

# Friendship with the Holy Spirit

BY BRANDON DAHM

**The marvel of God making us friends is given practical contours through the gifts of the Spirit, which are interpersonal dispositions that allow us to relate to God. By living through these gifts, we live in personal contact with the Gift—the Holy Spirit.**

---

**W**ho is the Holy Spirit? That question can be difficult for us to answer, in part because we pay less attention to the Holy Spirit than to the other persons of the Holy Trinity. We pray familiar prayers to God the Father (“Our Father who art in heaven...”) and our imaginations are filled with arresting images of God the Son in the Gospels, but God the Spirit does not seem so much like a person. When the new Testament depicts the Holy Spirit as like a dove that descends from heaven during Jesus’ baptism (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; and John 1:32) or as tongues of fire resting on the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), these images are not personal in the way the Father and Jesus are. Perhaps more personal is Jesus’ description of the Spirit’s role in our discipleship, as like an “advocate” or “helper” or “someone else to stand by you” (John 14:16-17, 26).<sup>1</sup>

Often when we try to flesh out this role of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we focus on the dramatic events of Pentecost and the marvels of the early church (e.g., speaking in tongues, miraculous healings, and prophecies). When I was in seminary, we debated whether these gifts of the Spirit

continue to this day and whether we should seek them. These are important questions. But the ordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit – the ones that grace the Messiah: wisdom, knowledge, understanding, counsel, piety, courage, and fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:2) – are worthy of our attention as well, for they are part of something equally marvelous: our being drawn into friendship with God.

In this article I will borrow from the writings of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) to reflect on these ordinary gifts and roles of the Holy Spirit in our discipleship. Aquinas draws special attention to one of the Spirit's proper names: Gift. The way that he unpacks this important name can help us better understand how to relate at a more personal level to the Holy Spirit.



Aquinas worked within the long tradition of Trinitarian theology that recognizes the Holy Spirit as the love between the Father and the Son. Thus, he notes, one proper name of the Holy Spirit is Love. He goes on to point out

...it is manifest that love has the nature of a first gift, through which all free gifts are given. So since the Holy Spirit proceeds as love... he proceeds as the first gift. Hence Augustine says (*On the Trinity*, xv, 24): "By the gift, which is the Holy Spirit, many particular gifts are portioned out to the members of Christ."<sup>2</sup>

In other words, within his very nature as Love, the Holy Spirit has the aptitude for being given to others. We see this aptitude in Christ promising to send the Gift to his disciples in order that they may love others as he does (John 14:15-30).

Thus, the Holy Spirit is both Love and Gift. But why are these facts so important, and how do they help us encounter the Holy Spirit as a person? To answer those questions, Aquinas examines the nature of personal relationships.

From antiquity, friendship was considered to be the most significant and rich relationship possible between persons. But the ancients could not imagine any friendship existing between a human being and a divine being. That was because friends must be equal in some way, they must share something in common. Thus, the philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) reasoned that any friendship between a king and a peasant must be strained at best and that friendship would become impossible when "one side is removed at a great distance – as god is."<sup>3</sup> The Christian God, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, is transcendent beyond what Aristotle thought. Thus, any friendship between a human being and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would seem to be even less likely. But, according to Aquinas, this deep relationship is precisely what the sharing of the Holy Spirit – the giving of the Gift – accomplishes.

For Aquinas, a Christian's relationship with God begins with an infusion of God's grace (i.e., a gift) that includes the three virtues enumerated by the Apostle Paul—faith, hope, and love (or charity, from the Latin *caritas*). While many other important virtues, like prudence, justice, courage, and temperance, are “natural” in the sense that we can gradually develop them by living in the ways recommended to us by wise men and women, we cannot work ourselves up to these three—faith, hope, and love; we can only receive them as a gift from God. That is why they are called “theological” virtues. As Paul explains, “the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13). This suggests to Aquinas that it is this love, poured into us by the Holy Spirit, who is Love, which enables us to be friends of God.

Recall that friendship requires that the friends share something in common, but on our own (as the ancients rightly anticipated) we can have nothing in common with God. So our relationship with God is only possible if God communicates God's life to us, which is Love. And this is what God does when, through the Spirit, he gifts us with the divine love.<sup>4</sup>

In a sermon on Pentecost, Aquinas comments on the psalmist's praise of God as the sustainer of all creatures:

When you send forth your spirit, they are created;  
and you renew the face of the ground.

