

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit: Power from on High

May 15, 2016

Pentecost

By Rev. Peter R. Pilsner

Readings: Acts 2.1-11; 1 Corinthians 12.3b-7, 12-13,
or Romans 8.8-17; John 20.19-23

Imagine yourself on Christmas morning, opening gifts you find under the tree. You see one from a relative – a rectangular box, about a foot long. You guess, a scarf. You open it and, voila! You are correct. You look at the next one. It is heavy, the dimensions of a book. You open it to find – a book, a cookbook in fact, which would be welcome, except that you don't cook. Then you see one more box, wrapped in gold. You look at the tag and see that the giver is "God." You have a gift from God. If you truly believe this, then you already know something about the gift before you open it. If it is from God, it is not something chosen with little thought, like the annual scarf. Nor is it of little use to you, like the cookbook. No, if it is from God, it is the gift you always wanted the most, always needed the most, the one that would do you the most good.

Fortunately, we need never muse about what God might put in a box for us, because we already have from him a gift so precious it could never be put in a box. That gift is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was given to the Church by Christ on the evening of Easter Sunday. He came into the cenacle, breathed on his apostles, and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This gift was not for the apostles alone, but for the whole Church, to be made manifest – activated, if you will – on the feast of Pentecost.

The Charismatic Gifts

After Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit remained with the Church. His presence and action in the Christian community in Corinth is described by Saint Paul. Paul notes that different members of that community have different gifts from the Holy Spirit. In verses which for some reason the lectionary reading skips, Paul mentions healing, prophesy, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. Paul explains that, just as the head of a body organizes and coordinates the various other body parts, so Christ coordinates these gifts to the benefit of the Church.

I would never deny that these special gifts – we call them the charismatic gifts – such as prophesy and tongues were present in the Church and can still be present today. But that being said, do not allow yourself to think that if you have never manifested such gifts (tongues, for example), then you do not have any gifts from the Holy Spirit. You most certainly do. When you were baptized, you received the Holy Spirit with his "sevenfold gift," as was said in today's sequence, and these seven gifts of the Holy Spirit were increased when you received confirmation. Let's look at them more closely.

Christ bestowed the Holy Spirit upon you as a gift. As Saint Thomas Aquinas tells us, this is not a figure of speech. He is a true gift. He belongs to you. If I said, "I'm giving you this pen, and you are free to use it when I am not," that would be a loan, not a gift. But the Holy Spirit is not occasionally "on loan" to us. Christ gave us the Spirit as a gift. Just as a gift is always there for us when we need it, so too is the Holy Spirit. We "possess" the Holy Spirit, not in the sense that we control or use him, but in the sense that he is always present to help us flourish, grow, and fulfill our part in the mystical body. In understanding how the Holy Spirit is present to us as a gift, we elaborate on the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.

His Sevenfold Gift

Do you know the seven gifts? When I was preparing for my confirmation, I had to memorize them: wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, piety, fear of the Lord. To be honest, at the time they were just words to me. I had no clear idea what they really meant. But that should not be how it is. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are not mere words. They are important and powerful blessings. Let me briefly describe them for you.

At first glance, you might think that the gifts of the Holy Spirit give you special powers. But they are not your powers. Instead, they make you *able to receive* a higher power. One author compares them to the sails on a ship. The sails make the ship go, not because they have power, but because they can catch the power of the wind. Another author compares them to a radio receiver that can catch signals and change them into music or other sounds. So it is with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The gifts make you able to catch or be moved by the workings and inspirations of the Holy Spirit. They make you attuned to him, so you can receive his power or truth. Let's take them one by one, in reverse order from which I listed them, saving the highest one for last.

First, there is *fear of the Lord*. Fear of the Lord does not mean being afraid of God, that he might punish or hurt you. It means that you love God so profoundly, and sense how horribly lost you would be without him, that you fear anything that could separate him from you, specifically, sin. For example, at twelve years old, Saint Dominic Savio wrote a rule for himself: *death rather than sin*. Moved by the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction, he knew he could not bear to be separated from God.

