

Fr. Perozich comments —

Fr. Brent James, O.P. (Dominican) presents a clear explanation of God's grace and invitation to a deep relationship with the Trinity.

Since it is offered in parts, I will update this teaching as it is offered on SpiritualDirection.com.

Father James Dominic Brent, O.P. is a Dominican Friar who lives and teaches at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. Several of his homilies, spiritual conferences, interviews, and radio spots can be found on his personal [Soundcloud site](#). He frequently lectures for the [Thomistic Institute](#), and appears on [Aquinas 101](#).

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The newest post is part 27 at the end of this document.

Part 1

The Kingdom Of Grace

JULY 28, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: Enjoy this first in a new series on grace by Fr. James Brent, O.P. We are blessed to have him contributing to our website and to our understanding of how God works in the soul and how we cooperate in the process of sanctification. As Fr. James explains below, this divinizing work is the natural maturation of our baptismal grace and is the call of every Christian — and it is, always, the goal of all the content we seek to share on Spiritualdirection.com.

The grace of God has appeared.

Titus 2:11

“The grace of God has appeared” (Titus 2:11). A new kind of life, therefore, is possible for human beings. Thanks to the incarnation of the eternal Son of God, and his death and resurrection, the grace of the Holy Spirit was poured into our souls in our baptism. Baptism has established a new form of life in us — a supernatural life — as friends of God, other Christs in the world, adopted sons and daughters of the Father, members of the Church, and the temple of the living God. Such a gift was given to us not because of any merit of our own, but

it was God who first loved us (1 Jn. 4:19). He poured forth his grace into our souls in order to transform us in the depths of our hearts. And the gift of his grace, which is something of his own divine Life, is meant to grow in us.

Few people realize that the grace of God given to us in our baptism is meant to *grow*. God works to increase his grace or supernatural life in our souls, but God also calls us to participate in the process of growth through our free choices and various practices. Every one of us is called to go on a journey from the land of our bondages to the land of the living God in the heavenly places. The journey is challenging, and “many are the trials of the just man” (Ps. 34:19). Yet, through them all the God of grace is with us to lead us on to the abodes of the victorious in the Jerusalem up above. To live according to grace is the road into the Light. There is no other way.

God himself has revealed the ways and means for us to take so that his grace might grow strong in us, and so that we might shine like lights in the world around us. The gospel that the Church proclaims to the world is that *The Kingdom of Grace* is at hand. *The Kingdom of Grace* is the title of this series of articles on the spiritual life, and the purpose of the series is to provide traditional, time tested, and true teachings on the mystery of grace, on the growth of grace in our souls, and how to live our lives according to divine grace more and more.

The series will touch on many topics in the spiritual life: the meaning of grace, how the Spirit dwelling in us by grace works to form “Christ in you” (Col. 1:27), and how everything leads on to the Father. Friendship with God, filial adoption, and the indwelling Trinity are but a few of the topics, but so too are the practicals of living by grace, e.g. fruitful reception of the Eucharist, various forms of prayer, and the importance of works of mercy. Life in the kingdom of grace leads to the purification and illumination of the deep heart in each of us. It

leads to the renewal of the image of God in the depths of our hearts. It leads to increasingly greater interior likeness to God – divinization. Life according to grace leads to a new awareness of God speaking to us in Scripture and liturgy, a new awareness of the presence of God dwelling in our hearts, a new awareness of God shining out all around us in people and in nature in different ways. In short, it leads to contemplative prayer and to wisdom of heart.

Such are a few of the topics in our series, and the best way to begin is with humility, i.e. with a tiny practical step. Why not take a brief moment, find a quiet place, silence oneself as much as possible, and offer up a simple prayer? Any prayer will do – the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Glory Be, or whatever else one finds attractive at the moment. God never asks us to start from anywhere other than where we are now. He never asks for more than what we can do today by the grace that is already given to us. The point is to ask for new graces. Let us ask for God to give new life to our hearts, new graces to his Church, and new graces for the many people who live “without hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). The hearts of those who are hurting and broken, indeed the whole world, is so much in need of God’s grace. The time to seek his grace is *now*. Only let us do so with confidence in the words of the Lord Jesus: “Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you.” (Mt. 7:7).

Part 2

Gospel Of Grace

AUGUST 2, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: This article is part 2 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 1 can be found [here](#).

The Lord Jesus came so that we might have life, and have it more abundantly (Jn. 10:10). The abundant life he came to give us was nothing less than eternal life – the divine Life of God himself. The gospel of grace is simply the story of how God has opened up his inner life to us, has personally called us to participate in his inner life, and actually transmits to our souls something of his own divine Life. The gospel of grace is the announcement that out of his sheer love for us God is now giving himself to us.

The story of grace begins with God. God dwells in unapproachable Light (1 Tim. 6:6). What sort of life God lives in the Light, and what goes on in his inner life too, is also a secret. No one on earth could ever imagine it, guess it, or fathom it. Yet, God did not want to keep his secret to himself. He wanted, rather, to reveal it to us. His purpose in revealing the secret of his Life, however, was not simply to tell us about it or give us new information. If his purpose were merely to tell

us about it, then the revelation would have been for us like hearing of a beautiful island somewhere – a place of splendid sunrises, gorgeous waters, amazing plants and animals – but a place we never get to visit and experience for ourselves.

Rather, God wanted to open up his secret to us so that we might enter into his inner Life and to participate in it for ourselves – knowingly, lovingly, freely enjoy his eternal and divine Life. He wanted to transmit something of us his very Life to our souls. In this way, our inner life would mysteriously blend with his inner Life, and something like a marriage between God and humanity could come to pass. There is a name for the wonderful act by which God reveals his inner secret to us, calls us into his inner life and transmits something of his divine Life to our very souls. The name is *grace*.

When God set about the work of revealing his secret to us and transmitting to our souls something of his own Life, God did so in an orderly fashion. The secret of God is that he is a Trinity of divine persons – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and the manner in which he revealed this mystery to us involves all three persons in the process. After a preparatory phase under the old covenant, when the fullness of time had come, the Father sent his eternal Son into the world. Jesus of Nazareth is the eternal Son of God. He was born of Mary of Nazareth in Bethlehem of Judea, and he was a real and true human being who walked the face of the earth. As he did so, Jesus carried within himself the whole divine Life. For he was the eternal Son of God, and so he carried the secret of God within himself.

Truly he lived a human life, but unique among all human beings, he also lived the divine Life. Everything that he said or did revealed this Life in some way or another. Jesus spoke of his heavenly Father, and ministered in the power of the Spirit – healings and exorcisms and sublime teachings. In the power of the same Spirit, Jesus also freely chose to die on the cross

out of sheer love for us, as a sacrifice for our sins, and in so doing revealed the magnitude of divine Love for you and for me. But that was not enough. God also raised him from the dead, and in his ascension, Jesus returned to the Father. When he returned, he did so with a specific purpose in mind. His purpose was to stand before the Father of lights and intercede on our behalf for a special intention. The intention was for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us.

The Holy Spirit is the personal Love going on between the Father and the Son within the inner life of God for all eternity. Just as two people who love each other look at each other and tend to breathe a sigh of love for one another, so for all eternity the Father and the Son behold each other in splendor and breathe a sigh of Love for each other. The Holy Spirit is their eternal sigh of Love. The Holy Spirit is a sigh of Love so deep and so magnificent that the Spirit is actually a third divine person proceeding from the Father and the Son. Teachings such as these are so very great that they deserve long meditation in their own right, but it is even more amazing to consider that day and night the risen Lord Jesus stands before the Father, shows his glorified wounds to the Father, and intercedes for you and me to receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Such is the mystery of Jesus Christ the Eternal High Priest.

The Father always hears the prayer of his Son, the Eternal High Priest, and the Spirit has been sent into our lives in a new and special way – in a manner over and above the Spirit's work of creating the world. The good news that comes down to us from the apostles of old is that “the love of God has been poured forth into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rm. 5:5). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit – the grace of the Holy Spirit – is now ever at work in the world in different people and in different ways. But most

importantly, the Spirit actually comes to live and dwell in the hearts of those who are baptized.

It is an amazing thing to ponder that the Holy Spirit himself abides in the depths of our hearts. He lives and abides there so long as we continue to live in a state of grace – in the sanctifying grace we received in our baptism. Once sanctifying grace has been given in baptism, it is impossible for someone to lose it except by committing mortal sin. If there is any question of having committed mortal sin, it is time to fly to the sacrament of penance. For that great sacrament restores sanctifying grace in our souls, and the Spirit comes to dwell in us anew.

“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16). The question is as relevant for us today as when Saint Paul first put it to the Corinthians in the first century. How many Catholics have never heard of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit! How few Catholics realize that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the key to our sanctification and our transformation! How few Catholics learn to walk in the presence and the power of the Spirit dwelling in their hearts! One of the main points of this series is to learn more of the mystery of the Spirit dwelling in us, and how to live more and more according to his presence in our hearts.

When the Spirit comes to dwell in us, he comes to carry out a project in us – a saving mission. He comes to Love us, to give us Light, and to transmit to our souls something of the very divine Life that is in Jesus Christ. The Spirit comes to befriend us to God. He comes to inspire the pronouncement of the Name in our hearts, to flood our souls with the filial prayer of Jesus, and to transform us into another Christ in the world. Every one of these points is a mystery, and each deserves a meditation of its own. Everything begins with the gift of grace, and the gift of grace is the topic of our next article.

Part 3

The God Of Grace

AUGUST 10, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: This article is part 3 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 2 can be found [here](#).

Many people speak of the graces of God, but first, let us ponder the God of grace. Scripture and tradition tell us that grace is first of all a gift of God's *love*. But how shall we understand his love?

In one sense, **God loves absolutely everyone and everything. For God is love (1 Jn. 4:8).** And he shows his universal or common love simply by creating all people and all the things of nature. **From out of his love God gives being to the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth, the flora and fauna all around us. God gives to all things their very natures, their activities, their purposes, and their**

place in the world. God also moves them and directs them along their paths.

Most importantly, God created the soul of each human being – each in a special way. Each human soul is a source of life for the person's body, and also the abode of the person's *inner life*. The soul and body together constitute our human nature, and, in a sense, we too belong to the world of nature (even though we are destined for so much more). For those with eyes to see, the whole world of nature is a breathtaking display of the wisdom of God. It is all an amazing gift of love flowing from the God who simply loves all. Traditionally, therefore, we speak of the *blessings of nature*.

The blessings of nature are immense and without them, no one could live or breathe or move towards God in any way at all. Sunbeams and pure water are good things indeed and reflect the goodness of God a bit. So, too, the human love of spouses, parents, family, and friends. And it pleases God for us to seek him through the blessings of nature provided we do so in a morally good way. But God's gift of grace is something different in kind from all of the blessings of nature – something even more amazing and more wonderful.

For grace is a *special gift* of God's love in the sense that it is a gift distinct from the outpouring of all the blessings of nature. All of nature combined, the sun, moon, and stars, the flora and fauna of the earth, our souls and bodies, our whole life in this world, even the whole order of angels, is really next to nothing by comparison to God himself. For God himself is unspeakably better and infinitely greater than all of it. At this point, it is worth pausing to ponder just how *all-surpassing* is the goodness of God himself.

For only if we hold in mind the all-surpassing goodness of God are we really in a position to catch a glimpse of the grandeur of grace. God did not create us human beings only in

order to give us the blessings of nature. God did not create human beings simply in order to give us the world.

God created us to give us *himself*.

It was not enough for God to give us a reflection of himself *through* the finite things of nature. God wanted to give us himself immediately and in person. **He wanted us to know, to love, and to enjoy the all-surpassing goodness that he himself is. Grace, in the first and most important sense, is God's gift of himself to us. Grace is first of all the mystery of God saying: "here, have Me."**

Grace is first of all the mystery of God saying: "here, have Me." — Fr. James Brent, O.P.

In this sense, grace is a gift of *excessive love*. It is a love over and above all of the blessings of nature. No one deserves God's gift of himself to us, and no one can comprehend it. But God gives his grace nonetheless – **he gives himself to us in Jesus Christ and in the outpouring of the Spirit into our souls.** God does so **for no other reason than that he is good.** He is simply generous. He is over-the-top generous. From all eternity he has held in his heart the plan to bless us in such an excessive way – *over the top*.

How does God give himself to us? In what ways? In a sense, the whole purpose of Scripture and tradition is to answer those questions. The story of Scripture is the story of God's secret love designs upon humanity and the special blessing he has held in store for us from all eternity. It was a secret plan, hidden from before the foundation of the world, yet now it has been revealed to us through the prophets and the apostles. It was the plan to give us himself, to open up his inner Life to us, and draw us into it.

When God gives himself to us in love, the gift of himself is sometimes called *uncreated grace*. In the process of giving himself to us, God also gives us many *graces*.

He creates in our souls many special qualities, distinct from all the blessings of nature, and he also moves in our hearts, stirs us, and inclines us to act in ways that will really save our souls, e.g. to repent of our sins or to say a prayer. All of these qualities and stirrings are sometimes called *created graces*, and they are the topic of our next article.

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Image courtesy of Unsplash.*

Part 4 follows

The Graces Of God

AUGUST 16, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: This article is part 4 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 3 can be found [here](#).

God is Love.

