

John Poinsoot: On The Gift of Counsel

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This essay examines the teaching of John Poinsoot on the gift of the Holy Spirit called Counsel. In his treatment of the gift of Counsel, John Poinsoot clearly exercises the role of a theologian. But the theological essay that he produces decisively demonstrates his philosophical genius. The academic conventions of seventeenth-century Spanish scholasticism adopted by Poinsoot entailed a complete subordination to the work of Aquinas. But some 350 years after his death, we are in position to recognize how much Poinsoot's own intelligence, manifest in his philosophical acumen, advanced his writing on Aquinas well beyond the status of a simple commentary. In this regard, Poinsoot differs from the late medieval commentator John Capreolus (d. 1444) whose reputation rests principally on the merits of his organization of Aquinas's texts. In particular, Poinsoot's discussion of the gift of Counsel displays a penetrating psychological analysis of the moral conscience.

Poinsoot's treatise on the gifts occurs in his *Cursus Theologicus*, Disputatio XVIII, Article 5, where it is presented as commentary on Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* Ia IIae, qq. 68–70.¹ In theological discourse, the gifts of

¹ The first edition of the treatise on the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Disputation XVIII) was published in 1645, one year after the death of Poinsoot, by Didacus Ramirez as part of the 5th volume of Poinsoot's *Cursus Theologicus*. In the Vivès edition, printed in Paris in 1885, the text of Disputation XVIII appears in vol. VI, pp. 655–665. All references to the texts of John Poinsoot are from this edition, [and give the Disp., art., no. and (page no.)]. For the place of this treatise in the life of John Poinsoot, see the well-annotated chronology established by John N. Deely in his interpretative arrangement of Poinsoot's *Tractatus de Signis, The Semiotic of John Poinsoot* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1985), esp. pp. 443–444.

the Holy Spirit represent infused supernatural *habitus* of the soul that one can really differentiate from the Christian moral and theological virtues. As virtue-like *habitus*, moreover, the seven gifts form an ensemble of distinctive spiritual qualities that shape the life of the Christian believer. A discussion of Counsel, the gift that aids practical reasoning, allows Poinsoot to explain how a gift exercises a direct formative influence on a person's moral comportment. It is this specific detail of Poinsoot's general treatment that I want to focus on in this essay.

Poinsoot begins his discussion of the gift of Counsel by distinguishing Counsel and the other traditional gifts of the Holy Spirit. The very name of the gift, observes Poinsoot, suggests that Counsel represents a divine assistance that prompts the human person from within.² And he supports this contention by reference to St. Thomas's remark in the *Summa Theologiae* that the word counsel implies "the mind being moved to ponder under the influence of another's advising" (*motio mentis consiliata ab alio consiliante*).³ It remains for Poinsoot to show the distinctive operation of the gift of Counsel, distinguishing it from other divine movements so as to illumine the Church's practice in presenting Counsel as one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁴

Demonstrating his creative use of Renaissance scholastic categories, Poinsoot advances three arguments for establishing the conclusion that Counsel forms a distinct gift. First, he shows that one can distinguish this gift from the virtue of theological faith, from the gifts of Knowledge and Wisdom that respectively accompany faith and charity, and from the infused virtue of prudence. By establishing this distinction, Poinsoot replies to those authors who hold the view that these infused *habitus* and higher movements are sufficient for directing the Christian moral life.

Secondly and as a result of the first argument, Poinsoot affirms that one can identify a specific [formal] object for the gift of Counsel. Does this gift, he asks, embrace every sphere of rational human activity? Or does it concern only the regulation of those actions springing from human appetite—in short, what we call human behavior? Poinsoot argues that Counsel is like the virtue of prudence which it principally aids. The gift of Counsel embraces all that pertains to the virtue of justice aided by the gift of Piety, to

² Disp. XVIII, art. 5, no. 1 (655): "Appellatur autem potius donum concilii, quam donum prudentiae ut magis per hoc insinuetur divina modo et instinctus. . . ."

³ *Summa Theologiae* IIaIIae, q. 52, art. 2, ad 2: "per quod [consilium] potest significari motio mentis consiliatae ab alio consiliante."

