

Seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are imparted on those who receive the sacrament of confirmation.

Six are listed in the “Immanuel Prophecy,” which describes an expected future ideal Davidic king: wisdom and understanding, counsel and strength (fortitude), knowledge and fear of the Lord (Is 11:2). The translators of the Hebrew Bible to Greek, the Septuagint, added a seventh gift, piety, to achieve the symbolic number for completeness. Jesus was blessed with these gifts by his Father, and those who are confirmed are blessed with these gifts by the Holy Spirit. They supply the spiritual power and strength a person needs to accomplish his or her vocational calling and mission in life.

The bishop asks God to bestow these gifts on the confirmation candidates in the prayer he offers with outstretched hands before the anointing: “Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who brought these your servants to new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, freeing them from sin: send upon them, O Lord, the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete; give them the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and fortitude, the spirit of knowledge and piety; fill them with the spirit of the fear of the Lord.”

Wisdom is the ability to exercise good judgment. It distinguishes between right and wrong, seeks and upholds truth and justice, and balances personal good with the common good. It is in touch with reality, demonstrates common sense and is prudent. It often increases as a person advances in years and gains life experience. In the Old Testament, wisdom is personified by “Sophia,” the mythical mother of faith, hope and love; while in the New Testament, wisdom is personified by Jesus himself.

Understanding is the gift of intelligence and enlightenment. It is the ability to think clearly; to perceive, comprehend and interpret information; and to have insight and discern meaning.

Counsel is good advice. It is the ability to teach, inform, guide, direct, warn, admonish, recommend and encourage. It is not limited to the giving of advice but extends to the ability to graciously receive it. The gift is needed by parents, teachers, coaches, supervisors, mentors, therapists, lawyers, clergy, consultants, elders and spouses — anyone who offers advice to others.

Fortitude is an unwavering commitment to God or a proper course of action, and it shows itself as moral strength, courage, determination, patient endurance, long suffering, a resolute spirit, stamina and resiliency.

Knowledge is the ability to study and learn; to acquire, retain and master facts and information; and to put what is learned to good use for constructive purposes.

Fear of the Lord is awe, reverence and respect for God. It acknowledges that everything comes as a gift from God, downplays personal achievement and self-sufficiency, and gladly offers praise, worship and adoration to God.

Piety is personal holiness, and it includes devotion to God, prayer, virtue, goodness, decency, self-mastery, innocence, the avoidance of sin and obedience to God’s will.

A person who receives the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of confirmation must cooperate with these special graces and put them to good use. To fail to do so would be like purchasing a new computer and leaving it in the box or buying a new car and leaving it in the garage. For the computer to work, the owner must plug it in and turn it on. For the car to work, the motorist must put it in gear and drive it. For confirmation to work, the recipient must cultivate the divine gifts by using and applying them, not just occasionally, but consistently throughout each day.

The fruits of the Holy Spirit

In the reception of the sacrament of confirmation, the person receives the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, wisdom and understanding, counsel and strength (fortitude), knowledge and fear of the Lord (Is 11:2), and piety. These gifts are not to sit idle or be kept in storage. Rather, they are to be put to good use so they will bear much fruit.

In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul lists the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). These fruits emanate or proceed from the Holy Spirit and reveal what the Holy Spirit is like. These are the Holy Spirit's character traits. And because the Holy Spirit is a Person of the Most Holy Trinity, and because the three Persons are one, the fruits reveal what God is like. The grace and power of the Holy Spirit give increase to these fruits. A confirmed person cooperates with this grace, and with growth in holiness, these fruits expand and intensify.

Love. Agape love is the highest form of love, love for both God and neighbor. It is selfless, focused on the other person, given freely and gladly without condition or the expectation of repayment, expressed in service, and willing to suffer on another's behalf.

Joy. Joy is an interior contentment that comes from being close to God and in right relationship with others. Joy also comes with speaking and upholding the truth, honesty and integrity in relationships, enduring hardships and decent conduct.

