

## Breathing Forth the Word: Yves Congar's Articulation of the Activity of The Holy Spirit In The Life of Christ

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### Abstract

Much of Yves M-J. Congar's O.P. (1904-1995) later work concentrates more explicitly on pneumatology, most famously his three-volume *I believe in the Holy Spirit* (1979-80). Writing shortly after its publication, Congar notes that "if he could draw only one conclusion from [his] studies on the Holy Spirit, it would concern the Spirit's bond with the Word. There is no breath without speaking or articulating something." Congar later argues in *The Word and the Spirit* (1984) that the doctrines of pneumatology and Christology should not be treated separately but should inform and shape each other. This led him to develop what he termed a pneumatological Christology and a Christological pneumatology. A criticism that Congar dealt with on several occasions was that Catholic theology suffered from a form of Christomonism, whereby the Holy Spirit appeared to be subordinated to the Son, with dire consequences for the ecclesial life of the church. This essay briefly examines the accusation of Christomonism and evaluates Congar's response to it. It primarily does this by critically engaging with Congar's image of the Son as the *Word* and the Spirit as the *Breath*. As well as evaluating Congar's approach, this essay also suggests how his language could be expanded further.

### Keywords

Congar, Holy Spirit, Christomonism, Word, Breath

### Introduction

Writing in 1952 Yves Congar commented that "the things that divide us [Christians] in our notions of the nature of the Church find expression in points of language and usage which strike the eye and

attract immediate attention.”<sup>1</sup> For Congar, engaging with these different expressions was essential to furthering ecumenical dialogue. What “strikes the eye” in Congar’s own specific language about Christ and the Holy Spirit is how his expression changes over time. In earlier writings Congar refers to the Holy Spirit in the words of Tertullian as the *vicarius Christi* (Vicar of Christ), where the Spirit carries on the work of Christ alongside the Apostles.<sup>2</sup> It is not unfair to argue, as some scholars have, that in such works Congar appears to subordinate the Spirit to Christ.<sup>3</sup> However, in later works Congar instead favours Irenaeus’ image of Christ and the Spirit as the “two hands of God” acting in the world.<sup>4</sup> This image usually accompanies the pairing of the Son as the *Word* and the Spirit as the *Breath*. This essay will examine to what extent Congar’s later language provides a healthier and more fruitful way of expressing the Son and the Spirit’s economic relationship than his earlier articulations.

I will examine the words, in particular the images, Congar uses to describe the relationship between the *Word* of God and the *Spirit* of God. I argue that the shift from predominantly Christocentric language to a more balanced integration of Word and Spirit language, in part reflects his response to accusations made during the 1960s that Catholic theology suffered from a form of *Christomonism*.<sup>5</sup> This accusation claims that Catholic theology concentrates so much on Christ, that it effectively lacks a robust and fully developed pneumatology.<sup>6</sup> This, therefore, has detrimental consequences for its ecclesial life and teachings. Although Congar rejects the accusation, he does not dismiss it. He responds to it in various articles, published between the late 1960s and early 1980s.

<sup>1</sup> Yves M-J. Congar, *Christ, Our Lady and the Church: A Study in Eirenic Theology*, trans. Henry St. John (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Yves M-J. Congar, ‘The Holy Spirit and the Apostolic Body, Continuator of the Work of Christ’ in *The Mystery of the Church*, trans. by A. V. Littledale (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1960), pp. 147-186.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Famerée and Gilles Routhier, *Yves Congar* (Paris: Cerf, 2008), p. 149.

<sup>4</sup> Yves M-J. Congar, ‘The Human Spirit and the Spirit of God’, in *Spirit of God*, ed. by Mark E. Ginter, Susan Mader Brown and Joseph G. Mueller, (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), pp. 25, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Nikos A. Nissiotis, ‘The Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity for Church Life and Theology’, in *The Orthodox Ethos: Essays in Honor of the Centenary of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America* ed. by A.J. Philippou (Oxford: Holywell, 1964), pp. 32-69.

<sup>6</sup> See Pablo Arteaga, ‘How an Orthodox Accusation Became a Source of Inspiration for Congar’s Pneumatology’, *New Blackfriars*, 100: Sept (2019), pp. 526-537.

