

Session Twelve: Choosing Confirmation Parents' Guide

Unit One

This unit looks at the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit. An explanation of what each of the gifts means is found in the presentation. Talk through these with your *Confirmand(i)*, and make sure they have a basic understanding of what they are. We are not looking for your children to be theologians, but they need to have enough understanding of the gifts they are about to receive. For anyone looking for more detail, see the explanation below.

The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are, according to Catholic Tradition, heroic character traits that Jesus Christ alone possesses in their plenitude but that he freely shares with the members of his mystical body (i.e., his Church). These traits are infused into every Christian as a permanent endowment at his baptism, nurtured by the practice of the seven virtues, and sealed in the sacrament of confirmation. They are also known as the sanctifying gifts of the Spirit, because they serve the purpose of rendering their recipients docile to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in their lives, helping them to grow in holiness and making them fit for heaven.

The nature of the seven gifts has been debated by theologians since the mid-second century, but the standard interpretation has been the one that St. Thomas Aquinas worked out in the thirteenth century in his *Summa Theologiae*:

- **Wisdom** is both the knowledge of and judgment about "divine things" and the ability to judge and direct human affairs according to divine truth (I/I.1.6; I/II.69.3; II/II.8.6; II/II.45.1-5).
- **Understanding** is penetrating insight into the very heart of things, especially those higher truths that are necessary for our eternal salvation—in effect, the ability to "see" God (I/I.12.5; I/II.69.2; II/II.8.1-3).
- **Counsel** allows a man to be directed by God in matters necessary for his salvation (II/II.52.1).
- **Fortitude** denotes a firmness of mind in doing good and in avoiding evil, particularly when it is difficult or dangerous to do so, and the confidence to overcome all obstacles, even deadly ones, by virtue of the assurance of everlasting life (I/II.61.3; II/II.123.2; II/II.139.1).
- **Knowledge** is the ability to judge correctly about matters of faith and right action, so as to never wander from the straight path of justice (II/II.9.3).
- **Piety** is, principally, revering God with filial affection, paying worship and duty to God, paying due duty to all men on account of their relationship to God, and honoring the saints and not contradicting Scripture. The Latin word *pietas* denotes the reverence that we give to our father and to our country; since God is the Father of all, the worship of God is also called piety (I/II.68.4; II/II.121.1).
- **Fear of God** is, in this context, "filial" or chaste fear whereby we revere God and avoid separating ourselves from him—opposed to "servile" fear, whereby we fear punishment (I/II.67.4; II/II.19.9).

These gifts, according to Aquinas, are "habits," "instincts," or "dispositions" provided by God as supernatural helps to man in the process of his "perfection." They enable man to transcend the limitations of human reason and human nature and participate in the very life of God, as Christ promised (John 14:23). Aquinas insisted that they are necessary for man's salvation, which he cannot achieve on his own. They serve to "perfect" the four cardinal or moral virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance) and the three theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity). The virtue of charity is the key that unlocks the potential power of the seven gifts, which can (and will) lie dormant in the soul after baptism unless so acted upon.

Because "grace builds upon nature" (ST I.2.3), the seven gifts work synergistically with the seven virtues and also with the twelve fruits of the Spirit and the eight beatitudes. The emergence of the gifts is fostered by the practice of the virtues, which in turn are perfected by the exercise of the gifts. The proper exercise of the gifts, in turn, produce the fruits of the Spirit in the life of the Christian: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, modesty, self-control, and chastity (Gal. 5:22-23). The goal of this cooperation among virtues, gifts, and fruits is the attainment of the eight-fold state of beatitude described by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:3-10).

Unit Two

This part is really about rounding off the course with a meaningful conversation between you and your child about what they have learned and what they might have gained from this Confirmation programme. This is your chance to really listen to where your child is at, spiritually. Listen deeply to where they are now, and consider, prayerfully, how you can help them move forward spiritually after Confirmation.

A word on encouraging your child(ren). Obviously, Catholic parents must encourage their children to receive Confirmation. However, any sacrament must be freely received. As this programme comes to an end, do listen to your child, and consider whether they are ready to receive the sacrament now. Your ultimate duty is not to sacramentalize your children, but to pass on the faith to them - those are not the same things, and can sometimes work in opposing directions if we are not listening carefully to our now young adults.

Unit Three

This straightforwardly seeks to make your *Confirmand(i)* aware of the place of Confirmation in relation to Pentecost, and the proximity of this Sacrament to the call to be on mission.