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COMPLEMENTS TO VIRTUE

BERNARD SHERIDAN, O.P.

"Whosoever are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God."

Rom. viii, 14.



WHEN we were children we attended Catechism class daily, or at least Sunday school. There, in order to reply to the teacher's questions, we were expected to have a reason for the faith which was in us. Among the many mystifying questions which come our way in the course of the year, there were the virtues, the gifts and fruits of the Holy Ghost and the beatitudes. Somehow we managed to grasp the notion of virtue. For us the virtues were special blessings from God which helped us to be good. But for the rest—these gifts and fruits and beatitudes—well, with the definitions ready upon demand and with the ability to recite "trip-pingly upon the tongue" the number and names of each, we were content to rest. With no more than such a catalogue, we go through life with many of the faithful, satisfied with the ability to enumerate, but unable to understand, our grand supernatural equipment. We believe, therefore, that it will be well worth while to consider briefly—though not so briefly that clarity will be sacrificed—the gifts of the Holy Ghost.

I

The Christian life is first and foremost a supernatural life. Why do we say that? Because the end for which God has destined us is a supernatural one. Towards this end we must strive every moment of our earthly existence. What is this end? It is an intimate union with God for all eternity. Being strictly supernatural, this end could never

be attained by man were he dependent upon his own natural powers. We can not reach something which is above us unless we are raised up to it. Man had this supernatural power when he came from the Hand of his Creator, but he lost it by the sin of our first parents.

Consequently we must have a supernatural life and supernatural powers to attain our supernatural end. God, our merciful Father, gives these to us. He sent His Son Who by His Passion and Death won us back our birthright. Christ left us the Sacraments which are the channels of sanctifying grace. In Baptism it flows into our souls and once again we find favor with God. Sanctifying grace is God's gift of a supernatural life, the breath of God's own life in our souls. By grace we are made "partakers of the divine nature."¹

Since we have received the gift of a supernatural life, it follows, as night the day, that we must *live* a supernatural life if we hope to keep it. A limb which is bound up tightly soon becomes paralyzed. It is by the practice of the virtues and under the influence of the gifts of the Holy Ghost that we keep alive and strong spiritually. Only in the state of grace are we enabled to cultivate these blessings from God. When we are in the state of sanctifying grace, we have at the same time the supernatural virtues and the gifts of the Holy Ghost—everything we need to be happy now and hereafter.

What are these gifts of the Holy Ghost? The gifts are supernatural habits accompanying sanctifying grace which make the powers of the soul responsive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and docile under His direction. Or, as Msgr. Gay aptly terms them, they are "sources of suppleness and of energy, of docility and of power . . . which render the soul more passive under the Hand of God, and at the same time more active in His service and in the practice of good works."² We say 'more', because it is by the cultivation of the gifts that we are enabled to practice all the supernatural virtues more perfectly.

The gifts, then, are not to be confused with the virtues. They are really in a class by themselves. *The function of the gifts is to complement and perfect the virtues.* To understand this we must be mindful that throughout the course of our life, so long as we are in the state of grace, we are living under the direct influence and guidance of the Holy Ghost Whose temples we are. The Holy Ghost directs the course of our virtuous actions. He moves us to do *this* good deed rather than *that*, to choose *such* a good means for the attainment

¹ II Peter i, 4.

² *Christian Life and Virtues*, Vol. I, p. 46.

of an end rather than some other. But to receive and make proper use of these divine motions we have the gifts of the Holy Ghost, already infused and permanently residing in the soul.

The fundamental difference between the virtues and the gifts is not to be found in their field of action, since this is the same in both. Rather must we look to their *different modes of action*. In the practice of the virtues, God helps us to reflect, to seek the best means to arrive at our final destination. But it is we who are acting according to the dictates of our own prudence and of reason enlightened by faith. God accommodates Himself to our human way of acting. Not so with the gifts! Here, the Holy Spirit acts in a super-human way. Before we can have recourse to the dictates of prudence, He sends us a divine light which acts in us and obtains our consent. This special help may be called *operating grace*. Without it, this suppleness, this ready response to the movement of the Holy Ghost, is never exercised.

Perhaps a comparison may serve to give a clearer understanding of this doctrine. The man who practices the virtues may be likened to the musician who calls forth beautiful sounds from the strings of a harp. Let the Holy Ghost come and Himself play upon the strings of the heart, and we may say that the soul is then under the influence of the gifts. This is a favorite figure of the Fathers to picture the action of Jesus upon the soul of Mary: "A most melodious harp used by Jesus to delight the eternal Father."

