

O Holy Spirit, Root of Life

Robin Knowles Wallace

This year, 1998, marks the celebration of the 900th anniversary of the birth of a remarkable woman, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), whose writings inspired this text. A nun, she eventually became the spiritual leader and administrator of two communities (at Rupertsberg, near Bingen, and at Eibingen, both in present-day Germany). Hildegard wrote about her visions (*Scivias*), natural science, herbs and medicine, lives of saints, and composed a collection of over 70 liturgical songs (*Symphonia*). Her letters spread her influence far beyond her convents: she corresponded with kings and leaders of the church. Translations of Hildegard's works, biographies about her, and recordings of her music have appeared widely in the last ten years. It will be helpful to include information about Hildegard as part of "the cloud of witnesses" when using this hymn text.

Jean Wiebe Janzen, a poet living in Fresno, California, teaches poetry writing at Fresno Pacific College, in Fresno public schools, and at Eastern Mennonite College in Virginia. Her primary work has been in free verse, and she is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship in Poetry, 1995. Janzen wrote her first hymns in meter at the request of the Mennonite Church. Eight of her hymns were published in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* in 1992. These included three texts based on the writings of medieval mystics—Hildegard, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and Julian of Norwich.

"O Holy Spirit, Root of life" is based on three hymns by Hildegard, "O vis eternitatis," "O virtus Sapientie," and "Spiritu sanctus." Janzen used the translations by Jerry Dybdal and Matthew Fox, found in Hildegard of Bingen's *Book of Divine Works with Letters and Songs* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Bear and Company, 1987). This hymn appeared first in *Hymnal:*

A Worship Book #123, then in three hymnals printed in 1995: *Chalice Hymnal* #251, *The New Century Hymnal* #57, and *With One Voice* #688. It also appears in two hymnals from Canada, *Voices United* 1996, #379, and the hymnal of the Presbyterian Church of Canada (at the writing of this article, in publication).

Although the opening line of this hymn is directed to the Spirit, and it appears in the sections about the Holy Spirit in most hymnals, I believe that *Hymnal: A Worship Book* is more correct about its interpretation by placing it between two trinitarian hymns. All of the stanzas draw on characteristics and actions traditionally associated with different Persons of the Trinity.

The concept of *viriditas* ("the color green") was important to Hildegard in describing life, both physical and spiritual, quickened by the Holy Spirit ("Introduction" by Barbara J. Newman to *Scivias by Hildegard of Bingen*, New York: Paulist Press, 1990, p. 25). *Viriditas* is reflected in the opening lines of this hymn in the images of root, life, creation, cleansing, anointing (with oils derived from green plants), and awakening. Wings appear in Hildegard's visions and reflect the biblical images of the wings of the dove who descended upon Jesus at his baptism, as well as the wings of God seen in Exodus 19:4 and the psalms, particularly Ps. 57:1. In this first stanza the parts of the Trinity are named in several ways, beginning with the Holy Spirit. Creator and "Root of life" are often associated with the First Person of the Trinity, but John 1:1-4 reminds us that Jesus Christ was present at creation and Proverbs 8:22-31 recalls the presence of the Holy Spirit through identification with Wisdom. "Cleanser of all things" suggests both God as the cleanser through the flood and Jesus Christ whose death cleansed us from sin.

The movement of God's wings continues in the energy of Eternal Vigor in the opening of the second stanza. Vigor is related also to the growth of plants, so it echoes the sense of *viriditas* from

the first stanza. Saving One refers to both the Godhead and to Jesus Christ, whose saving actions together form salvation history. This stanza goes on to describe the saving work of Christ Jesus, the living Word, who frees us, wears our pain, and restores all creation. The use of Word in this text (by speaking of creation in the first stanza and focusing on God incarnate in this second stanza) ties together the concepts of Word—Logos—Wisdom, concepts used in connection both with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, also associated with Wisdom.

Thus the third stanza begins with Wisdom, currently enjoying a revival of interest under her Greek name *Sophia*, due in part to biblical studies which have uncovered her tradition and the connection with Jesus as the Wisdom of God (for example, 1 Corinthians 1:30, "Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God"). Soaring Power recalls the wings of the first stanza and lifts our spirits as all creation is held in the very wings of God and taken soaring to God's heart in loving freedom. This movement of wings echoes the movement of the three persons of the Trinity in this text, a movement described by contemporary Christian theologians as *perichoresis*.

