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The gifts of the Holy Spirit (5/7): The gift of knowledge

"What, then, will anyone gain by winning the whole world and forfeiting his life?" (Mt 16:26)

Through the first four gifts (fear of the Lord, piety, fortitude and counsel), the Holy Spirit guides our moral life above all. Through the last three gifts (knowledge, understanding and wisdom) He directly guides our supernatural life, i.e. our God-centred life.

The first four gifts lead to the perfection of the cardinal virtues; the last three, on the other hand, complete the theological virtues. These last three gifts are related to contemplation, to the life of prayer, to unification with God.

In our way of following Christ, we are exposed to the temptation to let ourselves be carried away by the attraction of creatures, falling into an inordinate attachment to them. It is not easy for us, who are "sensible" beings, to bear the invisibility of God. That is why it is difficult for us to remain in the right relationship with the visible world and to know how to deal with its force of attraction.

Thanks to Holy Scripture - especially the book of Ecclesiastes - we know in theory how transient and vain created things are (Eccl 12-10). However, this knowledge does not penetrate our inner self. It remains a knowledge of faith, which we try to apply through asceticism; but in the long run this response is not enough.

The gift of knowledge, on the other hand, enables us to experience the nothingness of creatures with such clarity that we no longer have any doubt. Through the Holy Spirit we recognise the imperfection and transience of creatures. At the same time, it urges us to place all our hope in the Lord: our heart must be unhesitatingly grounded in God!

Through this gift, the Holy Spirit also makes us aware of our vanity even in its subtlest manifestations: in the smallest satisfactions of self-love; in the slightest self-indulgence; in the subtle attempts to win the sympathy and recognition of others.

Under the influence of the gift of knowledge, we learn very clearly that the essential thing is to adhere to God; and that everything else is secondary. Thus a clear hierarchy of things emerges in our lives. We learn to look at this world from God's perspective. Once we have achieved this, creatures will no longer be an obstacle on the way to God, but can even be a bridge to Him, for in them we will recognise the works of His hands. Moreover, the gift of knowledge will help us to cope with our present sufferings and not to be swallowed up by them, considering them as a small thing in comparison to eternal beatitude.

The gift of knowledge also teaches the soul to know itself. It permeates the whole of life, and enables us to recognise God's guidance in all circumstances. God's plan for our life shines ever more clearly, so that we find our deepest identity and recognise our task in this world.

Under the influence of the spirit of knowledge, Holy Scripture speaks more vividly to the soul, and it discovers its meaning ever more deeply... The soul learns to know the Heart of its Redeemer ever better from within, and wants to lead others to a deeper following of Christ and to work with all its strength for the salvation of souls.

Then, the gift of knowledge makes us know inwardly the nothingness of creatures. Thus, happiness and satisfaction will no longer be sought in created things, but only in God. In this sense, a Saint Teresa of Avila used to say: "God alone is enough".