Holy Spirit, Hidden God: Moral Life and the Non-Believer

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The proclamation in I Timothy of God’s desire for everyone to be saved and ‘reach full knowledge of the truth’ had an uneasy passage into the twenty-first century. We are now more ‘comfortable’ theologically with divine grace and Christ’s saving action present in other religious traditions and even in the lives of non-believers. Ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue is symptomatic of the former. Yet, can we say the same of the existence of grace, God’s self-gift, in the lives of non-believers, especially in its moral dimension? Is it possible to articulate a more integrated account of its presence, particularly in the lives of those who define themselves as non-religious, humanist, agnostic, even atheist?

I would like to approach this task by building on two recent quotes. The first affirms those theologians who have rightly noted that

...the Holy Spirit, the personal gift of God poured into our hearts, remains always our fundamental resource for the moral life, especially in a world in which relationship and personhood seem so threatened.¹

The second is concerned with the reality of salvation, through the offer of grace as a work of the Holy Spirit, beyond the confines of the Church and, in fact, for all people of every time and place. It is embodied in the personal commitment to conscience which, for Denis Edwards, is one Vatican II’s ‘most decisive and most important clarifications.’²

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The correlation between these two comments prompts a question. The Holy Spirit is the source of the Christian moral life. But commitment to conscience under grace (the divine self-gift offered by the Spirit) is salvific for the non-believer. Therefore, in what way and to what extent is the Holy Spirit the source of the non-believer’s moral life?

Two sources suggest both an answer and the framework of this article: a) Church teaching and theology concerning the Holy Spirit, grace, the invincibly erroneous conscience and their relationship to Christ and the Church; b) the Church’s liturgical prayer as an expression of its faith. Throughout our discussion, the manner of the Spirit’s action is further specified by drawing on Rosato’s treatment of the Spirit’s regenerating mission in the Church and in creation in terms of four complementary descriptions used in Scripture (Liberator, Teacher, Unifier and Vivifier).

Church Teaching and Theology of the Holy Spirit

A theological assumption guides our discussion. Grace, as the divine self-gift, definitively realised in Jesus Christ, is embodied in the Church, the universal sacrament of salvation and of saving unity. The sending of the Spirit to form the community of believers means that we look to ecclesial existence as the paradigm of the Spirit’s presence and activity. We can highlight briefly three specific areas for the purposes of this article. First, the Spirit’s primary gift to the Church is holiness, a conformity to the Trinitarian life as much in truth as in love. Second, the normative benchmark for the Christian moral life and authentic humanity is embodied in Jesus Christ, who, William Spohn argues, is ‘the concrete universal of Christian ethics.’ Finally, the Spirit guides the Church as the bearer of salvific truth. We appreciate more that the Church, led by the Spirit into an every-deepening understanding of the ‘complete truth,’ is called to be the universal sign and instrument of God’s reign in the world. This shift in the Church’s understanding of itself and of God’s saving action underpins this article.

The ‘decisive’ change in perspective on the salvation of non-believers is reflected in two benchmarks from Vatican II. Gaudium et Spes 22 provides the general theological framework, namely the common vocation of all humanity and the offer of participating in the paschal mystery made to all people of good will through the Holy Spirit’s action. The specific moral focus of this process

3. A third aspect could be the Gifts of the Spirit and the mode of the Spirit’s action through grace. But this is beyond the scope of this article.
5. William C. Spohn, Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics (New York: Continuum, 1999), 2.
6. God’s universal saving will embodied in the death and resurrection of Jesus ‘holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For since Christ dies for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit, in a way known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery’ (emphasis added), Gaudium et Spes 22 in Walter M. Abbot SJ, ed., The Documents of Vatican II, (The America Press, 1965), 221-2. The footnote to this text in the Abbot translation notes that the Council
is captured in *Lumen Gentium* 16 which highlights the salvific value of striving to lead a good life through commitment to conscience.²

The theological foundations and implications of these lapidary statements have been extensively explored. They encapsulate three issues: the relationship between nature and grace (‘offers to every man’, ‘moved by grace’), between truth and goodness (‘sincerely seek God’, ‘strive to live a good life’) and that between the Spirit and Christ in the work of salvation (‘associated with the paschal mystery’). These provide markers in this discussion.

