

SECOND PART OF THE SECOND PART, QUESTION 8

Of the Gift of Understanding (In Eight Articles)

We must now consider the gifts of understand and knowledge, which respond to the virtue of faith. With regard to the gift of understanding there are eight points of inquiry:

- (1) Whether understanding is a gift of the Holy Ghost?
- (2) Whether it can be together with faith in the same person?
- (3) Whether the understanding which is a gift of the Holy Ghost, is only speculative, or practical also?
- (4) Whether all who are in a state of grace have the gift of understanding?
- (5) Whether this gift is to be found in those who are without grace?
- (6) Of the relationship of the gift of understanding to the other gifts;
- (7) Which of the beatitudes corresponds to this gift?
- (8) Which of the fruits?

Whether understanding is a gift of the Holy Ghost?

IIa IIae q. 8 a. 1

Objection 1. It would seem that understanding is not a gift of the Holy Ghost. For the gifts of grace are distinct from the gifts of nature, since they are given in addition to the latter. Now understanding is a natural habit of the soul, whereby self-evident principles are known, as stated in *Ethic. vi, 6*. Therefore it should not be reckoned among the gifts of the Holy Ghost.

Objection 2. Further, the Divine gifts are shared by creatures according to their capacity and mode, as Dionysius states (*Div. Nom. iv*). Now the mode of human nature is to know the truth, not simply (which is a sign of understanding), but discursively (which is a sign of reason), as Dionysius explains (*Div. Nom. vii*). Therefore the Divine knowledge which is bestowed on man, should be called a gift of reason rather than a gift of understanding.

Objection 3. Further, in the powers of the soul the understanding is condivided with the will (*De Anima iii, 9,10*). Now no gift of the Holy Ghost is called after the will. Therefore no gift of the Holy Ghost should receive the name of understanding.

On the contrary, It is written (*Is. 11:2*): “The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom of understanding.”

I answer that, Understanding implies an intimate knowledge, for “*intelligere*” [to understand] is the same as “*intus legere*” [to read inwardly]. This is clear to anyone who considers the difference between intellect and sense, because sensitive knowledge is concerned with external sensible qualities, whereas intellectual knowledge penetrates into the very essence of a thing, because the object of the intellect is “what a thing is,” as stated in *De Anima iii, 6*.

Now there are many kinds of things that are hidden within, to find which human knowledge has to penetrate within so to speak. Thus, under the accidents lies hidden the nature of the substantial reality, under words lies hidden their meaning; under likenesses and figures

the truth they denote lies hidden (because the intelligible world is enclosed within as compared with the sensible world, which is perceived externally), and effects lie hidden in their causes, and vice versa. Hence we may speak of understanding with regard to all these things.

Since, however, human knowledge begins with the outside of things as it were, it is evident that the stronger the light of the understanding, the further can it penetrate into the heart of things. Now the natural light of our understanding is of finite power; wherefore it can reach to a certain fixed point. Consequently man needs a supernatural light in order to penetrate further still so as to know what it cannot know by its natural light: and this supernatural light which is bestowed on man is called the gift of understanding.

Reply to Objection 1. The natural light instilled within us, manifests only certain general principles, which are known naturally. But since man is ordained to supernatural happiness, as stated above (q. 2, a. 3; *Ia IIae, q. 3, a. 8*), man needs to reach to certain higher truths, for which he requires the gift of understanding.

Reply to Objection 2. The discourse of reason always begins from an understanding and ends at an understanding; because we reason by proceeding from certain understood principles, and the discourse of reason is perfected when we come to understand what hitherto we ignored. Hence the act of reasoning proceeds from something previously understood. Now a gift of grace does not proceed from the light of nature, but is added thereto as perfecting it. Wherefore this addition is not called “reason” but “understanding,” since the additional light is in comparison with what we know supernaturally, what the natural light is in regard to those things which we know from the first.

Reply to Objection 3. “Will” denotes simply a movement of the appetite without indicating any excellence; whereas “understanding” denotes a certain excellence of a knowledge that penetrates into the heart

of things. Hence the supernatural gift is called after the understanding rather than after the will.

Whether the gift of understanding is compatible with faith?

