

Is His Grace Truly Sufficient – or Not?

By [Fr. Mark A. Pilon](#)

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What I find most troubling about the current controversy over whether the divorced and civilly remarried can be allowed to receive Communion (while living in the state of adultery) is the way the debate seems to obscure the whole issue of free will and grace. This is not simply a dispute over moral norms or sacramental discipline; at its very heart is the whole question of the power of God's grace in the soul of the sinner.

Those who say that a person living in adultery may find it “impossible” to obey the sixth commandment – by logical extension any of the commandments in a difficult situation – are in effect demeaning either the operative power of the graces flowing from Christ or the operative freedom of the person struggling with temptation or living in sin.

If the operative grace of Christ is not sufficient to enable the sinner to reject the sin, repent, and do what's necessary to change a sinful way of life, then just how powerful can that grace really be? When Paul begged Christ three times to remove the thorn in his flesh, which he attributed to Satan, Christ replied: “*My grace is sufficient for thee: for my power is made perfect in weakness.*” (2 Cor 12:9)

Now, we don't know exactly what this “thorn” from Satan was – perhaps a grave temptation or a serious health problem. What is important, regardless of the problem, is the solid assurance that His grace is not only sufficient to overcome it but is actually made perfect in the face of any human weakness.

Moreover, Paul has already addressed this same issue of the power of Grace when he reassures the Corinthians: “*No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.*”

The “way out” is by virtue of His grace, which is the reason why the Christian never boasts in his own power, but in his weakness, because he trusts that God will come to our aid and help us overcome any temptation, any struggle with evil if we surrender to His grace.



St. Paul by Etienne Parrocel, 1720 [private collection]

When a Christian says that it is “impossible” for another Christian to obey a commandment, as a Roman Cardinal recently did, what is such an assertion but a practical denial of the power of grace and of Christ Himself? If His grace is ultimately conditioned in its effectiveness by human will and passions and circumstances, then it is weaker than they are.

Thus, at least in practice, it becomes very much a secondary element in the moral life – somewhat like what the Pelagian heresy taught about grace: that it's effectively non-essential if helpful in some instances.

Pelagianism was not simply an anthropological and moral heresy that denied the transmission of Original Sin and asserted that free will was sufficient to attain moral perfection. The denial of the necessity of Grace for Justification and moral perfection led theo-*logically* to an even more profound Christological and soteriological heresy, which undermined the whole redemptive mission of Christ and thus undermined the theological foundation for the Incarnation. What do we need Christ for, if man is perfectly capable of saving himself by properly exercising his free will?

What is going on today, however, is not exactly a form of neo-Pelagianism, but rather a new form of quasi-determinism. While Pelagius exalted free will to the heavens, the modern denial of the power of grace is based on the reduction of free will to a slave of the passions. Free will is so utterly weak, that in difficult situations, it cannot begin to cooperate with God's grace. Thus obedience to the will of God becomes "impossible" in some cases, a position condemned at the Council of Trent for important theological reasons.

If God's grace is so weak that it cannot heal the weakness of the will and enable it to overcome temptations, or moral conundrums – especially those related to the flesh – "my grace is sufficient for thee" is reduced to a platitude or banality, a nice saying, but ultimately meaningless for real life. Maybe Christ should have said, "*Sometimes* my grace is sufficient for thee, and *only sometimes* it is made perfect in weakness, *but not always, in tough cases.*"

Today, the penetration of the Christian ethos by various forms of determinism, especially by a rabid psychological determinism, has radically demeaned free will and human dignity and the power of actual operative grace, while absolutizing the grace of justification. It is more like a resurgence of extreme Calvinist determinism but without the element of negative predestination.

In that view, man's free will is totally corrupted, but, thanks to Christ's redemption, most if not all men are positively predestined to heaven. So why agonize over the moral life so much, since many if not most men seem to find it "impossible" to overcome certain sins?

The proponents of this strange combination of moral determinism and salvific universalism never seem to see just how these various denials of moral responsibility demean not only the operative grace of Christ but likewise the true dignity of man. How much more dignified is the man who confesses his responsibility for sin than the man who declares himself guiltless because he found it just impossible to follow God's commandment, regardless of the grace of Christ?

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