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WHAT IS GRACE AND WHAT GRACE IS GIVEN IN THE SACRAMENTS?

Rosamaria Agostino

1. Introduction

Grace is a word that is used quite often in relation to God and the sacraments; yet is misunderstood. This essay will define grace and look at its scriptural basis. This essay will then look at how grace works within the people of faith and the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Penance.

Grace is defined by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as the “help God gives us to respond to our vocation of becoming his adopted sons” as well as “introducing us into the intimacy of the Trinitarian life”.¹ The *Catechism* adds that, although the free gift of God’s grace is initiated by God Himself, we make a choice whether to accept or reject His invitation.² This grace, therefore, invites us to accept and participate in God’s free gift of love so that we can, firstly, become interiorly changed through God’s presence and, ultimately, become what God always intended us to be.³

2. Biblical Understanding of Grace

The word grace can be traced back to the Old Testament where the word נָחַם was used. This word means “to be gracious, to bestow in mercy and kindness, to find favour”.⁴ This particular verb is used 78 times in the Old Testament in the *Qal* form,⁵ while it is used approximately 200 times in its basic form.⁶ This grace is not only an outward gesture but an interior disposition which is usually given to a person who has not asked for it but is in some

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., (1997), n. 2021 (= CCC, 2021). Henceforth this will simply be referred to as the *Catechism*.

² CCC, 2002.

³ Bernard Leeming, *Principles of Sacramental Theology* (London: The Newman Press, 1960), 4.

⁴ Benjamin Davidson, ed., s.v. “נָחַם,” in *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon: Every Word and Inflection of the Hebrew Old Testament Arranged Alphabetically and with Grammatical Analyses: a Complete Series of Hebrew and Chaldee Paradigms, with Grammatical Remarks and Explanations* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995). See 267.

⁵ Qal form can be translated into the simple past, past perfect or present tense in English but is usually written as ‘he graced’.

⁶ The most basic form of the word that the rest of the forms build on, נָחַם. David Noel Freedman, ed., s.v. “Grace,” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

form of need, like a leader to his or her subjects.⁷ An example of this use of the word, ‘grace’ is found in *Exodus* where God states: “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The Lord’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy”.⁸

In the New Testament, the translation of the Hebrew word חַסֵּד is χάρις which means “a beneficent disposition toward someone, favour, grace, gracious care, goodwill”.⁹ This word for grace appears mostly in the Pauline Epistles (101 uses) where Paul uses it in almost every greeting and conclusion in his letters.¹⁰ A reason for this use could have come from the Jewish custom of wishing someone peace, which was also understood as wishing God’s blessing on them.¹¹ An example of this use of grace can be seen in *Corinthians* where Paul states “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all”.¹² Paul also describes grace as being in “right relationship with God”.¹³ Grace, in this context, is seen as an interior as well as exterior action which Paul describes as a gift we receive through Christ: “through him we have obtained access to his grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God”.¹⁴

Another word used in the scriptures to understand grace is רַחֲמִים¹⁵ in Hebrew or ἐλεος¹⁶ in Greek. This particular meaning of grace is commonly misunderstood since the typical English translation of mercy does not adequately capture the biblical meaning. The scriptures (especially the Old Testament) use this word to describe how one moves beyond the obligations and duties expected in a relationship. This word is described as an “overwhelming, astonishing graciousness that is oblivious of itself and solely for the other”.¹⁷ Duffy states that this word is the most adequate way to speak about how God sees his relationship with mankind and what the response of mankind should be.¹⁸ An example of its use is seen in *Exodus* where God

⁷ Stephen J. Duffy, *Volume 3: The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 18.

⁸ Exod 33:19 (Revised Standard Version, Navarre Series).

⁹ Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and William Arndt, eds., s.v. “χάρις,” in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). This is only one meaning of the word. The root is Greek is char and means something that sparkles or gleams. See Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace*, 24.

¹⁰ Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace*, 31.

¹¹ Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace*, 31.

