

Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M., S.T.D.

# Lent



## Opening the Gifts of the HOLY SPIRIT

**T**eam spirit! School spirit! We are often encouraged to “get into the spirit” of things. But “getting into the spirit of Lent” is somewhat different. The spirit of Lent is the Holy Spirit! At issue is not so much how we can get into the spirit of Lent, but how we can allow the spirit of Lent—the Holy Spirit—to get into us!

Why is the spirit of Lent the Holy Spirit? Because of the relationship between Lent and the Sacraments of Initiation—Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist—which confer the Holy Spirit.

Historically and liturgically, Lent and Christian initiation are closely associated. We cannot understand Lent without reference to the Sacraments of Initiation.

During Lent, the elect—those catechumens who will be initiated into the Church at the Easter Vigil—prepare to celebrate the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist for the first time. Lent is their “40-day retreat” before Baptism.

For those of us who have already been initiated into the Church by the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist, Lent is a time to renew the grace—the Spirit—of these sacraments within us. We promise once again to die to selfishness and sin (through our Lenten prayer, fasting and almsgiving) so that this year at Easter we may more completely rise to new life with Christ.

### Initiation and the Holy Spirit

**W**e usually think of Confirmation as the sacrament which gives the Holy Spirit. But Confirmation is best understood in its relation to Baptism and Eucharist. An analogy can illustrate the relationship among the three Sacraments of Initiation.

What do you do when you are invited to a banquet? When the time comes, 1) you take off your old clothes and wash up; 2) then you dry off and put on your good clothes and 3) you go to the banquet. Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist exist in a similar relationship. In Baptism we 1) take off the old, sinful person and wash away Original Sin, thus receiving new life; in Confirmation we 2) put on the new person and are anointed with the oil of the Holy Spirit; and then we 3) are led to the Eucharistic Banquet. The official prayers of these sacraments indicate how the Holy Spirit operates in each of these actions.

**Baptism and the Holy Spirit.** As the elect come to the place for Baptism at the Easter Vigil, we learn of the role of the Holy Spirit in the prayer over the baptismal water: “Father, look now with love on your Church, and unseal for her the fountain of baptism. By the power of the Spirit give to the water of this font



the grace of your Son. You created man in your own likeness: cleanse him from sin in a new birth of innocence by water and the Spirit."

Then the minister lowers the Easter candle into the water—the symbol of Christ impregnating and making fruitful the womb of the Church—and prays:

"We ask you, Father, with your Son to send the Holy Spirit on the waters of this font. May all who are buried with Christ in the death of baptism rise also with him to newness of life" (Roman Sacramentary).

**Confirmation and the Holy Spirit.** The prayers of Confirmation tell us how the Holy Spirit, received at our Baptism, is to function in our lives. The celebrant holds his hands outstretched over the entire group of those to be confirmed and prays:

"All powerful God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by water and the Holy Spirit you freed your sons and daughters from sin and gave them new life. Send your Holy Spirit upon them to be their helper and guide. Give them the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence. Fill them with the spirit of wonder and awe in your presence."

This prayer names the traditional "seven gifts of the Holy Spirit." The biblical origin of these seven gifts (*seven* is the biblical number meaning "completion, totality, all-that-we-need") is found in a passage where Isaiah is foretelling the qualities of the Messiah. The word *Messiah*—*Christos* in Greek—means "anointed." When we are anointed in the Sacraments of Initiation, we "put on Christ" and the qualities of the Messiah take root in us and become our qualities.

The Isaiah passage is well known: "But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom. The spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the LORD, and his delight shall be the fear of the LORD" (Isaiah 11:1-3).

(The ancient Greek and Latin translations of this passage read "piety" for "fear of the Lord"; this gives us our traditional seven gifts.)

Following this prayer for the sevenfold gift of the Spirit, each candidate goes to the minister of the sacrament. He dips his right thumb in the holy oil (chrism) and makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the one to be confirmed and prays: "[Name], be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit." Here the "gift" referred to is the Holy Spirit himself. We are sealed with the gift "of"



(= "the gift which is") the Holy Spirit, God's "first gift to those who believe" (Eucharistic Prayer IV).

**Eucharist and the Holy Spirit.** Clothed in the sevenfold Spirit, with our sins washed away, we now come to the banquet table of the Eucharist.

The eucharistic prayers which have been given us following the Second Vatican Council express the role of the Holy Spirit even more clearly than the traditional Roman Canon (Eucharistic Prayer I). Although the words vary according to the prayer, at each Eucharist we ask God: "Let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy, so that they may become for us the body and the blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ....May all of us who share in the body and blood of Christ be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit" (Eucharistic Prayer II).