IIa IIae q. 8 a. 2

Objection 1. It would seem that the gift of understanding is incompatible with faith. For Augustine says (QQ. lxxxiii, qu. 15) that “the thing which is understood is bounded by the comprehension of him who understands it.” But the thing which is believed is not comprehended, according to the word of the Apostle to the Philippians 3:12: “Not as though I had already comprehended [Douay: ‘attained’], or were already perfect.” Therefore it seems that faith and understanding are incompatible in the same subject.

Objection 2. Further, whatever is understood is seen by the understanding. But faith is of things that appear not, as stated above (q. 1, a. 4; q. 4, a. 1). Therefore faith is incompatible with understanding in the same subject.

Objection 3. Further, understanding is more certain than science. But science and faith are incompatible in the same subject, as stated above (q. 1, Aa. 4,5). Much less, therefore, can understanding and faith be in the same subject.

On the contrary, Gregory says (Moral. i, 15) that “understanding enlightens the mind concerning the things it has heard.” Now one who has faith can be enlightened in his mind concerning what he has heard; thus it is written (Lk. 24:27,32) that Our Lord opened the scriptures to His disciples, that they might understand them. Therefore understanding is compatible with faith.

I answer that, We need to make a twofold distinction here: one on the side of faith, the other on the part of understanding.

On the side of faith the distinction to be made is that certain things, of themselves, come directly under faith, such as the mystery to three Persons in one God, and the incarnation of God the Son; whereas other things come under faith, through being subordinate, in one way or another, to those just mentioned, for instance, all that is contained in the Divine Scriptures.

On the part of understanding the distinction to be observed is that there are two ways in which we may be said to understand. In one way, we understand a thing perfectly, when we arrive at knowing the essence of the thing we understand, and the very truth considered in itself of the proposition understood. In this way, so long as the state of faith lasts, we cannot understand those things which are the direct object of faith: although certain other things that are subordinate to faith can be understood even in this way.

In another way we understand a thing imperfectly, when the essence of a thing or the truth of a proposition is not known as to its quiddity or mode of being, and yet we know that whatever be the outward appearances, they do not contradict the truth, in so far as we understand that we ought not to depart from matters of faith, for the sake of things that appear externally. In this way, even during the state of faith, nothing hinders us from understanding even those things which are the direct object of faith.

This suffices for the Replies to the Objections: for the first three argue in reference to perfect understanding, while the last refers to the understanding of matters subordinate to faith.

Whether the gift of understanding is merely speculative or also practical?

IIa IIae q. 8 a. 3

Objection 1. It would seem that understanding, considered as a gift of the Holy Ghost, is not practical, but only speculative. For, according to Gregory (Moral. i, 32), “understanding penetrates certain more exalted things.” But the practical intellect is occupied, not with exalted, but with inferior things, viz. singulars, about which actions are concerned. Therefore understanding, considered as a gift, is not practical.

Objection 2. Further, the gift of understanding is something more excellent than the intellectual virtue of understanding. But the intellectual virtue of understanding is concerned with none but necessary things, according to the Philosopher (Ethic. vi, 6). Much more, therefore, is the gift of understanding concerned with none but necessary matters. Now the practical intellect is not about necessary things, but about things which may be otherwise than they are, and which may result from man’s activity. Therefore the gift of understanding

is not practical.

Objection 3. Further, the gift of understanding enlightens the mind in matters which surpass natural reason. Now human activities, with which the practical intellect is concerned, do not surpass natural reason, which is the directing principle in matters of action, as was made clear above (Ia IIae, q. 58, a. 2; Ia IIae, q. 71, a. 6). Therefore the gift of understanding is not practical.

On the contrary, It is written (Ps. 110:10): “A good understanding to all that do it.”

I answer that, As stated above (a. 2), the gift of understanding is not only about those things which come under faith first and principally, but also about all things subordinate to faith. Now good actions have a certain relationship to faith: since “faith worketh through charity,” according to the Apostle (Gal. 5:6). Hence the gift of understanding extends also to certain actions, not as

though these were its principal object, but in so far as the rule of our actions is the eternal law, to which the higher reason, which is perfected by the gift of understanding, adheres by contemplating and consulting it, as Augustine states (De Trin. xii, 7).