**Grace and Human Self-Transcendence**

Karl Rahner is a significant resource for the Church’s positive and expanded approach to the issue of salvation. The main lines of his approach to the mystery of grace can be outlined in an example adapted from Denis Edwards.⁸ What Edwards says of an Aboriginal woman living fifty thousand years ago is applicable in our world. Such a woman knows nothing of Christianity. Today’s office worker or tradesman may have rejected (‘never heard’) the Gospel, say they are ‘not religious’ or that they are an unbeliever or an atheist. What is common to all three is that they live in a universe that is graced. They are surrounded by the Spirit of God, present to them in the openness of their hearts and minds. This is the offer of the Holy Spirit to somehow participate in the saving mystery of God.⁹

If this is the case, our three non-believers are typical of every person, precisely as human, in having an inbuilt openness to transcendent mystery. As a created being who is embodied spirit, the human person, as Hunt expresses it ‘is not limited to desiring infinite truth and good but is open – “naturally”, we might say – to God’s self-gift, should that be offered, and enabled by grace to accept it.’¹⁰ In traditional terms, the human person has the capacity to receive God (capax dei) and God reaches out to us in some form of offer or invitation.

The reality of grace, as divine self-gift, is, for Rahner, concealed in the human spirit’s striving for fulfillment or in the promptings and movements of self-transcendence. It is revealed in a pattern or movement away from the self,
in the desire for ‘more’: in awe and gratitude that life is gracious and gift-filled; in an ongoing search for what is true and good; in moments when, in a sense of emptiness or being alone, one is hypersensitive to what cannot satisfy and hopeful for something or someone that can; in [importantly] a persistent pattern of other-concern, of love in the relationships of life.¹¹

Like every human being, yesterday’s woman in her desert tribe and today’s members of a secular society can respond positively or negatively to this divine self-offering. To accept the Spirit is to be justified before God through a form of faith, even if implicit. It will find expression in their persevering love for their families and their children, in fidelity to promises, in compassion for others, in listening to the promptings of the Spirit in the depths of their conscience. These embody the self-transcending momentum of grace, of God’s self-giving accepted, shared and lived. In this way, they are ‘associated with the paschal mystery.’

The Spirit’s role here is twofold. First, wonder and awe are responses to something given that Creation reveals to us, a mystery that summons us to reach out beyond ourselves. Mercier suggests that the power of the Spirit is best viewed as the ‘actual experience of God’ understood as the divine bestowal to Creation (but discerned within it).¹² Second, Rosato reminds us of the Spirit’s regenerating mission specifically, for our purposes, beyond the Church and within the world. In passages pointing to the freedom won by Jesus’ death and resurrection (Gal 5:1) and our prayer that the Spirit renews the earth, it is the Spirit as Liberator who reminds us of the range of ways in which the Holy Spirit can inspire people, whether believers or unbelievers, to articulate and live by ethical norms. The Spirit’s presence in the world can thus be understood as ‘the origin, end, and motivating force of all ethical ideals.’¹³

So far in our discussion, three things emerge: first, Rahner’s view of faith as a decision concerning one’s life direction is confirmed in LG 16 and GS 22 in their minimum statement about faith that is salvific. For our purposes here, I would like to suggest the term ‘radical faith’ to describe this phenomenon, in contrast with Christian ‘faith’ whose object is Christ and his revealed message. Radical faith is verified in a person’s obedience to conscience ‘no matter the setting in which this decision is taken and carried out.’¹⁴

Second, the various movements towards self-transcendence (towards meaning, happiness, belonging etc.) ultimately must constellate around the moral response that is ‘a claim of absolute moral obligation.’¹⁵ The moral core of self-transcendence is at the heart of the Church’s teaching and concurs with Sandra Schneiders’ definition of spirituality as ‘the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives.’¹⁶ This is an expression of the Spirit as Liberator in the world, especially beyond the

¹¹ Hunt notes that, for Rahner, grace works ‘in and through these expressions of human self-transcendence and concomitantly, that transcendence is always graced.’ Ibid., 172.
¹⁴ David Coffey, Believer, Christian, Catholic (Sydney, NSW: Catholic Institute, 1986), 10.
¹⁵ Ibid., 16.
boundaries of the Church.

