

PENTECOST *Today*

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Chairman's
Corner

by Aggie Neck



The gift of life-giving water

Grace! Grace is a word with many definitions but the one that I think is a spiritual eye-opener comes from a footnote for Revelation 7:17: "Life-giving water: God's grace which flows from Christ." Scripture is filled with verses that invite us to partake of this life-giving water. One of my favorites is in John 7:37-39: "If any one thirsts let him come to me; let him drink who believes in me. Scripture has it: 'From within him rivers of living water shall flow'. Here he was referring to the Spirit, whom those that come to believe in him were to receive." Grace—life-giving water.

Grace is defined in *Webster's Dictionary* as "unmerited divine assistance given for our repentance or sanctification; a virtue coming from God." It further defines the word *graceless* as "lacking in divine grace, void of attractive qualities."

As we look at these definitions it causes us to reflect on the many facets of this wonderful gift that God has given to us because of his love for us. Truly, Webster's definition of "unmerited divine assistance" strikes a chord. Unmerited indeed is this gift of grace, this life-giving water flowing from Christ to us. Yet, God gives freely, without hesitation to all who come to him, to all who call upon him, to all who seek him in truth.

We all know people who reflect this quality of grace. They wear it like a garment; it radiates from their words and actions. Grace lived is to receive that unmerited divine assistance as the anointing of God that enables us to

minister in love, to proclaim the Gospel in truth, to bring healing, and to comfort those who mourn.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (n. 1810) describes it this way: "Human virtues acquired by education, by deliberate acts and by a perseverance ever renewed in repeated efforts are purified and elevated by divine grace. With God's help, they forge character and give facility in the practice of good. The virtuous man/woman is happy to practice them." Thus we can see that everything we are is purified, elevated and even anointed when we bring it to God.

We all also know people who are "graceless," who are lacking in divine grace. Noticeable characteristics are "void of life, of love, of goodness." These are the people God calls us to reach out to, that we might help them find the fullness of grace. Our reception of grace brings a responsibility to be heralds of the good news that declares the joy of being a recipient of this unmerited gift.

"The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come!' Let him who hears answer, 'Come!' Let him who is thirsty come forward; let all who desire it accept the gift of life-giving water" (Rev. 22:17). May we be those who cry, "Come" and accept this gift of grace, the living water which flows from Christ. ♦

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PENTECOST *Today*

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Amazing Grace

The primacy of grace and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal

by Walter Matthews

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.*

These words, penned by John Newton over two hundred years ago, contain a perennial truth. St. Paul expressed it this way:

But God being rich in faithful love...brought us to life with Christ—it is through grace that you have been saved—and raised us up with him and gave us a place with him in heaven, in Christ Jesus. This was to show for all ages to come, through his goodness towards us in Christ Jesus, how extraordinarily rich he is in grace. Because it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith; not by anything of your own, but by a gift from God; not by anything that you have done, so that nobody can claim the credit (Eph. 1:4-9).

How often we forget the *sine qua non* of grace in our lives and in the ministry we do in this Renewal, not to mention, the church's struggle throughout the ages. That is why, in his apostolic letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Pope John Paul II writes about "an essential principle of the Christian view of life: the primacy of grace" (n. 38).

There is a temptation which besets every spiritual journey and pastoral work: that of thinking that the results depend on our ability to act and to plan. God of course asks us really to cooperate with his grace, and therefore invites us to invest all our resources of intelligence and energy in serving the cause of the kingdom. But it is fatal to forget that "without Christ we can do nothing" (cf. Jn. 15:5) (n. 38).

How does our Holy Father's exhortation about the primacy of grace apply to us and to this Renewal?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines grace as "favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life" (n. 1996). In the sacraments of initiation we receive grace to become sons and daughters of the Father, sharing the divine nature (cf. 2 Pt. 1:4). Through sin, however, this grace can be lost and this relationship fractured. Even without serious sin, we can fail to grow in this life of grace. The baptism in the Holy Spirit we experienced in this Renewal is a re-energizing of grace in our lives. It is, as *Fanning the Flame* asserts, "a key to living the Christian life to the fullest" (p. 9).

