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The Gifts of the Holy Spirit According to St. Thomas Aquinas

by

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THE GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT ACCORDING TO ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

**by
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All through history, God has revealed himself as the supreme Gift-Giver.

Creation is a gift. Life is a gift. The Lord gave his covenants as gifts, and called Abraham, Moses, and the Jewish People to himself all out of sheer generosity. Moreover, God sent his Son to us as a gift, and Christ won for us all the gift of eternal life.

God wants nothing more than to share his own life with us. The Lord wants to make us, as Scripture says, “sharers in the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). As creatures, however, and sinful ones at that, we need to be prepared and elevated by God before we can be perfectly united with him. In a word, we must be changed.

Part of our transformation into the people God wants us to be happens because his grace makes us virtuous. To be virtuous means not only to do right, but to be the kind of person who does what is good readily, spontaneously, and with joy. The life of the virtues prevents evils from poisoning the love in our hearts, and

frees us to advance in godliness. But besides strengthening us in goodness, God also infuses into our souls the gifts of Faith, Hope and Charity—the “theological virtues,” which are nothing less than a sharing in God’s own divine knowledge and love. Through Faith, Hope and Charity we are brought to live in union with the Holy Trinity even during our life on earth.

In giving us the theological virtues, the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling in us and enlivens us with rich blessings of every description, making us daily more like Christ and guiding us to the life of perfection in heaven.

Scripture emphasizes two groups of blessings that the Holy Spirit gives to those who receive him. First, there are the twelve “Fruits of the Holy Spirit” that St. Paul names for us in his letter to the Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control and chastity (Gal 5:22–23). In addition, the Spirit endows us with blessings we traditionally call the seven “Gifts of the Holy Spirit.” These particular gifts are lasting (but not indestructible) endowments that perfect the good habits and natural powers of the human soul and have the effect of making us supernaturally sensitive and supernaturally responsive to the guidance and inspirations of God.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of these seven Gifts when he writes, prophesying about the coming of Christ (the “flower of Jesse”):

A branch will sprout from the root of Jesse, and from his root a flower will rise up: and the spirit of the Lord will rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of fortitude, a spirit of knowledge and of piety, and he shall be filled with the spirit of the fear of the Lord (Is 11:1–3).¹

These seven Gifts—Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety and Fear of the Lord—are spoken of throughout Scripture, and have been received and explained by saints throughout the ages. Of these, the 13th century Dominican theologian St. Thomas Aquinas offers us what is perhaps the clearest and most thorough explanation of how the Gifts work in our life. In this booklet, our goal is to present St. Thomas’s explanation, together with his description of how we can see the Gifts at work in the woman who was the most perfect dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

What are the Gifts, exactly?

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit are blessings given to our souls, to enhance and refine the natural powers that our souls possess. “‘Soul’ refers to the innermost aspect of man, that which is of greatest value in him, that by which he is most especially in God’s image: ‘soul’ signifies the *spiritual principle* in man.”²

God the Holy Spirit is always at work prompting us and leading us to greater purity, greater love, and greater holiness. However, even with the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity, our hearts can remain insensitive to the Holy Spirit. The seven Gifts are the remedy for this dullness. They enhance the powers of the soul and make our hearts more sensitive to God, so that we can easily and consistently follow the movements and inspirations of the Holy Spirit. The Gifts are lasting, habitual dispositions that keep us keenly attuned and devotedly responsive to even the smallest promptings of God. They make us ready for His initiatives, and enable us to act in a holy, even God-like way.

These seven graces are called “Gifts” for two reasons. First, they are “Gifts” because God infuses them in us without expecting any payment. Second, they are “Gifts” because they give us the

privilege of responding to divine inspirations. The name “Gifts,” given in Scripture, seems most appropriate when we consider what supreme blessings and benefits God gives us through them.

Who needs the Gifts?

We all need the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, since without God’s help it is impossible for us to find our way to him. Besides needing for our sins to be forgiven, we need God to overcome our vices, foolishness, ignorance, mental dullness, and other defects of mind and soul. He does this in a magnificent way by giving the Gifts, since these more than compensate for the weaknesses of our fallen nature and remedy the spiritual sicknesses that keep us from full communion with God. The Gifts are more than a remedy, and they strengthen and confirm us in following the good inspirations and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Gifts bring us to hear and obey God readily, and they make doing his will our supreme delight.

How do we obtain the Gifts?

The seven Gifts, like the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity, are given to us in Holy Baptism. Once given they enhance the soul and exist as new, supernatural faculties or powers. Unlike the natural faculties, however, the Gifts depend directly upon God for their exercise. We have by nature the power to think and reason (for example), but when we are brought to life by God’s grace we are endowed with the Gifts as supernatural faculties, senses (as it were) that make possible our life as new spiritual creatures. The real action or operation of the Gifts—and thus their benefits—depend upon the further working of God. In fact, the operation of the Gifts is often hidden to us. It is not unusual for them to be revealed only in retrospect, through an enlightened examination of our actions. This is not surprising since at the time

of the Gifts' activity our attention will be on God and on other objects as they relate to him.

The operation of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit depends primarily and essentially upon the grace of God. For our part, we can cultivate them by avoiding sin and by exercising the moral and intellectual virtues. Full of ready obedience, we must disown whatever could impede or offer resistance to the movement of the Holy Spirit. For instance, if we are stubborn, selfish, or self-indulgent, we are creating obstacles in our souls and are impeding the work of grace. We cannot enjoy the Gifts of the Holy Spirit in a stable or lasting way as long as we remain willing to sin, or unresolved in our determination never to offend God. "No one," Christ reminds us in the Gospel, "can serve two masters" (Mt 6:24).

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit appear when we are living in true, divine Charity. When we love God above all things, and when we love all things for his sake, then that same spiritual fire of love makes us keenly sensitive to his direction. Thus the Gifts appear with Charity, and in turn they lead back to greater holiness and to greater love. The Gifts are always present all together, since in the life of divine love they form an organic, integral whole. (This is so even though, in particular cases, the operation of a particular Gift is needed and evident.) In Charity, the Gifts cannot be disconnected or parceled out separately, and they work in such a way that they reinforce, complement, and replenish each other inasmuch as they act together to keep us attuned to doing whatever God wants.

The Gifts make us like Christ

Since the Gifts bring about exquisite sensitivity and responsiveness to God, we can say that they are, in a sense, the crowning dignity of our human nature. Even Our Lord Jesus Christ himself,

as true man, was endowed with the Gifts. In his infinite and loving wisdom, God has ordained that it is only through the Gifts of the Holy Spirit that souls should be made fully attentive, alert, and heedful to the Spirit's urgings. In receiving the Gifts, we are brought into a deeper conformity to Christ, who, in his perfect humanity, was supremely and perfectly sensitive and subject to the inspirations of God.

Our sharing in the glory of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit is not limited to the time of our short life on earth. It is true that, in this present life, the Gifts assist us in those areas that purify and perfect our relationship with God. They especially protect us against temptation and the trials brought about by evil. But in heaven, our entire life will be one of following the movements and life of the Holy Spirit. The Gifts will enable us to participate in the very life of the Holy Trinity, in a way that only God himself can teach us. In their essence, then, the Gifts of the Holy Spirit will continue to last and be active in heaven. There they will be fully permanent and perfect, enabling us to enjoy total communion with God and with all the angels and saints in him. Together we will exult in God's own love and beauty, and will share in them together as his beloved children for ever.

THE SEVEN GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Gift of Fear of the Lord

Why would God want to give us a gift called "Fear of the Lord?" How could fear ever be good and desirable? St. Thomas Aquinas tells us that we need the Gift of fear as a kind of first beginning of the perfection of all the Gifts. For the Fear of the Lord conditions us to show proper reverence to God and to be completely devoted to him. In this way, Fear of the Lord is a kind

of foundation on which the other Gifts are built.

Like all the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, Fear of the Lord is a habitual perfection of the powers of the soul that makes the believer responsive to the inspiration and movements of the Holy Spirit. When we say this, we mean that Fear of the Lord is a lasting and stable condition, a refinement or disposition that makes us consistently and happily receptive to God. Without being receptive, without being submissive and docile (teachable), how could we go on to enjoy the other Gifts? The Fear of the Lord paves the way for the rest of the Gifts by leading us to revere God and avoid anything that might alienate us from him.

