

Catholic

UPDATE

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HOW CATHOLICS UNDERSTAND GRACE

JOHN FEISTER

What must I do to be holy? If I do everything right, will I be assured of redemption? Can I earn salvation?

The question of holiness and God's grace—God's powerful force of love within us, implanted by God and sustained by God—is as old as Adam and Eve and is the root of a 600-year-old debate between Catholics and Lutherans. Christians, like Jews, have always agreed that woman and man were created in the image and likeness of God (see Genesis 1:26). Among Christians, the argument has been over the extent of damage done by the original parents' sin. We are born with original sin; what is its effect?

A NEW LOOK AT GRACE

by Bill Huebsch

- Grace is God's self-communication to us.
- It's experienced as a divine loving energy (or power) that comes from God alone, is completely free, and is offered to every human being.
- Grace alone can make us whole. It lets us be precisely who we're made to be.
- It is received and celebrated in community with each other.
- Sanctifying grace is God's free and generous gift, sometimes called the "state of grace," that ongoing disposition to live and act in keeping with God's call.
- Actual grace is the effect in the human personality of that gift. It is God's support for us in individual instances.
- Do you realize what this means? It means that God's own life—a full surge of divine energy, God's grace—is with us.
- And it isn't just with us in some abstract and artificial way. It fills our bodies and our souls to the very top, it means we are empowered to love.
- We are empowered to forgive, to accept without judgment, to give without asking for return, to love without end.
- This is a power that can do marvelous things! It can heal and bind people together, give comfort and peace, offer affectionate love and create new persons, rest peacefully, and disturb the comfortable!
- This is how we will live together forever, in this love.
- This is grace: God's powerful force of love within us, implanted by God and sustained by God.
- There's really nothing else like it in all the world!

FROM A NEW LOOK AT GRACE: A SPIRITUALITY OF WHOLENESS (TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS), USED WITH PERMISSION.

We all know the gulf between how fully we love and how fully God wants us to love. Evidence abounds, within our hearts and in human society, that human nature falls short of perfection, and is flawed. But how flawed are we?

Some of the Church's deepest struggles have been about this doctrine of grace. Even in New Testament times, we see different approaches in response to the differing situations of the local Churches. Saint Paul writes of the "righteousness of faith" in Romans 1:17 and again in Ephesians 2:4–10. Yet the Apostle James writes that faith without works is dead (James 2:17). Writing to the Galatians (5:6), St. Paul strikes a balance, speaking of "faith working through love."

Back in the 1500s, Martin Luther and his followers had declared *sola fide!* Faith alone! That is, we are saved by grace alone. Nothing we do can earn our salvation. Catholics have insisted all along that salvation comes to us by God's grace and our cooperation with it. That's a blend of faith and works, a position defined at the Council of Trent (1545–1563).

BOOTSTRAP THEOLOGY

Saint Augustine, known as the "Doctor of Grace," forged his understanding of grace in the fifth century against Pelagius, a rigorist who held that humans can become perfect through their own efforts. Pelagianism is sometimes called "bootstrap theology," referring to the notion of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. Some say, in today's culture

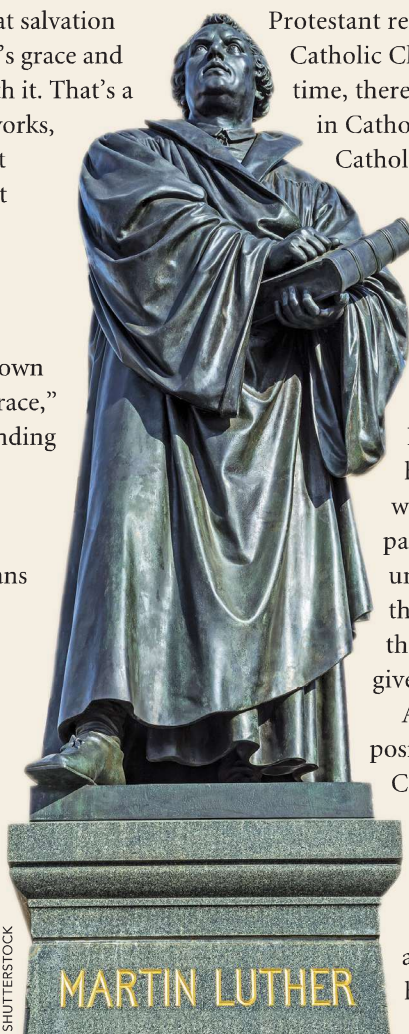
of acquisition and workaholism, Pelagianism never left us. If we can buy happiness, do we really need grace? Pelagius was ultimately condemned as a heretic at the Synod of Carthage (North Africa) in 418. Bootstrap theology was roundly rejected.