At the outset these gifts are merely *supernatural powers* and they remain so unless we cultivate them. It is important that we do cultivate them because it is under the influence of the gifts that we become strong and flower into the full vigor of our normal, spiritual growth. How are we to cultivate these gifts? The conditions necessary for the cultivation of the gifts may be reduced to three. *First*, we must previously *practice the moral virtues* for thereby we merit an increase in grace. The exercise of the moral virtues tends gradually to dispose the soul for that joyful and perfect abandonment to the Holy Spirit which is the first requisite for the full exercise of the gifts. *Secondly*, we must ever *be on our guard against the spirit of the world* which is so at variance with the Spirit of God. *Thirdly*, we must *strive to foster an attitude of prayerful serenity*. Frequently mindful of the presence of God, dwelling not only near us but in us, we are better disposed to hearken to the Voice of His Spirit. "I will hear what the Lord God will speak in me."³

³ Ps. lxxxiv, 9.

How many gifts are there? Holy Scripture makes many references to the gifts. The classic text from the Old Testament are the words of the Prophet Isaías: "And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: the spirit of wisdom, and of understanding, the spirit of counsel, and of fortitude, the spirit of knowledge, and of godliness, and he shall be filled with the spirit of the Lord."⁴ The Hebrew rendering of this text has caused considerable difficulty, but from the Third Century the constant tradition of the Church assures us of the seven-fold number. In the hymn of the third hour for the feast of Pentecost we hail the Holy Ghost:

"Come Thou Creator Spirit
With Thy sevenfold gift."

The Mass of the same day reëchoes this sentiment:

"Grant to Thy faithful trusting in Thee,
Thy sevenfold blessed gift."

St. Thomas Aquinas stoutly maintains with characteristic spirit of convincing finality that the enumeration of Isaías is not to be taken figuratively but that there are seven gifts no more and no less.⁵ It is fitting that there should be seven gifts since they correspond to the seven virtues—Faith, Hope and Charity; Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance—towards the perfect practice of which the gifts tend. Thus, turning back to our childhood days, we cite the teaching of the Catechism: "There are seven gifts of the Holy Ghost, namely, the gifts of Wisdom, Understanding, Knowledge, Counsel, Piety, Fortitude and Fear of the Lord.

We will now proceed to consider each of the gifts in turn. By comparing them with the virtues which they complement, we will be better able to see the part which the gifts play in the scheme of salvation.

II

Wisdom is the supreme gift and corresponds to the noblest of the virtues—charity. From charity there flows a knowledge of God, an understanding sympathy, which no amount of study can give. By charity we are united to God and this union begets in us an aptitude for understanding God which is peculiar to the lover and his beloved. This aptitude, born of charity, is increased by the gift of wisdom.

⁴ *Isaías* ii, 2-3.

⁵ *Summa. Theol.* I-II q. 68, a. 4.

Therein lies the difference between the wisdom of the theologian, acquired by dint of hard study, and the infused gift of wisdom. From our Catechism we learn many things about God. Our knowledge of the things around us enables us to rise to a knowledge of the things above us. We see the new-born babe—a new spark of life from the Hand of the Creator—and we exclaim: God is great! God is good! The beauty of the heavens above us tells us that God is beautiful. But God is more than great, more than good, more than beautiful. He *is* His greatness, He *is* His Goodness, He *is* His beauty! All beauty which we see in His creatures is but a faint reflection of His own eternal, unfading Beauty. In God there is no shadow of alteration. That which He reveals to us is true because He is Truth itself, the measure of all truths. But how are we to grasp the full significance of these profound truths? We do this by the gift of wisdom which brings the soul into more complete harmony with God. St. Bernard calls this gift the “knowledge which relishes things divine.”

Understanding and knowledge supplement the virtue of faith. Faith opens before us the truths which God has revealed. The gifts of understanding and knowledge allow us to enter more fully into their inner meaning, to grasp them as realities. The gift of wisdom, as we have seen, gives us a deeper appreciation of God as He is in Himself. These two gifts, which we now consider, afford us a clearer insight into the *works* of God. The scope of the gift of understanding, however, is more extensive than that of knowledge. By ‘knowledge’ here we do not mean what the term ordinarily implies, that is, conclusions acquired through a process of reasoning. Rather we mean the *science of the Saints*, whereby we form a sound judgment of *created things* insofar as they lead us to God. Creatures are not to be sought for their own sake. They are given to us to help us work out our eternal salvation. The gift of knowledge enables us to view creatures in their proper light.

The scope of the gift of understanding is not limited to created things; it extends to *all the revealed truths*. For that reason we obtain by it a much deeper insight than by the gift of knowledge. This does not imply that we comprehend the mysteries, but that we are enabled to perceive that there is no conflict between them and reason. By the gift of understanding the mind’s eye is cleansed, so to speak, and there is granted us a glimpse of God; not that we may positively and perfectly behold the divine Essence, but rather that we may see *what God is not*. Here again it is not the understanding of the theologian. Indeed, these gifts of the Holy Ghost have little to do with

learning and may be possessed by even the most illiterate to a surprising degree. Thus we have the example of the peasant of whom the Curé of Ars speaks. By means of the gift of understanding the simple soul was able to pierce the veil of the tabernacle: "I look at Him, and He looks at me."