¹² 2 Cor 13:14.

¹³ Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace*, 35.

¹⁴ Romans 5:2.

¹⁵ Davidson, “*The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*” and Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, “*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.”

¹⁶ This word has many meanings, but in relation to the Hebrew word before it seems to be indicating mercy.

¹⁷ Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace*, 21.

¹⁸ Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace*, 21.

Himself states that He is “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness”.¹⁹ With this understanding, we can see the basis for much of what happened afterwards; God’s constant love towards His people even when they reject him, God’s gratuitous gift of Himself through Christ and therefore God’s gift of Himself through the graces of the sacraments.

3. The Acceptance of Grace

The *Catechism* states that grace enables man to come to know God in a personal and intimate way.²⁰ Man did not do anything to deserve this grace, it is a gift freely given by God that cannot be earned. Man in return has to respond to this gift by either accepting or rejecting this invitation into relationship with God.²¹ To accept means to respond and return this loving gift of grace by living God’s love in every aspect of life through thoughts, words and actions.²² Since every person is a unique creation of God they receive through grace the gifts that are most appropriate to them to be exercised as part of their responsibilities as a member of the body of Christ.²³ This is evidenced in Romans where it states the following: “having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our servicing; he who teaches, in his teaching”.²⁴

To be able to properly live this intimate relationship with God, man needs help from the supernatural virtues of faith, hope and charity that are given through the gift of grace. These virtues are said to be operative or habitual since they are meant to become the new norm for the way man lives this life of grace.²⁵ Faith provides the information necessary to be able to search for God in the first place, orientating one’s life towards the divine. Hope enables man to keep striving to remain in right relationship with God, while he awaits the time that he will hopefully be able to see God in heaven. Charity helps man demonstrate the love that God has shown to him since faith and hope find their end in charity and God is the ultimate manifestation of charity.²⁶

¹⁹ Exod 34:7

²⁰ CCC, 35.

²¹ W.G. Most, s.v. “Grace (In the Bible),” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Detroit: Gale, 2003).

²² Jean Daujat, *The Theology of Grace* (London: Burns & Oates, 1959), 103.

²³ CCC, 2004.

²⁴ Rom 12:6-7

²⁵ P. Gregory Stevens, *The Life of Grace* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 81.

²⁶ Stevens, *The Life of Grace*, 85.

Since God's love is the reason why we receive grace and the reason why we accept grace, living life together with God necessarily entails living in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.²⁷ This is confirmed by Jesus in John's gospel where he states that the people who believe in him "may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us".²⁸ In order for us, as flesh and bone humans, to dwell in something as supernatural as the Trinity we must be able to freely and consciously move beyond ourselves and enter into this relationship with the Divine Persons. With a proper disposition and the help of grace we become able to receive the gift of God which is seen as the fulfilment of our deepest longings and greatest perfection of our nature.²⁹

4. Grace and the Sacraments

The Sacraments are typically defined as "efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us".³⁰ They are visible signs of the invisible graces that we receive when we celebrate them. These sacraments are given to their fullest capacity or if they are completed correctly *ex opere operato*³¹ and we are in the proper state to receive them.³² The *Catechism* defines sacramental grace as "the grace of the Holy Spirit, given by Christ and proper to each sacrament".³³ This spirit transforms those who receive it and brings them into communion with Christ, allowing them to share in Christ's divinity and thus become divinely adopted sons of God.³⁴ The importance of sacramental grace stems from the fact that sacraments touch every aspect of our lives. Since the graces of the individual sacraments draw their power from the Paschal Mystery of Christ this leads to the conclusion that it is God who acts through us *ex opere operantis*³⁵ or if we use the graces given to us.

²⁷ Daujat, *The Theology of Grace*, 76.

²⁸ John 17:21

²⁹ Stevens, *The Life of Grace*, 70.

³⁰ CCC, 1131.

³¹ *Ex opere operato* means 'from the work worked'. Kurt Stasiak, *Sacramental Theology: Means of Grace, Ways of Life* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002), 145.