Augustine stressed that God's free gift of grace—not our actions—plays the critical role in our salvation. But the issue was by no means put to rest at Carthage. Within a hundred years, a group of monks in southern France, seeking to stand out against those who were Christian in name only, adopted an austere lifestyle. They saw the role of grace in salvation but overemphasized the power of human will. Thus they became known as semi-Pelagians. Their views were rejected by the Synod of Orange in 529.

As Europe emerged from the Middle Ages, the issue erupted as central in the argument between the Protestant reformers and the Roman Catholic Church. By Luther's time, there were many excesses in Catholic practice. Many Catholics felt they could earn

salvation in all manner of ways. Luther, likely a perfectionist, couldn't bear the pressure of having to do so many things to remain in God's grace. His confessor advised him to study Scripture, which he did with a passion. There he came to understand, especially in the writings of St. Paul, that God's grace is freely given.

As he challenged the position of the Roman Catholic establishment—which was reigning over a Church in need of reform—there was misunderstanding after misunderstanding, hardened positions, and



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mutual, long-lasting condemnations. The Roman Catholic theological response to Luther's fundamental criticisms came decades later in the Council of Trent. By then, the rift between Catholics and Protestants was firmly in place.

Setting Catholic theology straight in several areas, Trent acknowledged the freedom of God's grace but insisted our works do contribute to our salvation though even our ability to do good works is due to God's grace. Trent defined baptism's role in cleansing or healing us of original sin (though even baptized humans still tend toward sin, and thus need continual grace, especially through the sacraments). Luther's first followers described damaged human nature more pessimistically.

For 450 years, Lutherans and Catholics eyed each other with fear and suspicion. During the twentieth century, breakthroughs in biblical studies brought Catholic and Protestant scholars closer together. The misery of two world wars showed everyone the futility of human divisions. Protestants began the ecumenical movement as Catholics watched from outside.

Then in 1963, citing the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council, pressing for unity among Christians, as Jesus had prayed for his disciples (see John 17:20–21). Formal dialogue began between Catholics and other Christians, including Lutherans, in the 1960s. Three decades later, on the eve of the Jubilee celebrating the 2000th anniversary of Jesus' birth, the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue marked progress when the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation signed a historic agreement about the nature of grace.

The dialogue groups of Catholic and Lutheran theologians found common ground in describing how grace works in our lives. Since the sixteenth-century breakdown had been over the concept of justification—a central aspect of the

doctrine of grace, the efforts toward reconciliation focused on justification.

CORE OF THE AGREEMENT

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification essentially says that Lutherans and Catholics explain justification in different ways but share the same basic understanding.

The central passage reads, "Together we confess: by grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping us and calling us to good works." The declaration acknowledges that good works are a genuine *response* to God's grace—not the *cause* of it. The declaration also rescinds the formal condemnations of both the Catholic and Lutheran Churches against one another.

The ceremony took place in Augsburg, Germany, on October 31, 1999, Reformation Sunday—the anniversary of Martin Luther nailing

his ninety-five theses of protest to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. At liturgy, as the congregation sang "Come, Holy Spirit," the document was signed for Catholics by Cardinal Edward Cassidy and Bishop Walter Kasper, with approval of Pope John Paul II. Lutheran signers included Bishop Christian Krause

and Dr. Ishmael Noko, representing the Lutheran World Federation, a union of 58.1 of 63 million Lutherans worldwide. Representatives of the six geographical regions of the

Lutheran World Federation signed as well.

