

Our Advocate
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A minister, a priest, and a lawyer all die on the same day at the same time and appear before Peter at the pearly gates of heaven. Peter looks at the minister and says, "Welcome to Heaven! My friend, you have lived a wonderful life, here are the keys to your heavenly hovel." So the minister takes the keys from Peter and walks over to her new home. Then Peter turns to the priest and says, "Welcome to Heaven! You have also lived an exemplary life on earth; here are the keys to your heavenly shack." So the priest takes the keys from Peter and walks over to his heavenly shack. Finally, Peter turns to the lawyer and says, "Welcome to Heaven! You have lived a wonderful life too, and so here are the keys to your heavenly mansion." So the lawyer takes the keys from Peter and walks over to his new luxurious heavenly mansion.

Now the minister and the priest were carefully watching this interaction and so they walk back up to Peter and the minister says, "Peter, I know that I just got here and I'm not trying to complain or anything . . . but I didn't have a lot of earthly possessions." The priest chimes in, "Yes, I even took a vow of poverty to be a priest! So we both just thought that once we got into heaven, well, we thought that we would get to own mansions like the lawyer over there."

"Ah, yes," Peter said, "I do understand your concerns, but you both have to understand that priests and ministers are a dime a dozen here in Heaven. But lawyers? Well, we hardly ever get any of them!"

Now before going any further with this sermon, I should clarify that my one and only sister is a lawyer, so the joke is really all in good fun. I appreciate that it points out some of the terrible, but admittedly funny, stereotypes we may have about lawyers.

But the legal profession is one of the oldest professions in existence, and most would say that it dates back to Ancient Greece since the Athenian orators often functioned as lawyers. And we certainly have examples in the Old Testament of judgments being handed down by those in power, whether that was a judge or a king.

So practices were in place—of having moral or legal codes, requiring people to abide by those codes, or if someone violated them, having a trial to argue your case. And at the end of the trial, judgment would be handed down to the person accused—all of these practices seem to be in the mindset of some people thousands of years ago. We have Hammurabi's Code and the Levitical Codes to help prove our case. We have the woman caught in adultery and Jesus pardoning her before punishment would have been inflicted. And we have the trial of Jesus himself before the Sanhedrin and Pontius Pilate. When you look for it, the Bible is full of stories about judgments, laws on the books, and the codes required of the faithful for good conduct in the community.

But what is so interesting is that in today's passage from the 14th Chapter of the Gospel of John, the Holy Spirit is referred to as the Advocate. The Greek word used is Paraclete which can mean Helper or Comforter or Advocate. The word is actually the equivalent of a defense lawyer. So Jesus basically says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Defense Attorney, to be with you forever."

This brings out the unique nature of the Gospel of John since John is the only Gospel writer who ever refers to the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete. John presents the Holy Spirit as our Divine Defense Attorney, the part of the Trinity charged with defending Christians from the attacks of the world and also defending Christ's cause to humanity.

Even though Jesus is leaving and will no longer be with the disciples, he reassures them by saying that the Holy Spirit will remain to be with them forever. Jesus says, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live." Widows and orphans were the most vulnerable in the highly patriarchal society in which Jesus himself lived. This is part of the reason why in a later passage in John, Jesus makes sure to entrust the care of his mother to his beloved disciple even as he is dying on the cross. He was making sure that Mary would be cared for and defended, that she would have a home and a son to be her advocate in a society where she lacked power.

It is so telling that Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will be with us forever and that we will not be orphans. These are promises, words of reassurance, they are meant to give comfort and put our minds at ease.

After all, the role of the Holy Spirit as our Defense Attorney is to provide some protection, to maybe even clear a path for us, to have a clear path to God. In my own life, I had one of these moments where I felt the advocating, defending work of the Spirit through the actions of a person-----

I happened to be in India during a festival—the Gowlis, a local indigenous tribe—were celebrating their goddess day and night for a week. The festival culminated in a huge celebration in one of the neighboring villages. All of the Gowlis would gather together from near and far to dance and to sing and to drum and to pray and to eat and just gather together as one people. So Sr. Reeta, one of the nuns at the convent where I was staying, Pash, my mentor, and yours truly trekked through the muddy, excruciatingly hot jungle to witness the celebration.

We got to the village and walked up to where the dancing and drumming was taking place and we definitely could not be incognito. Since many of these Gowlis had literally never laid eyes on a Caucasian woman before, I ended up being a huge distraction. And I felt a bit like a caged animal at the zoo on display. People swarmed around me and just stared, pointing at how weird I suppose I looked to them. Anyone who had a camera phone was taking my picture and it was hard for me to even get close to the dancing. When I tried to move to a different location everyone followed and blocked my way, so I tried the best that I could from my vantage point to see the dancing in the distance.

And then one man, a village elder, came to speak to us and he escorted Sr. Reeta and me up to the front of the crowd. He allowed us to stand in the inner circle closest to the dancers and asked people to part for us so that I could witness the ceremony. He allowed me to film the dance and take pictures, and again, people were taking pictures of me as I was taking pictures of the festival, but this time, I had my Advocate next to me and some room to breathe and just witness this mesmerizing religious observance.

This Gowli elder ended up being my Defender of sorts and allowed me to have a place in the tribe's inner circle to witness the celebrations and share in the joy of the festivities. He didn't leave me orphaned and alone, separated from this event I had hiked through the jungle to witness. Instead, he came to me and escorted me up to see the action.

And it may sound strange, but this is often how I see the Holy Spirit at work in this passage and in the world. Sometimes the Spirit takes us by the hand and leads us to the action. Sometimes the Spirit is our Advocate and our Defender and blazes a trail ahead of us to witness the miraculous world we inhabit and take part in the glory of creation. Sometimes the Spirit works through people and inspires them to reach out to the strangers and the foreigners.

The Spirit is about movement and new horizons; the Spirit so often leads people through the wilderness and reveals the glory of God along the way. And why can't the Holy Spirit work through people, to inspire them to include others? Why can't the Holy Spirit work in mysterious ways to help enlarge peoples' worldviews? Why can't we call this phenomenon of enlightenment and new understanding the work of the Holy Spirit in the world?

For a long time, the Holy Spirit seemed to be the neglected part of the Trinity. Clark Pinnock, a Canadian seminary professor, related, "Thankfully, the Spirit is no longer the Cinderella of the Trinity, uninvited to the party, but rather a rich and unexplored theological frontier." There has been a real resurgence in people pondering the meaning and nature of the Holy Spirit, but it's hard to know what to do with the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit evolved to be God's primary agent in the world and then evolved again by the time of the Council of Nicaea to literally be the third person of the Trinity. But taken metaphorically, the presence and action of the Holy Spirit seems to point us to valuable ways in which human beings experience God.

We can experience God as an unseen, empowering presence, as a force that compels us forward to do good works in the world, as an impulse that opens our eyes and our hearts and hones us in on the divine in everyday living, on the life-affirming wonders of God's creation we are called to experience. And I would argue that the Holy Spirit can work through the actions of a Gowli elder reaching out to an intimidated American just trying to take some pictures and figure out what this dancing and drumming was all about.

Those moments where the Divine shines through point to the active role of the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit can be the trailblazer, the Advocate, the force that sheds some light on the interconnectedness of creation and all of humanity.

So maybe it will always seem strange to have a Divine Defense Attorney as one of the persons of our Trinity. But the Spirit moves and breathes and works in the world in ways that are not often predictable—and yet are transformative. We know that we do indeed have an Advocate that will be with us forever. We know that we have a force that will break us out of our comfort zones and lead us forward onto new holy ground. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.