

Conversion to Jesus Christ

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ~ Ezekiel 36:26

THROUGHOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT men and women who encountered Jesus were profoundly changed. *“And a leper came to him beseeching him, and kneeling said to him, ‘If you will, you can make me clean.’ Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I will; be clean.’ And immediately the leprosy left him”* (Mk 1:40-42).

There was a paralytic whose friends let him down through the roof (see Mk 2:1-12). Jesus saw their faith and said to the man, *“My son, your sins are forgiven”* (Mk 2:5). This was revolutionary and seemed blasphemous to many, since only God can forgive sins. Yet Jesus made his mission very clear: *“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners”* (Mk 2:17).

There was the woman of Samaria (the land of the despised outcasts as far as the Jews were concerned), whom Jesus engaged in conversation, (itself an extremely unusual behavior). Jesus made it very clear that he knew the condition of her soul (she was living with a man who was not her husband). As well, he revealed that he is the Messiah, the One promised by the Father. *“The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming ... when he comes, he will show us all things.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I who speak to you am he.’ ... So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people, ‘Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?’ They went out of the city and were coming to him”* (Jn 4:25-30).

There was the woman caught in adultery, who was saved from certain physical death by stoning and from eternal death because of her sin. *“Jesus*

looked up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again’” (Jn 8:10-11).

There was the man blind from birth who received sight from Jesus after washing clay from his eyes (see Jn 9:1-15). As well, one of the thieves who were crucified next to Jesus virtually “stole” Heaven

in the eleventh hour of his life. *“One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’ And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.’ And he said*

“It is very simple to come to Jesus. He is always near to those who call on him.”



The centurion glorifies God, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise’” (Lk 23:39-43).

It is very simple to come to Jesus today. He is always near to those who call on him. In fact, he is standing at the door of each person’s heart: *“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me”* (Rv 3:20). One of the best ways to respond to the invitation of Christ is this ancient prayer: *“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”* (see Lk 18:13). By this prayer, the human heart is opened to repentance from sin and to commitment to follow Jesus in all things. As well, every Christian is called to a continual renewal of that initial conversion, frequently praying that prayer and going deeper into the life of Christ.

(CCC 1425-1433)

Grace

And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ~ Acts 20:32

GRACE IS A GIFT FROM GOD — it is the gift of God himself. Because of his great love for us, God gives us this undeserved gift of grace so that we may be able to respond to his call to become children of God and share in the divine nature. Scripture says that God, “*destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through*

his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us” (Eph 1:5-8). This grace, though one and the same reality, namely a participation in the life of God, is traditionally expressed by the following terms: sanctifying grace, sacramental grace, and actual grace.

Sanctifying grace refers to the grace received at Baptism that produces in the soul a permanent supernatural disposition that enables the believer to live ac-

“Grace is a real sharing in and communion with God in the Trinity.”

live ac-



Jesus raising Jairus' daughter from the dead, by Domenico Mastroianni, 1876-1962

ording to the new law of the Gospel. As Scripture says, "if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). Literally, this grace brings about a total transformation of the believer that is permanent, and one which gives rise to a "graced" state of being. In this new life, human dispositions and attitudes are perfected, and by the action of the virtues (especially the theological virtues), the believer puts himself at the service of charity and walks by the Spirit. Ultimately, sanctifying grace makes it possible for us to live in Heaven with God.

Although human cooperation and effort is important, the work of sanctification is primarily God's work and involves each person of the Trinity. God the Father designs the plan and sends his Son to bring it about. Jesus fulfills this plan and through the power of the Holy Spirit makes this work of sanctification effective in the Church's sacramental life, beginning with Baptism.

