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Spiritual Gifts

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SPIRITUAL GIFTS

“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be uninformed.” With these words, St. Paul begins Chapter 12 of his first letter to the Corinthians. He wants them to have information about spiritual gifts. He wants the Corinthians to understand what spiritual gifts are and how they should function in the life of the Church. He is concerned because he knows that spiritual gifts can be a great source of strength to the Church, as well as an occasion of trouble.

It is hard to know what St. Paul would write to the Church today. He did not want to have the Corinthians uninformed, but few Catholics today know much about what he wanted the Corinthians to know. Few understand what spiritual gifts are or their place in the life of the Church. Now that there is a renewal in the use of spiritual gifts among Catholics and many are experiencing prophecy, healing, speaking in tongues, and the rest, it has become even more important to understand the place of these “manifestations of the Spirit” in the life of the Church.

By and large, we Catholics have a less difficult time with spiritual gifts than most Protestants have. Many Protestants do not believe that miracles happened after the death of the last apostle. Yet Catholics expect to have them occur in every century and every land. Our lives have been filled with

stories of the supernatural works of the saints and the miracles that occur at the shrines. We have not forgotten that God heals directly, that he speaks through prophecies, that extraordinary events accompany his work.

The Catholic Church has also preserved in its teaching the importance of spiritual gifts. Thomas Aquinas, in the *Summa Theologiae* (in the section on "Graces Freely Given") taught that Christians need spiritual gifts, because Christian revelation contains truths above the power of man to know. Consequently, a Christian needs special gifts from God to know Christian truth and preach it, and he needs to have his preaching accompanied by signs so that others will believe.

Even in our own time, the Church at the Vatican Council taught Christians that they should expect spiritual gifts. In the Decree on the Lay Apostolate (sec. 3) the Council Fathers say:

"For the exercise of this apostolate (of evangelism) the Holy Spirit who sanctifies the people of God through the ministry and the sacraments, gives to the faithful special gifts as well (cf. I Cor. 12:7), 'alloting to everyone according as he will' (I Cor. 12:11). Thus may the individual 'according to the gifts that each has received, administer it to one another' and become 'good stewards of the manifold grace of God' (I Pet. 4:10) and build up the whole body in charity (cf. Eph. 4:16). From the

reception of these charisms or gifts, including those which are less dramatic, there arises for each believer the right and duty to use them in the Church and in the world for the good of mankind and for the upbuilding of the Church.”

Something similar is stated in the Constitution on the Church (sec. 12). The fact that the Council fathers emphasize what are called the less dramatic gifts, indicates that they also expect the more dramatic gifts, the kind Paul talks about in I Cor. 12.

Moreover we know from the Bible that we should expect these gifts. At the end of the gospel of Mark, the risen Christ says to the Apostles:

“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

Or St. Paul says in I Cor. 13:

“Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues they will cease; as for knowledge it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect, and our prophecy is imperfect, but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.”

“The coming of the perfect” must mean the second coming. It is certainly not referring to anything that has happened yet (who has yet suggested that the perfect has come and we see face to face?). Until Christ comes we can expect the spiritual gifts.

As Catholics, we should expect to see spiritual gifts in the life of the Church. And it should not surprise us to know that they are becoming as frequent as they were in New Testament times. We know that if the Church is to be renewed and if the world can ever be led to Christ, there is going to be needed a special work of the Holy Spirit. It was this realization that guided Pope John when he prayed for the Vatican Council, “Renew your wonders this day as by a new Pentecost.”

What Are the Spiritual Gifts?

St. Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapters 12-14 about spiritual gifts, and if we want to understand more fully what spiritual gifts are and how they should be used we can study these chapters. These chapters are his special instructions about spiritual gifts to the Church at Corinth, a Church he had founded. He begins the whole section by talking about the spiritual gifts he has in mind: the utterance of wisdom, the utterance of knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, the ability to distinguish between spirits, various kinds of tongues, the interpretation of tongues.

At this point we Catholics sometimes get

confused. We know something about spiritual gifts, but we were taught in the catechism class that there are only seven of them: wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, piety, fortitude, and fear of the Lord. To understand what Paul is talking about we need to understand that there are different types of spiritual gifts. The seven gifts are gifts that come along with the Spirit for the strengthening of each individual Christian. The nine gifts that St. Paul is talking about are sometimes called charismatic gifts, and are a different type of gift. As we consider what they are we will see how they differ from the seven gifts.