*Psalm 104:30*

In like way, Aquinas explains, we are created anew when we receive God's love: “Love (*caritas*) gives life to the soul, for just as the body lives through the soul, so the soul lives through God, and God dwells in us through love (*caritas*).” He goes on to relate this to Paul's teaching: “From where is this love (*caritas*) in us? From the Holy Spirit, as the Apostle says: ‘The love (*caritas*) of God is spread in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who is given to us’ (Romans 5:5).”<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere in his commentary on Romans, Aquinas expands on this verse:

For the Holy Spirit, who is the love of the Father and of the Son, to be given to us is our being brought to participate in the love who is the Holy Spirit, and by this participation we are made lovers of God.<sup>6</sup>

A friendship between unequals is thus established by God sharing his life with us.



Our becoming friends of God despite our immeasurable inferiority is a greater marvel than tongues or even healings. Yet, Aquinas's account of it remains abstract. How does God sharing the divine life change our lives in

the concrete? For this we need a more experiential account of our receiving the virtues and gifts infused in us by God's grace.<sup>7</sup>

Let's begin with two relevant psychological concepts: second-person awareness<sup>8</sup> and joint attention. A second-person experience of another must have these characteristics: you are aware of the other person as a person, your personal interaction with the other person is relatively direct and immediate, and that person is conscious.<sup>9</sup> It is called a "second-person" experience for a reason. It is not reducible to introspective knowledge about one's own self (which would be first-person knowledge) because it requires knowledge of the other person. And it is not reducible to knowing true propositions about the other person, or knowing about that person through another person's experience (third-person knowledge) because it requires experience of the person as a person.

Psychologists use the concept of irreducibly second-person experience to describe cases of autism spectrum disorder. Autistic persons know about other persons (that is, they know a lot of true propositions about them), but do not see and interact with them as persons.<sup>10</sup> That is, they possess third-person knowledge but not second-person awareness of others. In order to have second-person awareness of others, we must see them as persons in light of their desires, history, preferences, motivations, and so on. In short, the difference between third-person and second-person knowledge of others is like the difference between looking at them and looking into their eyes.

Second-person awareness – an awareness of a person as a person – is often accompanied by joint attention. To jointly attend to some object is to share a stance toward that object with another person. Andrew Pinsent writes, "The key point is that although it is the object, rather than the other person, that is the focus of one's attention, the presence and attention of the other person seem to make a qualitative difference to one's experience."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, as Peter Hobson explains, one "needs to be aware of the object or event as the focus of the other person's attention."<sup>12</sup>

Two examples will help make the nature of joint attention clear. Suppose you are watching a movie with mildly violent or sexual content, but you are so engaged in the narrative of the movie that you aren't paying attention to its vulgarities. Then your grandmother comes and sits beside you. Instead of just being aware of the story in the movie, you are now also aware, maybe even predominately so, of your grandma's perspective on the movie. Although attending to the movie, you are also attending to your grandmother's values, motivation structures, tastes, personality, and so on. That is, you have a joint attention with her of the movie. This is a consequence of second-person knowledge because you are seeing the film in light of your understanding of the person of your grandmother. Something similar happens when you bring a friend from another denomination to church with you. For example, when I bring my Reformed family to Mass with me, I am now aware of the liturgy and homily through their beliefs, concerns,

histories, and sensitivities in a way I'm normally not. I share a stance with them: I see the Mass through their eyes.

Something similar happens as we grow in the life of the Spirit. As we grow in friendship with God, we begin to have second-person awareness of God in our ordinary lives and this can lead us to jointly attend to daily events with God.

The experience of prayer is an example. John Vianney, who served as the curé or parish priest of Ars, France in the early nineteenth century, tells a story about a local peasant who often spent long hours sitting in prayer. Curious about this, Vianney one day asked the man what was going on in his mind.

"Going on in my mind, M'sieur Curé?" The old man smiled. "Nothing. I am not much good at thinking, nor do I know many prayers. So I just sit here, as you see, looking at God. I look at Him and He looks at me. That is all."<sup>13</sup>

As two lovers might look into each other's eyes, the peasant, aware that God was looking at him, simply looked at God. The man's prayer was clearly a second-person experience of God.



