

Grace as a Celebration

What is this thing called "grace?"

You can't see it.

You can't hear it.

You can't smell it, or even taste it.

You might say you can feel it,

not physically,

but on an emotional level. (Hospital emergency call)

That is because, while our five physical senses are about our bodies, grace is about our soul. Being in the proper state of grace is essential to our salvation. But just what is the proper state of grace?

Although we never quite seem to know when we are in the state of grace,
we sure seem to know when we are NOT.

That is because of the nature of serious sin.

When we have committed a serious sin,

and we really know that what we have done is wrong,

we know for certain that we need God's grace.

We know for certain we need God's mercy and forgiveness.

But grace cannot and should not be limited only to God's mercy.

It is so much more than that.

Grace is . . . strength, courage, wisdom, blessing, love, mercy, forgiveness, unity, healing

Grace is that feeling of peaceful well-being

when we know we have been touched by the hand of God (anointing mom).

My computer thesaurus had several excellent words to substitute for grace.

As a noun grace is . . .

(kindness (n.): decency, favor, mercy, charity, goodness, clemency, leniency)

(blessing (n.): prayer, thanks, thanksgiving)

As a verb grace means to . . .

(adorn (v.): embellish, enhance, beautify, decorate, ornament)

(dignify (v.): honor, favor, distinguish)

You might say that with God, grace is a verb, the way in which God acts towards us.

It is important to note the Catholic understanding of the gift of grace. We teach that grace builds on nature. This means that the better we live our faith, the greater effect grace has in our lives. This isn't to say that God blesses good people more than bad people. No! God

graces everyone equally. But those who live their faith, those who cooperate with the grace that God gives to all people allow the grace to go more deeply into their lives.

When we sin we put obstacles to that grace entering our lives. Venial sins might be compared to arterial plaque. The little sins begin to build up around our souls preventing the flow of grace from fully penetrating our hearts. Sacramental confession is one way of removing this blockage so that the grace can flow freely.

Sometimes sin is so serious, that the flow of grace is stopped completely, like a blood clot blocking an artery. That is the case of what we call mortal sins. When one has committed a serious sin, the sacramental graces of God are stopped completely from entering the soul. If one dies in the state of serious sin one might even lose his/her eternal salvation. Sacramental confession is essential for the forgiveness of mortal sins.

But, once the blockage is removed, all of the grace that God has already given the person begins to flow freely again. In other words, the grace that God wants to give to us, but we are prevented from receiving because of our sin, is there waiting for the time when we remove that blockage through sacramental confession.

Martin Luther, and several of the reformers, had a very negative understanding of grace. This was conditioned partly by Luther's own personal state of serious sin, and his own inability to accept the fact that God could forgive him. Because he did not believe he could be forgiven, but he knew that Christ had died to forgive sins, he postulated the teaching that grace simply cloaks nature. In other words, because of sin, God could not look at humanity broken by sin. And so the grace of Christ came to cover over the sinfulness of humanity so that God would see only the beauty of Christ covering sinful humanity.

The problem with this is two-fold. First of all it puts limits on God. To say that God cannot do something is to say that God is not infinite. This is false theology.

The second problem is that it denies the human ability to change. If grace simply cloaks nature then we are like a manure pile covered with a pretty quilt. On the outside we might look beautiful, but on the inside we are still smelly, animal dung. This is not a very attractive thought. One theologian put it this way. Imagine your child has been outside playing. He comes in covered from head to foot with smelly, sticky mud. The first thing you do is put him in the bathtub and throw his clothes in the washer. Now imagine the same scenario. Your child has been playing outside and is covered with smelly, sticky mud. This time though he puts clean clothes on over the mud before he comes into the house. The child is still dirty and smelly, the clothing is not really "hiding" anything. You still have to throw him in the tub to clean him up. Not only that, you have even more clothes to throw in the washer.

Paul's theology of grace.

Paul uses the word "grace" 75 times in his epistles. Interestingly Jesus never once used the word "grace." Instead he was "grace incarnate" the "word made flesh"

Because of Luther's negative thought of human nature he took Paul's theology of grace in his letter to the Romans ". . . where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more . . ." (Romans

5:20)" and turned it into a theology in which Luther states we are to "sin boldly." Why in the world would God tell us to "sin boldly" when Christ died to save us from our sin? Unfortunately, when Luther postulated his theory of salvation from grace and not works (cf. Romans) he forgot to read further when Paul says, "*Shall we persist in sin that grace may abound? Of course not!*" (Romans 6:1).

To say that grace builds on nature means that we can change. We have the ability to be transformed. Our broken fallen nature has been re-formed into the image of Christ who became like us in all things but sin. So we can become like Christ who made us anew in the waters of baptism. We can give up our sinful way of life and live more Christ-like lives. In fact that is what is expected of us, that we turn away from sin and be like Christ.

And so why do we keep on sinning? For one reason, many sins kind of feel good (over indulgence of food or drink). We can get an adrenalin rush from some sins (addictions) or because of the thrill of possibly getting caught (shop-lifting, wreckless driving). Then there are those pesky sexual sins. Sex is good and it feels good (if it didn't there would probably be a whole lot less people in the world).

