

Some Catechetical Approaches to Grace

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Introduction

This paper is intended to be a guidepost for the presentation of some key concepts of grace to high school students. In reviewing a number of high school texts the matter was found to be presented in a very dogmatic and often irrelevant manner for students living in an era of existentialism and in an era when the basis of all theology—the Bible, has come into its own. Thus this treatment of grace is not going to follow the traditional catechetical approach but will emphasize the existential “I-Thou” relation and take the transformation of the Christian as its center of focus:

“This trend is seen in present theological understanding of the mystery of grace. Moving away somewhat from the post-Reformation emphasis on grace as justification or on the role of actual grace in making human moral behavior efficacious, theologians are concentrating on the role of sanctifying grace in the life of the individual Christian as well as in the Christian community. One of the most fascinating developments is suggested by the studies which indicate that grace consists basically in a relatedness of the Christian to the three persons of the Blessed Trinity. Because of this new reality (grace) the Christian finds himself in a situation of son-ship, a situation which relates him differently to each of the three divine Persons and permits him to enter into a truly personal communication of knowledge and love with them.

Seen in this way, grace is not something superimposed on the human person but something which enters into him to transform and fulfill him as person. The supernatural order in no way detracts from the orientations of man to personal development and achievement, but truly opens up the capacities of his personal being to yet fuller participation in knowledge and in love. If persons develop in terms of their mature relatedness to other persons, the fact that grace sets up a

situation of friendship with the three divine Persons means that entirely unprecedented possibilities of human maturity and growth enter the picture.

Seen in this way the life of grace is an integral element in human existing. Its development is not a question of peripheral and super-added practices, somewhat detached and apart from the normal course of human living; rather that which is the highest expression of the life of grace, charity, is found at the very center of all true human activity. When one says that a person develops in proportion to his capacity to love, one is stating in another form the oft-repeated truth that one's sanctity is measurable most properly by the extent of one's charity.

It is quite apparent how this approach to the understanding of sanctifying grace is of immense importance for the catechist. It points to the fact that grace is not to be explained primarily in terms of a reality given to man in order that he may be more correct in his ethical behavior. Rather grace is the foundation for the mystery of friendship with the three divine Persons. Grace is seen as something given the individual so that he can become more truly the person he is meant to be. Thus there is an openness, a sense of freedom, a sense of personal importance, rather than the sense of restriction and imposition sometimes found in the older emphasis on the ten commandments and on conformity to law as being the essence of the life of grace."¹

A Biblical presentation of grace will be emphasized. A few catechetical approaches will be included in the presentation.

Biblical Background

It seems appropriate to begin with the actual beginning of each Christian's supernatural life—the sacrament of Baptism, grounded in and in a sense continuing the historical event of Christ's own baptism. A literary analysis of the account of Christ's baptism in the New Testament demands that it be accompanied by the account of the temptation in the desert if the *significance* of Christian Baptism is to be emphasized and these two events must be analyzed through a consideration of the Old Testament background against which they were depicted, a background presenting the meaning of grace. It must be kept in mind, however, that this "grace—understanding" was a gradual development. There are many examples from which to draw.

In the story of Exodus, Moses and the Israelite people are *called* out of Egypt. They must *turn away* from the life in Egypt and turn toward God before they can be definitely *elected* by God at Sinai.

This election is solemnized in a *covenant* at the foot of Sinai and the occurrence is recalled by a *sign*, the Sabbath.

The same pattern can be seen in the story of Abraham. He is *called* out of Ur of Chaldees. He must *leave* his pagan homeland and is *chosen* by God only when he arrives in the land of Canaan. In a mysterious *covenant*-act God binds himself to Abraham and vice versa. Circumcision is a lasting memorial of this event.

The same pattern might be analyzed in the origin of the Davidic kingship and in the mission of the prophets.

This favor of God enjoyed by the chosen people was gratuitous. It implied intimate friendship with God:

“The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another.” (Exodus 33:11)

“Moses said to the Lord, ‘You indeed are telling me to lead this people on; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, “You are my intimate friend,” and also “You have found favor with me” ’” (Exodus 33:12)

It involved an inner change:

“But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (Jeremiah 31:33)

“Thus said the Lord: The people that were left and escaped from the sword, found grace in the desert. Israel shall go to his rest.” (Jeremiah 31:2-3)

Father Bernard Cooke, S. J., has summarized the Old Testament grace themes thus:

- a. A calling, a vocation; God always takes the initiative.
- b. A conversion by the human beings conceived; they must turn away from their previous way of life.
- c. An election in which God chooses the people as his, and they choose God as the divinity they will worship.
- d. A covenant action that solemnizes the election and makes it ‘legally binding.’
- e. A commemorative sign as a lasting reminder of the covenant agreement.”²

In the Old Testament God’s calls or vocations become progressively more spiritual climaxed by the vocation or call of Christ. Christ’s re-

sponse in complete self-giving epitomizes the call to become a saint and establishes a new covenant for all mankind. Going back to the original purpose of understanding the Old Testament background in order to better comprehend the baptism and temptation of Christ, a definite parallel can be drawn between the Exodus and Christ's baptism. In the Exodus Israel passed through the waters of the Red Sea and into the desert to be tested. Jesus was led by the spirit from the waters of the Jordan into the desert to be tested by Satan.