We can now use these concepts of second-person awareness and joint attention to understand how the ordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit – wisdom, knowledge, understanding, counsel, piety, courage, and fear of the Lord – can thoroughly transform us into friends of God. Aquinas notes that the Holy Spirit, or Gift, who is poured into our hearts, "reaches to the perfecting of all the moral habits and acts of the soul."<sup>14</sup> In other words, the divine love (*caritas*) does not just provide an additional motivation to care for others, but it reshapes for the best every aspect of our thinking, feeling, and acting.

In general, the gifts of the Holy Spirit make us open to God's guidance. They "dispose all the powers of the soul to be amenable to the divine motion" and "perfect the soul's powers in relation to the Holy Spirit their Mover," Aquinas writes.<sup>15</sup> Columba Marmion (1858-1923), an Irish, Benedictine monk, puts it this way: as we embrace the Gift and the gifts, we receive "a supernatural tact [or keen sense], a divine instinct of spiritual things" by which we can know, embrace, and obey the inspirations of the Holy Spirit "promptly and easily."<sup>16</sup>

Two gifts of the Holy Spirit transform our intellectual life, with *understanding* helping us grasp supernatural things, and *knowledge* helping us recognize the things we should believe.<sup>17</sup> The second-personal aspect of knowledge becomes clear in Marmion's explanation:

The gift of knowledge makes us see created things in a supernatural way only as a child of God can see them. ... The child of God sees creation in the light of the Holy Spirit, as the work of God wherein His eternal Perfections are reflected.<sup>18</sup>

By these gifts, then, we share a perspective toward the world with the Holy Spirit.

Although *wisdom* might also seem like a merely intellectual gift, Aquinas connects it more closely to love, because it enables us not only to think about but also “judge aright about [divine things] on account of connaturality with them.”<sup>19</sup> By “connaturality” he means a sympathy that is grounded in a similar nature. An example will show it is a familiar concept. As a husband and wife grow together through their marital love, they come to share attitudes and emotions. Thus, the husband will have a spontaneous, sympathetic understanding of his wife’s emotional state after a disappointment at work. Through his love for her, he connaturally recognizes that something is wrong. By wisdom, we connaturally recognize, and moreover, delight in, the things of God. As Marmion says, wisdom “is an intimate, deep knowledge that relishes the things of God.”<sup>20</sup>

The gifts of *counsel* and *courage* are helpfully paired. “By the gift of counsel, the Holy Spirit responds to this prayer of the soul: ‘Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do!’” writes Marmion.<sup>21</sup> It is through this gift that we share a stance with God about

what we should do. Yet, actually doing what we should do is often difficult, and may be beyond what we are capable of achieving in our fallen state. The gift of courage sustains us in such difficult situations.

Aquinas explains: “A certain confidence of [everlasting life] is infused into the mind by the Holy Spirit who expels any fear of the contrary. It is in this sense that courage is

reckoned a gift of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>22</sup> Andrew Pinsent, who has argued persuasively for the gifts being second-person traits, explains how the gift of courage also involves joint attention: “Being moved by the gift of courage can therefore be interpreted as a sharing in God’s confidence that a good outcome is possible, in the face of every particular danger on the way to eternal life.”<sup>23</sup>

---

**The gifts of the Holy Spirit make us open to God’s guidance. As we embrace the Gift and the gifts, we receive “a supernatural [keen sense], a divine instinct of spiritual things” by which we know, embrace, and obey the inspirations of Spirit “promptly and easily.”**

---

The gifts of *piety* and *fear of the Lord*, according to Marmot, are complimentary: “Far from excluding each other, these dispositions can be perfectly allied; but it is the Holy Spirit Who will teach us in what measure they are to be harmonized.”<sup>24</sup> Let’s look first at the fear of the Lord, for it is often misunderstood today. Recall that according to Isaiah this gift, like the others, is best exemplified in the Messiah; so, it cannot refer to groveling, servile fear of divine punishment. The Apostle Paul teaches that when we are redeemed, we become children of God: “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God” (Galatians 4:6-7). One implication of our new status, Aquinas suggests, is that we come to fear God in a very different way – not as a slave fears to be punished by a vengeful master, but as a child fears to abuse the trust and respect of a loving parent. The gift of fear, therefore, is filial fear, which is tied to our love of God: “Filial fear must needs increase when love increases,” Aquinas explains. “For the more one loves a person, the more one fears to offend him and to be separated from him.”<sup>25</sup> Filial fear is closely tied to piety because the gift of piety inclines our affection towards God the Father. Through our love of our Father, we also have affection for others because God is their Father. The “gift of piety implants in us, as in Jesus, the tendency to refer everything to our Father.”<sup>26</sup> We thus attend to our lives with the Holy Spirit, and this includes our being alert to the danger, in errant thoughts and deeds, of hurting our friendship with God.

