

The Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit

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Introduction

We learn from the book of the Acts of the Apostles, that once Paul traveled overland until he reached Ephesus, on the coast. There he found a number of disciples. “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” he asked them. “No,” they replied, “we were never even told there was such a thing as a Holy Spirit.” “Then how were you baptised?” he asked. They replied, “With John’s baptism.” Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance; but he insisted that the people should believe in the one who was to come after him, in other words Jesus.” When they heard this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus and the moment Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came down on them, and they began to speak with tongues and to prophesy. There were about twelve of these men. (Ac 19, 1-7)

This little passage shows us how important the receiving of the Holy Spirit is. These men, as well as the 12 Apostles themselves on the day of Pentecost, experienced the power of the Holy Spirit. They were granted his gifts. Which ones and where do they come from ?

The list of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit comes from the book of Isaiah : « A shoot springs from the stock of Jesse, a scion thrusts from his roots : on him the spirit of the Lord rests, a spirit of wisdom and insight, a spirit of counsel and power, a spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord ». If you were attentive, you will have noticed that only 6 gifts were mentioned. You are perfectly right : Piety is missing but it is implied. Therefore the Tradition of the Church has always affirmed seven gifts - Understanding, Knowledge, Fear of the Lord, Wisdom, Counsel, Piety and Fortitude - and Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches that « these gifts are permanent dispositions which make man docile in following the promptings of the Holy Spirit » (Summa Theologiae, Ila Ilae, q. 121, a. 1, co.)

We need to underline that prior to clothing us with his gifts, the Holy Spirit strips us of everything. He makes us pass through the desert, like Christ. He purifies us with fire. Remember, that it is under this symbol that he descends on the Apostles. The image is very strong and eloquent. Because fire burns, blazes, enflames and illuminates. Exactly as the Holy Spirit acts towards each of us. That is because He wants us to be able to receive his gifts and to use them efficiently.

Therefore tonight I would like us to meditate on each of these seven gifts of the Holy Spirit and try to understand a little bit how they work. All that in order to be always more docile to the grace of God shaping our souls.

Understanding (or Intelligence)

From the Latin *Intus legerere*, intelligence means « to read within ». It must not be confused with human science. The gift of the Holy Spirit will not necessarily raise your IQ. Although ... So what does it do ?

Well, science looks for something visible. It concentrates on appearances, experiences ; in short : what you can touch, feel, measure, etc. The understanding that comes from the Holy Spirit permits us to grasp the very essence of things.

Let's take an example : imagine that you suddenly have the capacity of seeing the feelings which dwell in people's hearts. Someone else will focus mainly on a person's actions and their consequences. You can understand the reason for them. Your judgement too will be more just and appropriate.

Another example : lying in a hammock by the seaside I can reflect with my own intelligence on the beauty of the moment, the pleasure of lazing around etc. But with the gift of understanding which comes from the Holy Spirit I can discover that in creating all that, God had thought of me and of that moment so that I could be sure of his tenderness and his love. More than just being present and savouring the moment, I can grasp the reason and the purpose behind it.

This gift of understanding is like a light which is added to our intelligence and allows us to see more. Before Confirmation we are a bicycle lighting the way through the forest. The Holy Spirit « boosts » our headlamps with extra powerful xenon !

The gift of understanding produces a great and beautiful fruit : the certainty of invisible realities, in other words : faith !

Knowledge

The gift of understanding allows us to grasp the truth of the faith. But even if I understand something, I still have to make a judgement on what I understand. That is, I must put what I have understood in the entirety of things, in its proper place.

For example : thanks to the gift of understanding I have suddenly grasped the full measure of the love which God has for me : I have seen Christ on the cross, I have read

his passion and I understand that he did all that for me. He loves me. Through the gift of knowledge I shall know how to incorporate this new insight into my whole life. This divine love requires a response. I understand that on Sunday I have a « date » with God in church etc. The gift of knowledge makes me discover that with just a little adjustment to my planning I can get there easily. In fact, the gift of knowledge is very like that intuitive way of grasping the truth with certainty and conviction that it is important for my life. It deals with things in life. It is as practical as it is speculative.

Another example : it can happen that the gift of knowledge opens our eyes to the amount of time we are spending on the internet or going out and it encourages us to modify our behaviour to turn us more towards the Lord. I think it is also the gift of knowledge that reveals our sins to us and leads us to a profound and sincere confession.

Fear of the Lord

How can that be a gift of the Holy Spirit ? We need to remember that there are two sorts of fear :

Servile fear : I'm afraid of being punished, of being deprived of something good. In this way for example I am afraid of police radar because it will put penalty points on my licence and impose a fine on me. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. It will encourage me to drive more carefully. Regarding God, fear of punishment can sometimes be salutary and prevent me from committing sins. However, that being so, this kind of fear isn't the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In fact there is another kind of fear, the one called filial fear. That is how a son fears offending his father or his mother, of causing them pain, because he loves them and because he knows he is loved. This fear is nourished by love and grows in the measure that the love of God grows in us. It is this fear which is a true gift of the Holy Spirit.

It is the origin of fruits like modesty, temperance and chastity.

Wisdom

We have spoken about the gift of knowledge. It allows us to judge earthly things, the things of daily life, rightly, by placing them in relation with our real goal – to gain heaven. The gift of Wisdom is a special grace of the Holy Spirit in order to judge divine things. Well then, is it faith ? No ! The gift of Wisdom presupposes faith.

