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Jesus alone possessed the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit in their fullness. But, the Holy Spirit graciously gives those same gifts to all who follow Jesus. In Baptism, we are clothed with Christ and become a member of His Body the Church, sharing in His dignity as priest, prophet, and king. In Confirmation, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit so that, through His holy anointing, we “*may be conformed more perfectly to Christ, the Son of God*” (*The Rite of Confirmation*). As St. Paul teaches, “*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son ...*” (Rom 8:29). Through the grace of Baptism and Confirmation, we take on the identity of Christ. We become one with Him and come to share those seven gifts given to Him as Messiah. Blessed with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, we continue His work in our world.

The seven gifts are our inheritance as baptized and confirmed Christians. We do not earn them. We do not merit them. They are given to us gratuitously. They make us open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in our lives. They help us grow in holiness, making us fit for heaven.

These seven gifts of the Holy Spirit help us live a truly authentic Christian way of life. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “*The moral life of Christians is sustained by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These are permanent dispositions which make a person docile in following the promptings of the Holy Spirit. . . .They complete and perfect the virtues of those who receive them. . . readily obeying divine inspirations*” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1830-31).





CHAPTER 6

The Gift of Piety

True Loyalty to God and to Neighbor

Inside St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, to the right of the main entrance, stands Michelangelo's *Pietà*. The *Pietà* quietly draws the viewer into the profound grief that Mary experienced at the death of her only son. Holding the lifeless body of Jesus on her lap, Mary looks with deep affection on the child she gave to the world to be its savior. With outstretched left hand, she beckons the viewer to share her own sentiments of love and devotion to Jesus.

Michelangelo's Renaissance masterpiece memorializes in marble the virtue of piety. No surprise that Michelangelo would choose piety as the subject of the world's most famous religious sculpture. The ancient Romans, whose art and culture were at the heart of the Renaissance, placed great value on piety.

For some, the noun "piety" and the adjective "pious" may suggest a saccharine disposition or an unctuous attitude. It conjures

up images of an overly excessive religiosity or a sentimental superficiality in matters of religion. Some may even make the mistake of equating piety with hypocrisy. But, this is to misunderstand the real meaning of piety as a virtue.

The ancient Romans traditionally understood piety as taking one's responsibilities seriously. A pious individual was the person who fulfilled all of his or her duties to the gods and to others. At the time that the Roman Republic was in its decline, the great philosopher and orator Cicero said, "*Piety is justice toward the gods and the foundation of all virtues*" (*De Natura Deorum* 1.116). He also said that piety "*admonishes us to do our duty to our country or our parents or other blood relations*" (*De inventione* 2.22.66). Piety was both a religious and social virtue. So it likewise is in Sacred Scripture.

On the one hand, Psalm 119 exemplifies piety as a religious virtue. This psalm, the longest in the psalter, extols God's law. Each verse contains a special word for the law, e.g., ordinances, word, commandments, statutes, precepts, and decrees. The psalm makes clear that the truly good person, the pious individual, delights to do God's will

because his or her own desire and prayer is to do what God commands. This psalm captures the essence of Hebrew piety in terms of God. Piety is reverencing and respecting God, keeping His commandments not out of a sense of fear or dread, not as a heavy burden, but as a joyful response to God Who wants what it is best for us.

On the other hand, the book of Ruth epitomizes piety as a social virtue. Ruth, a woman from Moab, marries the son of Naomi from Bethlehem. Ruth's husband dies as well as his brother, and their widowed mother Naomi is left alone. Ruth remains steadfast in her love and care of her mother-in-law. When Naomi is about to return to her home in Judah, Ruth tells Naomi, "*Wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God*" (Ru 1:16). For the Hebrews, this is true filial piety. Ruth remains devoted and loyal to family. Ruth's piety is so blessed by God that she, a foreigner, becomes the great-grandmother of David, from whose line the Messiah is born.

Michelangelo's *Pietà* captures both the religious and the social dimension of

piety. Mary tenderly holds the body of the Crucified Jesus. No trace of rebellion, no sign of anger across her face. Her serene countenance betrays her total acquiescence to the will of God. Her Son was obedient to the Father's will, accepting death on the Cross for our salvation. Mary, likewise, is obedient to God's will, even as the sword of sorrow pierces her maternal heart.

Furthermore, Mary is with Jesus to the bitter end. From the crib to the Cross, Mary was always at the side of her Son, supporting Him and loving Him. She is present to Him throughout His public ministry. Nothing was ever able to keep her apart from the child that God had given into her care. From Cana to Calvary, Mary is there loving her Son. And, Jesus himself returned her great love. In His last moments, He cares for His mother, entrusting her to John, the Beloved Apostle. Never abandoning one's own: is this not the greatest example of duty and responsibility within a family? This is true piety.

The pages of Scripture are crowded with other pious individuals who are steadfast in loving obedience to God and attentive to the needs of others. Abraham is willing to

sacrifice his son Isaac in obedience to God. Joseph refuses to do anything that offends God grievously. Simeon and Anna prayerfully await the Messiah. Mary Magdalene is the first to visit the tomb of Jesus. Tabitha, the wealthy disciple, attends the needs of the poor at Joppa. Each of these, with unselfish hearts and great joy, are devoted to God and to neighbor.

Piety is one of the seven gifts given by the Holy Spirit at Baptism and Confirmation. As an infused gift, it is a disposition or attitude that helps us follow the inspirations of the Holy Spirit (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1830-1831). This divinely given gift nourishes sentiments of profound confidence in God and His will for us. It moves us to works of mercy and compassion toward others.

Piety makes it easier for us to trust God, even when we do not understand His will. Piety opens the way for us to live our ordinary life in intimacy with God. Piety prompts us to pray. It allows us to be held in God's loving embrace. Moved by the gift of piety, we live our lives as a continual conversation with God. Not just our words but our deeds and our silence become a

prayer. Piety helps us pray without ceasing, just as Paul tells us to do in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. And, when we pray without ceasing, we always have a reason to be thankful. In pleasant and prosperous moments, we are grateful for God's gifts. In trials and deprivations, we rejoice in His providence. The truly pious individual remains united with God in heart and mind.

Furthermore, as a gift of the Holy Spirit, piety helps us to respect and love others with practical charity, coming to assist them in their need. We see others as children of God. We recognize them as part of the family of God to which we belong. We feel urged to treat all *“with the kindness and friendliness which are proper to a frank and fraternal relationship ... [Piety] is at the root of that new human community, which is based on the civilization of love”* (Pope St. John Paul II, *Angelus*, May 14, 1989).

Reverencing and obeying God in all things and remaining steadfast in prayer can be difficult and painful. Remaining united with family members and assisting those in need is not always easy. But the gift of piety enables us to be unswerving in our devotion to God and one another. Where

we may be tempted to fail, the Holy Spirit strengthens us with this gift. The heart of true piety is unshakable loyalty, so clearly seen in Jesus and Mary in the Passion.

