

FATHER REGINALD MARTIN, O.P., *DIRECTOR*

Vol. 64, No. 5 - A WESTERN DOMINICAN PUBLICATION

NOVEMBER: THE MONTH OF THE HOLY SOULS

From the Director

Someone recently asked me to name the Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin. The list reminded me how many call us to share Mary's pain at the suffering and death of her Son. This issue of *Light and Life* will go to the printer just a day or two after the great feast of Mary's Assumption, so we have a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the immense gift Our Savior won for us by His cross – and the magnificent promise we have received in His Mother's triumphant Assumption. During the month of November we will offer Mass each day for the happy repose of the souls of our friends' relatives and loved ones. We will remember you, our friends, as well, praying that the message of Christ's Resurrection and Mary's Assumption will be a source of comfort and solace in times of death, pain, and loss.

Who Wrote the Book of Love?

The Song of Songs for Catholics

Fr. James Thompson, O.P.

PART 4: CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE AS CONTEXT

MARRIAGE AS A SACRAMENT

Marriage is a human institution that was in place millennia before Christ founded the Church. As with many aspects of our lives, marriage finds its basis in our animal nature, namely in the need to procreate. But this biological function has been humanized in such a way that it transforms an otherwise instinctive behavior into an expression of the human spirit, and into an institutional element of human society that provides a stable environment for the inculturation of young humans, bringing out their potential. The human institution of marriage and family is a natural transcendence over the merely biological. In the light of the sacrament of God that is Jesus Christ, marriage between baptized Christians transforms this human institution up into a further transcendent level.



*Shrine of Our Lady of the Rosary
Holy Rosary Church*

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, states:

Finally, in virtue of the sacrament of Matrimony by which they signify and share (cf. Eph. 5:32) the mystery of the unity and faithful love between Christ and the Church, Christian married couples help one another to attain holiness in their married life and in the rearing of their children....From the marriage of Christians there comes the family in which new citizens of human society are born and, by the grace of the Holy Spirit received in Baptism, are made children of God so that the People of God may be perpetuated throughout the centuries. (LG §11)

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

Gifts of the Holy Spirit: I

The Nature of a Gift

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

VIRTUES: A BRIEF REVIEW

In earlier reflections we have considered the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity, and the moral (or human) virtues, which are Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance. Each of these virtues shares a common character, and our *Catechism* provides a very simple definition, “A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good.” (CCC, 1803) The text continues,

[Virtue] allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions.

THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

What distinguishes the theological and moral virtues is their origin. The theological virtues are rooted in God, and unite us to God through our Baptism. “[they] are the foundation of Christian moral activity; they animate it and give it its special character. They inform and give life to all the moral virtues.” (CCC, 1812)

MORAL VIRTUES

The moral virtues, by contrast, are “perfections of intellect and will” that we achieve by human effort. They lead us toward God and His love, and they are supported by the theological virtues, but our progress in them is largely the effort of our own hard work. At their heart, all the virtues are good habits; they become easier with practice. But the *Catechism* reminds us, the theological virtues “are infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as His children and meriting eternal life.” (CCC, 1813)

The moral virtues are a simpler matter. “With God’s help, they forge character and give facility in the practice of the good. The virtuous man is happy to practice them” (CCC, 1810) for the simple reason, says one of the early Church writers (Gregory of Nyssa) that “the goal of the virtuous life is to become like God.”

THE DISPOSITION TO SUCCEED

As we practice the virtues over time, the choice to do good becomes easier; at least it should. Ultimately, it should become second nature. However, human experience teaches us that no matter how good our intentions, and no matter how well-disciplined we may be, we can accomplish only so much by our unaided effort. At some point in our development, each of us

has had to turn to parents, teachers, a mentor, or “how-to” books to arrive at a “next step” in our personal or intellectual development.

PERFECTION: GOD’S GIFT

We find a parallel in our spiritual lives. The practice of virtue may lead us toward perfection, but only God’s assistance can make us perfect. Not surprisingly, we call this assistance a “gift,” and – again, not surprisingly – God’s gifts come to our assistance only when we have fully achieved what we can accomplish by our own effort.

Only when we have reached this point, may we reasonably look beyond ourselves, to God. The original *Catholic Encyclopedia* gives a very succinct definition of God’s supernatural gifts, “something conferred on nature that is above all the powers...of created nature.” The gifts we will consider in the next few *Light and Life* reflections are the seven gifts the prophet Isaiah identified in the Messiah, when he exclaimed

*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse
And a branch shall grow out of his roots.
And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him
The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The spirit of council and might,
The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord
And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.* (Is. 11. 2, 3)

IDENTIFYING GOD’S GIFTS

Our more modern vocabulary has named the gifts: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. As we shall see, some of these terms have particular theological meanings that distinguish them from our common understanding of the words.