It might be mentioned that baptism (washings) were very common and very important to the Jewish people and symbolized the removing of sin and a certain degree of healing. Christ's baptism was symbolic of His answering His Father's "call" and His turning away from His hidden life.

The temptations of Christ in the desert find many parallels in the *Old Testament* as the Israelites were constantly tempted by the pagan world surrounding them to mistrust God, to "go it their own way" and even to turn totally away from God in idolatry.

Christ's first temptation, to turn stones to bread, was actually to mistrust God and His covenant, but Christ accepted whole-heartedly the God of the covenant, His bread was to do the will of Him who sent Him.

The second temptation was to misguided presumptuous trust. Christ resisted and did not attempt to "use" the covenant with His Father to fit any personal preconceived ideas or desires.

In the third temptation Christ was invited to abandon the covenant in favor of Satan. Satan was again thwarted.

The baptism of Christ (the new Adam) can also be studied in comparison with the first Adam. In the creation of the world God is pictured as bringing into being a chaotic mass (or mess) which is thought of in terms of water. Then God speaks and His spirit "broods over the waters" (suggesting a bird hovering). In the baptism of Christ the Holy Spirit symbolized as a dove, descends as Christ steps from the waters of the Jordan to begin the task of bringing life and order to the world.

Adam lived in peace with the animals in Paradise as Christ was "in the midst of wild animals in the desert" (Mark 1:13). There is also a similarity between the temptation of Adam and the temptation of Christ.

In the baptism of Christ, after Christ has answered the call and left his hidden life by coming to the waters of the Jordan, the Father reciprocally announces His election of Christ as His chosen one. Thus

Christ's baptism establishes Him as the new Israel. His action is a pledge of a new covenant and the lasting sign of his action is Christian Baptism.

It is important to realize that *Christ's action* in the baptism and temptation is essentially one of free choice. Thus from the very beginning of the gospel, the early Christian was told that correct use of freedom lies at the very heart of the mystery of Christ. While the baptism of Christ was only symbolic of Christ's *public* acceptance of His call, the temptation was real and Christ refused to abandon His call.

The Christian also externally manifests his acceptance of the Father's will, symbolically in the sacrament of Baptism and *really* in his ordinary daily actions done in conformity to God's will.

St. Paul stressed that through Baptism the Christian is united with Christ, lives with Christ, lives in and through Christ (Col. 3:3-4), (Gal. 3:27), (Col. 2:12). Also, because of each Christian's union with the living Christ there exists a profound union of each Christian with all other Christians. They share "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." (Eph. 4:5).

In Baptism the Christian is united to Christ's death (the "old self" is buried in the waters of Baptism) and Resurrection (the Christian emerges from the waters of Baptism to lead a new life). (Rom. 6:9-11)

Thus Baptism is an entry into a new chosen people, the Church. The Christian publically renounces the devil, his works, pomp and service, and a new life is communicated to him, a life called sanctifying or habitual grace.

Ways of Presenting Grace

At the root of the mystery of grace lies a still greater mystery—the fact that men are offered friendship with the Three Divine Persons. Neither reason nor revelation can explain why They gave Themselves to us other than They love us.

The Three Divine Persons in their graciousness toward us are theologically referred to as uncreated grace. The reason for the term "grace" is more evident after a consideration of the derivation of the word. Grace originates from the Latin "gratia" or "gratus" meaning pleasing. A grace is something pleasing to someone yet not strictly due, or a pardon, a free remission of a penalty incurred. The word grace has had an important use in aesthetics. La Fontaine described it as "something still more than beauty." Another French writer states

that grace suggests a quality that charms because it symbolizes something supremely lovable such as trust, and tenderness. In the last analysis love is the essence of grace, even the grace in an admiring smile, a gracious manner.

To love is to give and the generosity prompted by love is the deepest meaning of the word grace. Grace is a call to an exchange of love between God and man, a call to cling by love to the love God bears man. However, there is a difference between God's love and man's as the following parable illustrates:

"Once upon a time, there was a young girl, an orphan, who grew up in coarse surroundings. Her foster parents were hard and rough, and had never wanted her. Never as a baby or as a growing child had she known the subtle intimacy of a true home. She had never been loved.

