

24. The Gifts of the Spirit

Contemplative prayer is a communion in the prayer of Jesus. The more we surrender to his love, the more we say Yes to his longing to draw us into the intimacy of the love that he receives from the Father. This is the love that he gives to the Father, the bond of love who is the Holy Spirit. In contemplative prayer we share in the communion of love in which the very Being of God consists.

The communion of love that we experience in contemplative prayer is an experience of Jesus' own Spirit. This is the gift that Jesus gave his contemporaries all through his life. He was able to give this Spirit in a complete way when he reached the goal of his life in the complete self-giving that he offered on the cross. That was the hour that the Beloved Disciple calls his 'hour of glory'. This is the gift that the risen Jesus continues to offer to anyone who wants to be open to his love. This is the gift that comes to us through all the encounters that we have with Jesus, for his one desire is to draw us to enjoy the love that is the fount of his own life. In contemplative prayer we experience a love which wells up from God who dwells in the depths of our being; we are touched by a spark issuing from the fire of love which is God's Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts, the Spirit promised by Jesus (John 14:17).

Paul knew that the only way we can belong to Jesus is by sharing Jesus' Spirit (Romans 8:9). The more we allow ourselves to be led by this Spirit the more we allow ourselves to be taken into the heart of God, the more we enjoy the communion in love for which we are created. Paul prays for the Christians in Ephesus:

'I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God's Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love' (Ephesians 3:16-17).

In earlier prayer we respond to the inspiration of God's Spirit inviting us to be in love. In contemplative prayer we offer our whole selves to God, trusting God to do the drawing. This is the work of the Spirit whom Paul calls the 'sanctifying Spirit' (Romans 1:4), the Spirit through whom 'God's love has been poured into our hearts' (Romans 5:5). It is Jesus' Spirit who inspires and directs our contemplation:

'The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit' (Romans 8:25-26).

It is Jesus' Spirit who transforms us through love (2 Corinthians 3:17-18), till we can say with Paul:

'It is no longer I who live. It is Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

Since the second century, Christian writers have spoken of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit¹. The number seven is symbolic and signifies fullness. The traditional list comes from the Greek and Latin versions of Isaiah:

'The spirit of the Lord will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and fortitude, the spirit of knowledge and piety [not in the Hebrew text]. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord' (Isaiah 11:2-3).

¹Justin Martyr Dialogue with Trypho, chapter 87; Irenaeus Against the Heresies III,17,3.

Towards the end of the 4th century, Saint Ambrose wrote:

‘Recall then that you have received the spiritual seal, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence, the spirit of holy fear in God’s presence. Guard what you have received. God the Father has marked you with God’s sign; Christ the Lord has confirmed you and has placed his pledge, the Spirit, in your hearts’ (*On the Mysteries* 7.42 - quoted in the Catholic Catechism n. 1303).

God’s love is all-embracing and so there is no limit to the ways in which we are graced by God’s Spirit of love. There is value, however, in following tradition by reflecting on the ways in which God’s transforming grace acts in our hearts through the seven gifts, which, according to the thirteenth century theologian, Thomas Aquinas, dispose us to respond promptly to God’s inspiration. They may be compared to seven sails given us by God to enable us to pick up the divine breeze. They enable us to surrender to God’s action and so to move in accordance with the mysterious motion of God rather than our own determined will, however obedient. Aquinas quotes Psalm 143:10: ‘Let your good spirit lead me on a level path’ and adds: ‘No one can inherit the land of the blessed unless he is moved and drawn by the Holy Spirit.’² A modern theologian expresses it thus:

‘The gifts of the Holy Spirit are special salutary modifications of the openness for God which is intrinsic to human nature. They also hold in check the forces of self-assertiveness, selfishness and sloth which resist the inspirations of grace.’³

In speaking of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit we are not dealing with a central dogma of faith. Nor should we be too precise in distinguishing between them or think of them as an exhaustive list. The traditional seven gifts do, however, express significant aspects of the way in which we are graced by God, and they represent a time-honoured way of reminding us of the fullness of God’s gift of the Spirit to us. In the Rite of Confirmation n. 25 the Bishop invokes the outpouring of the Spirit in these words:

‘All-powerful God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by water and the Holy Spirit you freed your sons and daughters from sin and gave them new life. Send your Holy Spirit upon them to be their helper and guide. Give them the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence. Fill them with the spirit of wonder and awe in your presence. We ask this through Christ our Lord’ (quoted in Catholic Catechism n.1299).

Speaking of the sacrament of Confirmation, the Catholic Catechism n. 1303 writes:

‘Confirmation brings an increase and deepening of baptismal grace:

- it roots us more deeply in the divine filiation which makes us cry, ‘Abba! Father!’
- it unites us more firmly to Christ.
- it increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit in us.
- it render our bond with the Church more perfect.
- it gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross.’

Let us examine more closely the seven effects on the soul of the Living Flame from the lamp of fire, which is God’s love.

²Summa 1^a 2^{ae} q 68, a.1-2.

³M. Schmaus in *Encyclopedia of Theology* Ed. Rahner, Burns & Oates 1975, page 648.