⁴ For the latest authoritative expression of this teaching, see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1830–1831.

the virtue of fortitude aided by the gift of the same name, and to the virtue of temperance aided by the gift of Fear of the Lord. Counsel, in other words, directs the entire substance of the moral life.

Thirdly, Poinsot identifies a special act that belongs to the gift of Counsel. Indeed, some considerations suggest that there may not be a specific act that belongs exclusively to the gift of Counsel—the psychological landscape of the moral life being already sufficiently occupied. While Poinsot admits that Counsel possesses its own act, he also recognizes the difficulty in identifying it. Consider these quandaries: when a person is not sure that a particular inspiration comes from God, then he or she is compelled to follow the dictates of prudence, with the result that, properly speaking, the subsequent action belongs to the virtue of prudence. Or again, when a person claims to be sure about the authenticity of an interior movement, there exists the danger of promoting an anti-ecclesial individualism. Poinsot is thus challenged to give a specific definition to the act of counsel that does not risk promoting the spiritual hubris that he associates with the Protestant Reform of the 16th century.

In Article 5, which forms the equivalent of a modern chapter, Poinsot develops arguments demonstrating Counsel's specific character, its object, and its act. In addition, he aims to resolve the difficulties associated with each of his conclusions.

I. The Distinctiveness of Counsel

Poinsot's first line of inquiry aims to show how one should distinguish the gift of Counsel from other recognized endowments of the supernatural life. He begins by recounting the opinion of one of his contemporaries—a certain Gregory Martinez.⁵ On the latter's account, Counsel differs from the infused virtue of prudence in the same way that a direct illumination differs from the exercise of discursive reasoning. Thus, prudence discovers "means proportioned to an end from the nature of the case,"⁶ whereas the gift of Counsel enables the moral agent to consider better a "proportioned

⁵ The Spanish Dominican Gregory Martinez (1575–1637), a noted theologian, preacher, and confessor, wrote a commentary on the *Summa Theologiae*; see his *Commentaria super Iallae D. Thomae*, Bk II (Toledo, 1622), q. 68, art. 4, 2nd dubium.

⁶ Disp. XVIII, art. 5, no. 5 (656): "virtus autem prudentiae discursu et inquisitione nititur. Et hoc inde confirmant, quia in prudentia quae est virtus respiciuntur media quae proportionem habent cum fine ex natura rei. . . ."

mean," through an exclusive reliance on the divine power.⁷ But this dichotomous way of distinguishing virtue from gift, says Poinsoot, clearly fails to take adequate account of the special character of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Poinsoot undertakes a three-pronged rebuttal of the theory that Counsel is merely an instance of spiritual illumination. He first argues that the gifts of the Holy Spirit perfect human intelligence, and that they accomplish this goal without prejudice to the ordinary structures of human knowing. Secondly, Poinsoot considers the parallel case of the infused knowledge of Christ. He recalls that even within the grace of the hypostatic union the human mind of Christ continues to function in a way that is recognizably human. Thirdly Poinsoot appeals to ordinary human experience, which for the most part does not corroborate the supposition that persons receiving a special light from God thereby find human reasoning superfluous. Even those who are illumined and directed by the Holy Spirit do not thereby escape all work of discursive reflection. Moreover, it can occur that sudden bursts of inspiration befall even persons deprived of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Instead of distinguishing the gift of Counsel from the virtue of prudence by demarcating inspiration from discursive reasoning, Poinsoot prefers to situate the gift within the full context of moral decision-making. But there still remains a difference between an infused virtue and a gift. In the case of Counsel, the gift regulates human action not within the limits set by human reasoning but rather according to the mode of God's own wisdom. Moreover, the human person's capacity to experience God makes this mode of the gift possible.

Counsel, writes Poinsoot, works through "an intimate experience of divine realities that instruct the soul about everything necessary for salvation, without excluding the operation of discursive reasoning, the need for making inquiry, and the willingness to consult with other persons."⁸ It should be emphatically stressed that Poinsoot does not simply associate the illuminations of Counsel with what a person holds by the theological virtue of

⁷ Ibid.: "Donum autem consilii non respicit medium proportionatum ex natura rei, sed ex divina potentia. . . ."