Thirdly, the reality of grace is not something beyond our conscious reach working in some ontological realm in the depths of the self. It affects our consciousness at the cognitive, affective and behavioural levels. It can be active despite the biases, distortions, resistances and deepest dissonances of our fallen condition. Even in a person without Christian faith, if grace is, in reality, the divine self-gift, it is the bestowal of God who is Trinity whose hidden, unobtrusive presence somehow shapes a person’s perceptions, dispositions and identity. This is true even if that awareness is implicit. It cannot be described or is not even acknowledged – which is the case for so many people. They have the experience but miss the meaning, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot. They embody Rahner’s observation that we should not confuse the possibility of experiencing grace ‘and the possibility of experiencing grace as grace.’\textsuperscript{17} To recognize and express its presence and meaning is a form of self-awareness. It requires a framework of meaning that is best expressed in the Christian articulation of God’s self-gift in the person of Jesus and the divine plan of saving love for the world.

Many, however, may find that the story, metaphors and belief structures of Christianity or of any institutional religion are either unsuitable or inadequate for capturing adequately the pattern of self-transcendence in their lives. They may resort to political or social ideologies as vehicles for some sort of a meaning structure for living. They may do so in terms of a generalised secular humanist axiom for life such as ‘Do the right thing’ or ‘Don’t harm anyone.’ Generally, the basic focus of primordial moral consciousness and commitment to conscience is on the worth of persons. For some, the experience of grace may remain, for the most part, a diffuse awareness without much self-reflection at all.

These considerations help reconcile some of the anomalies arising in people’s lives, and here, in those of non-believers. Yet, David Hay remarks that, in our secularised era, recognition of the Spirit and its fruits can take puzzling forms. The dissonances between head and heart, image and reality, illusion and truth can be resolved in ways that are harmonically paradoxical. For instance, Hay cites someone saying,

\begin{quote}
I know that since I concluded some years ago that my mind could not accept a personal God I seem to have become more aware of this all-pervading power which to me is strength, comfort, joy, goodness.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

In discussing the nature/grace question, we have seen that radical faith, in the non-believer, is essentially a question of a moral response to an absolute

\textsuperscript{16} Sandra Schneiders, ‘Spirituality in the Academy’, \textit{Theological Studies} 50 (1989), 684 [emphasis added].


claim grounded in the gift of the Holy Spirit, specifically as Liberator, arousing and renewing the moral sense of all of humanity. This brings us to our second marker: if God’s universal desire to save is at work as grace, namely the divine self-gift prompting a response and a pattern of self-transcendence in one’s life, it raises the question of truth and goodness. In non-believers of ‘good faith’, how can their invincibly erroneous conscience concerning what is true be reconciled with their response to the good? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in this process? Further, where is the place for Christ and the Church?

**Conscience that is Honestly Mistaken**

The salvific standing of the commitment to follow conscience adumbrated in *GS* 22 and explicitly acknowledged in *LG* 16 is clarified elsewhere. In the case of someone who genuinely seeks truth and goodness, it can happen that ‘conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity.’ John Paul II expands this by saying that conscience maintains its dignity because even when it directs us to act in a way not in conformity with the objective moral order, it continues to speak in the name of that *truth about the good* which the subject is called to seek sincerely.

The Pope’s compressed summary offers two guideposts in our investigation: the relationship between: a) the subjective and objective; and b) being good and acting rightly in the moral life.

In his valuable treatment, Gerald Gleeson correlates Newman’s approach to the dual aspects of conscience (fidelity and right judgment) with James Keenan’s explanation of the relationship of goodness and rightness. Given our aim here, I will work on the assumption that the arguments of these two authors also apply to people who, in their commitment to conscience, live good and loving lives. Specifically, this refers to non-believers, even atheists, whose basic (radical) faith in obedience to conscience brings a practical, non-conceptual, ‘non-conscious knowledge of God, which can co-exist with a theoretical ignorance of God.’ Or, as Lonergan suggests, they ‘may love God in their hearts while not knowing him with their heads.’

For Newman, the dynamism of conscience has two polarities: the transcendent and the immanent, as a *rule of right judgment* and as a call to *fidelity*. Conscience is orientated to ‘a truth and good not of its own making’

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19. Namely, those who ‘through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church’ or who ‘without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life’ *GS* 16.
21. VS, 62 (emphasis added).
in a movement that is transcendent and objectively oriented. One seeks to obey a transcendent voice found in the immanent realm of conscience, namely in my conscience as my personal awareness. In this respect, conscience is directed to what is truly right, is guided by a ‘rule of right judgment’ in which ‘a person seeks to be in harmony with a truth not of (one’s) own making.’ Alternatively, I am called to fidelity, namely to act in accord with what I judge as the right thing to do. The objective moral order is mediated through the judgment made by the person. Moral integrity requires sincerity and good will, namely to be personally committed to be guided in my action by what I judge, as best I can, to be the right (morally correct) thing to do.