All the sacraments have particular effects according to their individual purpose. The graces flowing from the sacraments are called **sacramental graces** to distinguish them from the other graces (actual

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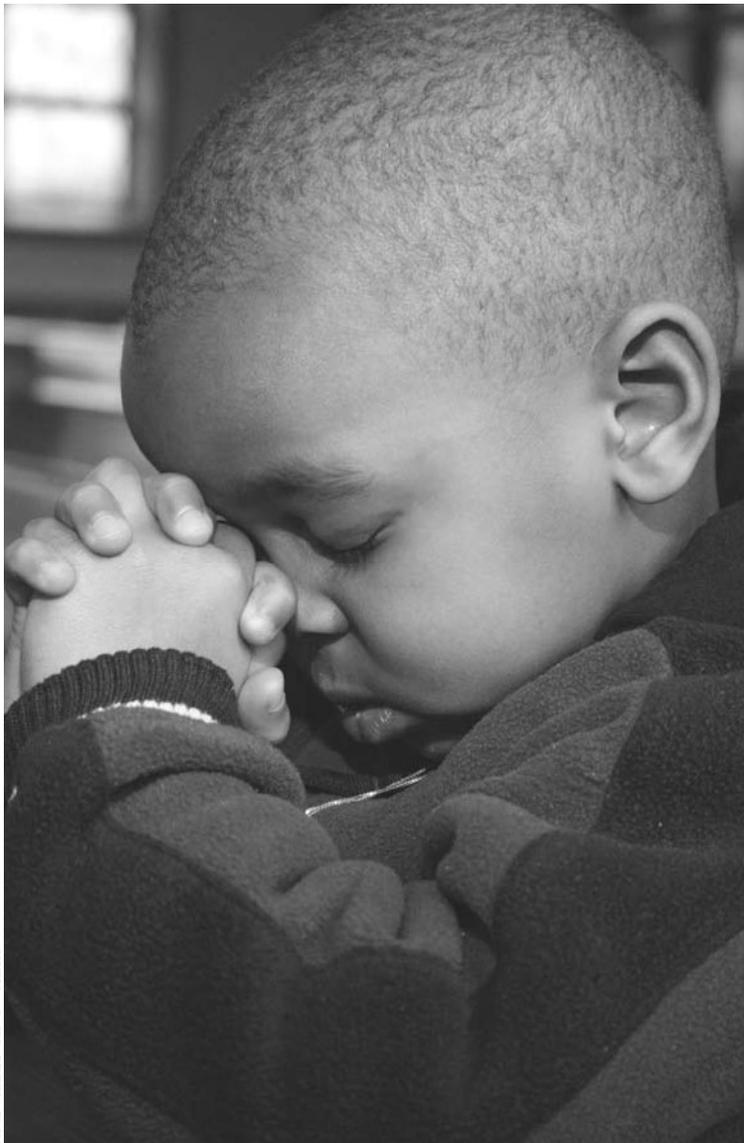
graces) which God gives to the believer, to those at the beginning of conversion, or to those who do not have access to the sacraments or have never heard the Gospel yet strive to live uprightly according to the light of their conscience.

Actual grace is a supernatural intervention of God given to help the Christian in a particular circumstance or at a certain point in his vocation. For example, one might receive a special grace to start an orphanage or to help deal with the death of a loved one or a painful situation. Also, the gifts or charisms

of the Spirit are actual graces because they are given to build up the Church and, like all actual graces, are further divine aids that help sanctify the members of the Church.

The point is not so much the terminology of grace (although this is helpful) but the reality behind these terms which is a real sharing in and communion with God in the Trinity. He is always the initiator in our relationship and so his gift of grace comes first. The human response to God's invitation of grace is free, and yet, even in it, grace has already been given to help prepare for and elicit this response from the human heart.

