

How's the communication going?

A favour cannot be imposed on someone, it can only be offered; a gift cannot be taken from someone, it can only be received. But good giving and good receiving require good communicating. The divine communion of the Blessed Trinity shows us the way to do this: God reveals himself in the self-communicating offer (Father) and reception (Son) of love (Holy Spirit). This self-communicating life of God is then given to us as the gift of grace. All that I am – anything that is good and loving and noble in me – comes via God's self-communication.

If we were looking for an analogy of how this divine communication operates, then marriage is an excellent example. When married couples get on with their daily task of offering and receiving those little acts of love and kindness, they are actually modelling the inner workings of grace. This 'ebb and flow' of love between a couple is usually a very ordinary thing, and only occasionally is it obvious. Yet, it is precisely through their daily acts of love that a married couple grow in their relationship. It should not be a surprise that the relationship between Jesus and his Church, and more generally the relationship of God with his people, is expressed in the language of marriage. Grace has a nuptial meaning.

But just as a marriage will flounder if communication fails, so too with grace. Grace only flourishes when there is good communication between the giver and receiver. This is why God is all grace: the communication between the three Persons of the Trinity couldn't be better! But this is certainly not the case with us. We can be poor communicators of love, and as a result grace can quickly dry up. It is not because of a lack on God's part: his self-communication remains as crystal clear as it has been from the beginning. No, it is we receivers of God's love who are often the poor communicators.

So, what can we do? Pray, of course! Prayer is the means that God has given us to communicate in love with him. Thankfully, we have some marvellous gifts of prayer readily at our disposal: the Word of God in Holy Scripture; the Sacraments, especially Reconciliation and the Eucharist; the great traditions of prayer; the Rosary. It doesn't matter what style of prayer we adopt, nor does it matter what words we use (in fact, words can get in the way!), so long as it is God we are communicating with. Grace creates the power to transform our crazy, mixed-up world when the channels of loving communication are allowed to open wide.

All you need is (a Year of) Grace.

"God never gives less than himself," St Augustine once said. When all is said and done, that's about as good a definition of grace that you'll ever need. As we hear more about the upcoming Year of Grace – commencing on Pentecost, that great Day of the outpouring of grace – we will have many opportunities to learn more about the operation of grace in our lives. But right now, and into the future, all that is really needed to make any year a Year of Grace is an open heart. The Lord will do the rest.

"Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and enkindle in them the fire of your love".

Questions

1. What are some of the ways in which you have experienced God's grace in your life?
2. Look up the passages in the Gospel and First Epistle of St John referred to above. Does your experience of the love of God point toward the love found within the Trinity?
3. Do you experience God's grace as joy? In what ways can you express your gratitude for this gift? In what ways can you demonstrate and tell others about God's gift of grace?

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Faith & Life Matters

INFORM

AMAZING YEAR OF Grace!



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Pentecost 2012 will mark the Beginning of the "Year of Grace" in the Church in Australia. **Bishop Peter Comensoli**, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Sydney reflects upon the meaning of the word 'grace' and how grace works in the lives of God's people.

Introduction

From Pentecost 2012 to Pentecost 2013, the Bishops of Australia have invited all Catholics throughout the country to join with them in a "Year of Grace". This Year is an invitation for the entire Church community in Australia – bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful – to "start afresh from Christ". But if we are to embrace well this special time, it might be helpful to take a little time to reflect about the experience of grace and how it operates in our lives.¹

What's in a word?

In 2010, 'Grace' was the 14th most popular name for a baby girl in Australia.² As a result, we currently have 1,271 Graces entering their 'terrible twos', and no doubt causing their parents no end of headaches! 'Grace' is certainly a well-loved way of being identified. However, the word itself is not just a pretty name. We tend to know how to use the word 'grace', with its many variations, in all sorts of ordinary ways. Yet many, if not most of us, would struggle to define 'grace' with any clarity. So, what exactly is this thing called grace? What is so amazing about it (as the famous 18th century hymn suggests)?³ To find out, perhaps the best place to start is with the word itself.