How does this distinction from Newman apply to the erroneous or invincibly ignorant conscience? The benchmark is that a rounded conscience must be both rightly ordered (upright, correct, true) and faithful (obedient, faithful in responding to the good as perceived). But it often happens that people, in good faith, fail to know the moral rule or the objective standard of what is right. They make an honest mistake, we would say.

Gleeson rightly suggest that, in Catholic accounts, this situation of someone acting on an erroneous conscience is mainly seen in negative terms. The person is ‘excused’ or ‘blameless’ because they made an honest mistake. Gleeson asks: what about ‘the positive goodness of a person’ who, despite error of judgment about the rightness of the action according to the objective moral order, still ‘remains faithful to the moral call’? He suggests that this fidelity to a call or commitment to the claims of conscience has moral standing. It is expressed in his or her goodness and their openness to further growth. In Christian terms, it is salvific. So we ask: what precisely is the positive goodness of the erroneous conscience and how can it be justified?

In their response, Gleeson and Keenan continue the tradition from St Alphonsus Ligouri and the Manualist tradition after him. These theologians argue the person acting out of love when committing error is not just ‘excused’ but is good and the act itself is meritorious because it is directed towards a good end. Building on the role of the infused virtue of charity as found in Aquinas, Gleeson cites Keenan who argues that a person’s moral goodness ‘depends on the primary movement of his or her will to love God and neighbour, rather than on the righteousness of the person’s judgment about action.’ It is goodness that measures ‘whether out of love one strives to attain a rightly ordered self. Charity, for Thomas, is that measure. Whereas, rightness measures whether one actually attains a rightly ordered self.’ Gleeson captures it with clarity: the heart of moral goodness and saving merit is being

26. Aquinas himself acknowledged the limit case of someone who strives to know what is right yet arrives at a position in which their conscience is at odds with Church teaching. For Aquinas, contra Peter Lombard, such a person should die excommunicated rather than violate their conscience. See his Scriptum super Libros Sententiarum, IV, 38.2.4 q.a3.
faithful to conscience as directed by the grace of charity irrespective of the correctness of one’s judgments. What is central is striving – the committed effort to be faithful to hear and respond to the call of conscience.

This does not imply that the morally right and the morally good are not related to each other. Nor does it mean that living according to one’s sincerely held beliefs (one’s ‘lights’), or being in error (whether short or long term) does not carry a responsibility to try to correct the error, to seek other ‘lights’ that further a more truthful understanding. In other words, this account does not justify saying ‘as long as I am sincere and loving, everything is ok!'

Keenan and Gleeson argue that what characterises the morally good (faithful) person is precisely his or her striving to know and do what is right. Such an interpretation is consonant with John Paul II’s statement noted earlier from VS 62: when a good person sincerely seeks to hear the voice of the truth about the good, conscience retains its dignity (i.e. is to be followed). In the case of the non-believer, divine grace is present and active even if not recognised or articulated. For all that, it must be remembered that goodness and rightness are not the same thing. Acting out of love (goodness) is no guarantee that my actions are morally right. Alternatively, the wrongness of an action does not, in itself, mean that a person is not acting out of the love (of God and others).

Keenan further suggests that this distinction is not so much between the objective and the subjective, between human actions as right (in the judgment of prudence) and the acting subject as good. It is rather that, within the person, one can distinguish the rightness of reason (in the judgment about what is right morally) and the goodness of the heart (as the primary movement of the will towards the good). For Gleeson, this approach corresponds with Newman’s distinction between conscience understood both as a rule of right conduct and as obedience or fidelity (as, for Newman, its ‘most authoritative aspect’).

This brings us back to the Holy Spirit. The Council explicitly says that the offer of grace (sharing God’s life) is in terms of the paschal mystery and is the work of the Holy Spirit. Its silent workings in the conscientious non-believer are revealed in the ‘displacing of the ego (that) becomes a giving “place” to others.’ It is a form of life having an inbuilt momentum to develop in depth and scope. Alternatively, as the free acceptance of a gift, it ‘symbolises our willingness to receive “the other”, our willingness to enter into a world that is not of our own making.’ This openness to an objective reality is exercised when one chooses to follow the impetus towards both an upright/correct conscience and persistent fidelity to the summons of the truth about what is

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29. See Abbott’s comment n. 6 concerning those who ‘sincerely follow the lights God gives them.’
31. Ibid., 65.
good. This implies a desire to understand not only what is good in so far as it is true but also to grasp what is true in itself in so far as it is good, namely as a value to be pursued. The sincere effort to pursue the claims of a world ‘not of our own making’ is, in reality, integral to the non-believer’s positive response to the Spirit’s offer to be ‘associated’ with the paschal mystery.