The Fear of the Lord is not a matter of anxiety or terror. Rather, it is marked by a calm yet eager resolve. How does Fear of the Lord help us follow God? St. Thomas helps us see how when he points out a common fact of life: before people can begin to do good, they must first withdraw from evil. As we know from our own experience, fear always involves turning away from something that we consider a threat to our wellbeing.

In our relationship with God, fear can play a role in two ways. First, fear can be a fear of punishment (especially Hell). We can and should turn us away from evil, run to God, and stay close to him whenever we feel intimidated by the reality of punishment. St. Thomas refers to this kind of fear as “servile” fear, or the fear of one who obeys the master because of the possibility of punishment. Servile fear, however, does not involve the full range of freedom and grace that Our Lord wants us to enjoy. There is a second and holier kind of fear that has to do not with punishment, but with the wonderful good of communion with God.

This second kind of fear is not afraid of punishment but of losing God. St. Thomas calls this “filial” fear, the fear of sons, since it is the kind of fear a good son should have about ever violating

or losing his relationship with his father. To have filial fear means to be eager to avoid the evil of offending God or doing anything that might damage our relationship with him.

The Holy Spirit's Gift, Fear of the Lord, is a Gift of filial fear. By this Gift, we respond to the Spirit's guidance in withdrawing from evil pleasures out of love for God. In fact, this Gift transforms the way we regard God. St. Thomas goes so far as to say that the charity which informs the gift of fear enables us to look upon God as at once our father, *and even our spouse!* In other words, the Charity (love) active in Fear of the Lord is one that makes us keenly sensitive to how God loves us and to how we need to answer that love. Through Fear of the Lord, we become deeply sensitive to anything that might diminish our life of loving God and of enjoying his love.

There is, then, something quite ironic about Fear of the Lord. This fear is produced by love. As St. Thomas explains, love is the mother of which fear is born, for a person fears to lose only what he loves. When our desires get firmly fixed on something, we loathe ever losing it. To be deprived of the object of our affections is something we fear as an evil. In this respect, then, fear of its very nature arises from love. This insight urges us to ask ourselves the question: "What do I really fear losing?" If we see what we are afraid to lose, then we will see what we really love in life.

With this understanding of fear, we can see why it is right to say that even Jesus himself had the Gift of Fear of the Lord. For when we fear another person with filial fear (even a divine person, like God the Father), we are fearing the loss of some overwhelming good. What Christ feared—what he was eager never to lose—was what is most overwhelming in God, in particular his infinite love. As a result, Jesus' human soul was moved under the impulse of the Holy Spirit to a profoundly awed reverence of God. St.

Thomas comments that, as man, Christ had a deeper sense of reverence for God than anyone else ever had.

Because of this holy, loving fear, Jesus did not turn away from his agony or the anguish of the Passion. Something greater than the torment of torture overwhelmed him and moved him to reject utterly any deed that would have separated him in the slightest way from doing the will of his Father. Thus it was precisely the evil of violence and punishment—the evil that was meant to discourage Jesus (“Do you not know that I have the power to crucify you?” [Jn 19:10])—that urged him on! For by faithfully responding to the Gift of Fear in his human soul, Jesus provided the way for the servile fear of others to be transformed into authentic filial fear. By his own suffering and love, Jesus teaches us and enables us to seek reconciliation and unending communion with God above all things.

In Jesus’ Fear of the Lord we come to understand how we can expect the Gift of Fear will be active in our own souls. As we see in the Passion, one chief effect of Fear of the Lord is a total and pure humility. With Fear of the Lord, we are not only willing but eager and joyful at the prospect of enduring suffering for the sake of God and his plan of salvation. Holy Fear disciplines us, so that we stop seeking glory for ourselves, but instead seek God’s glory and our own happiness in him. Fear of the Lord reveres and loves God, and so uproots the very beginnings of human pride. Fear is a remedy for all pride and arrogance of spirit, which are the evils most likely to lead us away from the Lord.

This effect of humility increases in proportion to our charity. The more we love God, the more we fear to offend him and to be separated from him. Yet the more we love God, the less we fear punishment—true love saves us from being preoccupied with our own welfare, and makes us pay attention not to punishment but to

the awesome love that we cannot afford to lose. The humble love that securely attaches us to God also causes us to have greater confidence of reward, and consequently less fear of punishment.

A second effect of Fear of the Lord, then, is the enhancement of Hope. St. Thomas notes that Fear humbles the spirit so that it will not grow proud about present things. And it strengthens us with the bread of hope as we look forward to things yet to be. The Spirit's Gift does not make us worry about whether God will save us, but makes us eager to avoid any disregard or sin or neglect on our part that would reject or diminish the effectiveness of that divine help. This way, Fear and Hope work together. Hope is confident that God will do great things for us, while Fear keeps us pure and humble, in the perfect state to receive the loving graces of God. In a sense, Hope even makes Fear more intense, since the more we confidently hope for from another (from God, in this case), the more eager we will be not to forfeit that gift by offending our benefactor or by separating ourselves from him.

Fear of the Lord also enables us to live the Beatitude, "How blessed are the poor in spirit" (Mt 5:3), in a more authentic way. For the Gift of Fear does not only liberate us from seeking the self-exaltation of pride; it also saves us from craving the fame that can be gained through exterior goods, such as honors and wealth. Thus, through Fear we become eager for God alone, and are set free from the pride and greed that would send us racing after treasures other than God himself.

Fear of the Lord also strengthens the virtue of temperance (that virtue that keeps us free and reasonable about things that are pleasurable to the body). Because the Gift of Fear of the Lord prompts us to look to God first of all while shunning everything that could offend or separate us from him, this Gift also readily restrains us from giving ourselves up to bodily delights. When we

love God above all and are lead by the Holy Spirit to prize his love absolutely, then we are more easily going to avoid sins related to bodily desire and pleasure.

St. Thomas tells us that, of all the seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit, Fear of the Lord comes first in the order of need, last in the order of nobility. Fear of the Lord opens a door for doing good. It is the foundation or beginning for the activity of all the other Gifts. In this way, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps 111:10)—it is where wisdom has its roots, and where it first begins to come alive.

In heaven, when love is perfect, there will be no room for fear of punishment (1 Jn 4:18) and no possibility of offending God. Nevertheless, we can still say that the holiest part of fear—reverence for God—will remain even in the glory of heaven. There, Fear will not involve any anxiety or concern about sinning, but will be perfect in complete peace, in the absolutely firm and final rejection of evil, and in the total tranquility in loving God above all and in all.

The Gift of Piety

Can we ever show God the kind of honor and devotion that he deserves? Try as we might, we will never be able to do so on our own. If we are ever going to render to God the kind of homage that we owe him as his creatures and adopted children, then we will need the help of the Holy Spirit. The Gift of Piety is the particular Gift by which God the Holy Spirit himself enables us to come to God paying the kind of homage and worship that is appropriate and best. The fact that only God can lead us to praise and honor him in a fitting way is expressed by the Church in one of the prayers of her liturgy: “Father, you have no need of our praise, yet our desire to thank you is itself your gift. Our prayer of

thanksgiving adds nothing to your greatness, but makes us grow in your grace, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”³

The Gift of Piety helps to realize the ultimate purpose of our existence: “God puts us in the world to know, to love, and to serve him, and so to come to paradise.”⁴ While Fear of the Lord helps us shun evils, Piety enables us to make a right and holy *approach* to God so as to deepen and advance our relationship with him through worship and good works.

To understand the Gift of Piety—that is, the special disposition of soul by which the Holy Spirit makes us more sensitive to his own guidance—we must know what piety is in general. Unfortunately, piety is often misrepresented and parodied by misconceptions, prejudices, and stereotypes. We tend to confuse true piety with a kind of pretended sweetness, with superficial exterior devotion, and with fake emotionalism in church. Authentic piety, however, is far from all these things. Real piety, in fact, is a virtue that governs our behavior at all times, and not only when we are engaged in prayer, worship, and other acts of religious devotion. The essence of true piety lies in showing appropriate honor, respect, and appreciation to those deserving of such esteem.

