

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. ~ Isaiah 11:2

ST. PAUL TELLS US that the Church becomes “a holy temple in the Lord ... a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph 2:21-22). St. Augustine, the great Doctor of Grace, adds: “What the soul is to the human body, the Holy Spirit is to the Body of Christ, which is the Church” (CCC 797). The Holy Spirit works in us through the bestowal of his gifts, which are permanent dispositions that render us able to be obedient to the promptings of his grace. These gifts are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord (some translations of Isaiah, as that shown above, combine the last two; by tradition, however, there are seven).

The Purpose of the Gifts

Each of the gifts of the Holy Spirit has special significance for the soul in its progress toward holiness. **Wisdom** detaches us from the world, and in doing so makes the soul more responsive to the things of God. We have deeper insight into the value of our faith. **Understanding** helps us to grasp more clearly what the truths of our faith really mean to us and our salvation. Understanding enables us to see; it gives eyes to our faith. **Counsel** is the gift that makes us aware of the guidance that the Spirit makes available to us; it helps our conscience distinguish what good to do and what evil to avoid, and helps us choose to do the good. **Fortitude** is the gift of the courage to seek God, who is our goal, and to reject everything that stands in the way of God or bars us from him, including ridicule, malice, and outright persecution by others. **Knowledge** tells us the path of virtue and warns us of the dangers that we face in seeking and attaining Heav-

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en. **Piety** is the confidence in God that a child feels for a loving parent, so that we can serve our Heavenly Father with joy. Finally, **fear of the Lord** is the solemn respect of God that fills us with a horror and dread of offending him, not because he is a God who will punish us with wrath, but because we would never hurt the one who loves us so completely.

How the Gifts are Related to Each Other

In the Old Testament, these gifts are often linked to each other (see, for example, Jb 28:28; Prv 1:7; Prv 2:6; Prv 8:12-14; Dn 2:21-23), so that one is the beginning or the completion of another. The most significant link is between the gifts that begin and end the list, that is, between wisdom and fear of the Lord. “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*” (Ps 111:10). This is not a quaking terror such as that taught by the “hellfire and brimstone” school of preaching. Instead, the “*fear of the Lord is like a garden of blessing, and covers a man better than any glory*” (Sir 40:27). The prophet Isaiah said of the Messiah that “*his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord*” (Is 11:3), and we, too, should take delight in the proper reverence and awe of the God who made us out of love alone: “*The fear of the Lord is glory and exultation, and gladness and a crown of rejoicing. The fear of the Lord delights the heart, and gives gladness and joy and long life. With him who fears the Lord it will go well at the end; on the day of his death he will be blessed*” (Sir 1:11-13).

Fear of the Lord is our “*instruction in wisdom*” (Prv 15:33); “*wisdom is the fulfillment of the fear of the Lord*” (Sir 21:11). This wisdom is not wisdom as the world understands it, as St. Paul tells us: “*If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly*



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The Sacrament of Confirmation is conferred

with God” (1 Cor 3:18-19).

We seek not worldly wisdom, but that bestowed by God himself. In the book of Wisdom, we hear this beautiful hymn to supernatural wisdom: “[I]n her there is a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety,

all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent and pure and most subtle. For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Though she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the man who lives with wisdom. For she is more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light she is found to be superior; for it is succeeded by the night, but against wisdom evil does not prevail” (Wis 7:22-30). The Apostle James also tells us that “the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity” (Jas 3:17). Supernatural wisdom is the gift through which we attain the purity of heart that, Jesus tells us, will allow us to see God (see Mt 5:8).

How the Gifts are Related to the Human Virtues

There is a close relationship between the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the human virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance (see handout on Virtuous Living). The gifts of the Holy Spirit give supernatural value to the human virtues, completing and perfecting them. Understanding, counsel, and knowledge help us see the spiritual value of things, an aid to the virtue of prudence. Piety is related to justice, which renders to others what is due them. Piety gives to God the love and obedience that is due him just because he is our God and is infinitely lovable and



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Priest and parents celebrate a newly-baptized child

deserves our obedience. Fortitude is obviously directly related to the moral virtue of the same name. Finally, fear of the Lord is akin to the virtue of temperance. Temperance helps us curb our tendency to seek material things that can upset the balance of our priorities, which should put God first as he is the most desirable and lovable. Fear of offending

our God by giving emphasis to anything other than him is a valuable gift that helps keep us on the right path, and prioritizes our efforts to attain true holiness and union with him. To need this gift speaks volumes about the weakness of our humanity, which can so readily slip from the pursuit of our true happiness, which is God.

Effects of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to enable us to grow in the life of grace, to become truly holy. They are given to all the faithful at Baptism, and increased in the sacrament of Confirmation. We become partakers of the special love of the Holy Spirit, who is the sanctifier of the Church. All of these gifts, along with the theological and moral virtues and the fruits of the Spirit, give concrete reality to the effects of being in the state of grace, in friendship with God. To be free of sin is to be truly free — free to approach God, to be united with him and to share his treasures even here on earth. Whoever is in the state of grace has all these wonderful treasures — gifts and virtues — bestowed by a God whose love never ends. We must, however, use our free will to develop these treasures in cooperation with God’s grace. And, since “wisdom is justified by her deeds” (Mt 11:19), these gifts show themselves in daily acts of love of God and love of neighbor. These treasures are outpourings upon us of the love of the Holy Spirit, in whom rests the vitality of our spiritual lives and the mission of our holy Mother Church. They are not treasures to be kept in secret, but to create holiness and, as instruments of the Holy Spirit, to renew the face of the earth (see Ps 104:30).

(CCC 797, 1303, 1830-1831)

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