

## Lesson 7 – The Holy Spirit’s Gift of Understanding

### Questions:

Why do we receive the gift of Understanding?

How does the Gift of Understanding Operate?

How does the gift of understanding help us?

How does Understanding help us to grasp the meaning of the truths of our Holy religion?

How does Jesus demonstrate the Holy Spirit’s gift of Understanding?

How do we acquire the gift of Understanding?

Listening can lead to better Understanding. What are the key attributes for good listening skills?

### I The Gift of Understanding - by Mother Nadine

When Mary went to visit Elizabeth, Elizabeth could have sung her praises in many areas. But it's very interesting that Elizabeth said, "Blest is she who **trusted** that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled" (Lk 1: 45). She didn't say blessed are you because you are the Mother of God; she said blessed are you because you have **believed**. Had Mary not believed, she wouldn't have become the Mother of God. There wouldn't have been that "yes." The **Spirit was speaking** within Elizabeth. The prophet, John the Baptist, leapt in her womb. Blessed is she because she believed. Blessed means to be happy, to be joyful, and to be blessed by God.

We see Our Lady's tremendous faith all throughout the Gospels. One of the places that we especially see her faith is at the tomb on Easter morning. One of the things that St. Ignatius recommended was to meditate on Our Lady on Easter morning-because she wasn't there at the tomb. I asked Our Lady, "Where were you? You weren't there." She indicated to me that she wasn't there because she **believed**. She didn't have to be there. She knew He wouldn't be there. She knew that the tomb was empty. She believed Him when He said He would rise on the third day. So **Mary was this woman of great faith**, and she so wants to share this great gift of faith with each of us.

**The Holy Spirit Gift of Understanding develops the gift of faith within us. It's a special gift that we received at Confirmation. It's a gift that helps us to see. When you say to someone, "Oh, now I understand" what we are really saying is, "Now, I see. I see what you're saying. I see what you mean. I see your point." This great gift of understanding is this seeing of the heart and soul.**

After the Resurrection, two of the disciples were walking along the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35) and they were pretty dejected because of the Crucifixion. All of a sudden, this stranger walks beside them. They didn't recognize that it was Jesus. He was risen. He was in the Spirit somehow. **But He gave them the gift of understanding**. Scripture says that **He opened their minds** to all the Scriptures that pertained to Him so that they too could **believe** (Lk 24:13-32). **This is what happens to us in prayer. He can open our minds to this gift so that we, too, can truly believe. Understanding will deepen our faith.**

The blind beggar knew he was blind. Sometimes we don't know we're blind. Sometimes we don't know that we can't see or understand. And so it's good to meditate on that particular passage because Jesus, who saw the blind man, didn't reach out and heal him immediately. Instead, Jesus stopped and said, "What do you want Me to do for you?" (Mk 10:51) Jesus didn't assume. He wants it to come from us. So in our prayer, many times He will say, "What is it? What do you want Me to do for you?" When we're in the presence of the Lord, we take that very seriously. Our request does not become casual, nor was the request of the beggar casual. He said, "Lord, I want to see." We want to see. From time to time we pray, "I want to see this truth. I want to see into this mystery. I want to see the Father's plan for me that He knows so well." Remember that beautiful Scripture from Jeremiah? **"I know well the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare not for your woe! Plans to give you a future full of hope"** (Jer 29: 11). And yet we have to say, "But I don't know. I need to see." **So this beautiful gift of understanding is given so that we, too, may see and believe.**

## **II The Second Gift of the Holy Spirit:**

Understanding is the second gift of the Holy Spirit. It differs from wisdom in that wisdom is the desire to contemplate the things of God, while **Understanding allows us to "penetrate to the very core of revealed truths."** This doesn't mean that we can come to understand, say, the Trinity the way that we might a mathematical equation, but that we become certain of the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity. Such certitude moves beyond faith, which "merely assents to what God has revealed."

