

# A Note on Grace

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Few topics, to my mind, have been so obscured by inter-confessional debates as that of grace. Particularly, perhaps, among Catholics really everything written or said since the sixteenth century has been conditioned by reaction against, or attack upon, positions asserted to be those of the Reformers. Yet when we trundle out these statements and the arguments on which they rest, it comes as a surprise to be told that we have got the Reformers quite wrong; even their contemporaries, the theologians of the Council of Trent, seem to have been grappling with adversaries of their own making. When we go on to look, far too superficially in my case, at what seems to be the Reformed view about what we hold, the results are even more surprising.

Perhaps the Reformed take theologians more seriously than we do, but even given this, they seem, from our point of view, to be remarkably unlucky in the ones they read (but I except Professor Torrance from this).

It may well be—because Catholics have been guilty of practically every absurdity—that there are theologians who hold, or have held, that grace is a separate thing, something we can possess; or a reservoir on which we can draw. Some, not of very great repute, have certainly held that a right use of natural powers deserved or brought about a giving of grace. On a hasty reading it might appear that even the great medieval theologians regarded grace as the embellishment of an aristotelian universe. But when it is suggested that even Roman theologians regard grace as an impersonal something, a something detachable from the presence of the living God, I do not recognise anything more than the selection of one set of statements interpreted in the worst possible sense and used out of context.

This is not to say that terminology has not been used badly; many theologians have clung to phrases well enough understood in the Middle Ages but which require today radical translation if they are not to be misleading. A good case is, I think, the analysis of one aspect of grace in terms of the category 'habitus', which St Bonaventure thought provided a good weapon against Pelagianism, but which now seems to most non-Catholics to involve a Pelagian way of speaking. More serious is the charge put by Newman, that Romanism 'views the influences of grace, not as the operations of the living God, but as something to bargain about, and buy, and traffic with, as if religion were, not an approach to Things above us, but a commerce with our equals concerning things we can master'.

In so far as the charge points to historic corruptions and to present

tendencies no reply is possible, save repentance and prayer; we Catholics do not recognise ourselves sufficiently as a sinful people. In so far as teaching is asserted to be involved, we must re-examine our position.

Does our theology attempt to imprison the mysteries of faith in a philosophic strait-jacket, emptying out the content of revelation in the interests of a shallow logic? To reply to this would take us far afield, but one can say that no Catholic theology, *qua* Catholic, is tied to Aristotelianism. St Bonaventure, speaking of the work of St Thomas, said it was *Pessimum miraculum* in which the wine is changed to water; but even if one is a Thomist one can, one must, maintain that *sacra doctrina* must conform to the categories imposed by the Word of God. Of course it will involve the attempt to communicate, even to show the intelligible coherence of faith; but it is the declared mystery of God's purpose that is dominant, not the exegesis of a logic resting on our knowledge of the world. The Thomist, I think, recognises that in theology we never deal with pure nature, which is simply a residual concept of merely speculative interest, but always with man before the God of grace; and he also admits that in the face of Scriptural teaching pure logic may have to be neglected, since one's philosophic equipment is at times proved to be inadequate when we are involved in theological discussion. A case in point, as Pfürtner tries to show, is St Thomas's treatment of the certainty of salvation in the context of the certainty of hope, the ground of which is our faith in God's mercy. Though St Thomas would have been horrified by an abandonment of logic, he would have agreed with Newman that philosophising on the inspired text is a very poor method of interpreting it. According to Chenu, he said himself, speaking of Jacob's struggle: 'The whole night they wrestled, muscles straining, neither yielding, but at daybreak the angel disappeared, apparently leaving the field clear to his adversary. But Jacob then felt a violent pain in the thigh. He was left wounded and limping. It is thus the theologian grapples with the mystery when God brings him face to face with it. He is taut, like a bent bow, grappling with human language; he struggles like a wrestler; he even seems to win the mastery. But then he feels a weakness, a weakness at once painful and delicious, for to be thus defeated is in fact the proof that his combat was divine'.<sup>1</sup>

It is quite understandable that many people, not only non-Catholics, become cross with Aristotle and regard our use of Aristotelian terminology as annoying, but even in terms of that usage it is clear enough that grace is the gift of God himself, that in this context his work is the same as himself. One cannot, whatever school of theology one belongs to, stress too strongly the freedom of the gift. 'Because thou hast loved me, thou hast made me loveable'.

Perhaps the most difficult point is the tendency for Catholic theologians to talk about the being 'made loveable' as if the sanctification of man could be adequately expressed in Aristotelian terms. In fact the terminology breaks down, and in St Thomas's writings two points

<sup>1</sup>M. D. Chenu, *La Théologie est-elle une science?* (Paris, 1957), pp. 47-48.

seem to emerge: an emphasis on the distinction between Creator and creature, and the mystery of their union which involves for man a newness of life. When one goes on to ask: What is this newness of life? he replies that man, while remaining man, is transformed, if one can use the expression, from the root of his being, or in his heart. If, however, we ask whether this opens the gate to Pelagianism, he thinks not, for our justification and salvation are in Christ and our consent is itself not a condition of, but a result of grace.

It may be that the use of words like 'consent' and 'result' is deceptive, but it is difficult, for me at any rate, to envisage any words that are not deceptive; one always tends to introduce a sort of Pelagianism; *we* spoil ourselves. St Paul himself provides many instances of this, and also of its corrective. Words like 'contract', 'union', 'tension', 'decision', can all be corrupted by the same tendency to exalt ourselves over against God. When a Catholic theologian makes use of them, he is only wishing to point to the manifestations of grace, or its effects if you prefer it; and by this he means that God's sovereign Word alone is creative, he alone builds up, he alone destroys. We exist because he condescends to address us; he calls us. All because he so loves us, he gives himself.

Unfortunately too much speculation in theological teaching has tended to separate *sacra doctrina* into isolated departments—speculative, dogmatic, moral, liturgical. But in truth it is one. When it seeks clarity by analysis, we must not ignore, as we have too frequently ignored, that this is only a commentary on God's overwhelming love discovered in Ezechiel, in Hosea, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the other son, in the experiences of St Paul; and not only in these. *Sacra doctrina* is not a theory, it is a response with newness of life. Perhaps professional theologians—who with us are the scavengers of the Christian mind—should pay more attention to the writings of those who struggle like a wrestler.

When St Theresa of Avila was asked what she thought about when she finished her prayer, she said: 'Imagine a person so deeply in love that it is impossible for him to live apart for a moment from the one he loves. So it is with me and Christ'. If the theologians deceived themselves by their concepts and distinctions, she did not. Nor did St Catherine of Siena when she cried out in her prayer: 'O Eternal Father! Forgive my ignorance, that I presume thus to chatter to Thee, but the love of Thy mercy will be my excuse before the Face of Thy loving kindness'.