and the Church in the Liturgy” (§1091-1109).

It is striking that after considering the role in the liturgy of the Father in Himself and of Christ in Himself, these next paragraphs of the *Catechism* treat the Holy Spirit together with the Church. This is seen already in the title of the section, and the reasoning behind this is immediately explained: “The desire and work of the Spirit in the heart of the Church is that we may live from the life of the risen Christ” (§1091). The Spirit is, as it were, looking in two directions: toward the risen Christ and toward the Church. He “takes” from the risen Christ and makes what he takes the Church’s own. When the Spirit finds in us “the response of faith which he has aroused,” then the liturgy in fact can become “the common work of the Holy Spirit and the Church” (§1091). This is something marvelous. The liturgy is something that God does, *and* it is something that the Church does. It is at one and the same time a divine work and a human work.

A huge claim follows, even if it is expressed in deceptively simple language. It is that in the liturgy “the Holy Spirit acts in the same way as at other times in the economy of salvation” (§1092). This means that the divine action of the Spirit that unfolded through all the centuries of both the Old and the New Testaments is concentrated now in the event of the liturgy. Four verbs summarize the Spirit’s action: the Spirit *prepares* the Church to meet Christ, *recalls* Christ, *makes present* His mystery, and *unites* the Church to Him. Each of these dimensions is developed under separate subtitles. This whole section of the *Catechism* on the Holy Spirit and the Church in the liturgy is twice as long as the sections on the Father’s and the Son’s roles. For this reason we will need to divide our analysis into several installments. For the present let us examine the first of the four subtitles.

*The Holy Spirit prepares for the reception of Christ.* This title, this sentence, exactly describes the action of the Spirit in two places: in the economy of salvation and in the sacramental economy. As such, it is the first instance of what I called a “huge claim,” namely, the convergence of Spirit’s work in salvation history with Spirit’s work in the liturgy. Throughout the Old Covenant, the Spirit was preparing a people for Christ’s coming. Now, in the liturgy, all that was prefigured there is fulfilled. This is why “the Church’s liturgy has retained certain elements of the worship of the Old Covenant...” (§1093). Three such elements are mentioned, the first two stated simply as reading the Old Testament and praying the Psalms. The third element is more complex. It is “recalling the saving events and significant realities which have found their fulfillment in the mystery of Christ...” (§1093). Underlying this expression is the notion of feast as understood in the religion of Israel. Feasts consisted in “recalling saving events,” which, precisely because they were God’s deeds, could become present again in the celebration of their memory. These events cumulatively build up an inner meaning, which the *Catechism* calls “significant realities.” Key instances are mentioned: “promise and covenant, Exodus and Passover, kingdom and temple, exile and return” (§1093). All of these find their fulfillment in the mystery of Christ, and it is as we recall those events and realities in the liturgy that the Spirit fulfills them in our very midst.

The next paragraph defends this concept, or in any case, gives it a firm theological foundation, calling the relation between what was prefigured in the Old Covenant and its fulfillment in Christ the “harmony of the two Testaments.” The *Catechism* affirms: “It is on this harmony of the two Testaments that the Paschal catechesis of the Lord is built, and then, that of the Apostles and the Fathers of the Church” (§1094). The term “Paschal catechesis” provides important insight into the Church’s justification of the way in

which she understands the Old Testament and uses it in the liturgy. In reality, the Church’s understanding of the Old Testament *is* “Paschal catechesis,” and its original and authoritative practitioner is the risen Lord Himself. A footnote in this paragraph refers the reader to Luke 24:13-49 where, in two different Resurrection appearances, the Lord indicates that the Messiah’s Death and Resurrection is the meaning of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms, of the entire Old Covenant. The Apostles, the *Catechism* contends, build their understanding of the mystery of Christ on His own “Paschal catechesis,” and the Church Fathers follow in the pattern of the Lord and the Apostles.

The *Catechism* states that this way of interpreting the hidden meaning of the letter of the Old Testament has a technical name: “It is called ‘typological’ because it reveals the newness of Christ on the basis of the ‘figures’ (types) which announce him in the deeds, words, and symbols of the first covenant” (§1094). That is, the warrant for this method of scriptural interpretation is in the Scriptures themselves, as the *Catechism* then demonstrates with examples from the New Testament. Typological interpretation of Scripture is not the invention or intrusion of a later period or a different culture — say, that of the patristic Church. No, the Fathers continued what was begun by the risen Lord and the Apostles, and they extended it to all parts of the Scriptures.

All of this explains why in her liturgy the Christian Church continues to celebrate the great deeds of God from Israel’s past. Just as the Holy Spirit was preparing Israel for the coming of Christ, now the same Spirit prepares the liturgical assembly for the coming of Christ. The *Catechism* puts forward the various liturgical seasons as prime examples of this: “For this reason the Church, especially during Advent and Lent and above all at the Easter Vigil, re-reads and re-lives

the great events of salvation history in the ‘today’ of her liturgy” (§1095). All of us who hear these Old Testament readings proclaimed during Advent, Lent, and especially at the Easter Vigil, will certainly listen more sensitively and profit the more from hearing them if we keep in mind that by means of them the Holy Spirit is actively preparing us to meet Christ in the very liturgy in which they are proclaimed.

The phrase “above all at the Easter Vigil” deserves our attention. The *Catechism* does not develop it in this particular paragraph, but it does provide us with a crucial element of what is needed to understand more deeply this part of the “mother of all Vigils” (*Missale Romanum*, “Rubrics for the Easter Vigil,” §20). The Holy Spirit is active in the liturgical assembly precisely by means of the details of what is read. The seven Old Testament readings of the Easter Vigil are representative texts that proclaim whole blocks of essential Old Testament theology, moving from creation through Abraham’s sacrifice to the most important reading, the Exodus; four subsequent readings announce pivotal themes of the prophets. An understanding of these texts in relation to the Paschal Mystery, which is so explicit in the Easter Vigil, can serve also when these or similar readings appear at other times in the liturgical year. The Collects that follow each reading are a rich resource for understanding these links between Old Testament themes and their fulfillment in Christ’s Paschal Mystery. These express with simplicity and clarity the Church’s profound Christological and sacramental understanding of the Old Testament texts.

This first subsection of the *Catechism* on the Holy Spirit and the Church in the liturgy concludes by returning to the word “prepare” from its title, highlighting again the notion of the liturgy as a common work of both the Holy Spirit and the Church. “The assembly should *prepare* itself to

encounter its Lord and to become ‘a people well disposed.’ The preparation of hearts is the joint work of the Holy Spirit and the assembly, especially of its ministers” (§1098). We can hope that this work of the Holy Spirit in us, together with our own disposition to be open to his inspirations, will make of our liturgies what they are truly meant to be in the plan of God: a divine work and the work of the Church.