### **Understanding in Practice:**

Once we become convinced through understanding of the truths of the Faith, we can also draw conclusions from those truths and arrive at a further **understanding of man's relation to God and his role in the world.** Understanding rises above natural reason, which is concerned only with the things we can sense in the world around us. Thus, understanding is both speculative—concerned with intellectual knowledge—and practical, because it can help us to order the actions of our lives toward our final end, which is God. **Through understanding, we see the world and our life within it in the larger context of the eternal law and the relation of our souls to God.**

**Question:** Why do we receive the gift of Understanding?

**Answer:** We receive the gift of Understanding to enable us to know more clearly the mysteries of faith. This is Question 183 of the Baltimore Catechism.

### **Meditation —"The Gift of Understanding":**

Understanding, as a gift of the Holy Ghost, helps us to grasp the meaning of the truths of our holy religion. By faith we know them, but by Understanding, we learn to appreciate and relish them. **It enables us to penetrate the inner meaning of revealed truths and through them to be quickened to newness of life.** Our faith ceases to be sterile and inactive, but inspires a mode of life that bears eloquent testimony to the faith that is in us; we begin to "walk worthy of God in all things pleasing, and increasing in the knowledge of God."

### **Prayers for Understanding**

Come, O Spirit of Understanding, and enlighten our minds, that we may know and believe all the mysteries of salvation; and may merit at last to see the eternal light in Thy Light; and, in the light of glory, to have a clear vision of Thee and the Father and the Son. Amen.

### **III Understanding**

Understanding is the second gift of the Holy Spirit, and people sometimes have a hard time understanding (no pun intended) how it differs from wisdom. While wisdom is the desire to contemplate the things of God, understanding allows us to grasp, at least in a limited way, the very essence of the truths of the Catholic Faith. Through understanding, we gain a certitude about our beliefs that moves beyond faith.

All the gifts are connected. Wisdom and understanding are certainly linked. Does someone you know seem to have problems? Try being a listener, not giving advice or trying to help. **The gift of understanding helps you to really hear what another person is saying. Sometimes that's all that is needed.**

Kris, was determined not to be confirmed because she was so angry with her parents. Ron, a group leader at her retreat, just let her talk out the problem. He never told her what she should do, nor did he agree or disagree with her about her parents. When Ron paid attention to Kris and listened to her angry feelings, Kris felt respected. She also heard for herself what she was saying. She realized it wasn't her parents who would be hurt by her action. She'd be shortchanging herself.

Ron expressed the gift of understanding. He had developed his God-given gifts as a listener and he had a real impact on Kris's life. Someone using the gift of understanding, as Ron did, has other skills as well, like the ability to keep a confidence and never talk about anything that is shared.

### **IV UNDERSTANDING**

Understanding is a gift "to give a deeper insight and penetration of divine truths held by faith, **not as a transitory enlightenment but as a permanent intuition.**" Illuminating the mind to truth, The Holy Spirit aids a person to grasp truths of faith easily and intimately, and to penetrate the depths of those truths. This gift not only assists in penetrating revealed truths, but also natural truths in so far as they are related to the supernatural end. The essential quality of this gift is a "**penetrating intuition**" - in a sense, the moving beyond the surface. This gift, penetrating the truths of faith, operates in several ways: disclosing the hidden meaning of Sacred Scripture; revealing the significance of symbols and figures (like St. Paul seeing Christ as fulfillment of the rock of the Exodus account that poured forth water to quench the thirst of the Israelites (1 Cor 10:4); showing the hand of God at work in a person's life, even in the most mysterious or troublesome events (like suffering); and revealing the spiritual realities that underlie sensible appearances (like penetrating the mystery of the Lord's sacrifice in the ritual of the Mass). This gift brings the virtue of faith to perfection. **Accordingly, St. Thomas said, "In this very life, when the eye of the spirit is purified by the gift of understanding, one can in a certain way see God"** (*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 69, a. 2, ad. 3).

