

Grace and Conversion

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God — not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. ~ Ephesians 2:4-10

ONE CANNOT HELP BUT TO THINK of the song “Amazing Grace” when one speaks about grace. Grace is simply that, amazing, because it is help from God completely undeserved and in one sense surprising. It is help that God gives to bring us into his divine family of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as adopted children.

Grace is a participation in the Trinitarian life. At Baptism we get God’s life in us. His grace is infused into the soul and the work of sanctification begins. Even the preparation that precedes the reception of grace at Baptism is itself the work of grace. The merit we receive through our good works find their source only in Jesus Christ. We can take no credit for our salvation or anyone else’s. The saints have always understood that their good works are pure grace. St. Thérèse of Lisieux prayed to Jesus: “I want to work for your *love alone*.... I do not ask you, Lord, to count my works. All our justice is blemished in your eyes. I wish, then, to be clothed in your own *justice* and to receive from your *love* the eternal possession of *yourself*”¹ (CCC 2011; italics in original).

St. Augustine, an early bishop of the Church often referred to as the “Doctor of Grace,” wrote volumes on the subject in an effort to defend the doctrine of grace from the error of Pelagius. Pelagius was a lay monk who

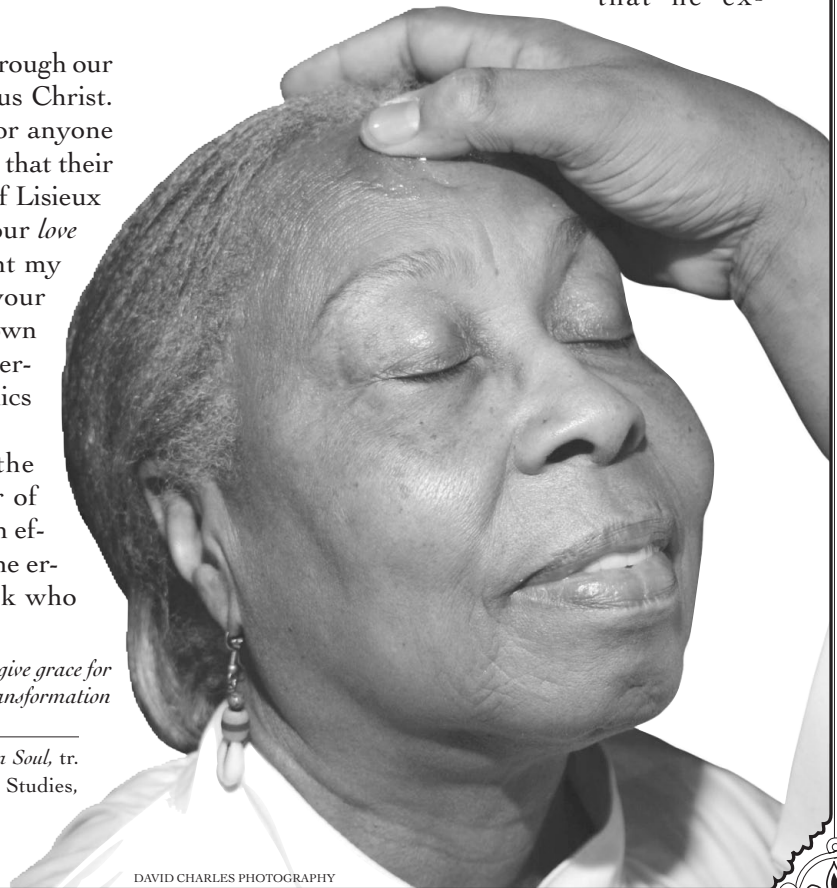
lived during the fifth century. He denied original sin and taught that salvation could be achieved by man’s efforts alone. He thought that Adam’s sin had only affected the human race by way of bad example and that Christ came to simply give us a good example. If we follow his good example then we can achieve grace and merit eternal life by our own power. However, our nature, even before it was wounded by sin, could not have merited a supernatural union with

God. God’s gift to raise us into his life and adopt us as his children is his free gift that he ex-

“We can take no credit for our salvation or anyone else’s.”

The sacraments give grace for inner transformation

¹ St. Thérèse of Lisieux, “Act of Offering” in *Story of a Soul*, tr. John Clarke (Washington DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1981), 277



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tends to us in virtue of the merits of Christ's redemption.

While Pelagius denied the necessity of God's help and praised human goodness and freedom, Luther and other Protestant reformers went to the other incorrect extreme. They praised the necessity of grace to the detriment of our nature. According to them, human nature was entirely corrupted by sin, the mind completely incapable of knowing any truth about God on its own, and the will no longer free but only capable of sin. Grace for them does not perfect our nature, because our nature is incapable of being salvaged. Grace merely covers us extrinsically with the righteousness of Christ. We are not perfected by grace intrinsically, but only made to *appear* righteous. Any good action comes from grace alone and in no way can it be said that our will cooperated with grace because our will is only capable of evil. Grace is incapable of healing our wounded nature, because our nature is irreformable. The Church condemned Luther's doctrine of grace because our nature, though tainted by sin, is still good. Our will is weakened and our mind is darkened by sin, but the image of God in us is not erased. We still possess the power to do good and know the truth because that is how God created us. Sin cannot overcome what God created. Grace builds on nature; our minds are enlightened by grace, our wills strengthened to do good, and our freedom perfected to cooperate toward that which God has ordained. Grace is certainly necessary for salvation, as Luther taught, but it is also capable of reaching down into the woundedness of our nature and healing and perfecting us.

Though the error of Luther is over 500 years old and that of Pelagius 1500 years old, people today still fall into them. Present-day rationalists essentially have picked up the Pelagian error that we do not need God's grace but can reach perfection through our own means. Luther's doctrine of the irreformable corruption of human nature was picked up by a Catholic bishop in France named Cornelius Jansenius. Although Jansenius died in communion with



Icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help

the Church, he left behind his writings that continue to perpetuate the errors of what is called Jansenism. Jansenism is the idea that the human will is completely corrupt and only capable of evil and promotes a kind of moral rigorism under which human freedom and dignity are destroyed. This kind of moral rigorism is very dangerous because many times it can lead to an over-preoccupation with sin and push people to the brink of despair. We do need to be concerned about sin, and should examine our conscience and ask the Holy Spirit to aid us in those areas where we are failing. But if the focus on sin does not lead us to the mercy and love of God, then it could be that

we are being too critical and overly scrupulous with ourselves.

Conversion

God's grace is always in superabundance. "[W]here sin increased, grace abounded all the more," St. Paul tells us (Rom 5:20). The first work of grace is to bring us to conversion. Conversion is both a turning away from sin and a turning toward God. Conversion is an answer to Christ's proclamation: "*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand*" (Mt 4:17). "Moved by grace, man turns toward God and away from sin, thus accepting forgiveness and righteousness from on high" (CCC 1989).

Conversion not only brings about forgiveness but also sanctification. God wants us to be holy: "*You, therefore, must be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect*" (Mt 5:48). The work of sanctification does not happen at once, but takes a lifetime. For this reason, conversion is an ongoing process. Daily we should turn away from those sins that still entice or plague us, and turn toward God. His mercy is always there to forgive and his grace more than sufficient to overcome our weaknesses.

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness" (Lam 3:22-23).

(CCC 1987-2016)

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