

## THE GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

In preparation for confirmation, most students learn to list these gifts, i.e. wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, piety and fear of the Lord. For the gifts of the Holy Spirit are received in Baptism and completed in Confirmation. And likewise, there has been in the last 40 years a desire for a more "Spirit-filled" prayer life and religion in general. However, few of the faithful have reflected upon what these gifts are or why they are important. This article will describe what we mean by the gifts of the Holy Spirit in general, each one in particular, and how they can guide our life.

### I. THE GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Paragraphs 1830 and 1831 of the Catechism describes the gifts of the Holy Spirit as completing and perfecting the virtues and making us open to the inspirations of the Spirit. St. Thomas Aquinas compares the influence of the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the wind upon the sails of a ship; one can move a ship to a certain degree by rowing, but more swiftly and easily by catching the wind in sails. The gifts like sails, allow us to catch the inspirations of the Spirit and soar above even ordinary goodness to a level that is "heroic, indeed divine." See Summa Theologica Part II-I, question 68, article 1. The saints are people who learned by the end of their lives to respond to the Spirit through those gifts as a matter of course, to live at this divine level on a regular basis. And we are all called to live at that level and so one day to shine forth with the saints in light. Thus, as Pope Leo XIII said in his 1897 encyclical on the Holy Spirit Divinum Illud Munus (That Divine Office), we "need those seven gifts which are properly attributed to the Holy Spirit. . . . By means of these gifts the soul is excited and encouraged to attain the evangelical beatitudes which, like the flowers that come forth in the spring time are the signs and harbingers of eternal beatitude."

The actual list of the gifts of the Holy Spirit comes from a prophecy of Isaiah about the Messiah. In chapter 11 of the Book of Isaiah, the prophet says of the future king, "The Spirit of the Lord will be upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and fortitude, the spirit of knowledge and piety. And his delight shall be the fear of the Lord." (There are actually six gifts listed in the prophecy, but the last gift can be translated as both piety and fear of the Lord, bringing the number in general tradition to seven.) These gifts were to be those of the Messiah; and at His baptism, Jesus in His human nature received this Spirit in fullness. See Matt. 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22. However, Jesus also promised a number of times to send the Spirit in fullness upon

His disciples. See, e.g., John 14:26, 15:26-27, 16:7, 13-15; Acts 1:8. At Pentecost, the promise was fulfilled for the early Christians, and the Spirit guided them to proclaim the Gospel to many nations gathered in Jerusalem, and then to be witnesses of Christ and His Church throughout the world. The gifts of the Holy Spirit allow us to be open to the Spirit as those first Christians were, and like them to witness to the faith to the world. Following columns will discuss each of the gifts in turn and describe how they allow us to be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

## II. WISDOM

In The Prince of Egypt, the animated movie about the Exodus, there is a scene where Moses as a young man wonders what meaning his life has. In response, his father-in-law Jethro compares our lives to threads of a tapestry that can only be understood as a part of the whole. Accompanying that analogy is a song with the refrain "You've got to look with heaven's eyes." The gift of the Holy Spirit that is wisdom involves that ability to look at all things with the eyes of heaven.

In the Old Testament, the wisdom literature often presented lady Wisdom as either a maiden or a matron, inviting her beloved or her children to learn about the ways of God and be refreshed with His bounty. See, e.g., Prov. 1:20-33, 9:1-6; Wis. 8:1-16; Sir. 4:11-14. She was there at creation and teaches us how to judge all things in accordance with the holiness of God. See, e.g., Prov. 8:22-36; Wis. 9:9-11. A wise man continually ponders and lives according to the order that God has set forth from all time. See, e.g., Prov. 2:1-22; Sir. 14:20-27. In Greek philosophy (the term means "love of wisdom"), a wise man was considered one who understands first principles, such as the good, the true and the beautiful, and orders his life and desires accordingly. Thus, Aristotle in the beginning of Metaphysics, describes wisdom as, among other things, the knowledge of the highest, indeed divine, goods, and the ability to live in accordance with them.

As Pope John Paul II pointed out in his encyclical Fides et Ratio (Faith and Reason), the Scriptural writers, were able to incorporate the desire for truth and learning of Greek philosophy, but with an understanding that even the highest human wisdom is not sufficient. Jesus raises us to a greater wisdom, the wisdom of the Cross, the ability to see all things in the light of God's love shown to us from the Cross and the triumph of that love in the Resurrection. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 2:6-16; Eph. 1:15-21. St. Thomas Aquinas explains that the gift of wisdom allows us to see all things in the light of Christ, not merely with abstract knowledge, but through our friendship with Him. See Summa Theologica part II-II question 45, articles 1-2.