To begin our reflection, we should understand that God intends these gifts for our personal sanctification. This does not mean the gifts will isolate us from other Christians, or insulate us from the demands of the world. Our cooperation with God’s gifts will inevitably spill over in good works that benefit others, but their primary purpose is not others’ welfare, but our own.

THE GIFTS IN BRIEF

We shall consider each of these gifts in more detail, and we shall relate them to the moral and theological virtues, but by way of introduction, we may say the gift of wisdom helps us detach ourselves from the

world and desire more fervently the things of heaven. Understanding comes to our aid in grasping the truths of our faith. Counsel helps us choose what will most glorify God and aid our salvation.

Fortitude gives us the strength to face difficulties we may encounter in our life as Catholic Christians. Knowledge is a guide between right and wrong as we strive to make our way toward heaven. Piety inspires us with a love for God as our father, encouraging us to undertake swiftly and eagerly our duties toward Him. The fear of the Lord is often misunderstood. It has nothing to do with dread of God's punishment, but rather instills a deep respect for God's majesty, and a fear of offending Him.

HOW THE GIFTS WORK

We may ask how these gifts operate in our lives. They do so by making us more readily responsive to the actions of the Holy Spirit. We may likewise ask how they differ from the virtues, as some of the gifts share the same name as the virtues. The answer here is not one of difference but degree. The gifts of God's Spirit are intimately related to the virtues and bring them to completion in our lives. They enable us to embrace the virtues more fully, and live them more completely.

A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN VIRTUES AND GIFTS

When St. Thomas Aquinas considers the distinction between the virtues and the gifts, he observes that the moral virtues

...perfect man according as it is natural for him to be moved by his reason...Consequently man needs yet higher perfections, whereby to be disposed to be moved by God. These perfections are called gifts...because by them man is disposed to become amenable to the Divine inspiration...This then is why some say...that the gifts perfect man for acts which are higher than the acts of virtue. (ST I-II, 68. 1)

AN EXAMPLE FROM NATURE

This is, to be sure, a complex statement, and it describes a spiritual reality we have probably never given much thought, namely, that to benefit from God's inspiration, God must prepare us to receive that inspiration. If we consider the matter, though, we can see parallels, in our everyday life. We do not toss seeds on the ground and expect them to grow, nor do we imagine that a child who has not learned to read will be able to tell us the contents of a book. The best fertilizers and libraries cannot replace basic preparation; they can only build upon and augment the all-important first steps that must be undertaken if any project is to reach its fulfillment. Once those foundations are laid, however, the next steps follow naturally.

SPIRITUAL APPLICATIONS

We can see a similar progress in our spiritual lives. St. Thomas describes the gifts of the Holy Spirit as *"...habits whereby [we are] perfected to obey readily the Holy Ghost."* (ST I-II 68.3)

This means if we cooperate with God's gifts, we ought to discover an ease and speed with which we pursue and choose good in our actions. St. Thomas observes, *"...for those moved by Divine instinct, there is no need to take counsel according to human reason, but only to follow their inner promptings, since they are moved by a principle higher than human reason."* (*ibid.*)

Obviously, this describes those quite advanced along the way of spiritual perfection; the rest of us will undoubtedly need to "stop, look, and listen" for some before we act with such ease and assurance. Nevertheless, the growth that results in such readiness and ease of action is a goal we should look forward to, with the assistance of God's gifts.

We have seen that this readiness and ease of action are necessary parts of our understanding of virtue as a disposition to do good. We shall encounter the notions of readiness and ease often again in these reflections on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, for just as our progress in the moral virtues makes the promptings of reason easier to follow, our surrender to the gifts of the Spirit makes us more apt to listen to God and the promptings of His Spirit. St. Thomas writes,

God...to whose knowledge and power all things are subject, by His motion safeguards us from all folly, ignorance, dullness of mind and hardness of heart, and the rest. Consequently the gifts of the Holy Ghost, which make us amenable to His promptings, are said to be given as remedies for these defects. (ST I-II 68 2, ad. obj. 3)

THE NECESSITY OF THE GIFTS

If the subject were not so serious, these words would sound almost light-hearted. In fact, St. Thomas writes, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are absolutely necessary for our salvation. This is because we possess the theological virtues only imperfectly. Without God, *"Who works inwardly in every nature and every will,"* we cannot know and love God.

The gifts of the Spirit build on the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity we receive at our Baptism. Our *Catechism* reminds us that these gifts *"...complete and perfect the virtues of those who receive them. They make the faithful docile in readily obeying divine inspirations."* (CCC, 1831) In this statement we once again encounter the notion, as we will so often, that the gifts of the Spirit make us "ready" – eager – to follow God's promptings.

