

The Catholic Concept of Grace

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Introduction

The Catholic concept of grace is one of the most rich and perhaps most difficult ideas to completely understand. Both the richness and the difficulty arise from the fact that we use the term grace in so many ways. The priest can be heard to say 'May the grace and fellowship of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you' at mass. Before meals we say grace (and, if you are Chesterton, before all sorts of activities – a sentiment worth admiring). The Catechism teaches the sacraments are outward signs of inward grace. We talk of someone being in a state of grace. We may even refer to someone as being graceful. I would argue that the uses and concepts of the word (idea) of grace are as intricate and diverse as life on the planet itself. The question is then, how do we make sense of all these distinctions and can we arrive at a core set of concepts that holds it all together?

In the rest of this work, I hope to leave you with the following three concepts associated with grace. These concepts are:

1. Grace is the active agent in salvation
2. Grace comes to us from the action of the Holy Spirit
3. Grace involves a subtle interplay between God's infinite might and man's free will.

Grace as the active agent in salvation

Let's start by discussing what I mean when I say that grace is the active agent in salvation. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia [CE], 'grace is a supernatural gift of God to intellectual men and angels for their eternal salvation either through salutary acts or through a state of holiness.' It continues on to say that one can better understand what grace is by examining the four uses of the word grace in biblical, classical, and modern language and by looking at how these ideas interrelate.

The first definition of grace is good will or benevolence. The second definition of grace is the good actions or gifts that come from that good will. The third definition is the gratitude the receiver feels for the given gift. The fourth definition of grace is the beauty or attractiveness that is generated upon the giving and/or receiving of the gift. To make these definitions more concrete consider the parents of a girl who wants to be a pianist. To begin, let's assume that the parents love their daughter and that, as a result, they are in a condition or state to have a good will towards her – thus we arrive at the first definition of grace. Operationally, the second definition of grace would be realized when we imagine next that their good will results in them getting the girl private piano lessons. The girl's gushing thank-yous and hugs and kisses constitute the third definition – the one of gratitude. Finally, the joy that lights up her face and the faces of the parents make them beautiful to look at (as are all good things) thus reflecting the fourth definition of grace. I would like to ask you to think about this example a bit because I would like to return to this later when discussing free will.

Likewise, we can understand some of God's plan for our salvation in terms of these four definitions of grace by realizing that all of the goodness we experience arises first from the benevolence of a loving God. From this benevolence comes the creation of the world with all of its natural and supernatural benefits to us. Recognition of these benefits gives rise to feelings of gratitude to Our

Father and finally to the enrichment of our souls. It is in this way that we can better appreciate the full catechism lesson that the sacraments are outward signs of inward grace instituted by Christ in which we encounter him at key points in our journey of life and we grow grace.

To continue, the church also teaches that the grace that enriches our souls (fourth definition) comes in two types. The first, known as actual grace, is a help or a strengthening during a particular time in our lives that helps us to overcome a difficulty or perform a good work. Actual grace is temporary with the beneficial effects departing once the action is complete. The second, known as sanctifying grace, is a condition of our souls in which they are pleasing to God. Sanctifying grace is permanent condition that we original gain in baptism and which is lost when we commit a mortal sin and is regained when we make a contrite confession. Sanctifying grace is necessary for salvation because it is the supernatural life, which alone enables us to attain the supernatural happiness of Heaven [DC].

The Holy Spirit and Grace

In some sense this is the easiest part of the discussion of grace to understand. By divine revelation, we know of the trinity and that the third member of the trinity, the Holy Spirit, brings life to the world (Nicene Creed: I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son). What role does the Holy Spirit play in bring grace? We can start to get the answer from John 14: 16-17 in which Jesus says: 'And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it.' Jesus explains to us that he will provide us with a helper that dwells with us and in us and this helper will be the Spirit of Truth. For Saint Augustine, Truth & Beauty are good and are all components of God grace; facets of the same thing. From this line of thought, but with much more development in the philosophy, the church comes to the doctrine of the action of the Holy Spirit best capture in lesson 108 from the Baltimore Catechism:

108. What does the Holy Ghost do for the salvation of mankind?

The Holy Ghost dwells in the Church as the source of its life and sanctifies souls through the gift of grace.

How exactly does the Holy Spirit bring us grace. Well, the Holy Spirit provides the graces of God that were restored to us by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. As an article from the Daily Catholic puts it, the Holy Spirit bestows and perfects what is already earned in a similar manner to the sun, which does not make plants, nonetheless causes them grow. When we are in state of sanctifying grace, we are inspired to do good works, because the Holy Spirit expands our hearts to obey God; not because we will achieve a reward or escape punishment but rather because it is its own reward. Our love for God becomes a love for all good things for his people.

God's Might and Man's Free Will

In this section, I'll try to cover a concept that have caused a great deal of controversy of the history of the church: the role of God's might in bestowing or bringing to us his grace held against the free will that man possesses. If you've found the previous discussion difficult to follow, don't lose hope,

this one is even more difficult. Before trying to give a flavor of the associated complexities let me jump right to the doctrine taught by the church.

This is the essential piece: Through the merits of Jesus Christ we have been given the right to Heaven, [b]ut we must cooperate with God's graces [DC].

What is meant by cooperating with God's graces? Well to begin, the most basic cooperation is the avoidance of sin. Even though we may be in a state of sanctifying grace doesn't mean that we are free from the temptations to sin. Because the world is in a journeying state and is not perfect we must strive to make ourselves open to the graces of God. The two most useful ways identified by the church for avoiding sin and cooperating with God are through prayer and by receiving the sacraments.

