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MORE ABOUT GRACE (Part Three)

The first Christians chose the Greek word *charis* to express the nature of God's self-giving to us. They could have used Old Testament terms that signify justice or truth. Instead they selected a word with many shades of meaning. *Charis* can be that which shines, what delights the eye. It may refer to physical beauty, the sweetness of life, virtue. It can also express favor, goodness, liberality.

Actually Jesus did not use the word translated into the Greek as *charis*. It was not in the vocabulary of His contemporaries. Of course, the Good News of Jesus Christ is all about grace. But words have a kind of life of their own. They appear at a certain time. A term will be applied to a particular reality, and gradually that term will assume more and more significance. The evangelist John who wrote many years after the Synoptic writers, says in his prologue, "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17). We do not find the word for "grace" in Matthew and Mark. Luke does use it with the special sense of "favor." The angel greets Mary at the annunciation, "Rejoice, so highly favored." That means *so highly graced*. "Mary, do not be afraid for you have won God's favor (or *grace*)" (Lk 1:28,30).

The reality of what we call grace is everywhere in all the Gospel narratives. To understand that reality, we turn to the tales describing the power, boundless love, and compassion of Christ for the people he encounters.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux was not envious of those who walked with Jesus and felt the blessedness of His nearness touching their lives with light and grace. She declares, "I'm very certain that our Lord did not say any more to His apostles through His instructions and His physical presence than He says to us through His good inspirations and His grace." She goes on to explain how Jesus takes part in our lives not only through our positive qualities but also through our frailty. "Jesus could have said to St. Peter: 'Ask me for the strength to accomplish what you want.' But no, He did not, because He wanted to show Peter his weakness and because, before ruling the Church which is filled with sinners, he had to experience for himself what one is able to do without God's help" (*Her Last Conversations*, pp. 140-141: #4). Listen to her, "...what one is able to do without God's help." On your own, relying on your own resources.

Grace, however, is much more than assistance, although it certainly is that. It is also God's transforming power affecting our very substance. Here we are referring to sanctifying grace, what is called "the state of grace."

After Jesus' resurrection, we see in the Book of Acts and in the Epistles how the early Christian church explained grace as the basis of our new life in Christ. Peter declares to the elders in Jerusalem, "We believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus" (15:11). Later in Acts, the apostle Paul shares with us his understanding of his mission, "The ministry which I have received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (20:24).

In the Epistle to the Romans, Paul explains that the gift of sanctifying grace affects our very being. "We were buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (6:4). He emphasizes this by adding, "The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (6:23). Paul is telling us that we are radically changed through a regeneration and new birth in the Holy Spirit.

Grace is God's self-communication to our human nature. The infinite has taken hold of our finitude: we are raised to a holiness that participates in the very life of God. Sanctifying grace establishes a new relationship between God and you. St. John of the Cross describes how grace permeates the essence of who we are. (St. Thérèse tells us that through his writings, he was in a special way her mentor and guide.) St. John says, "God descends in mercy on the soul, impressing and infusing His love and grace in her, making her beautiful and lifting her so high as to make her a partaker of His very divinity" (*The Spiritual Canticle* , 32:4, p 600). What John means is that in giving grace, God lovingly elevates your inmost being. You are not simply better than you were-- as if God added some quantity of natural goodness to all you already had. God has changed the very quality of what you are in your humanity. Now you have a different way of existing, a fresh life that is ordained to activity beyond your natural powers of behavior. Grace is the pledge of your new destiny and also the means of achieving that destiny. You are able to reach out to God in faith, hope and love since your whole substance is sanctified and ordered toward your God. The second letter to Timothy urges, "Accept the strength that comes from the grace of Christ Jesus " (2:1). Whenever we experience our feebleness-- whether physical, moral, or spiritual-- our Savior comes to fortify us. "From His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (Jn 1:16).

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