One way in which St. Paul describes the nine gifts that he is talking about is as “manifestations” of the spirit. In other words, when we see a spiritual gift operating, we realize that the Spirit is at work. A spiritual gift makes us aware of his presence. When, for instance, we see someone healed miraculously, or when we hear a prophecy, we know that the Spirit is present and at work. When someone is present at a manifestation of the Spirit it is hard to even think that God is dead.

Spiritual gifts also make us aware of God’s power. They manifest his ability to change the world. A man recently said that he was praying the rosary, and he was wondering whether Mary’s prayers had any special effect. He began to doubt whether praying the rosary would do any good, whether it was worth the effort. And then he suddenly began

to think of Lourdes and of the extraordinary cures at Lourdes. "Then," he said, "it seemed stupid to wonder about the power of Mary's intercession." This man's reaction shows the kind of effect a real spiritual gift can have. It has an even greater effect when we are actually present. If we see a deaf boy healed, or if we are given a prophecy and see it fulfilled, we are reassured in an even deeper way that God's power is great enough to do all things. That is why St. Paul speaks of Christians as having "tasted the powers of the age to come" (Heb. 6:5).

The spiritual gifts, then, are manifestations of God's presence and power. That is why it would be a mistake to say that the gift of healing is what doctors have or the gift of tongues is the ability to speak a foreign language (that you learned in school) or the gift of interpretation is what Berlitz translators have. All these things may in a certain sense be gifts of God, but they are not the kind of spiritual gifts that Paul is talking about. If I were to try to tell a non-Christian doctor that his medical skill was a spiritual gift and a manifestation of the Spirit and that therefore he should become a Christian, he would reply that he could not see that it had anything to do with the Spirit. He learned it in school. Moreover, if that was a manifestation of the Spirit, it was an excellent proof that you could have all the spiritual gifts there are without any faith in Christ at all. Christian belief, according to

this view, would be of no value in obtaining gifts of the Spirit.

It is clear what St. Paul meant when he talked about gifts of healing, for instance. He himself healed people instantaneously, not by using healing, medically, but by a simple command (Acts 14:8). And it was a manifestation for the people that the power of God was present. And it is clear that when he talks about the gift of tongues, he is not speaking about a foreign language that he understands, but he is talking about speaking in a language he does not understand (I Cor. 14:14).

As he begins to talk about the spiritual gifts, St. Paul gives us a list of the kind of gifts that he has in mind. There are other lists of spiritual gifts in the New Testament (Rom. 12:4-8 and I Peter 4:10-11), and they are not the same as the list in I Cor. 12:4-11, so it is probable that St. Paul was not trying to give a complete list of all the spiritual gifts. Be he does give us enough examples of spiritual gifts so that we can understand what he is talking about.

Teaching Gifts

The first two gifts which St. Paul mentions are teaching gifts: the *utterance of wisdom* (sometimes translated: "the word of wisdom") and the *utterance of knowledge* (sometimes translated: "the word of knowledge"). They are special inspirations by which God works through one person to give understanding to another person or to a

group of people. A person who is given an utterance of wisdom or an utterance of knowledge can then give a lesson (an instruction or an explanation) in the Christian assembly (I Cor. 14:26) or perhaps a special word of advice or instruction to a particular person. The New Testament in great part, especially the epistles, is made up of utterances of wisdom and knowledge, inspired teaching.

The utterance of wisdom probably refers to something different from the utterance of knowledge. The utterance of wisdom is concerned with the best way to live. It is an expression of God's guidance in how to live as a Christian. When Christ spoke to the rich young man and advised him to sell his possessions and follow him (Mk. 10:20), he was giving him a word of wisdom. Or when Peter spoke in the Council of Jerusalem and said that the Gentiles should not have to follow the full Mosaic Law, he was given an utterance of wisdom by God. Or much of what St. Paul said in I Cor. 12-14 would be examples of the utterance of wisdom, practical spiritual teaching. The utterance of knowledge on the other hand, is more what we would call doctrinal teaching. It is the Spirit inspiring someone to speak an understanding of a truth of the mystery of Christ. Christ's teaching about the relationship between the Father and the Son in Lk. 10:22 would be an example of the utterance of knowledge as would the first chapter of

Ephesians where Paul teaches the Ephesians about God's plan.