(CCC 1996-2005)



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

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

W E 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

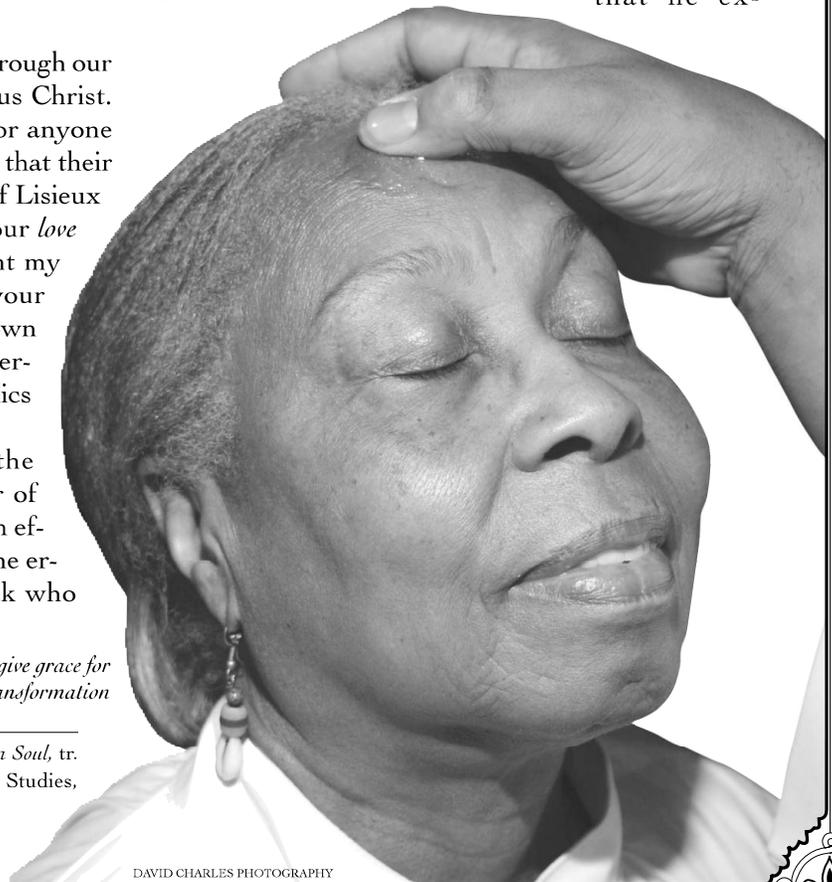
lived during the fifth century. He denied original sin and taught that salvation could be achieved by man’s efforts alone. He thought that Adam’s sin had only affected the human race by way of bad example and that Christ came to simply give us a good example. If we follow his good example then we can 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

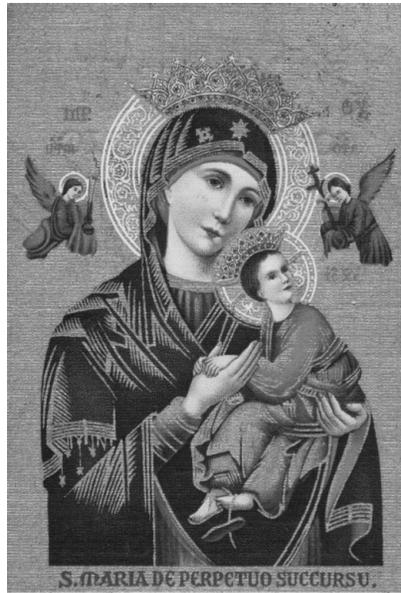


DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

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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Justification