⁸ Disp. XVIII, art. 5, no. 7 (657): "donum consilii dirigit ea quae agenda sunt non ex rationibus humanis praecise, sed ex divinis non praecise cognitis a fide, aut prophetia, qualiter potest esse in peccatore, sed ex affectu, et experientia divinorum interna, ex qua docetur, et inspiratur de omnibus necessariis ad salutem, etiam cum discursu, et inquisitione, aut consultatione aliorum, quia totum hoc inspiratur, et docetur a Spiritu. . . ."

faith or receives through prophecy; for, as he keenly observes, God communicates through unformed faith even to sinners and sometimes uses them as instruments of prophetic utterance.

Because John Poinsoot considers himself to be engaged principally in a theological enterprise, we are not surprised to discover him resorting to the sacred Scriptures to show that his theological conclusion enjoys the confirmatory witness of divine revelation. Thus, Poinsoot cites texts that he considers to be *loci* where the Bible speaks about Counsel as a special divine gift. First, there is the text from the 24th chapter of the book of Ecclesiasticus: "for her [wisdom's] thought is more abundant than the sea, and her counsel deeper than the great abyss."⁹ Here, Poinsoot points out how the sacred Scriptures emphasize that the human person needs to be moved by God, and indeed led by the Angel of Great Counsel who possesses wisdom more abundant than the sea and counsel deeper than the great abyss.

Poinsoot next considers a text from a later chapter of the same book: the one devoted to the study of the law of the Most High "will give thanks to the Lord in prayer. He will direct his counsel and knowledge aright, and meditate on his secrets."¹⁰ As a theologian with a profound awareness that the God of creation remains one and the same with the God of salvation, Poinsoot's exegesis naturally leads to a broadening of his philosophical insight. The gift of Counsel, he concludes, reveals a new dimension of God's relationship with man, namely, that God touches the human person in the deepest interiority of conscience, the inner sanctuary of the self.

Poinsoot then returns to his effort to identify the gift of Counsel as a special capacity of the moral life. He begins by explaining the difference between the way in which the virtue of prudence directs the moral agent and the way in which the gift of Counsel moves the believer. According to the Aristotelian account, the virtue of prudence cannot operate except that the person enjoy an affective connaturality for the end (*ex affectu ad finem*) as well as exercise a right judgment (*recta aestimatio*) about the end of human well-being. For Poinsoot such adherence to the good ends of human flourishing forms the indispensable starting point for right judgment regarding the means to obtaining a virtuous end. Since Counsel supplies practical reasoning about the means to be chosen in order for the believer to reach beatitude, it operates in a similar way. The gift of Counsel evolves out of a special attachment to God that the person enjoys exclusively

⁹ Sir. 24:29.

¹⁰ Ibid., 39:6b, 7.

through the gift of divine grace; Poinsoot even speaks about this union as mystical: *in mystico affectu, et unione ad Deum*.¹¹ Hence in this respect Counsel generically resembles the gifts of Knowledge and Wisdom which, though they aid human intelligence in grasping the propositions of faith, remain rooted and founded in the same source of connatural acquaintance with God.¹²

Counsel serves the perfection of the moral life in a world marked by human failure and even hardness to God's plans. So Poinsoot suggests that the gift of Counsel is appropriately associated with the theological virtue of hope, whose act, hoping, includes a full reliance on the divine omnipotence and mercy. For the person whose counsel is conformed to the divine Counsel more readily recognizes the opportunities and means that are available only to those who acknowledge what is possible in light of God's omnipotence.

Theological hope, Poinsoot argues, ensures that our counsels are limited neither to what human perspectives would consider the most expedient means to accomplish an end nor to what a person would consider within the limits of his or her own endurance. The persons who place their confidence in God's merciful omnipotence, or as some would put it, confide themselves to his omnipotent mercy, can overcome many obstacles. At the same time, such persons can ready themselves to sustain even extraordinary hardships, such as supporting death, sorrow, and other afflictions, holding riches in contempt, and following nakedly the naked Christ. In short they are readied to accomplish under the regulation of Counsel the works toward which the gifts of Fortitude, Piety and Fear prompt us.