St. Paul, when he is speaking about the utterance of knowledge almost certainly does not mean a special knowledge of facts that a person could not have known otherwise. I have been present and seen a person filled with the Spirit tell another person something about his past that he could not have known or tell us what is happening in a room that he was not present in. These things happen often, but they are not what St. Paul is referring to by "the utterance of knowledge." When such a thing happened in the New Testament, people considered it an indication that a person was a prophet (Jn. 4:16-19, Lk. 7:39), but they did not consider it "knowledge," a word which in the New Testament is used to describe knowledge of God and the mysteries of God.

The utterance of wisdom and knowledge are spiritual gifts that work through the understanding. The Spirit inspires a person to understand a truth, to understand things the way God understands them and then to speak about them. There is a difference between natural understanding, acquired by study, and inspired understanding. Inspired understanding feeds the spirit in a way that natural understanding cannot, because it is a manifestation of the presence of the Spirit in a person. It makes a deep change in people, giving them an increase of spiritual life.

I remember once being present when a Christian teacher spoke about the love of God. Even while he spoke, I had a sense of the presence of God and was praying while I was listening to his words. When he finished, there was a change in the whole room. People had come to life, and there was a new sense of the presence of the Spirit. Even though what he had to say was not naturally very impressive, everyone knew that God spoke through him.

Another time I was present while a mature Christian was speaking to a young man who had just received the baptism of the Spirit. He was explaining how to live the Christian life, and I could see by the expression on the young man's face that his life was being changed by those words. Moreover, the older man did not know the younger man as well as I did, and I am sure that he could not have known how appropriate what he was saying was for that particular man. The Spirit, however, was working through his mind to instruct a new Christian. When I asked him later how he let these gifts operate, he said that when he felt the presence of the Spirit trying to use him, he yielded his mind to the Spirit and he "saw" what to say and how to say it. He said that very often in such a situation, he would learn as much as the person he was speaking to, and that he often found himself knowing things that he had never studied or thought through.

Sign Gifts

The next three gifts which St. Paul mentions could be called sign gifts: *faith*, *gifts of healing*, and *the working of miracles*. They are gifts which manifest the power of God in the world in a particularly striking way. They call attention to God's reality, and so they bring people to a knowledge of God. The words of Christ at the end of the gospel of Mark tell us that this is God's way of confirming the truth of the message (as Aquinas pointed out, such confirmation is important if men are to be able to accept the truth of something that is beyond human reason) :

“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons. They will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover. . . . And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it.”

I was present at a Kathryn Kuhlman “evangelistic” service in Los Angeles one summer, and there I saw the power of the spiritual gifts to bring men to Christ. The message at the service was simple, without

a great deal of power to it. But much of the meeting was devoted to prayer for God to heal people. Early in the service a couple of men spoke who had been healed the time before. One had been healed of crippling arthritis (as he put it, "I couldn't even weed my garden, it was so bad"). Another man had been cured of terminal cancer and had his doctor with x-rays taken a week apart to show the authenticity of the cure. Neither of the men was a Christian when he was cured. In the course of that service about 35 people came forward and said that they were cured of a variety of things. A young boy had been deaf in one ear and was supposed to be operated on that week to have his eardrum sealed up, and now he could hear; a couple of people were cured of arthritis; a woman whom I had seen before her cure on crutches and in a large brace was able to move around and walk normally for the first time since an automobile accident nine years before. At the end of the service, when the woman who was leading it asked how many men wanted to become Christians, about 150 men filled the front of the auditorium to commit their lives to Christ, and there were probably even more women who could not find a place.

We have seen such things happen for many years. The shrine at Lourdes is the source of accounts of people who have turned to Christ, because they have seen the power of God operate in extraordinary ways. The lives of the saints like Francis and Anthony

and Vincent Ferrer contain stories of miracles which converted whole towns. When men see the power of God do something extraordinary, they do wonder, and they do turn to God. When they can see him at work in the world in a way that goes beyond what human beings by themselves can do, they recognize the need to confront him.