We who have experienced this release of grace in our lives and profess being baptized in the Holy Spirit should manifest a freedom from legalism and from trying to earn salvation on our own, a certainty of our identity as members of the body of Christ and as sons and daughters of a loving Father. "Abba, Father" should be as much on our lips as "Jesus is Lord" and "come, Holy Spirit."

The primacy of grace in our spiritual journey also impacts how we think about the call to holiness. Archbishop Paul Cordes, in his book, *Call to Holiness: Reflections on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal*, addresses this challenge:

When Jesus is heard saying, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48), many are discouraged because they misunderstand the nature of holiness, thinking it primarily the result of personal asceticism. On the contrary, it is first of all a free, unmerited gift. "The love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given us" (Rom. 5:5). We are invited to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect because we carry within us that life of the Father given through Christ in the Spirit, given without cost to us. We start at the top of the ladder, not at the bottom (p. 7).

This image of the ladder is vivid. So many see themselves at the bottom striving to get to the top by their own efforts. We make progress, then fail, and we see ourselves at the bottom again. After years of this struggle many give up and settle for a mediocre Christian life, even a mediocre charismatic life. Instead, the Archbishop suggests, if we see ourselves at the top—"holy," because the Holy Spirit lives in us through grace, because the church is holy (see *Catechism* n. 823)—then our ascetical and devotional practices are not means to an end, only attainable by a few saints. Rather, they are expressions of our response to God's presence in us.

If the primacy of grace is to be lived in our daily lives as sons and daughters growing in holiness, how might this challenge of our Holy Father affect those of us involved in Charismatic Renewal?

First, we must confront what Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa addresses in an article entitled, "The Temptation of Renewal"—the temptation to end in the flesh what was begun in the Spirit. This drift to the flesh has affected and infected the two primary vehicles of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal: Life in the Spirit seminars and prayer meetings.

Excerpts from the Documents of Vatican Council II

Before this faith can be exercised, man must have the grace of God to move and assist him; he must have the interior helps of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God, who opens the eyes of the mind and “makes it easy for all to accept and believe the truth!” (*Dei Verbum*, n. 5)

The church, to which we are all called in Christ Jesus, and in which by the grace of God we acquire holiness, will receive its perfection only in the glory of heaven, when will come the time of the renewal of all things (Acts 3:21). At that time, together with the human race, the universe itself, which is so closely related to man and which attains its destiny through him, will be perfectly reestablished in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:20; 2 Pet. 3:10-13). (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 48)

Christ is now at work in the hearts of men by the power of his Spirit; not only does he arouse in them a desire for the world to come but he quickens, purifies and strengthens the generous aspirations of mankind to make life more humane and conquer the earth for this purpose. (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 38)

Whether it aids the world or whether it benefits from it, the church has but one sole purpose—that the kingdom of God may come and the salvation of the human race may be accomplished. Every benefit the people of God can confer on mankind during its earthly pilgrimage is rooted in the church’s being “the universal sacrament of salvation” at once manifesting and actualizing the mystery of God’s love for men. (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 45)

In the first place, many prayer groups have given up even doing Life in the Spirit (understood generically) seminars. Fr. Cantalamessa refers to this as a weariness, where “baptism in the Spirit has passed to the second place,” where “there are groups in which a few have received it and in which people believe that it is not so important in the life of the Renewal.” He continues, “It is from this weariness...that the flattening of the Renewal starts.”

The solution Fr. Cantalamessa offers is that “we must begin again to use this gift better, to run seminars with effective baptism in the Holy Spirit.” This does not mean leading people to a limited “emotional experience of the divine” (Pope John Paul II to Italian charismatics earlier this year), or yielding to only one of the wide spectrum of charisms, or encouraging people to pursue religious experience for itself. Rather, “we must awaken Christian lives which are dormant or spent” (Cantalamessa) and help people understand that a more authentic sign of being baptized in the Spirit is “a life of converted Christian discipleship” (*Fanning the Flame*, p. 12).

What of our prayer meetings? Fr. Cantalamessa is brief but incisive: “a certain ritualism comes to the surface: we do the same things of the past, but without the power of past times, because inside there is no Spirit and no life.”