In his very great love for us, God gives himself to us. He opens up his inner Life to us, and gives us his Son and Spirit. In so doing, **he proves himself to be the God of grace—*uncreated grace*. When God gives himself to us, however, he also gives us many *graces—created* graces.**

The many **created graces** coming to us from God are worth pondering at some length so that we might learn to live by them more and more. For all of them, in one way or another, work to open our hearts to the God of grace and go into his life in a manner otherwise impossible for human beings to do.

When God gives himself to us, when he opens up his inner Life and gives us his eternal Son and Spirit, the whole act of love is really quite unfathomable for us. It is also quite impossible for us to receive him or respond

to him consciously, freely, or in a personal way. It is simply not in the powers of our human nature to be able to do so.

All of our intelligence and strength are but poverty before him, and **the gift of himself to us is too excessive for us to handle.** For our lives, our loves, our relationships, our knowledge, all of our inner resources and wealth, all of it is naturally adapted to life in the physical world, and God is beyond the physical world.

He is a mystery to us.

However, God knows our limits rather well. He knows of our incapacities to welcome and respond to him when he gives himself to us. **So, when he gives us his uncreated grace, when he gives us himself, he also gives us by his grace certain new and special qualities.**

These new qualities are over and above all the qualities that belong to our nature such as musical gifts or a high degree of intelligence. They are distinct from all the blessings of nature that make us up individually, the gifts of body or soul, and these new qualities enable us to receive and respond to God's gift of himself in a way that is conscious, free, and personal. Such is their importance.

When God by his grace creates in our souls these new and special gifts, these **created graces, some are more fundamental than others.** The most fundamental one is *sanctifying grace*. For now, let us just say that sanctifying grace is something of God's own *life* planted in the depths of our souls. (More to say on the life of grace in the next article.)

Flowing from sanctifying grace are all the *infused virtues* as well as the *gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit*. According to the traditional list, the infused virtues are **faith, hope, love, prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude.** The gifts of the Spirit are **understanding, knowledge, wisdom, counsel, piety, fortitude, and**

fear of the Lord. The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, and chastity.

All of these graces are created in our souls through the waters of baptism. They are stable gifts, deeply rooted in our souls, and cannot be lost except by mortal sin. (Thanks be to God, if one commits a mortal sin, the sacrament of penance restores them.)

From the days of their catechesis, many Catholics are familiar with terms such as sanctifying grace and might even remember the lists of the infused virtues, gifts, and fruits of the Spirit. Very few Catholics, however, realize what all these things really are, what they do for us, and why they are given to us in our baptism.

In a nutshell, all of these qualities enable us to receive and to respond to God in a conscious, free, and personal way when he gives himself to us – when he opens up to us his inner Life and shares with us his Word and Spirit. Sanctifying grace, the virtues, gifts, and fruits spelled out on the catechetical lists form the very capacity to welcome God personally and respond to him consciously and freely on a level beyond all that is possible for us to do by our own human strength or abilities.

Even more amazingly, God gives us not only a host of qualities such as sanctifying grace or the virtues, but he also activates us in various ways. **He stirs within our hearts, moves and inclines our hearts, to welcome God as he gives himself to us.** When God so works in our hearts and inclines us from within to welcome him and respond to him, **the stirrings and promptings are traditionally called *actual graces* or *inspirations*.** Actual graces and inspirations move us in the depths of our hearts to

various saving acts such as repenting of one's sins or offering up praise and thanksgiving to God. The graces and inspirations to do so are also created graces.

Sometimes people speak of more specific graces. For example, God might give someone the grace of conversion, the grace of a religious vocation, the grace of the priesthood, the grace of a miraculous healing, or the grace of greater patience or chastity or something similar. One might speak even more particularly of the grace of Saint Paul, the grace of Saint Augustine, the grace of Saint Catherine of Sienna, or the grace of Pope Saint John Paul II. One might also speak of the grace of particular sacraments: the grace of baptism, the grace of confirmation, the grace of holy matrimony, etc.

God gives such graces to different people in different ways, and at the same time gives them to his Church. He gives them according to his eternal designs for the particular person and for the Church as a whole. For he is ever forming us individually, and in so doing he is ever building up the Church for what he has always planned her to be in heaven – the Church of the endless ages in Light.

The graces of God come to us in myriads of forms: stable qualities, actual graces, inspirations, sacramental graces, the grace of a particular vocation or apostolate, and many more. Regardless of their forms, **created graces are given to us to open our hearts to God so that we can personally receive him and freely respond to him when he pours himself out upon us in Love.**

The graces of God in our lives accomplish something still more. **His graces to us are supernatural, and actually lift us up to live on a new level beyond the whole world of nature.** They adapt us to live in God's own supernatural and divine milieu, beyond the visible world of

nature and even beyond the world of the angels, but to ponder such mysteries belongs to the next article in our series.

Father James Dominic Brent, O.P. is a Dominican Friar who lives and teaches at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. Several of his homilies, spiritual conferences, interviews, and radio spots can be found on his [personal Soundcloud site](#). He frequently lectures for the [Thomistic Institute](#) and appears on [Aquinas 101](#). Image courtesy of Unsplash.

The Life Of Grace

AUGUST 24, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.

Part 5



*Editor's note: This article is part 5 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace."
Part 4 can be found [here](#).*

Grace is a special gift of divine Love, different from all the blessings of nature, and stands out from them all. God has loved us excessively and poured out *himself* upon us. He gives us himself, his uncreated grace when he gives the person of Jesus Christ and pours his Holy Spirit into our hearts.

He also gives us *created graces* so that we might consciously receive the gift of himself, and freely respond to him in love. Created graces, however, to more than give us the ability to welcome God and respond to him. They actually adapt us to living in a higher milieu – the milieu of divine Life up above in the heavenly places.

Let us try to explain this mystery a bit.

Love makes us come alive. When two people fall in love with one another, do they not come alive in a new way? So, too, it is when God loves us in a special way, and gives us his grace.

When the grace of God comes to us, our souls come alive, but our souls come alive with a form of life different from all the forms of life found in nature.

The life of grace is not of this world. It is obviously not a form of plant life or animal life. It is not a form of human life *per se*. It is not even a form of angelic life. **The angels live a purely spiritual form** of life abounding in the most sublime knowing, loving, and freedom. But the life of grace is not the angelic form of life. **The life of grace is, in fact, beyond all the natural forms of life whether in this world or in the world of the angels.**

The life of grace is strictly *supernatural*. That means it is *above the natures of all creatures whatsoever*. The life of grace is, therefore, truly all-surpassing. When our Lord Jesus said “I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (Jn. 10:10), he revealed the intention of God to animate us with something of his very own *supernatural and divine Life*.

Now, when such an announcement is made the proper response is for the jaw to drop and the eyebrows to raise. If there is one thing that is obvious about human beings, or should be obvious, it is our poverty before God. It is simply not possible for us to live the very life of God by our own human strength. Surely, however, God can lift us up to live on his level if it should so please him. For if one human being can open his home to another, and invite the other in to live there, dwell there, and share life together, why cannot God do the same with human beings?

For if one human being can open his home to another, and invite the other in to live there, dwell there, and share life together,

why cannot God do the same with human beings? – Fr. James Brent, O.P.

Indeed, it has always been the purpose of God's will to do so, that is, to open his Life to us and call us into his house to live there and dwell there for eternity. The very first statement of the *Catechism* says so: "God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness, freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life."

In order to get a better sense of what sharing in the blessed life of God actually means, let us consider an analogy.

J.R. Tolkien was a man who lived in Oxford, studied and taught there, frequented the pubs there, and wrote stories of fiction. He lived in the world of Oxford, but he produced another world – the narrative world of the *Lord of the Rings*. Now, let us imagine if Tolkien could reach into the narrative world he created, take hold of one of the characters, lift the character out of the narrative world, and set the character down with himself in a pub in the world of Oxford just to enjoy a beer together and have a conversation. Tolkien would thus give to the character an existence and form of life in a whole new order – the order of reality. Impossible though it may be for human authors to do so with their fictional characters, it is possible for God to do something like this with persons in the world of nature. Indeed, God *has* done so by giving us grace.

When someone is baptized, and God creates in the soul sanctifying grace, the infused virtues, the gifts and fruits of the Spirit, it is somewhat like Tolkien reaching into his narrative world and lifting up a character out of the story. By creating such graces in our souls, God reaches down so to speak, and lifts us up out of the natural order to live in a whole new order – in the supernatural order, in the

unapproachable Light, in the world of God himself, in the Holy Trinity. The marvel of the created graces we receive in our baptism is that they adapt us to live beyond nature in the world of God.

Created graces enable us to know *God*, love *God*, and enjoy *God* on the most personal, intimate, and familiar terms. They also enable us to act in the ways he secretly and inwardly inclines us to act in order to go to him. By knowing him, loving him, and enjoying him on such familiar and personal terms, and by going to him according to his actual graces and inspirations at work in our hearts, you and I actually live to some extent the very Life of God. We live *his* Life in the depths of our hearts by grace.

Thanks to his created grace at work in our souls, it becomes more or less normal for us to commune with God, and to interact personally with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **Our interaction with them might be silent, in the depths of our souls, or it might be in the liturgy of the Church. It might in some ways be both.**

One way or another, to live such a supernatural and divine Life, to be so personally familiar with God, to know him and love him so intimately, and to interact with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as a living presence in our lives is far beyond all the powers of our human nature.

The good news is that God is now calling all people up to live on his level. **He is calling all to live in the supernatural order – to go up by grace into the unapproachable Light in which God himself dwells. In order to accomplish his plan for us to do so, God gives *actual graces* to all people everywhere, but in different ways.** Through the touches and promptings of his grace, God walks with all people everywhere and directs their course. His actual graces serve myriads of purposes in people's lives, and God alone knows them all.

One of the primary reasons, however, that God gives *actual graces* to all people is to lead all of humanity by stages and degrees to the grace given in baptism. For in baptism a human being receives *sanctifying grace* – a personal share in the very life of God who comes to dwell in the soul. Sanctifying grace is no transitory touch of God, but something of his supernatural and divine Life rooted in the depths of our souls. Sanctifying grace is the root of the whole spiritual life in us.

Spiritual life is an ancient expression of our sacred tradition, and it means something specific. To say what it means is, in a way, the purpose of the rest of the series. For now, it suffices to say that **those who live the spiritual life learn to say with all confidence: “I will walk in the presence of the Lord in the land of the living” (Ps. 116:9).** In order to do so, however, one needs the *light of grace*, and that is the topic of the next article.

part 6

The Light Of Grace

AUGUST 31, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: This article is part 6 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 5 can be found [here](#).

Grace is a special gift of God's love, different from all the blessings of nature, and God gives us his grace in order to draw us into us his own divine Life. God gives actual graces to all people, but in baptism he gives sanctifying grace to souls. **Thanks to sanctifying grace, the soul lives on another level than all the things of natural world – on a level beyond even that of the angels.** It was God's plan all along to bestow such a special gift of his Love, and to share something of his own Life with us. **In order to live the spiritual life, in order to come to know, love, and** enjoy God himself, the first thing one needs is the *light* of grace.

In order to live the spiritual life, in order to come to know, love, and enjoy God himself, the first thing one needs is the light of grace. – Fr. James Brent, O.P.

To understand the light of grace, the liturgy of the Church provides the best comparison. Every year at the Easter Vigil, the priest first blesses the fire, and from the holy fire the paschal candle is lit. From the paschal candle, in turn, the candles of the people are lit. The deacon then processes with the paschal candle. Three times he stops in the procession, holds the candle high, and chants “the Light of Christ!” All of this reveals that Christ is the light of God, and each of us receives *his* light. The light of Christ, God’s own Light, radiates in us by the grace of our baptism.

Throughout the year, the same paschal candle is present in the liturgy of baptisms. When a baptism takes place, after the pouring or immersion in the water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a small candle is lit from the paschal candle and handed to the newly baptized or to the godfather. When the newly lit candle is handed over, the minister says “keep the *flame of faith* burning brightly.” The liturgy of the Church teaches us clearly that **faith is a special light received from God in Jesus Christ, and thanks to grace his divine Light illuminates our souls**. Faith is the light of God shining within us in the depths of our souls – in a special part of the soul traditionally called the spiritual part of the soul, the mind, or the heart.

Faith is a fixed tendency to trust and affirm what God has revealed to the human race, i.e. everything that comes down to us in the testimony of the prophets and apostles. This fixed tendency is traditionally called a theological virtue. Thanks to this virtue or fixed tendency of the heart or mind, when a person full of faith hears what God has revealed, the person simply believes it all. The faithful affirm in all simplicity that Jesus is Lord, that he freely chose to die on the cross out of love for us, that God raised him from the dead, that now he stands before the Father interceding for us, and the Father answers his prayers by

pouring out the Holy Spirit upon us – especially in the sacraments of the Church.

Thanks to the virtue of faith, the faithful simply believe in the perpetual Virginity of Mary, the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the mystery of the Holy Trinity, and all the other mysteries of our faith. **These mysteries naturally give rise to many questions. The questions are not doubts (or need not become doubts). Rather, every question is a call to grow in understanding of what God has revealed,** and so faith also ponders the mysteries in love like the Blessed Virgin Mary who “kept all these things pondering them in her heart” (Lk. 2:19). Faith, therefore, gives birth to prayer and meditation, contemplation and sacred study, indeed, to the whole personal response to the Light that is living and true theology.