And then she grew into a young woman. Daily encounter with disparagement, egotism and brutality hardened her heart. All she knew was self-defense, daily surly bickering to make sure of a minimum of security and right. To the best of her knowledge it had always been so in the past, and it would remain so in the future: biting in order not to be bitten,—the law of the jungle. She had no faith in man; she had not even faith in herself.

Her whole appearance betrayed the solitude in which the soul of her youth was living. She toiled and moiled, dressed in cheap graceless attire. Her one resource to escape from hopeless emptiness was rough and rowdy amusement. Selfish, suspicious and uncouth, with bitterness distorting her mouth, she was aware that she had no beauty and that what men wanted was her body for a few lustful moments.

There lived in the same city a young man, hale and strong. His sunny youth, spent in the midst of loving parents, brothers, and sisters, shone in his gaze and sang in his voice. His step and speech were assured and firm, as is the case with those who have found peace. He was a good man.

One bright morning in spring, the miracle happened. The young man met the girl, by chance. Moved in his innermost self, his heart went out to her. With the eyes of love he saw right through and beyond her shabby vulgarity. He looked out for her; he spoke to her with the simplicity of a conquered heart. But she, at first, laughed in his face, addressed him in crude unmannered language. She thought he was ridiculous. Tact, however, patience and respect found their way at last to a remnant of yearning which lay still unwithered in the depth of the girl's being. For the first time in her life, *she was appreciated for her own sake*,—the greatest need of human nature. Yet, *the beauty he discovered in her did not come from her but from his love.*

Love has been a creative power since the beginning of the world.

The young man's deference and appreciation stirred up in her a nascent self-reliance, a foretaste of peace and quiet, of inner self-assurance. And timidly, gropingly, the young woman awakened to first love. She shyly began taking care of her appearance, gaudily still and without elegance. His tenderness and his example refined her taste. Beauty came to her with the first smile.

Soon they were absorbed in each other. They steadily drew together in a selfless exchange of pure mutual love. What had happened really? Or better: what had come into being? That girl had been granted a great *favor*, a matchless present, a gift she did not deserve: the favor of love.

After the long barren winter of her youth, a seed had been sown in her innermost self; it was ready to spring into life. Though still very much herself, she was already another person. Welling up from unsuspected regions within her, she experienced a soothing security; she grew steadily in strength and depth, in proportion as her formerly cherished convictions were pulled up by the roots. It was like a painful dying. All the distrust, hatred and vindictiveness she had so far nursed in herself, whatever she had clung to with the despair of a drowning person: all that she had now to let go; she had to resign herself to the sensation of being stripped bare, bereaved of all. A harrowing agony, indeed; but one of which life is born.

Like a ship tossed on the waves and driven from her course, the girl tried another tack; she steered to the unknown: *the leap of faith in another*. The aggressive self-assertiveness, the armor in which she had shielded herself so far, was torn off her. She attempted *the leap of hope in another* who would, in the future, stand surety for her. Meanwhile, a novel, unsuspected marvel happened: she felt enriched by her new state of bereavement, secure and anchored in her surrender. Faith and hope ripened into *real love*, the final leap indispensable to any one who wants both to lose himself and to find himself in another. The girl had lost everything she had; but what she lost, she recovered superabundantly. She ceased putting her trust in appearances and now saw deeper in things. She discovered the beauty of her surrounding world: the setting sun, the violet in the shade, the light in the eyes of the child, the laughter in a voice. She saw everything through the eyes of the beloved. She became another being altogether; for the first time, she was her true self. Her injured youth lived on in her; but it now began to develop along the line of generosity and disinterested care of others,—in a wealth of gratitude.

A beautiful tale, indeed. The one thing in it which leaves us somewhat sceptical is whether there ever was a young man powerful enough to work such a miracle. We read of the custom in honor among the conquistadores that when the latter were caught in a storm at sea, they vowed marriage with the first penniless girl God would put on their path after a safe return home, with the proviso, naturally, that the girl be sound of limb and morals. Whatever view

one takes of the parable or of the conquistadores's custom, it is sure that only a very pure and powerful love can change bitterness and hatred into a return of love. No mere man, however, can achieve even that much; for wickedness is rooted more deeply in our nature than we dare suspect. That is why there had to appear a Man without sin; a Man possessing God's own heart. And when He came, the tale became reality.³

Thus God's love is creative; it pours out being and goodness into things; whereas, man's love presupposes the goodness. Man loves because a thing is, because it is good or beautiful. Man's love follows upon the goodness of things; God's is creative of the goodness of things.