Reply to Objection 1. The things with which human actions are concerned are not surpassingly exalted considered in themselves, but, as referred to the rule of the eternal law, and to the end of Divine happiness, they are exalted so that they can be the matter of understanding.

Reply to Objection 2. The excellence of the gift of

understanding consists precisely in its considering eternal or necessary matters, not only as they are rules of human actions, because a cognitive virtue is the more excellent, according to the greater extent of its object.

Reply to Objection 3. The rule of human actions is the human reason and the eternal law, as stated above (Ia IIae, q. 71, a. 6). Now the eternal law surpasses human reason: so that the knowledge of human actions, as ruled by the eternal law, surpasses the natural reason, and requires the supernatural light of a gift of the Holy Ghost.

Whether the gift of understanding is in all who are in a state of grace?

IIa IIae q. 8 a. 4

Objection 1. It would seem that the gift of understanding is not in all who are in a state of grace. For Gregory says (Moral. ii, 49) that “the gift of understanding is given as a remedy against dulness of mind.” Now many who are in a state of grace suffer from dulness of mind. Therefore the gift of understanding is not in all who are in a state of grace.

Objection 2. Further, of all the things that are connected with knowledge, faith alone seems to be necessary for salvation, since by faith Christ dwells in our hearts, according to Eph. 3:17. Now the gift of understanding is not in everyone that has faith; indeed, those who have faith ought to pray that they may understand, as Augustine says (De Trin. xv, 27). Therefore the gift of understanding is not necessary for salvation: and, consequently, is not in all who are in a state of grace.

Objection 3. Further, those things which are common to all who are in a state of grace, are never withdrawn from them. Now the grace of understanding and of the other gifts sometimes withdraws itself profitably, for, at times, “when the mind is puffed up with understanding sublime things, it becomes sluggish and dull in base and vile things,” as Gregory observes (Moral. ii, 49). Therefore the gift of understanding is not in all who are in a state of grace.

On the contrary, It is written (Ps. 81:5): “They have not known or understood, they walk on in darkness.” But no one who is in a state of grace walks in darkness, according to Jn. 8:12: “He that followeth Me, walketh not in darkness.” Therefore no one who is in a state of grace is without the gift of understanding.

I answer that, In all who are in a state of grace, there must needs be rectitude of the will, since grace prepares man’s will for good, according to Augustine (Contra Julian. Pelag. iv, 3). Now the will cannot be rightly directed to good, unless there be already some knowledge of the truth, since the object of the will is good understood, as stated in De Anima iii, 7. Again, just as the Holy Ghost directs man’s will by the gift of charity, so as to move it directly to some supernatural good; so also, by the gift of understanding, He enlightens the human mind, so that it knows some supernatural truth, to which the right will needs to tend.

Therefore, just as the gift of charity is in all of those who have sanctifying grace, so also is the gift of understanding.

Reply to Objection 1. Some who have sanctifying grace may suffer dulness of mind with regard to things that are not necessary for salvation; but with regard to those that are necessary for salvation, they are sufficiently instructed by the Holy Ghost, according to 1 Jn. 2:27: “His unction teacheth you of all things.”

Reply to Objection 2. Although not all who have faith understand fully the things that are proposed to be believed, yet they understand that they ought to believe them, and that they ought nowise to deviate from them.

Reply to Objection 3. With regard to things necessary for salvation, the gift of understanding never withdraws from holy persons: but, in order that they may have no incentive to pride, it does withdraw sometimes with regard to other things, so that their mind is unable to penetrate all things clearly.

Whether the gift of understanding is found also in those who have not sanctifying grace?

IIa IIae q. 8 a. 5

Objection 1. It would seem that the gift of understanding is found also in those who have not sanctifying grace. For Augustine, in expounding the words of Ps. 118:20: “My soul hath coveted to long for Thy justifications,” says: “Understanding flies ahead, and man’s will is weak and slow to follow.” But in all who have sanctifying grace, the will is prompt on account of char-

ity. Therefore the gift of understanding can be in those who have not sanctifying grace.

Objection 2. Further, it is written (Dan. 10:1) that “there is need of understanding in a” prophetic “vision,” so that, seemingly, there is no prophecy without the gift of understanding. But there can be prophecy without sanctifying grace, as evidenced by Mat. 7:22, where

those who say: “We have prophesied in Thy name*,” are answered with the words: “I never knew you.” Therefore the gift of understanding can be without sanctifying grace.