More importantly, **faith is the beginning of eternal life in us. In John 17:3, the Lord said: “eternal life is knowing you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”** Eternal life is a form of *knowing*. It is not merely an abstract or conceptual knowledge, but a personal, experiential, familiar form of knowing God. Faith is contact of the mind with God himself, and the fruit of such contact is life in the presence of God, awareness of him, knowing him in the biblical sense in the depths of the heart. Whoever lives in such contact with God in the depths of the heart is already in some sense one with him. That is why Saint Thomas Aquinas says that by faith a person enters into “a union similar to marriage” with God, and also that by faith a person “perceives many things of God in a manner higher than reason.”

Now, just as in a marriage, the union merely *begins* on the day of the wedding and is meant to *grow* from that day forward, so union with God *begins* in faith and is meant to *grow* through faith and hope and charity and the seven gifts of

the Spirit. **It is meant to grow into the full enjoyment of the presence of God dwelling within us.** In this way, God recovers fallen humanity from its sense of the absence of God, heals our hearts of the calamity of the Fall, and renews us in the life of knowing the divine Light.

Most importantly of all, faith is the root and source of contemplative prayer. “Contemplation,” the *Catechism* says, “is a gaze of faith fixed on Jesus” (CCC 2715). When two people trust each other and abide in love together, their communication tends to simplify, to become more interior, more silent, and yet mysteriously richer and more intimate. So too it is with the faithful who pray. **Those who believe – in all trust and love – what God reveals, and give themselves to the practice of prayer, tend to become more interior souls, more silent, abiding more with a simple awareness of the presence of God living within.** They begin to experience for themselves the meaning of these words: “he who believes in me out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” (Jn. 7:38).

Such contemplative awareness can become radical. One great example is the French Carmelite nun Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity. She was a contemplative soul, and by grace was given from an early age to pondering the reality of the Trinity dwelling in her soul. “I have found heaven on earth, since heaven is God, and God is in my soul,” she wrote. What was her secret? What was the secret of her growth in radical awareness of God dwelling within her? “Believe in his Love,” she wrote, “in his exceeding Love.”

“Believe in his Love, in his exceeding Love.” – St. Elizabeth of the Trinity

Father James Dominic Brent, O.P. is a Dominican Friar who lives and teaches at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. Several of

his homilies, spiritual conferences, interviews, and radio spots can be found on his [personal Soundcloud site](#). He frequently lectures for the [Thomistic Institute](#) and appears on [Aquinas 101](#).

Part 7



The Friends Of God

SEPTEMBER 8, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: This article is part 7 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 6 can be found [here](#).

In his very great goodness and love, God has opened up his own Life to us and called us to share in it. By the gift of his sanctifying grace, given to us in our baptism, he has lifted us up to live on his level – to live something of his own divine Life. In our baptism, when he gave us the gift of sanctifying grace, he also gave us the light of grace. He gave us the virtue of faith together with the Spirit's gifts of understanding, knowledge, wisdom, and much more.

By believing in all that God has revealed to us, and by accepting the gracious Love revealed to us, a real union with God himself has begun in our souls. So, too, has eternal life – personal familiarity with God. So, too, has contemplative prayer or the gaze of faith fixed on Jesus. The pathway to increasingly more profound union with God is now open for us to walk under the influence of still further graces given to us.

What God is doing in the whole mystery of his grace is actually *befriending* us personally. Perhaps Christianity, and

the proposal of a personal relationship with Jesus, has become too familiar to many of us. **Perhaps it no longer really astonishes us to hear that God has set about befriending us to himself.**

The more common tendency today is often for us to think that a deep and rich friendship with God is simply natural for human beings or that it is in the normal and ordinary course of the development of human nature for us to become friends with God.

It is not.

To be friends with God is a special gift from God, a gift not of this world, a gift of a special and gratuitous Love on God's part. No human being can make such a friendship happen by his or her own natural strength.

It would be easier for a human being to jump over the moon than for any one of us, by his or her own natural strength, to pass beyond all finite things and enter into a personal friendship with the living God. For "God dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16).

High above all things, existing for all eternity, the very being of God is utterly incomprehensible for human beings, and union with him is beyond the reach of our natural powers. **As far as human nature goes, friendship with God is out of the question.** The ancient pagan philosopher Aristotle saw this truth clearly. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle delivered one of the most illuminating and compelling accounts of friendship anyone has ever produced. Much of it rings true to this day.

In one place, he takes up the question of whether there can be friendship between those who are not equals such as between parents and their children. It is possible, he says, to some extent and with many qualifications. But "when one party is removed to a great distance, *as God is*, then the possibility of friendship ceases" (Bk. 8 c.7). Friendship with

God is simply impossible, Aristotle says, and there is simply no further discussion of the matter. Human beings and God have nothing in common.

Aristotle's point stands as far as human *nature* goes, but Aristotle knew nothing of *grace*.

As a pagan, he knew nothing of what had been revealed through the prophets of the Old Testament. Furthermore, since he lived hundreds of years before Christ, he knew nothing of what Jesus Christ revealed to the apostles and what we have learned from them. What we have learned from Christ and the apostles makes all the difference. When God gives us his grace, he gives us something that Aristotle and the pagans could never even have so much as imagined. God gives us something of his own divine Life, and so by grace we now have something in common with God. Grace establishes the possibility of friendship with God.

Grace establishes the possibility of friendship with God.

In the process of opening up and sharing his life with us, God revealed his intentions to befriend us. At the Last Supper, the Lord Jesus said: "I no longer call you servants... but I have called you friends" (Jn. 15:15). **The Lord did not call the twelve his friends because they were particularly good at being his friend.** In fact, their human ability to be friends with the Lord was something of a farce. Peter denied the Lord, Thomas doubted him, and all but one of the twelve abandoned him to die on Calvary. Through it all, however, the Lord Jesus was loving them beyond anything they could fathom. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (Jn. 13:1).

The Lord Jesus died for them – even while they were weak, even were still sinners, even while they fled. He died for us too, each one and all, even though we are weak and even

though we sin. The *Catechism* says very clearly: “Jesus knew us and loved us each and all during his life, his agony, and his passion, and gave himself up for each one of us” (CCC 478). Saint Paul never knew the Lord Jesus on earth, but Saint Paul did not hesitate to speak of “the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20).

Every one of us can say the same. **The Lord has revealed his plan and purpose of making us into his friends. We have no natural ability to be friends of God, and we are weak in every way, but he loves us nonetheless.** Knowing our weakness and sorry condition, the Lord loved us first and died on the cross in order to demonstrate how God first loves us (1 Jn. 4:19). “No man has greater love than this, that he lay down his life for his friend” (Jn. 15:13).

Christ died in order to reveal to us, indeed to *prove* to us, God’s eternal will to mercy. His death was a free choice of love for the Father and for us. Because he freely chose to die out of love and obedience to the Father and to lay down his life for us, Jesus Christ obtained from the eternal Father the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The grace of the Holy Spirit poured into our souls changes us inwardly, establishes us in friendship with God, and unites us to God more and more.

The name of this friendship is *charity*.

Charity is a created grace. God produces it in our souls along with sanctifying grace, faith, and the light of grace. As a created grace, however, it adapts us to live God’s own Life. For charity is love for God himself, and those who love God, those who cling to him in love, become “one spirit with him” (1 Cor. 6:17). Those who love God in charity live his very own divine Life.

The next article in our series takes up some of the details of charity.

Father James Dominic Brent, O.P. is a Dominican Friar who lives and teaches at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. Several of his homilies, spiritual conferences, interviews, and radio spots can be found on his [personal Soundcloud site](#). He frequently lectures for the [Thomistic Institute](#) and appears on [Aquinas 101](#).

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Part 8



The Meaning Of Charity

SEPTEMBER 12, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: This article is part 8 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 7 can be found [here](#).

When many people hear the word *charity*, the first thing that comes to mind are various works of mercy such as soup kitchens, shelters, and orphanages. All such things are outward works of charity indeed, but the essence of charity is *friendship with God*.

It is impossible for human beings to be or to become personal friends with God by our own natural strength. **Friendship with God can only be a gift of his grace.** Friendship with God is something altogether beyond us – something supernatural. In our baptism, however, the grace of just such a personal friendship with God is given to us.

Scripture tells us that charity or friendship with God is the principle thing in the spiritual life (1 Cor. 13). The journey from the land of our bondages to our home in the heavenly places is essentially the unfolding of a friendship with God.

The friendship given to us by grace is first of all interior. **The friendship is planted in the depths of our souls.** It

unfolds both inwardly and outwardly, in the depths of the heart and in outward behavior, over the course of a lifetime. It unfolds through God's action and our actions. The friendship unfolds in actions of increasingly greater intensity and immensity, and as the journey continues the friends of God normally become increasingly more amazed at what God is doing in them. They become amazed at the riches of grace God planned to give them from before the foundation of the world.

From before the foundation of the world God has created us and called us to go into the Light, and as the journey of our friendship with God continues the first installments – the down payments – of our inheritance with the saints in Light becomes increasingly greater.

Charity, or friendship with God, is a great mystery indeed, but human friendships provide an obvious model or analogy for purposes of understanding and living in friendship with God. Let us consider a few examples.

Friends live together. It is an ordinary part of friendship that the friends want to be together and remain together. So, too, it is in our friendship with God. Thanks to the grace of charity, we live together with God in the depths of our hearts. For the Spirit himself has come to dwell within us: “you know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you” (Jn. 14:17). We also want to stay with God. What did the disciples on the road to Emmaus say to the Lord as he was about to travel on? “Stay with us” (Lk. 24:29).

Friends converse together. What would a friendship with someone be without an ongoing conversation? So, too, it is in our friendship with God. Thanks to the grace of charity, we converse with God. For the Spirit of truth “will teach you all things and remind you of all that I told you” (Jn. 14: 26). It is normal for friends to remember one another's words, and try to understand them. So, too, with us and the Lord. Though we

live on earth, “our conversation is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20), and in that conversation, the Spirit “will teach you all things” (Jn. 14:26). In order for this conversation to deepen, however, the Lord says: “Come away with me to a lonely place” (Mk. 6:31). Why?

Friends share their secrets with one another. So, too, it is in our friendship with God. God shares his secrets with us, and we share our secrets with God. He shares his secrets with us in Scripture and tradition, and is eager to open up their lessons to us. “All that the Father has is mine,” said the Lord Jesus, and the Spirit “will take from what is mine and declare it to you” (Jn. 16:15).

The sharing of secrets best takes place in solitude and silence, for in solitude and silence the soul is lent to listening. In personal prayer and the sacrament of penance, we also share our secrets with God – especially our sins. “Come now, let us settle the matter, though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow” (Is. 1:18). “Look to him and be radiant, do not let your faces be ashamed” (Ps. 34:5).

Friends find joy and peace in one another, and we find joy and peace in God. The joy and peace of God coming to us by grace are not of this world, and even though our health or our finances or our families or our world remain afflicted in a thousand ways, the peace and joy of God dwelling in our hearts prove remarkable in their power to sustain the soul. “The Kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness, joy, and peace in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

Friends eat together. It would be a strange friendship indeed if the two people never ate together. In our friendship with God, we eat together with God in the sacred banquet of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not merely bread or wine. It looks like bread and wine, and tastes like bread and wine, but it is not bread and wine.

Rather, the fire of the Holy Spirit working through the words of the priest transforms what at first is bread and wine into the very body and blood of Christ. Those who come forward to receive holy communion receive *him* – Jesus Christ – who gives himself to us in the sacrament of the altar.

Friends also work together for the same purposes, and we work together with Christ for the salvation of the world. In all our Christian works, we are “coworkers in the Truth” (3 Jn. 1:8), but in the Mass our status as coworkers reaches a certain height. For Jesus Christ offered himself to the Father through the Holy Spirit on Calvary (Heb. 9:14), and even until now Jesus Christ continues to offer himself to the Father through the Holy Spirit in the heavenly places. At the same time, Jesus Christ also now offers himself to the Father in an unbloody way, in a sacramental way, on the altar in the sacrifice of the Mass.

The mystery of Christ offering himself on Calvary, the mystery of Christ now offering himself in heaven, and the mystery of Christ now offering himself on altars around the world are all one and the same reality. It is one and the same self-offering given “for the life of the world” (Jn. 6:51). When we go to Mass, we join in the mystery of the sacrifice, and offer



ourselves along with Jesus Christ to the Father for the life of the world.

In all of these ways, the supernatural friendship with God is very rich indeed. The more we ponder the ways of ordinary friendship, the more we can learn of the friendship with God we have received by grace. Slowly, the riches of charity unfold before us. One of those riches is the Name dwelling in our hearts, and that is the topic of the next article.

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Part 9



The Name In Our Hearts

SEPTEMBER 21, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.

Editor's note: This article is part 9 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 8 can be found [here](#).

The goodness of God, and the greatness of his life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is rather far beyond all telling. God has revealed the mystery of his Triune Life to us, and we believe in the mystery by faith, but before the splendor of the Trinity we are like little children who babble and barely know how to use words.

Yet, it pleases God to transmit to our hearts something of his own divine Life. As friends of God by grace, one of the first and greatest treasures he transmits to us is his holy Name dwelling in our hearts.