1. Divine Wisdom

Human wisdom is an acquired skill in judging the best way of acting in the changing and often complex circumstances of life, and in putting decisions into operation. What interests us here is that special wisdom which concerns the purpose of life itself and the way in which we relate to God, the source of life. This wisdom is the gift that is most relevant to contemplative prayer, for it gives us a special sensitivity and openness to receive God's self revelation to us. It enables us to savour and relish the divine.

When Paul claims that God alone is truly wise (Romans 16:27), he is speaking for the whole of the Biblical tradition:

'I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me.

That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?' (Ecclesiastes 7:23-24).

'The root of wisdom - to whom has it been revealed? Her subtleties - who knows them?

There is but one who is wise, greatly to be feared, seated upon his throne - the Lord.'

(Sirach 1:6-8)

'My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts' (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Divine Wisdom is God present in creation and in history, gracing all things and 'ordering all things in harmony' (Wisdom 8:1). The Book of Proverbs tells us that God 'rejoices in the inhabited world and delights in the human race' (Proverbs 8:31). The prophet Zephaniah has God dancing to the music of the spheres and the harmony of nature 'renewing the people in divine love, exulting with loud singing as on a day of festival' (3:17). In the Book of Wisdom we are told that divine Wisdom:

'renews all things, passing into holy souls in every generation making them friends of God.

God loves nothing so much as the man or woman who lives with wisdom' (Wisdom 7:27).

It is through God's gift to us, the gift of this Spirit of Wisdom, that we 'learn what is pleasing to God' (Wisdom 9:10). We are assured that if we truly love this divine wisdom and if we earnestly seek it, we will find it, and we will find God (Wisdom 6:12).

Jesus is the incarnation of divine Wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30), the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14). He invites all who are thirsty to come to him and drink (John 7:37). He invites all who are walking in darkness to come to him, the light of the world (John 8:12). He invites all who labour and are overburdened to come to him and he will give them rest (Matthew 11:29-30).

Paul exclaims:

'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways!

For who has known the mind of God? Or who has been God's counsellor?' ...

For from God and through God and to God are all things.

To God be the glory forever. Amen' (Romans 11:33-36).

All things are *from* God, for God is the origin and source of all wisdom. All things are *through* God, for it is through God's action that we participate in divine wisdom. All things are *to* God, for all wisdom is directed towards God, the goal of our existence.

It is by keeping our eyes on Jesus and by opening our souls to receive his Spirit that we learn wisdom:

'There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.'

(1 Corinthians 8:6)

In contemplating Jesus we see who we really are and we learn how to respond to the action of divine Wisdom in our lives. By his Spirit we are transformed, so that the life of Jesus becomes our life, his thoughts become our thoughts, his responses become our responses, his prayer becomes our prayer.

To speak of divine Wisdom is to speak of God's design for the world. Each of us is created and held in existence by God to be part of the beauty of this design. We will fulfil our purpose only by being open to the inspiration of grace. If we choose to resist grace, God can use even our resistance to further God's mysterious designs. What a personal tragedy it would be for us not to enjoy being part of the beauty of divine communion.

With the gift of contemplative prayer comes an invitation to surrender to God's loving presence in our souls. If we respond in faith and yield to God, then, and only then, all that we are and all that we do becomes suffused with divine Wisdom. Then we can begin to say with Saint Paul: 'I live, no longer I. It is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). It is a journey of faith, for we journey in darkness. Our eyes are unable to take the brightness of God's light. It is a journey of hope, for now we have only touches of the embrace for which we are made and for which our hearts long. It is a journey of love, for it is in being in trusting communion with God that we find peace.

2. Fear of the Lord (wonder and awe in God's presence)

The following texts represent a frequently recurring motif in the Hebrew Scriptures:

'The eye of the Lord is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in God's covenant love' (Psalm 33:18)

'Praise the Lord! Happy are those who fear the Lord,
who greatly delight in God's commandments' (Psalm 112:1).

'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 9:10).

In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux writes (Sermon 38.3):

'The Bridegroom intends to inspire the fear that purifies, that by this purification we may be made ready for the vision we long for. It is a vision reserved for the pure in heart.'

In communion with the transcendent and absolute Other on whom we are utterly dependent, we are faced with our own mortality and sinfulness. We cannot ensure our survival. We are powerless and dependent. Yet revelation opens us to God who is love. The gift of 'fear of the Lord' disposes us to a sentiment of profound awe and wonder at God who holds us in being and who loves us so personally. 'Fear of the Lord' is a foundational religious attitude of living one's life in the presence of God and according to God's will. Something of this sentiment is found in the following words of Isaiah:

'One seraph called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"' (Isaiah 6:3-5).

We are not to fear God in the sense of being afraid, as though God were a threat to us. But we are meant to take seriously our capacity to be lost. We are to fear our sinfulness and recognise our need for God's grace and forgiveness. The Book of Exodus makes this distinction nicely:

'Do not be afraid [God is not a threat].
God has come only to test you and to put the fear of God upon you
so that you do not sin' (Exodus 20:20).