The world calls someone wise if he gets along with the world and thus makes himself prosperous, popular and powerful. But that sort of the wisdom is described in Scripture as worldly, sensual, even diabolic, the sort of wisdom that the Cross overcomes. See James 3:15; 1 Cor. 1:18-25. The wisdom from heaven allows us to sense all things as directed by the love God for our salvation through Jesus. Thus, in wisdom we see the good things of this life, not as our final goal, but as first promises of the good things of heaven. And, therefore, we can let them go for the sake of the greater calling. Wisdom allows us to see sufferings as opportunities to join with Christ and to make of our lives "living sacrifices of praise." Cf. Rom. 12:1; Heb. 13:15. It allows us to sense every moment as a part of God's plan of salvation at the intersection of time and eternity. And wisdom enables us to sense each person as one whom Christ died upon the Cross to save, called by God to be a great and glorious saint, greater anyone we can imagine on earth. Wisdom, the highest of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, is associated with love, the highest of the virtues. For it gives us the vision and the will to understand all things in the light of our love of God and, more importantly, His love for us.

### III. UNDERSTANDING

We often use such phrases as "Now, I get it" to indicate that we understand the essence of something, such the flow of an argument, the point of a story or a joke, or the way that something works. It reflects going beyond the surface level to comprehend the deeper level of the meaning, or the pattern, of the things that are described. Likewise, the gift of the Holy Spirit called understanding allows us to take what we know from faith, and go to the deeper meaning and implications of it. Thus, when Jesus washed the feet of Peter, He said, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will understand later." John 13:7. The idea is that Peter (and the other Apostles) at that point only saw the action of their Master washing their feet; later they would see the significance of His humble service cleansing them and commissioning them to imitate His example. Likewise, before His ascension, Jesus "opened [the Apostles'] minds to understand the Scriptures" and explained how His death and Resurrection, and the proclamation of the Gospel fulfilled the law and the prophets. See Luke 24:46-47. By contrast, when He explained the parable of the sower to the disciples, He added that those outside would "hear and listen but not understand," for they could not see the implications of the analogy. See Mark 4:12.

As St. Thomas Aquinas explains in the Summa Theologica, the Spirit's gift of understanding builds upon our faith by enabling us to comprehend more fully the significance of the things that we believe. We grow into this deeper understanding by an experience of the divine, which gives us a sense of how the truth of God is operating in the world and in our lives. One can draw an analogy to other fields. Thus, for example, if one visits an historic site, such as Mount Vernon or a battlefield, one can get a greater sense of what happened there. Or, if one plays a sport or a musical instrument, or acts in a play, one understands these fields all the more because

of the experience of them, which gives a comprehension consistent with verbal descriptions, but deeper than them.

In the realm of the spirit, this gift enables us to experience and live out what God has revealed. For example, we know through faith that the Bible is the divinely inspired word of God. Understanding enables us to sense what it was like when the events described were occurring and to reflect deeply upon the sacred words and apply them to our lives. We know by faith that Jesus is especially present in the Eucharist and that He pours forth graces, such as strength, forgiveness and commissioning in all of the sacraments. Understanding enables us to sense His presence and experience these graces. We know through faith that the angels and saints pray with us and for us; understanding allows us to experience them as "a great cloud of witnesses urging us on to victory." See Heb. 12:1.

As with the other gifts of the Holy Spirit, we receive understanding at baptism, and it is fulfilled in Confirmation. But, in order to make this gift active in our lives, we need to use our intellect to learn the faith more and more, focus in prayer on God and His celestial realm, and strive to be free of sinful and excessive attachments that cloud the mind. For, as St. Thomas Aquinas argues, the gift of understanding leads to a delight in faith and is connected to the beatitude, "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God." See Matt. 5:8.

#### IV. KNOWLEDGE

The word "science" comes from the Latin word "scientia," meaning knowledge. And the word scientia is also the Latin term for the gift of the Holy Spirit we call knowledge. The connection is fitting, for the natural and social sciences are studies of created things, of nature and society. And the gift of knowledge guides the Christian to judge rightfully created things. Here, as usual, the Christian approach takes a middle way between two extremes. One extreme is the tendency to treat things of the world as final ends, to put them above God and our final goal of beatitude with Him. The other extreme is the sloth or blindness that fails to see God's glory shining on in the world. Between the two faults is the Christian vision that this world is, in the words of the poet Keats, "the vale of soul-making" guiding us as wayfarers onto our final homeland.