Christians of the first generations knew that something new, something stupendous, something supernatural had been given to them by grace. By faith and by personal experience, they were vividly aware that thanks to the death and resurrection of Jesus the Spirit of Love had been poured into their hearts (Rom. 5:5). The Spirit was now living and dwelling in the depths of their souls and the telltale sign of his indwelling was the pronouncement of the Name.

The telltale sign of his indwelling was the pronouncement of the Name.

Which name? The Spirit of sonship has been sent into our hearts, Saint Paul tells us, and makes us cry "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). The Name, however, might also be that of the Lord Jesus as we find at the end of the *Book of Revelation*: "the Spirit and the Bride say 'Come...Come, Lord Jesus!'" (Rev. 22:17, 20). But the Name might be simply that of God. The desert Fathers of the fourth century tell us the

formula for ceaseless prayer. It was Psalm 70:1: “O God, come to my assistance, O Lord make haste to help me.” The ancient monks teach us to call constantly upon the name of God using those words. It was the formula handed down among them for generations, and to this day it is the first line of every divine office in the Latin Rite. For the ancient Christians, though, it did not matter so much which particular *word* was pronounced – either *God* or *Abba* or *Lord Jesus*. What mattered was that the mystery of the *Name* was now living and active in our hearts by grace.

What is this mystery of the Name? One of the earliest documents of sacred tradition outside of Scripture is called the *Didache* (c.50-70 AD). It hands on in summary fashion the teaching of the twelve apostles. Even a quick reading shows how much it overlaps with the Gospels (it is even identical at certain points), and it contains some of the earliest details of the liturgy on record. After receiving holy communion, the earliest Christians offered up prayers of thanksgiving, and among them was the line: “We thank thee, Almighty God, for having caused thy holy Name to dwell in our hearts” (*Didache* 8:10).

In the ancient context, it was understood that **there is much more to a name than simply being a word to pick someone out of a crowd**. A name was not a digital data point, but was somehow the person’s very identity, presence, and energy. That is why in Scripture name changes are so significant: Abram becomes Abraham, Jacob becomes Israel, Simon becomes Peter, Saul becomes Paul. **The name change means becoming, in some sense, a new person**. (In many religious communities, the custom of the new name is still in effect upon entering into the novitiate.)

In Scripture, names are to be handled with care. The Israelites worshipped the name of God (Ps. 138:2), were prohibited from abusing the name of God (Ex. 20:7), and were

forbidden even from calling upon the names of other gods (Ex. 23:13). To abuse the name of God would be to break the covenant with him, and to call upon the names of other gods would produce relational entanglement with demons working through idols (1 Cor. 10:20). In Scripture, names are not just for texting or indexing, but are actual sacramentals. They are sacramentals of a person.

There is *power*, therefore, in the Name.

There is power, therefore, in the Name.

The Name is, in a way, the very person and presence of God. When God gives us the grace of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit causes the Name to dwell in our hearts. What happens is that the very person, presence, and power of the living God comes to be reproduced in the depths of our hearts. The likeness of God produced in our hearts by grace is not like a photocopy. It is not a second reality distinct from the original. The likeness – the Name – somehow is the original. The Name is at work in our hearts to cleanse, heal, purify, renew, deliver, and transform us.

Saint Simeon of Thessalonica celebrates the wonders of the **Name of Jesus when he says it is**

“a confession of faith, conferring upon us the Holy Spirit and divine gifts, cleansing the heart, driving out devils. It is the indwelling presence of Jesus Christ within us, and a fountain of spiritual reflections and divine thoughts. It is remission of sins, healing of soul and body, and shining of divine illumination; it is a well of God’s mercy, bestowing upon the humble revelations and initiation into the mysteries of God. It is our only salvation...”*

The experience of the saints down through the centuries is that the indwelling of the Name is a wondrous gift indeed. **Thanks to the Name living and active in our hearts, no one is bound to live alone.** No one is bound to do life all on his or her own with all of its challenges and difficulties. No one is bound to fix himself. No one is bound to save himself. And no one really can. **The Name has come to dwell in our hearts, and the Name works wonders. In the Name of Jesus, there is power unto salvation for all who believe (Rom. 1:16).**

The Name has come to dwell in our hearts, and the Name works wonders.

It is time for everyone in the Church today to wake up to the reality that the first Christians knew so vividly. **It is time to become aware of the grace of the Name dwelling in our hearts. It is time to call upon the Name day and night. Simply to say the holy Name of Jesus, from a heart full of faith, is to make personal contact with the living God in the depths of the soul.** Every time we say the Name, it begins to work the wonders of God within us. Through practice and experience, we can learn anew the wonders of the Name planted in our hearts, and come to echo once again the prayer of the earliest Christians: “we thank thee, Almighty God, for having caused thy holy Name to dwell in our hearts.”

* Simeon of Thessalonica, *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology*. Translated by E. Kadloubovsky and E.M Palmer. (London: Faber and Faber, 1966): p.88-9

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Part 10



The Filial Prayer

SEPTEMBER 27, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: This article is part 10 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 9 can be found [here](#).

"Love unites," says the ancient proverb. It is particularly true with the God of Love. When people love each other they spontaneously tend to seek one another out, find means of contact, and work to remain together. In this sense, love seeks union.

But love unites in another way. **Love forges a bond between people, and through the bond of love features of one person transfer to the other.** Married couples who have lived together long enough talk like each other, sound like each other, and even look like each other. Even the thoughts and feelings of their hearts belong to one another in ways that only they can understand. If love works so powerfully to unite people in natural friendships, how much more so in the supernatural friendship between us and God.

God has given us a special gift of Love called *grace*. He has reached down to us and called us up into friendship with himself – into true Life in God. In our friendship with God, love is at work uniting us with God in amazing ways. Just as a lover seeks out the beloved, so God seeks us out. But for a moment had Adam fallen and God called out: "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9).

The pattern of God seeking us out repeats itself with the patriarchs, the prophets, the apostles – with each of us in a unique way. He addresses us as friends. **Each of us tends to think that it is *I* who seek out God, but in fact, it is *God* who first seeks out each of us.** Indeed, **"we are not Christians because of our own achievement, but because God has sought us from eternity with the power of his love."***

Just as friends come to share one another's features through the bond of love, so we have come to share the features of God himself through the bond of love established with him by grace. There is really no end to saying all that has been or ever could be exchanged between us and God in our friendship with him. It is just too much. To enjoy his holy Name dwelling in our hearts by grace is only the beginning of the grandeurs.

Another astonishing thing transmitted to us through the bond of friendship with God is that **our hearts now share in the very prayer of Jesus Christ himself.**

What could be more central to someone than his or her prayer? The prayer of a person is an interior act, very secret, and something of a personal characteristic or unique trait. Just as each human finger leaves a unique fingerprint, so **each human heart raises a unique prayer to God.** The prayer of one's heart is deeply personal, and for no two people is the prayer of the heart ever quite the same. The deepest prayer of your heart or mine might well be as of yet unspoken. It might not yet have surfaced. **But truly God seeks your prayer.** For no one else can give *your* prayer to God except you.

The deepest prayer of your heart or mine might well be as of yet unspoken. It might not yet have surfaced. But truly God seeks your prayer. For no one else can give your prayer to God except you.

So, too, it is with the person of **Jesus Christ. He had a prayer all of his own.** The Gospels tell us what it was: "Abba!" (Mk. 14:36). **It was a unique prayer, unprecedented in all of Israel, and it belonged to Jesus alone.** But something very interesting appears in the letters of the New Testament. Saint Paul tells us that, thanks to

the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, the Spirit of sonship has been sent into our hearts and now *we* cry: “Abba!” (Rom. 8:15: Gal. 4:6). **The most personal, interior, and intimate act of the heart of Jesus has now been transmitted to Christian hearts too through the Spirit of Love.** As a result, the prayer that was original and proper to the heart of Jesus is now the prayer of our hearts too. **Our prayer participates in his.** Thanks to this participation, one and the same prayer-event going on in the heart of the Lord Jesus is now going on in our hearts too. **“The Spirit of adoption enables us to share in the prayer of Jesus” (CCC 2717).**

How can this be so? “All who cling to the Lord become one spirit with him,” says Saint Paul (1 Cor. 6:17). One could never ponder enough what it means to cling to the Lord and



become one spirit with him, but in essence, it means that there is an exchange of prayer-life with the Lord through the bond of love. **The prayer of his heart and the prayer of our hearts are *one prayer*.** The fusion of our prayer life with his

comes to pass **through the bond of love**, or more specifically, through *clinging* to the Lord in love. The more deeply and intensely each one of us clings to the Lord in love, the more each and all of our hearts will share in the one prayer – **the Son's prayer to the Father in the Spirit**. It is sometimes called the *filial prayer*.

The filial prayer is a shared action going on now between the heart of Jesus Christ in heaven, and our own hearts here on earth. Though we live on the earth, and Jesus Christ lives in the heavenly places, the prayer of our hearts on earth is the prayer of his heart in heaven. **It is also the one prayer of the holy angels, the saints, and the Virgin.** It is the one prayer that saves the world, and it is our joy and our calling to share in the filial prayer of the Lord day and night. **His filial prayer is at its most perfect on earth in the celebration of the Eucharist, but the share of our hearts in the filial prayer is not limited or reserved to moments of external rites.**

The filial prayer is a shared action going on now between the heart of Jesus Christ in heaven, and our own hearts here on earth. Though we live on the earth, and Jesus Christ lives in the heavenly places, the prayer of our hearts on earth is the prayer of his heart in heaven.

For those living in a state of sanctifying grace, walking by the light of faith and living in friendship with God, the filial prayer takes place in the depths of our hearts even when we are busy about other matters. In the depths of our hearts is where the true life is found.

True life is found in living the one prayer that saves the world – the filial prayer of Jesus Christ.

*Josef Ratzinger, *Seeking God's Face: Meditations for the Church Year*. Translated by David Smith and Robert Cunningham. (Providence, RI: Cluny, 2020): p.54

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Part 11



The Grace To Be Jesus

OCTOBER 5, 2022

FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.

Editor's note: This article is part 11 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace."

Part 10 can be found [here](#).

The grace of God at work in our lives is richly abundant, and no one can tell of all its wonders. By pouring into our hearts the grace of the Holy Spirit, God lifts us up to live on his

level, floods us with the light of faith, and eternal Life begins in us. By his grace God establishes us as his friends, he causes his own Name to dwell in our hearts, and our hearts share in the one prayer of Jesus Christ to the Father in the Spirit. Through all of it, the Holy Spirit living and dwelling in our hearts is busy about transforming you and me into Jesus Christ himself. The process has begun in our baptism. By the gift of God's grace, you are Jesus.

Such a statement sounds astonishing to most people when they first hear it. Almost everyone wants to make qualifications and draw distinctions. Some people make moral objections: "but I am such a sinner." Other people make metaphysical objections: "but I am not equal to God." Surely there are qualifications and distinctions to be made, but few are those who want to make them simply for the sake of a more perfect understanding of the truth. More often than not, people want to quibble with the claim that *you are Jesus* in order to escape the extremely radical claims it makes on us. The statement is essentially an announcement of *who you are* in the depths of your soul by the grace of baptism.

It is important for us to pause with the truth *you are Jesus* in all of its simplicity and truth. To pause with it is to be like good soil for seeds of the Word, and to hold it in prayer and ponder it for a long time is to be like our Lady pondering the Life growing within her womb. Every day of our lives a thousand opposite messages about our identity are directed against us. Catholic Christians, it is said, are patriarchal, bigoted, misogynistic, homophobic, fundamentalist, totalitarian, hateful, spiteful, judgmental, irrational, deluded, etc.. What is the latest label on the list? Does the list ever end? The truth is, rather, *you are Jesus*.

Jesus Christ himself says so. "I am the vine, you are the branches" (Jn. 15:5). When we ponder ordinary vines and branches, we see that a vine and its branches are one organism

and one life. In fact, a vine and its branches are often so bundled, so entangled, and so continuous that it is practically impossible to determine any one place where the vine ends and the branches begin. The vine and branches are blended in a single life form. So it is with Jesus Christ and us, thanks to the gift of grace.

He and we are blended in one form of Life that is proper and original to Jesus Christ himself – a form of Life shared with us in baptism, the sacraments, and the whole life of the Church. Just as all the sap, nutrients, and energy flow from a vine into its branches, so the divine life, energy, and prayer of Jesus Christ flow into us.

In his encyclical letter *Mystici Corporis*, Pope Pius XII compares our union with the Lord Jesus to two other kinds of unions. On the one hand, he compares our union with the Lord to a “moral body” like a sports team or corporation. In a moral body, different people are joined together simply by a common end or purpose and they work together for it. In a moral body, nothing unites the members except their common purpose and joint action. Now, in our union with the Lord Jesus, we do share a common end. In our union with him, all live and act together for God, for salvation, and for the life of the world. However, there is *more* to our union with the Lord Jesus than merely a common purpose and joint action. There is a mysterious, interior, reality common to each of us – one and the same divine Life flowing in Jesus Christ and in us by grace.