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus. ~ Romans 3:21-26

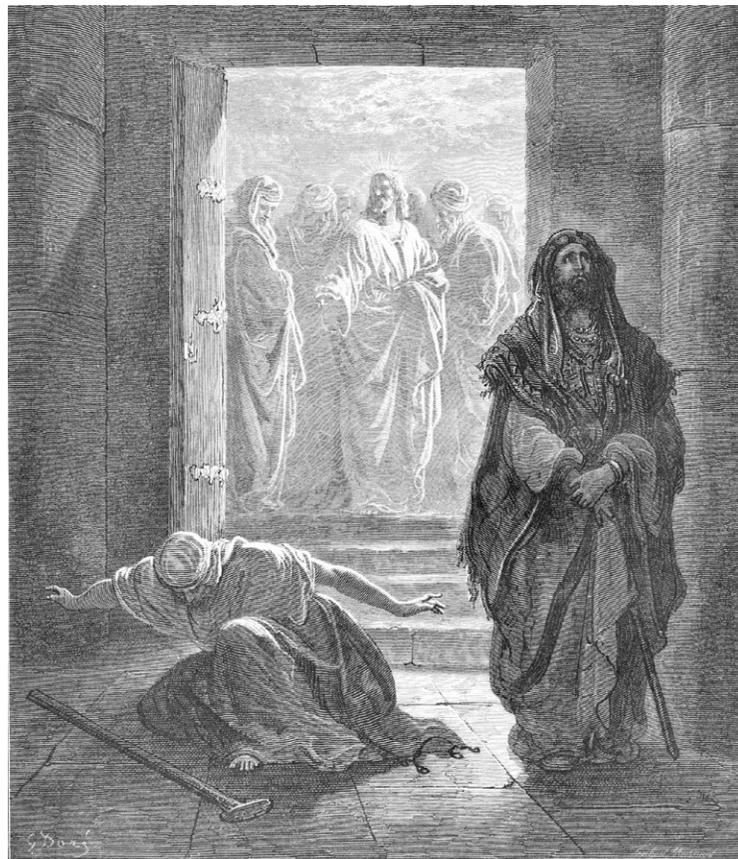
THE PURPOSE OF HUMAN EXISTENCE, the reason why we are created, is to share in the very life of God by becoming members of his divine family. This membership in the family of

God makes us heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven. When Adam and Eve fell at the dawn of creation, however, humanity's relationship with God was shattered to its very foundations. Because of original sin, we found ourselves separated from God and totally disinherited. Yet God did not abandon us. He gave us the hope of salvation by promising a redeemer who would justify us before God and restore us to the full measure of divine friendship (see Gn 3:15).

The Church teaches that it is the grace of the Holy Spirit, given initially in Baptism, which has the power to justify human-

ity. This grace flows from the power of the Redemption that was accomplished once and for all by the saving sacrifice of Jesus Christ on Calvary. Justification, then, flows from and is merited for us by the

“Justification is the restoration of sinners to friendship with God so that he may adopt them into his divine life.”



The Pharisee and the Publican, by Gustave Doré, 1853-1885

Passion of Christ, and it is accomplished in us at the moment of our Baptism where we die with Christ and are raised up with him. St. Paul expresses this truth very clearly: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him 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” (Rom 6:3-4). Thus, at Baptism, we are not simply passive receivers of divine grace, but in a very real and mysterious way, actually participate in Christ's Passion by dying to sin, and in



his Resurrection, by being born to a new life.

Basically, justification is the restoration of sinners to friendship with God so that he may adopt them into his divine life. Therefore, justification is a cleansing of the soul from sin and the communication of *“the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ”* (see verses at beginning of handout). This means that when a person is justified, he or she is newly created and is fully released from the bondage of sin and death that separate the soul from God’s inner life. This renewal and freedom reestablishes in the person a right relationship with God in which *sin is not merely overlooked, but is truly and entirely blotted out* (see Acts 3:19). Hence, the power of Christ’s redemption conquers sin and death totally by wiping it out completely.

Justification also entails a transformation of the whole human person, accomplished by the grace of the Holy Spirit received in Baptism. This sanctification of the Spirit renews us and makes us true sons and daughters of God and heirs to the Kingdom of Heaven (see Rom 8:15-17).

We cannot speak of justification without some mention of freedom. Freedom and justification go hand in hand. Justification enables men and women to cooper-

ate freely with God’s grace. This is expressed by believing in God’s Word that calls the sinner to conversion. To be justified, a sinner must undergo a free conversion of heart which turns him or her away from sin and toward God, thus fulfilling Jesus’ command to *“repent, and believe in the gospel”* (Mk 1:15). A free conversion means that God respects our free will; thus his invitation of forgiveness and grace can be rejected. No one is ever justified against his or her will.