Thus, for example, one error is the tendency to see nature as the final end, whether that tendency comes in the ancient form of pagan worship, the more modern atheistic belief that the laws of nature determine everything, the romantic idealization of nature without reference to God, or the worship of "the environment" as the most important thing to the point that having children is discouraged on the grounds that they would place demands upon it. On the other hand, there is what C.S. Lewis calls in The Abolition of Man, "the

trousered ape who has never been able to conceive the Atlantic as anything more than so many million tons of cold salt water," the one who cares nothing for nature save what he can get from it. Between the two extremes is the Psalmist who sings, "The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky proclaims its builder's craft." Psalm 19:2. Likewise, St. Francis in his Canticle of the Creatures, like the friends of Daniel the prophet, calls for praise to God through the things of nature, the sun and the moon, fire and water, wind and earth, and even death. See Dan. 3:52-90. As St. Paul says, we should see in visible nature the invisible attributes of God. See Rom. 1:20. But we also know that nature is herself fallen and in need of redemption, awaiting fulfillment in the new heavens and new earth. See Rom. 8:19-22. The gift of knowledge allows us to sense nature as God's artwork and a gift from Him that we may honor Him.

On another front, there is on the one hand the worldly tendency to value such things as wealth, talents and power above all else. Some symptoms of this tendency are: the consumerist mentality, the belief that having more stuff is the key to happiness; the measure of all things by reference to money, as in the question "How much are you worth"; and the valuing of people in accordance to what they can do, rather than the love of God that they represent. On the other extreme is laxness and laziness about responsibilities in the world, which often results in people vegetating in front of televisions or computer games without developing their intellect talents, caring for their health, or taking advantage of good opportunities. The gift of knowledge guides us to see, as the parable of the talents and the gold coins indicates, that all of our talents, time and treasure are given by God for a time to carry out our vocations here on earth. See Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27.

In short, the gift of knowledge gives us the sense that created things should neither be hoarded nor squandered, neither wasted nor worshipped. Rather, we see them as gifts given for a short time that we may become worthy of the lasting treasures of the new heavens and the new earth.

## V. COUNSEL

A good parent sets clear rules for children and keeps order, but also allows the children as they grow to make choices and be in charge of some things themselves, for growing involves making difficult decisions. Likewise, good teachers give students the information and principles of a subject, but also call for them creatively to apply that knowledge in situations where the answer is not obvious. In addition, in order to develop a spirit of charity and openness to the goodness of others, parents, teachers, coaches and the like also encourage teamwork that people may arrive at solutions in a spirit of charity. Likewise, our Father and Christ the Teacher set forth certain clear rules, such as the Ten Commandments. See, e.g., Duet. 5:6-21; Matt. 5:17-20; Mark 10:19-20. But God also calls for us to apply divine principles in situations where the answer is not obvious, and to sense the wisdom of other

people, especially within the Church, that we may grow together in charity. See, e.g., Matt. 10:16. The gift of counsel guides us to apply Christian principles in such situations and recognize the wisdom of others.

Thus, in the early Church, Christian community responded to the outpouring of the Spirit by speaking in the Spirit and recognizing the fulfillment of ancient prophecies, always acting together and accepting Peter's leadership. See Acts 2:1-41. They lived in harmony, composing prayers and acting with such creative goodness that the people recognized the Spirit at work. See Acts 2:42-3:10. St. Paul praises the early Christians for being enriched by the Spirit in speech, knowledge and the ability to witness to Christ, telling them that they are being prepared to judge the world. See 1 Cor. 1:4-7, 6:3. But he also criticizes them for being so filled with their own plans and expectations that they formed factions to advance their ideas; and he instructs them to be united within the Church even if that involves putting their own interests aside. See 1 Cor. 1:10-17, 2:1-4, 6:1-8. Likewise, St. Peter speaks of the glory of all Christians as a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of [God's] own" and says that each of us should be ready with a defense of our faith. See 1 Pet. 2:9, 3:13. But he also reminds us of the importance of acting within the Church and respecting proper authority. See 1 Pet. 5:5-6.

On the natural level, prudence allows one to make good decisions in ambiguous situations and recognize the rightful authority and wisdom of others. However, there is a greater level we are called to, a level of thinking in the Spirit, which often contradicts human wisdom. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 2:6-16. The gift of counsel enables us to make decisions in that wisdom, judging as God does, not as man does, and to recognize the Spirit working in others, whether authorities or people who are seemingly simple. See, e.g., Luke 10:21, 18:17. We see this gift at work in the lives of saints, as they have joined or formed religious orders, explained the faith well, and responded to needs by creating such things as schools, missions and lay groups. But also in our daily lives, we are called to live out this gift of counsel to make decisions, ranging from regular questions such as what to say to someone to greater matters such as deciding whether to commit to a project to life choices such as discerning a career or even more a vocation. If, through prayer, careful discernment, and openness to the wisdom of others, we are open to the Spirit, then individually and as a Church we will, like the faithful servants in the parables of the gold coins and the talents, be able to use our gifts well and train on earth for the inheritance God has prepared for us in His eternal kingdom.