In this theological argument Poinsoot displays a profound psychological intuition concerning the important role that self-esteem rooted in hope plays in shaping a person's capacity for making virtuous choices. The notion of self-esteem might seem an overly modern concept to be found in the thought of Poinsoot, but he arrives at an approximation of this contemporary psychological notion by distinguishing between formed and unformed theological hope. As I have said, those who exercise the virtue of hope judge human potential according to what they believe is possible with divine as-

¹¹ Disp. XVIII, art. 5, no. 10 (658): "Dabitur ergo donum consilii fundatum in mystico affectu, et unione ad Deum."

¹² Ibid.: "Si ergo datur pars speculativa affectiva, et mystica secundum cognitionem, et iudicium fundatum in experimentalis, et interno gustu Dei, et in quadam connaturalitate, et invisceratione ad divina, etiam pars practica poterit perfici mystice, et e{a}ffective ex eadem unione, et connaturalitate ad Deum, ex quo redditur habilior, et perfectior ad iudicandum de agendis pars practica. . . ."

sistance, and not according to the weight of difficulty that a particular objective lays on human resources.

Poinsot holds that even sinners can hope, but in them the virtue is "dead" precisely because sinners, given that they stand outside the communion of charity, are blocked from personally experiencing the goodness and the power of God. In other words, sinners schizophrenically hope to obtain a good that they do not love. The just person, on the other hand, "is moved efficaciously" precisely on account of the personal experience of these divine qualities as fully operative in him or her. And such an experience, one must conclude, engenders a proper appreciation of one's self-worth. For, in Poinsot's view, grace decidedly perfects human nature.¹³

Given the foregoing justification for the existence of the gift of Counsel, Poinsot now turns to explain why this gift differs from the other endowments of the Christian life. As we have seen above, some theologians argue that the virtue of theological faith alone suffices to guarantee that the Christian believer remain steady in the practice of a good moral life. But the virtue of faith is about universal truths, such as those contained in the Creed or in the general instruction in morals that the Church from time to time fittingly sets forth. Since Poinsot realizes that judgments in the moral life are always about particular actions, he cannot accept the *sola fides* theory.

The gift of Counsel responds always to the here-and-now; it aims at particular actions by discerning and judging about the means that will best accomplish a certain end. Counsel guides authentically human operations in the very concrete circumstances that comprise the sphere of moral action. As Poinsot explains further on, the virtue of prudence works in this same domain insofar as virtuous activity falls under human regulations and is produced according to the human mode.

But as a gift, Counsel always remains concerned with what is beyond human rules, *id quod ultra humanas regulas est*.¹⁴ In other words, Counsel represents an intervention in the practical intelligence that aids the moral conscience in making concrete choices. This distinction allows Poinsot to illuminate further the relationship of Counsel to the theological virtue of

¹³ See Disp. XVIII, art. 5, no. 10 (658): "Sed tamen spes ista minus efficax est quando est informis, et in peccatore: sed quando est in justo qui experientiam habet de voluntate, et potentia Deo auxiliandum, et benignitatem ejus in se experitur, tunc efficaciter movetur, et tunc est spiritus, donumque consilii movens. . . ."

¹⁴ Disp. XVIII, art. 5, no. 11 (659): "sed ad hoc ponitur virtus prudentiae quantum ad modum, et regulas humanas, et ad id quod ultra humanas regulas est, donum consilii."

faith by comparison with the way that prudence develops and particularizes *synderesis*, the *habitus* of the first principles of practical reason. Counsel, it is true, depends on faith, but the gift particularizes the judgments of faith to meet the requirements of moral action.

In the geography of the moral life, Counsel is situated among the gifts that aid the wayfarer to reach the goal of beatitude. To the saint who enjoys the beatific vision, the highest truth appears in its fullness. But as long as the believer remains here below, he or she must live according to the discipline of faith. This means that the believer enjoys epistemic surety about divine truth, but does not possess full evidence for what he or she holds to be true. Even when guided by the gift of Counsel, each human action of the believer participates in faith's lack of evidence. Still, because of the affective, experimental knowledge associated with the gift of Counsel, those who are moved by this gift do enjoy what Poinsoot calls a "practical evidence" (*evidentiam practicum*).¹⁵ This practical evidence helps the moral agent overcome the lack of evidential surety occasioned by faith. Reliance on this kind of evidence develops especially within a community that shares common convictions about what constitutes human well-being as well as shared views about the role of divine providence in human affairs.