## Christomonism: A Harmless Jest?

Congar attributes the accusation of *Christomonism* to an Orthodox theologian, Nikos Nissiotis, but recognises that it was also echoed by other ecumenical observers of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>7</sup> Congar summarises Nissiotis' claim as follows:

Everything [in Catholic theology] is seen one-sidedly as referring to Christ. The Spirit is merely added to the Church, its ministries and its sacraments, all of which are already constituted. The Spirit simply carries out a function of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

In such a description, the role of the Spirit appears limited and is subordinated to Christ. The main reason why Congar rejects the accusation is fairly straightforward. He writes, "neither biblically nor dogmatically could one justify a conception of the Holy Spirit as autonomous with respect to the economy of the incarnate Word."<sup>9</sup> The Spirit has a mission, distinct from Christ's, but there is not a "hypostatic incarnation of the Holy Spirit"; the Spirit is not "manifested in a personal way".<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, he argues it is incorrect to imply that the western Church did not have a pneumatology, pointing instead to such examples as "the theology of the Spirit's operations and the Spirit's sanctifying indwelling in souls".<sup>11</sup>

Although Congar believed *Christomonism* to be "imprecise"<sup>12</sup> and "insufficiently substantiated",<sup>13</sup> there was an element of it that seemed to ring true and warranted further reflection. As Pablo Arteaga has recently demonstrated, Congar deals with the topic in at least seven different publications and appears to give both direct and indirect responses to it.<sup>14</sup> In one of these articles Congar makes the following suggestion:

Even if the accusation of "Christomonism" seems to us so massive that we must reject it, we cannot but profit from a critical second look at our Latin tradition.<sup>15</sup>

As Congar further reflects on the accusation, he progressively finds more examples in the Catholic tradition that could be seen as

<sup>7</sup> Yves M-J. Congar, 'Pneumatology or "Christomonism" in the Latin Tradition?', in *The Spirit of God*, pp. 162-196 (p. 162).

<sup>8</sup> Yves M-J. Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, trans. by David Smith (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984), p. 113.

<sup>9</sup> Congar, "Christomonism", p. 164.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>14</sup> Arteaga, p. 530.

<sup>15</sup> Congar, "Christomonism", p. 164.

encouraging such a view. Congar points to the theology of the Eucharist, of grace, of the Mystical Body, and of ecclesiology, as examples that could justify aspects of Nissiotis' criticism.<sup>16</sup> Congar acknowledges that these conceptions may have been shaped by the "Scholastic period", which

showed its predilection for developing the Christological aspect of the Christian mystery. It was led in this direction by its pursuit of notional clarity—the mystery of the Spirit offers little that a conceptualized discourse can grab hold of—and also by its tendency to pass from a consideration of the Economy to a consideration of ontology.<sup>17</sup>

Although Congar admits that aspects of Catholic tradition are Christocentric, on the whole, the accusation of *Christomonism* must be rejected as an exaggeration. He argues that a Catholic pneumatology is not completely absent from the tradition. A promising sign of how much this has changed is found in the more significant role the Holy Spirit is given in the theology of Vatican II.<sup>18</sup> However, Congar does not completely dismiss the accusation. His critical re-examination of the tradition reveals that in Catholic ecclesiology, clericalism and legalism were often exacerbated by a concentrated use of Christic language about the church.<sup>19</sup>

Congar's turn to pneumatology in the late 1970s, which led to his three-volume work, was not solely as a result of this accusation. There were numerous other factors that influenced Congar's renewed focus on the Spirit. His experience of Vatican II, the phenomenon of the Charismatic Renewal and the flourishing of ecumenical dialogue, were just three "events" of the Spirit in his own lifetime that undoubtedly shaped his work. However, there is a significant change in the language that Congar uses to describe the relationship between Christ and the Spirit<sup>20</sup> and it appears directly to address some of the concerns raised by the accusation. Perhaps, even more interesting than this change itself, is the way Congar chooses to structure it. I will now turn to examine what function this more balanced language plays in Congar's theology.

<sup>16</sup> Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, pp. 114-15.

<sup>17</sup> Congar, "Christomonism", p. 194.

<sup>18</sup> Yves M-J. Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 3 vols., trans. David Smith, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), I, pp. 167-173.

<sup>19</sup> Yves M-J. Congar, 'A Theology of the Holy Spirit', in *Spirit of God*, pp. 75-123, (p. 97).

<sup>20</sup> Aidan Nichols, *Yves Congar* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), p. 61; Elizabeth Teresa Groppe, *Yves Congar's Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 48, 75; Mark E. Ginter et al. *The Spirit of God*, p. 7.