## VI. FORTITUDE

Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem called "If," part of which reads "If you can keep your head when all about / Are losing theirs and blaming it on you . . . If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew / to serve your turn long after they are gone / and hold on

when there is nothing in you / Except the Will which says to them 'Hold on' . . . Yours is the earth and everything that's in it, and – which is more – you will be a man , my son!" Similarly, when Socrates was nearing death for his defense of the truth, he said that he did not fear death, but rather feared doing injustice, for "to go to the world below having one's soul full of injustice is that last and worst of all evils."

Such wisdom describes the natural virtue of courage, the steadfast ability and willingness to endure hardships, whether sudden and great, such as injury and death, or (more often) subtle and gradual, such as unpopularity or difficulties with a task. A courageous person knows that doing what is right often involves pain and troubles and is willing to endure them. And any civilization or individual who will accomplish anything of lasting value must know and live this truth.

But such fortitude is limited if it is based merely upon one's own strength. It is greater, but still limited, if based upon the gathering of good people together, as in a family, friends, a team, or a regiment. But fortitude rises to its greatest height when it comes from a sense of union with God and His angels and saints. The ancient Jews knew this truth and would often repeat such phrases as "The Lord gives strength to the fainting; for the weak He makes vigor abound. . . . They that hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar as with eagle's wings." (Is. 40:29, 31) and "Like Mount Zion are they who trust in the Lord, unshakeable, forever enduring." (Ps. 125:1).

The gift of fortitude gives us that ability to tap into the power of God, knowing that He is with us in all suffering and struggles. Even in human affairs, having a good friend can make all the difference in overcoming difficulties and danger. All the more does the ability to sense that Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the angels and saints are with us make it a lot easier to endure struggles. As St. Paul says "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses [the saints] . . . keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith", "If God is with us, who can be against?" Heb. 13:1-2; Rom. 8:31. What is more, because sufferings, especially those endured for the sake of truth and holiness, join us more with Jesus in His suffering and show our love for Him, they can be, not only endured, but greatly valued. Thus, the early Christians "rejoiced that they were found worthy to suffer for the sake of the Name" of Jesus. Acts 5:41. And the letters of Saints Peter and Paul often contain such things as, "rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ" and "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the sake of His body, the Church." 1 Pet. 4:13; Col 1:24.

The gift of fortitude builds upon the natural virtue by giving us that sense of union with Jesus and with His Church throughout time and space and into heaven. In the context of that union, we hear and live the words of Jesus, "You will have troubles in the world, but

take courage. I have overcome the world." John 16:33.

## VII. PIETY

When I was younger, I took piano lessons, and would be assigned a few pieces every week to learn. One week, one assignment was "When the Saints Go Marching In." At the end of the week, I had not gotten the music down very well and played the song slowly and hesitatingly. At that point, my piano teacher said, "It sounds like the saints are saying, 'Do we have to do this *again*? Do we have to march into heaven again?'" Unfortunately, it is common for people to approach worship and religious duties likewise saying, "Do we have to enter into the presence of the Lord or heaven and earth *again*? Do we have to join the saints and angels in their songs of glory again?"

The gift of piety guides us to approach God with a very different attitude. Among the ancient Jews, there was an awe, a delight at being in the presence of the Almighty God, who created the sun, the moon and the stars, whose glory was so great that the angels veil their faces before him. Many of the Psalms, for example, express this delight, saying such things as, "It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praise to Your name most High , , , For You make me jubilant, Lord, by Your deeds, at the works of Your hands I shout for joy." Psalm 92:2, 5. There was a delight in knowing and living by the law of God, seeing it not as a burden, but as the path He has shown us to share in His creative goodness, power, and timeless light. Thus, Psalm 119, the great praise of the law of God resounds with such declarations as "Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart. My heart is set on fulfilling your laws; they are my reward forever."

All the more should we as Christians delight in praising God and living by His commandments, knowing that God comes to us in our worship and especially at every Mass. As the Letter to the Hebrews says, in prayer and faithfulness, we "approach Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and angels in festal gathering, and the assembly of the first born." Heb. 12:22. We are called to obey God, not only as our Master, but as our Father, who has adopted each of us through Jesus Christ, and to delight in knowing His laws and pleasing Him. Thus, Jesus promised that we would be friends of Him, and therefore of God, if only we obey Him. See John 15:14. And St. Paul says, "the Spirit itself bears witness that we are children of God, and if children then heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with Him." Rom. 8:16-17. In that context of being in the family of God, we also celebrate the company of angels and saints, knowing them to be our elder brothers and sisters, and have a reverence for all of our fellow pilgrims on this earth, recognizing them as also part of the family of God.



