

10. June 2022

The gifts of the Holy Spirit (6/7): The gift of understanding

"The Spirit explores the depths of everything, even the depths of God" (1 Cor 2:10)

While the gift of knowledge helps us to withdraw from the attraction of creatures, recognising in an inner sight their nothingness (inasmuch as they were created out of nothing), and makes us realise that all life and beauty proceed from God; the gift of understanding helps us to penetrate the mystery of God with the light of the Holy Spirit Himself.

Our understanding is not capable of penetrating the divine mysteries with the help of faith alone, even if we hold fast to the revealed truths. For faith is, on the one hand, a great light, but, on the other hand, it is still dark. It is a light in that it conveys to us the truth about God and about all that we need for the path of following Christ. But it does not allow us to penetrate into the mystery of God himself, nor to understand his Being from within. The knowledge of God remains somehow obscure. St. Paul directs our gaze to eternity, where we will see God face to face:

"Now we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles, but then we shall be seeing face to face". (1 Cor 13:12)

The gift of understanding allows us, in a certain way, to penetrate the darkness in which we find ourselves. It is a contemplative understanding, as if it enables us to read the mysteries of God from within, thus tearing away the veil of human ideas and concepts. Thanks to the gift of understanding, we can glimpse the substance of the divine mysteries. Thus, not only do we believe by faith that God is One and Triune; but we can grasp the Holy Trinity as an absolute reality and as the clearest revelation of God's perfection. In this way, the gift of understanding breaks through the darkness, at least partially, and makes us partakers of the knowledge of the divine mysteries. This can only be the work of the Holy Spirit!

“It is as scripture says: What no eye has seen and no ear has heard, what the mind of man cannot visualise; all that God has prepared for those who love him; to us, though, God has given revelation through the Spirit, for the Spirit explores the depths of everything, even the depths of God. After all, is there anyone who knows the qualities of anyone except his own spirit, within him; and in the same way, nobody knows the qualities of God except the Spirit of God.” (1 Cor 2:9-11).

Through the gift of understanding, we can understand Sacred Scripture, its commandments and counsels more deeply. Our prayer becomes simpler and more contemplative; the soul finds it easier to remain simply in the presence of the Lord and its gaze is simply fixed on the truth. We can perceive God's presence more clearly and we learn to know him from within.

Since God has infused us with this gift in baptism, He will normally cause it to unfold in due time. We can ask for the spirit of understanding, but we will not be able to obtain it by our own will. However, if we carefully walk our path of discipleship and strive to grow in love, the Lord will not deprive us of being able to know and understand him more deeply.

Perhaps it might be helpful to relate the gift of understanding to the angelic choir of cherubim, who are regarded as the angels of divine knowledge. It cannot be ruled out that God has entrusted them with the task of "personifying" the spirit of understanding, so to speak, so that they may transmit to us their knowledge of God, this inner vision of His, which has certainly been granted to them in greater abundance.