It would not be at all presumptuous for the man under the guidance of the gift of counsel to sing with the Psalmist: "The Lord ruleth me, and I shall want nothing."⁶ We all realize the necessity of deliberating well before acting. One hasty step may prove fatal to the fulfillment of long-cherished plans. He would be a foolish ruler, indeed, who did not have special advisers, prudent men, to assist him in the direction of the affairs of state. The virtue of prudence directs us to seek, with the help of past experience, the best means of attaining a certain end. But human reason is not infallible and it is possible for us to act unwisely. The gift of counsel, which is the complement of prudence, makes this impossible for the Voice of God Himself directs us, especially in difficult cases. Many Saints have been privileged with this gift of counsel. St. Catherine of Sienna, though an uneducated girl, gave wise counsel to princes, cardinals and even to the Pope himself.

The gift of piety answers to the virtue of religion which, in turn, is related to the virtue of justice. This gift engenders in our hearts a filial affection for God and a tender devotion towards those persons and things consecrated to Him, in order to make us fulfil our religious duties with a holy joy. It is not a maudlin sentimentality craving emotional satisfaction; it is a virile affection, expressing itself in compliance with the Will of God. God is not a harsh taskmaster Who bears down upon us and crushes us to the earth. Rather is He a kindly Father Who knows that which is best for us His children. It is by the name of Father that He is pleased to be known and loved, especially since the coming of Christ. "You have received the spirit of adoption of sons, whereby we cry: Abba (Father)."

Let us now consider the gift of fortitude. To be a follower of Christ has ever meant to suffer persecution at some time or another. This is to be expected, for the servant is not above the Master. Christ, however, has not left His followers orphans. "You shall receive the power of the Holy Ghost coming upon you, and you shall be witnesses unto me."⁸ The gift of fortitude corresponds to the

⁶ *Ps.* xxii, 1.

⁷ *Rom.* viii, 15.

⁸ *Acts* i, 8.

virtue of the same name which strengthens the will in the face of great obstacles, especially the danger of death. What does the gift of fortitude add over and above the virtue? According to St. Thomas, its special function is to impart confidence, a more intense determination, the certain hope of success, and thus to bring about greater results.

The seventh gift of the Holy Ghost is called holy fear. The rôle assigned to fear in the interrelation between the virtues and the gifts is to complement the virtue of hope. It is not a servile, cringing fear, a dread of displeasing God because of subsequent punishment, but it is a filial fear. It is the fear of losing God which frightens us. This final gift has a twofold salutary effect. It fills us with a great reverence for the majesty and holiness of God, impresses us with a deep sense of our own nothingness, and gives us a great loathing for sin. Obviously from what has been said, this gift serves also to strengthen the virtue of temperance which restrains our appetites in all matters of unlawful self-indulgence. The gift of fear severs our attachment to such pleasures which might separate us from God.

This has not been an exhaustive treatise of the subject. Such a project would fill many volumes. Our purpose has been to give the simplest notions and to lay a groundwork for further study.

The gifts of the Holy Ghost are necessary for the attainment of our last end because we have the virtues only imperfectly. Our imperfect possession of the virtues is due to the fact that we have not the fulness of grace. The Holy Spirit makes use of His gifts to give us a more penetrating appreciation of things divine.

In heaven everything will be completely subjected to the Will of God. "God will be all in all."⁹ Discord will be unknown. There will be nothing to prevent the gifts from functioning perfectly. The gifts will remain with the just for all eternity insofar as they are compatible with the life hereafter. Fortitude, for example, will remain as a pledge of our confidence in God, although there will be no obstacles to be encountered and overcome.

Summing up the doctrine which we have outlined as briefly as possible, we find that the gifts of the Holy Ghost are the complements of the virtues. They are *not* the virtues themselves. That is the point that we would impress upon the reader. By the virtues we work under the direction of reason enlightened by faith; by the gifts we are docile to the special inspirations of the Holy Spirit. The vir-

⁹ I *Cor.* xv, 28.

tues are connected one with another in prudence. The gifts converge with charity, that is, all the just who are in the state of grace and who love God with their whole heart, have these seven gifts because the Holy Ghost Himself dwells in us through charity. To practice virtue is *to row*; to use the gifts is *to sail*. The seven gifts of the Holy Ghost are truly like seven sails which facilitate, under the inspiration from on high, the work of the virtues.

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