

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The Manifestation of Sanctifying Grace

1. Wisdom

Wisdom is the perfection of faith. As Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J., notes in his *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, "Where faith is a simple knowledge of the articles of Christian belief, wisdom goes on to a certain divine penetration of the truths themselves." The better we understand those truths, the more we value them properly. Thus wisdom, the Catholic Encyclopedia notes, "by detaching us from the world, makes us relish and love only the things of heaven." Through wisdom, we judge the things of the world in light of the highest end of man—the contemplation of God.

The Application of Wisdom:

Such detachment, however, is not the same as renunciation of the world—far from it. Rather, wisdom helps us to love the world properly, as the creation of God, rather than for its own sake. The material world, though fallen as a result of the sin of Adam and Eve, is still worthy of our love; we simply need to see it in the proper light, and wisdom allows us to do so.

Knowing the proper ordering of the material and spiritual worlds through wisdom, we can more easily bear the burdens of this life and respond to our fellow man with charity and patience.

2. Understanding

Understanding is the second gift of the Holy Spirit, behind only wisdom. It differs from wisdom in that wisdom is the desire to contemplate the things of God, while understanding allows us, as Fr. John A. Hardon writes in his *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, to "penetrate to the very core of revealed truths." This doesn't mean that we can come to understand, say, the Trinity the way that we might a mathematical equation, but that we become certain of the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity. Such certitude moves beyond faith, which "merely assents to what God has revealed."

Understanding in Practice:

Once we become convinced through understanding of the truths of the Faith, we can also draw conclusions from those truths and arrive at a further understanding of man's relation to God and his role in the world. Understanding rises above natural reason, which is concerned only with the things we can sense in the world around us. Thus, understanding is both speculative—concerned with intellectual knowledge—and practical, because it can help us to order the actions of our lives toward our final end,

which is God. Through understanding, we see the world and our life within it in the larger context of the eternal law and the relation of our souls to God.

3. Counsel

Counsel is the perfection of the cardinal virtue of prudence. While prudence, like all the cardinal virtues, can be practiced by anyone, whether in a state of grace or not, it can take on a supernatural dimension through sanctifying grace. Counsel is the fruit of this supernatural prudence.

Like prudence, counsel allows us to judge rightly what we should do in a particular circumstance. It goes beyond prudence, though, in allowing such judgments to be made promptly, "as by a sort of supernatural intuition," as Fr. John A. Hardon writes in his *Modern Catholic Dictionary*.

Counsel in Practice:

Counsel builds on both wisdom, which allows us to judge the things of the world in light of our final end, and understanding, which helps us to penetrate to the very core of the mysteries of our faith.

"With the gift of counsel, the Holy Spirit speaks, as it were, to the heart and in an instant enlightens a person what to do," writes Father Hardon. It is the gift that allows us as Christians to be assured that we will act correctly in times of trouble and trial. Through counsel, we can speak without fear in defense of the Christian Faith. Thus, the Catholic Encyclopedia notes, counsel "enables us to see and choose correctly what will help most to the glory of God and our own salvation."

4. Knowledge

Like wisdom, knowledge perfects the theological virtue of faith. The aims of knowledge and wisdom are different, however. Whereas wisdom helps us to penetrate divine truth and prepares us to judge all things according to that truth, knowledge gives us that ability to judge. As Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J., writes in his *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, "The object of this gift is the whole spectrum of created things insofar as they lead one to God."

The Application of Knowledge:

Knowledge allows us to see the circumstances of our life as God sees them, albeit in a more limited way, since we are limited by our human nature. Through the exercise of knowledge, we can ascertain God's purpose in our lives and His reason for placing us in our particular circumstances. As Father Hardon notes, knowledge is sometimes called "the science of the saints," because "it enables those who have the gift to discern easily

and effectively between the impulses of temptation and the inspirations of grace." Judging all things in the light of divine truth, we can more easily distinguish between the promptings of God and the subtle wiles of the devil.

5. Piety

Perhaps in none of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is this instinctual response more obvious than in piety. While wisdom and knowledge perfect the theological virtue of faith, piety perfects religion, which, as Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J., notes in his *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, is "The moral virtue by which a person is disposed to render to God the worship and service he deserves." Far from being a drudgery, worship should be an act of love, and piety is the instinctive affection for God that makes us desire to render worship to Him, just as we voluntarily honor our parents.

Piety in Practice:

Piety, Father Hardon notes, arises "not so much from a studied effort or acquired habit as from a supernatural communication conferred by the Holy Spirit." People sometimes say that "piety demands it," which usually means that they feel compelled to do something that they don't want to do. But true piety makes no such demands but instills in us a desire always to do that which is pleasing to God (and, by extension, that which is pleasing to those who serve God in their own lives).

6. Fortitude

St. Thomas Aquinas ranked fortitude as the third of the cardinal virtues, because it serves prudence and justice, the higher virtues. Fortitude is the virtue that allows us to overcome fear and to remain steady in our will in the face of obstacles. Prudence and justice are the virtues through which we decide what needs to be done; fortitude gives us the strength to do it.

What Fortitude Is Not:

Fortitude is not foolhardiness or rashness, "rushing in where angels fear to tread." Indeed, part of the virtue of fortitude, as Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J., notes in his *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, is the "curbing of recklessness." Putting our bodies or lives in danger when it is not necessary is not fortitude but foolishness.

A Gift of the Holy Spirit:

Sometimes, however, the ultimate sacrifice is necessary, in order to stand up for what is right and to save our souls. Fortitude is the virtue of the martyrs, who are willing to give their lives rather than to renounce their faith. That sacrifice may be passive—

Christian martyrs do not actively seek martyrdom—but it is nonetheless determined and resolute.

It is in martyrdom that we see the best example of fortitude rising above a mere cardinal virtue (able to be practiced by anyone) into a supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit. But it also shows itself, as the Catholic Encyclopedia notes, "in moral courage against the evil spirit of the times, against improper fashions, against human respect, against the common tendency to seek at least the comfortable, if not the voluptuous."

Fortitude, as a gift of the Holy Spirit, also allows us to cope with poverty and loss, and to cultivate the Christian virtues that allow us to rise above the basic requirements of Christianity. The saints, in their love for God and their fellow man and their determination to do what is right, exhibit fortitude as a supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit, and not merely as a cardinal virtue.

7. Fear of the Lord

The gift of the fear of the Lord, Fr. John A. Hardon notes in his *Modern Catholic Dictionary*, confirms the virtue of hope. We often think of hope and fear as mutually exclusive, but the fear of the Lord is the desire not to offend Him, and the certainty that He will give us the grace necessary to keep from doing so. It is that certainty that gives us hope.

The fear of the Lord is like the respect we have for our parents. We do not wish to offend them, but we also do not live in fear of them, in the sense of being frightened.

What the Fear of the Lord Is Not:

In the same way, Father Hardon notes, "The fear of the Lord is not servile but filial." In other words, it is not a fear of punishment, but a desire not to offend God that parallels our desire not to offend our parents. Even so, many people misunderstand the fear of the Lord. Recalling the verse that "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," they think that the fear of the Lord is something that is good to have when you first start out as a Christian, but that you should grow beyond it. That is not the case; rather, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom because it is one of the foundations of our religious life, just as the desire to do what our parents wish us to do should remain with us our entire lives.