In order to understand properly we shall take an example : I believe by faith that the Lord is present in the Eucharist. My love towards God grows stronger : He loves me to such a point that he comes to see me every day ! Well, when you fall in love, you try to understand and get to know the person you love : what do they do, what are they like ? In order to answer these questions, there is no better way than to listen to the answer from the mouth of the person you love. It's the same for the Lord. I believe in the Eucharist and I love God. The gift of Wisdom which comes from the Holy Spirit will allow me to better understand how it is possible that God can really be present in a small piece of bread and above all why he does it. It will give me certainty.

However, as in the case when you are in love with a person : if love is absent, we shall not be receptive to the words spoken to us. They will go over our heads. It's the same in the case of the gift of Wisdom. The Holy Spirit speaks to us himself about himself. But if the love of God in us is killed by sin, it will not have any great effect. Consequently the gift of Wisdom presupposes love, charity and the life of grace.

One more thing : the more intense love of God is, the greater will be the gift of Wisdom. It isn't by chance that Saint Mother Theresa and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux had extraordinary wisdom. They spoke about God as if they knew him intimately, as one knows a friend or the Beloved.

And to finish : the gift of Wisdom produces peace. In fact the whole of our life is led towards order. I think it was Saint Ignatius who said « When God is in the first place, everything is in its place ». That brings peace. Like when you have just tidied your room and you feel good ! You become more and more like Christ who is the Wisdom of God. In fact, the gift of Wisdom gives us more and more the grace to truly become children of God.

Counsel

In general counsel is concerned with things to be done with an end in view. If someone tells me: « I want to become the world number 1 in tennis», I shall tell him to do lots of training and lead an impeccable lifestyle. It's perfectly natural that man has need of advice. He is a reasonable creature. In order for him to go in one direction or another, to choose this action rather than another, he must hear convincing arguments.

Through the gift of Counsel, the Holy Spirit guides our soul on the choices we have to make. For example : reading the Bible I discover that God is calling me to sanctity and is asking me to pray all the time. How can I do it ? The Holy Spirit will « counsel » me

inwardly to pray the rosary because it's a simple, effectual prayer that is easy to pray even during my bus or train journey.

In fact the gift of Counsel corresponds with the virtue of Prudence. In the same way that reason puts us on our guard against an action or the absence of an action by reflecting on its consequences, the Holy Spirit through the gift of Counsel encourages us to act with a view to Heaven. You will have understood : it's through a sort of intuition – which reveals itself above all in time of prayer, meditation and reading the word of God – that the Holy Spirit advises us inwardly what things to do or not do.

This gift often motivates us to works of mercy. Because in being merciful we become like God and it's like being on a motorway to Heaven.

Piety

The Apostle Saint Paul writes in the letter to the Romans (8, 15) : « You received the Spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry out, 'Abba, Father! ». The gift of piety therefore allows us to worship God as Father. Certainly, we celebrate God as Creator, judge of all flesh, All-Powerful, etc. But loving him as our Father, our daddy, is the characteristic of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

If you want an example : imagine you are an employee in a prestigious multinational company. Your boss is an extraordinary man. He is wise, humble, etc. You appreciate him and you love him for all these qualities. But in addition you have the extraordinary opportunity of being his son. The homage you pay him will also be on a higher level because of this bond between child and father. This is what the gift of Piety does.

Remember the words of the Lord : « No-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him ».

This gift produces gentleness, it makes us meek. My Father loves me and trusts me. The best way of paying him homage is being worthy of his love, it's being like him : treating others as he does. Because he is meek and humble of heart.

The gift of Piety also consists in honouring other people or the saints in heaven because they are in a relationship with our Father. I also very much like the words of Saint Augustine who says the gift of Piety gives us the grace of « not contradicting Holy Scripture (the Bible), whether we understand it or not » (De Doctrinae Christianae, II, 7). A bit like a dutiful child who respects his parent's words even if he doesn't always understand them.

Fortitude

Doing an « obstacle course » demonstrates well the strength of the person who is doing it. On the one hand the physical strength to endure the difficulties and obstacles of the course, on the other the mental strength to grit your teeth and carry on to the end of the course which is long. In the same way through the gift of Fortitude, the Holy Spirit gives us a special grace to endure the difficulties of the spiritual life and the grace of patience to carry on to the end knowing that our obstacle course will last all our lives.

Once again you can think of Mother Theresa. When we learn about all the difficulties she had in her life, both spiritual and material, we wonder how she could keep going ?! This little scrap of a woman, how could she manage to change the lives of millions of people ? The strength of the Holy Spirit !.. Humanly it's impossible. But nothing is impossible to God.

Similarly how did Saint Joan of Arc manage to go to the stake, to be burnt alive ? She only needed to renounce Christ and she would have been spared. The strength of the Holy Spirit !..

As you can see I am quoting examples which allow us to understand that this strength of the Holy Spirit is often revealed in what the world considers as weakness. The Christians were confronted with the whole Roman Empire. Hunted down, exterminated. And they won the victory : the Roman Empire became Christian. It wasn't through the power of the sword but through the power of the soul, through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The gift of Fortitude also produces two fruits : patience which withstands suffering and self-control which has the purpose of bearing the long duration necessary to achieve and do good.

Conclusion

In order to properly understand the gifts of the Holy Spirit, imagine a sailing ship crossing the sea.

You are the sailing ship. The mast is charity. The hoisted sails are the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The wind ? Yes, it's the Holy Spirit. The port is Heaven. The higher the mast is, the faster the ship will go and reach the port. But if the mast is broken, the sails are useless. And if we haven't hoisted them, the ship won't go forward either.

On confirmation day the Holy Spirit gives us sails of an excellent quality. It's our job to take care that our ship is ready for the crossing and that the mast is high enough to receive and to use them.