

GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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WHEN many good-living Catholics read or hear anything about the gifts of the Holy Ghost, they have a strong inclination to pass it by with the same feeling they would a tombstone in a graveyard on a dark night. Not that the gifts are so many tombstones but that the mere mention of them seems to affect us in much the same way. A surprising number of otherwise alert and staunch Catholics would bog down pitifully if too many embarrassing questions about the gifts were put to them. Those same people would offer the questioner a cautiously whispered reminder that the gifts are for saints and saintly people and not for "ordinary Catholics such as you and I!" If by "ordinary Catholic" is meant one who is in the state of grace, the preceding statement so helpfully offered is false. The gifts are the peculiar heritage of every Catholic whose soul is in the hands of God through grace and not in the power of the devil through mortal sin.

Why is it a fact, which we will readily enough admit if we are honest with ourselves, that we do not feel comfortable in the spiritual order? We find it almost impossible to breathe easily in that atmosphere. Our reaction is akin to that of a boy adopted from the slums into a rich family who finds it very difficult to keep from tripping over the rug in his newly-found and terrifying home while he is courageously serving tea to some all too observant guests. We would like very much to fall off our high horse and hit the lowly but familiar earth with a reassuring bump. That satisfying and degrading descent would follow without hesitation were it not for the inner voice of God's love impressing upon us the fact that we can never again be satisfied with the slums.

Grace has lifted us up to a supernatural plane. We have been adopted into God's family. We are sons of God and brothers of Christ. Yet we have not got that old familiar feeling that we delight to experience in our earthly home when, for instance, we sink into a favorite armchair with a comfortable grunt or put our feet on the desk at the office. We act like strangers in the mansion of our Father. We move in a strained atmosphere and the anguish springing from our slum-child background is, at times, almost too grievous for us to bear. Is that the best God can do? We hesitate to voice that

query because we are certain that everything God does or permits is for our happiness. And so we are left with an irritating but God-given problem on our unwilling hands. We have a very vehement desire to enjoy God as much as possible in this passing moment of our existence. We want to live His life to the fullest extent. But that 'fish-out-of-water' feeling, which perhaps we have never submitted to the glare of the footlights of consciousness, has always swung into action like a monster steamer across the path of a speed-boat, whenever our efforts were bent along those lines. Much as we would like to feel at home among things spiritual, our best efforts do not seem able to effect that happy state. We are painfully aware of our own inadequacy and the maddening thought of it almost drives us to despair. And it is entirely natural that such reliance on self should lead to disaster, for we are not even self-sufficient in the natural order much less in the spiritual order. We are forced into the conclusion that we need something besides grace if we are to pursue a happy domestic life in God's family. That "something" which we need so badly is the Holy Ghost Who through His gifts leads us, the adopted children of the Father, along the way of divine life and enables us to enjoy its prerogatives, in a word, to live the life of God minus the feeling that we do not belong.

If the privilege of living God's life was due to our nature, such helps as the gifts would be superfluous. But we are not natural members of God's family. We are, as it were, transients seeking permanent residence in the divine household. Our adoption into it through the merits of Christ is due solely to the goodness of God. As adopted slum-children we find it impossible, relying on our own powers, to act in a manner befitting a son of God. In that situation even a slum-child would recognize that the most prudent course we could follow would be to ask some member of the family for his help. He could tell us exactly what to do and how to do it, and even help us in the doing of it. That is precisely the rôle of the Holy Ghost. He is the divine guide Who leads us ultimately to the complete enjoyment of our patrimony. Through His gifts we can come to know what actions are most pleasing to God and how we are to perform those actions if they are to be God-like. Not even a prudent guess could discover these things to us without His help, for the mask of matter obscures our vision of the eternal as effectively as a brick wall. With His help, our own floundering and confused efforts begin to take on a unified and determined mein. The aurora of awkwardness which has always dogged our spiritual actions, like a terrier worrying a fox, begins to fade and finally disappear as dew before the morning sun.

The Holy Ghost is helping us to feel at home.

There is a common opinion, frequently seen in works on the gifts, that the Holy Ghost through the influence of the gifts does most of the work and we are more or less passive under His guidance. The opinion is correct but the statement of it can be easily misunderstood. The Holy Ghost does not substitute for us. If the acts which we do are not our own they are of no advantage for our salvation. While it is true that under the gifts we are more acted upon than acting, it is entirely false to suppose that the Holy Ghost picks us up like a child to help us over the rough spots. He holds us by the hand enlightening and strengthening us, but we do the walking. Everyone has seen a mother proudly display her child's ability to walk. She holds his hand while he walks, so that the rugs and chairs which keep continually getting in the way will not bowl the little fellow over. Imagine the resentful indignation of both mother and child if you tried to carry him instead of letting him walk! It would be conceived as nothing less than an insult if you attempted such a rash action. And so it is with God. He would never insult the nature He has given us by doing things for us. He must do them with us.

The gifts, then, are habits which make us submissive under the influence of the Holy Ghost to divine movement. As part of the complement of the soul in grace, they dispose us to act in a divine way infinitely above our unaided powers. We can neglect them, or fail to recognize them even when we stumble over them (as we often do), or use them. In fact, we can do with them what we can do with any other habit. There is only one thing our human perversity has never managed to attain. We cannot turn them into bad habits. They cannot exist with serious sin and even venial sin dulls their edge. Like every other habit their intensity can be increased through acts which follow their inclination. Through their constant use our souls are habituated to divine acts. We begin to live here the life we hope to live forever hereafter.

All of us have a more or less clear notion of spiritual joy. If we see things in their true perspective we realize that a moment of spiritual joy is worth years of temporal pleasure. That knowledge does not have much effect upon us as the world will sadly testify. But the gifts of the Holy Ghost give us a practical grasp of its truth. With such supernatural habits as the gifts functioning in the armory of our soul, we are always on the alert for the slightest sign of God's pleasure. And not only do we recognize it but through the gifts we are capable of fulfilling it. Under their guidance the breathing of

the Holy Ghost upon our souls is amplified until it sounds like the roar of a blast furnace. The most commonplace actions of ours become fired with the spark of divinity.

We slum-children now see our Father's mansion through different eyes. It is true that we do not completely possess the treasures we find there but we do recognize their worth. We have secured the constant help of a member of the divine family. He has shown us the way and helped us along the path. He has transformed us into a loving, trustful son. We no longer look upon our heavenly Father as a stern, inflexible taskmaster, but as a kindly, loving, and lovable Father, whose interests are ours, whose life we live. We feel that we are wanted, that our adoption has fructified into loving sonship, that our actions are approved and not censured. We appreciate the full meaning of our membership in the divine family. We feel at home.

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