In speaking of piety (the general virtue, not the Gift), St. Thomas Aquinas explains that it is concerned with fulfilling our duty and conscientious service towards those who are significant in our life. First and foremost among these stand those to whom we are related, our flesh and blood, and especially our parents. Piety also involves patriotism, our duty and devotion to our country. St. Thomas says that piety denotes the reverence which we have for our father and our fatherland. But the virtue of piety naturally extends its regard to all those with whom we share a common allegiance or interests; thus, it is ordered to the common good of all.

With this in mind, we can see how the virtue of piety matches the Gospel call to justice: piety makes us acknowledge how indebted we are to others, either because of a superior role they play in our life (as in the case of parents, teachers, coaches, and others in authority) or because of specific benefits they contribute (as with friends, benefactors, co-workers, and supporters of all sorts). As a matter of justice—giving each person what is his due—piety impels us to show gratitude and appreciation to anyone who is a source of life, maturity, human development and personal enrichment in our life. As a virtue, piety affords us the opportunity to give sanctified expression to the love we bear for and owe to family, nation, friends, colleagues, and associates.

Like all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the Gift of Piety is a lasting perfection or refinement of the powers of our soul. Specifically, Piety makes us readily responsive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit with regard to honoring God as *our Father*.⁵ St. Thomas explains that, because God is called our Father *par excellence*, homage to him is termed piety.

Made receptive by the Gift of Piety, we are led to honor and serve God in the spirit of sonship. Piety is a Gift by which we are brought to participate very practically in the Sonship of Jesus Christ, the eternal and divine Son of God. At the same time, the Gift of Piety offers honor and service to all people on the basis of our relationship to God as his children. For this reason St. Thomas notes that the Gift of Piety inspires any act by which a person does good to all out of reverence for God.

Solicitude for others is the second concern of the Gift of Piety. For Piety, like God, remains concerned with coming to the aid of those in need. St. Thomas quotes St. Augustine in this regard, who says that we pay homage to those whom we cherish by doing honor either to their memory or their company. By

reaching out to others in their actual struggles, we honor the Father by serving his children. This dynamic of self-giving service remains the very lifeblood of the Church, as is witnessed by the mutual love and constant intercession of the saints in heaven. St. Thomas points out that the saints continue to manifest the Gift of Piety through the honor they show each other in heaven, and through the compassion they show to us on earth in our moments of misery. The saints' intercession on our behalf is at root a pious impulse.

St. Thomas connects the Beatitudes "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after justice" (Mt 5:6) and "Blessed are the merciful" (Mt 5:7) with the Gift of Piety because Piety fills the heart with eagerness to do works of mercy. The Gift's principal act of filial reverence for God will remain even in heaven, for the deep affection that we have for others will only increase as we enter into the rejoicing of the saints. In heaven, piety is exercised as the saints manifest their love for God by honoring him together and by honoring the wonders his grace has done in all the elect. The Gift of Piety persists in heaven, where it enhances the mutual joy and delight the holy ones experience in each other's company.

Now although the Gift of Piety naturally affects the way we worship God in prayer and in other religious practices, it is mainly a matter of our devotion to God as his adopted sons and daughters in Christ. The Gift of Piety reminds us that we are God's children, and it gives us special confidence and satisfaction in that recollection. Thanks to this Gift, we offer true worship and service to God the Father, the saints are honored, good works are done to relieve human misery, and we are led to rejoice as we are adopted into the life of the Trinity.

The Gift of Knowledge

In our world there are as many opinions as there are people (if not more!), and when it comes to questions of religion we find that even in the Church we can hear voices of dissent and confusion that would pull us away from God's Truth. How can we know what we need to believe, and how to assess things according to Faith? One grace God gives us to enable us to make a complete and penetrating assent (agreement) to the truth of faith is the Gift of Knowledge. The Gift of Knowledge is a perfection of the human mind that disposes us to follow the impulses of the Holy Spirit when we judge human or created things in relation to God. Through the Gift of Knowledge, the Holy Spirit guides our judgment so that we can recognize created things—especially human thoughts, words, inclinations, circumstances, and deeds—in the light of Faith.

The Gift of Knowledge, when operative, is concerned with differentiating between what is and is not consistent with Faith. By this Gift, God enables us to recognize when a human and temporal thing—a plan, a practice, an idea—ought to be received as consistent with the revealed truth or not.

Unlike God himself, whose knowledge is “sheer and simple,” instantaneous and perfect, our human knowledge depends on a process of reasoning and logical progress. We naturally need examples, arguments, diagrams, evidence, illustrations, instruction, and many other helps before we can ever know anything with certainty—and, of course, we can make mistakes. God, on the other hand, judges the truth of all things by a simple and utterly infallible insight. And shockingly enough, he wants to impart a share of that capacity to us. Through the Gift of Knowledge, the Holy Spirit blesses us with the ability to know and judge in an enhanced way that resembles, to some extent, the perfect knowledge of God.

The believer in whom the Gift of Knowledge is active will recognize, when confronted with facts, ideas, circumstances, or any created being, what is in harmony with the truths of Faith. This Gift operates, then, as a kind of supernatural instinct for discerning the authentic and the inauthentic in all that pertains to God and to our salvation. The Gift of Knowledge keeps the saints—those who truly love God—from falling into errors and confusion in faith and morals.

As St. Thomas Aquinas explains, although Faith itself touches on what is divine and eternal (that is, God), the act of believing is a temporal and created event in the mind of the believer. Our ideas about God, even when true, are not the same as God himself. This is why a particular Gift is needed for dealing with them here and now. Knowledge provides a means by which we can conform our beliefs to the truth of Faith, thus bringing us confidence and certainty in questions that concern the practical and theoretical judgments of religion.

In his explanation of Knowledge, St. Thomas observes that ignorance is never entirely removed from us except by the input of two kinds of knowledge: theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. The Spirit's Gift of Knowledge is both theoretical and practical at the same time. First and foremost, it is engaged with contemplation, illumining a believer to know what he or she ought to hold by faith. Therefore, pure truth remains the gift's main concern. However, the Gift of Knowledge also, and in a secondary way, considers what we do and what we think about—since our practical, active life and works should be directed by the knowledge of divine truth, the matters of faith, and the conclusions to be drawn from them. Knowledge, then, also prevents us from being misled with regard to the moral life and in practical matters that bear on the Faith.

We witness the efficacy of the Gift of Knowledge in the holiness of the saints. Through the outpouring of the Spirit's grace, the saints possessed sure judgment in all matters of faith and practice so that they never strayed from the straight paths of justice and right faith. The Holy Spirit calls us to the same kind of holiness, and provides for it in his Gift of Knowledge.

Unfortunately, though, we fall. How well we know the temptation to pursue evil things as if they were truly good, enriching, and satisfying for us. When we pursue evil under an appearance of good, it inevitably turns on us and betrays us. The very things we had hoped to master, instead master us. We become infatuated with evils (masquerading as goods!) and are robbed of our authentic freedom. The created things we mistakenly trust to fulfill us instead become tragic occasions for our turning away from God. St. Thomas considers these pitfalls—these created things that we mistakenly seek and love as if they would fulfill us—and likens them to idols, which, as Scripture says, “have become abominable amid God's works, snares for the souls of men and a trap for the feet of the senseless” (Wis 14:11). The Gift of Knowledge gives us the supernatural good sense to keep our feet out of those snares.

The office and function of the Gift of Knowledge is to pass a right judgment about created things so as to purify and perfect our relationship with God. Creaturely things can never stir us to spiritual delight unless they are enjoyed in their fitting and proper relation to the Divine Good. In a special way, the Spirit's Gift of Knowledge helps us to come to this right judgment about created things. It helps make us aware of the deadly loss created things may occasion when we stake our happiness on them. And it helps us to maintain a right and holy relation between God's uncreated Goodness and the things of creation that are designed to lead us

to divine Goodness. The Gift of Knowledge instills in us solid sense of balance, proportion, and judgment.

For this reason, St. Thomas relates the Gift of Knowledge to the Beatitude of mourning (Mt 5:5). In this he relies on the insight of St. Augustine, who observed that knowledge befits those who mourn, that is, those people who have learned a hard lesson by the difficulty of defeat they experience whenever they seek evil things as goods. St. Thomas reminds us how precious is the knowledge we gain from our mistakes. True, it fills us with sorrow for what we have done wrong. But at the same time it gives us true consolation, for our regret over past failings finally persuades us to accept the created things in our life in the way that God would have us accept them: not making idols out of them, but using them in God's Providence to lead us more surely into his love. The right judgment of Knowledge comforts us by assuring us how created things are ordered to divine Good.