Piety is a gift that transforms our relationship with God and others. We are uplifted by the Holy Spirit to love God, not just by our debt of gratitude to him for his blessings, but because we cling to him dearly as our good Father. Along with this, the Holy Spirit changes the way we see other people, so that we cherish them as our dear brothers and sisters.

The gift of *fortitude* allows us to act with a strength that surpasses human strength – the strength from God. It explains how Mother Angelica, a nun in Alabama, dared to take on a project so bold as to create an international media network. It is the strength that allows martyrs to accept pain and death in a spirit of joy.

Counsel helps us make good decisions about our spiritual journey. I am sure you have heard the phrase “What would Jesus do?” Without using the gift of counsel, a person could ponder and consider what Jesus would do. But with the gift of counsel, a person truly knows by intuition what Jesus would do, and thus what he himself should do, so he can act immediately with peace and confidence.

By the gift of *knowledge* the Holy Spirit shows us the true value of the things we experience in this world. He reveals the emptiness of worldly possessions. But he also shows us how what many regard as repulsive – poverty, pain, or humiliation – can bring us spiritual growth, joy, and intimacy with God. The priest, religious sister, or brother, for example, acting with the gift of knowledge, will regard the loss of freedom or possessions as a clear, obvious choice, in view of the far greater blessings that lie ahead.

Understanding helps our minds grasp spiritual truth. You might hear a sermon on mercy, for instance. You listen attentively and comprehend the idea. Then later, during prayer, you come back to it, and you grasp with a new, personal clarity how God has blessed you in spite of your sins, far beyond your deserving. This simple contemplation of mercy may hold you in joy and amazement for a period of time. It is as if the concept of mercy has given way to a direct experience of it.

The Highest Gift of All

Finally, there is the gift of *wisdom*, the highest of the gifts. We have a saying that two people in love can finish each other's sentences. This suggests that when two people love each other, they know each other so well that each understands how the other person thinks and sees things. Wisdom is like knowing God so well, through love, that you can finish his sentences. By love, a person knows God so intimately that he sees the whole of creation and salvation the way God sees it, and knows, as best as a human could ever know, what God would think and say.

Here I can give only the briefest description of the gifts. But I hope you can see the truth of what I said at the beginning. Whatever gifts you might find under your Christmas tree, no gift could be as powerful, as joyful, as precious, or as perfectly suited to you as the gifts of the Holy Spirit. You have them. Christ himself breathed on you on the day of your baptism and gave them to you. All you need to do is nurture them.

Raise your sails! Catch the wind that is the Spirit of God! Say the name of each gift, but go beyond the words. With appreciation for the way each gift can renew you, pray to be clothed with power from on high.

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FOR FURTHER READING

Benedict XVI, Homily (June 12, 2011), available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict>

*Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##687-747, available at:
<http://www.vatican.va/archive>*

*"The Holy Spirit," available at:
<https://www.ewtn.com/faith/teachings/spirmenu.htm>*

Rev. William Saunders, "Gifts of the Holy Spirit," available at: <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture>

*Rev. James Schall, S.J., "Pentecost," *The Catholic Thing* (May 29, 2012), available at:
<https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2012/05/29/pentecost-2/>*

IN SHORT . . .

- ***Christ gave the Holy Spirit to the apostles and the whole Church on Easter Sunday and Pentecost.***
- ***Different members of the community have different gifts from the Holy Spirit, and Christ coordinates these gifts to the benefit of the Church.***
- ***We "possess" the Holy Spirit, not in the sense that we control or use him, but in the sense that he is always present to help us flourish, grow, and fulfill our part in the mystical body.***
- ***The gifts of the Holy Spirit do not give us special powers, but rather make us able to receive a higher power.***
- ***The gifts make us attuned to the workings and inspirations of the Holy Spirit, so we can receive his power and truth.***
- ***Wisdom, the highest of the gifts, means a person knows God so intimately that he sees the whole of creation and salvation the way God sees it.***