

“Walking in His Power: The Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit”

by Bobby Hesley

Probably the best definition I’ve ever heard of what the word “gift” means is “The ability to do with great ease, what others can only do with great difficulty.” Most of us have natural gifts and talents that are unique to us. Maybe it’s singing and dancing or the ability to play musical instruments. Some people seem like they are walking calculators who can figure out complex mathematical equations in their heads. Others seem to have an uncanny ability to make friends with whoever they meet, regardless of time, place, or circumstance. Then there are the people who are gifted with naturally good looks and perfectly symmetrical physiques, who seem to be able to eat whatever they want and exercise as little as they want, and yet are still able to turn heads wherever they go. These are all examples of natural gifts that only some have and that others don’t; and for these types of natural gifts, the above definition fits perfectly.

However, there is a certain type of Gift, seven of them in fact, that God gives to *every single one of us* in Baptism, then brings them to their full strength in Confirmation; and those are the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit, mentioned in Isaiah 11:2. Though the above definition of a gift is the best I’ve ever heard concerning natural gifts, it falls infinitely short of the Seven Gifts that God gives us, since these supernatural Gifts not only enable us to easily and swiftly do things that are incredibly difficult, they enable us to do things that are absolutely IMPOSSIBLE to do without God’s help. What is it that is so impossible for us to do that requires us to have these Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit? The answer to this question is plain and simple – achieving extraordinary Holiness.

Why Do We Need the 7 Gifts and the 7 Virtues?

We have all been wounded by the Fall of Adam and are in need of healing. This was not so in the beginning. Man’s nature was perfect and complete. There were no rebellions in his lower nature because it was perfectly subjected to his reason; since his reason was perfectly subjected to God. When man rebelled against God, God allowed his lower nature (passions, urges, and emotions) to rebel against his higher nature (reason). Essentially, what happened in our relationship with God in the Garden of Eden (man, the lower creature, rebelling against God, his Higher Creator), God allowed to happen in our human nature as a punishment for sin (our lower appetites rebelling against our higher reason). St. Paul vividly expresses our condition when he complained:

“...but I see in my flesh another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my flesh.” (Romans 7:23)

This is why we all struggle with sin and vice, and yet not only does God call us to overcome it, He also gives us the necessary helps to overcome sin, and this is done with the Seven Virtues and Gifts. There are seven Supernatural Virtues that are each perfected by a corresponding Gift of the Holy Spirit. Three of them are called “Theological” Virtues, since they have God (*Theos*) as their direct object. They are Faith, Hope, and Charity, mentioned by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:13:

“So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

The other four are called “Moral” or “Cardinal” virtues. They are Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance. “Cardinal” means “hinge” in Latin, since the four Cardinal virtues have other virtues that hinge on them or are connected to them, as a door is connected to a hinge. They are mentioned together in Wisdom 8:7:

“And if any one loves righteousness, her labors are virtues; for she teaches self-control and prudence, justice and courage; nothing in life is more profitable for man than these.”

As human beings we are composed of two natures, a physical nature with all of its senses, and a spiritual nature that enables us to think and rationalize. In other words, we are a mix of intellect and appetite. Therefore, the Seven Gifts and Seven Virtues perfect our entire being. Of the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit, four of them perfect our intellect, and the remaining three perfect our lower appetites; both of which were weakened and damaged by Original Sin and are therefore in need of healing and repair via the Seven Virtues and Gifts.

Each of the Gifts in Detail:

Let’s take a brief walk through the 7 Gifts of the Holy Spirit and see how they assist us in growing in the Theological and Cardinal Virtues:

Wisdom – This is the greatest of all the Seven Gifts. Wisdom is simply the knowledge of Divine Truth. It is not knowledge in an abstract or scientific sense, but a deep and intimate knowledge of the Highest Cause that seizes both our will and our intellect. It is knowledge through union, hence its connection to Charity. It enables us to judge and order our lives according to the Eternal Law of God. Since these are Laws that are above our human capacity to arrive at on our own, we are in need of this Gift. It unites us directly with the Highest Cause, therefore it is the highest of all the Gifts, and consequently it perfects the highest of all the virtues, which is Charity.

Understanding – The Gift of Understanding is defined by St. Thomas Aquinas as “A quick and piercing insight into the Divine Mysteries.” While the Gift of Wisdom enables us to make right judgments about Divine things, the Gift of Understanding enables us to perceive and apprehend them in the first place, since something must first be perceived before it can be judged. A good example of this Gift is the deep insight that the Saints and Doctors of the Church have into the Scriptures in their beautiful works and writings. In her classic spiritual masterpiece, *The Dialogue*, St. Catherine of Sienna says that this Gift enables one to penetrate “into the sweet marrow of the Scriptures.” On a personal level, some of my greatest insights I’ve ever had into the Bible came to me not while I was studying or searching for them, but while I was sitting in front of the Tabernacle without my Bible. If you’ve ever had a similar experience of receiving a sure and deep impression about one of the Mysteries of our Faith, making itself known to you without any action on your part, (except the passive act of receiving it) there’s a good chance that you were experiencing the Gift of Understanding at work in your soul. This Gift perfects the Theological virtue of Faith.

Knowledge – The Gift of Knowledge is simply knowledge of human affairs and of created things as they relate to the Truths of our Faith. This Gift enables us to arrive at a true estimation of created things, be it people or possessions, which inevitably leads us to realize their inherent emptiness and limitations, while at the same time being able to still love them in a well-ordered way despite their emptiness; which is how God intended for us to love created things, the way that He loves them in fact. Like Understanding, this Gift also perfects the Theological Virtue of Faith, and is simply called “Knowledge” since it deals primarily with created, changeable, temporal things, as opposed to Wisdom, which deals primarily with uncreated, unchangeable, eternal things.