St. Thomas says that the comfort effected by the Gift of Knowledge begins now but will be complete only in heaven. Therefore, while this Gift presently on earth overcomes the hunger of ignorance, only in heaven will the gift manifest its real mettle. For there it is destined to fill and satisfy the mind with a complete and perfect certainty not of faith, but of vision—for in heaven, we shall see God.

The Gift of Fortitude

At first blush it might seem that the Gifts of Fortitude (Courage) and Fear of the Lord should cancel each other out. How can the Holy Spirit offer us two graces, fear and courage, that seem to be opposed to each other? It must be that these two Gifts are not really opposed, but complementary. Now Fear of the Lord leads us to withdraw from any evil and abstain from any action

that would ever offend God or impair our relationship with Him. Yet, our holy commitment to maintain a reverent and upright relationship with the Father as his children is constantly assailed by the world and the forces of evil. Reverence and Fear of the Lord are needed, but are not all we require—we need an additional force to fortify, temper, and reinforce us in the struggle. Such is the Holy Spirit’s Gift of Fortitude.

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that Fortitude (also called Courage), is that kind of firmness of mind and spirit that we need both for doing good and for enduring evil. We require this steadfastness especially when embracing good and eschewing evil become more difficult. The Spirit’s gift of fortitude preserves us from yielding to untoward pressure.

Through God’s own power, the Gift of Fortitude goes beyond and perfects the natural moral virtue of fortitude. For the human virtue, fortitude, makes our mind competent to confront and to endure dangers; yet it does not carry the resources to make us confident of escaping *each and every danger* that might come our way. Complete and supernaturally stable confidence belongs instead to the Gift of Fortitude. For through this Gift, the Holy Spirit moves our human mind in a way that exceeds its natural, particular abilities so that we enjoy a full and perfectly well-founded confidence in the strength of God. This Gift enables us to endure and persevere in achieving arduous (hard-to-reach) goods and in sustaining sufferings. Of course, this spiritual work is ultimately and gloriously achieved by the Holy Spirit in us when he leads us to eternal life—the consummate end of all good works and the final escape from every danger.

The Fortitude that is a Gift of the Holy Spirit operates as a certain, unshakable confidence that will see us through the terrors and trials of earthly life to the eternal joys of heaven. Endowed

with Fortitude, we are prevented from giving in to any fear that menaces us on the way to God. Fortitude will not grant these fears a hearing. As a kind of holy censor, Fortitude removes all credibility and influence from the fear and discouragement that would turn us back from the way of Christ.

Such divine assistance is sorely needed in our life of faith. Left to itself, our weak and sinful human will is all too inclined to retreat from following the guidance of reason and conscience. Whenever our will is hindered from obeying the dictates of right reason (because, for instance, what we know is good and right has some difficult or unpleasant features), Fortitude steps in to remove that obstacle. Courage, therefore, helps our wills to conform rightly to reason. In the face of the greatest evils, Courage preserves the attachment of the human will to what is truly good.

In a particular way, Fortitude is concerned with the fear and difficulty of death. Giving up one's life is indeed the greatest challenge to courage. The Gift of Fortitude, however, enables us to repulse whatever makes steadfastness outstandingly difficult—especially dangers to our bodily life. In this regard, Fortitude does more than restrain our fear. Rather, Fortitude guides us to attack our goal—our “high calling from Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:14)—in a manner that is supernaturally confident and calculated. God himself secures us, through Fortitude, with confidence in his power to see us through all difficulties and to secure the ultimate blessings of heaven.

So often in life we fret and get frustrated about our lack of patience. St. Thomas points out that patience is a fruit of the Holy Spirit's Gift of Fortitude. Thus the true remedy for our impatience does not within ourselves, but with God. That power, given in Fortitude, makes it possible for us to endure and persevere

through all difficulties, great and small, through the guidance and confidence communicated to us by the Spirit.

Similarly, long-suffering—the ability to persevere in the midst of prolonged challenges—is a fruit of this spiritual Gift. Fortitude brings us a spirit of special forbearance in good, but taxing, works. It enables us to continue and remain constant in the performance of strenuous tasks.

St. Thomas relates the Beatitude of “hungering and thirsting for righteousness” (Mt 5:6) to the Spirit’s Gift of Fortitude. St. Augustine held that courage befits those who thirst because the thirsty work hard to do whatever they need to do to get the drink that will satisfy their thirst. In the same way, the courageous work hard and apply themselves in their longing for the joy they know they will receive once they achieve their goal. This is so much the case that the courageous are eager even to divert their affection from legitimate earthly comforts and delights. They sacrifice and deprive themselves, undeterred by what they suffer. It is the gift of Fortitude that fills us with that insatiable longing that bolsters and empowers us to counter the evils and to press on in the virtuous actions which lead us to God and to heaven.

The Gospel teachings of Jesus assert that, in the Providence of God, adversity is necessary in this present life. The Lord’s own Passion is the greatest testimony to this truth. The Spirit’s Gift of Fortitude does not abolish or deny this challenge, but it does make us bold and confident in facing it. As St. Thomas says, Fortitude supplies the “bread of confidence” that remains even in the future. And that is why the Gift of Fortitude accompanies us into the life of glory. For in heaven, the act of courage is the enjoyment of utter freedom from toils and evils.

The Gift of Counsel

As we noted above in our discussion of the Gift of Knowledge, we human beings are rational creatures. Typically, our actions follow some degree of forethought and consideration. We ponder and mull, study, muse and ruminate. We seek out expert opinions, rely on others' experiences, and compare present options with choices of the past. All of this reasoned inquiry so characteristic of thinking, self-reflective beings can be referred to as "taking counsel."

The Holy Spirit recognizes and esteems this most human dynamic, and tailors to our way of thinking a special Gift that deepens and perfects the human power of deliberation. Such is the divine Gift of Counsel. The Gift of Counsel renders us sensitive to the movement of the Holy Spirit in a manner supremely compatible and congenial to the deliberating way that we become motivated to act.

The human person stands in a constant state of searching. The *Catechism* tells us that "only in God will man find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for He cannot live fully according to the truth unless he freely acknowledges God's love and entrusts himself to his Creator."⁶ In our searching, we need the invaluable guidance—the advice or "counsel"—of God, who knows all things.

Such direction comes to us from heaven through the Spirit's Gift of Counsel, whereby we are guided by the very advice of God. St. Thomas Aquinas compares it to the experience of those involved in human affairs who lack what they need to work things out for themselves. In such a case, we simply turn to those more suitably qualified in order to benefit from their wisdom and expertise. The divine gift of counsel so moves us to avail ourselves of the guiding insights and direction of the Holy Spirit.

The Gift of Counsel remains highly specific and practical in its orientation. It is given for the sake of our guidance to a very particular end or goal. And what is the end that determines the operation of Counsel? The Gift of Counsel does not bring us assistance in worldly affairs. Rather, this Gift makes us responsive to the enlightenment of God in everything that pertains to the goal of eternal life. All those who are friends of God by grace can expect this benefit of being counseled by God about what we need to do in matters necessary for salvation.

The Gift of Counsel corresponds intrinsically to the moral virtue known as prudence—the master virtue, which is the habit of recognizing the good and charting the right course to its attainment. Prudence, like the Gift of Counsel, is ordered to the achievement of what is specific and particular. Counsel, then, perfects prudence in regard to the ultimate goal of eternal life. It complements and perfects prudence by introducing the judgment and advice of God himself—and thus, enlightened by Counsel, prudence welcomes the practical guidance of God and is conformed to the excellence of divine wisdom.

In the operation of Counsel the Holy Spirit upholds and ennobles our dignity as human persons by assisting us in a manner consonant with our natural way of thinking and acting. Rather than overriding or confounding us, the Spirit safeguards and enlightens our minds in a manner that promotes our human liberty. By enlivening our prudence with Counsel, the Holy Spirit opens our minds to heed God's own perfect prudence. Our minds are then enlightened without violence, so that supernatural guidance is assimilated within the natural process of human consideration.