Through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, then, God shares the divine life with us. Each one “can be interpreted as *participating in God’s stance* toward various matters.”<sup>27</sup>



More than any human relationship of deepest affection and trust, friendship with the Holy Spirit requires our proper attention. “The action of the Spirit in the soul is delicate because it is an action of completeness, of perfection,” Marmion observes; “His touches are of infinite delicacy.”<sup>28</sup> We must especially avoid deliberate and calculated resistance to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, because such resistance is incompatible with love and therefore with Love.

Marmion also urges us to invoke the Holy Spirit: “Like the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is God; He too desires our holiness.”<sup>29</sup> An old Latin hymn, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, traditionally sung at Pentecost services, is the sort of entreaty Marmion commends:

Come, Holy Ghost, send down those beams,  
which sweetly flow in silent streams  
from thy bright throne above.

O come, thou Father of the poor;  
 O come, thou source of all our store,  
 come, fill our hearts with love. . . .

Grant to thy faithful, dearest Lord,  
 whose only hope is thy sure word,  
 the sevenfold gifts of grace.

Grant us in life thy grace that we,  
 in peace may die and ever be,  
 in joy before thy face.

Amen. Alleluia.

The marvel of God making us friends is given practical contours through the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are interpersonal dispositions that allow us to relate to God. By having joint attention with God, we can then have second-person awareness of the Holy Spirit. Recognizing this is one way of engaging in what Brother Lawrence calls “practicing the presence of God.” By living through the gifts, we live in personal contact with the Holy Spirit. Once we realize we are sharing a stance with the Holy Spirit, we realize we are in personal relationship with the Gift. In short, we look at the Holy Spirit while the Holy Spirit looks at us.

## NOTES

1 The last is J. B. Phillips’s dynamic translation of *paraklēton* in *The New Testament in Modern English* (New York: Touchstone, 1996 [1958]).

2 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q 38, a 1. My translations of the *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) are drawn, with minor changes, from the English Dominican Brothers translation. For instance, I change their translation of “*sancta spiritus*” from “Holy Ghost” to “Holy Spirit.”

3 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 7 (1159a4-7), translated by Roger Crisp (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 152.

4 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, Q 23, a 1.

5 Thomas Aquinas, “Sermon 11: *Emitte spiritum*,” in *The Academic Sermons, The Fathers of the Church: Mediaeval Continuation*, translated by Mark-Robin Hoogland, C.P. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 149-150.

6 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans* (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 5:2:392.

7 My reading of Aquinas in this and the next section is deeply indebted to Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), and Andrew Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective in Aquinas’s Ethics: Virtues and Gifts* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

8 Although the psychological literature identifies technical differences among second person “experience,” “awareness,” and “knowledge,” I will be using these terms fluidly to refer to the same range of phenomena.

9 Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 75.

10 *Ibid.*, 65-73. On the use of second-person experience and joint attention to understand autism spectrum disorder, see Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, 41 ff., and Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 64 ff. and 112 ff.

11 Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, 42.

12 Peter Hobson, "What Puts the Jointness into Joint Attention?" in Naomi Eilan, et al., eds., *Joint Attention: Communication and Other Minds*, Issues in Philosophy and Psychology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 185-204, here citing 185.

13 Milton Lomask, *The Curé of Ars: The Priest Who Outtalked the Devil* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1998 [1958]), 114.

14 Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, 5:2:392.

15 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, I-II, Q 68, a 8.

16 Columba Marmion, *Christ the Life of the Soul* (Tacoma, WA: Angelica Press, 2012 [1925]), 118.

17 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, II-II, Q 9, a 1.

18 Marmion, *Christ the Life of the Soul*, 122.

19 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, II-II, Q 45, a 2.

20 Marmion, *Christ the Life of the Soul*, 120.

21 Ibid. 121.

22 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, II-II, Q 139, a 1.

23 Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, 55.

24 Marmion, *Christ the Life of the Soul*, 122-123.

25 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, II-II, Q 121, a 1, reply 3.

26 Marmion, *Christ the Life of the Soul*, 123.

27 Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, 54.

28 Marmion, *Christ the Life of the Soul*, 125.

29 Ibid. 124.

---



**BRANDON DAHM**

*is a Ph.D. Candidate in Philosophy at Baylor University.*