Finally, justification can be lost (see also handout on *Once Saved, Always Saved?*). Just as God does not justify us against our will, he does not prevent us from turning against him after Baptism. St. Paul warns: *“And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard”* (Col 1:21-23). He admonishes us to *“work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling”* (Phil 2:12). We

can be confident of God’s unending love and care for us, but we must still seek to do his will so as to remain on the *“hard way”* and enter through the *“narrow gate”* to eternal life (see Mt 7:13-14). (CCC 1987-1995)

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Once Saved, Always Saved?

For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. ~ 2 Peter 2:20-21

IS IT POSSIBLE TO KNOW with absolute certainty that we are saved?

God's desire is that we know him with ease, firm certainty, and without error. For this purpose he has revealed himself in history and Sacred Scripture (see CCC 50-53). John 20:31 says, "*These [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.*" God has revealed everything that is necessary for us to know to obtain salvation. From this, we know that it is his desire that we have confident hope in his offer of salvation, which is his free gift to us.

However, God's grace is never in opposition to human freedom. God desires us to freely choose him; therefore, his offer of salvation is always extended to us as a gift that we are free to accept or reject. Even the great apostle Paul knew the importance of persevering in faith. He wrote, "*I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified*" (1 Cor 9:26-27).

Some Christians interpret certain passages of Scripture to mean that, once salvation is accepted by faith, it is "eternally secure," even if the believer later falls into habitual, serious sin. They may phrase this belief as "once saved, always saved." This poses a difficulty since Sacred Scripture is clear that some choices disqualify us from participation in God's life. "*Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God*" (Gal 5:19-21). St. Paul also writes: "*The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we shall also live with him; if we endure,*

we shall also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us" (2 Tm 2:11-12). Many Christians who believe "once saved, always saved" explain this problem by concluding that a believer who later falls into serious sin did not experience a genuine conversion, or that his or her faith was not sincere, even though at the time it seemed sincere. However, this poses the further problem that the only way to determine if our faith is sincere is if we never fall into serious sin. Since none of us knows for sure what we may do in the future, this would make it impossible for anyone to ever know the way of salvation.

Yet God's desire is that we have a sure and steadfast hope, based on his revealed truth. "*For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope*" (Rom 15:4). "*We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf*" (Heb 6:19-20).

We must always be on guard that our selfish free choices do not separate us from God's gift of mercy and grace, but we can have absolute confidence in God's intention to lavish his love and mercy upon us. Jere-

miah, a prophet of the Old Testament, wrote, "*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).

God has graciously given us the means of salvation, which include a way to receive forgiveness even for serious sins. By continually saying "Yes" to the gift of God's grace, we can have firm confidence that, through his mercy, we will indeed receive the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls (see 1 Pt 1:9).

(CCC 600, 1817-1821, 2016)



Christ in Glory, 15th century illuminated manuscript, from an English Psalter

Grace — Suggested Questions for Discussion:

1. When have I seen the power of God's grace manifested?
2. Do I have to accept God's grace?
3. Why is sanctifying (or sacramental) grace not something to which we have an automatic right?
4. How would our view of life's disappointments change if we saw everything in life as gift of grace?

Justification and Merit — Suggested Questions for Discussion:

1. What does the doctrine of justification teach us about how to read Scripture as one, single book?
2. Why is simply acknowledging Jesus as our Lord and Savior not enough for salvation?
3. How do my good works fit into the idea that grace is a free gift of God?
4. What are ways to persevere at what God has begun in me?