Congar's Balanced Language: The Son-*Word* and Spirit-*Breath*

In 1983, Congar wrote “if I myself were to draw one conclusion from my studies on the Holy Spirit, it would concern the Spirit’s bond with the Word.”<sup>21</sup> In fact he explores this “bond” in more detail in 1984 in *La Parole et le Souffle*. In this work, he characterises the bond in a chiasmic turn of phrase, “no Christology without pneumatology and no pneumatology without Christology.”<sup>22</sup> Congar’s chiasm is intended to ensure the health of both Christology and pneumatology and consequently the health of other doctrines too. This chiasm is showcased by Congar’s consistent reference to the Son and Spirit as the *Word* and *Breath* of God. The significance of this pairing is lost in the English translation of the *La Parole et le Souffle*, which is published under the title of *The Word and the Spirit* rather than *The Word and the Breath*. Congar employs the Trinitarian image of the “thought, the word and the breath” more frequently than others such as; sun, light and warmth; spring, river and sea; the root, the branch, and the fruit. All of which were commonly used by patristic sources as well.<sup>23</sup>

Before examining why Congar seems to favour the *Word/Breath* pairing, it is worth noting that on numerous occasions, Congar recognises the limits of any language used to describe the Holy Spirit, “the mystery of the uncreated one who is ‘light beyond all light.’”<sup>24</sup> These images, he writes, “are obviously very imperfect” and their “adequacy must be denied even as they are being proposed.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, as a way of understanding what Congar means by *Word/Breath* it will be helpful to consider three questions:

- (i) What is Congar *not* saying about the Holy Spirit in this analogy?
- (ii) What is Congar actually saying?
- (iii) What is he saying about the *relationship* between the Son and Spirit?

<sup>21</sup> Congar, ‘The Human Spirit and the Spirit of God’, p. 25. See also Yves M-J. Congar, ‘Theology of the Holy Spirit and Charismatic Renewal’ in *Called to Life*, (Slough: St Paul Publications, 1985), p. 84; Congar, ‘Pneumatology Today’ in *Spirit of God*, p. 220; Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> *The Word and the Spirit*, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> ‘The Human Spirit and the Spirit of God’, p. 56.

<sup>24</sup> *The Word and the Spirit*, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> ‘The Human Spirit and the Spirit of God’, p. 56.

(i) What the Spirit is *not*

According to Congar, when using the language of *Breath*:

... we need to avoid thinking of the Holy Spirit either in terms of the breath of an animal or the simple animation of nature, which we would risk doing by stringing together Old Testament passages in which the word “spirit-breath, *ruach*,” is found.<sup>26</sup>

By this, Congar is arguing that ‘Breath’ should not lead us to consider the Spirit as a purely immanent life force that permeates the universe and causes its evolution, such as that found in the *Pneuma* of the Stoics.<sup>27</sup>

Congar also argues that the Spirit is *not* the Word, and although they are often together in scripture and are hard to distinguish at times, this is rather because they are both involved in the same work. He also argues that the Word and the Spirit are *not* intermediaries, nor modalities through which a creative and provident God separately acts.<sup>28</sup> The Three-Personed God acts as one in the world. Therefore, in relation to the analogy, the *Breath* is never an isolated breath, nor simply the animating life force that is present only in the world. It always carries forth the *Word*.

(ii) What the Spirit *is*

For Congar, the term *Breath* has natural connotations with *activity* and *movement*. The *Breath* is part of the one action of speech, which has three dynamic and simultaneous elements, “The Thought, The Word, and The Breath”. Congar writes, it is the breath that makes speech happen, “that makes speech come forth and that carries it afar.”<sup>29</sup>

Although the *Breath* is representative of movement, Congar distinguishes between the “Spirit’s *action*, a simple presence of cause, and the *gift*, the indwelling of the Spirit as a communication of grace that enables us to enter into a relationship of communion and familial intimacy with God.”<sup>30</sup> A word of love, breathed forth, dwells, grows and moves in us. However, the Spirit does not remain in the world but is the “Breath, the gush of air that wafts back to the Father.”<sup>31</sup> And, it does not return empty:

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. See also, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, I, p. 20.

<sup>28</sup> ‘The Human Spirit and the Spirit of God’, p. 52.

<sup>29</sup> ‘A Theology of the Holy Spirit’, p. 79.