But the real reason that we all sin is something we call concupiscence, our broken human nature's tendency to sin. If we absolutely could NOT sin, most of us probably would not sin. But because of our broken human nature we will at times find ourselves doing what we would rather not do. Paul struggled with this same issue,

Christ has established for His Church a primary way in which God's grace is given. We give this means of grace the name, "Sacrament." Although grace can and does come in many other ways, the primary means (or ordinary means) of grace is through the sacraments.

Sacramental Grace¹

The Catholic Church is a Sacramental Church. Without the sacraments we would have no purpose for existence. This is because in the Sacrament, earth unites with heaven, as God pours out the graces of heaven upon us. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, A sacrament is an outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace.

One thing for which the Church of the Nativity is known, is for our care and concern we give to our sacramental celebrations. We know and believe that the Sacraments are the primary way we give praise and thanks to God, especially in the Sacrament of the Eucharist and so we celebrate them well. Let us look briefly at the graces we receive in the Sacraments.

"Father you give us grace through sacramental signs, which tell us of the wonders of your unseen power." These words, taken from the beginning of the prayer for the blessing of baptismal water, speak to us of the graces that all the sacraments give to us. The first grace that God gives us in the sacrament of baptism is forgiveness of sins. And as if that were not enough, God continues to make forgiveness available to us after baptism.

¹ Portions of this section edited from "Set Free from Sin," Paul Turner" This Rock, Ministry & Liturgy, March 2008, pp. 6-7

In the Penitential Rite of the Mass, we pause for a moment to call to mind our own personal need for God's mercy. If we are not in the state of mortal sin when we attend mass, our venial sins are forgiven in our celebration of the Mass. It is important then to begin the mass by humbly acknowledging our need for this mercy.

But attending Mass should not be the only way we seek this grace of forgiveness. The Sacrament of Reconciliation, given to us by Jesus, is equally among the seven as the primary means that God gives us grace. While the sacraments are not the only way God graces us, they are the primary way that God graces us. Therefore, availing ourselves of all of the sacraments is for our own good.

In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the imposition of Hands by the priest is the sacramental sign of God's mighty power. Now some will say, "I don't need a priest. I can go straight to God to have my sins forgiven." There is truth in this statement and we ought to go to God for forgiveness. And we ought to go often. But in the Catholic Church we have lifted the liturgy of Reconciliation to a status equal to that of the liturgy of Baptism and the liturgy of the Eucharist. Can you go straight to God to be a child of God? Yes. Can you go straight to God if you want communion with God? Yes. But Christ gave us sacraments that lift these events to another level.

It would be nice if we didn't need to confess our sins. Confession is not an easy thing because it humbles us in our open honesty. It would be nice if after baptism we lived a perfect life, keeping that grace-filled glow in a polished shine. But we don't. God understands this. After all, God made us. Our Maker therefore makes available to us this other means by which we may enjoy forgiveness and a grace-filled life. Baptism washes away original sin. For adults, it even forgives all sins we have committed prior to baptism. Confession forgives subsequent sin. These sacramental signs show the mighty power of a merciful God who understands the condition of humans and offers us – again and again – the forgiveness we need on our journey to eternal life.

Living in the state of grace is the goal, and the reward we gain, in this life. Faith is not just about one day getting to heaven. Faith is living each day with our hearts and minds set on the things of heaven, and then making heaven happen here on earth. When we live in the state of grace there is very tangible heart-felt evidence in our lives. We call this evidence the Fruits of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul outlines these "fruits of the Spirit" in his letter to the Galatians, ". . . love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22). This is the list found in all modern translations of the Bible, which base their content on the most ancient manuscripts of the Letter to the Galatians. Because some ancient manuscripts contain additions the Catechism (1832) lists twelve fruits with the addition of the words, "goodness . . . modesty . . . and chastity."

Having any of these virtues in our life are signs that the Spirit is alive in us, or in other words, we are in the state of grace. Likewise, lack of these virtues is probably a sign that we are not fully in the state of grace. Let us look at a few of these fruits.²

² Reflection on the Fruits of the Spirit edited from www.Spirithome.com, operated by Robert Longman, an ELCA Minister.

The first fruit is "love" or "caritas" which translates "charity." Who can really describe love? We can point to its source, and say "God is love." We can point to the cross and say, "this is what love does." We can even think of those we have loved and have loved us in return. But if you think about, because "God is love" (1 John 4), then everything exists because of God, then everything in the world has something to do with love. That is why Paul lists love as the first virtue. Richard McBrien, in his word entitled "Catholicism" has this to say.

"If love is the soul of Christian existence, it must be at the heart of every other Christian virtue. Thus, for example, justice without love is legalism; faith without love is ideology; hope without love is self-centeredness; forgiveness without love is self-abasement; fortitude without love is recklessness; generosity without love is extravagance; care without love is mere duty; fidelity without love is servitude. Every virtue is an expression of love. No virtue is really a virtue unless it is permeated, or informed, by love (1 Cor 13)."

