

questioning is not very useful. Suffice to say that our life is a struggle without God and we must do all we can to ensure God stays within us for as long as possible. This is why the sacraments are so important, and this provides the answer to the second dilemma proposed above.

God's presence transforms us, but without God we begin to revert to our former state with an inclination to sin, called concupiscence. We need the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, to re-invigorate our life, to re-new God's presence within us, and make us open to a life of faith, hope, and charity. I compare our Christian life to that of a business partnership between two people, with God as the senior partner. While he is around we thrive in his company, we become influenced by his genius and personality to become better people ourselves and this, in turn, rubs off on others around us. But we are not yet 'the finished article' and when he disappears for a while, we are no longer so inspired, we slacken off and the business is in danger of failing completely unless and until he returns.



A Story to Help Illustrate How Grace Works

The following story is an imperfect analogy to the workings of grace but may be helpful in trying to grasp how grace works.

'A writer was writing a book on murderers. She researched the life of a notorious killer and discovered he had lived a terrible life. He had been abandoned by his parents, lived in a slum without any education, been a drug addict, and seen his sister raped and a brother shot dead, all before he was sixteen years old. As a result he had grown up with no sense of guilt or remorse for hurting others and had been imprisoned for killing his brother's murderers. The writer was intrigued to meet him and managed to gain visiting rights to see him in prison where he had been for over 20 years. She visited him for several years and did all she could to teach him that a good life was possible for him. Slowly, he began to change. Her promptings made him realise that he could lead a better life, one that would give him genuine inner peace. Eventually he and the writer fell in love. When his prison sentence was completed he found that not only was he now legally free but he was also inwardly freed from his past and was a different person. He and the writer married and her presence seemed to cement his transformation.

However, when his wife went away for a while to visit some relatives he met a former cellmate who persuaded him to sell some drugs for him. Tempted by the prospect of 'quick' money he did so. His wife was furious when she found out and, feeling betrayed, she left him. But she still loved him and would contact him periodically to make sure he was all right, and to make him see that what he had done was wrong and hurtful to her.

Realising how much he loved her, how stupid he had been, and how much his actions had hurt her, he became remorseful and begged her to give him another chance. Because of her great love for him, and because she recognised his sincerity and genuine sorrow, she returned to live with him'.



In essence, I hope you now see that the concept of grace is really just about a person's relationship with God, your relationship with God and mine. God is the prime mover, the senior, in this relationship but we are all called to respond in the most effective way we can. Ultimately, though, we must realise that we are totally dependent on God reaching out to us. His offer is a free gift of Himself to us but, in his wisdom, he chooses to give Himself to different people in different ways.

Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

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What is Meant by Grace?

Looking at The Biblical view and later views



Questions

for Reflection

1. Is grace really just God's goodness to us?
2. Can we do any good without grace?
3. Was grace given to those who lived before Jesus?
4. Why does the Church no longer talk about the different categories of grace like it used to e.g. Created and Uncreated, Sanctifying and Actual graces?

Introduction

Although there are several difficult Church doctrines e.g. the Trinity, the doctrine of grace is one that somehow seems even more difficult to relate to because it seems to defy tangible comparison to anything in our daily life. Later, though, I shall relate a story to try and bring home, however imperfectly, its key importance in our actions and our relationship with God.



When I was a child I got the impression that grace was some kind of substance that was

periodically poured out of a bucket into my soul as a kind of food to keep me going and bring me close to God. If I'm honest, that image still persists in the back of my mind. But, in a sense, there is some truth in that viewpoint. Before trying to define grace, I shall summarise the OT and NT usage of the words usually translated as grace.

Grace in the Old and New Testaments

In the OT, the Hebrew word 'hen' refers to 'favour', or treating someone kindly, either in general or in response to a petition. Again, remembering the lack of any conventional idea of spirituality for most of the OT, this notion of favour associated with God (Yahweh) meant material benefits, like protection from enemies (Isa. ch.30), or the granting of prosperity (e.g. to Jacob, Exodus ch.33). It is important to recognise that Yahweh's favour was entirely free, and it is *not the same* as his righteousness which is associated with his obligations to Israel under the Covenant.