The Gift of Counsel bears very practical consequences, for Counsel keeps us from foolishness and from impetuosity (acting

without thinking). By endowing the soul with divinely shaped reasoning, Counsel saves us from the risks of hasty, rash, and ill-formed practical judgments on our way to eternal life. It protects us from our impulsive and precipitous ways. The Gift of Counsel preserves us from recklessness, and guides our practical actions in the way of the soundest judgment.

It is also highly significant that the Gift of Counsel liberates us from the trap of self-reliance. We are indeed only too-strongly inclined to depend on ourselves and our own resources in the pursuit of our goals. Such radical individualism prevents us becoming truly mature persons and ensnares us an illusion of self-sufficiency. In reality, of course, maturity always involves a dynamic of mutual, life-giving interdependence, while recognizing our constant, fundamental, and very urgent practical need for God lies at the very root of the life of faith. St. Thomas notes that even the angels in heaven consult God regarding their duties as our protectors and guardians. The all-wise prompting they receive from God also come from the Spirit, through a Gift of Counsel perfectly suited to the angelic intelligences. If the angels in all their power and holiness stand in need of God's practical advice, how much more do we who are ignorant, weak and still on our trial.

The Gift of Counsel is of particular importance for our cooperation with the Lord in the workings of his Providence for others. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes, God "wills that each receive what he needs from others, and that those endowed with particular 'talents' share the benefits with those who need them. These differences encourage and often oblige persons to practice generosity, kindness, and sharing of goods."⁷ Through the generosity to which we are lead by the Spirit of Counsel, this Gift effectively works to weave the very fabric of the Church. The Lord once spoke to St. Catherine of Siena in these words: "I have given many gifts and graces, both spiritual and temporal, with such

diversity that I have not given everything to one single person.... I have willed that one should need another and that all should be my ministers in distributing the graces and gifts they have received from me.”⁸ The Gift of Counsel insures that that divine distribution will continually take place according to God’s plan in a manner that provides for our cooperation in the sharing of God’s blessings.

In light of Counsel’s connection with the workings of Providence, St. Thomas Aquinas relates the Gift of Counsel to the beatitude, “Blessed are the merciful” (Mt 5:7). Aquinas observes that Counsel will inevitably guide us to pardon others, since to pardon and give mercifully to others is, by grace, the remedy for all the spiritual ills of our life. The supernaturally merciful are invariably guided by Counsel, since God who opens our hearts to clemency also directs the exercise of that virtue through his Gifts.

The Gift of Counsel remains with us after death as a necessary element of the life of glory. St. Thomas notes that even in the blessed there are some acts to be done that are ordered to an end, such as giving praise to God, or drawing others to the destination they have attained. Such are the ministry of the angels and the prayers of the saints. The Gift of Counsel plays its role in such activities by shaping them according to what God knows is best. Of course, in heaven our need for Counsel does not arise from doubt—rather it is an effect of our complete attention to God and our total reliance on his loving wisdom.

The Gift of Understanding

So much of the sorrow we experience seems to be caused by a lack of understanding. We feel grief and may suffer injury when others misunderstand our intentions, words, or deeds. That grief is complicated by the fact that we, in turn, often find it difficult or

impossible to understand the actions of others. But the understanding we seek is not limited to what we say and do. We deeply feel the need for others to understand us “for who we are.” That is, we long for others to know us in an all-embracing way that includes a profound appreciation of our unique identity.

In fact, because we have been created for and ordained to supernatural happiness, we remain ever restless and unfulfilled unless we reach beyond ourselves to certain deeper and ineffable truths. Yet we are not alone in our desire to understand and to be understood. God also wants to be understood—by us! And so he blesses us through the Holy Spirit with the Gift of Understanding, to endow us with a certain, intimate knowledge of himself.

St. Thomas Aquinas observes that human knowledge starts from the outside through our interaction with the things around us via the five senses. However, the natural light of understanding that we possess bears only limited power. In terms of comprehension, it can carry us just so far. Therefore, we require a supernatural light capable of piercing the boundaries restricting natural light so as to give us access to a knowledge we could never otherwise reach on our own. Such is the Spirit’s Gift of Understanding.

This divine Understanding implies a certain excellence of knowledge by inward penetration. St. Thomas notes that the main purpose of this Gift is to effect in the believer a spiritual sureness of faith. The function of the Gift of Understanding, then, is to enable us to see into the meaning—the core and inner truth—of the principles of what we know in the life of grace.

Thus, Understanding serves to satisfy the urgent longings of our soul by enabling us to apprehend the truth about our final end: we are called to eternal beatific communion with God. The Gift’s intellectual light of grace provides us with a right appraisal and appreciation of that ultimate end. At the same time, the spe-

cial perception of the truth produced by Understanding prompts us to cleave to this end firmly as our greatest good. We come to grasp the value and importance of all things in its light.

We rely on the Holy Spirit through the Gift of Understanding to enlighten our minds to recognize the supernatural truth on which our wills should be intent. In the process, we come to see all human deeds in relation to the rule of the Eternal Law and our goal of divine communion. The supernatural light of Understanding surpasses the range of natural reason as it endows us with the knowledge of the truth of how human acts are measured by divine law.

Herein lies the supreme value of the Gift of Understanding. For Understanding reveals to us how God's eternal and necessary truths serve as steadfast standards for human conduct. Since the field of the Gift of Understanding extends to all interests relevant to the faith, Understanding also encompasses the good deeds we perform. Understanding enlightens us regarding works to be done. For human actions are governed by eternal reasons. And our human reason cleaves to God's providential reasons by contemplating and being advised by them. In this way our human reason is perfected by the Gift of Understanding so as to facilitate our ready undertaking of good deeds.

Just as all those in a state of grace possess divine Charity, so too is the Gift of Understanding theirs. God never withdraws this gift from such holy ones with respect to any matter essential to salvation. Yet, ironically, as St. Thomas explains, in other matters, the Gift of Understanding is sometimes withdrawn in order that our inability to see clearly into all things may remove temptations to pride. In other words, God wisely protects us from the self-inflated haughtiness that comes from being a know-it-all, by making it a little more laborious for us to perceive matters of lesser importance.

In a special way, the Gift of Understanding gives us privileged access to the meaning of Sacred Scripture. For Understanding enlightens our mind regarding things we have heard. St. Thomas recalls that graced moment of enlightenment when the Lord commissioned his apostles and “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Lk 24:45). This Gift of Divine Understanding remains a spiritual benefit of discipleship.

At the same time, even if we occasionally lack a certain clarity and intellectual acuity regarding particular articles of faith proposed to us for our belief, we should not jump to the conclusion that Understanding has failed us. On the contrary, as believers we can with confidence understand that such articles are to be believed and not to be abandoned on account of anything else. For, as spiritual people, the ultimate authority in our life is not our unguided intellect—as brilliant and ingenious as it may seem—but the divine insight and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, shared with us in the manner and to the extent that he sees fit.

St. Thomas relates the Spirit’s Gift of Understanding to the beatitude regarding purity of heart (Mt 5:8). The single-hearted permit their lives to be purged of fanciful ideas and damaging errors. As a result, the truth about God proposed to the pure of heart is not received as disguised by bodily images or heretical misrepresentations. This cleanness of reception and appropriation is the result of the Gift of Understanding.

The pure of heart are promised the reward of seeing God (Mt 5:8). In our present pilgrim condition, the Gift of Understanding empowers us to see, not what God is, but what God is not. As St. Thomas asserts, in this life, the better we know God the more we understand that he surpasses whatever the mind grasps. And with this “knowing ignorance,” this knowing that we do not yet fully know, comes a deep and abiding peace. However,

even in heaven the Spirit's Gift of Understanding will continue to aid our insight of the divine. For there we will enjoy the sight of the Lord and behold God's essence in the vision of eternal beatitude.

The Gift of Wisdom

St. Thomas Aquinas, looking to the etymology (the word origins) of the term, defines Wisdom as a knowing that is "tasted."⁹ The Gift of Wisdom is, then, a special taste for God and the truth about God that we acquire by experience through the action of the Holy Spirit. Wisdom is where Knowledge and experience coexist.

The wise person, generally speaking, is one committed to thorough, rational investigation of the ultimate cause of things. Endowed with this far-reaching consideration, the wise person then judges all other causes in life through that one ultimate cause. The wise person makes judgments with certainty in such a way that he sets all things in their proper order according to the dictates of this full and far-reaching perspective.