³² Pope Paul VI, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Vatican Website, December 4, 1963, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html, sec. 11.

³³ CCC, 1129.

³⁴ CCC, 460.

³⁵ *Ex opere operantis* means by the work of the worker. Stasiak, *Sacramental Theology*, 146.

Baptism manifests the love of God that we share through the Paschal Mystery of Christ. This participation leads us to new life which we receive through the Holy Spirit that joins us to the Christian community, the Body of Christ.³⁶ The Sacrament of Baptism is usually given to a newborn child. This is because Baptism is seen as a grace filled gift from God and, therefore, can in no way be earned by man.³⁷ The matter and form of the sacrament are the pouring of running water and the words “I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”.³⁸ The sacrament also confers a seal or character that “configures us to Christ”.³⁹ Since Baptism is the first sacrament we receive, it provides the grace that saves us. This grace given to us through Jesus is what allows us to be reborn into the life of God. Baptismal grace also gives us the ability to avoid the temptation of sin and live in imitation of Christ throughout our lives.⁴⁰

Penance is a healing sacrament that allows the baptised who have gravely sinned to turn back to God, restore their baptismal grace and come back into communion with the Body of Christ.⁴¹ In the gospels penance is seen as *μετανοια* or a conscious turning away of one’s life from sin, striving to imitate Christ both internally and externally.⁴² This is seen in Acts, from Peter’s address in the temple: “Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord”.⁴³ Pope Francis emphasises that forgiveness is not something that we do ourselves but rather a “gift of the Holy Spirit who fills us with the wellspring of mercy and of grace that flows unceasingly from the open heart of the Crucified and Risen Christ”.⁴⁴ Penance should remind us that all of the sacraments and the graces they provide are gifts from God. The more that we realise this gift of grace in the Sacrament of Penance the more we affirm its influence in our lives and the more our disposition becomes one of humility and thanks.⁴⁵

³⁶ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction On Infant Baptism – Pastoralis actio*, October 20, 1980, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19801020_pastoralis_actio_en.html, sec. 9.

³⁷ CCC, 1282.

³⁸ CCC, 265.

³⁹ Stasiak, *Sacramental Theology*, 75.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴¹ CCC, 1446.

⁴² Pope John Paul II, *Reconciliation and penance*, December 2, 1984, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html, sec. 4.

⁴³ Acts 3:19.

⁴⁴ Pope Francis, General audience, February 19, 2014, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140219_udienza-generale.html, sec. 1.

⁴⁵ Stasiak, *Sacramental Theology*, 112.

The Sacrament of Confirmation is where the baptised receive the sacramental sign or seal and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This same spirit was given to the Apostles on Pentecost: “and there appeared to them tongues of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit”.⁴⁶ The graces received in Confirmation bring us closer to Christ and deepen the graces we received in Baptism.⁴⁷ This gift of grace also strengthens us for our mission to be witnesses and continue to build up the Church, just as Christ himself said the Apostles would: “you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit is upon you and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth”.⁴⁸ Pope Francis emphasises the gratuitous aspect of the sacrament in his own words about Confirmation being the work of God that: “moulds us in the image of his Son, to make us capable of loving like him...by infusing in us his Holy Spirit, whose action pervades the whole person and his entire life”.⁴⁹

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has looked at the meaning of grace as a free gift from God that allows one to draw closer to Him. This essay looked at how grace is understood in the Old and New Testaments and how grace provides man with the ability to grow closer to God and know Him in an ever more personal and intimate way. The Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Penance were looked at in terms of the graces they respectively impart and how these sacramental graces help individuals work towards the fulfillment of their duty as Christians, throughout their lives, in anticipation of meeting God in heaven.

⁴⁶ Acts 2: 3-4.

⁴⁷ CCC, 1303.

⁴⁸ Acts 1:8

⁴⁹ Pope Francis, General audience, January 29, 2014,

https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140129_udienza-generale.html.

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