Objection 3. Further, the gift of understanding responds to the virtue of faith, according to Is. 7:9, following another reading*: “If you will not believe you shall not understand.” Now faith can be without sanctifying grace. Therefore the gift of understanding can be without it.

On the contrary, Our Lord said (Jn. 6:45): “Every one that hath heard of the Father, and hath learned, cometh to Me.” Now it is by the intellect, as Gregory observes (Moral. i, 32), that we learn or understand what we hear. Therefore whoever has the gift of understanding, cometh to Christ, which is impossible without sanctifying grace. Therefore the gift of understanding cannot be without sanctifying grace.

I answer that, As stated above (Ia IIae, q. 68, Aa. 1,2) the gifts of the Holy Ghost perfect the soul, according as it is amenable to the motion of the Holy Ghost. Accordingly then, the intellectual light of grace is called the gift of understanding, in so far as man’s understanding is easily moved by the Holy Ghost, the consideration of which movement depends on a true apprehension of the end. Wherefore unless the human intellect be moved by the Holy Ghost so far as to have a right estimate of the end, it has not yet obtained the

gift of understanding, however much the Holy Ghost may have enlightened it in regard to other truths that are preambles to the faith.

Now to have a right estimate about the last end one must not be in error about the end, and must adhere to it firmly as to the greatest good: and no one can do this without sanctifying grace; even as in moral matters a man has a right estimate about the end through a habit of virtue. Therefore no one has the gift of understanding without sanctifying grace.

Reply to Objection 1. By understanding Augustine means any kind of intellectual light, that, however, does not fulfil all the conditions of a gift, unless the mind of man be so far perfected as to have a right estimate about the end.

Reply to Objection 2. The understanding that is requisite for prophecy, is a kind of enlightenment of the mind with regard to the things revealed to the prophet: but it is not an enlightenment of the mind with regard to a right estimate about the last end, which belongs to the gift of understanding.

Reply to Objection 3. Faith implies merely assent to what is proposed but understanding implies a certain perception of the truth, which perception, except in one who has sanctifying grace, cannot regard the end, as stated above. Hence the comparison fails between understanding and faith.

Whether the gift of understanding is distinct from the other gifts?

Ia IIae q. 8 a. 6

Objection 1. It would seem that the gift of understanding is not distinct from the other gifts. For there is no distinction between things whose opposites are not distinct. Now “wisdom is contrary to folly, understanding is contrary to dulness, counsel is contrary to rashness, knowledge is contrary to ignorance,” as Gregory states (Moral. ii, 49). But there would seem to be no difference between folly, dulness, ignorance and rashness. Therefore neither does understanding differ from the other gifts.

Objection 2. Further, the intellectual virtue of understanding differs from the other intellectual virtues in that it is proper to it to be about self-evident principles. But the gift of understanding is not about any self-evident principles, since the natural habit of first principles suffices in respect of those matters which are naturally self-evident: while faith is sufficient in respect of such things as are supernatural, since the articles of faith are like first principles in supernatural knowledge, as stated above (q. 1, a. 7). Therefore the gift of understanding does not differ from the other intellectual gifts.

Objection 3. Further, all intellectual knowledge is either speculative or practical. Now the gift of understanding is related to both, as stated above (a. 3). There-

fore it is not distinct from the other intellectual gifts, but comprises them all.

On the contrary, When several things are enumerated together they must be, in some way, distinct from one another, because distinction is the origin of number. Now the gift of understanding is enumerated together with the other gifts, as appears from Is. 11:2. Therefore the gift of understanding is distinct from the other gifts.

I answer that, The difference between the gift of understanding and three of the others, viz. piety, fortitude, and fear, is evident, since the gift of understanding belongs to the cognitive power, while the three belong to the appetitive power.

But the difference between this gift of understanding and the remaining three, viz. wisdom, knowledge, and counsel, which also belong to the cognitive power, is not so evident. To some[†], it seems that the gift of understanding differs from the gifts of knowledge and counsel, in that these two belong to practical knowledge, while the gift of understanding belongs to speculative knowledge; and that it differs from the gift of wisdom, which also belongs to speculative knowledge, in that wisdom is concerned with judgment, while understanding renders the mind apt to grasp the things that are proposed, and to penetrate into their very heart. And

* Vulg.: ‘Have we not prophesied in Thy name?’ * The Septuagint

† William of Auxerre, Sum. Aur. III, iii, 8

in this sense we have assigned the number of the gifts, above (Ia IIae, q. 68, a. 4).