Peace. Peace is the harmony that occurs when justice prevails. It happens when resources are shared equitably, power is used for service, interdependence is fostered, information is shared openly and honestly, the dignity of each person is respected, legitimate differences are tolerated, the disadvantaged receive help, hurts are forgiven and the common good is upheld.

Patience. Patience is the virtue of suffering interruption or delay with composure and without complaint; to suffer annoyance, insult or mistreatment with self-restraint, refusing to be provoked; and to suffer burdens and difficult tasks with resolve and determination. It is also the willingness to slow down for another's benefit, to set aside one's personal plans and concerns, to go at another's pace, and to take whatever time is necessary to address their need.

Kindness. Kindness is a warm and friendly disposition toward another. A kind person is polite and well-mannered, respectful and considerate, pleasant and agreeable, cheerful and upbeat, caring and helpful, positive and complimentary.

Generosity. Generosity is a bigheartedness grounded in an abundance mentality. It is unselfish and expresses itself in sharing. It is extended to family and friends, strangers, and particularly those in need, and is offered not only as money, food and clothing, but also as time shared and assistance provided.

Faithfulness. Faithfulness is demonstrated by loyalty to friends, duties performed, promises kept, commitments fulfilled, contracts completed, vows observed and being true to one's word.

Gentleness. Gentleness is sensitivity for another person. It is concerned with another's welfare, safety and security. It is grounded in humility. The approach is careful, tender, considerate, affectionate and mild-mannered, free of all pushiness, roughness or abrasiveness.

Self-control. Self-control is self-mastery regardless of the circumstances, to be in control of one's self rather than to be controlled by temptations, events or other people, especially when under pressure or in times of crisis. It is to remain calm, cool and collected, reasonable and even-tempered; to be alert and conscious, to proceed with caution and prudence, and to avoid an impulse or kneejerk response; to be a moderating influence; and to have the strength and courage to reject evil and choose good.

The Holy Spirit: the gift of confirmation

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Most Holy Trinity and the gift of the sacrament of confirmation. The characteristics of the Holy Spirit describe the nature of the gifts that are bestowed upon the person who is confirmed.

The Holy Spirit is the abiding and continuing presence of God, a co-equal partner with the Father and the Son, the giver of life, the sanctifier, the one who makes holy, helper and supporter, the inspiration for sacred Scripture and the voice of the prophets.

The Holy Spirit keeps Jesus alive in our consciousness, reminds us of all that he said and did, strengthens our faith and belief, and enables us to give testimony about him and witness for him.

The Holy Spirit is love, both the bond of love between God and us, between one person and another, and between the members of a group such as a family, a church community or an organization. The Holy Spirit fosters and enables unity and togetherness, patience and kindness, compassion, humility, gentleness, generosity, faithfulness and self-control.

The Holy Spirit informs the conscience. The Holy Spirit discerns right from wrong, raises awareness of sin, calls for conversion, leads to remorse, and brings pardon and forgiveness.

The Holy Spirit is the Advocate, the Paraclete, the one who stands with us when we face trials and tribulations, our true friend and a faithful companion when we are alone, our protector when opposed, the provider of the words of defense when accused, our reassurance when we are worried, our hope when the situation seems bleak, and our guardian when others malign us, lie about us or betray us.

The Holy Spirit dwells within every person, and thus the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit invites and urges each person to glorify God in his or her body, to be pure and blameless, to please God in every thought, word and deed.

The Holy Spirit teaches everything. The Holy Spirit is truth, the source of truth, the revealer of truth, counselor and guide, and the moral compass for decisions and choices.

The Holy Spirit is knowledge. The Holy Spirit is enlightenment and insight for the mind, inspiration and creativity for the thinker, understanding and wisdom for the learner, and clarity for the problem solver.

The Holy Spirit is power and strength, drive and determination, energy and stamina for the believer, the laborer, the weary and the weak.

The Holy Spirit is courage for the fearful, consolation for the grieving, comfort for the hurting, healing for the wounded, relief for the burdened, calm for the worried, peace for the troubled, encouragement for the dejected, hope for the disheartened, joy for the sorrowful and direction for the wandering.