So, on the other hand, Pius XII compares our union with the Lord Jesus to a “natural or physical body” like a cat, dog, or our own bodies. In a natural body, the parts are united by a common nature and belong to one and the same living body. The eyes of a human, fingers of a human, and organs of a human are all human. In fact, they are all Joe or all Jane. The parts do not exist in their own right as individual cats, dogs, or trees do. The parts of a body do not have their own individual

existence or identity. Now, in our union with the Lord Jesus, we share with him a common form of life, namely, the divine Life of Jesus. Scripture even says we are his members or body parts (e.g. Eph. 5:3). As baptized human beings, we are parts of the mystical body of Christ.

But, unlike the parts of natural bodies, in our participation or membership in the mystical body of Christ each of us exists as a whole and retains his or her own distinct personality. You and I are parts of Jesus Christ, but not just parts. You are also your own person. The whole of you is a part of him and permeated by him. In that sense, you are Jesus. But you are Jesus without ceasing to be a distinct person – you.

Our union with the Lord Jesus by grace is not merely a moral union and not merely a body-part union. Denying that it is of either of those two kinds, it might seem at first like our union with the Lord Jesus is something less than either of them. But on the contrary, it is actually something more – much more. Our union with the Lord Jesus is a special kind of union. It is higher and greater than any kind of natural union to be found in the whole world. It is strictly supernatural, and a sheer gift of grace.

Our union with the Lord Jesus is a special kind of union. It is higher and greater than any kind of natural union to be found in the whole world. It is strictly supernatural, and a sheer gift of grace.

Saint Paul learned all of this the hard way. Before his conversion, he devoted himself to breathing threats against Christians, and hunting them down. Every day he was seeing to their arrest, imprisonment, and execution, but on the road to Damascus, he heard the words that changed him forever. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?” (Acts 9:4). The

words are worth pondering. Saul never knew Jesus when Jesus walked the earth. Saul never laid hands on him. Saul had only persecuted his followers – the Christians. As far as the risen Lord Jesus was concerned, however, Saul's attack was *on him* – *on Jesus*. For there is no union greater or more radical than the oneness between Jesus Christ and his followers who live by grace.

There is no union greater or more radical than the oneness between Jesus Christ and his followers who live by grace.

In time, after his own christening, Saint Paul came to marvel at the oneness forged by grace between Jesus Christ and us. At the height of his marveling, Saint Paul would exclaim: “it is no longer I who live, but Jesus Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). In that moment, when he so rejoiced in the truth of our union with Jesus, Saint Paul also revealed the secret to living in the union. “For the life I live now, I live *by faith* in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me.” Faith in the love of Jesus Christ is the secret to growing in our union with him, and the means to increasingly greater personal identification with him. Only a simple and childlike faith in the Lord Jesus can really receive the truth of one's identification with him. Only a simple and childlike faith can really accept the saving truth of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27).

In the Carmelite monastery of Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity, it was customary for the Sisters to have a profession crucifix with an engraving on the back. On the back of Saint Elizabeth's, on the upright beam, were engraved the words of Saint Paul in Latin: *Vivo enim jam non ego, vivit vero in me Christus* – It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. On

the crossbeam were engraved the simple words *amo Christus* – I love Christ. The two statements tell the essential truth of who you are now because of your baptism, and what your deepest calling is.

Baptized into Jesus, you are Jesus. It is who you are. To love Christ is your deepest calling. Our calling now is to grow every day, by ever new graces, to “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 3:13). The only way to grow into him is love, that is, by clinging to him in order to become one spirit with him. Yes, it is possible to throw away the gift of grace. Yes, it is possible to kill the life of Christ in us through mortal sin. Yes, it is even possible for one to walk away and never repent. But “all who cling to the Lord become one spirit with him” (1 Cor. 6:17).

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Statue of St. Paul at Night; Deposit Photos.*

Part 12



The Grace Of Filial Adoption

OCTOBER 13, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



*Editor's note: This article is part 12 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace."
Part 11 can be found [here](#).*

Every baptized person living in a state of grace has a special mystery taking place in the depths of his or her heart. It is a mystery of God sharing himself with us, and drawing us into his supernatural and divine Life. It is a mystery of love and union. **In order for us to live the mystery fully and consciously, however, it is crucial for us to understand a bit of what is going on within us.**

In order to bring the matter to light, let us turn to consider the Holy Trinity. What is going on in the depths of God is rather impossible for human beings to figure out just by using our natural reason, but God has revealed to us the secret of his inner life. **God has revealed that he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and by the light of grace we believe in the Trinity.**

Within the mystery of the Trinity, the Father eternally generates the Son, and the Son lives eternally from the Father and toward the Father. The Son lives eternally under the gaze of his loving Father, and the Son knows and loves the Father. The Spirit is the breath of Love between the Father and the Son. The life of the eternal Son within the Trinity is so very exalted. Only the eternal Son knows what it is to be him – to be the Son – and to enjoy his Life.

Only the eternal Son knows what it is to be God from God, Light from Light, and to breathe the Holy Spirit without beginning and without end. For only the eternal Son lives his relation to the Father. No one less than God has by nature the power to be the Son. No one can rise up by his or her own strength to live the Son's own Sonship with the Father. But, marvel of marvels, it belongs to the power of

God to share that Sonship with others if it should please him to do so. He is, after all, God. He can do whatever pleases him.

And it has pleased him to share with us the Sonship. “The grace of God has appeared,” says Saint Paul (Tit. 2:11). What he means is that it has pleased God to transmit to our souls by grace the eternal Son’s own relation to the Father so that we too can live it to some extent. No one can live that relation to the same extent as the Son himself. No one else will ever be simply equal to the Son. Jesus Christ shall ever be the all-surpassing one. But what we receive **in our baptism is something amazing. The Spirit comes into our souls in order to reproduce in us the Sonship of the Son, and to establish in our hearts the Son’s own relation to the Father.** Thanks to baptism, something of the eternal Sonship of the Son – something of his Life of standing before the Father in the Spirit of Love – is now established in our souls too. As a result, the difference between the eternal Son’s relation to the Father and our souls’ relation to the Father is a difference not in kind but merely in degree.

The eternal Sonship of the Son is called *divine filiation*, and its reproduction in us under the influence of the Spirit is called *the grace of filial adoption*. What Jesus Christ came to announce is the divine plan to adopt us, but the adoption is wholly supernatural in the way it works. It works by God sharing his own Sonship with us by grace. **What Jesus Christ came to teach us is how to receive this gift, and how to live out his relation to the Father daily in the presence and power of the Spirit. We receive it in baptism, and live it out by walking in the way he walked – walking in his Spirit.**

Over the course of our series, we have pondered several sides of the mystery of grace. **By grace, God lifts us up to live on his level. By grace, God floods our hearts with the Holy Spirit himself.** We become temples of the Spirit.

By grace, God lifts us up to live on his level. We live something of his own divine and supernatural Life. By grace, God gives us the light of faith and love of charity. God befriends us to himself, and transmits his own features to us. He causes his Name to dwell in our hearts, and reproduces in our hearts the filial prayer of Jesus Christ himself. Indeed, **by grace we come to be Jesus Christ, not his equal to be clear, but a member of his mystical body and a participant in his Life.** In short, each of the baptized is another Christ. Each of us lives the Son's own Life – something of the Son's own relation to the Father. That relation now forms our hearts, and it is possible for us to learn how to live from out of it.

The basic way to do so is to believe in the Father. Every one of the mysteries of grace is a good and perfect gift coming down to us from “the Father of lights” (Ja. 1:17). Every one of the mysteries of grace is a call to seek the things that are above (Col. 3:1), to turn with Jesus, like Jesus, and as Jesus to the Father, and expect good things to come from above – from the Father who is pleased to bless us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3). “Fear not, little flock, it pleases the Father to give you the Kingdom” (Lk. 12:32).

In order to catch a glimpse of the grace of filial adoption, let us compare and contrast it with natural adoption.

In **natural adoption**, an orphan stands in need of a home. Similarly, the fallen children of Adam and Eve are like orphans in need of a home. **Natural adoption** is a free initiative and loving work of the adoptive parents to bring into their home a child who has none. So, too, it is in **supernatural adoption**. Foreseeing all along the fall of Adam and Eve, God always freely planned out of sheer love to adopt orphaned humanity into the Holy Trinity. **The Father**

sent his Son, his Spirit, and his Church into the world to adopt us one person at a time through baptism.

In **natural adoption**, the child acquires a father, a mother, and perhaps an older brother. So, too, **by the grace of filial adoption we have acquired a Father in God himself, we have acquired a mother in Mary, and we have acquired an older brother in our Lord Jesus Christ.** He called the disciples *my brothers* (Mt. 28:10), told them he was going to *my Father and to your Father* (Jn. 20:17), and taught them to pray *Our Father* (Mt. 6:9). Just as an adopted child begins to imitate his new older brother, so **we are called to imitate our older brother. After all, we live the Lord Jesus's own relationship with the Father, his filial prayer, his Life.**

In **natural adoption**, the adopted child acquires a right to an inheritance. In our **supernatural adoption** by grace, we too have acquired a right to an inheritance. Saint Paul calls it "the inheritance of the saints in Light" (Col. 1:12). The inheritance of the saints in Light really just is the saints and their God. Just as families on earth hold all things in common, and the members of the family belong to one another in different ways, so too in heaven they hold all things in common and belong to one another in various ways. The inheritance we have coming to us in heaven is to share somehow in each other's lives – in the lives and graces of all the saints of all times and places. "Whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas...all is yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (1 Cor. 7:22-3).

There is one important difference, however, between natural and supernatural adoption. In **natural adoption**, the adopted child belongs *legally* to the adoptive parents, but never has the same *lifeblood* as the adoptive parents. To have the same lifeblood as one's parents belongs to natural children alone. **The bond of blood is of particular power, and cannot be equaled by a bond of law.** The bond of blood is

internal to our very nature, the bond of law is not. It remains external. For this reason, and many others, those who are adopted often feel the need later in life to seek out and find their natural parents. In supernatural adoption, however, God's act of adopting us is not merely a legal transaction. The grace of filial adoption is not something merely legal or external to us. Rather, **in supernatural adoption, the adopted children come to have the lifeblood of God in their souls – the eternal Son's own relation to the Father, the Son's own prayer, the Son's own Life. It was in order to nourish and intensify this grace of filial adoption that the Lord taught us even to eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to live forever in Him.**

Father James Dominic Brent, O.P. is a Dominican Friar who lives and teaches at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. Several of his homilies, spiritual conferences, interviews, and radio spots can be found on his [personal Soundcloud site](#). He frequently lectures for the [Thomistic Institute](#) and appears on [Aquinas 101](#). Image courtesy of Unsplash.

Part 13

Fr. Perozich comments —

When I read this chapter 13, I am convicted of being too preoccupied with the things of this world rather than the great work of God to draw me into His divinity.

As St. Basil the Great said in his Detailed Rules for Monks,

To confess my personal feelings, when I reflect on all these blessings I am overcome by a kind of dread and numbness at the very possibility of ceasing to love God and of bringing shame upon Christ because of my lack of recollection and my preoccupation with trivialities.



The Meaning Of Divinization

OCTOBER 18, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



*Editor's note: This article is part 13 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace."
Part 12 can be found [here](#).*

Divinization is one of the most powerful words used to express what God does with us by grace. By grace, God divinizes us. It is a hard to understand such a mystery, but there is no escaping it. The teaching is found in sacred Scripture, and the term belongs to sacred tradition. 2 *Peter* 1:4 says that God has given us such precious and very great promises "so that you might become partakers of the divine nature." And Saint Athanasius said, "the Son of God became man so that we might become God." The *Catechism* quotes his saying with approval (CCC 460). The news of our **divinization** by grace is good news indeed, and in my

experience whenever it is preached people become hungry to hear more.

God's secret purpose for creating the world was to divinize human beings by grace.

But what does **divinization** really mean? Normally, the statement that by grace you and I *become God* lands with a certain shock. It can even provoke a horrified and vehement rejection. People rightly have a strong intuition that no one is God but God alone, and no created person could ever simply become God or be equal to God without qualification. Such intuitions are good and true, but the teaching on **divinization** does not really contradict them. **When God divinizes someone by grace, the person does not cease to be a creature. The person does not become simply equal to God, but rather takes on somehow *a measure* of God's divinity.**

The Fathers of the Church explained it this way. A sword plunged into fire does not cease to be a sword, but participates in the fire and takes on its attributes – light and heat. Similarly, a human being plunged into God in baptism does not cease to be human, but participates in God and takes on his attributes – *his Light, his Love, his Life.*

Saint Paul affirms that by grace Christians are flooded with God. Saint Paul even prays for such a thing to take place in the people. In *Ephesians* 3:14-19, he bows his knees before the Father, and prays for the Spirit to strengthen the Ephesians in the “inner man” of each, i.e. in the depths of their hearts. He also prays for Christ to dwell in their hearts through faith, and for them to be rooted and grounded in love. He is asking for the **intensification of the divine indwelling in their souls**, and his prayer builds up to the climactic and confident plea that “you might be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19). **To be divinized is not to**

cease to be a creature, but to be filled all the fullness of God while remaining yet a creature. After all, grace is primarily God's gift of *himself* to us.

Saint John teaches **divinization** as well, but in even stronger language. In the Gospel of John, the Lord offers a vivid analogy for what happens in us by grace. "I am the vine, you are the branches" (Jn. 15:5). **Grace makes us to live one common Life with God. God is the divine Life itself, and he shares his Life with us. No one of us has or lives the divine Life by nature, but by grace we come to have it and live it.** Our share by grace in the divine Life is always finite, but finite thought it may be, what is amazing is that it is *his* Life – *divine Life* – that we now live by grace.