"Grace to you...!" exclaims St Paul at the beginning and the end of every single one of his letters. These were his permanent words of greeting and farewell. Grace formed the bookends, so to speak, of all that Paul thought and wrote about. Grace was the invisible thread that bound together his proclamation of Jesus Christ.

Whenever Paul wrote about 'grace' he used an ancient Greek root-word: *chárís*. The most basic meaning of *chárís* is this: 'that which delights'. Grace is a delight for the person who receives it; it is not a difficulty sent to be endured. This suggests, therefore, that the word 'grace' is closely related in meaning to the word 'joy', which itself may be defined as something good that brings delight. And this is exactly the case: 'joy' in ancient Greek – *chará* – is one of the words which shares its roots with *chárís*. Whenever Paul was writing to his beloved Christian communities, he was writing with grace in his heart, the cause and the companion of his joy in them, and the gift he most wanted for them.

Every time we say the "Hail Mary" we begin: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." These words refer to the greeting by the angel Gabriel



because she is the one who was 'highly favoured' by God. What this tells us is that grace is something to rejoice in – as Mary certainly did – because it is something favourable bestowed on the recipient. Grace is something real received (the favour itself), and not just a feeling experienced (the joy engendered).

A favour, of course, is something that is meant to be of benefit to the receiver; it is something good to be received, not a burden imposed. Therefore, what was bestowed as a favour by God was received as a gift by Mary. And this, too, is backed up in the Greek: *charitōō* means 'favour', and *chárísma* means 'gift'. Therefore, to speak of grace as 'a favour bestowed' is also to speak of grace as 'a gift received'.

Yet, not every gift is a grace. The gift of an iPad might bring delight to the receiver, but we would hardly call it a grace bestowed by the giver! So, what kind of favour is grace? It is not without reason we call the little prayers we say before meals 'Grace'. It reminds us that grace is the kind of favour that bestows a blessing. Our Lord often used 'grace' in this way. This is nowhere more evident than at the Last Supper when Jesus blessed the bread and wine, which he then freely gave to his disciples as the blessing of his own Body and Blood (Mt 26.26-29).

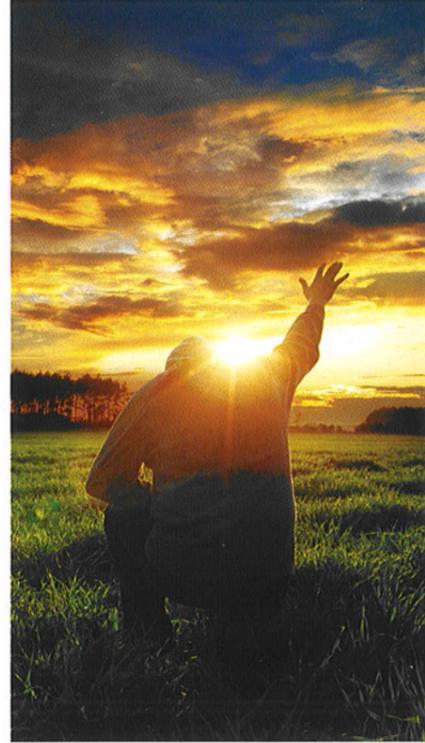
The Greek word used to translate what Jesus said at the Last Supper (and on many other occasions) is *eucharistéō*, which means both 'to show favour', and 'to give thanks'. This tells us that the blessing of grace is intimately linked to gratitude and thanksgiving. Grace is a blessing that brings forth gratitude and thanksgiving in the one who receives it. It is from this blessing aspect of grace that we arrive at the word 'Eucharist', the privileged name the Church gives to the truly great Sacrament of Thanksgiving, given to all of humanity on our journey through life and history.

