



Loosening the knots:

Knowledge

Thomas Flowers SJ

Is it possible to possess any knowledge that doesn't relate to our lives as Christians? Well, no, says Thomas Flowers SJ, because knowing the truth about anything can direct us towards and help us to build the kingdom of God, by loosening the tight knots in which ignorance can keep us tied. 'In an age in which we are bombarded with information, opinion and argument, the Spirit's gift of knowledge invites us into the deeper truth of Jesus Christ.'

Catechesis comes with considerable baggage. For those who learned the rudiments of the Christian faith by memorising questions and answers from a catechism book like the nineteenth-century *Penny Catechism*, the word 'catechism' or 'catechesis' easily conjures uncomfortable memories of a lifeless approach, filled with unintelligible theological terminology and overly simplified answers. Today, references to teachings in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* are just as likely wielded as ammunition in theological battles over controversial issues in the Church as actually intended to edify. We so often think of catechesis as pertaining to dusty memories from our youth or ecclesiastical rules that it is easy to overlook what the word means. At the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, the writer explains that: 'since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us [. . .] I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.'¹ The word 'instructed' is, in Greek, *κατηχήθης* (*katēchēthēs*). When the early Church began to



use the word 'catechesis' to describe the instruction of those preparing to become Christians, they evoked this sense of the word in Luke's Gospel as instruction in the truth brought to light by Christian faith. The early Church recognised that knowledge was an important building block for being a faithful Christian. If we do not know the truth, we cannot live it out in lives

of faith, hope and love.

The Holy Spirit's gift of knowledge serves as a cornerstone for our lives as Christians, and this is why the Church has always emphasised, however imperfectly, the importance of catechising the faithful. But it can feel peculiar to call knowledge a gift of the Holy Spirit. Surely knowledge is something we acquire ourselves and has no innate holiness. After all, we all know a great many things that do not strike us as holy and oriented toward the Kingdom of God. But to divorce our knowledge from our faith is to deny how our lives depend upon God and to risk living a Christian life that lacks a firm foundation. In an age in which we are bombarded with information, opinion and argument, the Spirit's gift of knowledge invites us into the deeper truth of Jesus Christ.

Our lives depend upon God: that is what we profess when, in the words of the Nicene Creed, we acknowledge our belief in the Holy Spirit under the title ‘the Lord, the giver of life.’ Recognising knowledge as a gift from the Holy Spirit affirms this dependence. We assuredly do learn by virtue of our own natural talents, through the hard work we dedicate to our education, and thanks to the attention lavished upon us by our teachers. But through all of that runs the Spirit’s gift of knowledge. We learn because we are alive, because we are human persons capable of learning, because we have minds and senses open to the world around us. We gain knowledge because we are created in the image and likeness of the One who possesses all knowledge. For knowledge is something we receive, something that fills us from without as it transforms our interior way of looking at the world around us.

The interior transformation wrought by our knowledge has everything to do with our lives as Christians. For what we do not know, we cannot hope to love. It is for this reason that the Spirit’s gift of knowledge serves as a cornerstone for our lives of faith. In one of the most influential texts in the history of Christian catechesis, St Augustine declares that: ‘you will know, beyond doubt, all these things which you seek, by diligently knowing what is to be believed, what ought to be hoped for and what ought to be loved. For these are the greatest, indeed truly the only things that must be followed in religion.’² Augustine here invokes St Paul’s famous triad of faith, hope and love, a vision of life that tugs at the Christian heart and stirs our longing for a world shaped by the steadfast, hopeful love manifested in Christ Jesus.³ But Augustine has carefully linked knowledge to these virtues. It is not enough to believe: we must know what to believe. If we are to hope, we must know what we hope for. If we are to love, we must know the ones we are called to love.

This gift of knowledge becomes all the more important when we realise the destructive force of ignorance that pervades the world in which we live. Powerful people count on what others do not know in order to maintain their own ‘pride, honour, and riches.’⁴ Disinformation about our scientific knowledge of the climate allows rich companies to convince people that they are not harming the environment. Racist and politically driven conspiracy theories without factual foundation drive people to violence and to put themselves at risk in the middle of a global pandemic. Carefully curated public personas keep people in ignorance about the harm inflicted on the most vulnerable of the world by influential politicians, business leaders and others.

There is no such thing as knowledge that is not holy, for knowledge of the truth can only draw us closer to the one who declared himself to be ‘the way, the truth, and life.’⁵ If something is true, then it is worth knowing. If something is true, then it accords with Jesus Christ, who is the truth. There is no knowledge that we need fear. Rather, knowledge provides an important first step in our lives of Christian holiness. It is not enough on its own, but it opens wide the possibility for us to have faith, to hope and to love.

This is why the Church’s catechetical mandate is as important as it ever was. Our methods stand in need of constant renewal, but the drive to catechise is spurred by the Spirit’s gift of knowledge to the Church. At the same time, this is also why it is important that people of faith know the world around them: that we are not ignorant of science, politics, literature, history and other academic disciplines. For it is by knowing the faith and the world that the Spirit readies us to live lives of Christian love. Christian love is not a vague or ethereal concept we invoke to comfort ourselves. Christian love calls upon us to act in the knowledge of what we know about God and what we know about the world. Christian love is discerning love.

Christian love asks us to consider the world in which we live with care, to recognise hidden injustices, to challenge accepted values, to attend to the humanity of the dehumanised. To love like that requires knowledge. In ignorance, we easily accept that the way things are is the way they ought to be. But as we gain knowledge of the truth, we receive the first gift we need to approach the world with a discerning heart. If we desire to change the world for the better, we first need to know the truth of what is better. And we need not wonder how to learn this truth: we have to read, to listen, to discuss, to think. God has given us minds ready for knowledge, and when we desire to know, the Spirit comes swiftly to our aid, encouraging us and giving us life. Knowledge begins to untie the knots in which our ignorance leaves us – the knots that keep us

bound in inaction and frustration. The Spirit's gift of knowledge unbinds us so that we can move toward spiritual freedom.

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¹ Luke 1:1-4. NRSV, Anglicised.

² Augustine, *Enchiridion de fide, spe et caritate* (CPL 0295), Chapter 1, Lines 36-37. The translation from the Latin is my own.

³ 1 Corinthians 13:13.

⁴ St Ignatius Loyola, 'Meditation on the Two Standards', *Spiritual Exercises* §143.

⁵ John 14:6.