

# The Spirit Is Here

“In the heart of a world desiccated by rationalistic skepticism, a new experience of the Holy Spirit has come about, amounting to a worldwide renewal movement. What the New Testament describes with reference to the charisms as visible signs of the coming of the Spirit is no longer merely ancient, past history: this history is becoming a burning reality today.”<sup>1</sup>

-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger

## ■ BY MAURA POSTON ZAGRAS

*Note to Readers: We will be writing in coming issues on the action of the Holy Spirit in our time, for healing and for restoring faith, in a series of reports from around the world. This is the first of those reports, from Cleveland, Ohio, in the US. —The Editor*

The corridor of centuries gone by stretches from the footfalls of the New Testament to the ever-new faith of the future. We are in that corridor. We trust that Jesus is beside us, but we often feel as though we walk alone. The Word echoes throughout the vast belly of our history, but we don't comprehend it as we should, careening as it does off the walls and distortions of our often empty spirituality. We need a sign. We need to know where we are. We need to know where God wants us to go, and how we will get there.

The sign we search for is here. It is the Holy Spirit. The Dove who flies from the Father, to the Son, to us, and back again, ties us together with the strong twine of Love He carries in His golden beak. Since we distrust that which we cannot verify with our senses, the Spirit has enlisted helpers, souls willing to work with Him, or to have Him work through them.

Bishop **Roger Gries**, OSB, the auxiliary bishop of Cleveland, believes Dr. **Issam Neme**, who lives in the Cleveland, Ohio diocese, is an instrument of the Lord.

“Dr. Neme uses his gifts of faith and healing in doing God's work,” Gries said. “He is a comrade — a fellow worker in the vineyard.”

Bishop Gries has seen first-hand what happens when Dr. Neme prays. “This is real,” he says. “This is authentic. Issam Neme is a conduit of the Holy Spirit.”

Father **Daniel Schlegel**, pastor of Holy Angels Church in Bainbridge, Ohio, has witnessed the responsive relationship between the Spirit and Dr. Neme. He invited Dr. Neme to conduct a healing service at his parish one Sunday during the summer of 2003, and has invited him back several times since.

That first time, more than 1,000 people received a personal prayer from Dr. Neme. Many were healed. Priorities were re-



ordered and simplified in a spiritual tectonic shift.

Father Dan takes no credit for the success of the day. “Holy Angels creates a special environment for God to be revealed,” he says. “I am privileged to be with parishioners in their moments of triumph and success but most of all in times of sorrow, when they demonstrate a spiritual martyrdom and a sacrificial love. I tell people I am not the source of the power. I am like an extension cord, plugged into the power.”

Sister Susan, his pastoral associate, now in her 12th year at Holy Angels, has seen the parish struggle through painful times. “I still stand in awe of the faith of the people,” she says. “They are welcoming; they respond when others are in need. They step forward. Still, the ability of the leadership makes a big difference. New life came again with Father Dan; he is God's gift to the parish.”

With a pastor who stokes a burning awareness that he is “like an extension cord” between heaven and earth, a supporting cast of dedicated religious like Sister Susan, and a responsive parish that steps up to their Catholicism, Holy Angels was primed to host a day dedicated to healing prayers.

IT WAS 10:30 P.M. AND **REBECCA LAWES** WAS EXHAUSTED. Her daughters, aged 4, 8 and 11, were tucked into bed. She pulled on her pajamas and said a weary goodnight to her husband. She closed her eyes; lying in bed she felt as though she was still moving.

Her prayers were interrupted by a voice that said, “Get up.” The voice pricked her memory about Father Dan's event and suddenly she recalled: Dr. Neme was at Holy Angels.

She announced from the darkness on her side of the bed, “Philip, we have to go to church.”

“Rebecca, for the love of God, we just got the girls to bed.”

Minutes later they were in the car and driving to Holy Angels, all five of them still in their pajamas.

The family sat in the pew for a while, taking it all in. They watched as Father Dan anointed with holy oil. This was important to Rebecca because she looked to Father for guidance.

She wondered: *Should I be doing this?* Spot check: *Well, what is Father Dan doing?* It's a cinch: *If Father is in it, I'm in it!*

A few steps behind, Dr. NemeH raised his hands in quiet prayer over each person. His lips moved silently and his face was a study in expressiveness. A volunteer approached and indicated they could come up for their prayers. “No,” said Rebecca, glancing toward her family, “they’re here for a prayer, not me.”

“You need to go, too.”