It is helpful to recall Aquinas’ comment that ‘truth, whatever its source, is of the Holy Spirit.’ Torrell observes that Aquinas, at times, amplifies it by stressing that it is not only all truth but all good (omne bonum) that comes from the Holy Spirit. This does not mean, as Torrell notes, that the Holy Spirit dwells necessarily through grace in someone who speaks the truth, whatever it may be, but that ‘the universality of the Spirit’s presence and action in this context corresponds exactly to the universality of the active presence of the Word in all things.’

Again, drawing on Rosato, by inspiring aspects of saving truth and goodness in non-believers, it is the Holy ‘Spirit of Truth’ as Teacher who drives the search for truth and goodness but always in relation to the Word who is Truth. We need ‘a serene respect for the universal activity of the Son and the Spirit within the realm of created intelligence.’ Further, this same Spirit does not impose but, with delicacy, ‘leads us into the complete truth.’ The Spirit as Teacher, always sensitive to rhythms of moral growth, guides us gently to the truth which, at times, can be ‘too much to bear’, sometimes less from resistance and more from human limitation in the face of what is not able to be appropriated at this stage of one’s life.

We have explored a second way in which the Holy Spirit is the source of the moral life for the non-believer. The Spirit as teacher and guide enables the morally good (faithful) person (non-believer) to sustain ‘commitment to conscience’ through his or her striving to know and do what is right. What is central is the goodness of the heart (as the primary movement of the will towards the good). But this implies a sincere desire to listen to the summons of the good precisely as true, hence to achieve rightness of reason (in the judgment about what is right morally). This may not be achieved or, if so, only partially. It is the striving that is crucial – the persistent and sincere search for the truth as mediated through the judgment of conscience.

34. Summa Theologiae I.II. 109. 1, ad 1 (Henceforth ST). Torrell notes that the quotation is repeated by Aquinas in most diverse contexts [15 times of which there are 5 in his Commentary on the Sentences and 4 in his commentary on John’s Gospel]. See Jean-Pierre Torrell, OP., Saint Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master Volume 2 (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 2003), 221-2 body of text and Note 65.
35. Ibid., 65. ‘Quia omne verum et omne bonum est a spiritu sancto’ (In I ad Cor. 12:3).
36. Ibid., 65.
37. As in John 14:16 ‘I shall ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate to be with you for ever, the Spirit of truth.’
39. See John 16: 12-13. In Familiaris Consortio 34 this is described as the ‘law of gradualness.’
**Spirit and Christ in the Work of Salvation**

We come to the third marker noted earlier – the relationship between the Spirit and Christ in the work of salvation. Kelly reminds us that central in all this is ‘the irresistible objectivity of the resurrection of Jesus (that) places all the events of the past and the future in a universe of transforming grace.’ Our faith is that God, through the Spirit, offers saving grace to every human being and that this grace is a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ (paschal mystery). This reaches back to the beginnings of human history and looks forward to its full embodiment such that what is offered is the grace of Christ. As Edwards sums it up ‘the whole history of the Spirit’s presence in grace is directed towards Jesus Christ.’ As the Spirit of Love, it prompts the non-believer to seek what is good. But it is also the Spirit of Truth guiding the non-believer’s heart and intelligence to understand and grasp what is true in itself and truly good, revealed in the Word, Jesus Christ.

We need to affirm, then, the Trinitarian nature of the saving process, for believer and non-believer alike. In speaking of the Spirit of Truth, we are reminded that it is the Spirit who leads us to the Son and through the Son to the Father. In other words, the temporal missions of the Trinity are inseparable from their eternal processions. There must be a consistency between the immanent and economic Trinity. In considering the non-believer, Aquinas is again relevant. As Torrell notes, whatever darkness there may be in this world where the Word Incarnate brings his light, we can only say that

[No] mind is darkened to the point of not participating in anything of the divine light. In fact, all truth, whoever knows it, is entirely due to that “light which shines in the darkness” for “every truth, whoever says it, comes from the Holy Spirit” (In Joannem 1:5, 1. 3).

