

GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

By Jim Seghers

In Athens St. Paul preached at the Areopagus using as his springboard an altar inscribed, “To an Unknown God” (Acts 17:23). Today that same passage could be a fitting introduction to a sermon regarding the awesome presence of the Holy Spirit. In his gifts Christians receive superhuman powers that enable them to faithfully live a Christian life in ways that would be otherwise impossible. As we approach the celebration of Pentecost let’s direct our attention to these marvelous gifts.

Wisdom

Wisdom is the highest of the gifts because it corresponds most to the virtue of love, which is the loftiest of the virtues. It directs the intellect, moderates the passions, corrects the affections and directs the will. Wisdom leads us to judge all things by their relationship to God, not so much as an intellectual enterprise, but from the perspective of our loving relationship with God. Therefore, it enables us to focus on eternal truths, to make correct judgments in the light of eternity, and to delight in the things of God. In this way the Holy Spirit prevents us from becoming preoccupied with human culture, the flawed politically correct thinking of this world, and the latest theological fads. Wisdom helps us understand that all that glitters is not gold. On the contrary it helps us marvel at the graces given in the humblest exteriors. Wisdom reminds us, in the words of Cardinal Newman: “A thousand difficulties do not make a doubt.” The gift of wisdom brings peace because all of life, even in its difficulties, is viewed from God’s perspective.

Understanding

Understanding helps us penetrate the mysteries of salvation. It makes the Bible come alive in our hearts. Similarly the gift of understanding enlightens us during sermons, conferences, religious classes, and when reading spiritual books. It develops a profound appreciation of God’s saving grace through the sacraments. Understanding develops within us contempt for the world and tutors us to advise and lead others. This gift helps a person appreciate their vocation in life so they can faithfully live it. According to St. Augustine understanding cannot exist in a high degree without a great purity of heart, which corresponds to the beatitude: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8).

Counsel

Council gives us a readiness of will to do the better thing even when it is the hardest choice. It gives us the capability to prudently decide about the concerns of God and salvation. What must I do? Should I silently preserve in patience, should I show meekness, or should I act with firmness, even boldness? The Holy Spirit guides us through the gift of council. He fortifies us against rash impulsiveness and cowardness. With the gift of council the Holy Spirit harmonizes the apparent contradictory virtues: prudence and simplicity, fortitude and meekness, frankness and

reserve. The gift of council leads to harmony, kindness, and peace. It undermines the enemy of our soul who creates discord by making mountains out of trifles.

Fortitude

Isaiah placed fortitude above knowledge because it is vital to have the strength to avoid evil and do good without becoming discouraged. The world, the flesh and the devil are powerful, subtle and perfidious enemies. Fortitude gives us the courage and strength to be steadfast and patient in the midst of our trials and temptations. It gives us the bravery to proclaim our fidelity to Christ during times of persecution or ridicule. This is the gift that sustained the martyrs. Lastly, it gives us the determination and energy needed for perseverance. In all cases the gift of fortitude leads us to rely totally on God's strength, not our weakness and natural ineptitude.

Knowledge

Knowledge enables us to see and use temporal things in a way that will help others and us toward our eternal salvation. The gift of knowledge helps us avoid sentimentalism and the illusion of control and self-sufficiency that can so easily dominate the imagination. With this gift the Holy Spirit vividly shows us the vanity of all passing things: honors, titles, praise of man, wealth, position, and power. Knowledge exposes the emptiness and deception of the world. It also shows us the infinite gravity of mortal sin (2 Jn 5:16-17), and it produces profound sorrow for having offended God. Unlike human knowledge, which can easily lead to self-confident pride and presumption, the gift of knowledge motivates us to place all our trust in God for he alone can save us. This gift creates the balance between discouraging pessimism and the optimism of vanity that relies on self.

Piety

Piety gives us the disposition to serve God with tenderness and devotion. It helps us love all others because they are God's children for whom Jesus died on the cross. Piety compliments the fear of the Lord because it inclines our heart with a wholly filial affection for God. Piety brings disinterestedness for sensible consolations in prayer by giving us peace during times of distractions, dryness and aridity. In this regard St. Paul wrote: "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship... Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:15, 26).

Fear of the Lord

This gift is not the servile fear that dreads God's punishment, but the reverential loving fear of the Father's sons and daughters who dread offending him by sin. Servile fear diminishes love because it views God as the punishing avenger rather than our loving, merciful Father. The fear of the Lord is an extension of our love for God. This holy horror of sin is the "beginning of wisdom" (Ps 110:10) because it leads us to surrender to God in everything. Often this gift is the first manifestation of the Holy Spirit's influence in the soul when he experiences a genuine conversion.

Question

If these gifts of the Holy Spirit are so powerful, why is it that many Christians exhibit little indication that the Holy Spirit is active in their lives? Sadly, it is because we have divided hearts. This dynamo of love gently seeks to reside fully in our hearts, but he never violates our freedom. A good gauge of our receptiveness to the Holy Spirit is the degree the fruits of the Spirit are exhibited in our daily lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). May we heed the plea of the psalmist: “O that today you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts” (Ps 95:7-8).