In the NT, the key word translated as grace is 'charis'. This word is sometimes used in the general sense of 'the good will of God' but much more frequently comes to adopt a special meaning related to the saving will of God brought through Jesus. St. Paul's exposition in Romans expresses this most clearly. The important point here is that grace is not just God giving or doing something; rather it is a *free gift* he gives through Jesus and becomes a reality in the lives of those who accept it. It is *a transforming event or occurrence*. As such, it is dynamic and becomes the principle of life. This can most clearly be seen in the way that grace is included in the introduction and final greetings of the Epistles:

'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ'.

What is Grace?

In Romans (ch.5) St. Paul describes how, once being justified or made righteous in the eyes of God:

'we have been admitted into God's favour .. the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit ...'

This expresses how our decision in faith to accept Jesus as our redeemer is the beginning of a new relationship with God. It is not yet apparent what the nature of that relationship is, but later St Paul makes his view clear. Not only are we in God's favour and recipients of His love but something *much more incredible* occurs — God Himself, in the form of the Holy Spirit, comes to live within us (Romans ch.8):

'the Spirit of God has made a home in you... if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead has made his home in you, then he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life



to your own mortal bodies through the Spirit living in you'

Grace, therefore, in its fullest NT sense, is nothing less than **God himself within us**. It is for this reason that we can be called **'children of God'** enabling us to call out **'Abba, Father'** to God (also Romans ch. 8)

Of course, St. Paul is referring to the specific situation following a person's justification. The Church would later call this fullest sense of grace, God himself living in us, 'sanctifying grace' or **uncreated** grace. But the Church also gives the name sanctifying grace to **the change** made to us by the indwelling of God, in other words our transformation into holiness through faith, hope and charity:



'through him, by faith, we have been admitted into God's favour .. hope will not let us down .. the love of God poured into our hearts' (Romans ch.5).

This transforming aspect of sanctifying grace is called 'created grace'. In making these and other distinctions in types of grace the Church is really trying to *describe the different ways in which God necessarily influences all our good actions*.

The key point, then, is to understand grace not as some nebulous substance given us by God but the presence of God Himself in our lives in some degree or other. The Church states that any good we do in life comes from grace, that is from some impulse given us from God. Even our decision of Justification by faith is itself moved by God, by what used to be called 'prevenient grace'. In a real sense, then, God is even involved in our decision to choose Him. A similar process occurs before we make any good decision involving God e.g. when we are tempted. The Church describes these impulses or influences of God as 'actual graces'.

But this raises two problems: if all our good deeds come from God, how are we free and, if we do evil instead, does this mean God has deliberately not helped us sufficiently? This is the view of St. Augustine of Hippo who came to the conclusion that some were predestined to salvation. I think that one way to escape this dilemma is to see God consciously abrogating his power for the instant we exercise our free-will to do good or evil whilst he remains omniscient about the outcome. This enables us to exercise a genuine free-will when we decide to co-operate with God's grace or not. Thus, this approach enables genuine free-will to occur without inferring any motive behind God's decision or implying any restriction on God's power.

The problem in categorising grace in this way also fails to explain why it appears that people can commit serious sin (defined as making a decision to reject God) *while in an apparent state of sanctifying grace* and why, if God's presence within us *has really transformed us*, we also need additional graces through the sacraments to strengthen us further (what could be added to the transformation already made to us by an indwelling God?). These two questions are extremely difficult to answer definitively and remain part of the mystery of salvation. The only solution that I can propose, that could reconcile this apparent paradox, is to re-examine our assumptions.

If a person is actually in a state of sanctifying grace, that is, God indwelling, then in my opinion, by definition, he or she can *not* also be in a state of serious sin and is not able to commit such a sin. The fact that subsequently a person is able to commit a serious sin implies to me that some point must occur when God **ceases** to be indwelling, therefore leaving the person susceptible to sin again. Of course, we may then be tempted to ask how long does the presence of God stay in a person, and does this period of time vary between people? However, this particular line of