Again, since the Church is called to realise and witness to Christ’s saving love in the world, the non-believer must be ‘associated’ with it in a hidden but real way (‘in a manner known only to God’). Contemporary theology expresses this in terms of the Church as the sign and instrument of God’s Reign. In that sense, ‘outside the Church no salvation’ takes on a more expansive and positive meaning. As Ladislas Boros notes, a universal negative proposition (extra ecclesiæm, nulla salus) can be expressed affirmatively (ubi salus, ibi ecclesia) – wherever God’s saving action (the Reign of God) is evident, then the Church is somehow present. The Spirit’s offer of grace to all people points inescapably, even if mysteriously, both to

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41. Edwards, Breath of Life, 57. The scope of saving grace within the whole of human history is reflected in Eucharistic Prayer 4: ‘Even when he disobeyed you and lost your friendship you did not abandon him to the power of death, but helped all men to seek and find you.’
42. Torrell, Saint Thomas Aquinas, 222, note 65. Elsewhere, Aquinas argues that the spark of reason that attracts us to the good cannot be totally extinguished from the human heart. See ST, 1.2.94, 6.
43. GS 22.
Christ and to the Church.

If the non-believer can be saved, why Christian faith? All humans are called to commitment in conscience concerning an ultimate value or transcendent warrant. This ‘radical faith’ or religious conversion is oriented towards further intellectual, affective and moral expressions. Further, it is not simply a static attitude of openness to the good or, by implication, to God. It is a form of life and is oriented towards growth. Openness to a world not of ‘our own making’ means that we are called to keep on seeking what is true and good and their fullest realisation. If the non-believer moves from radical faith (a committed conscience) to Christian faith, this conscious response to Jesus Christ involves a qualitative change in the person, a further differentiation of consciousness. In other words, Christian faith does make a difference.

Finally, the Council says that ‘those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God.’ This reminds us of the analogical nature of the non-believer’s ‘taking part’ in the divine life and in the Eucharist (see below). For believers and non-believers, response to grace admits of varying degrees. Its tapestry is found in the Gospels. It may be that, for the non-believer, the centre-piece has three panels: the dying Jesus who forgives those who, in rejecting grace, ‘do not know what they are doing’; the anonymous Jesus revealed in the face of the ‘other’ (‘when did we see you hungry, or thirsty…’); the Risen Jesus, often unrecognised, whose ‘divine discretion’, does not overwhelm freedom ‘but brings it to a new intensity and breadth.’

The Spirit who invites, liberates and guides the non-believer is that of the Risen Jesus who transforms the universe so that we are immersed in divine forgiveness, compassion and courtesy. This aspect of God’s search for us prompts in believers a renewed sense of the intensity and breadth of God’s love.

**The Praying Church, Holy Spirit and the Non-Believer**

We have probed the role of the Holy Spirit in the moral life of the non-believer in terms of: a) grace and human self-transcendence; and b) the good conscience that errs and the non-believer’s relationship to Christ and the Church. The third and fourth aspects of the Spirit’s role for non-believers can be probed in relation to the adage **Lex orandi lex credendi** – the Church’s faith is mirrored in its prayer. The final task, then, is to examine briefly three aspects of the Church’s liturgical prayer that bear on the Holy Spirit’s role as **Unifier** – to bring unity (1 Cor 12:13) – and as **Vivifier** in fulfilled hope in the new creation (2 Cor 5:17, Gal 6:15) in the non-believer’s moral life.

**Good Friday Liturgy**

First, in the Intercessions for Good Friday, the Church prays for those who do not believe in Christ that they ‘find the truth as they walk before (God) in sincerity of heart’; and for those who do not believe in God that ‘they may find him by sincerely following all that is right.’ Interestingly, in this second

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45. *LG* 16, citing *ST*, 3. 8.3 ad 1.
instance, the obstacles explicitly noted to finding God are not assumed to originate in the searching non-believer (in prejudice, misguided belief, or deliberate error, refusal to believe or ‘iniquity from their hearts’). We cannot conclude that the Church is thereby denying that these are realities in our fallen, and often deliberately sinful, world.

But it is striking that the Church, on a day central to the liturgy of the paschal mystery, highlights obstacles and barriers erected by believing Christians. It is their lives that generate the ‘hurtful things that stand in their [unbelievers’] way.’ This intercession states that God’s face is recognised by, and attractive to, others through the ‘the tokens of God’s mercy and love’ evident in the lives of Christians. Regretfully, the Church admits that when these are missing, the result is unbelief. In other words, the divine face is distorted, even concealed, by the very Christians who are called to witness to God’s love present and active in the world.