A LOOK FROM THE CATHOLIC SIDE

"The joint declaration is a key breakthrough." So says Brother Jeffrey Gros, a Christian Brother, who is also a member of the U.S. Catholic bishops' staff who helped forge the justification agreement.

In an interview not long after the historic agreement, he observes that some seeds of this breakthrough were

CONTEMPORARY TEACHINGS ON GRACE

- The followers of Christ, called by God not for what they had done but by his design and grace, and justified in the Lord Jesus, have been made sons and daughters of God by the Baptism of faith and partakers of the divine nature, and so are truly sanctified. They must therefore hold on to and perfect in their lives that holiness which they have received from God. (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 40)
- Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is the *favor, the free and undeserved help* that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1996)
- God's free initiative demands *man's free response*, for God has created man in his image by conferring on him, along with freedom, the power to know him and love him. The soul only enters freely into the communion of love. God immediately touches and directly moves the heart of man. He has placed in man a longing for truth and goodness that only he can satisfy. (CCC 2002)



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sown in the United States. “The homework was done here and in Germany,” he asserts. The U.S. Lutheran-Catholic dialogue had resulted in a joint U.S. agreement about justification doctrine in 1983 that has been broadened into a worldwide agreement.

Brother Gros links the signing with Pope John Paul II’s emphatic concern for moving unity forward, which had intensified at the millennium celebration. “We began the Reformation with the disagreement over justification,” says Gros. “And we’ve only picked up this dialogue again in 1966. So we’ve begun to knit together again our faith life, or, as the Holy Father says and continues to say in *That They May Be One* (*Ut Unum Sint*, 1995), ‘We share more than divides us.’ In signing this joint declaration, we are, in a sense, able to say that this is no longer a Church-dividing issue.”

Gros notes the declaration will likely affect the way Catholics describe some practices that have been misunderstood in the past: “We have to, for example, understand our own belief in indulgences in light of this joint declaration,” he suggests.

The abuse of indulgences was the last straw for Martin Luther, then a Catholic priest. Trent addressed that abuse, and Pope Paul VI further reformed Catholic teaching in this area in the 1960s. Gros notes that indulgences aren’t the dominant form of Catholic piety. And most Catholics who are aware of indulgences don’t understand them properly, he observes. Gros says you can’t understand indulgences or any other Catholic practice “unless you understand the prior gift that we’ve received in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, mediated to us by grace.”

This Catholic-Lutheran agreement provides a new opportunity to deepen our understanding of grace: “We Catholics would be renewed by this joint declaration to understand the Council of Trent better. Because we come closer to where Luther is, closer to where Paul is, and that will bring us closer to where the Council of Trent is.”

When asked how this declaration might matter to everyday Catholics, Brother Gros points out: “It matters because it has to do with our relationship to Jesus Christ. To the extent that we’re concerned about Jesus Christ, grace, and our own baptism, it’s central to our identity.” The fact that Lutherans and Catholics share the centrality of God’s grace in Jesus Christ and the centrality of our response is of tremendous theological significance, he says.

GRACE COMES FIRST

One practical outcome of the Catholic-Lutheran agreement will be for those Lutherans and Catholics joined in marriage. The two partners can now rest assured that they share a common faith even though some fundamental differences remain.

The dialogue about grace between Catholics and Lutherans challenges all of us to deepen our understanding of grace.

“The most important thing for us to think about when we get up in the morning,” says

Brother Gros, “is not *what* we’re going to do, *how* we’re going to do our job or good works in the Church, but to recognize God’s love. The reason we can do any good work is because God loves us first in grace.” That’s what the Lutherans mean by “grace alone,” he explains. “They don’t mean grace without anything else, but they mean *grace at the center of everything*.”

“Every Catholic and Lutheran Christian ought to wake up thanking God for the grace they’ve received in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That’s what this is about.” You can’t be saved by money, he observes, and you can’t please God by yourself: “It’s already been done in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We respond to that gift with gratitude.”

DIG DEEPER

Name some times you’ve been aware of God’s grace.

Why can’t people earn salvation?

What 20th-century events led to greater Catholic-Lutheran unity?

Read John 17:20–21.
How can you build Christian unity?

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