The Holy Spirit's Gift of Wisdom belongs to the graced person who knows the cause that is simply the highest (the ultimate) without qualification, namely God. These persons are called wise without restriction, since they can—and do—judge and set in order all things according to God's divine design and prerogatives. For Wisdom implies a certain rightness of judgment in contemplating and in consulting divine realities. Since truly good things have as their highest cause the sovereign good and ultimate end (God himself), the truly wise must be said to have a certain knowing familiarity with that highest cause. And knowing It radically transforms the wise person's life.

Through the infusion of the Holy Spirit one comes to such judgment. "The spiritual man can appraise everything God has

revealed this wisdom to us through the Spirit” (1 Cor 2:15, 10). Unlike the acquired intellectual virtue of wisdom that comes through human effort, the Gift of Wisdom comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. At the same time, the Gift of Wisdom presupposes supernatural Faith. For this Wisdom judges things according to divine truth, while Faith grasps and assents to divine truth for itself.

We commonly describe both piety and fear as “wisdom” for good reason. Piety remains central to worship which serves to make faith manifest, especially through our prayerful profession of faith. In the same manner, piety also makes wisdom manifest. We pray what we believe, reverence, and esteem. Our piety reveals the truths, the values, the motivations that govern our life—that is, wisdom. Moreover, Fear and Wisdom share a common occupation, for, as St. Thomas says, if a person fears and worships God he shows that he has a right judgment about divine things. That “right judgment” constitutes the Gift of Wisdom.

Wisdom brings about a right judgment concerning divine realities as well as other things in the light of divine standards by means of a certain spiritual contact and communion (a “connaturality”) with divine things. That is to say, the Spirit’s Gift of Wisdom empowers us to judge correctly in certain matters through a certain fellowship with them, or through a specific kind of “tasting” or experience.

Wisdom is not only theoretical but practical as well. As its principal function, Wisdom first contemplates divine ideas and realities. However, in the light of this contemplation, Wisdom also directs human actions according to divine reasons. Through the act of meditation, Wisdom ponders divine things in themselves. Through the act of consultation, Wisdom makes a judgment that

directs human actions according to divine directives. In this way we see how Wisdom remains both speculative and practical.

The special association and fellowship with the divine that Wisdom effects comes from the working of Charity. As a result, Wisdom cannot coexist with mortal sin. Therefore, Wisdom abides in all those who live in a state of grace, free of mortal sin. And the degree of Wisdom that inheres in us varies according to the degree of our union with divine things. St. Thomas goes so far as to assert that even the insane who are baptized have the settled quality of the Gift of Wisdom, but not the activity of the gift, owing to physical impediment which hinders their use of reason.

In some people, the measure of contemplating divine things and of directing human affairs according to divine standards will not exceed the minimum needed for salvation. All those living in sanctifying grace without mortal sin will attain this degree. However, certain other people receive a higher degree of the Gift of Wisdom through the extraordinary graces dispensed by the Holy Spirit. These people, far advanced in contemplation and more intimately familiar with the mysteries of God, are able to communicate these truths effectively to others. Moreover, they enjoy a higher degree of Wisdom in ordering human life according to divine standards, being able to direct not only themselves but others as well. It is for this reason that Scripture advises us, “If you discover a wise man, seek him out; let your feet wear out his doorstep” (Sir 6:36).

St. Thomas associates Wisdom with the peacemaker of the Beatitudes. For a peacemaker is one who brings about peace in himself or in others. Since peace is not merely the absence of conflict but the tranquillity of right order (*tranquillitas ordinis* according to St. Augustine’s classical definition), it is produced when one puts first things first and arranges everything in harmony with

God. This is what Wisdom does. Therefore, peacemaking is well-suited to Wisdom. For, as the wise person studies and assesses the “big picture” with a zealous concern for serving and promoting priorities, for putting first things first, he at the same time establishes authentic peace through the right order his efforts produce. As the wise person considers and evaluates the many and various options before him according to the mind of God, he produces the kind of tranquillity that proceeds only from fitting all the pieces of our life into a divinely providential whole.

We can understand, then, why the Son of God identifies himself with Wisdom. St. Thomas emphasizes that the Son is not just any word, but the Word breathing love: the Word which is a knowledge accompanied by love. Consequently the Son’s being sent is that sort of enlightening that bursts forth into love. The Son is being sent whenever someone has knowledge or perception of him. Because of this truth, through the Gift of Wisdom, we come to share in the image of Jesus. For people are called children of God as they participate in the likeness of his only begotten Son, who is Wisdom Begotten. In the Holy Spirit’s Gift of Wisdom that we receive, we enter into the state of being children of God.

THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY AND THE GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Annunciation to Mary and the Gift of Fear of the Lord

We pray and we hope that our prayers will be heard and answered. But what would we ever do if that answer took the form of a radiant angel speaking our name in the middle of our living room? It would probably terrify us just as it apparently terrified Mary. Gabriel soothes her with the words, “Do not fear, Mary”

(Lk 1:30). The archangel frees Mary from her fright so as to bless her with the holy Fear of the Lord. For the Holy Spirit's Gift of Fear disposes us to reverence God and to be completely devoted to him. Sanctified Fear of the Lord enables the Blessed Mother to show God the same devotion that he shows to her: "O highly favored daughter! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women" (Lk 1:28).

Fear of the Lord strengthens, renews, and refashions Mary's hope. In response to the angel's revelations, the Blessed Mother asks: "How can this be?" In the answer Gabriel gives, powerful hope is also given as well. Fear of the Lord helps Mary—and us—to see beyond whatever we consider constraining, unlikely, or impossible in our life. It opens up for us the boundlessness of God's mercy and providence. All the Lord asks of us to do in response is to rely utterly on his divine help. Fear of the Lord prevents us from ever disregarding God's assistance. Holy fear reminds us how crucial and urgent God's interaction in our life must remain in order for us to be happy, holy, and hope-filled.

At the same time, we see in Mary how "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps 111:10). For in reverencing and believing the excellence of God revealed in the archangel Gabriel, the Blessed Mother manifests the right judgment she has about divine things. Her grace as Seat of Wisdom has begun to function in the reverent fear in which she receives God's messenger and accepts his message of Wisdom Incarnate.

Through this transforming experience of sanctified fear, Mary is called to look upon God in a new way. The angel announces that God is now her Spouse. St. Louis de Montfort writes: "The Holy Spirit became fruitful through Mary whom he espoused. To his faithful spouse, Mary, the Holy Spirit has communicated his ineffable gifts, and he has chosen her to dispense all

that he possesses. The Holy Spirit says to Mary: ‘You are still My Spouse, unswervingly faithful, pure and fruitful.’”

And what is Mary’s response to all this? The profound humility that is Fear’s effect. “Mary said, ‘I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say’” (Lk 1:38). She gives herself to God as a servant ... but not in a servile manner. Her concern is only to love God more, to fulfill his will, to avoid whatever might offend him, and to grow closer to him in love and devotion. In her utter poverty and humility, the Blessed Mother seeks nothing for herself. “Full of grace,” Mary’s Immaculate Heart is so absolutely disinclined to sin that Fear of the Lord prompts her to shun all evil as she awaits the birth of the Savior in perfect tranquillity. And as we remain united to the Blessed Mother in her Fear of the Lord, her confidence and tranquillity become our own. As Mary’s life and song proclaim: “God’s mercy is from age to age on those who fear him” (Lk 1:50).

The Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Gift of Piety

Immediately after Gabriel left her presence, “Mary set out, proceeding in haste into the hill country to a town of Judah, where she entered Zechariah’s house, and greeted her kinswoman Elizabeth” (Lk 1:39–40). In so doing, Mary manifests the Spirit’s Gift of Piety that prepares God’s people to be promptly responsive in a special way to the divine inspirations he sends. Mary’s love of her cherished relationship with God moves her immediately to offer him extraordinary homage and worship. And it should move us as well.

The Visitation is an act that manifests the Gift of Piety. Piety concerns fulfilling our duty and conscientious service towards God, towards our country, and towards those related to

us by blood or by any common allegiance. The Visitation gives expression to the Blessed Mother's love for God, for the child in her womb, for her relatives Elizabeth and Zechariah, for the child in Elizabeth's womb, and for the common allegiance they all share thanks to the divine vocations with which they have been entrusted.