The sign gifts, then, are the working of the Spirit in power through certain Christians, so that men might know the truth of the Christian message. The first of these, the gift of faith, is not the same as the faith by which all Christians believe and turn to Christ. That is given to all Christians, not just to "another." That kind of faith is what makes men Christians. This kind of faith is a special spiritual gift.

The charismatic gift of faith seems to be a special gift of prayer. It is a gift of praying with a God-given confidence, and it produces extraordinary results. The person who prays with faith knows through the work of the Spirit in him that what he asks for will be given. It is the kind of faith which Christ was speaking about when he said in the gospel of Mark (Mk. 11:23), "Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, Be taken up and cast into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him."

The gift of faith is what the prophet Elijah had when he confronted the prophets of

Baal. He challenged them to a contest. Whoever's God would send down fire from heaven to consume a burnt offering would be the God of Israel. The prophets of Baal went through every rite they could to get Baal to burn the offering, with no results at all. Elijah, on the other hand, first drenched the offering with water so that there would be no doubt about the power of Yahweh, and then he simply prayed, knowing God would answer. And he did. Such faith is God-given. No matter how a man would try to work himself into such faith he could not do it.

The gifts of healing are different from the power of prayer for healing which is part of the ordinary life of the Christian community. Christians pray for one another for a variety of things and see results. In our community, we have seen people cured of migraine headaches which they have had for years, of colds and flu, of epileptic seizures. Not every prayer has been answered, but we have seen more than can be explained just by accident. Moreover, the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick has always been a normal part of the life of the Church, and since the recent outpouring of the Spirit, I know of at least one person who was given up as hopeless, who improved right after receiving the sacrament and is well today. Most priests can tell stories of the differences the sacrament has made. These things are part of the normal life of the Christian community.

There are, however, people who seem to have a special gift of healing. When they pray for healing, results happen, and they happen with greater frequency and with more extraordinary effects than happen with other people. The Spirit works through them to produce "works of power," to produce "things for people to be astonished at," to produce miracles. These people have a special spiritual gift, probably because God wishes to use them to bring others to know Christ.

Revelational Gifts

The next four gifts are gifts which could be called revelational gifts: *prophecy*, *the ability to distinguish between spirits* (sometimes called discernment of spirits), *various kinds of tongues*, and *interpretation of tongues*. These are gifts by which God makes known something about the present situation to his people.

Discernment of spirits has been called the protection of the Christian community. This is the gift which allows a man to "distinguish between spirits," to tell whether an evil spirit is at work in a person or a situation or whether it is the Holy Spirit or whether it is just a man's own spirit. This is probably the work of the Spirit by which Peter "saw" that Simon was "in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity" when he tried to buy the power to confer the Spirit (Acts 8:23), or by which Paul could "see" that the Holy Spirit had given the cripple the faith to be made well (Acts 14:9).

Discernment of spirits is a kind of vision or a sense. One person described to me how the gift of discernment worked with him by saying that he often could almost see the presence of the Holy Spirit in power like a glow. I asked him what he could discern in some people that he did not know but whom I did know. Like Paul he “peered intently” and then gave me a description of those people that I knew to be accurate and which was beyond the power of even extraordinary psychological sensitivity. Another man once told me how in talking to a girl, he was aware that what was holding her back in turning to Christ was the influence (not possession) of an evil spirit. As he put it, he could just sense that that was what the cause was, without knowing her. His discernment was proven true by the marked change in her attitude toward Christ after he prayed with her for deliverance from the influence of the evil spirit (and she did not realize that he had prayed for her that way, because he prayed in a foreign language). In other words, discernment is a spiritual revelation of the operation of different types of spirits in a person or situation, a means by which God makes Christians aware of what is happening.

Prophecy is a gift by which God speaks through a person a message to an individual or to the whole Christian community. It is God making use of someone to tell men what he thinks about the present situation or what his intention is for the future, or what he

thinks they should know or be mindful of right now. Prophecy is not necessarily for prediction of the future (although this frequently happens). Paul describes some of the uses of prophecy by saying in I Cor. 14:3, "He who prophecies, speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation." It is God speaking now to his people, words which are intended to reveal his present attitude.