This asking God to send the Holy Spirit is called the *epiclesis* (invocation, or petition) prayer. In the prayers of many Eastern-rite Churches the prayer comes after the narrative of the Institution of the Eucharist. In the eucharistic prayers of the Roman rite, the *epiclesis* is split. The first part of the prayer (in which we ask the Spirit to change the bread and wine) is prayed before the institution narrative. The second part of the prayer (in which we ask the Holy Spirit to change those who eat and drink the bread and wine) is prayed after the narrative of the institu-

tion. But whether the two parts of the prayer occur together as in many of the Eastern rites or whether they are split as in the Roman rite, the two parts of the prayer go together: We ask God to send the Holy Spirit to transform our food and drink so that we who eat and drink might be transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ.

This unity in Christ is the culminating work of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit given at Baptism and Confirmation. The Holy Spirit is the divine spirit of unity and communion. It is the work of the Holy Spirit ultimately to consummate the high priestly prayer of Jesus:

"I pray...that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one" (John 17:20-23).

The purpose of Lent and the role of the Holy Spirit are one and the same: that we all be one in Christ. By the Spirit we know that we are brothers and sisters. By the Spirit we see all of humanity to be members of one Body. By the Spirit we experience the harmony of the earth and all creation. The Holy Spirit brings about the ultimate design for creation: that we become one in Christ. As St. Paul tell us, this is God's "plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth" (Ephesians 1:10).



# Prayers for Lent: 7 Gifts of the Holy Spirit

As a practical exercise this year for Lent, try to use one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit during each of the seven periods of Lent: the first period being Ash Wednesday and the following three days, then each of the six following weeks.

I cannot tell you specifically how to use each gift—the Spirit's gifts are personal and often shaped by the individual recipient. I will, however, offer a "starter idea," along with a few reflections and prayers that might stimulate your own thinking and creativity.

Think of how you feel when you give someone a gift—a shirt, for example. You are honored when he or she uses the

gift (i.e., wears the shirt) and you are disappointed if the gift goes unused. Similarly, I would imagine that God is pleased when we use the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit—and disappointed if these divine gifts are left unused. I recommend that each week you reflect on different ways to use a gift of the Spirit. Then put that gift into action.

If you practice this exercise during each of the weeks of Lent, by Easter you will have gained a real facility for using the seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit. And the exercise might well serve as a preparation for opening God's final gift—everlasting life in the risen Lord.

## Ash Wednesday

### Wisdom

As we begin the season of Lent, open—and use!—the gift of Wisdom. What does it mean to be wise? Being wise is different from just being smart. Wisdom moves our vision far out into the future; it gives us perspective. God's gift of Wisdom—the Holy Spirit—enables us to see things with God's eyes.

Wisdom enables us to see this world through the lens of Christ's Easter victory. The wise person knows that Good Friday will be followed by Easter Sunday. God's gift of Wisdom enables us to see our own sufferings and "Good Fridays" in the light of God's loving plan for us.

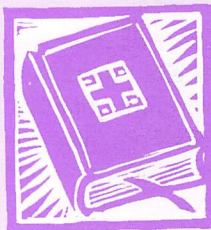


**Idea:** *Today I will consider my own life's troubles and look for God's hand in them.*

**Prayer:** God of Wisdom, you created us in wonder and sustain us in your embracing love. May your Holy Spirit of Wisdom enable us to see even as you see.

## First Week

### Understanding



During this first week of Lent open the gift of understanding. Understanding is to "stand under," to "get to the bottom of things."

Sometimes in order to understand how to use a gift—a new VCR or an automatic coffeepot—we have to read the directions. God's gift of Easter life comes with directions also—the sacred Scriptures.

Prayerful reading of the Bible enables us to understand God's plan and to get to the bottom of things. The psalmist prays: "I have more understanding than all my teachers, because I ponder your decrees....The revelation of your words sheds light, gives understanding to the simple" (Psalm 119:99, 130). St. Francis of Assisi was a simple man who enjoyed the Gift of Understanding. Pray with him, in the Peace Prayer: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace....Grant that I may not so much seek to be understood, as to understand."

**Idea:** *This week I will reread or listen to the Bible passages from Sunday's liturgy (see your parish bulletin or missalette).*

**Prayer:** God of Understanding, your inspired word reveals your mysterious plan for the world. May your Holy Spirit of Understanding help us to interpret your will in the daily events of our lives.

## Second Week

### Right Judgment (Counsel)

Decisions! From the time we decide to get up and out of bed, we make choices. Modern technology facilitates quick decisions. A computer can process thousands of bits of information in a second. God doesn't always act so quickly. God worked on the Grand Canyon for years and years. God waited countless generations before sending Jesus. And one thing God is really slow at is anger! Time after time the Bible describes our God as a God who is slow to anger. Right Judgment helps us avoid rash judgments.