But if we consider the matter carefully, the gift of understanding is concerned not only with speculative, but also with practical matters, as stated above (a. 3), and likewise, the gift of knowledge regards both matters, as we shall show further on (q. 9, a. 3), and consequently, we must take their distinction in some other way. For all these four gifts are ordained to supernatural knowledge, which, in us, takes its foundation from faith. Now “faith is through hearing” (Rom. 10:17). Hence some things must be proposed to be believed by man, not as seen, but as heard, to which he assents by faith. But faith, first and principally, is about the First Truth, secondarily, about certain considerations concerning creatures, and furthermore extends to the direction of human actions, in so far as it works through charity, as appears from what has been said above (q. 4, a. 2, ad 3).

Accordingly on the part of the things proposed to faith for belief, two things are requisite on our part: first that they be penetrated or grasped by the intellect, and this belongs to the gift of understanding. Secondly, it is necessary that man should judge these things aright, that he should esteem that he ought to adhere to these things, and to withdraw from their opposites: and this judgment, with regard to Divine things belong to the gift of wisdom, but with regard to created things, belongs to the gift of knowledge, and as to its application

to individual actions, belongs to the gift of counsel.

Reply to Objection 1. The foregoing difference between those four gifts is clearly in agreement with the distinction of those things which Gregory assigns as their opposites. For dulness is contrary to sharpness, since an intellect is said, by comparison, to be sharp, when it is able to penetrate into the heart of the things that are proposed to it. Hence it is dulness of mind that renders the mind unable to pierce into the heart of a thing. A man is said to be a fool if he judges wrongly about the common end of life, wherefore folly is properly opposed to wisdom, which makes us judge aright about the universal cause. Ignorance implies a defect in the mind, even about any particular things whatever, so that it is contrary to knowledge, which gives man a right judgment about particular causes, viz. about creatures. Rashness is clearly opposed to counsel, whereby man does not proceed to action before deliberating with his reason.

Reply to Objection 2. The gift of understanding is about the first principles of that knowledge which is conferred by grace; but otherwise than faith, because it belongs to faith to assent to them, while it belongs to the gift of understanding to pierce with the mind the things that are said.

Reply to Objection 3. The gift of understanding is related to both kinds of knowledge, viz. speculative and practical, not as to the judgment, but as to apprehension, by grasping what is said.

Whether the sixth beatitude, “Blessed are the clean of heart,” etc., responds to the gift of understanding?

Ia IIae q. 8 a. 7

Objection 1. It would seem that the sixth beatitude, “Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God,” does not respond to the gift of understanding. Because cleanness of heart seems to belong chiefly to the appetite. But the gift of understanding belongs, not to the appetite, but rather to the intellectual power. Therefore the aforesaid beatitude does not respond to the gift of understanding.

Objection 2. Further, it is written (Acts 15:9): “Purifying their hearts by faith.” Now cleanness of heart is acquired by the heart being purified. Therefore the aforesaid beatitude is related to the virtue of faith rather than to the gift of understanding.

Objection 3. Further, the gifts of the Holy Ghost perfect man in the present state of life. But the sight of God does not belong to the present life, since it is that which gives happiness to the Blessed, as stated above (Ia IIae, q. 3, a. 8). Therefore the sixth beatitude which comprises the sight of God, does not respond to the gift of understanding.

On the contrary, Augustine says (De Serm. Dom. in Monte i, 4): “The sixth work of the Holy Ghost which is understanding, is applicable to the clean of heart, whose eye being purified, they can see what eye hath

not seen.”

I answer that, Two things are contained in the sixth beatitude, as also in the others, one by way of merit, viz. cleanness of heart; the other by way of reward, viz. the sight of God, as stated above (Ia IIae, q. 69, Aa. 2 ,4), and each of these, in some way, responds to the gift of understanding.