**Understanding** means that one is able to comprehend the actions of God, and also by extension to comprehend fellow humanity. **Understanding does not mean that one understands God himself**, for that is impossible, due to the limitations of any life form, including humans, to understanding the all knowingness and thus the perspective of God. But this is why the Bible uses this phrase: that **one is able to understand "the ways of God."**

**A way of God is a particular manifestation of his will.** Thus the “way of God” can be identified and discerned in everything from God’s “decision” to structure the universe with gaseous and energy filled bodies called stars, all the way to how God had a specific communication with a Prophet in the past. **Each time that God creates, allows or wills something to happen, that provides insight into “His Ways.”** The gift of the Holy Spirit, **Understanding**, allows the believer who has cultivated the previous, foundational gifts, to begin to understand God’s ways.

Also, by better understanding God, one better understands God’s creations, including the mysteries of the human mind and heart, soul and their behavior (both good and deplorable, as bad behavior comes from misuse of one of God’s gifts). When one understands God’s ways as in, for example, better understanding one of his gifts, one can better understand why fellow humans fall into temptation of misuse of those gifts, and how to remedy that sinful situation.

**Further, when one understands God’s ways, one can better understand the universe, the earth, and the ecosystems upon it, and be a better steward of the gifts of creation.** When one does not understand God first, such as certain scientists who are “secular” plus personally unbelieving, they risk misunderstanding even the factual measurements that they observe of their studies, for they project the way and motivations of humans onto the behavior of plants and animals, even if they are unaware that they are doing so.

**When one has grounded themselves in the gifts of the Holy Spirit as preparation, and then cultivates receipt of the gift of Understanding, it brings great joy and even the most mysterious and difficult concepts of the Almighty can be comprehended by anyone, regardless of background or education.** There is a very subtle but moving example of this in the Gospel, where Jesus is teaching in the very Temple of Jerusalem itself. The Temple was always busy and crowded, with holy people, priests and scholars and also many crowds of the ordinary people who have come to either worship or to learn.

#### **Mark 12:35**

**And while Jesus was teaching in the temple, he addressed them, saying, “How do the Scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? For David himself says, by the Holy Spirit, ‘The Lord said to my Lord: Sit thou at my right hand, till I make thy enemies thy footstool.’ David himself, therefore, calls him ‘Lord’; how, then, is he his son?” And the mass of the common people liked to hear him.**

Jesus is here teaching one of the most complicated of the theologies, which is to understand the nature of the Messiah according to the mysterious prophecies of King David. The prophecies were difficult even for the Scribes to understand, and Jesus “calls them out” on their lack of understanding of what they themselves preach and teach. In this excerpt from what was the longer teaching, Mark preserves a real gem, actually two gems. One is that Jesus, without providing the “answer,” forces the Scribes to see that they cannot use simplistic assumptions in interpreting and understanding how God will manifest his will in raising the Messiah. The second gem is that Mark records that “the common people liked to hear him” teach these complicated theologies in the Temple.

So Jesus demonstrates the gift of the Holy Spirit of **Understanding** in three ways here. The first is that he affirms that King David's capability to prophesy and the exact specifics of what he prophesied were provided "by the Holy Spirit." Jesus thus helps people to understand the reality of the Holy Spirit by being very clear as to the Holy Spirit's potency and moments of intervention. So Jesus provides an example of the gift of Understanding from the Holy Spirit that occurred in the prior times. Second, Jesus role models for the Scribes how to manifest genuine gift of **Understanding** from the Holy Spirit, as Jesus was doing, rather than false proclamation of **Understanding**, as the Scribes were doing. Third, Jesus demonstrates that through receptivity of the gift of the Holy Spirit of **Understanding** that the common people of all types and education can and did very much comprehend and appreciate the implications of the learning, and the love of **Understanding** of God. Mark records in this simple sentence that the common people not only "got" the complicated teaching of Jesus, but they loved it.