The Holy Spirit is the source of grace, helps a person pray and give adoration to God, and be closely connected to God. The Holy Spirit gives a new birth as well as meaning and purpose to life.

Confirmation is not graduation

Some regard confirmation as a sort of spiritual graduation. Confirmation comes at the end of the successful completion of a course of study and a set of requirements that typically include a retreat and community service, and a high school or college graduation comes at the end of the successful completion of a set of academic requirements.

The confirmation “graduate” receives the gift of the Holy Spirit and an anointing; the high school graduate receives a diploma, and the college graduate receives a degree. Similar as these may seem at first glance, they are drastically different in many ways.

A graduate is no longer enrolled in the programs at their alma mater, but a confirmand is a registered member of a parish and recommits to full, active and conscious participation in its “programs,” especially Sunday Mass and the regular reception of the sacraments, as well as other “offerings” like eucharistic adoration, young adult groups and peer ministry.

A graduate’s classes are finished, but a confirmand’s learning has just begun. It would be a terrible shame to stop spiritual learning at the age of 13 to 16 and to spend one’s adult life with a confirmation-level education. With one’s appetite whetted with what was learned during confirmation classes, the confirmand eagerly forges ahead with continuing religious education: attentive listening to the Scripture readings and homilies at Mass, theology classes in high school and college, spiritual reading, Bible study, study groups, retreats and adult education programs at the parish or throughout the diocese.

A graduate usually leaves behind most of their old friends at their former school and forms a new network of friendships at the next school or new workplace, while a confirmand deepens and expands friendships at the parish. This is accomplished by mixing with fellow parishioners before or after Mass, prayer groups, serving in various ministries, volunteering on parish projects, participation in community builders and parish festivals, membership in the women’s or men’s groups, or a position on a council or a commission. Also, potential new friends at school or work may or may not share a person’s religious values, while friends at the parish are fellow Catholics who share and support the same spiritual beliefs and practices.

A graduate receives the services of teachers, professors, nurses, counselors, coaches and staff, while a confirmand generously serves others, in one’s family, at the parish, in a helping profession and in the military. He or she particularly serves the poor and disadvantaged.

A graduate may have been the recipient of a scholarship, grant or parental financial support, while a confirmand gladly and freely shares time, talent and treasure including monetary donations in appreciation for blessings received.

Grade school, high school and college are of limited duration, while a confirmand is on a lifetime journey of faith. A graduate celebrates what has been accomplished, while a confirmand looks ahead to God’s will for the future. Graduation is an ending. Confirmation is a beginning.

The confirmed are soldiers for Christ

A soldier for Christ is an ancient image that dates to the early Church. It was mentioned by St. Cyril of Jerusalem in 350 A.D. and the Council of Trent in the 16th century, but it is not mentioned much these days, possibly because of its militaristic overtones. The principles underlying this imagery are both enlightening and formative.

Soldiers do not fight alone but in concert with other soldiers as part of an elite fighting force. The confirmed realize that there is strength in numbers, become members of the Army of Light, function as a unit, work together to carry out their mission and protect each other.

Soldiers have a commander-in-chief and superior officers, and they obey their orders. The confirmed have a supreme commander, almighty God, and they completely and dutifully obey the will of God. They have religious superiors, the college of bishops, and they obey their magisterial teaching, as well as local bishops, and they comply with their mandates and instructions.

When soldiers join the military, they go into “the service.” The confirmed pattern their lives on Jesus, who came to serve. They spend their lives serving God by serving their neighbors, particularly their family members, but also in their parishes and schools, the wider community and for the betterment of society. The confirmed gravitate toward service professions.

Soldiers begin with basic training, an intense preliminary period of drills and exercises to gain mental toughness and physical strength to prepare for the challenges that lie ahead. The confirmed gain a solid spiritual mindset with personal prayer, Mass and the sacraments, retreats and spiritual reading, and discipline themselves through their practice of the virtues.

Soldiers arm themselves with the best possible weaponry. The confirmed arm themselves with the Word of God, divine grace, prayer, the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, and the inspiration of the lives of the saints. They are protected by their guardian angels and their patron saints.