Eucharistic Prayer 4

Secondly, Eucharistic Prayer 4 emphasises the universal nature of God’s will for the salvation of all humanity. Divine wisdom and love drawing ‘all men to seek and find you’ (Preface) suggests God’s saving action at work before historical revelation (or in tandem with it) as it is reflected in the Scriptural witness.\(^\text{48}\) The optimistic nature of Eucharistic Prayer 4 is reflected the Intercessions for the Church after the acclamation. After praying to the Lord to ‘remember those for whom we offer this sacrifice’ and enumerates the faithful within the Church, the Prayer then proceeds to say:

> Remember those who take part in this offering,  
> those here present and all your people,  
> and all who seek you with a sincere heart.

This intercession reinforces the words noted above from the Preface and mirrors the reassuring presence of the unobtrusive God of the Psalmist.\(^\text{49}\) Soubigou points out that these phrases clearly indicate the Church’s faith that ‘God’s mercy is such that those who seek him find him.’\(^\text{50}\) Further, their wording has theological implications. As on Good Friday, those of sincere and upright heart are included among those for whom the Eucharistic sacrifice is

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47. Prayer VIII for those who do not believe in God: ‘Almighty and eternal God, you created mankind so that all might long to find you and have peace where you are found. Grant that, in spite of the hurtful things that stand in their way, they may all recognize in the lives of Christians the tokens of your love and mercy, and gladly acknowledge you as the one true God and Father of us all. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.’ It is interesting to contrast the attitude and tone in the old ‘Mass of the Pre-sanctified’ of Good Friday: ‘Let us pray also for the pagans: that almighty God would remove iniquity from their hearts: that, putting aside their idols, they may be converted to the true and living God.’

48. ‘…so that all nations may seek the deity and, by feeling their way towards him, succeed in finding him’ Acts 17: 27.

49. ‘You never desert those who seek you, Yahweh’ Ps 9:10.

50. L. Soubigou, *A Commentary on the Prefaces and the Eucharistic Prayers of the Roman Missal* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1976), 302. Also included are ‘those who have died in the peace of Christ and all the dead whose faith is known to you alone.’
being offered. In this way, the Church’s prayer acknowledges how, through the Spirit’s call, they are ‘associated with this paschal mystery’ (GS 22).

Yet, if they are ‘associated’, can we also ask whether, in some way, known only to God, all seekers of God ‘with a sincere heart’ are included amongst those who participate (‘take part’) in the offering of Jesus to the Father? The Church prays not just for them but with them?

Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation 2

Thirdly, this prayer opens, as is normally the case, by addressing the Father through Jesus. But the focus immediately moves to thanks/praise for God’s [through Jesus] ‘presence and action in the world.’ We begin our common prayer in Jesus as a believing community but, importantly, as part of a wider or global context. We appear to be praying as citizens of the world, doing so on its behalf. This is later confirmed when we pray to make the Church throughout the world a ‘sign of unity and an instrument of [God’s] peace.’

In the next section from ‘in the midst of conflict and division’ and into the following paragraph, the trajectory of awareness is centrifugal and its focus becomes more specific in two ways. While true reconciliation is fully realised in Jesus, divine presence and reconciling action in the world are seen to be properly, or appropriately (whichever theology you hold), through the mediation of the Holy Spirit. The locus is primarily the intrapersonal arena in change of attitudes (mind) and dispositions (heart) effected by the Spirit. The key word here is our (as in ‘turn our minds’, ‘changes our hearts’). In the context ‘our’ does not immediately denote Christian faithful in a worshipping community. Its primary referent is to worshippers as members of the human family.

Secondly, these Spirit-driven ‘conversions’ emerge in understanding, mercy, and forgiveness that supplant strife, hatred and vengeance. Dialogue and friendship replace enmity and alienation. Thus, the intrapersonal realm overflows into the interpersonal, relational and social dimensions of life in the world at the local, national and international levels. It would not push the meaning of the text too far to suggest that ‘we’ are praying for a change in cultural and social structures, namely in practices and arrangements understood as having their roots in attitudes and dispositions of people and of groups. This is evident in our own time when authors such as René Girard testify to the intensified awareness of human rights and of global responsibility to the silent victims of history as ‘the secular face of Christian love.’ Anthony Kelly argues that this unprecedented ‘stirring of conscience’ about victims and