The next line of inquiry further pursues the question whether there is need for a distinct gift of the Holy Spirit to serve the working of the practical intelligence. For some argue that the gifts that serve theological faith and charity, namely, Knowledge and Wisdom, should also suffice for directing the moral life. Poinsoot admits, of course, that the gifts that aid the theological virtues of faith and charity do indirectly influence the practical order. Indeed, Christian faith teaches about both what is to be believed and what is to be accomplished—the *agenda*. But like faith itself, the gift of Knowledge helps the believer to enter into truths that are formulated in general terms.

Counsel is distinguished by its work of helping the Christian believer in "the [very] circumstances of an operation," as Poinsoot says, "in the mode of choice, and not in the abstract."¹⁶ Charity, aided by the gift of Wisdom, plays another role. As the supreme and architectonic virtue of the Christian life, charity and the gift of Wisdom transcend the distinction between the speculative and practical orders. St. Paul teaches this explicitly in I

¹⁵ Disp. XVIII, art. 5, no. 13 (659): "ita prudentia de se petit evidentiam practicum fundatam in illa experimentalium unione effectiva. . . ."

¹⁶ Disp. XVIII, art. 5, no. 14 (660): "donum agens de ipsis in singulari, et de circumstantiis operationum modo arbitrio, et non scientifico."

Corinthians 13 when he writes that if we “understand all mysteries and knowledge” and if we give away all that we have, but have not love, we gain nothing.¹⁷

If Counsel is distinguished from the virtue of faith and from the gifts that assist it because of the concreteness that practical reasoning entails, how is the gift of Counsel to be distinguished from the virtue of prudence that it aids? Poinsoot addresses this issue by distinguishing the mode of action that characterizes the gifts from the mode of the infused virtues. He articulates the quite subtle difference between grace working in a human mode and grace working in a divine mode. Obviously the most precise philosophical analysis is required for Poinsoot to elucidate this crucial distinction.

His explanation runs as follows: Since the infused virtues constitute endowments of the supernatural life, they all contribute to the well-being of the Christian believer set upon the pursuit of eternal beatitude within the community of the Church. But the infused virtues do not enable a person to realize supernatural goods except in a human way (*nisi juxta modum humanum*), that is, in a way that accords with the common rules of virtue (*[juxta] communes regulas virtutum*).¹⁸ In other words, the infused virtues enable a person to accomplish supernatural actions, including ecclesial actions such as the worship of God and sacramental reconciliation, but only as the result of judgments made in accord with the ordinary workings of human reason.

For Poinsoot, then, there is nothing untoward about considering a human judgment that operates under the influence of divine grace. To put it another way, a human judgment can serve the purposes of the Christian life. Such a judgment in fact is made each time a person undertakes a specific activity on account of revealed truth, as happens when one frequents the sacraments or engages in other activities that depend upon revealed truth and grace.

As divine promptings, the gifts work according to another mode, a mode of divine inspiration. The gifts supply the moral agent with resources that enable him or her to step outside the limitations of rationality, so that the direction followed flows from a special divine instinct or prompting. The theologian attributes such promptings to the Holy Spirit on the basis of sa-

¹⁷ 1 Cor. 13: 2–3.

¹⁸ Disp. XVIII, art. 5, no. 15 (660): “prudentia etiam infusa . . . non cognoscit, nec attingit de istis agendis supernaturalibus, nisi juxta modum humanum, et communes regulas virtutum. . . .”

cred Scripture: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."¹⁹ But unlike his Dominican confrère Martinez, Poinsoot does not interpret this text as one that justifies a completely charismatic account of the gifts, with the possible result that a person could claim exemption from following the established norms of nature or of the Church.

II. The Scope of Counsel

The second main line of inquiry centers on the object of Counsel. Poinsoot considers the specific moral matter to which the gift of Counsel extends. As operational *habitus*, the gifts of the Holy Spirit of course are not constituted out of a determined kind of matter. In the case of an operational *habitus*, such as a virtue or a gift, the very activities that the *habitus* regulate are considered as the material cause—the *materia circa quam*, as the Scholastic authors would say.