An anonymous monk in a book entitled '*The Hermitage Within*' writes:

'The point of departure for great mystical ascents is always the intense activity of the gift of fear. People like insisting on the "filial" character of this fear, but this presupposes a perfectly clear view of everything, which by definition keeps us in an abyss of nothingness below our heavenly Father. Harmless, artificial insults to your self-esteem are not going to make you humble. Humiliation has its compensations in religion: an "edifying" acceptance of it raises our prestige and ministers to our vanity. But the Holy Spirit will deprive you of self-esteem from inside, by contrasting God's grandeur and your baseness by its light: to the point perhaps of making you cry for mercy in horror of your abjectness: "Alas for me, I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips"' (Isaiah 6:5).

Julian of Norwich writes:

'Reverent fear makes us hastily flee from everything that is not good, and fall into our Lord's breast, as the child into the mother's bosom, with all our intention and with all our mind, knowing our feebleness and our great need, knowing God's everlasting goodness and blessed love, seeking for salvation only in God, cleaving to God with faithful trust. The fear which leads us in this direction is gentle and gracious and good and true ... For the natural attribute of fear which we have in this life by the grace-giving operation of the Holy Spirit will be the same in heaven before God, gentle, courteous, most sweet; and thus in love we shall be familiar and close to God, and in fear we shall be gentle and courteous to God.'

(*Showings*, chapter 74)

'Reverent fear softens and strengthens and pleases and gives rest. False fear (fear that comes from doubt and leads to a lack of trust) belabours, assails and perturbs. Recognise them both, and reject false fear, for God wants us always to be strong in our love, and peaceful and restful as God is towards us; and God wants us to be, for ourselves and for our fellow Christians, what God is for us. Amen' (The final words of '*Showings*', short version, ch.25).

3. Piety (absent from the Hebrew Bible; found in the Greek and Latin versions)

This gift disposes us to be 'poor in spirit' (Matthew 5:3), to be 'humble like a child' (Matthew 18:4). Saint Paul writes: 'God has sent the Spirit of God's Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba! Father!'' (Galatians 4:6).

4. Understanding

This gift is especially active in theologians, catechists, and teachers. It enriches the capacity of our minds to grasp the implications of revealed truth and the meaning revelation has for our lives. The Holy Spirit disposes us to integrate our faith and to gain insight into the ways in which other areas of knowledge take on a more profound relevance when seen in the perspective in faith: 'I have good advice and sound wisdom; I have understanding, I have strength' (Proverbs 8:14).

5. Knowledge

The grace of the Holy Spirit also disposes us to grasp truth more richly and more readily by guiding our judgment to assert truth and to reject error. Our judgments are true to the extent that our understanding is in conformity with the way things are. The gift of knowledge helps us to judge truthfully in the light of who God is and how God has chosen to relate to us. It disposes us to judge all things in the knowledge that nothing can be properly understood without grasping its relationship to God, the source of all being.

6. The spirit of counsel or right judgment

This gift enriches our judgment as regards how we should respond most creatively and in a way that is most responsive to grace in the changing circumstances of our life. The Holy Spirit disposes us to make moral decisions under God's inspiration.

7. The spirit of courage

Everyone suffers. We are all tested by life. However, Paul reassures us:

'No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it' (1 Corinthians 10:13).

The Holy Spirit is always offering us all the love we need to do God's will and to tend towards the perfection of love in which holiness consists. The gift of courage disposes us to receive this support and sustenance from God in our trials and so to endure to the end and find salvation (Matthew 24:13). It helps to keep us trusting and alert to God's grace even when our circumstances tend to reduce us to fear and impotence. The following statement comes from a book describing the crucifix of San Damiano before which Francis of Assisi prayed:

'It is courage that makes saints, and courage is nothing more nor less than trusting in the grace that comes from God, and that is always present. For, in our trials and sufferings, God is always there ... like the space that surrounds a bird.'

John of the Cross reminds us of our need for this gift:

'Though the path is plain and smooth for those of good will, you who walk will not travel far, and you will do so with difficulty, if you do not have good feet, *courage*, and tenacity of spirit' (*Sayings of light and love* n.3).

We conclude this brief survey with the sequence composed for the Feast of Pentecost:

Holy Spirit, Lord of light, from your clear celestial height your pure beaming radiance give.
Come, Father of the poor, come with treasures which endure. Come, light of all that live.
You of all consolers best, you the soul's delightful guest. Refreshing peace bestow.
You in toil are comfort sweet, pleasant coolness in the heat, solace in the midst of woe.
Light immortal, light divine, visit these hearts of thine and our inmost being fill.
If you take your grace away, nothing pure in us will stay; all our good is turned to ill.
Heal our wounds, our strength renew. On our dryness pour your dew.
Wash the stains of guilt away. Bend the stubborn heart and will.
Melt the frozen. Warm the chill. Guide the steps that go astray.
On us who evermore you confess and you adore, with your sevenfold gifts descend.
Give us comfort when we die. Give us life with you on high. Give us joys that never end.