

SALVATION AND THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, good works are indeed necessary for salvation. However, it is important to understand the Catholic understanding of salvation and the role of good works within it.

Salvation is a gift from God's grace, which is freely given to us. This grace is received through faith and baptism, which initiates our relationship with God and incorporates us into the Body of Christ (the Church). Through this initial grace, we are justified, meaning that we are made right with God and our sins are forgiven.

However, this initial grace of justification must be lived out and continually nourished through a life of faith and good works. Good works are seen as the fruit and manifestation of the grace we have received. They are not merely external actions but flow from a transformed heart and a desire to love God and neighbor.

Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification.

In other words, while we cannot earn the initial grace of justification through our own efforts, once we have received this grace, we are called to respond in faith and love, cooperating with God's grace to grow in holiness. Our good works, done in union with Christ, become a means of cooperating with God's grace and growing in righteousness.

Furthermore, our final salvation is not solely dependent on our own efforts or good works. It is ultimately a gift from God, who desires the salvation of all people. Our good works, however, play a role in our journey of faith and in our cooperation with God's grace.

In summary, while good works are not the means by which we initially receive God's grace and justification, they are necessary for our ongoing journey of faith, growth in holiness, and cooperation with God's grace. Good works are the fruit of our faith and love, and they play a role in our response to God's gift of salvation.

THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

THE GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

How do we know that we have received the Holy Spirit? Let us consider several ways in which, taken together, we are assured that the Holy Spirit is transforming our daily lives and leading us onward in sanctification and perfection in Christ.

First, we have received the sacraments of the Church. Christ gives us the sacraments through the power of his Holy Spirit.

Second, we are acting more and more like Jesus did. Our lifestyles are reflecting the values and teachings of Jesus.

Third, we are thinking and feeling more like Jesus did. Our inward desires are being transformed into Gospel values.

Fourth, we are experiencing the Fruits of the Spirit in our lives. We notice these traits in our lives, and others notice them too.

Fifth, we are making good use of the Gifts of the Spirit. We consciously and conscientiously apply these spiritual gifts.

Sixth, we are providing a good example to others. Authenticity makes a difference that other people both notice and desire.

Seventh, we are inviting others to experience the Spirit. We intentionally reach out to others as missionary disciples.

In our pursuit of virtuous excellence in the spiritual life, we want to become holy as the Lord himself is holy. We want to become perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. We want to fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the Church. We want to work out our salvation in fear and trembling. The Lord wants us to do all of these things, and when we commit our lives to him, his Holy Spirit dwells within us to help us accomplish his will.

THE GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Wisdom: This gift allows individuals to see and judge things from a divine perspective. It helps them understand the deeper meaning of life and God's plan for salvation.

Understanding: This gift helps individuals comprehend the truths of the faith and the teachings of the Church. It enables them to grasp the mysteries of God and His Word.

Counsel: Also known as right judgment, this gift enables individuals to discern between right and wrong, to make sound moral decisions, and to seek advice and guidance from the Holy Spirit.

Fortitude: This gift provides individuals with the strength and courage to live out their faith in the face of challenges, persecution, and temptation. It empowers them to stand firm in their convictions and to persevere in their commitment to God.

Knowledge: This gift grants individuals a deeper understanding of God's revelation, His creation, and the purpose of human existence. It helps them seek truth and grow in their relationship with God.

Piety: This gift inspires individuals to have a deep reverence and love for God, to worship Him with sincerity and devotion, and to live a life of prayer and worship.

Fear of the Lord: Also known as wonder and awe, this gift instills in individuals a profound respect and reverence for God's majesty and power. It helps them avoid sin and motivates them to live in accordance with God's will.

ABOUT THE GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Although freely given to us by the Holy Spirit, these gifts must be actually used in our lives to produce their intended effects. Our cooperation with these freely given gifts is motivated by the Holy Spirit dwelling within our hearts and minds by faith.

- How do Knowledge and Understanding work together to help us live our faith and share our faith with others? For example, what is the difference between intellectual knowledge and experiential understanding?
- How do Wisdom and Counsel work together to make us wise and learn how to give sound advice to others? For example, how do wise people advise other people about applying the gifts of the Spirit in their lives?
- How do Piety and Fear of the Lord work together to help us lift up our hearts and minds to God in prayer? For example, what is the difference between saying ritual prayers and actually encountering God in prayer?
- How does Fortitude help us courageously apply all these gifts into an authentic Christian lifestyle of faith? For example, how do we live out our faith in such convincing ways that we attract others toward embracing our faith?

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit produce the Fruits of the Holy Spirit and motivate us to pursue excellence in Christian living. As evidenced by the moral and the theological virtues of our faith, God wishes that his gifts become our merits through grace.