St. Mary of Egypt

Born probably about 344; died about 421. At the early age of twelve Mary left her home and came to Alexandria, where for upwards of seventeen years she led a life of public prostitution. At the end of that time, on the occasion of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, she embarked for Palestine, not however with the intention of making the pilgrimage, but in the hope that life on board ship would afford her new and abundant opportunities of gratifying an insatiable lust. Arrived in Jerusalem she persisted in her shameless life, and on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross joined the crowds towards the church where the sacred relic was venerated, hoping to meet in the gathering some new victims whom she might allure into sin. And now came the turning-point in her career. When she reached the church door, she suddenly felt herself repelled by some secret force, and having vainly attempted three or four times to enter, she retired to a corner of the churchyard, and was struck with remorse for her wicked life, which she recognized as the cause of her exclusion from the church. Bursting into bitter tears and beating her breast, she began to bewail her sins. Just then her eyes fell upon a statue of the Blessed Virgin above the spot where she was standing, and in deep faith and humility of heart she besought Our Lady for help, and permission to enter the church and venerate the sacred wood on which Jesus had suffered, promising that if her request were granted, she would then renounce forever the world and its ways, and forthwith depart whithersoever Our Lady might lead her. Encouraged by prayer and counting on the mercy of the Mother of God, she once more approached the door of the church, and this time succeeded in entering without the slightest difficulty. Having adored the Holy Cross and kissed the pavement of the church, she returned to Our Lady's statue, and while praying there for guidance as to her future course, she seemed to hear a voice from afar telling her that if she crossed the Jordan, she would find rest. That same evening Mary reached the Jordan and received Holy Communion in a church dedicated to the Baptist, and the day following crossed the river and wandered eastward into the desert that stretches towards Arabia.

Here she had lived absolutely alone for forty-seven years, subsisting apparently on herbs, when a priest and monk, named Zosimus, who after the custom of his brethren had come out from his monastery to spend Lent in the desert, met her and learned from her own lips the strange and romantic story of her life. As soon as they met, she called Zosimus by his name and recognized him as a priest. After they had conversed and prayed together, she begged Zosimus to promise to meet her at the Jordan on Holy Thursday evening of the following year and bring with him the Blessed Sacrament. When the appointed evening arrived, Zosimus, we are told, put into a small chalice a portion of the undefiled Body and the precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ (P. L. LXXIII, 686; "Mittens in modico calice intemerati corporis portionem et pretioso sanguinis D.N.J.C." But the reference to both species is less clear in Acta SS., IX, 82: "Accipiens parvum poculum intemerati corporis ac venerandi sanguinis Christi Dei nostri"), and came to the spot that had been indicated. After some time Mary appeared on the eastern bank of the river, and having made the sign of the cross, walked upon the waters to the western side. Having received Holy Communion, she raised her hands towards heaven, and cried aloud in the words of Simeon: "Now thou dost dismiss thy servant, O Lord, according to thy word in peace, because my eyes have seen thy salvation". She then charged Zosimus to come in the course of a year to the spot where he had first met her in the desert, adding that he would find her then in what condition God might ordain. He came, but only to find the poor saint's corpse, and written beside it on the ground a request that he should bury her, and a statement that she had died a year before, on the very night on which he had given her Holy Communion, far away by the Jordan's banks. Aided, we are told, by a lion, he prepared her grave and buried her, and having commended himself and the Church to her prayers, he returned to his monastery, where now for the first time he recounted the wondrous story of her life.

The saint's life was written not very long after her death by one who states that he learned the details from the monks of the monastery to which Zosimus had belonged. Many authorities mention St. Sophronius, who became Patriarch of Jerusalem in 635, as the author; but as the Bollandists give good reasons for believing that the Life was written before 500, we may conclude that it is from some other hand. The date of the saint is somewhat uncertain. The Bollandists place her death on 1 April, 421, while many other authorities put it a century later. The Greek Church celebrates her feast on 1 April, while the Roman Martyrology assigns it to 2 April, and the Roman Calendar to 3 April. The Greek date is more likely to be correct; the others may be due to the fact that on those days portions of her relics reached the West. Relics of the saint are venerated at Rome, Naples, Cremona, Antwerp, and some other places.

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