

Trinity Sunday (4 June 2023)

“AFTER this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven:... and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne... And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God...”

+In the Name...

“What are those red lamps for?” It is a question I have been asked more than once by visitors to the church. Some suspect it must have something to do with reserving the Blessed Sacrament. A few others who realize that there are seven, guess that they represent all seven of the Church’s Sacraments. But in most cases, when I explain that they represent the Seven Gifts of the Holy Ghost, in response I get blank stares. Now it is easy for those of us in the business to forget that not everyone goes around thinking about churchy things all day.

Many people outside of the Church have heard of Sacraments, or at least they know that there is something pretty important to most Christians about the Holy Communion. But gifts of the Holy Ghost? He is easily the one person in the Holy Trinity that we know the least about. We all like gifts, but if one is coming from a completely un-churched background, what gifts might one expect from a Person depicted in art as a dove surrounded by flames? Birdseed and a fire extinguisher? Everyone knows what a father is. Everyone knows what a son is. The Holy Ghost is a little more abstract.

I have mentioned these gifts in passing before, but where do they come from? We can safely remove the local farm and feed store from the list of possibilities. The reading from the Revelation of St. John only mentions the Seven lamps burning and that they are of God, but not what they are. For that information we have to look farther back in Holy Scripture to the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Prophet Isaiah: “And

there shall come forth a rod out of the stem 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 counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD; And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD”: “Now, wait”, you say. “Father cannot count!” Indeed, it was a running joke with my students that Mr. Hart could not do math. Our problem here is not with math but with language. In the Greek, a different noun is used for the first “fear” than the second fear: in fact, it is the word *pietas*, from which we get the English word “piety”. So there are seven, at least as determined by St. Thomas Aquinas. To add to the bird artistry, the seven gifts are sometimes portrayed as doves in medieval art.

Okay, Father, yeah, yeah, we have heard these before. Sure, we have, but do we really know what they mean? Even if we can recite all

seven of them as we learned them in catechism class taught by St. Thomas himself. “Wisdom... understanding... Isn’t that awfully similar to wisdom, counsel, fortitude, knowledge... Okay, knowledge has got to be like either wisdom or understanding!”

We start with wisdom: wisdom here is not just general knowledge, but knowledge and judgment about divine things. We can see God at work in our lives, and are able to see Him in all His Creation, not just on Sunday mornings.

Understanding goes hand in hand with wisdom. Whereas in wisdom we saw God in everything, in understanding we put what we perceive and experience into our daily lives. We understand that we need to make our faith the basis of what we choose to do and not do.

Counsel is not us counselling others, but us allowing God to counsel us. That is, letting God direct our actions, especially in matters essential to salvation. Sometimes this gift is called “right

judgment”, which gives us a better explanation of what it is: we can look at right and wrong and not only be able to tell the difference, but we know to make the right choice.

Fortitude should sound familiar to us after last week: we know that the Holy Ghost is sometimes called the Holy Comforter because he strengthens us or builds us up. He gives us the courage to take risks when following Jesus Christ without concerning ourselves with whether the decision will result in ridicule or loss of status. Fortitude gives us the firmness of mind for not only doing good, but also enduring the evil that may be inflicted on us.

Knowledge is not just an accumulation of facts, but the ability to judge correctly about matters of faith and right action. As far as is humanly possible, knowledge allows us to judge things from God’s perspective.

Piety is a deep reverence for God, His Church, and the Holy Scriptures. A person with reverence recognizes his total reliance on God and approaches God with trust and humility. Indications (but not guarantees) of piety include attendance at mass and reading Scripture.

I actually learned the last one as awe of the Lord, but it is probably more commonly called fear of the Lord. Both are accurate, but it is fear in the sense of a child not wanting to disappoint his father because he holds him in such high esteem, not a “servile fear” of a slave not wanting to disappoint his master because he would be punished. The Proverbs tell us “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” which puts our relationship with God in its proper order: we are the dependent creature while God is the omnipotent Creator. It also brings us back to wisdom, which is where we started the list!

Some of these may seem to you like we are splitting hairs, and surely there could be no saint better qualified to lead a hair-splitting expedition than St. Thomas Aquinas! But when the seven gifts are looked at in total, they make sense. Part of what might look like hair-splitting to us is the challenge involved in being able to cultivate all seven gifts. But if we go back to Isaiah, this is the list of characteristics of the Messiah. No small task here! But then we see how this relates to the Trinity: the gifts are similar in many ways, but they all complement one another. The three persons of the Holy Trinity are different yet complement one another. Their tasks are different but similar, yet they all go together as part of the divine will.

Today begins the very long green season of Trinitytide. (I thought as I put out the missalettes yesterday that I shall not change them again until Advent!) Pick a Gift of the Holy Ghost to cultivate this Trinity season. You need not tell anyone, of course. In fact, it is

likely better if you do not. But pick one that you can gradually allow the Holy Ghost to take over that aspect of your life. Every week look at the corresponding lamp in the sanctuary to remind you to stay with your task. The Gifts of the Holy Ghost may always be a little obscure to visitors, but they need not be obscure in the lives of us who choose to follow the Blessed Trinity.

+In the Name...