The gift of Counsel concerns everything that falls under the purview of the behavioral virtues; in short, everything that involves human willing and affect. Because the gifts of the Holy Spirit operate among themselves in a certain harmony, Poinsoot assigns as the material cause of Counsel every human action that is governed by the gifts of Piety, Fortitude, and Fear of the Lord. This means that the gift of Counsel per se fills up what is lacking in prudence and in the "common rules" that prudence seeks to supply for moral action. When Poinsoot argues that Counsel per se directs works that surpass the common rules of morality, he is referring to moral conduct that surpasses the ordinary workings of human reason. As I have said, Christian theology considers such virtuous works the specific dominion of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Poinsoot considers that a realistic view of human life compels one to take a broad view of Counsel's sphere of action, and he notes that Aquinas construes the working of Counsel in the broadest of terms. In *Summa Theologiae* IIa-IIae, q.52, a.4, Aquinas teaches that the gift of Counsel is at work in every action that moves a person further along towards accomplishing the end of human life, whether the action is strictly speaking necessary for obtaining the gift of eternal life or not. This perspective spurs Poinsoot to reflect that Counsel can also guide good works that fall under the common rules of morality, including matters that pertain to the commandments, pro-

¹⁹ John 3: 8.

vided that such works enjoy some special reference to the participated divine life. As proof of this, Poinsoot asks us to reflect on the enormous difficulties that most people encounter when they try to submit every contingency of human life to the directive pull of the good ends of human existence. And this tension proves all the more acute, when one takes into account that, in the Christian view, every human being remains ultimately ordered to the one end of eternal beatitude.

Because of the weighty position that Counsel holds in the moral life, the Church teaches that every justified believer possesses the gift in some way. Poinsoot, however, qualifies the received opinion by arguing that everyone who lives in the *communio* of divine charity does not exercise the gift in a most excellent degree. In making this qualification, he intends to establish that, while everyone who lives within the grace of the Church does manifest an *instinctus* for rectitude of life, only some persons outstandingly exhibit wise discretion and good judgment in every important moral choice. This *instinctus* or movement toward holiness takes the concrete form of placing earthly goods in their proper frame of reference, at least to the extent that a person does not allow the preoccupations of this world to obscure his or her vision of the highest excellence. Poinsoot cites the *Moralia*, Gregory the Great's classic study of the virtuous life, which Poinsoot recognizes as both anticipating and reflecting his own vision of Counsel.

Each one of the elect still of the world in body, already rises in mind above the world; he deplores the bitterness of the exile that he tolerates, and rouses himself through the unceasing movement of love toward the sublime fatherland. [Whence] he discovers a salubrious counsel, namely, to despise the temporal world through which he passes. Then, as the knowledge of counsel which leads one to flee passing things develops in him the more, so also develops sorrow at not yet having attained those things that are lasting or eternal. . . . So the person who, with solicitude, fixes his spirit in life-giving counsel carefully and circumspectly reflects on himself in every action. And fearing lest an untoward end or [other] obstacle surprise him in the course of an action, he always begins with a soft tap, as if using the foot of his thought.²⁰

²⁰ In Disp. XVIII, art. 5, no. 17 (661), John Poinsoot in fact pieces together several sentences from Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job*, I, chap. 25, no. 34 (PL 75: 542–543): “et unusquisque eorum adhuc in mundo corpore positus, mente jam extra mundum surgit, aerumnam exilii, quam tolerat, deplorat, et ad sublimem patriam incessantibus se amoris stimulis excitat. . . . invenit salubre consilium, temporale hoc despiciere quod percurrit: et quo magis crescit consilii scientia, ut peritura deserat, eo augetur dolor, quod necdum ad mansura pertingat. . . . Nam qui solerter

The text continues to explain the need for special caution in the face of strong emotional pulls and tugs that can deter the workings of Counsel. Even though Pope Gregory's imaginative metaphor of testing the moral terrain aims to persuade the simple believer, Poinsoot considers this patristic text as both an "elegant" testimony to an authentically Christian teaching on counsel and a profoundly realistic analysis of ethical action within the horizon of transcendence.