Soldiers are on high alert, in a constant state of readiness, and set to go into action at a moment’s notice. The confirmed are sober and vigilant, alert and on guard, continuously in the state of grace, and act quickly to uphold the truth and do the right thing.

Soldiers fight with courage and bravery, are prepared to suffer, consider surrender unthinkable and are willing to lay down their lives for their country. The confirmed pattern themselves on Jesus who suffered and died for us, and are willing to suffer on behalf of others. The confirmed embrace hardship, sacrifice and remain faithful until the end, even to the point of death.

Soldiers go into the battlefield to carry out a specific mission or objective. The confirmed go into the world to make the name of Jesus known and loved, give heroic witness, and spread and defend the faith.

Soldiers fight with determination against their opponent. The confirmed fight with valor against the enemy, the devil, temptation and the forces of evil in the world. They also fully engage in the raging battle to conquer the sinful inclinations in their own minds and hearts.

Soldiers are peacekeepers: They restore and maintain peace. The confirmed stop hostilities, bring calm, establish communication, effect reconciliation, repair damage, build mutual respect, uphold the common good, and foster harmony and cooperation.

The Effects of the Gift of the Holy Spirit at Confirmation

Confirmation imparts the gift of the Holy Spirit. The person who receives this sacrament has already received the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of Baptism, and the Holy Spirit abides with a person always. The Holy Spirit comes when a person prays or reads Scripture, or when a person asks the Holy Spirit for guidance, inspiration, or courage. Confirmation is not the new arrival of the Holy Spirit, but rather an intensification of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit enlightens the mind and impassions the heart. It gives increased knowledge and understanding of Jesus, his gospel, and the mysteries of the faith. It also moves a person to love Jesus more dearly and strengthens the desire to please and obey him.

The gift of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation completes the Sacraments of Initiation and equips a person to live one's faith as an adult. A Christian child has the support of parents and family, but when it is time to leave home and live independently, the Holy Spirit gives the interior strength to make good decisions and to live a holy and virtuous life.

Confirmation serves as the foundation of the Sacraments of Commitment, marriage and Holy Orders. The Holy Spirit often points a person toward a lifelong Christian vocation, to live the faith as a wife or husband, and as a mother or father, or as a priest. The Holy Spirit may also guide a person in other directions, such as the consecrated life as a religious sister or brother, or as a dedicated single person. The Holy Spirit also directs a person toward a profession that is of service to others and improves society.

The Holy Spirit emboldens a person's words and deeds. The special graces of Confirmation enliven a person to speak more often, more openly, and with greater clarity and conviction, about their faith and beliefs; to be an evangelizer, ready and willing to spread the good news of Jesus and his gospel; and to be better prepared and more determined to testify to the truth.

The Holy Spirit stirs a person to give bolder public witness to their faith, to give outstanding example through love, joyfulness, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, and service. The Holy Spirit empowers a person to do mighty deeds, to perform good works that do much good, actions that are visible, make a strong statement, and are persuasive to others.

The gift of the Holy Spirit at Confirmation draws a person into a stronger bond with the Body of Christ, the Church. It encourages a person to receive the sacraments and pray with the community regularly, to make friends at church who are fellow pilgrims on journey of faith, to have partners on larger tasks and service projects, to pass on the gift of faith to others, particularly children and those searching for God, and to give collective or corporate witness.

The Holy Spirit prepares a person for battle. The Spirit gives a person the firm resolve and fierce determination to reject temptation, stand up against evil, refute errors, defend the faith, and withstand attacks. The Spirit also gives the strength and stamina to persevere in the battle, to remain true to Christ, unwavering in belief, and constant in goodness.

What are the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit? Catholic Answers, Frank X. Blisard, 2019

The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are, according to Catholic Tradition: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of God. 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—as opposed to “servile” fear, whereby we fear punishment (I/II.67.4; II/II.19.9).

These are 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.

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/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).