The *First Letter of John* puts it this way: "beloved, we are God's children now" (1 Jn. 3:2). In an earlier article, we pointed out a critical difference between natural and supernatural adoption. Natural adoption is a legal transaction, and the adopted child never comes to have the same lifeblood as the adoptive parents. Supernatural adoption, however, is not merely legal. Rather, **by grace we are adopted into God, we begin to live on his level, live the Son's own relation to the Father to a certain extent, and live the Son's very Life in the very depths of our being. The Spirit of Sonship permeates our spirit, his eternal Father becomes our Father, and the filial prayer of the Son becomes our prayer. The Life of the Trinity is now the life we live too.**

"What we shall be has not yet appeared" (1 Jn. 3:2). Most people are unaware of what was given to them in their baptism. Normally, they do not experience it at first, but *divinization* has begun nonetheless in the depths of their souls. Before being a state of consciousness or experience, *divinization* is

primarily a truth of our *being*, but it is possible for someone to become conscious of what God is doing in them. In order for such consciousness to develop, however, people normally need to learn something of the grace of God, believe in his grace, and accept his grace.

When people do so, the Kingdom of Grace tends to grow into a mystery consciously lived. The Kingdom of Grace becomes something consciously received as a gratuitous gift, and freely lived in a personal way. The Kingdom of Grace working within us tends to become an outward display of Jesus Christ himself through our words and deeds.

Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity is an outstanding example. Like most Christians, she was baptized as an infant, but what made her different was that she became so vividly aware of what is given to all in baptism. She **woke up to being the temple of God, and consciously accepted the work of *divinization* happening in her.** She simply took seriously her catechetical instructions, and the preaching she heard about the indwelling of God. **Through a flow of graces and inspirations that came to her over time in ordinary ways, such as going to Mass and confession, talking with priests, reading the Scriptures, and taking trips into the beautiful countryside, she became increasingly more aware of the mystery of God's grace at work in her soul.** She embraced the God who dwelt in her heart, and he became her all-consuming preoccupation. As she grew in grace, she became an outward sign of the inner Kingdom. She had her weaknesses, but her prayerfulness was noted by all. Many remarked on how even her eyes revealed the gaze of God. With her, the **divinization** taking place in her was something almost palpable to others. She is a true illustration of these words: "and we all, with unveiled faces,

beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).

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Part 14



The Temple Of The Trinity

OCTOBER 26, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: This article is part 14 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 13 can be found [here](#).

The primary activity of the Christian heart is the loving contemplation of the Holy Trinity. All the works of God in this fallen and broken world, including all the works of the apostolate, aim to recover the human heart from the deleterious effects of the fall so that we might come to know and love, enjoy and adore, the Triune God dwelling in our hearts by grace. Yet, how many Catholic Christians have even heard of the indwelling Trinity?

The theme of the indwelling is a most ancient one. It comes down to us from the Lord himself. At the Last Supper, Jesus promised to send the Spirit of Truth, so that the Spirit would be "in you" (Jn. 14:17). **The fulfillment of the promise began at Pentecost, and the promise is fulfilled anew in every baptism. At that sacred moment in our lives, the Spirit comes to dwell in our souls in a new way. "Do you not know that you are the**

temple of God, and the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16). However, it is not only the Spirit who comes to dwell in us.

For whenever God works anything in the world beyond the inner life of the Trinity, all three divine persons are involved. In our baptism, therefore, all three persons of the Trinity are given to us. The Lord Jesus said as much when he said, “my Father will love him, and *we* will come to him, and make *our* home in him” (Jn. 14:23). So, the Spirit dwells in us, but the eternal Son dwells in us too. **“It is no longer I who live, but Jesus Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). The Father, too, lives in our hearts by grace.** “For God who said, ‘let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts...” (2 Cor. 4:6). **Thanks to the gift of sanctifying grace, the entire Holy Trinity dwells in our hearts, and transforms our hearts increasingly more into the house of God.**

It is an amazing thing to consider that the entire Holy Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – lives and dwells in our hearts by grace. It is an amazing thing to consider that our hearts are the house of God, his sanctuary, his shrine, and it pleases him to make his home in us. **God is ever at work in our lives by his grace,** and his grace works to form our hearts for his indwelling more and more. All the days of our years here below are but a formation process for our hearts to receive the indwelling more and more, and in the end every heart belonging to the one Church shall be the temple of God for eternity.

The grace of baptism is the grace to become God-bearers, and the call for us now is to awaken to the grace and live it freely. But how? A stunning example of someone who was fully aware of the indwelling, and taught us how to live consciously and freely according to that grace, is Saint Ignatius of Antioch.

Ignatius was the Bishop of Antioch in the very early Church, perhaps even appointed the Bishop there by Saint Peter himself, and his Church was under persecution. He was captured by Roman soldiers and force marched to Rome during the reign of the emperor Trajan sometime between the years 98-117. We are familiar with the story from the letters he wrote to the seven Churches along the way – letters which scholars concur are authentic. His captors, whom he called wild beasts, tormented him every step of the way, but with every step his desire to die for Christ and go to God only grew stronger. His letters contain many exhortations to unity with the local Bishop and to participation in the Eucharist. The letters also display his incredible desire to become food for the lions, to be ground down like wheat, to be transformed into the Eucharist, and to become another Christ. He knew that no one goes through the gates of heaven or passes into the paradise of Light except the one who loves. And like all the first Christians, he was convinced that love proves itself in martyrdom.

How did this outstanding man conceive of himself? All seven of his letters begin the same way. “Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, who is also called Theophorus...” *Theophorus* is Greek for *God-bearer*. Now that is a bold introduction. It is like saying, “Hi, I’m Ignatius. They call me God-bearer.” It is doubtful he gave the title to himself. Perhaps his people called him by the name. Surely the soldiers read the letters, and perhaps he wanted to let the Romans know exactly who they were killing. He knew it was not an arrogant boast. He knew that **to be a God-bearer is a grace**. It is a gift of God’s gratuitous love, and he just accepted it.

His letters go on with many instructions and exhortations, and they are like the code of a God-bearing Bishop. Yet, the letters reveal something more. **He considered his people to be God-bearers too**. In the letter to the Ephesians, he says: “you are all fellow pilgrims, carrying your God and your

shrine, your Christ and your holy things.” The letters are like the code of a God-bearing Bishop on how to be a God-bearing Church. What is the way for you and I, and the whole Church on earth, to become fully aware of the indwelling and to live daily according to such grace? Let us listen to the instructions of Saint Ignatius in his letter to the Ephesians:

“It is better to be silent and to be real than to talk and not be real. It is good to teach if one does what one says. Now there is one such teacher who spoke and it happened. Indeed, even the things he has done in silence are worthy of the Father. The one who truly possesses the word of Jesus is also able to hear his silence, that he may be perfect, that he may act through what he says and be known through his silence. Nothing is hidden from the Lord; even our secrets are close to him. Therefore, let us **do everything with the knowledge that he dwells in us, in order that we may be his temples, and he may be in us as our God**, as in fact he really is, as will be made clear in our sight by the love which we justly have for him.”

Saint Ignatius remained true to the end. He was eventually martyred in Rome. We know that in our own baptism God has given us the grace of his indwelling. We know God wants us to accept the grace consciously, and live according to it freely. In order to do so, it is essential to listen in all simplicity and trust to this most ancient of fathers:

Let us do everything with the knowledge that he dwells in us in order that we may be his temples.

Image courtesy Depositphotos.

part 15 of the Kingdom of Grace



The Forgiveness Of Sins Part 1

NOVEMBER 3, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: This article is part 15 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 14 can be found [here](#).

By his gift of grace, God elevates our humanity so that each of us can live his supernatural and divine Life to some extent, but by the same gift of grace God also works to heal our fallen, sinful, and broken humanity. So far, our series has focused on how God elevates us by his grace, but it is now time to ponder how he heals us.

“I believe in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins,” says the Nicene Creed. There is much more packed into that little article of faith than first meets the eye. For there are two quite different, but closely related, kinds of sin. On the one hand, **there are personal sins. On the other hand, there is original sin. Baptism is the remedy for both.**

Let us start with personal sins. **A personal sin, according to the definition of Saint Augustine, is any freely chosen “word, deed, or desire contrary to the eternal law” (CCC 1849).** Standard and sound examinations of conscience offer plenty of examples of personal sins, and **a healthy and holy conscience normally pricks us when we have committed a sin. There is, however, a tendency of the fallen mind to deny our sins, rationalize them away, and refuse them notice.**

Fallen human beings tend to forget their sins, and a good examination of conscience helps bring them to light for honest acknowledgment and true repentance. The woman at the well, for example, seems to have forgotten she had five husbands, and the man she was with now was not her husband. Through his artful questioning, the **Lord gently reminded her.**

Most Catholics today are baptized as infants, and so have little sense of how baptism forgives personal sins. In the ancient Church, however, the baptism of adults was much more common. In the ancient world, many people were born into pagan practices and grew up with the worship of idols. Thanks to the help of Christians bearing witness to them, and the light of grace shining in their consciences, many such people converted to Christ and his Church.

They were **awakened to a sense of their own personal sins** – often a lifetime of sins. They probably also had a sense of how entangled they were with the dark forces and demons involved in pagan ritual and practices (1 Cor. 10:20).

It was to an audience of such converts that Saint Paul first wrote, “you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Among these **we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind**” (Eph. 2:1-3). Such a statement can sound harsh to our ears, or “pastorally insensitive,” **but such a statement would have sounded like the obvious truth to people who once practiced paganism and idolatry and every kind of immorality.** The statement rang true in the depths of their souls. Having experienced conversion, and initiation into the Church, they knew that Jesus Christ had set them free through baptism.

The ancient catechumenate normally included *years* of catechetical instructions and exorcisms in preparation for baptism at the Easter Vigil. The ritual of baptism itself was dramatic. It normally involved the catechumens first gathering together as a group outside the Church. **As part of the ritual, the catechumens first stood facing west. The west was the place of sunset, the place where night begins. It represented the world of sin and demons. The catechumens then spit on the west and turned around. Having turned their backs to the west, they now stood facing the east. The east was the place of the sunrise, the place where the light dawns. It represented the world of holiness, good angels, and God. The catechumens then walked eastwards toward the Church where there was the font of baptism.**

Baptism was normally by immersion. In many ancient baptismal fonts, one stairwell leads down into the water, and another one leads out. The person would first go down into the water and undergo a triple immersion. The immersion experience was, in some ways, similar to drowning. It symbolized death – death to sin, death to one’s old way of life, death to a self-centered existence. The same experience, however, was also like bathing. So, it also symbolized cleansing.

The Fathers sometimes compared it to a nuptial bath in preparation for a wedding. But the same immersion also symbolized birth unto new life. **For when a child is to be born into this world, first the water breaks, and only then does the new child come forth. In baptism, one might say, holy mother Church’s water breaks. What comes forth is a new child of God – a child of the Light and of the Day (1 Thess. 5:5).**

The Church has always taught that **baptism affects complete forgiveness for all personal sins. Baptism mysteriously reaches into a person’s soul and washes the person’s will of all the faults of all the personal sins of his or her life. It also washes away the whole debt of temporal punishment due to all one’s personal sins and faults. Those who have been baptized as infants cannot easily appreciate such a gift. But those who were not baptized as infants, those who were granted the grace of conversion as an adult after a lifetime of personal sins, can testify to the greatness of such a gift. For them, the whole sad story of their former life of sin is all washed away in but a moment.**

Editor’s note: Part two of this article “The Forgiveness of Sins” is to be continued next week.

Image courtesy of Unsplash.

Father James Dominic Brent, O.P. is a Dominican Friar who lives and teaches at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. Several of his homilies,

spiritual conferences, interviews, and radio spots can be found on his personal Soundcloud site. He frequently lectures for the Thomistic Institute and appears on Aquinas 101.

Part 16 of the series The Kingdom of God



The Forgiveness Of Sins Part 2

NOVEMBER 10, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



*Editor's note: This article is part 16 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace."
Part 15 can be found [here](#).*

Baptism not only washes away personal sins, but also forgives original sin. It forgives original sin both in adults who are baptized and “in tiny infants who have not yet committed personal sin” (CCC 405). The Church does not teach that infants are full of *personal* sin, but the Church does teach that all humans – even tiny infants – are afflicted with a certain inherited condition called *original sin*. The thought of infants being full of sin disturbs many people, so original sin calls for a careful explanation. How shall we understand it?

The answer comes in a story. Once upon a time, **when God created the first human beings, he created them with a common nature – human nature.** But God always had more in store for humanity than for us to live merely as human beings in this world. From all eternity, God wanted us to enjoy his own uncreated Life beyond all the powers of our nature. He planned to share with us his divine Life by grace, and he planned to share it with us *right from the first moment of the creation of humanity*. So, when he created our first parents, Adam and Eve, he created them with sanctifying grace already in their souls from the first moment of their existence.

Thanks to that original grace, **Adam and Eve inwardly lived something of the Life of God in a manner far surpassing all the powers of human nature.** They enjoyed a personal relationship with God – a friendship with God that is otherwise impossible for human beings apart from grace. They enjoyed the indwelling of God in the depths of their hearts and a life of communication with him. They had a certain order and equilibrium in all their passions, and in their inner life all was at peace. They had an amazing awareness of God shining out in creation all around

them. They also enjoyed the special privilege of immortality. All of this was due to the original grace they received from God.