Counsel – Just as Understanding is related to Wisdom, since it arrives at a quick and easy grasp of Divine Mysteries (which is what Wisdom concerns itself with), Counsel works in the same way, except it is a help to the Gift of Knowledge, since it guides us in what we should do in the complex daily situations that regard either human affairs or also the role and use of created things in our lives. We are in desperate need of this Gift since *“the thoughts of mortal men are fearful, and our counsels uncertain.” (Wisdom 9:14)*. Counsel manifests itself as a clear and immediate assurance of what to do in a situation that seems like it’s too baffling or confusing for us to figure out. It is the Gift of Counsel that comes into operation when we have a major life decision to make, like our chosen vocation, whether to leave or stay at a particular job, etc. But this Gift does not restrict itself to just the long-term decisions we have to make. Have you ever had an emergency situation unexpectedly arrive without any warning, leaving you no time whatsoever to deliberate or seek advice from anyone about how to handle it, yet it still demanded that you make an immediate decision that would have lasting effects; and yet somehow you knew EXACTLY what you were supposed to do? If so, then you experienced the Holy Spirit coming to your aid with the Gift of Counsel. Since Counsel deals primarily with the best way or means to arrive at God’s will concerning created things and human situations, it helps and perfects that virtue which enables us to choose the best means to an end in a given situation, the Cardinal Virtue of Prudence.

Piety – The Gift of Piety transforms and elevates obligatory acts of religion like fasting, the taking and living out of vows, tithes and alms, the duty of prayer, obedience to God and the Church, and paying honor to God and the Saints, into an intimate family affair with God, instead of a dry routine done only for duty’s sake. It perfects the Cardinal Virtue of Justice, since Justice enables one to “render another his due.” When we render our neighbor his just due, we do acts of the Cardinal Virtue of Justice; when we render God His just due, we perform acts of the virtue of Religion. The Gift of Piety perfects us in both of these operations by making them sweet and fulfilling to perform. *“Lead me in the path of Thy commandments, for in them is my delight.” (Psalm 119:35)*

Fortitude – *“Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.” (Ephesians 6:10)* The Gift of Fortitude strengthens our mind to endure brutal and difficult physical situations that are extremely intense and painful, but not long lasting, like martyrdom or physical violence and assault suffered for Christ’s sake. It also gives us the strength of mind to endure very painful moral situations, like overcoming sin and vice in our lives and pulling them out by their root, which is a long, constant and painful moral process that stretches out over an entire lifetime. St. Augustine connected the Beatitude *‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall have their fill’* to this Gift, since it takes a supernatural amount of Fortitude to hunger and thirst for holiness, which is

accompanied by much pain and toil that cannot be avoided in our pursuit of it. This Gift is not only given to the martyrs and historic heroes who followed Christ in His physical death; it is also available to every pew-sitting Catholic who has been Baptized and will enable them to heroically overcome whatever pet addiction or fault they struggle with. Try to recall the bravest act you've ever done in your life, or the most difficult situation that you were somehow able to successfully endure. You were given Fortitude from on high. Looking back on that situation(s) with the eyes of Faith, you'll realize that the only way you were able to endure those crosses was because of this Gift. *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for Thou art with me." (Psalm 23:4)* This Gift perfects the Cardinal Virtue of Fortitude and also indirectly the Theological Virtue of Hope, since Hope is a trust in God to finally deliver us from all pain, trials, and evil, whereas Fortitude is the supernatural ability to endure whatever pain, trial, or evil that Providence delays in delivering us from, since *"he cannot be crowned, who has not fought well." (2 Tim 2:5)*

Fear of the Lord – The Gift of Fear restrains us from committing sin. Therefore, it is the lowest of the 7 Gifts, since all it does is remove obstacles that turn us away from God. It is considered a lesser Gift since the removal of an obstacle is a lesser good than the achievement of a goal, which is a greater good, and in this case the goal would be God, our Highest Good. It is often referred to as "chaste fear" or "filial fear" since it gives us a higher motive for abstaining from sin than merely the selfish fear that only considers the resulting pain that we will endure, either from God's just judgments and punishments, or even from something as simple as the painful consequences of our sinful actions. This is called "servile fear" and though it does the trick in restraining us from sin, it is an imperfect fear. It is the fear that a slave has for his master, whereas the Gift of Fear is the fear that a son has for his Father. The Gift of Fear restrains us from sin, not because we fear the pain and unhappiness we'll inevitably go through if we commit it, but rather because of the pain and displeasure it will cause to the heart of our Heavenly Father if we willingly break His Laws. This Gift perfects the Cardinal Virtue of Temperance, since Temperance suppresses sinful pleasures that are extremely difficult to moderate. It not only suppresses spiritual vices, like Pride and excessive Anger, it also suppresses carnal/sensual vices involving food and sex, like Gluttony and Lust; hence the Psalmist's cry *"Pierce my flesh with Thy Fear." (Psalm 119:120)*

Questions for Reflection:

1. Do I rely on the Holy Spirit to strengthen me with His Gifts, or do I rely on myself?
2. Do I pray for a daily increase in the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially during Mass?
3. With the Seven Gifts, the Holy Spirit is the Mover, and I am the one who is moved by His loving action. But an instrument cannot be moved unless it's united to the hand of the Mover. Knowing this, am I continually vigilant about remaining in a state of grace so that I can be docile to the motion of the Holy Spirit? If I'm conscious of Mortal Sin, do I make it my first priority to receive God's forgiveness through the Sacrament of Confession, or do I put it off, presuming on God's Mercy and Goodness?
4. Have I made an effort to fully understand what happened to me in the Sacrament of Confirmation? Do I look at this Sacrament as my own personal Pentecost, or do I see it as just some liturgical formality that I had to go through?