Yet if Counsel is a distinctive gift, then why do many persons who live within Christian community still seek counsel from other graced persons? This occurrence, Poinsoot asserts, does not suggest that such persons are deprived of the gift of Counsel. Rather, the gift of Counsel itself moves a person to seek counsel from those persons whom God uses as secondary instruments, even for communicating the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, to seek counsel remains an ordinance of divine precept; and the gifts do aid the fulfillment of precepts. In the *Confessions*, St Augustine explains the supreme importance that the mature person attaches to taking counsel: "Your better servant is the one who is more ready to will what You speak to him than to hear from You what he himself wants."²¹

The theology of the gifts of the Holy Spirit cannot be used as a pretext for establishing an autonomous class of persons in whom God works in an exceptional way. Instead, the communion of the Church supposes an ordering of inferiors to superiors; this ecclesial *communio*, moreover, mirrors the choirs of angels, where we are told that the higher angels influence the lower ones. And so we observe that God encourages the holy ones of every age to seek counsel. In the New Testament, for example, Cornelius, who himself was the beneficiary of a revelation, was still told to seek counsel from the Apostle Peter,²² and Paul, who even beheld Christ himself on the road to Damascus, was still instructed that he would be told what to do once he arrived in the city.²³

in vitae consilio figit mentem, caute sese in omni actione circumspiciendo considerat; et ne ex re. quae agitur, repentinus finis adversusque subripiat, hunc prius moliter posito pede cogitationis palpat. . . ." Here, Gregory begins his moral or analogical commentary on Job 1:1, "Vir erat in terra Hus. nomine Job." Earlier, Gregory gave the allegorical commentary on this first verse of the book of Job, explaining that Hus means "the Counsellor." See I, chap. 11, no. 15 (*PL* 75:533-534): "Hus vero [interpretatur] consiliator."

²¹ *Confessionum* 10, chap. 26, 37: "Optimus minister tuus est. qui non magis intuetur hoc a te audire quod ipse uoluerit. sed potius hoc uelle quod a te audierit."

²² See Acts 10:5ff.

²³ See Acts 9:6.

III. The Function of Counsel

The third major enquiry centers on the act of Counsel. Following Poinsot's method, if we can identify a determined field of activity associated with the gift of Counsel—its matter, if you will—then the gift must also possess its own specific act. Poinsot uses his examination of the act of Counsel to probe the certainty that it enjoys. Human experience, he says, proves that those who enjoy the gift of Counsel sometimes continue to experience doubts about what course of action they should follow.

What kind of certitude, then, does the Holy Spirit bestow with the gift of Counsel? According to St Paul, God "accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will,"²⁴ and therefore the divine counsel can give no reason for a failure of resolve. But this does not mean that the gift of Counsel therefore takes away every doubt from the person who enjoys its help. Rather, the gift accomplishes its task by producing within us a kind of certitude and security, which at times comes from a private inspiration, and at other times, through the express teaching and example of others. Poinsot's analysis of how Counsel works reveals his balanced approach to human life as well as a certain psychological realism that complements his speculative achievement.

Lack of certitude manifests itself in two ways: first, incertitude arises when we recoil from a decision, asking ourselves whether we should do such and such or not; secondly, incertitude arises when we question whether a particular light of Counsel in fact comes from God. Poinsot estimates that some choices are such that no one who knows the truth of the Christian religion should find any positive cause to hesitate or doubt. Thus, the choice to suffer martyrdom rather than sin, or to enter a religious vocation, provide examples of indisputably good choices (although in the second example room is left for deliberation about particulars). Yet even in the case of unquestionably good choices, there exists the possibility that the acting person will experience a certain hesitancy, so that he or she requires the help of other persons. When this happens, however, there is no reason to doubt that the gift of Counsel is fully operative. St. Paul himself again provides an example of one who, though sure of his role as an apostle, went to seek the counsel of others, as he himself relates in Galatians.²⁵

Poinsot discovers a divine pedagogical purpose in the indeterminacy that

²⁴ Eph 1:11.