The Bible gives us many portraits of joy. Psalm 113:9 speaks of the barren woman who becomes a mother. Isaiah 51 describes joy as a crown, and speaks of a future day when those whom the Lord ransoms will be overtaken by joy (v. 11). The psalms and prophets are filled with accounts of "songs of joy" over Jerusalem's return from exile. The joy of God's kingdom is the subject of Jesus' parable of the hidden treasure [Mat 13:44] "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." The joy of God over those who turn away from evil and return to God is expressed in the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son.

The virtue of peace is described in many ways. Peace is about building bridges and establishing common ground. Peace is about creating understanding and appreciation. Peace is about bringing healing and reconciliation to those who have hurt each other. Peace is about soothing the wounds caused by disputes.

Patience, or a lack thereof, is something I frequently hear in the confessional. To be patient is to endure something with calmness. It is the ability to willingly accept or tolerate delay or hardship. The root of the word patience also forms the word "passion" which is the perfect word to describe Jesus' last week of life here on earth.

We do live in a fast-paced world that is getting faster, even as age slows us down. Because of this we get upset with the guy who doesn't move immediately when the light turns green. When we want something we want it now. We don't want to have to wait for it. To this the Holy Spirit counsels us to be patient. We have all of eternity ahead of us, and anything that is not joyful today will one day pass away. Fortunately for us, God is infinitely patient with us. How many times have we given God good reason to strike us dead, and yet God gives us time to turn our lives around.

When something tries your patience, have a laugh over it, and it will seem less burdensome. Patience comes easier when you think about God's timing rather than your own. If you are having trouble with patience then plant a garden or go fishing. Neither of these things gives instant gratification. You have to wait. The only sure way to cultivate the virtue of patience is to wait.

Kindness is to be of a friendly or generous nature; to show sympathy, mercy, empathy, or understanding. The Greek word in Galatians 5:22 was “Chrestetos” a form of “chrestos,” which means to be “useful.” Kindness is useful, while harshness works against others. Kindness puts people at ease, tells them you’re out to do them good instead of harm. That allows people to feel safe around us. As Ephesians 4:32 states “ . . . be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ.”

Goodness is not just a matter of being good or doing good. Goodness is to consistently seek the good of others, placing them ahead of your own needs. Goodness is infectious. When we see people doing good things it inspires us to do good things. It also though can remind us of the ways that we are not-so-good. One way to become more good is to admit the way’s we have been bad so we can replace the badness with goodness.

To be faithful is to be loyal, true, constant, steadfast, devoted and trustworthy. Faithfulness is the man who always true to his word. If he says he’s going to do something you can count on him to be there. Faithfulness is the woman who is devoted to her husband and children. She never lets the demands of work get in the way of her care and concern for family. Faithfulness is a good word to describe our Church’s moral teachings on the sanctity of life. Our teachings are consistently the same on all matters of life. Life is sacred, and under no circumstances is to be intentionally destroyed. Faithfulness is the way God has always, and will always deal with His people.

Gentleness is the simple act of being courteous – having good manners. It is also the ability to gentle or tender with others, considerate of their feelings and needs. It is a refusal to use power to control anyone. Gentleness is the choice to “do no harm.” This virtue is directly tied to Jesus, in the ways he interacted with people, and in the things he taught us about God’s kingdom. This is a virtue which goes against fallen human nature. By nature we are quick to anger, especially us men who are quick to use our fists or guns. Women also have ways of being vicious and destructive. And so, to cultivate this virtue, is to be more Christlike in all we do and say.

To truly be gentle often requires the last fruit – self-control. This means to have power or management over one’s desires, lusts, emotions, and feelings. It is the ability to tell yourself “no” and make it stick. Another way to look at the virtue of “self-control” is to see it as a form of “discipline.” To become a good athlete, or a great artist, one must exercise the discipline of the art. Today’s thrill-seeking world sometimes belittles this virtue calling in “inhibition” from which we must be freed. While it is not good to choke yourself off from the experiences of life, to experience the new and fun and daring, these things in and of themselves must have some sense of order and control. The simple question to ask when we seek these things is “Who is in control?” If you are set on the course of following Christ, there are some things in life that will take you off course. The unimportant can seem important. The entertaining can become addicting or enslaving. It is as if your heart is drawn to another lover, which in turn betrays the One who loves you.

Every single one of these fruits of the Spirit is an expression of God who is the first to bear these fruits. When we have these fruits in our life, we have the assurance that God is with us, and that we are living in the image and likeness of God who made us. Each of these fruits takes a lifetime to cultivate, but they also supply all that we need for a lifetime. Each of these fruits we experience in this world, are a foretaste of the heaven that is to come. In the words of the Apostle Paul:

"If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, (love) is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. If there are prophecies, they will be brought to nothing; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge, it will be brought to nothing. For we know partially and we prophesy partially, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things. At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known. So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love" [1 Cor 13:1-13].