To sum up, we can now see that there is a wonderful gathering of other words around the word 'grace'. There is joy, favour and gift happening here. There is also blessing, thanksgiving and gratitude. All of these are exemplified beautifully in the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary, our 'most highly favoured Lady'.⁴ Moreover, this happy confluence of words also suggests to us a simple definition for grace.

Grace is:

- (i) a real gift or favour (from God),
- (ii) that is a blessing,
- (iii) freely given as a benefit,
- (iv) and received as a joy,
- (v) prompting gratitude and thanksgiving.⁵

That's quite a lot in one word!



It's all in the relationship.

One thing that quickly becomes obvious about this little definition is that grace can only exist and operate within a loving relationship. This is because the blessing that is the gift of grace always directs us back to the one who gives, and forward to the one who receives. At the giving end, the presence of grace can only begin to be revealed when a person looks with love upon someone else. It is with a gaze of love that the lover will recognise what favour will truly benefit and bring joy to the beloved. On the receiving end, the presence of grace can only be fully revealed when someone returns the look of love. It is with the returning gaze of the beloved that the lover will know that the favour bestowed has been accepted as a fitting gift to receive.

Therefore, grace is the call and response – the invitation and acceptance – of love. Love needs a giver, a receiver, and the gift itself. But where are we to find such grace in full operation? St John comes to our aid in answering this question. He realised that if Jesus is the true and complete manifestation of God's love (Jn 3.16), and if this love involved the pledge of his life to the very end (Jn 15.13), then that will tell us who God is. And so indeed John declared: "God is love" (1Jn 4.8). God is grace in operation: the Giver, and the Receiver, and the Gift of love.

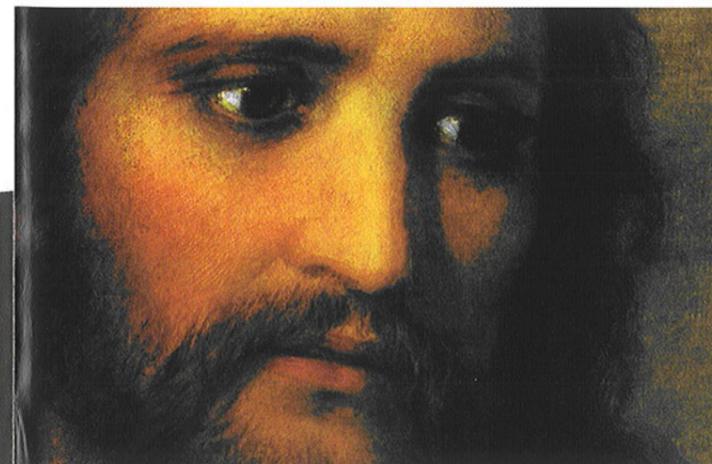
It is only as three Persons that the one true God can be the God of love. God the Father gives his love freely to his Son; God the Son freely returns that gift of love; God the Holy Spirit is that gift of love in person. Grace, therefore, reveals to us the mystery of the Blessed Trinity as the mystery of love. If we want God to be the One who truly and completely loves unconditionally, then only the Triune God will do.⁶

Therefore, grace always shelters under the umbrella of love, which is the umbrella of God. It is the name we give to the outpouring of love; it is the tell-tale sign of the presence of the God-who-loves. This is why 'grace' is such a significant word for Christians, and why it is crucial to appreciate that grace is relational by nature. At the heart of our Christian faith is the relationship of love built on God's delight in us and our response in gratitude. Grace is God's gracious invitation to, and our thankful acceptance of, his many and varied gifts of love.⁷

"Ubi caritas, Deus est!": Where there is love, there is God! There is nothing that anyone can do to switch off God's loving of us. Grace is what is received from the God who loves. That's why grace is always unmerited: no one deserves or earns the entirely free gift of God's love. You don't need to do anything to receive grace, it is already there to be received. As St Paul said: "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8.37-39).