Receipt of the gift of the Holy Spirit of **Understanding** is properly felt in small pieces that one at a time just "click" into place. **One comprehends one example of God's ways or his will, and suddenly "get it" at both an intellectual and a heartfelt level.** The feeling is like, "Ah, so this is 'why' God requires this, or this is 'how' God allowed that to happen." True **Understanding** as given by the Holy Spirit is sometimes as small as appreciating for the first time the fullness of meaning and implication in several words or a phrase in the Bible, or in prayer, or in something that a saint or prophet of God once said. God cannot be understood "holistically" or "as a whole." That is one of the mistakes of "New Age" and other mushy thinking and philosophy. God cannot be reduced to a holistic understanding that fits within a human brain, nor can HE be characterized by a human at the keyboard or holding a pen. **God can only be comprehended by the gift of Understanding of one small example of his ways and his will at a time.**

This is why the great Jewish, Muslim and Christian holy men and women can often **meditate upon just one aspect of God**, as experienced through a single line of prayer, a Jew bowing ("divining") at the Wall, calligraphy of the name of Allah, the writing and contemplation of an icon, or meditations upon the cross. These holy people are studying and comprehending with the mind and the heart "one way" of God's will. It is not a self centered and self denying pretension, such as "New Age" "meditation." **All true uses of the gift of the Holy Spirit of Understanding focuses on comprehending and appreciating God's ways and will, not turning "inward" or "outward" in "detachment" and self gratifying control over one's own mind and senses.**

Cultivating one's own "control" over whatever is hardly the route to the gift of genuine Understanding, which is only received when one turns directly toward God. An analogy is that "New Age" "meditation" is like being a student in the classroom and cultivating how many ways you can block out the sight, sound and words of the teacher and instead, focus only on some trivial aspect of your own self and glorify it. That becomes quite a problem when it is final exam time. One also shortchanges one's self on experiencing the genuine joyousness of **Understanding**, of comprehending the ways and the Will of God. Further, such misuse and misunderstanding is obviously detrimental to understanding one's fellow creations of God. Humans were made in the image of God, not in the image of the strongest human meditation 'expert.'

Far from being a barrier or a diversion, **fuller use of the gift of Understanding as given by the Holy Spirit enhances one's success and insight in even secular subjects**, such as science, mathematics, physics, biology and human behavior. Secularists inadvertently close off in their mind consideration of alternative hypotheses due to their conditioning to be only "factual." By trying too hard to be "factual" one misses interpretations and facts that are fact based, but simply would not have occurred to a mind that attempts to be so self focused and rigid.

Humans are very limited due to the facts of being a physical being with a given life span. **God has no limits. Thus God can envision and will scientific facts and solutions that humans cannot.** Thus, one who is rigidly anti-God is also truncating their mind's own flexibility, as they unconsciously assume that nothing in science can exist except what can be understood by one's self. This is an especial danger and blinders for people who are "high achievers" "at the top of their field of study." They not only unconsciously shut out a scientific fact that seems to "far out" for them to ever have considered, but they unconsciously shut out the voices of their colleagues, who are "secondary talents," in their minds. **When one receives with humility the gift of the Holy Spirit of Understanding, one enhances, rather than reduces, one's own understanding of mundane life and the scholarly studies of it.**

**Understanding combined with Fortitude gives each human the resiliency that they need to cope with the realities of life.** This is something that young people have been robbed of by their negligent parents, faith instructors, and profane society. It is no wonder that so many young people cannot cope with any heartbreak without turning to drugs or guns, or falling into depression or other mental disorders and sufferings. Young people used to be very faith and reality based, and thus grew to be adults that were rocks, were the salt of the earth. The past generations are filled with young people who were blessed with **Understanding and Fortitude** from the youngest ages, and they grew into the remarkable men and women we both read about in history books, or never hear about because they were the quiet folks who kept life and society going. **There is no education system, no pharmaceutical or street drug, no science fiction or meditation, and no entertainment that can take the place of Understanding and Fortitude. It is not only the salvation of the soul that is at risk without the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but also the health and sanity of the individual and society as a whole.**

If one needs air to breathe and in order to continue to live, attending classes that tell you that you do not need air, taking a drug so you can imagine that you do not need air and to help you 'forget' that you do not have air, reading a book about 'aliens' who do not need air, chanting 'I am air itself; I do not need earthly air,' or playing a video game where you shoot people who may or may not need air, none of those will save one's life and prevent one from dying a death due to lack of air.

That is why the holy people, and the ordinary people, have great joy in receiving the genuine gift of the Holy Spirit, **Understanding**, because it is comprehending reality, not fiction.