In the Catholic Church today, people use the term prophecy in many different senses. In the Council documents in many places, it is used to describe any speaking of Christ's message to the world. When the word is used in this sense, teaching is a type of prophecy. When a bishop or priest teaches, for instance, he is exercising a prophetic role. Another popular use of the term is that of prophecy as reading the signs of the times or judging the present situation. There are many today who would consider themselves to be exercising a prophetic role because they condemn many current situations in the name of what Christ has revealed.

The term prophecy can be used in many ways, but when Paul is using the term prophecy, he is probably using it in a way that would not allow a person to call teaching or judging the present situation prophecy. He is probably referring to the type of speaking that occurred when one of the prophets at Antioch stated that Paul and Barnabas were to be set aside for apostolic work (Acts 13:2) or when Agabus foretold

that there would be a great famine (Acts 11:28) or when Agabus predicted how Paul would be taken prisoner (Acts 21:1). These prophecies were given as messages from God. They are given in the words of God (the speaker speaks in the first person). That they are more than just human speech is indicated by the accuracy of the predictions and by the fact that the prophet gives directions from God, something that would be sheer presumption if God himself were not speaking. It is clear that not all prophecies are like this. The book of Acts only reports some of the more extraordinary prophecies, but these are enough to indicate that when the New Testament speaks of prophecy, it uses the word in a special sense to indicate direct messages from God.

Speaking a prophecy is more than a person just saying something that happens to be on his mind as a message from God. The prophet receives a special "anointing," an urging to speak. He realizes that he has a message from God, although often he does not know what it is until he actually yields to God and begins to speak. To the degree he yields to God, to that degree his message will be pure. A prophetic message is different from a teaching. A man gives a teaching with his understanding. He sees the truth of what he is saying. A prophet may not understand what he is saying, and he can never "see" that this is God's message right now. He has received a revelation, a message from God.

Prophecy can be very effective in building up the Christian community. It is clear from I Cor. 14 that prophecy was very common in the early Church. The Church at Corinth apparently had so many messages that there had to be a certain order in giving them (I Cor. 14:29-32). When a prophecy is given at a gathering of Christians, it has a powerful effect in drawing them to God and deepening their sense of the presence of God. Prophecies are also an effective way of God's directing his people. In the last year in our work on campus, God predicted through prophecy that we would have a major change in our situation (leaving one position and moving to another), that he would begin soon to bring many people to the prayer meetings at Ann Arbor and throughout Michigan, that he would give us a period of trials, and that he would end that period of trials and again bring many people and a deeper life in the Spirit. Each time, the prophecies turned out to be literally true, and the guidance given in the prophecies about how to confront these coming situations turned out to be a great help.

Speaking in tongues can be two different things. First of all, it can be a gift of prayer for an individual (I Cor. 14:14). This is the more common gift of tongues, but I will not go into it here. Speaking in tongues can also be a gift for the community when the Spirit urges someone to speak out loud in tongues for the community. In this case, the speaking in tongues should have an inter-

pretation, so that the whole community can understand what is happening. The experience of giving interpretations is similar to the experience of prophecy. The interpreter, like the speaker in tongues, does not understand the tongues (I Cor. 14:2, 14). In other words, the gift of interpretation is not a gift of translation. It is an urging to speak words which are given.

Speaking in tongues just means speaking in languages. As is clear from Acts and I Cor. 12-14, it was common for the Spirit to give Christians other languages to speak in which they did not understand. And it is still common today. I was talking to a man about a year and a half ago who told me of an experience that he had had a couple of years back. He went with a choir to a church to give a performance, and many of the choir members had received the baptism of the Spirit. During the concert, at a moment of silence, one of the choir members spoke in tongues and then another one gave the interpretation. The rest of the choir was embarrassed because they were afraid that the audience would not understand. But it turned out that the right afterwards, the pastor of the church turned to the choir directoress and asked her if she knew the men. When she replied that she did, he asked her if they knew Hebrew. When she replied that they did not he told her that he knew Hebrew and that the first man had given a message in perfect high Hebrew and that the second man had given an almost literal translation

of the message. It was enough to convince the pastor of the validity of the gift of tongues.