How do we get unstuck? We must begin with praise and thanksgiving. Even the smallest of groups can begin to thank and give praise.

Our Holy Father in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* speaks of “the duty of praise; this is the point of departure for every genuine response of faith to the revelation of God in Christ” (n. 4). He continues in the section on the primary of grace: “It is prayer which roots us in this truth. It constantly reminds us of the primacy of Christ and, in union with him, the primacy of the interior life and of holiness. When this principle is not respected, is it any wonder that pastoral plans come to nothing and leave us with a disheartening sense of frustration?” (n. 38). The antidote he suggests is “a renewed listening to the word of God (n. 39) which echoes St. Paul: “Let the Word of Christ, in all its richness, find a home with you. Teach each other, and advise each other in all wisdom” (Col. 3:16).

These two pillars, praise and thanksgiving, and listening to the word of God (I include here the discerned prophetic word and, of course, the authentic teaching of the church) will help every prayer group, and the Renewal as a whole, live the primacy of grace.

Finally, what of our church in the present moment? It is battered by the revelation of scandals new and old. It struggles with the loss of faith in the core truths of Catholicism: the virgin birth, the resurrection, Scripture as the word of God, the real presence and so on. It is attacked on the left by those who would change the church into the image it desires, and on the right by those who want to reject the breath of the Spirit in the Second Vatican Council who want to turn the altar around, insist on certain sameness in gestures and devotional practice, and in general oppose anything spontaneous or emotional.

Let us, with Fr. Cantalamessa, “have a great desire in our hearts that the Renewal be, or be again, that place where the Risen One may proclaim his unchallenged ‘I Am.’” Let us hear again, believe and live the words of our Holy Father to the Italian Renewal, “Yes! The Renewal in the Spirit can be considered as a special gift of the Holy Spirit to the church in our time.”

The primacy of grace we have experienced in baptism in the Holy Spirit, nourished in prayer and in an authentic understanding of holiness challenges the church (us) to put out in the deep, to go forward in hope and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

“This is the moment of faith, of prayer, of conversation with God, in order to open our hearts to the tide of grace and allow the word of Christ to pass through us in all its powers: *Duc in altum*...As this millennium begins, allow the successor of Peter to invite the whole church to make this act of faith, which expresses itself in a renewed commitment to prayer” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 38). For it is fatal to forget, personally or communally, that without Christ we can do nothing. ♦

Walter Matthews is Executive Director of the National Service Committee.



The grace of letting go

by Michele Needham Greisbar, Ph.D.

In his apostolic letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Pope John Paul II describes the primacy of grace as “an essential principle of the Christian view of life” (n. 38). Without the belief in grace being the core of our behavior, our spirituality—and indeed our acts of worship—become reflections of our own wills and we engage in self-salvation.

Perhaps because most of us have been born in the United States, we have also inherited the Puritan work ethic, which characterized our founding fathers. “God helps those who help themselves.” However, to translate that concept into the spiritual realm of Christian faith (our Roman Catholicism) is to deviate from the foundational truth that it is God who has saved us and continues to save us through the mystery of Jesus’ dying and rising. “Apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5).

As we mature in our personal lives, we find the importance of individuating, of becoming our true selves, of not acting out of codependency on others’ desires or needs. As infants we depend on others to meet all

our needs. As we grow we progress to independence; we begin to find our own voices and choose our own lives. For many, that development is a hard-fought battle, and it is very difficult to surrender that independence even to God. It may be midlife before we (hopefully) begin again to acknowledge our powerlessness in decisive situations and our constant dependency on God.

“There is a temptation which perennially besets every spiritual journey and pastoral work: that of thinking that the results depend on our ability to act and to plan” (n. 38). In reality, our triune God has determined to guide and strengthen us in our daily spiritual walk. The Father has given his Son (Jn. 3:16) to be Emmanuel, God-with-us, and their Spirit to remain with us as Jesus returned to the Father (Jn. 14:16). We are not abandoned to find our own pathway.

Jesus says, “Come to me all you who labor and are tired, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28). At times, when we most need to lose ourselves in the arms of our God, we struggle to maintain our independence.