²⁵ See Gal 2:1–10.

a person who enjoys the gift of Counsel may still experience. The hesitancy in the face of decision-making that compels a person to seek counsel offers the chance for both spiritual growth and human maturity. Insofar as we are moved to seek guidance from others, Counsel ensures that the believer is not left to his or her own devices. Isolation and particularity characterize those who rely exclusively on their own counsel, whereas the one who seeks counsel remains in solidarity with the whole ecclesial community. The Holy Spirit acts through a full range of secondary instruments so that individualism will not work against the good of the Body of Christ. Poinsoot recognizes that the exercise of Counsel contributes to the building up of community in as much as those who are moved by the gift develop the *habitus* of human communication and mutual dependence.

Because Counsel always results in the execution of a good act, the gift can be considered as a sort of superior prudence. The gift of Counsel always helps us to realize in as perfect a way as possible actions that are in themselves intrinsically good. Counsel therefore moves us to seek discernment, especially the discernment of spirits that is encouraged by the New Testament.²⁶ Such discernment, argues Poinsoot, does not subordinate Counsel to some other divine movement, but ministerially serves the gift. Because of this reliance on others, the gift of Counsel creates a prudential certitude in the one who acts according to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Recall that prudential certitude results from a *habitus*-formed inclination to moral truth, and for that reason can be distinguished from the epistemic certitude of faith. In the moral order, many things remain obscure, but testing spirits results in a salutary humbling that only comes when one submits to another and thereby learns to cultivate a tested spirit—"un esprit éprouvé," as Raïssa Maritain translates this important phrase.²⁷

Incertitude also arises in a person when one is not sure about the origin of a counsel. Poinsoot next discusses the criteria for judging the authenticity of a given inspiration, especially the case of extraordinary counsels that sometimes are given to certain persons who, as a result of private revelations, are urged to act outside of the ordinary norms of Christian life. Citing cases where the Holy Spirit moves persons to perform acts that would not fall under ordinary human prudence, Poinsoot recalls well-known cases from the Bible such as Samson's self-destruction and episodes from the lives of

²⁶ See 1 John 4 and 1 Thess 5.

²⁷ See *Les dons du Saint-Esprit*, traduction de Raïssa Maritain (Juvisy: Editions du Cerf, 1930), p. 202.

the saints recounting how certain martyrs actually thrust themselves onto the instruments of torture and death.

While it is true that the Holy Spirit remains free to inwardly inspire some persons with an assurance about what they should do, extraordinary examples such as these that seemingly go against the precepts of divine law cannot establish the norm. Whether such movements of the spirit come from God or not is often proved by their effects. In the final analysis, the Holy Spirit can be trusted to work ordinarily through examined counsel and communication with others. When, however, signs of emotional upset manifest themselves, then Poinsot suggests that God wants the person to devote further time to testing the spirit.

When a person openly claims to possess the spirit of God, especially when the inspiration affects some element of public teaching, the Church must take an active role in judging the authenticity of the affair. For less public matters, e.g. instructions or prophecies, it is always better to seek confirmation from several prudent persons who have not had the opportunity to consult among themselves. While there are cases both in the lives of the saints—Poinsot names St. Benedict, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Brigit, St. Vincent Ferrer, St. Francis da Paola—and even in the Old Testament where holy men and women appear to act on their own, the better course always leads to bringing the person into contact with the Church community. For in the Christian moral life, the experience of fruitful communication with other members of the community provides the indispensable starting point for moral development. To sum up, the gift of Counsel encourages a truly Christian sort of behavior, for it leads a person into an intimate union with Christ in the heart of the Church precisely through the experience of community.

IV. Poinsot's Achievement

Poinsot's *Treatise on the Gifts* forms a bridge between classical explanations of the moral life that view the human person as a free agent within a universe of divinely established purposes and ends and modern accounts of human agency that emphasize personal purposes and self-determination as the starting-point of moral evaluation. His work is distinguished by the delicacy and balance of its analysis. These qualities are especially evident in Poinsot's discussion of Counsel where he provides the classical clarification of the specifically mystical side of Christian moral life. Poinsot takes great care to demonstrate that even when the Holy Spirit is fully at work in a soul, the person does not become the Christian equivalent of an ethical

monad, but rather develops a full measure of human freedom through communion with others. Throughout his treatment of the gift of Counsel, Poinset is able to acknowledge the importance of human subjectivity, but without slighting the normative character of divine truth for human conduct. This achievement surely merits him a distinctive place among philosophical theologians.