The Purpose of Spiritual Gifts

There are more workings of the Spirit than those Paul enumerates in I Cor. 12:4-11. But these are enough to give us an idea of what spiritual gifts can be. In a community in which spiritual gifts operate, Christians are much more vividly aware of the presence and power of God.

Paul says in I Cor. 12:7: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Another translation might be that to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for usefulness. Spiritual gifts have a very pragmatic purpose. They are given to build up the community. This is the difference between the seven gifts and the nine charismatic gifts. The seven gifts are given with the Spirit for the building up of the individual, of his relationship with God. The charismatic gifts are given so that the individual can do something for the community.

One term which Paul uses to describe the gifts is "service" (I Cor. 12:5). Looked at from this perspective the gifts are a service for the community. In fact, the term "gift" is somewhat misleading. The gifts are not gifts to the individual Christian. They are gifts *through* the individual Christian to the community. For the individual Christian they are a service, a service he can perform for the community. When he makes himself

available to God to be used, he performs a service for the community.

It is no accident that the idea of the "body of Christ" is found in the New Testament at its earliest date in passages that are concerned mainly with charismatic gifts (I Cor. 12 and Rom. 12). The idea very likely first came to Paul or some early Christian when he was trying to explain how the spiritual gifts operated in a Christian community, a local Church. "All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. For just as the body is one and has many members and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (Rom. 12:4). In other words, in the Church, different Christians are the channels for different gifts. One prophesies, another heals, another speaks in tongues. And yet all these things are the work of the Spirit, and they all work together for the building up of the community. It is much like the different members of the body. The foot, the hand, the eye, all have different functions, and yet they all make one body and they all work together to build up the one body.

It is clear that in I Cor. 12-14 Paul is trying to teach the Corinthians how to use the spiritual gifts with love, in harmony, without envy or jealousy or conflict. No one is to envy the other, or to disdain the other, but they are to be as conscious of their dependence on one another as the different members of one body. But in making this

point, Paul brings out in a vivid way an important truth about the charismatic gifts—that they are for the upbuilding of the community. They are not primarily for an individual's benefit, but they are for the benefit of the whole Christian community. They are the way an individual can perform a service to the community—by putting himself at God's disposal to be used in one of his "workings."

The charismatic gifts, then, are intended to equip a Christian for service in the community. They are intended to equip him with the power of God so that he can work in the community with God-given ability to strengthen the community. That is why Paul ends the chapter with the paragraph on apostles, prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. These are the various services Christians can perform in the community. These are stable positions within a community. But in order for a person to truly perform one of these functions in the power of God, he has to have the spiritual gifts which equip him to do what these positions call for. In other words, any Christian community needs a certain number of functions to be performed, and God offers spiritual power, spiritual equipment through the spiritual gifts, for those functions to be performed. Moreover, the whole purpose of the giving of spiritual gifts is so that an individual Christian might be

ready to perform a service, to carry out a function within the community.

One way of summarizing the spiritual gifts is to say that the spiritual gifts are like tools or resources. They are the equipment of God for the work he has given Christians to do in the world. Christians need the power of God to do the work of God, because the work of God is something beyond human ability. The spiritual gifts are the empowering of Christians to do God's work—to teach, to speak his message, to perform signs of his presence. They are the Holy Spirit working through men to renew the face of the earth.

The Spiritual Gifts and Holiness

Strange as it may seem, before becoming acquainted with the new movement of the Spirit in the Church, it never occurred to me that I Cor. 13 came between I Cor. 12 and I Cor. 14. It sounds obvious when you say it that way, but I had never thought of it. I was not used to reading First Corinthians 13 in context. I, like most Catholics, knew chapter 13 as the great hymn to love. But I did not realize that Paul wrote that chapter to explain to the Corinthians how to use the spiritual gifts. I did not realize that the whole point of the chapter was to say that spiritual gifts are to be used in a loving way to build up the community.

First Corinthians 13 contains much wisdom that is important for the proper understanding of spiritual gifts. It is also frequently misunderstood because it is not read

in context. Paul begins by saying, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all that I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing." In this opening section Paul is not playing down spiritual gifts at all. He is not even saying that spiritual gifts are valueless if I do not have love (a healing by God's power is after all a healing by God's power). Rather he is saying that *I* am nothing if I do not love. He is making a simple point in a forceful way; namely, that there is a difference between charismatic power and holiness, and that holiness is the measure of a person, not charismatic power.