This reality is captured beautifully in a bronze panel depicting the crucifixion on the Holy Door at St Peter's Basilica. There is Jesus on the cross along with the two criminals executed with him (Lk 23.32-43). Unusually, the artist has positioned the crosses of the two men directly under the outstretched arms of Jesus. Consequently, while Jesus gazes intently at the so-called 'good thief', nonetheless the saving blood dripping from his hands falls onto the heads of both men. The message is clear: all of us come under the outstretched arms of Jesus; all of us – good and bad alike – come under his love. There is nothing we can do to switch off God's offer to dwell within us.

This means that everyone – Christian or otherwise – has been created to



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share in the gift of grace, and we do so by our participation in the gift of love. God is dwelling in us no matter what. Grace is recognisable wherever love is present. Grace is lost whenever love is obscured. It is us, therefore, and not God, who determine whether or not to live within this realm of love (in a state of grace). It is us, not God, who draw near to grace through love or move further away from grace through sin. To turn our back on grace is to turn away from God. Conversely, to (re)turn our faces to love is to (re)turn our lives to the operation of grace within them.

The more we love, the more we grow in grace. Jesus experienced precisely this aspect of grace as he grew from boyhood to manhood: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favour [Gk: *chariti*] with God and man" (Lk 2.52). Yet, we can't give something that is not already ours to give. Not even Jesus could do that. So, when we think of grace as the horizon of love, then we need to think of love as already dwelling within us. So, even our growth in grace – our living more and more in a state of giving and receiving love – is itself dependent on our having already received the grace needed. God is love, and in him will we find our home.

In the end, grace simply acknowledges that all is from God, all is in God, all is under God. As St Ignatius of Loyola prayed:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,

my memory, my understanding,

and my entire will,

All I have and call my own.

You have given all to me.

To you, Lord, I return it.

Everything is yours; do with it what you will.

Give me only your love and your grace,

that is enough for me.⁸

¹This not meant to be a theological or catechetical aid on the nature of grace; although I hope it will assist in understanding the place of grace in Christian faith. This article is what the title says: a personal reflection on grace. Nonetheless, at various points I have included references to the recently published *YouCat (English): Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), which provide simple definitions for some of the words and phrases commonly used about grace in the Catholic Church.

²www.kidspot.com.au

³The English poet and Church of England minister John Newton wrote the words for the hymn *Amazing Grace* in 1779.

⁴This is the evocative title given to Mary in a traditional Basque carol from the 14/15th century, known to us today as "The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came".

⁵*YouCat* gives an excellent definition of Grace: "By grace we mean God's free, loving gift to us, his helping goodness, the vitality that comes from him... Grace is everything God grants us, without our deserving it in the least" (§338).

⁶*YouCat* has this to say about the Trinitarian reality of grace: "God's grace brings us into the inner life of the Holy Trinity, into the exchange of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It makes us capable of living in God's love and of acting on the basis of this love" (§339).

⁷While grace is simply and always God's communication of himself to us, over the years the Church has come to recognize that there are various ways in which God has made the gift of his grace available to us. *YouCat* puts it this way: "Grace is infused in us from above and cannot be explained in terms of natural causes [=supernatural grace]. It makes us – especially through baptism – children of God and heirs of heaven [=sanctifying grace; state of grace]. It bestows on us a permanent disposition to do good [=habitual grace]. Grace helps us to know, to will, and to do everything that leads us to what is good, to God, and to heaven [=actual graces]. Grace comes about in a special way in the sacraments [=sacramental grace]. Grace is manifested also in special gifts of grace that are granted to individual Christians [=charisms] or in special powers that are promised to those in the state of marriage, the ordained state, or the religious state [=graces of state]" (§339).

⁸The 'Suscipe Prayer' comes from St Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*.

"Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you." Mary is "full of grace" in the prayer because she is the one who was 'highly favoured' by God. What this tells us is that grace is something to rejoice in.