Thus, the gift of piety leads us to be joyful in worshipping God in abiding in His commandments. For, in so doing, we are joining in His family and His glorious kingdom, which is too great for us to see now except in a vague form, but which will be revealed one day when God introduces each one of His faithful to all the court of heaven, to every angel and every saint who has ever and will ever live and says, "Behold my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

VIII. Imagine if a great writer or judge, or even the Pope, were coming to visit your house. There would be a great sense of thrill and honor, but also an anxiety to make everything exactly right, keeping the house, the family's behavior, even the food flawless. All the more, when we are entering the presence of the Almighty God, enthroned above all praises, before whom even the angels veil their faces, should there be a sense of overwhelming awe and an anxiety to make everything exactly right. This intense desire that everything be perfect to God, the aversion to all that might offend Him, is part of the gift of the fear of the Lord.

In the Bible, devout people consistently recognized that their sinfulness makes them unworthy to enter God's presence. Thus, when Isaiah was brought before the throne of God, he says, "Woe to me! I am doomed, for I am a man of unclean lips from a people of unclean lips." Is. 6:5. And when Jesus guided St. Peter to the miraculous catch of fish, St. Peter said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man." Luke 5:8. In both cases, as with God's calling to all His People, He does not send the sinner away, but rather calls us to that purification and growth that will make more worthy to be in His presence. And thus there is, at the same time, an anxiety to overcome all sinfulness and sense of guilt at it, but also a thrill and joy at being called by God, cleansed from sin, and allowed into the presence of the divine. Thus, both Old and New Testament, describe a delight at the fear of the Lord, for this fear will lead to a greater union with God and thus to the heights of holiness and wisdom. See, e.g., Ps. 34:10-11; Prov. 1:7; Sir. 1:9-12; Is. 11:3; Acts 6:31; Rev. 14:7, 15:4.

A rightful fear of the Lord leads the faithful to avoid two errors. The first error, more common in modern times, is complacency about sin, the belief that because God will forgive sin anyway, it does not really matter. The Bible, by contrast, contains constant calls to repent and warnings that the path of sin leads to a dead faith, a slavery to sin, and eternal darkness. See, e.g., Matt. 7:24-27, 24:36-35:46; Gal. 5:19-22; James 1:26-27, 2:14-17. The other error is a paralyzing fear that leads a person to evade any reminder of God's presence or to escape from God's presence, as Adam and Eve did. See Gen. 3:8. Oppressed by such fear, people may avoid doing anything for fear of error, as the foolish man in the parable of the talents did, see Matt. 25:14-30, or may despair of any possibility of change and persecute the prophetic voices that proclaim the call to holiness. See, e.g., Wis. 2:1-20; Acts 7:51-60. By contrast, gift of the fear of the Lord calls for us to seek to avoid sin and, recognizing the sin that remains, turn toward God for cleansing, in repentance, prayerfulness and the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

We know that nothing unclean is worthy to enter God's presence and thus nothing unclean can be in heaven. See, e.g., Ps. 15:1-2, 24:3-4; Rev. 21:26-27. Thus, we begin every Mass with a Penitential Rite, and continue lives of penance, trying to have a fear of offending God, but a fear that leads us to place our confidence in God, that with His help we can become worthy of His kingdom. As St. Paul says, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling. For God is the one who, for His good purpose, works within you." Phil 2:12.

## IX. CONCLUSION

When Moses appointed seventy elders to assist him in governing the people of God, seventy went to Mount Sinai to be commissioned by God Himself. Two of them, however, named Eldad and Medad, stayed behind for some reason. All seventy elders received the power of the Holy Spirit and were able to prophesy. Joshua, Moses' good friend and assistant objected to the receipt of the Spirit by Eldad and Medad on the grounds that they were not on the mountain like the others. Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake. Would that all of the Lord's people were prophets. Would that He confer the Spirit upon them all." The prophets would speak of a day when that prayer would be fulfilled and the Holy Spirit would come upon all of the faithful. See, e.g., Joel 3:1-2. At Pentecost, Peter declared that these prophecies were now fulfilled. The Spirit of God has come upon all of the faithful, and if we wish we can be prophets to the nation. The gifts of the Holy Spirit enable us to ascend to that glorious calling.