The same point is made in a passage in the seventh chapter of Matthew. "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works (miracles) in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers'." This is a passage that came home to me with a new force after acquaintance with the new work of the Spirit, because I found that I could take it quite literally. And what Christ is

saying is sobering. He is not saying that they did not really prophesy or cast out demons or do miracles in his name. Rather, he is saying that that is not what makes a man a genuine disciple of his (someone he “knows”). What makes a man a genuine disciple of his is doing his father’s will, holiness.

It is not uncommon for someone to say, when they see Paul’s exhortation in I Cor. 12:31 to “earnestly desire the higher gifts,” that the gift that they want is love. But to say that or to describe love as the “greatest of all” is either to miss the point or to obscure what Paul is saying. In this section Paul does not consider love one of the spiritual gifts. Rather, he calls it “a way.” And in Galatians 5:22 he describes it as a fruit of the Spirit along with “joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Love, in other words, is not one of the spiritual gifts, one of the tools to build up the life of the Christian community. It is the very life of the Christian community itself. It is the way in which the Christian must walk. It is what he must aim at.

To say that Paul does not describe love as a gift is not to say that there is no sense in which love is a gift. It is the effect of the Holy Spirit living in us. Paul conveys that idea by using the term “fruit of the Spirit” (something that grows in a person’s life from living the life of the Spirit). But it is to say that love is not a gift in the same sense that prophecy or healing is. A person

can prophesy or heal just by allowing the Spirit to work through him. But he loves by growing in holiness, by surrendering his heart and will to God, by growing into maturity of Christian character.

There is a relationship between holiness and the spiritual gifts. The spiritual gifts are not a sign of holiness. They are not a merit badge for spiritual achievement. Rather they are equipment for working to build up the Christian community in holiness. They are often given to beginners so that growth is possible for themselves and for the community that they are a part of. Perhaps the more extraordinary workings of the Spirit are only entrusted to those who are more mature in Christian character, but the whole of First Corinthians 12/14 is instructions for the use of spiritual gifts for Christians who need much more growth in love.

Seeking Spiritual Gifts

Paul says at the beginning of I Cor. 14, "Make love your aim and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy." This is the second time he urges the Corinthians to "earnestly desire" the spiritual gifts. He has an attitude which is much different from many modern Christians who are often reluctant to have spiritual gifts. Paul goes so far as to command the Corinthians to seek spiritual gifts.

Paul's attitude toward seeking spiritual gifts makes a great deal of sense if we understand what they are for. If they really are

God's equipment for the building up of the Church, they are really valuable to have. In these days in which the Church seems to be losing ground in the world and in which so much of the life of the Church seems to be weakening and losing vitality, God's power is needed desperately. It would not make sense for a carpenter to forego a hammer and try to use his fist or for a writer to forego a pen or a typewriter. They know they need them for effectiveness in their work. And we need the spiritual gifts, because we need the fullness of God's working among us, the fullness of the power he will put at our disposal.

The scripture does not say a great deal about how a person can obtain spiritual gifts. But the advice to seek the gifts is actually excellent advice on how to obtain them. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to our having them is not being open to them, not wanting them. There are, I think, a couple of reasons why this is so. One of them is fear of God. Many people do not want the spiritual gifts, because that brings God too close for comfort. It is one thing to think of God in heaven or as the creator. It is even safe to think of his providence, for that means that everything is God working and there is no need to confront God directly apart from dealing with things. And it is safe to think of him as speaking in the scriptures, because we can read those when we want to and absorb them as we want to. But when God starts healing my next door neighbor and speaking to me

in prophecy, that is a more frightening thing. That means that I have to confront him more immediately than ever before, and it might become obvious that I have not surrendered fully to him.

Another reason for not wanting spiritual gifts is the desire to do things ourselves. Being used for a spiritual gift involves yielding to God and letting him work through you. There is a certain self-denial involved. There is a surrendering of control and a devaluing of my natural abilities. It seems like a less glorious thing to let God work through me to convert the world than to actually go out and convert the world myself. To be the instrument of a working of God is a humbling thing, and we often have an inner resistance to being humbled.