THE FULFILLMENT OF THE GIFTS

Most importantly, the gifts of the Spirit enable us to achieve our full potential as God's children. The importance of the word "children" in this sentence must not be overlooked. It is key to our understanding of what God's gifts accomplish in our lives.

The legal protections in our country of the last two or so hundred years afford us the luxury of thinking of children as little more than charming young people, whose antics so often delight us. But investigative

journalism tells us this is not the case for many young people in the world today, and history teaches us this was certainly not the case in the ancient world. For early Christians, to be a “child” meant one enjoyed an important legal status, with rights denied those who were not children.

St. Paul was very aware of this when he wrote, “*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God... and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ.*” (Rom. 8:14) St. Thomas links St. Paul’s words to a passage from one of the psalms, “*Your good spirit shall guide me into the right land.*” (Ps. 117. 10) When he comments on these two passages St. Thomas remarks,

None can receive the inheritance of that land of the Blessed, except he be moved and led thither by the Holy Ghost. Therefore, in order to accomplish this end, it is necessary for man to have the gift of the Holy Ghost. (ST 68. 2)

THE GIFT OF CHOICE

So far, then, from being mere decorations, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are essential and defining elements of our life as Christians. God created us with free will, and we know that we must choose Him if we are to achieve our potential as His children and enjoy everlasting life in His kingdom. On its face, that choice could not be more clear or more simple. However, experience teaches us that simplicity and clarity do not guarantee that our choices will always – or even often – be easy. The gifts of His Spirit are one more aid God offers to help us freely choose what will lead to Him and His kingdom. ■

THE SONG OF SONGS

(continued from page 1)

A happy Christian marriage, then, becomes a natural image that points beyond itself. By this I mean that a marriage has within itself the capacity to orient the mind and will to the higher reality that is its source. Holy Matrimony is one of the seven specific sacraments by which Christ continues his mission of salvation through his body, the Church. By their lives together as sexual beings, Christian couples both exemplify in the world God’s unitive love and co-create with God other human persons.

THE “BOOK OF LOVE”

A DIRTY BOOK IN THE BIBLE?

Although it could be crudely described as a book about sex, the Song could also be described as a book about chastity. (Say what? Bear with me!) Chastity is not simply a “Don’t” writ large. Chastity is the virtue of the appropriate use of the gift of sexuality as an integral aspect of a human being in relation to others. Unchastity is the separation of sexuality from the integral wholeness of love. So the appropriate use of sexuality entails the total gift of self. Within marriage, sexual union in a loving, freely given and fully respectful way is an expression of the total gift of oneself to the spouse. This is the proper, God-given purpose of sexual union: unity. Like the love of God, it is a unity that overflows from its fullness into creation. In marriage this is an openness to

the procreation of children. Celibate chastity also entails a total gift of self, but not through sexual intercourse. It is the foregoing of this natural good to offer one’s whole self through the service of God for many others rather than through offering oneself to God through a spouse.

Marriage and celibacy as sacramental lifestyle choices are interrelated through the sacramentality of marriage. St. John Chrysostom noted the balanced relationship between marriage and celibacy:

Whoever denigrates marriage also diminishes the glory of virginity. Whoever praises it makes virginity more admirable and resplendent. What appears good only in comparison with evil would not be particularly good. It is something better than what is admitted to be good that is the most excellent good. (Virginity X, quoted in *Familiaris Consortio*, §16)

CHASTITY: BOTH CONJUGAL AND CELIBATE

The Song of Songs quivers with sexual tension and desire. This energy can be directed toward a single human beloved spouse or spouse-to-be as the path to God, or re-directed toward seeking God through the asceticism of celibacy. Both paths seek God, so persons of both callings can come to see the mystical union which the Song of Songs calls us to.

Therefore, since conjugal sex within a Christian marriage is a natural image of divine love, my take on the Song of Songs is that it is, on the literal level, a poem about the unitive aspect of marital relations. As such there is no problem with recognizing the frank sexuality expressed in the Song. But by virtue of its placement in the canon of Scripture, it was meant to point beyond erotic love to that of which it is an image: the love of Christ for the Church and the love of God for the individual soul. Therefore, in my concise commentary in future installments, I will point out both literal and mystical meanings of the text, maintaining that both are valid readings of this portion of Scripture.

In such a short space I cannot pretend to do more than skim the surface of what you might find in the Song of Songs. Accordingly, this concise orientation to the Song of Songs can only serve to introduce you to some of the intricacies and riches contained in this marvelous poem that is part of Holy Writ. My hope is that this can provoke further interest in the Song of Songs, and enable you to use it in your own meditation. If as a result of perusing this commentary you come to take a serious look at this Bible book that many through the centuries have lauded as the song above all other songs, my goal has been attained!

In the next installment I will begin a concise commentary on the first chapter of this Book of Love from the Catholic perspective outlined in this series thus far.