Rebecca rationalized. *Okay, she thought, I’ll go up just to give my moral support.*

Rebecca discovered that the lady next to her had been diagnosed just a few days earlier with breast cancer. The awareness of the life-and-death struggles that brought people to the healing service made her feel uncomfortable. She felt guilty standing there with her non-cancerous body. Her mind raced: *What should I say when he comes to me?*

Dr. NemeH stepped in front of Rebecca. He tilted his head a little to the side and said, “Hmm.”

Rebecca was thunderstruck. “*Hmm???*” *What does that mean?* She sensed he was reading her brain. She blurted, “I have cancer of the soul.” In that raw moment she had spoken the truth.

Rebecca’s mother had given birth to three daughters but chosen to abandon Rebecca and keep the two older girls. That is how baby Rebecca came to be adopted. Her childhood became a long nightmare of abuse. “My adoptive parents constantly belittled me as a person, telling me they wished they had never adopted me and that I was the biggest mistake they had ever made. It was my fault they couldn’t go on vacations or have things. After an exceptionally brutal beating in the 11th grade, I was put into foster care. I was told by the therapist that I should never have children of my own because my childhood had set me up to be an unfit parent. I met my birth mother and it was like looking into a mirror, she looked so much like me. I wondered, *How could she have abandoned me?*”

“But I always knew Christ was there. I couldn’t see Him but I could feel Him. All my life, through everything, I have felt Him by my side, telling me, ‘Everything is going to be okay.’ But I was filled with resentment and anger.”

Cancer of the soul.

There in the prayer line, Dr. NemeH and Rebecca made eye contact. She could see that he was praying fervently. He put his fingers on the back of her neck and she felt the touch of a flame. Hot fire entered at that point and spread throughout her entire body.

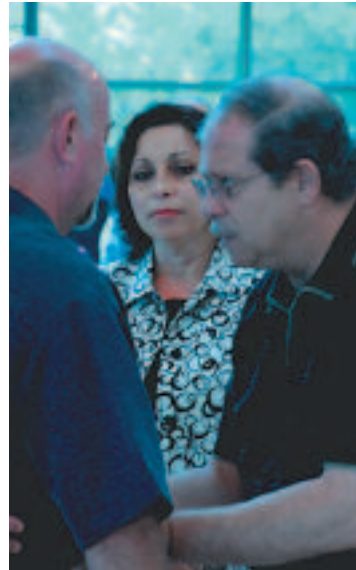
She started falling. Her legs were shaking, her knees were weak, and she heard her little one cry out, “You’re killing my Mommy!” She thought, *I have no control; this is not a choice.* She

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heard someone soothe her daughter. “No, no, no, she’s just going to lay down for a little bit...” Then it was lights out. Except...

Except...she saw a different kind of Light. A very beautiful White Light. “As a child you grow up seeing various images of what Jesus looks like. But, for me, He was a White Light. Without any doubt in my mind, I saw Christ.”

She lost all sense of time, place, feeling and awareness. She received a message: “Rebecca, your faith has healed you.” When she woke she was suffused with a magnificent feeling of peace.



FOR REBECCA, IT WAS A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE. “I had so much baggage. The cancer of my soul had gotten worse as I got older. Now, things don’t scare me like they used to. I’m not as judgmental and negative as I used to be. I’m not jealous of families. I know God put me through what He did for a reason. Now, I’m working with kids who have problems and I ‘get it.’ The resentment and anger — gone. The burden — gone. I gave it to God. He took it. It was *awesome* to be able to have that release. I was hearing Christ talk to me all my life, so there was a connectedness. But God’s gift was that I got to *see* Him. For me, that was huge, because you grow up believing in God but you’re never really sure. Everybody needs his or her own piece of proof. In Dr. NemeH, I met someone whose gifts I needed to open that door for me to the peace that is available. I couldn’t access it by myself; the human side of me blocked the door. God is using Dr. NemeH to remind us that Christ is needed right now in our world and society and culture.”

Father Dan reflects on the power of the healing service. “Our human stories connect our lives together; our human weakness is the common bond between us. It’s our fracturedness that allows the Holy Spirit to flow through, and then Christ is made present in a very tangible way. We are able to reorder what is important in life.”

Father Dan and Dr. NemeH are comrades focused, as is Pope Benedict, upon making the faith of the Church understandable, immediate, and, most important, alive. They are like two great conductors, bringing to full voice those who can’t find the tune by themselves, those who don’t quite know how to sing the song of love that is stirring deep in their souls. ○

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<sup>1</sup> Moynihan, Robert. *Let God’s Light Shine Forth: The Spiritual Vision of Pope Benedict XVI* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 101-102.

Maura Poston Zagras writes from Cleveland, Ohio.