The Spirit of Right Judgment is the gift to make good choices—to make God's choices. Many times our decisions seem to be based on merely one thing: money. We choose the career where we will make the most money. We buy the bottle of milk that will save us the most money. Money seems to determine how much time we spend with our families. The Gift of Right Judgment helps us seek



God's counsel, God's advice. Right judgments are made in the light of God's great Final Judgment.

**Idea:** *This week I will pray about my biggest life decisions: family, vocation, career.*

**Prayer:** God of Right Judgment, you are slow to anger and quick to forgive. May your Holy Spirit of Right Judgment free us from all resentment and prejudice.



### Third Week **Courage** (Fortitude)



We come to the heart of Lent. The word *courage* is derived from the Latin word *cor*, "heart." Courage is the gift that enables

us to face danger and overcome fear with confidence. In the Gospels, before performing a cure Jesus often says, "Take courage....Take heart....Be confident...."

Sometimes we are afraid in the face of danger or illness because we are depending on our own resources, our own strength. The Gift of Courage enables us to see where our real strength lies: God is our strength. "God indeed is my savior; I am confident and unafraid. My strength and my courage is the Lord" (Isaiah 12:2). How much of our planning is based on our own strength and resources?

**Idea:** *This week I will bring my difficulties before God in prayer.*

**Prayer:** God of Courage, your strength enables us to overcome any difficulty. May your Holy Spirit of Courage give us bold hearts to proclaim your love always.

### Fourth Week **Knowledge**



It's important to know things. We know how to make a living, how to raise a family, how to use a computer, how to

make vegetable soup. But neither the joys of heaven nor a life here on earth really worth living is achieved simply by knowing lots of things. The Gift of Knowledge helps us know the right things. Knowledge helps us know which things are important and which are not.

As Christians, it is important to know Jesus. Even non-Christians can know a lot about Jesus. The Gift of Knowledge helps us to know Jesus. "...[N]o one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3).

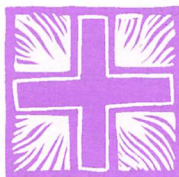
A good way to tell if we are really using the Gift of Knowledge is to examine whether or not the things we know lead us to charity in our actions. The

Spirit does not reveal things merely to satisfy our idle curiosity. "The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching must be directed to the love that never ends" (*Catechism*, #25).

**Idea:** *This week I will make a concrete act of charity each day, then pray about what are the most important things in my life.*

**Prayer:** God of Knowledge, you know when we sit and when we stand; you know the hidden secrets of the universe. May your Holy Spirit of Knowledge enlighten us to know how we are to love all you have made.

### Fifth Week **Reverence** (Piety)



Reverence is a versatile gift; it serves many different functions. For example, we expect children to reverence and respect

their parents. Reverence does not mean that the child must always be solemn and silent; there are times for children to laugh and shout. But reverence demands that the child remember who is who—who is the child and who is the parent. When this perspective is forgotten and the child becomes demanding, insisting on its own way, reverence is lost.

As Lent comes to a close, our journey through this holy season brings us to Jesus' death on the cross. Reverence places us at the foot of that cross, looking up to the face of Jesus. This perspective lets us see our relationship to God: the saved and the Savior. The Gift of Reverence enables us to act in the light of this reality and to show our gratitude by our piety and devotion. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to pray, "Our Father...." We are God's children.

**Idea:** *This week I will be aware of the crucifix at Mass and worship before a crucifix in private.*

**Prayer:** God of Reverence, you are always in loving relationship with your creation. May your Holy Spirit of Reverence place us confidently in your loving embrace.

### Holy Week **Wonder and Awe** in God's Presence (Fear of the Lord)



During these final days of Lent before the Easter Triduum of the passion and resurrection of Christ, we open the seventh gift:

Wonder and Awe. It takes time and leisure to wonder and be amazed. To take time to see God's beauty around you. To see God's beauty in a blade of grass, a baby's hand, a loved one's face. When was the last time you simply stood back in awe of something beautiful and said, "Wow!" Christians have traditionally taken time for a spiritual retreat—a time to step back from our daily routine and to take stock of our lives. Lent is our 40-day retreat before Easter.

**Idea:** *This week I will take notice of something of beauty in my life—a place, a person, a work of art—and look for the hand of God.*

**Prayer:** God of Wonder and Awe, how wonderful the work of your hands, how awesome your ways. May your Holy Spirit of Wonder and Awe enable us to see your beauty in each person we meet.

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