Consider the word-picture Janzen has drawn from Hildegard's texts: we are encompassed by the Holy God of Wisdom and carried, circling the world, cleansed and awakened, set free and restored, to enjoy all of creation. We have been invited to join in the dance of all creation, the dance begun in and nurtured by the Trinity. The nurturing and protecting wings of God shelter us and lovingly carry us. There is a sense of embodiment both of us and of God. And no matter where in the world we may go, God is already there.

Persons singing this text have mentioned feeling encircled and encompassed by the loving arms/wings of God as they sang this text, and commended its use for healing services. One person, recovering from a lengthy illness, shared, "This is a very comforting

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text, like wrapping up in a warm comforter or blanket and having your faith and energy restored." It is unusual to hear such a comment about a new hymn, and it speaks to the power of the Holy Spirit, which can reach through a Catholic abbess in medieval Germany to a Mennonite poet in California in the twentieth century to comfort and empower a United Methodist musician in Missouri five years later.

"O Holy Spirit, Root of Life" appeared first with the tune HEALER by Leonard Enns, 1989. Enns (b.1948), a Canadian Mennonite, teaches at Conrad-Greble College in Ontario, part of the University of Waterloo. A member of the Canadian League of Composers, he has published hymns and hymn-anthems as well as organ and other instrumental pieces. HEALER is set in 4/4 and 6/4 (with the 6/4 in alternating divisions of three and two beats a measure). In the Mennonite tradition it would be sung a cappella, in four parts. This tune has the advantage of being contemporary, with freer rhythms, giving this text a fresh sound. Reinforce the melody with oboe or violin when using keyboard to help teach this tune to congregations accustomed to singing in unison.

The other hymnals all use the tune PUER NOBIS NASCITUR (found in *Piae Cantiones* and adapted by Michael Praetorius early in the 1600s) for this text, set in 3/4 with the rhythm giving the text a dance-like motion. PUER NOBIS NASCITUR has the advantage of familiarity and several harmonizations are available. George Woodward's harmonization appears in *Chalice Hymnal* and *Voices United* (as well as *The Presbyterian Hymnal* and many others), and works particularly well on organ, because of the tenths which appear three times in this short tune. *With One Voice* and *The New Century Hymnal* use harmonizations that differ only in one measure and work equally well on piano or organ. *The Hymnal 1982* (Episcopal) contains three harmonizations of PUER NOBIS NASCITUR: #124 is keyboard based; #193 (first harmonization) appears to have been

written for voices, as the alto and tenor cross parts at the end of the first phrase; #193 (second harmonization) is a setting by John Erickson (which first appeared in *Supplement to the Book of Hymns*, 1982 [United Methodist]) for "keyboard, bells, Orff instruments, finger cymbals, etc."). Any of these harmonizations could be used to vary the accompaniment, with Erickson's used perhaps for the middle stanza.

The accompanying prayer was written to complement this hymn text. They might be used together in a healing service or as part of a service of prayer. They could also be appropriately used in Advent, springtime, Pentecost season (including Trinity Sunday), on Hildegard's feast day (September 17), or Earth Day. ■

Prayer for Healing (to be used with "O Holy Spirit, Root of life")

Saving God, you know the hurting places in our lives
and the wounds of the world.
Cleanse us that we may know your freeing power in our lives
and sense your loving presence moving throughout the world.
Come and encompass us, O Saving One, Creator, Holy Wisdom,
Trinity, who gloriously renews the life of the world. Amen.

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O Holy Spirit, Root of Life

O Holy Spirit, Root of Life
Creator, cleanser of all things,
anoint our wounds, awaken us
with lustrous movement of your wings.

Eternal Vigor, Saving One,
you free us by your living Word,
becoming flesh to wear our pain,
and all creation is restored.

O Holy Wisdom, Soaring Power,
encompass us with wings unfurled,
and carry us, encircling all,
above, below, and through the world.

—Based on the writings of Hildegard of Bingen.
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