If Adam and Eve had not sinned, had they never eaten from the tree, they would have transmitted that original grace and all of its benefits to their posterity. Their offspring would have received from them the grace of their special relationship with God, their awareness of his indwelling, their interior harmony and peace, their knowledge of God shining out in creation, and the privilege of immortality. When Adam and Eve sinned, however, they lost the original grace. They no longer walked in it, and could no longer transmit it to posterity. Consequently, all human beings ever since have been conceived and born without that original grace or its benefits. Original sin is precisely this lack or deprivation of the original grace that God gave to humanity. From the first moment of conception, something deep is missing from the human soul – something that God meant human beings to receive.

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Original sin is inherited in the sense that we do not receive the original grace of Adam and Eve that we were supposed to have received through procreation. The lack or deprivation of that grace has serious repercussions for our overall well-being. On account of being conceived and born without the original grace, human nature is afflicted with multiple wounds and disorderly tendencies. Instead of a sense of the

presence of God dwelling in our hearts and shining out all around us, fallen humanity tends to live **“without hope and without God in the world”** (Eph. 2:12). Instead of emotional equilibrium and inner peace, fallen humanity is afflicted with **many layers of disordered thoughts and passions**. “Where do the wars and where do the conflicts among you come from? Is it not from your passions that make war within your members?” (Ja. 4:1). Instead of a loving relationship with God, human beings instead have a tendency toward personal sins. “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mt. 26:40).

Original sin was a personal sin in the first human beings, but not in anyone else. Everyone else, however, is touched in a certain way by the effects of that first sin of the first human beings. **For as a result of that first free and personal sin of Adam and Eve, the rest of humanity is conceived without the original grace and is afflicted with various wounds. Due to the fallen condition of our nature, each of us has a tendency to commit personal sins of our own. Original sin, therefore, is more like an inherited pathological condition. It is the original global pandemic. It is a calamity of world-historical magnitude. It permeates our world – forming and influencing all human affairs to no small extent. It is one major source of our whole collective experience of the problem of evil over the course of all human history. It was the whole phenomenon of sin on display in the world that prompted Saint John to say: “the whole world is under the power of the evil one” (1 Jn. 5:19).**

The only antidote to sin is grace. Baptism touches the issue of original sin and instantly floods the soul with divine grace. In so doing, it addresses the lack or deprivation of the original grace that afflicts us all since the days of Adam.

Baptism does not, however, give us the *same* grace Adam and Eve once enjoyed before the fall. Amazingly, it gives us a new and better grace.

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The grace of Adam was great, but it was not the grace of Jesus Christ. Baptism gives us the grace of Jesus Christ and conforms us to him. The Garden of Eden was great, but it was not heaven. Baptism plants a seed in our souls, not from the Garden of Eden, but from the gardens of heaven. The first Adam, after all, was but a prefiguration of Jesus Christ, and the Garden of Eden was but a prefiguration of the world to come in the heavenly places. Jesus Christ is the eternal High Priest of the good things that have come to us now (Heb. 9:11), and the good things that have come to us are genuinely *new*.

Whoever is in Christ is a *new creation* (2 Cor. 5:17). By his grace we know, love, and enjoy things of which Adam and Eve knew nothing even before the fall. For even before the fall, when Adam and Eve still lived in the original grace, they were not explicitly aware of the three divine persons – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The first humans knew nothing of the face of Jesus Christ or his sacred heart beating with Love. They never received the Eucharist. Such things have been reserved for us – the children of the last days. It has been granted to us by the grace of Jesus Christ to know and love and enjoy such things in our hearts as we walk the pathways home to the heavenly places.

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Part 17



The Growth Of Grace

NOVEMBER 17, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



*Editor's note: This article is part 17 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace."
Part 16 can be found [here](#).*

In baptism, God gives us the forgiveness of sins and something of the riches of his supernatural and divine Life. Truly we become sharers of his divine nature, but **baptism does not instantly restore fallen human nature to full functioning and flourishing.** Even after baptism, we still carry many of the wounds of the old Adam – **many tendencies to personal sin.** The world, the flesh, and the devil remain active in our lives to some extent. **As a result, many disordered thoughts and passions swirl in the area around our hearts, seeking our consent, seeking to overthrow the kingdom of grace established in us at baptism.** Yet, God too is at work in our lives to bring to completion the good work he has begun in us by grace (Phil. 1:6).

In order to bring to completion the life of sanctifying grace in our souls, **God gives new and further graces beyond the grace of baptism.** He gives myriads of graces – actual graces, inspirations of the Spirit, sacramental graces, and more. The point of all such further graces, in one way or another, is **so that the life of grace given to us in baptism might grow.**

The life of grace is indeed supposed to grow in our souls, but the growth of grace is not a theme proclaimed very often or loudly in the Church at present. Yet, it is of first importance in the spiritual life. One might even say **one of the main reasons for our life in this world is for us to grow in grace more and more “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).** So let us pause with the point that grace is meant to grow in us.

Sanctifying grace is often compared to a seed. It is a seed of heavenly life planted in our souls. Just as a seed is meant to grow, so **sanctifying grace is meant to grow. In order**

for seeds to grow, they ordinarily need a certain environment, certain causes, and certain conditions. They need a hospitable environment, nutrients, water, and sunlight. Similarly, in order **for sanctifying grace to grow in our souls, it ordinarily needs a certain environment – the Church. It ordinarily needs certain causes – sacraments, prayer, works of love. It ordinarily needs certain conditions – scripture and tradition, sound teaching and saintly examples, silence, vigilance, and much more.**

The good news is that **God has given us in his Church everything necessary for sanctifying grace to grow strong in us.** He is ever at work in our lives giving us new and further graces. **God ordinarily gives us new graces through the sacraments, but he is not limited to the sacraments.** God also gives us graces in other ways. Sometimes they come through prayer or works of mercy, but sometimes they come to us without us first doing anything at all. One way or the other, God is ever at work in our lives to bring to completion the good work he has begun in us at baptism.

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The life of grace in our souls is also sometimes compared to a marriage. Wedding days are a moment of great beauty because it is the beginning of a union between a man and a woman. Yet, the wedding day is only a beginning. The union of husband and wife is supposed to deepen and grow over time. Somehow or another, over the course of days and years, the husband and wife slowly become more and more wedded to

each other. They go from having two life stories to one, and increasingly more it becomes the one story of *us* – the spouses and the children and all that God has done in their lives.

So too it is with God and the soul. **Baptism is a moment of great beauty because it is the beginning of the soul's union with God by sanctifying grace.** Such a union is interior and supernatural. It is a union of Light and Love. Indeed, our union with God by grace is the true Life. Yet, **the day of our baptism is only the beginning.** The union is meant to deepen. **Though at any one point in time we might not be conscious of our union with God, or only vaguely aware of it, it is real nonetheless.** It is a mystery of faith. Like a marital union, it is supposed to grow. Over the course of bright days and dark nights, it should grow into the story of someone whose heart is one with God even while he or she still walks the face of the earth. Or, perhaps more accurately, the union with God established in our souls at baptism *can* so grow. It might even become the story of someone who, passing through the door of death, goes into the Light for all eternity.

But there is another side to the story. **So long as we are in this life human beings are able to throw away the gift of sanctifying grace by committing mortal sin. Mortal sin is called *mortal* because it kills the life of grace in us.** Thanks be to God, **the sacrament of penance restores the life of grace** to the soul in those who have recourse to it. Venial sin does not destroy the life of grace, but diminishes it. Aside from committing sin, **we can also neglect the life of grace to such an extent that it grows but little.** It was the Lord himself who taught us of all such possibilities, and he sets them all before us in the Parable of the Sower (Mk. 4:1-20).

What is at stake is whether we shall continue in the life of grace, whether his grace in us will grow, whether our union

with God by grace shall develop into a true love story, and whether the story shall end with us passing through death only to enter that bright place with all the saints in Light. One of the most catastrophic attitudes of our times is the widespread *sin of presumption*. **The sin of presumption consists of expecting final salvation even without repenting or practicing the faith.** Such presumption is a very radical illusion indeed.

Instead of presumption, God calls us to repentance. God indeed has a plan for each of us. He is ever at work in our lives by grace to recover our hearts from the calamity of the fall, to deepen our union with him, and to lead us to the fullness of Life. **Yet, God also calls each of us to participate personally in the process – to participate consciously and freely – as people intent on our own salvation and that of others.** The great question is how. How do you and I participate in God's work of grace in our lives? What must you and I do to grow in grace? What must you and I do to receive by grace the full recovery of our hearts from the effects of the fall and come to the fulness of Life in him? The answer is that you and I must **walk the pathways of metanoia**. To those pathways we now turn over the next set of articles in our series.

Image courtesy of Unsplash.

Father James Dominic Brent, O.P. is a Dominican Friar who lives and teaches at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. Several of his homilies, spiritual conferences, interviews, and radio spots can be found on his personal Soundcloud site. He frequently lectures for the Thomistic Institute and appears on Aquinas 101.

Part 18 of the Kingdom of Grace



The Pathways Of Metanoia

NOVEMBER 24, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: This article is part 18 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 17 can be found [here](#).

Whoever emerges from the waters of baptism is truly a child of the Light and of the Day, and has great potential to recover still more from the effects of the fall, to grow in the life of grace, and to glorify God by a holy way of life. God is ever at work in our hearts to bring to

completion the good work he has begun in us at baptism, and he does so by giving us further graces – grace upon grace. **Yet God also calls us to participate consciously and freely in the process of our transformation.** The question is how. **How does one live and walk according to the grace of God in real life?**

The Lord Jesus answered the question in the first words of his public preaching: **“repent and believe in the gospel”** (Mk. 1:15; Mt. 4:17). The first words of the Lord are special. His first words are in the imperative and call us not only to make a one-time recitation of the sinner’s prayer, nor only to make a one-time trip to confession, but **to take up a whole way of life. His first words tell us, in a sense, the whole way home to the Father’s house.**

The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, and it means transformation of the mind. In Scripture, the terms *heart*, *mind*, and *spirit* all refer to the personal center and core of the human being, but the terms have different senses. **The human heart is the spiritual center and interior source of all our love and affection**, all of our spiritual hunger, but in Scripture, the heart is capable of much more than love and affection. Scripture also speaks of the “eyes of the heart” (Eph. 1:18), and the eyes of the heart are capable of a higher sort of knowing beyond all sensation, imagination, or memory of particular things. The eyes of the heart are even capable of beholding God by grace. By the light of grace, the eyes of our hearts can behold God enigmatically in this life, through a certain reflection of him in our hearts, and face to face in the next (1 Cor. 13:12). **Since the heart has eyes all of its own, and is capable of cognition, it is sometimes also called *mind*.** In the center of our souls, in our hearts or minds, knowledge and love work together, and from the dynamic interaction of what we know and love comes all our free choices. The same personal

center called the heart or mind, therefore, is also called our *spirit*. **For spirit is the source of motion, action, and life of the free and intentional kind.**

Once upon a time, **when God first created Adam and Eve, the eyes of their hearts were illuminated by grace, and they enjoyed a profound awareness of the presence of God in the depths of their hearts. They loved God above all, and their hearts were his temple and his dwelling place. When they fell, however, their hearts changed. They no longer enjoyed the same knowledge of God.** True, their descendants are still capable of many forms of knowledge. Even after the fall, human beings are capable of math, science, and philosophy as well as the arts thanks to the natural light of reason. Human beings are also capable of knowing good and evil to some extent. All human societies draw up their codes of ethics, and the codes are remarkably similar across cultures. By pondering the amazing order of nature in the light of reason, human beings are even capable of knowing that God exists. The eyes of the heart are capable by grace, however, of knowing and loving God in a still higher or deeper way. **By grace, the eyes of the heart are capable of knowing God inwardly and intimately on the most familiar terms of love – experiencing his Presence. When it comes to this higher and deeper sort of knowing, however, you and I are like the blind men in the gospel stories.**

The Lord Jesus Christ has come into the world to recover our hearts from the calamity of the fall and to renew our core awareness of the all-surpassing wisdom and love of God – the awareness of his Presence. The Lord revealed his purpose in the various healings of blind men in the gospels. The Lord healed the blind Bartimaeus outside the city of Jericho (Mk.10:46-52). Jericho is a city so old not even archeologists quite know when it was founded.

Perhaps the Lord conducted the healing there to signify he was resolving the most ancient of our issues. For such is the blindness of the eyes of our hearts to the Presence of God. The Lord healed another blind man by stages and degrees. As he recovered his sight, the people he saw first looked like trees but later he saw more clearly (Mk. 8:22-26). **The Lord does not heal the eyes of our hearts all at once, but he does so gradually and by stages on the spiritual way.** The greatest story of them all, however, is the healing of the man born blind (Jn. 9). The Lord made a salve of his own spittle and dirt, anointed the eyes of the man, and told him to walk through the city to wash in the pool called Siloam. So, too, the Lord does with us. The Lord anoints the eyes of our hearts with faith in the gospel and tells us to walk all our days in this world on the pathways of *metanoia* towards the gushing pool of Light in the heavenly places.