"God's love is of two kinds:

- a. a love which St. Thomas calls common by which God loves the blade of grass, the star, the pebble, a love by which God loves everything that exists.
- b. a special love elevating the rational creature above his nature, clothing him with a new nature, bringing him into a new universe."⁴

"God raises us up, rather as the artist uses an instrument to make it produce what by itself it would be incapable of—joy, sadness, prayers. Something beyond its own power acts through the instrument: it is a human heart that touches the instrument and the effect produced, being on the plane of its cause, is a human effect. If divine grace comes down into me, I shall no longer be in community only with the things of earth and with men, but with the divine Persons, with all that is deepest and most hidden in the heart of God."⁵

This deepening and opening up of the human personality is sanctifying grace. It is *life* on a very personal level, a new birth, a regeneration into holiness, a participation in the very life of God for the indwelling of the divine Persons is always the accompaniment of grace. The Trinity comes in created grace as the sun is given in its rays.

In addition to this new life, and as preparation for it, man is offered actual grace, a divine impulse causing (if he allows it) him to pass from sin to sanctifying grace.

"Actual grace seeks me out in sin to bring me to justification; then when I am there, it comes back again and again, insistently, to carry me to a higher stage of sanctifying grace. God is constantly knocking at the gate of my heart to invite me to go beyond the state I have reached, because my whole life should be a journey on the way to Love, nor above all can I give a more intensified assent than hitherto, unless a divine movement comes secretly to my heart to help it ascend higher. I can refuse. But if I let God act he will raise me further, step by step, to a greater love."⁶

“Rain is often used as a symbol of grace for rain is necessary to make things grow. Water falls from the sky and brings the seed of life; the plant then spreads its leaves and petals toward the sky. This is similar to the manner in which grace acts. God is farther above man than is the sky above the earth. Man cannot rise to God. The Blessed Trinity descends gently into man’s heart like rain falling upon the soul. He causes man’s heart to grow inwardly and to turn toward God.

The Blessed Trinity brings supernatural gifts. These inner, supernatural gifts are called created grace. As rain is necessary for plants to grow so also these graces are necessary to nourish the soul and draw it to God. Just as rain falling on seeds brings forth different flowers, so too grace produces different effects in men.”⁷

Grace is the life of the Church, the organic bond of Christ’s mystical body:

“What happens to others happens to ourselves; we rejoice in their joys, suffer in their sufferings, help them in all their needs as we help ourselves, because we and they live one single and same divine life. In living by the grace of that divine life, we live by the life of each of our neighbors; we live in them and they in us.”⁸

The Christian religion then is the revelation that God loves us and the effect of that love is grace. It is the revelation that God is our Father; Grace makes us children of God and every time we say “Our Father” we are talking about grace. It is the revelation that in God there are three Divine Persons and that we are made of the society of those Three Persons; Grace means life in that society. It is the revelation that we have been saved by Christ meaning He gives us the grace of which He is the source. Hence Christian life is grace and grace is the Christian life.

“God wishes to communicate Himself, to pour forth the love which He Himself is. That is the first and the last of His real plans and hence His real world too. Everything else exists so that this one thing might be: the eternal miracle of infinite Love. And so God makes a creature whom He can love: He creates man. He creates him in such a way that he can receive this Love which is God Himself, and that he can and must at the same time accept it for what it is: the ever astounding wonder, the unexpected, unexacted gift.”⁹

Conclusion

While grace gives Christ possessed, it is at the same time a relationship to Christ who is hoped for in eternity. In the Christian experience, grace, is betwixt and between, situated according to St. Ber-

nard, between Christ's first coming (Incarnation) and His second coming (the Parousia). Grace is "all the comings and goings and returns of Christ within the soul: a hidden coming always, glimpsed in mystery through those personal signs whose coherent but unpredictable totality forms the experience itself and enables the elect to see Christ in themselves"¹⁰—in the dark mirror which they will always be to themselves. But this mysterious coming is the link between the first and the second coming, the means of going from the one to the other, the only rest and comfort during the earthly pilgrimage—the hour between spring and summer.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Hofinger, S.J., Johannes and Stone, Theodore C., *Pastoral Catechetics*, pp. 93-94.

² Cooke, S.J., Bernard J., *Christian Sacraments and Christian Personality*, p. 4.

³ Fransen, S.J., Peter, *Divine Grace and Man*, pp. 43-46.

⁴ Journet, Charles, *The Meaning of Grace*, p. 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷ Goldbrunner, Josef, *Teaching the Catholic Catechism*, Volume I, p. 100.

⁸ Op. cit., *Christian Sacraments and Christian Personality*, p. 89.

⁹ Rahner, S.J., Karl, *Theological Investigations, Volume I, God, Christ, Mary and Grace*, p. 310.

¹⁰ Mouroux, Jean, *The Christian Experience*, p. 369.

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