<sup>30</sup> ‘The Human Spirit and the Spirit of God’, p. 33.

<sup>31</sup> *Called to life*, p. 77.

This indwelling of the Holy Spirit must not end in a sterile intimacy. The Spirit is Breath. The guest who dwells within us wants us to be dedicated and fruitful.<sup>32</sup>

Congar argues that this dynamic movement and action of the Spirit is not for its own end. The Spirit does not do its own work. The Spirit is not autonomous,<sup>33</sup> it is always connected with the Word:

The Breath is the one who breathes forth the utterance of the Word far and wide; the Spirit ensures that Christ will continue to come in Christians throughout the course of history. As time unfolds he constantly carries forward the truth which the Word contains.<sup>34</sup>

The Spirit brings Christ to life in the world, not only in the Incarnation, in which Congar gives great emphasis to the role of the Spirit, but also in the work of Jesus as the anointed Messiah.<sup>35</sup> Especially, after the Ascension, the Spirit continues to bring life to the ecclesial Body of Christ, “unceasingly” making “Christ’s work real in the present.”<sup>36</sup> This is illustrated in Congar’s claim that the life and the activity of the church can be seen totally as an epiclesis.<sup>37</sup> The invocation of the Spirit makes Christ present through the established structures of the church.

So, for Congar, *Breath* encapsulates an understanding of the Holy Spirit as *activity*, *gift*, and *life-giving*. From this brief survey, one can see how Congar is using the analogy to help him adhere to his own basic chiasm. Congar distinguishes but does not separate the Spirit from Christ. This is further illustrated by examining the *relationship* between the *Word* and the *Breath*.

### (iii) *Word/Breath* and the relationship between the Son and the Spirit

Congar neatly summarises the relationship between the Son and the Spirit in the following extract, where he comments on the analogy of speech, which is worth examining more closely:

<sup>32</sup> ‘The Human Spirit and the Spirit of God’, p. 69.

<sup>33</sup> *The Word and the Spirit*, pp. 48-77.

<sup>34</sup> *Called to Life*, p. 84. See a similar expression in Congar, ‘Pneumatology Today’, p. 221.

<sup>35</sup> *The Word and the Spirit*, pp. 85-100.

<sup>36</sup> Yves M-J. Congar, ‘Third Article of the Creed: The Impact of Pneumatology on the Life of the Church’, in *Spirit of God*, pp. 243-264, (p. 250).

<sup>37</sup> *I believe in the Holy Spirit*, III, pp. 267-274.

There is no Word without Breath; it would remain in the throat and would address no one. There is no Breath without a Word: it would have no content and would transmit nothing to anyone.<sup>38</sup>

What does this reveal to us of the relationship? Firstly, the *Son-Word* and *Spirit-Breath* are always at work together. We see in this example the chiasm in analogical form: “There is no Word without Breath: No Breath without Word.” Secondly, although the Son and Spirit work together, Congar recognises their own distinctive and essential roles. *Christomonism* is impossible in this analogy as the *Breath* is needed to carry the *Word* out of the throat so that it can address the world. Likewise, Congar rules out the other extreme of *pneumatomonism*, an unhealthy concentration on the Spirit, as the *Word* provides the content, the message, the tangible form. The Spirit never speaks of itself. The *Breath* and *Word* mutually inform and depend upon each other.

Finally, one can also see here how Congar is echoing the Thomistic conception of the two missions of the Son and the Spirit, which reflect the immanent trinitarian processions. The two missions bring about the one work of God. However, Congar does not stretch the analogy into immanent relations. The image of the *Word/Breath*, as part of the Trinitarian analogy of the act of speech is, for Congar, an economic image. One reason, perhaps, why Congar is reticent about applying it to the immanent Trinity, is because he had his own reservations about Karl Rahner’s *und umgekehrt* (and vice versa). Congar argued that the *Grundaxiom* (‘the “economic” Trinity is the “immanent” Trinity and vice versa’) could only be held as true by keeping some distance between God’s self-communication and God in Godself.<sup>39</sup> As with Rahner’s axiom, Congar’s own chiasm raises some critical questions and requires some qualifications.

### Some Critical Questions and a Creative Suggestion

First, one criticism of Congar’s approach might be that his language still perpetuates some form of *Christomonism*. The *Word* provides the content, arguably what matters most, and therefore the *Breath*’s role is secondary.