Above all else, the gift of piety is the offering of special service and honor to God as Father. Elizabeth proclaims the unique honor and service Mary offers to God: "Blessed are YOU who trusted that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled" (Lk 1:45). And Mary's Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55) praises the greatness of God's fatherly care, especially as he brings to fulfillment all that "he promised our fathers, promised Abraham and his descendants forever" (Lk 1:55). Mary's piety proclaims how God as a Father fulfills his promises to the Old Testament fathers. Whenever we join in proclaiming Mary's Magnificat, we more deeply esteem our own relationship with God in the most profound words of worship and honor.

Piety is also concerned with coming to the aid of those in need. St. Augustine wrote that we pay homage to those whom we cherish by doing honor either to their memory or their company. Mary exercises the chief act of piety by bringing her Son to Elizabeth—and to us—out of reverence for God. But at the same time, the Blessed Mother's offering to Elizabeth is also an offering to God. Elizabeth is vividly aware of this: "Who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" This pious exclamation of Elizabeth reveals another dimension of the gift: Piety moves us to honor the indebtedness we bear to others because of their superiority in our life as well as because of the different benefits they contribute to our life. Elizabeth's piety toward Mary—and therefore to God the Father—expresses her indebtedness to Mary by honoring the Blessed Mother as our God-given source of new

life, holiness, and joy. We are called to take up Elizabeth's pious regard for Mary as a way of cultivating the gift of piety in our own souls. Just as Mary and Elizabeth show honor to each other, so too do the saints demonstrate this kind of piety in heaven to each other as well as to us on earth by the compassion they show to us in our moments of misery.

Through the Gift of Piety, the Holy Spirit inspires us to have a profoundly childlike attitude towards God. Mary and Elizabeth, at this moment, are childlike in a unique way, for they are actual-ly with child. The gift of piety calls us to be childlike as well. And as we respond to that gift by honoring God as Father, we can be assured in our littleness with Mary that "God will raise the lowly to high places" (Lk 1:52).

The Presentation in the Temple and the Gift of Knowledge

Joseph and Mary present the infant Jesus in the temple so as to fulfill the law of Moses by offering sacrifice "in accord with the dictate of the law of the Lord" (Lk 2:23). They manifest in their offering the Spirit's gift of knowledge. For the gift of knowledge enables us to know what we ought to believe and do regarding God by giving us discernment about what belongs to the matter of faith. The gift of knowledge provides sure and correct judgment about the things of faith. And so, in obedience of faith, Mary and Joseph present Jesus to God in the temple.

There they encounter the "pious and just" man Simeon (Lk 2:25). The Holy Spirit has graced him with a very special knowl-edge: "that he would not experience death until he had seen the Anointed of the Lord" (Lk 2:26). But the trouble is this: How would Simeon know the Messiah when he appeared? It is the Spirit's Gift of Knowledge that blesses Simeon with sure and cor-

rect judgment about the identity of Jesus as he sees the Lord with Mary and Joseph. The Gift of Knowledge moves Simeon to the conviction that the baby Mary gives him to hold in his arms is the very object of his faith. Mary gives us Jesus as well so that we too can hold him close, so that he might renew and revive our flagging faith.

Simeon recognizes God Incarnate in the human flesh of the Jesus through the supernatural assistance of the Gift of Knowledge. The impulse of that Gift stirs Simeon in turn to express his certitude and conviction: “Now, Master, you have fulfilled your word. For my eyes have witnessed your saving deed” (Lk 2:29–30). The Gift of Knowledge gives us a graced way of discerning. It enables us to look upon created things and to assess with certainty, how they bolster our belief and feed our life of faith. Because of the Gift of Knowledge, we regard and esteem the presence and action of God in creation in a new way: with the “revealing light to the Gentiles” (Lk 2:31).

This experience also blesses Mary with new knowledge. Simeon assures her: “You yourself shall be pierced with a sword so that the thoughts of many hearts may be laid bare” (Lk 2:35). The Blessed Mother’s participation in the redemptive mission of her Son will cause many to empty their lives of old thoughts and ideas so as to make room for the Spirit’s gift of knowledge, a knowledge of the Truth that transforms us by uniting us to the very mind and heart of God. God gives Mary to us as a Mother with whom we can lay bare our hearts and unburden our souls. As we confide ourselves to Mary’s maternal care, she invites us to the Truth that liberates us, that brings full meaning and value to our life, that fills our life with Peace. By our union with Mary, the Spouse of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit’s Gift of Knowledge comes to fruition within us.

Anna the Prophetess also confirms the sure and correct judgment the gift of knowledge renders regarding the infant Jesus as she talks about the child “to all who looked forward to deliverance” (see Lk 2:36–38). We are part of her audience; the Spirit’s Gift of Knowledge gives us ears to hear, to listen, to believe, to respond in faith.

We are told that the child Jesus “grew in size and strength, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him” (Lk 2:40). Through the Gift of Knowledge, we can be certain that we will grow likewise. And the Blessed Mother will remain as instrumental in our own process of growth as she was in the life of her Son Jesus.

The Finding in the Temple and the Gift of Fortitude

What kind of terror must have seized the hearts of Mary and Joseph when they discovered their child missing from the traveling party on their journey home from the Passover feast in Jerusalem (Lk 2:41–45)? How did they console and fortify themselves as they urgently retraced their steps back to the place where they had last seen their twelve year old son? They must have been encouraged with the Holy Spirit’s Gift of Fortitude.

The Gift of Fortitude or courage is a kind of firmness of mind needed for doing good and enduring evil. This Gift surpasses the natural moral virtue of courage by its power to make us confident of escaping each and every danger, even those that make steadfastness outstandingly difficult. That was the kind of situation Mary and Joseph faced. The Gift of Fortitude empowered them to repulse the frightful imaginings and scenarios that must have tormented their minds as they searched sorrowfully for Jesus (cf. Lk 2:48).

The chief act of the Gift of Fortitude is to enable us to stand

our ground amidst dangers. In this way, the Gift prevented Mary and Joseph from jumping to false conclusions about why their child was missing. For through this Gift, the Holy Spirit moves the human mind in a way that surpasses what is natural and peculiar to it so as to reach the end of a good work begun. Simeon a few years earlier had revealed to Joseph and Mary the divine work that had begun in Jesus: “This child is destined to be the downfall and rise of many” (Lk 2:34). Therefore, the Holy Spirit fortified them through his special Gift to remain steadfast in their confidence despite the many excruciating anxieties and nightmares that must have plagued them.

Mary and Joseph sought their lost son like a parched man seeking water. St. Augustine says that courage befits those who thirst because they work hard to achieve the joy that springs from the good thing they seek. The fruits of the Gift of Fortitude are eminent in Mary and Joseph. They manifest a holy patience that enables them to endure the evil of being separated from their son. And they demonstrate long-suffering; that forbearance to wait in perseverance and faith all the while performing the good works necessary to restore their tranquillity and peace.

In God’s providence, it is necessary for Mary to suffer this grueling experience. For it prepares the Blessed Mother for that other excruciating experience of the cross. It is on Calvary that Mary’s sanctified courage is truly displayed. Yet, this experience of losing her Son in its own way is a foreshadowing and prefigurement of the Passion and death of Jesus. “On the third day” Joseph and Mary find Jesus in the temple. And on the third day the Risen Jesus appears to his believers. Mary’s finding of the child Jesus is like a mini-Resurrection in advance. But before the real thing, Mary—and we—must be fortified with the Spirit’s Gift of Fortitude so that we have the perseverance to stand firm and face death in our life, in whatever form it may come.

Just as courage led the Blessed Virgin Mary to Jesus, so too will our union with Mary in the Spirit's gift of courage lead us to eternal life with Jesus.

The Wedding Feast at Cana and the Gift of Counsel

In the Gospel of John, the first miracle of Jesus' ministry is the changing of water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana (cf. Jn 2:1–12). This divine sign inaugurates and signals the impact of God's transforming presence and power in our midst. What happens to that water is meant to happen to us—and even more! Therefore, it is of paramount importance for us to take note of how the Lord changes water into wine.