Another clue which Paul gives to obtaining spiritual gifts is in Gal. 3:5, where Paul asks the Galatians the question, "Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?" And he apparently is referring to a common experience of the Galatians, because he is using the experience of seeing miracles through faith as a proof that it is not law which justifies a man.

Faith, then, is a means to obtaining the spiritual gifts, perhaps *the* means. Faith means that we know, first of all, that these things are possible, because we realize that Christ promised them to us. And then it

means asking for them with expectancy, being willing to count on them happening. Peter would never have walked on the water if he had not had enough faith to actually step out upon it. And he stopped walking on the water when he started looking at the wind and the waves and started being afraid that it would not happen any longer.

God has a great deal in store for us, a great deal that we really need. But we need to be fully open to him. We need to be ready for everything he is willing to do, in fact earnestly desiring him to do more and more among us, for him to increase and for us to decrease. And we need to have faith, faith that his promises are still good. Then we will begin to see the spiritual gifts appearing among us and in our own lives.

Why Now?

Catholics do not find it difficult to believe that God does give prophecies and miracles, discernment of spirits and healing. But they do not expect to see them around commonly. Padre Pio in Italy or at the shrine of Lourdes maybe, but not my next door neighbor, especially not my next door neighbor with the raspy voice and the irritating habit of slamming the garage door. A prophet should have a certain prophetic look, and a miracle worker should certainly have some kind of glow.

It must be admitted that there is something new about the new movement of the Spirit compared to what we Catholics have been accustomed to. It is new not because of

the spiritual gifts, but because the spiritual gifts seem to be given much more commonly, and to ordinary people—not only to monks and nuns, but workers and housewives, lawyers and students. They are being given now, in fact, much the same way as they were given to the Christians in New Testament times. Why now?

The fathers of the Church noticed in the fourth century that there seemed to be a difference between their Church and the Church of the Acts of the Apostles in the frequency of spiritual gifts. John Chrysostom in his homilies on First Corinthians put it this way:

“Yes, the Church was then a heaven. The Holy Spirit reigned as its master, and inspired directly each of its ministers. Today, we have been left with nothing more than the symbols and signs of these gifts. In fact, in our own present day also, we speak in turn, two or three, and when one becomes silent, the other begins. But this is only the vestige and memorial of what used to happen.”

The reasons they gave for the departing of the spiritual gifts in their age are also clues to why they are returning in our age.

The first reason for the lack of spiritual gifts is given by St. Cyril of Jerusalem in his work on First Corinthians, Chapter 14:

“When we shall have the proper dispositions of faith, hope, and charity in regard to God and our brethren . . . we shall re-

ceive an abundance of the charisms of God.”

Cyril is saying that the disappearance of the spiritual gifts is our fault. We lack the right disposition to God which makes them possible. And this is probably one reason why the spiritual gifts are becoming more common. With more and more people receiving the baptism of the Spirit, they are receiving a renewal in the life of the Spirit of the kind that makes it possible for God to work through them in the way he did for the early Christians.

The second reason for the lack of spiritual gifts is given by St. John Chrysostom in his commentary on the Acts (chapter 2) :

“In the beginning the faith had to be spread throughout the world. Since it was new and weak, like a young tree, it needed special care from the farmer to enable its expansion and growth. So God granted the miraculous gifts, but these are no longer necessary.”

Chrysostom is saying that the reason for the disappearance of the spiritual gifts is God's fault. He gave them to get things started, and now that the Church is established, he is taking them away. And this is also probably a reason why the spiritual gifts are returning. It is obvious that we are in an age of crisis for the Church. Unbelief is increasing in the world. There is a loss of faith within the Church. Christians everywhere are becoming uneasy, wondering

where God is. The Church needs the spiritual gifts now as much as it did in the first centuries to meet the challenge of our unbelieving, technological society.

The last word has to be: it is a mystery. But like every Christian mystery, man enters in and God enters in. If we wish to see God at work in the way he acted in the early Church, we have to go deeper into the life of the Spirit. If we do not, the absence of God's gifts in the world is our fault. But it is also true that God is not tied down by us, and right now, almost despite us, he is renewing his Church with spiritual power to meet the challenge of this age.

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