However, such a criticism is problematic because the Spirit does not have its own separate “content” to communicate, as the Son and the Spirit are both God. Furthermore, Congar’s chiasmic approach tries to protect against any monistic tendencies by stressing the joint

<sup>38</sup> Congar, ‘Pneumatology Today’, in *Spirit of God*, p. 220. See also Congar, *Called to Life*, p. 84.

<sup>39</sup> ‘The Human Spirit and the Spirit of God’, p. 32.



relationship of the Son and Spirit. The Spirit is not dispensable. The Spirit is not an optional extra. Its presence and involvement in the life of Christ and in the life of a Christian is essential. Christ cannot be fully understood without the Paraclete, the one who will “guide us into all truth” (Jn. 16:13) – no *Word* without *Breath*. Likewise, the Spirit does not lead to a truth distinct or different from that of Christ, who is the “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6) – no *Breath* without *Word*.

Second, one might argue that Congar too closely identifies the Son and the Spirit. Could not the Spirit’s activity in the life of Christ be confused as an alternative explanation for the divinity of Jesus? Are adoptionism or modalism lurking around the corner? Again, Congar uses the analogy of the *Word* and *Breath* to stress the distinctive role of each. There are two missions, the Son and Spirit each contribute their own “hypostatic or personal stamp to a common action.” The Son is sent into the world to bring redemption, the Spirit is sent into our hearts to interiorise and personalise the treasury of grace acquired by Christ.<sup>40</sup>

Third, in the opposite sense, is the analogy in danger of separating out the one work of God? Once again, Congar’s approach appears to deal with this. There is only one Word of God that is spoken. The Spirit never reveals itself as a separate and autonomous agent, it always breathes forth the Word. The *Word* and the *Breath* are part of the one trinitarian analogy of the act of speaking.

Perhaps, if we were to expand Congar’s analogy further than he does, it may help to offer a clearer articulation of what difference the Spirit makes. We could expand *Breath* so that it does not simply imply the *active delivery* of the *Word* but also its *expression*. If we reflect on what speech involves, there is a creativity, a playfulness, an endless variation in how a word can be expressed. Conveying meaning rests as much on the speaker’s tone and intonation as on their choice of words. Therefore, the *Breath* is not additional, nor inconsequential but integral to the how the *Word* sounds.

To fully understand the Word made flesh, we must hear how it sounds. Perhaps this is a clearer way of understanding what Congar is trying to achieve by proposing a pneumatological Christology – a Spirit Christology, which takes seriously the action of the Spirit in shaping the life and work of Christ. One sees this in Congar’s constant request to move the language of Christology away from pure *ontology*, and to ground it in *history*.<sup>41</sup> Jesus of Nazareth is the anointed Christ-Messiah, because he is the Word incarnate spoken in the power of the Holy Spirit. This also links with Congar’s description

<sup>40</sup> ‘A Theology of the Holy Spirit’, p. 111

<sup>41</sup> *The Word and the Spirit*, pp. 85-92; ‘A Theology of the Holy Spirit’ pp. 103, 111.

of the Holy Spirit as the *Eschatological Gift*, the one who connects the “already and the not yet” of salvation history, the one who makes and will continue to make the Word present. As Congar writes, “The Spirit is the Breath which pushes the Gospel out into the newness of history.”<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

The words and images we use about the Word and the Spirit matter. Congar’s consistent choice of language about the Word and the Spirit matter too. They reveal not only his concern for avoiding monistic tendencies but also that he was striving to articulate a more comprehensive expression of the dynamic relationship between the Son and the Spirit.

The accusation of *Christomonism* was the result of Congar taking seriously the concern of an ecumenical dialogue partner. Although, there has not been space to treat it here, Congar recognised how an imbalance in Christology or pneumatology could have detrimental consequences for ecclesiology. It seems most fitting then to close with the words of Ignatius Hazim, an Orthodox Metropolitan of Latakia, who Congar cites at various points and who made the following comment during an opening address at the World Council of Churches in 1968:

Without the Spirit, God is far away, Christ is in the past, the Gospel is a dead letter, the Church is simply an organization, authority is domination, our mission is propaganda, worship is simply reminiscence.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. ‘A Theology of the Holy Spirit’, p. 111.

<sup>43</sup> Métropole de Lattaquié Ignace, ‘Conference D’Ouverture’, *Foi et Vie* (November-December 1968), 8-23. cited by Congar, *I believe in the Holy Spirit*, II, p. 33.