Our guarantees are in Jesus’ words: “I will give you rest.”

See **Letting go** page 13

You shall be my witnesses

From near-death to life in Christ

A story of grace



by Christine Watkins

I was raised in an anti-religious home, and I did not like Christians. I was never going to be a Christian—of that much, I was sure. In my youth, I also perfected the fine art of worrying and suffered from very low self-esteem and mild depression. I did find joy, though, in ballet and practiced it diligently for years with such commitment and passion that I ended up dancing professionally with the San Francisco Ballet Company. At age seven I decided that I was going to be a professional ballet dancer, and I became one. I was going to dance until approximately age forty, so I planned. Ballet was my destiny. Nothing else even remotely satisfied me.

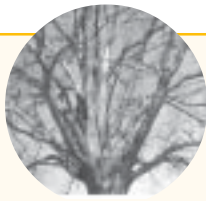
Not having been raised in a religion, I did not know there was a God; so, for me, ballet quickly became my personal god. At the height of my dancing abilities and fully in love with my profession, I suffered from foot injuries and had three foot operations. This ended my career and took away the only god I ever knew. Devastated, I grew depressed, lost my identity, and lost my hope.

I would not be alive were it not for divine grace, unmerited and unasked for.

In my sadness I looked for comfort in intimate relationships and sank ever deeper into a mire of sin. I felt temporarily filled with life when I was in a relationship, but when things failed—as they inevitably did—I was left with an even larger, empty, dark and lonely hole within me. I was always searching outside myself for something to make me happy, and I never truly felt a sense of inner peace. I did not think of changing my behavior. One summer I ended up very sick with cervical cancer—a disease with no known cure. I had approximately six weeks to live. My hair was falling out, I was bleeding internally and vomiting often. With no energy, I often collapsed with fatigue. Worst of all, I felt sick inside my soul. At times I called out in guttural despair; at times I could not stop crying once I started.

My tears were cathartic. I was searching desperately through New Age spirituality for answers and wanted nothing to do with Jesus or Mary. For years I had wanted nothing to do with them. I remember seeing a picture of the Madonna and child which made me so angry that I wanted it taken down. I also remember reading a self-help book that I enjoyed except for its fleeting references to Jesus. I knew that Jesus and Mary were fanciful figures for the hopeless and misguided.

[See Life in Christ page 13](#)



Spiritual Formation

Grace

by Dorothy Ranaghan

One of my granddaughters is named Grace. The mother of Jesus was termed “full of grace.” And for most of my adult life I’ve been reminded that I could have wound up in every sort of evil “but for the grace of God.”

So what is grace? There are, of course, official definitions: “grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us... participation in the life of God himself (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1996, 1997). Grace is *charis*, which comes from *chairo*, “to rejoice, be glad,” which is quite fitting since grace—that free expression of God’s *hesed*, his loving kindness and mercy—fills us with joy and gladness. Our response to grace should always and everywhere be gratitude.

I’ve had very human experiences of grace in my life that have taught me at least analogously what free and undeserved help looks like. A few years ago my husband and I were visiting New Orleans, and while we were there a friend handed us two (impossible to get and very expensive) tickets to the Superbowl, and also treated us to a gourmet dinner—over \$100 apiece—at a famous local restaurant, Louis Quatorze. Even the memory of that weekend still fills me with awe and gratitude. We didn’t deserve any of that. It was all grace. That is the simple and compelling reality of grace both human and divine.

Reading the long history and theology of grace can tend to make us forget the simplicity of God’s lavish gift. One of the most famous controversies about this doctrine was waged by Augustine and Pelagius. Their differences seem to stem from a radical disagreement about human nature itself. Pelagius believed humans could become perfect through their own efforts. Augustine saw human nature as a mass of sin, and said that without grace (received in baptism) we remain only sin and incapable of good. He called grace a gift of the Spirit.

To Augustine, grace was so irresistible that he sometimes seemed to overlook free will. He never went as far as to say we had to respond to grace of necessity, but he certainly leaned in that direction. In the Reformation there was a return to strict Augustinianism on the part of Luther.