51. ‘Father, all-powerful and ever-living God, we praise and thank you through Jesus Christ our Lord for your presence and action in the world. In the midst of conflict and division, we know it is you who turn our minds to thoughts of peace. Your Spirit changes our hearts; enemies begin to speak to one another, those who were estranged join hands in friendship, and nations seeks the way of peace together. Your Spirit is at work when understanding puts an end to strife, when hatred is quenched by mercy, and vengeance gives way to forgiveness.’
human rights may be secular in context yet its source lies in the transforming
effect of one particular ‘risen’ victim. It is arguably a sign that the ‘paschal
mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection is in fact penetrating human history
in a surprising way.’

This Eucharistic Prayer, then, shows us the Church praying what it
believes. It is through the Spirit that ‘God in Christ (is) reconciling the world
to himself’ (2 Cor 5: 19). The Spirit’s presence and action is revealed in the
world whenever and wherever these qualities are present: reconciliation of
alienated relationships, healing, forgiveness, mercy, international peace,
harmony etc. In many ways, this Eucharistic Prayer distills a theological
anthropology that is both relational and eschatological.

Understood in this way, this prayer captures the two remaining aspects
of the Scriptural designations of the Spirit’s mission. The Spirit as *Unifier* is
evident in any authentic human effort to strive for and achieve peace. The
Spirit as *Vivifier*, as the eschatological power of the Triune God, renews the
hope of the Church and of ‘the aspirations of humanity.’ The Spirit is not
confined to certain situations and people as the vehicles for the divine work.
All events are in ‘a universe of transforming grace.’ It is within a global
context that the Spirit’s fruits are seen to be present and we pray that they be
evident in the Church. They have their ultimate grounding in the gift of the
Spirit as the first fruit of Christ’s resurrection.

In these three instances of *Lex orandi lex credendi*, then, we see the
Church’s prayer acknowledging the presence of ‘grace’ and the Spirit’s action
going beyond the boundaries of the Church and other religious traditions to
embrace the lives of conscientious non-believers. Further, it prays its faith that,
in a hidden, mysterious way, non-believers are ‘associated with the paschal
mystery’ in the Church’s worship. It is also conscious of the effects of ‘grace’
in human life, both personal and social. The Spirit’s fruits can grow even
where there is no awareness of Jesus or God and can even, at times, co-exist
with rejection of God and Jesus at the conscious level. The Church is stating
its conviction that there are people who, by their good lives, reveal an implicit
love of ‘God in their hearts while not knowing him with their heads.’

**Conclusion**

It may be that the position argued here is seen as somewhat sanguine and
unrealistic. All I have attempted to do is to probe Church teaching, associated
theological literature and the Church’s public prayer concerning the Holy
Spirit as the divine self-gift to creation and the one who pours the divine love

52. ‘No historical period, no society we know, has ever spoken of victims…you will not find
anything anywhere that even remotely resembles our modern concern for victims… It is the
55. See Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 75.
into our hearts (Rom 5:5). Perhaps it is a stark reminder of the extent to which the radically transforming, even subversive, presence of the Spirit of the Risen Jesus disrupts our mental horizon and can even impel us, at times, to dismantle and re-assemble our theological categories. We need, finally, to balance two things.

On one hand, the Church is a sign of God’s love and Gospel hope. We must be careful not to assume that non-believers are ‘evil.’ As John Thornhill rightly observes, today’s typical person in westernised culture does not experience that he or she is ‘wicked.’ Rather, like Israel in its early moral awareness, they are ‘lost’, ‘not sure of the way.’57 Perhaps, for the typical non-believer, to live conscientiously according to one’s lights is akin to seeking the right path amongst a sea of shadows guided only by a flickering candle. We must be confident in our Christian faith to point them towards Christ who is both the full light and the true way. In all this, we can only be grateful that God’s offer of love continues to be extended in ways that confound our human horizons of courtesy and discretion.

On the other hand, if the Church’s stance on the universality of grace implies a patronising attitude, one can only apologise for believing in the excess of God’s love. I must, humbly and respectfully, see the non-believing ‘other’ as one who has already been touched by God – in truth, grace and love. Perhaps one cannot improve on Rahner in replying to critics of his notion of the anonymous Christian. Such humility in the Christian and in the Church is ‘a profound admission of the fact that God is greater than man or the Church.’58

58. ‘Christianity and Non-Christian Religions’ cited in Hunt, Trinity, 146.