Unfortunately, it is difficult to name another Catholic doctrine of as hallowed antiquity as the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit that is subject to as much benign neglect. Like most Catholics born around 1950, I learned their names by rote: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord! Sadly, though, it was all my classmates and I ever learned, at least formally, about these mysterious powers that were to descend upon us at our confirmation. Once Confirmation Day had come and gone, we were chagrined to find that we had not

become the all-wise, all-knowing, unconquerable *milites Christi* (soldiers of Christ) that our pre-Vatican II catechesis had promised.

The Problem

Ironically, post-Vatican II catechesis has proven even less capable of instilling in young Catholics a lively sense of what the seven gifts are all about. At least the previous approach had the advantage of conjuring up the lurid prospect of a martyr's bloody death at the hands of godless atheists. But, alas, such militant pedagogy went out the window in the aftermath of the Council. But a stream of reports in recent decades on declining interest in the faith among new *confirmandi* suggests that the changes are not having their desired effect. Not that there were no bugs in the pre-Vatican II catechetical machine—there were plenty—but such superficial tinkering did not even begin to address them.

A recent article in *Theological Studies* by Rev. Charles E. Bouchard, O.P., president of the Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, Missouri (“Recovering the Gifts of the Holy Spirit in Moral Theology,” Sept. 2002), identifies some specific weaknesses in traditional Catholic catechesis on the seven gifts:

- Neglect of the close connection between the seven gifts and the cardinal and theological virtues (faith, hope, charity/love, prudence, justice, fortitude/courage, and temperance), which St. Thomas Aquinas himself had emphasized in his treatment of the subject
- A tendency to relegate the seven gifts to the esoteric realm of ascetical/mystical spirituality rather than the practical, down-to-earth realm of moral theology, which Aquinas had indicated was their proper sphere
- A form of spiritual elitism whereby the fuller study of the theology of the gifts was reserved to priests and religious, who alone, it was presumed—unlike the unlettered masses—had the requisite learning and spirituality to appreciate and assimilate it
- Neglect of the scriptural basis of the theology of the gifts, particularly Isaiah 11, where the gifts were originally identified and applied prophetically to Christ

The 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* had already addressed some of these issues (such as the importance of the virtues and the relationship between the gifts and “the moral life”) but avoided defining the individual gifts or even treating them in any detail—a mere six paragraphs (1285–1287, 1830–1831, and 1845), as compared with forty on the virtues (1803–1829, 1832–1844). Perhaps that is why the catechetical textbooks that have appeared in the wake of the new *Catechism* present such a confusing array of definitions of the gifts. These definitions tend to be imprecise rehashings of the traditional Thomistic definitions or totally ad hoc definitions drawn from the author's personal experience or imagination.

The Seven Gifts and the Spiritual Arsenal

Rather than perpetuating either a strictly Thomistic approach or an approach based on contemporary, culturally conditioned definitions, I propose a third way of understanding the seven gifts, one that goes back the biblical source material.

The first—and only—place in the entire Bible where these seven special qualities are listed together is Isaiah 11:1–3, in a famous Messianic prophecy:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump 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 the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

Virtually every commentator on the seven gifts for the past two millennia has identified this passage as the source of the teaching, yet none have noted how integral these seven concepts were to the ancient Israelite “Wisdom”

tradition, which is reflected in such Old Testament books as Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Psalms, Ecclesiasticus, and the Wisdom of Solomon, as well as certain strands of the prophetic books, including Isaiah. This material focuses on how to navigate the ethical demands of daily life (economics, love and marriage, rearing children, interpersonal relationships, the use and abuse of power) rather than the historical, prophetic, or mythical/metaphysical themes usually associated with the Old Testament. It does not contradict these other aspects of revelation but complements them by providing a glimpse into how Israel's covenant with Yahweh is lived out in all its nitty-gritty detail.