Today we are no longer fighting old Reformation battles about grace. One of the greater miracles of the ecumenical movement occurred on October 31, 1999, in Augsburg, Germany. The Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation signed an historic agreement about the nature of grace. Breakthroughs in biblical studies brought greater understanding on both sides, and eventual accord. The key passage in the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” reads:

Together we confess: by grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping us and calling us to good works.

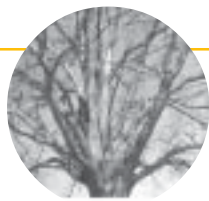
Good works are seen as a response to grace, not the cause of it.

Our response to grace should always and everywhere be gratitude.

Grace, the loving favor of God, comes to us in the sacraments, which were often called “channels of grace.” Today we prefer to think less in terms of physical analogies like channels, which tend to make grace sound like a liquid that flows in and out. Rather, we see it as a quality of a relationship. In this view, sacraments are “encounters with Christ,” and it is Christ who is the favor, mercy, gift, love and grace of God incarnate. Jesus was and is grace in the flesh. No wonder the angel greeted Mary as “full of grace.”

It is Jesus who is the point of contact between two worlds. In baptism, we become one with him by grace. In baptism, the Father sends the Spirit to make us one with Christ by his grace, so that in Christ the Father re-establishes the communication, the relationship between himself and us that was lost in the “fall.” The life of grace means that we live “in” Christ, “as” Christ, that he is “in us” and we, “in” God. It is a profound unity.





Spiritual Formation

Living in Christ we are now called to be “channels,” sacraments, signs, instruments, enfleshments of grace in this world. Grace in and through us changes this world so in need of the love and mercy of God. It forgives those who have been sexual abusers, racists, unfaithful spouses, murderers, rapists, terrorists, all who do not deserve or merit such love, such mercy, such grace. Grace is shocking. Does the world experience it in and through us? Does the world see us lavishing grace?

Theology may be complicated, but grace is simple, is freedom, is love. Walker Percy once wrote that “The old words of grace are worn smooth as poker chips and a certain devaluation has occurred.” He is correct. Most of the old debates and many of the older ways of thinking and speaking about grace fail to



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speak to modern ears. Christian writers like Flannery O’Connor, who believe that the modern world has resolved the ancient debate on nature and grace by eliminating grace altogether, make the struggle with grace central to their fictional characters. O’Connor locates the mystery of grace in the “solid flesh of our experience,” (cf. Peter Hawkins, *Language of Grace*, p. 22) and doesn’t mind shocking people with her dark stories to highlight the presence of grace, to prove her point that the vulgar world is sacramental, and the place where God and grace is present. In that insistence she actually repeats the sentiments of the great theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas, who said: “The whole of creation is a theater of grace, embodying and mediating the presence and saving activity of God on our behalf. It is the stage on which the drama of salvation continuously unfolds.”

Through the ages the ancient hymn *Amazing Grace* exalts the truth of grace.

’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
and grace my fears relieved.

How precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed...

’Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.

We should never doubt it. Our simple acceptance of such amazing grace is all that is required. Scrupulosity and worry about whether one is “in the state of grace” or not, has no place in our relationship with God. We can take our cue from the wisdom of Joan of Arc. Asked if she knew she was in God’s grace she answered: “If I am not, may it please God to put me in it; if I am, may it please God to keep me there” (*The Holiness of Saint Joan of Arc*, Etienne Robo). ♦

Dorothy Garrity Ranaghan is a founding member of the People of Praise Community, a former member of the National Service Committee and former



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Grace

Outline

A. Grace defined:

- favor
- free and undeserved help from God
- participation in the life of God

B. Human analogy

C. One controversial historical question: human nature and grace

D. Jesus: the grace of God incarnate

E. Sacraments: encounters with grace

F. How we are to live in grace grace changes us, and through us changes the world

G. Contemporary explanations of grace

H. Signs of being in the “state” of grace

Questions for reflection

1. What do you think of when you hear the word *grace*?
2. What does it look like to participate in the very life of God himself?
3. The Catechism says: “God’s full initiative demands man’s full response.” What does that mean?

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