To certain reformers from the late middle ages to the present, this previous line of thinking sounds like man can gain Heaven by participating in a type of game show. Score the most number of times that you've received communion and you get an all-expenses paid, one-way trip to Heaven. And to be fair, during certain periods of time, the common Catholic did (and perhaps still does) operate under these kinds of ideas. However, the reformers took things to far. For some of them (most notably Calvinists), man cannot gain Heaven by any works of his own but only through the action of God. The rallying cries of 'salvation by faith alone' (sola fide) or 'faith without works' usually swirl around this approach. Certain philosophers liken man to a horse ridden by two jockeys or a mule pulled between two carrots (God and the devil) with no control over the outcome of this competition. In this extreme case, we arrive at the notion of predestination – that individuals amongst us are chosen by God for salvation while others are chosen for damnation.

Suffice to say that the Church rejects the notion of predestination and affirms the role of man's free will. Nonetheless, the Church also recognizes the abuses that have occurred. It has never been a position of the church that man can achieve Heaven solely by good works but the Church does recognize the role that good works play. It is also worth noting that some middle ground has been achieved between the Church and some of the reformers (Lutherans) [AC].

Using the example of our aspiring piano student from before, let me see if I can try to illustrate the subtle interaction balance between God's grace and man's free will. It shouldn't be too hard to imagine that after the initial enthusiasm has come and gone, the girl begins to tire of playing the piano. After all her friends are playing outside, or are on Face Book and YouTube while she's stuck playing scales. What seemed like a good idea at the time suddenly seems like an obligation. How then does she stick at it? Well, there are at least three models that would explain why the girl persists in practicing the piano even if she's not having fun. They are: 1) She trusts in her parents, 2) she fears her parents, or 3) she honors her parents out of a sense of duty. Regardless of which of these it is, the piano-lesson-giving grace of the parents supersedes her own immediate will and pushes her to practice. This can hold her in the short-term and provide her the strength she needs to continue and can be thought of as realization of actual grace. But ultimately, her parents want her to enjoy playing the piano and even to make it a passion (i.e. fall in love with playing). To do this the girl must embrace the piano and change her heart. She must learn to love playing the scales for their own merit and not to please her parents, or escape punishment. When she develops this habit we can say that she has obtained sanctifying grace. The subtle interplay between the gift of the parents and

the will of the girl is a microcosm of the grand interaction between God's grace and man's free will that happens to each and everyone of us everyday of our lives.

I would like to close by sharing a few of my viewpoints on the subject of grace with you. I want to emphasize that while my viewpoints are not necessarily accepted doctrine (at least not in so many words) I don't think you'll hear anything that is contrary to catholic belief. First, I think that it is more important to focus on doing what is right because it is right, because of the intrinsic beauty of what is good rather than on focusing on how one merits Heaven. Some of the older language associated with the discussion sanctifying grace, if read casually, seems to imply that there is a rigid system to achieving Heaven. I believe that following the two great commandments is its own reward and I embrace the Augustinian viewpoint that servile obedience of God's will is not really obedience. Second, I believe that there additional 'categories' of grace beyond the actual and sanctifying ones discussed above. The very ability of man to think to come out of the womb ready-made to think and to learn to embody those thoughts in language is itself a grace. This is essentially discussed in CCC 2001 in the 'preparation of man for the reception of grace is already a work of grace'. Third, am amused by the mechanical/mechanistic ways that the classical philosophers talked about the tension between grace and free will. They often will use words like balance and will employ physical models of God and the devil or God and man's free will as forces in Newton's laws that compete or balance against each other. Like a pencil standing on its end, the competition between good and evil has an ultimate binary answer. The pencil falls on way or another. I'm comforted by the fact that modern physics seems to allow just the kind of 'it depends' answer that I think is at the heart of this question. I would like to know what an Aquinas or a Luther or a Calvin would say to quantum mechanics where the underlying rules are deterministic (blind watchmaker) but the outcome depends on the participants.

The Essentials

- ✧ Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help (a gratuitous gift [CCC 1999]) that God gives to us to respond to his call to become children of God [CCC1996] and is the participation in the life of God [CCC 1997] (man's free response [CCC 2002]). In other words, it is both a passive reception and an active choice.
- ✧ The vocation to eternal life is supernatural. It depends entirely on God's initiative in revealing himself [CCC 1998]
- ✧ The grace of Christ is the gift of God that makes our souls infused by the Holy Spirit to heal it of sin and sanctify it [CCC 1999]
- ✧ Sanctifying grace is an habitual gift that enables the soul to live with God [CCC 2000]
- ✧ Grace is first and foremost the gift of the Spirit who justifies and sanctifies us [CCC 2003]
- ✧ Grace escapes our [material or sensible] experience and can only be know through faith [and reason – that is to say in an intelligible way] [CCC 2005]

Food for Thought

Can you figure out how the Hail Mary and the Annunciation narrative give a biblical underpinning to the concept of the Immaculate Conception?

The beginning of the Hail Mary:

*Hail Mary, Full of Grace
The Lord is With Thee*

Luke 1:26-28

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you."

References

[CCC] – Catechism of the Catholic Church (available online at <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc.htm>)

[CE] – Catholic Encyclopedia <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06689a.htm>

[DC] – Daily Catholic, The Sanctifier and Grace
<http://www.dailycatholic.org/issue/10Jul/jul25cms.htm>

[AC] – American catholic newsletter on Catholic/Lutheran combined statement on grace
<http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac1000.asp>

Of additional interest: [BC] - Beginning Catholic, The Catholic Sacraments: Vehicles of Grace,
<http://www.beginningcatholic.com/sacraments.html>