At the center of the transformation is Mary, the Mother of God. It is Mary who takes notice that the wine has run out. It is Mary who informs her Son of the situation. And, especially, it is Mary who instructs those waiting on table: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5). Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the story is that the waiters actually listen to Mary. They follow her counsel.

The divine Gift of Counsel is the way the Holy Spirit quickens and instructs our minds to do whatever contributes to our spiritual welfare. Counsel is reasoned inquiry that leads us to deliberate action. But in the process, the Holy Spirit safeguards our freedom, our ability to reason things out for ourselves, and our willpower. Notice that the waiters don't heed the Blessed Mother like either tyrannized or obsequious slaves. Rather, they listen intently, intelligently: and they make a choice. We get the sense that there was reflection and sound deliberation at work in the minds and hearts of these servants who were surely impressed by the confidence, the prudence, and the soundness of this remarkable dinner guest—whom they, in turn, decided to obey.

Mary's words of counsel lead the waiters to her Son, and the

Gift of Counsel leads us, as well, to Jesus. In our searching for the Lord we need the very guidance of God which the Gift of Counsel supplies. For in this gift we are given God's own advice to make us holy. Everyone who is a friend of God by grace is blessed with God's counsel to advise us what we need to do in matters necessary for our salvation

There is a risk involved in following the Spirit's counsel. For Counsel might instruct us to do things that, in the eyes of the world, seem to make not much sense—like filling water jars and drawing out water for head waiters to taste! Therefore, a profound level of trust is required in order to benefit fully from the Gift of Counsel, the kind of trust that compelled professional waiters to listen to the counsel of a “perfect” stranger and to do whatever her Son told them. We are asked to do no less. And if we do, we can expect to be transformed from waiters into wedding guests who are the first to taste the choice wine that was saved for last.

To benefit from this Gift, we must surrender any stubborn self-reliance that would prevent us from taking God's advice. St. Augustine writes that even the angels consult God about things beneath them. It is a hallmark of the Church to rely on Counsel as a healthy, vital, life-giving dynamic of our life of faith.

The Holy Spirit's Gift of Counsel pertains to everything leading to eternal life. Counsel quickens and instructs our minds to tend to the miraculous Jesus at a wedding feast; at the Feast of his Last Supper where he turns wine into his Blood; and to keep on tending him until we are transformed with him at the Wedding Feast of heaven. The counsel and maternal mediation of Mary keeps us headed in Jesus' direction, especially when she sees something empty or unsatisfied in ourselves that the love of her Son is guaranteed to transform.

“Who Is My Mother?” — The Gift of Understanding

When the crowd tells Jesus that his Mother and brothers are outside waiting to see him, Jesus responds: “Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is brother and sister and mother to me. My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and act upon it” (cf. Mk 3:33, 35, Lk 8:21). By his response, the Lord reveals a new understanding to his disciples, an Understanding that continues to be given to Christians by the Holy Spirit as his divine Gift.

Understanding implies a certain intimate knowing. To understand or to exercise intelligence is to “read within.” God understands that the natural light of our human understanding is of limited power and can go only so far. That is why he graces us with the supernatural light of the Gift of Understanding by which we penetrate to the supernatural happiness and communion with God for which we were made.

By his answer, Jesus enlightens the crowd of their need to reach beyond their own preset notions, conceptions, and prejudices to certain deeper truths that only the Holy Spirit can reveal. If we do so in love, then the Spirit’s Gift of Understanding gives us a certain excellence of knowledge that inwardly penetrates to the very things of God. At the same time, the Spirit transforms the way we regard and assess ourselves. The divine Gift of Understanding illumines us to see how Christ reveals us to ourselves. We could not even understand ourselves correctly without the grace of his Understanding.

The special value of the Gift of Understanding lies in the way it considers eternal and necessary truths as reliable rules for human conduct. The Gift of divine Understanding leads us to perform divinely directed human actions. That is why the true “mother” of God is one who devotedly does God’s will (cf. Mt 12:50, Mk

3:35). In such a one, understanding and action form an organic, integral, life-giving whole. And as we do God's will, the Holy Spirit enables us to see beyond the immediate implications of our actions and to apprehend the truth about our final end with God. Therefore, the purpose of the Gift of Understanding is to give us a sureness of faith regarding our identity before God and the way that we belong to him.

The Gift of Understanding works in concert with the Beatitude of purity of heart (cf. Mt 5:8). For we cannot worthily receive the truth about God—or the truth about ourselves as brothers, sisters, and mother of Jesus—unless we are spiritually “clean.” Such cleanness is the result of the Gift of Understanding.

The Lord's response to the crowd is in no way a slight or insult to the Blessed Mother. For Mary is one who ardently wants us to share in the intimate Understanding of the Holy Spirit. She deliberately comes to the crowd—and she comes into our life—so that as we are prompted to remind Jesus of Mary's presence, the Lord in turn will be moved to bless us with that divine understanding by which we share in the blessedness of his Mother, the first to hear the Word of God who is Jesus and to act upon it.

The Passion, Pentecost, and the Gift of Wisdom

“Near the cross of Jesus there stood his mother” (Jn 19:25). How could Mary endure to witness the agony of her Son? Wisdom empowered her to witness this Passion. For Mary's Son is not just any Son; he is the Word—not just any word, but the Word breathing love. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that “the Son's being sent is that sort of enlightening that bursts forth in love.” Even in the midst of his excruciating death, Jesus offers anyone who looks upon him with love a special knowledge and perception of himself. In his Passion—especially in the Eucharist—Jesus offers us a

knowing that we can taste. This is Wisdom. This is the knowledge the Blessed Mother experiences on Calvary even as she shares in the agony of her Son.

The wise person is one who considers the ultimate cause of things and uses it to judge other things with certainty. The wise person's attention to the ultimate cause of things gives him or her a standard to set all things in order. The Spirit's Gift of Wisdom enables us to judge and to set in order everything in our life according to God's rules. Despite the suffering of the Passion, this Gift enabled the Blessed Mother to see beyond the anguish to the ultimate cause and the ultimate need for her Son to die for sinners. That experiential awareness equipped Mary to make the right judgment about what was happening on Golgotha. It gave her the confidence to regard the event according to God's rules and to trust that, even in the chaos of crucifixion, divine providence was maintaining everything in right order.

The Gift of Wisdom judges all things according to divine truth. Mary's faith-filled wisdom leads her to regard the horrible tragedy of the Passion solely according to God's truth. The same applies to us. Through the Gift of Wisdom, we rely confidently on divine truth to make sense of all the absurdity, the sorrow, the heartbreak, and the calamity in our life. Even amidst catastrophe and disaster, Wisdom restores order and divine purpose to our life. It gives us confidence that every fractured piece of our life is made whole as it finds its rightful place in the merciful plan of God's Providence. If we have the grace to accept God's rules, God's rules will reign in our pain.

Wisdom also is at work with the Apostles and the Blessed Mother in the Upper Room on Pentecost (cf. Acts 1:13–14). For it belongs to Wisdom first to contemplate divine realities, and then to direct human action according to divine reasons. Together they

contemplate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with all his Gifts. And by the divine Wisdom they share, they direct others through evangelization to follow the Way who is Jesus. They bring about peace by putting “first things first” in the tranquillity of order through the power of the Gift of Wisdom. They lead others to embrace the Wisdom of divine reasoning, and thereby to enter into the state of being children of God. And Mary, the Mother of God’s Son, is also our Mother as Wisdom begets us as children of the Father. For, in his infinite wisdom and love, Jesus gives us Mary to be our Mother as his final gift to us from the Cross.

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Endnotes

¹ This translation is from the Vulgate, the ancient Latin version of the Holy Bible, and reflects the Septuagint (the even more ancient Greek version of the Old Testament). The Latin text reads, “(1) Et egredietur virga de radice Jesse et flos de radice eius ascendet (2) et requiescet super eum spiritus Domini spiritus sapientiae et intellectus spiritus consilii et fortitudinis spiritus scientiae et pietatis (3a) et replebit eum spiritus timoris Domini.”

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶ 363.

³ Roman Missal, Preface IV for Weekdays.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶ 1721.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶ 2781.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶ 27.

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶1937.

⁸ St. Catherine of Siena, *Dial.* I, 7. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶1937.

⁹ In Latin, St. Thomas’s language, wisdom is *sapientia* and is derived from the verb *sapere*, which means both “to taste” and “to be wise.”