It is from this world of practical, down-to-earth, everyday concerns rather than the realm of ascetical or mystical experience that the seven gifts emerged, and the context of Isaiah 11 reinforces this frame of reference. The balance of Isaiah describes in loving detail the aggressiveness with which the “shoot of Jesse” will establish his “peaceable kingdom” upon the earth:

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. . . . They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Is. 11:3–4, 9)

Establishing this kingdom entails thought, planning, work, struggle, courage, endurance, perseverance, humility—that is, getting one's hands dirty. This earthbound perspective is a profitable one from which to view the role the seven gifts play in the life of mature (or maturing) Christians.

There is a strain within Catholicism, as within Christianity in general, that focuses on the afterlife to the exclusion—and detriment—of this world, as if detachment from temporal things were alone a guarantee of eternal life. One of the correctives to this kind of thinking issued by Vatican II was the recovery of the biblical emphasis on the kingdom of God as a concrete reality that not only transcends the created order but also transforms it (*Dei Verbum* 17; *Lumen Gentium* 5; *Gaudium et Spes* 39).

The seven gifts are indispensable resources in the struggle to establish the kingdom and are, in a sense, a byproduct of actively engaging in spiritual warfare. If a person does not bother to equip himself properly for battle, he should not be surprised to find himself defenseless when the battle is brought to his doorstep. If my classmates and I never “acquired” the “mysterious powers” we anticipated, perhaps it is because we never took up arms in the struggle to advance the kingdom of God!

The seven gifts are an endowment to which every baptized Christian can lay claim from his earliest childhood. They are our patrimony. These gifts, given in the sacraments for us to develop through experience, are indispensable to the successful conduct of the Christian way of life. They do not appear spontaneously and out of nowhere but emerge gradually as the fruit of virtuous living. Nor are they withdrawn by the Spirit once they are no longer needed, for they are perpetually needed as long as we are fighting the good fight.

The seven gifts are designed to be used in the world for the purpose of transforming that world for Christ. Isaiah 11 vividly portrays what these gifts are to be used for: to do what one is called to do in one's own time and place to advance the kingdom of God. The specific, personal details of that call do not come into focus until one has realized his very limited, ungodlike place in the scheme of things (fear of the Lord), accepted one's role as a member of God's family (piety), and acquired the habit of following the Father's specific directions for living a godly life (knowledge). This familiarity with God breeds the strength and courage needed to confront the evil that one inevitably encounters in one's life (fortitude) and the cunning to nimbly shift one's strategies to match—even anticipate—the many machinations of the Enemy (counsel). The more one engages in such “spiritual warfare,” the more one perceives how such skirmishes fit into the big picture that is God's master plan for establishing his reign in this fallen world (understanding) and the more confident, skillful, and successful one becomes in the conduct of his particular vocation (wisdom).

Soldiers of Christ

These remarks are aimed primarily at adult cradle Catholics who, like me, were inadequately catechized (at least with respect to the seven gifts). Because of the ongoing controversy in the Church at large over the proper age for reception of the sacrament of confirmation, the malaise of inadequate catechesis is likely to continue afflicting the faithful. The lack of attention to the synergistic relationship between the virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit seems to be the main culprit in the failure to develop the gifts among the *confirmandi*. Catechesis that is aimed only at the acquisition of knowledge or merely at promoting “random acts of kindness” without a solidly evangelical organizing principle simply will not cut it with this (or any other) generation of young people. Centering prayer, journaling, guided meditation, or any of the host of other pseudo-pedagogical tricks popular in many current catechetical programs cannot compete with the seductions of the culture of death.

The path to a mature appropriation of the spiritual arsenal represented by the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit needs to be trod as early as possible, and the seven virtues can serve today, as they have for most of the Church’s history, as excellent guides along that path. Perhaps it is time to resurrect the traditional image of the baptized as “soldiers of Christ,” a phrase that has been anathema for Catholic catechetical materials for decades. Despite the fact that the post-Vatican II *zeitgeist* has militated against the notion of “militancy” in all things religious, this stance has been shown to be misguided—by an honest assessment of what Sacred Scripture has to say about it and by world events in our own lifetime. The toppling of the Soviet Union, for example, would not have happened without the nonviolent militancy of John Paul II in the pursuit of a legitimate goal. The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are our spiritual weaponry for the spiritual warfare of everyday life.