For cleanness is twofold. One is a preamble and a disposition to seeing God, and consists in the heart being cleansed of inordinate affections: and this cleanness of heart is effected by the virtues and gifts belonging to the appetitive power. The other cleanness of heart is a kind of complement to the sight of God; such is the cleanness of the mind that is purged of phantasms and errors, so as to receive the truths which are proposed to it about God, no longer by way of corporeal phantasms, nor infected with heretical misrepresentations: and this cleanness is the result of the gift of understanding.

Again, the sight of God is twofold. One is perfect, whereby God’s Essence is seen: the other is imperfect, whereby, though we see not what God is, yet we see what He is not; and whereby, the more perfectly do we know God in this life, the more we understand that He surpasses all that the mind comprehends. Each of these

visions of God belongs to the gift of understanding; the first, to the gift of understanding in its state of perfection, as possessed in heaven; the second, to the gift of understanding in its state of inchoation, as possessed by wayfarers.

This suffices for the Replies to the Objections: for

the first two arguments refer to the first kind of cleanness; while the third refers to the perfect vision of God. Moreover the gifts both perfect us in this life by way of inchoation, and will be fulfilled, as stated above (Ia IIae, q. 69, a. 2).

Whether faith, among the fruits, responds to the gift of understanding?

IIa IIae q. 8 a. 8

Objection 1. It would seem that, among the fruits, faith does not respond to the gift of understanding. For understanding is the fruit of faith, since it is written (Is. 7:9) according to another reading*: “If you will not believe you shall not understand,” where our version has: “If you will not believe, you shall not continue.” Therefore fruit is not the fruit of understanding.

Objection 2. Further, that which precedes is not the fruit of what follows. But faith seems to precede understanding, since it is the foundation of the entire spiritual edifice, as stated above (q. 4, Aa. 1,7). Therefore faith is not the fruit of understanding.

Objection 3. Further, more gifts pertain to the intellect than to the appetite. Now, among the fruits, only one pertains to the intellect; namely, faith, while all the others pertain to the appetite. Therefore faith, seemingly, does not pertain to understanding more than to wisdom, knowledge or counsel.

On the contrary, The end of a thing is its fruit. Now the gift of understanding seems to be ordained chiefly to the certitude of faith, which certitude is reckoned a fruit. For a gloss on Gal. 5:22 says that the “faith which is a fruit, is certitude about the unseen.” Therefore faith, among the fruits, responds to the gift of understanding.

I answer that, The fruits of the Spirit, as stated above (Ia IIae, q. 70, a. 1), when we were discussing them, are so called because they are something ultimate and delightful, produced in us by the power of the Holy Ghost. Now the ultimate and delightful has the nature of an end, which is the proper object of the will: and consequently that which is ultimate and delightful with regard to the will, must be, after a fashion, the fruit of all the other things that pertain to the other powers.

Accordingly, therefore, to this kind of gift of virtue

that perfects a power, we may distinguish a double fruit: one, belonging to the same power; the other, the last of all as it were, belonging to the will. In this way we must conclude that the fruit which properly responds to the gift of understanding is faith, i.e. the certitude of faith; while the fruit that responds to it last of all is joy, which belongs to the will.

Reply to Objection 1. Understanding is the fruit of faith, taken as a virtue. But we are not taking faith in this sense here, but for a kind of certitude of faith, to which man attains by the gift of understanding.

Reply to Objection 2. Faith cannot altogether precede understanding, for it would be impossible to assent by believing what is proposed to be believed, without understanding it in some way. However, the perfection of understanding follows the virtue of faith: which perfection of understanding is itself followed by a kind of certainty of faith.

Reply to Objection 3. The fruit of practical knowledge cannot consist in that very knowledge, since knowledge of that kind is known not for its own sake, but for the sake of something else. On the other hand, speculative knowledge has its fruit in its very self, which fruit is the certitude about the thing known. Hence the gift of counsel, which belongs only to practical knowledge, has no corresponding fruit of its own: while the gifts of wisdom, understanding and knowledge, which can belong also to speculative knowledge, have but one corresponding fruit, which is certainly denoted by the name of faith. The reason why there are several fruits pertaining to the appetitive faculty, is because, as already stated, the character of end, which the word fruit implies, pertains to the appetitive rather than to the intellective part.

* The Septuagint