In keeping with the Lord's call to *metanoia*, Saint Augustine describes our whole situation as follows: **"Our whole business in this life, brethren, is to heal this eye of the heart whereby God may be seen.** To this end are celebrated the Holy Mysteries. To this end is preached the Word of God. To this end are the moral exhortations of the Church..." The whole purpose of our lives in this world, Saint Augustine says, is to receive the transformation of our minds – to heal the eyes of the heart – by grace. The holy Church of God sets before us many ways and means, practices and steps for us to take in doing so, but all of them together are best understood as so many *pathways of metanoia*. Saint Augustine sums them all up in three: **celebration of the sacraments, listening to the Word of God, and the whole vast array of moral exhortations.** When God calls us to participate consciously and freely in our transformation by grace, he calls us to walk in all these ways and further articles shall discuss them in more detail. **The point of them**

all is for our hearts to come to know *God*, to love *God*, and to enjoy *God* more and more by grace.

The second part of the *Kingdom of Grace* series shall spell out the pathways of *metanoia* in more detail, but the only way to walk them in a truly fruitful way is in the spirit of faith, hope, and love. “Repent,” the Lord says, “*and believe in the gospel.*” Belief in the gospel is the topic of the next article in our series.

Image courtesy of Unsplash.

Father James Dominic Brent, O.P. is a Dominican Friar who lives and teaches at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. Several of his homilies, spiritual conferences, interviews, and radio spots can be found on his [personal Soundcloud site](#). He frequently lectures for the [Thomistic Institute](#) and appears on [Aquinas 101](#)

The Kingdom of Grace Series Part 19 takes on a new theme, Believe in the Gospel, Part 1



Believe In The Gospel Part 1



DECEMBER 1, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.

*Editor's note: This article is part 19 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace."
Part 18 can be found [here](#).*

“Repent and believe in the gospel,” said the Lord Jesus, and in so doing he called us to walk the pathways of *metanoia*. He called us to walk in the spirit of faith from the beginning, through the middle, to the end.

A previous article – *The Light of Grace* – explained how faith is a special and supernatural light streaming into the depths of our minds from God. **Faith is an amazing ability, a fixed and stable tendency of the heart, to believe in all that God has revealed. The revelation of God is given to us in Scripture and tradition, and holy mother Church interprets it for us in her various teachings.** By faith we believe in all of it even though much of it surpasses our sight.

What God has revealed to us is himself, his purpose in creating us, and his plan to save the world in Jesus Christ. God's purpose is for us to receive and to grow into all the riches of divine grace: to share in the supernatural and divine life of God, to be his personal friends, to bear his Name in our hearts, to pray the filial prayer of Jesus Christ, indeed, to be Jesus Christ by grace, to live something of his eternal Sonship in God, to relate to his Father as our Father, for our hearts to be the temple of the Trinity, in short, for us to be divinized by grace. All such things are mysteries of faith taking place within us by grace. The testimony of the prophets and apostles set the mysteries before us, and by the light of faith we believe in all of them.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. Many signs and wonders confirm that the testimony of the prophets and apostles really is the Word of God, but we do not believe because of rational reflection on all of the confirmatory signs. Rather, we believe because the instinct of **the Holy Spirit inwardly moves us to affirm all the mysteries of faith in simplicity and trust.** The Spirit also lights up the mysteries for us through his gifts of understanding and knowledge, and through his gift of wisdom he gives us an interior taste of the good things that have come (Heb. 9:11).

Though the mysteries of grace are invisible to us, and call for faith, the life of faith normally also brings with it an experience all its own – **many lights, insights, and a sweet savor of the Word in our hearts – thanks to the influence of the Spirit dwelling in us.**

When someone is baptized, all such riches of divine grace come to the soul, but usually the person is more or less unaware of it. Infants are surely altogether unaware of it, but even adults who seek baptism have only an initial and catechetical understanding of such matters. **Though the renewal and transformation of our minds by the light of grace has begun in our baptism, our consciousness of living the Life given to us by grace is often rather dim. So, the Lord calls us to wake up, become aware, and live the supernatural and divine Life by grace with increasingly greater consciousness.** Such is the purpose of walking the *pathways of metanoia*. The first step is to believe in God's revelation of his exalted purposes for us and to believe in the magnitude of the gift given to us in our baptism. Only those who believe in God's revelation, and walk by the light of faith, will receive the opening of the eyes of their heart and the renewal of their contemplative gaze upon God dwelling in their hearts by grace and shining out all around us.

Practically speaking, the important thing is to **use your faith**. There comes a point in the development of children when they have learned to speak a little bit, but are still rather prone to fall back on preverbal ways of calling out for help. When something bad happens, even though the child can talk, he or she will revert to screaming, crying, kicking, and other such things. Seeking to help their child in distress, parents often say “use your words.” The parents remind the child he or she has another way of acting and communicating now, another way of obtaining help, by using words.

Similarly, **in our baptism you and I have been given the light of faith. We have another way now of looking upon God and all the things going on in our lives.** Somewhere in the depths of our souls, we have faith in the good God who loves us and orders all things well. Yet, **in the middle of daily life, our tendency is not to read the world by the light of God. It is all too easy and all too common for us to fall back on the old Adam’s ways of looking at everything.** We tend to walk by sight, not by faith, and God seems removed from it all. When troubles and trials come our way, it can be particularly difficult to understand what God is doing. In our everyday life, and especially in the midst of affliction, we are like children who have learned to speak somewhat but do not use their words. Though the light of faith irradiates our minds, we tend not use our faith, but instead we unconsciously default to looking at everything from the point of view of a fallen and faithless mind – especially the evils and afflictions in our lives.

As a result, fear can often reign in our hearts. So, too, does shame, disappointment, discouragement, and a thousand other disturbing feelings. Patterns of sin, a serious illness, crushing marital problems, children who struggle, financial problems, loneliness, and a thousand other struggles fill our lives and our world. Sometimes our struggles are with a more

generalized malaise about the state of the world, the state of the Church, or the state of our whole life. **In the midst of it all, the enemy hurls many fiery darts against us – dark and disturbing thoughts – that lead to one conclusion. God is not really that good, and he is not working all things together for the good of those who love him.**

The only remedy is to use *your faith* – deliberately. Faith is a shield against all the fiery darts of the enemy (Eph. 6:16), but to use the shield requires us actually to look at things in the light of God. It requires us to remember God, his eternal designs of Wisdom and Love, his ever-present help, and the saving work of his Son Jesus Christ. The practical question is *how* to use your faith. How do you and I learn to look at everything in light of God, day in and day out, through thick and thin?

To be continued...

Image courtesy of Unsplash.

Part 20 of the Kingdom of Grace



Believe In The Gospel Part 2

DECEMBER 8, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: This is part 20 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 19 can be found [here](#).

How do you and I **learn to use our faith** and look at everything in light of God, day in and day out, through thick and thin?

Saint Augustine answers: "let us also build a dwelling in our hearts and fashion a home for him where he may come and teach us." **The heart is the place where we learn slowly to listen to God and learn gradually to gaze upon all things in his Light.** When we build a dwelling for him in our hearts, he comes to teach us. "Those who welcome the Word as the guest of their hearts will find enduring joy," it says in the liturgy (Monday I, Lauds, Ps. 5). When building any sort of house, however, some things are more foundational than others. So, too, when building a house of God in our hearts where he might dwell and teach us. **The interior house of God is essentially the heart's loving faith in him, but some truths of faith are more foundational than**

others. The eyes of our hearts see most clearly when we focus on first things first.

The first thing to believe in is the existence of God. Faith in his existence might seem barely worth mentioning, but in the face of overwhelming evils and afflictions of every kind some people struggle to believe in God at all. The enemy works to stir up dark doubts and atheism is now trending all around us. Others have no doubt whatsoever about the existence of God, but run into another issue. Seeking to grow in every way, they might pray often, read many spiritual books, or perhaps follow Church politics. Yet, in so doing, they often stumble into a thousand perplexities and confusions, complicate the ways of grace, wonder how to proceed, or become discouraged about the situation of the Church on earth. The interior Teacher replies: **“Be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10).** According to Saint Augustine, the verse calls us all into the proper perspective before God. **The only proper perspective before God is to say: *You are God, I am not.***

The second thing to believe in is the providence of God. The providence of God is his perfect plan for all things whatsoever. In all the details of the world, every last circumstance of our lives, “all things together for the good of those who love him” (Rom. 8:28). “Everything which is brought upon us by God,” Abba Serenus said, “whether it appears sad or joyful at the time, is ordained as by a most tender father and a good physician for our benefit.” It can be hard to believe such a thing in the face of so many trials and troubles, especially in the face of so much suffering in the world, but through it all the Spirit convinces our hearts to believe in the unfathomable Wisdom of the good God who loves us. Yet, faith believes even more.

The third thing to believe in is divine help. We need divine help in everything, and God is always

there to help us. Faith in divine help gives birth to hope, and “those who hope in the Lord are like Mount Zion that cannot be shaken” (Ps.125:1). More on hope in the next article of the series. In order to hope fully in the Lord, one really needs to hear the gospel and believe in it.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the happy announcement that God first loved us (1 Jn. 4:19). Through all our sins, all our brokenness, and all our incapacities to fix ourselves, God has always loved you and me – even from before the foundation of the world. The cross of Jesus Christ is the revelation of God’s eternal Love. “Even while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). The Lord Jesus has taken all our sins upon himself and washed it all away in his own blood. **“No one could ever understand just how much Christ loved us,”** said Saint Thomas Aquinas. Faith believes in the incomprehensible love of Jesus Christ and so receives his love into the depths of the heart. **Faith in his eternal Love is like an anointing on the eyes of the man born blind (Jn. 9).** The eyes of our hearts will recover their contemplative gaze, their inward awareness of his Presence, precisely to the extent we focus by faith on a simple first truth: **“God loves you today as he loved you yesterday and will love you tomorrow”** (Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity).

“God loves you today as he loved you yesterday and will love you tomorrow.” —Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity

In revealing his eternal Love for us, God has also revealed many mysteries of faith such as the Trinity, the Cross, the Eucharist, or Our Lady. Every one of the mysteries has the power to change us, to illuminate the eyes of our hearts, and give birth to a

higher awareness of the presence of God. What throws open our hearts to receive the light and power of the mysteries is “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). Faith working through love not only believes *that* a particular mystery of faith is true, but believes *in* the mystery. Whoever believes *in* a mystery affirms it to be true, but also inwardly goes to the mystery, seeks it out, and clings to it in love – like the lover of the *Song of Songs* searching the streets for the Beloved.

To believe in the Holy Trinity, for example, is to turn to the Trinity, ponder the Trinity, pray with the Trinity, cling to the Trinity in love. The same goes for believing in any other mystery of faith: the cross of the Lord Jesus, the Eucharist, or Our Lady. We all have our favorite mysteries to which we return again and again. Our favorites reveal something of how the God of grace is working in our lives.

Whoever believes in a mystery of faith is like the hemorrhaging woman in the gospels who touched the hem of the garment of Jesus (Mk. 5:25-34). No sooner had she touched the hem of his garment than power flashed forth from him and she was healed. Though the Lord Jesus no longer walks the face of the earth, truly he is the Living One (Rev. 1:18). **Faith in a particular mystery touches the hem of his garment on high, and power flashes forth from him in the depths of our souls. New graces come to us even if we do not feel it.** Saint Paul was not throwing away words when he said the **Word of God is “now at work in you who believe”** (1 Thess. 2:13). **To believe in the Word – in a divinely revealed mystery – is to tap into the current of divine power flowing now from the risen Lord Jesus.**

Faith in a particular mystery touches the hem of his garment on high, and power flashes forth from him in the depths of our souls.

The house of prayer in the depths of the heart comes together slowly. Slowly do the mental habits of the old Adam lose their grip. Slowly do the foundational truths of God and the gospel sink into the recesses of the mind. Slowly does our core awareness of his eternal Wisdom and Love grow strong and stable in our hearts. On the *pathways of metanoia*, the fundamental practice is to devote oneself to listening to the Word, responding in faith, and reading the world in light of God.

Learning to read the world by the light of God comes from asking a simple question about all matters great and small in our lives. *What does my faith say about this?* Pick any matter you wish and ask yourself what your faith tells you about it. In the light of grace, the answer will come – usually not in a storm or in a fire or in an earthquake but in a still small breeze. God is in the breeze (1 Kgs. 19:10-18).

Image courtesy of Unsplash.

Father James Dominic Brent, O.P. is a Dominican Friar who lives and teaches at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. Several of his homilies, spiritual conferences, interviews, and radio spots can be found on his personal Soundcloud site. He frequently lectures for the Thomistic Institute and appears on Aquinas 101.

Part 21 of the Kingdom of Grace Series



Hope Does Not Disappoint

DECEMBER 15, 2022
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: This is part 21 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 20 can be found [here](#).

On the *pathways of metanoia*, hope counts on the help of God every step of the way.

All things need the help of God at all times. Such a statement might come as a surprise, but it is true nonetheless. Without the help of God, the sun would not rise in the sky or go down in the evening. Without the help of God, no star would ever trace a course through the night sky, no ant would ever go from here to there, and no blade of grass would ever grow at all. But for the help of God at every moment of our lives, you and I would not be able to think, blink, walk, talk or do any of the things we normally take for granted as our own most basic abilities. All of our abilities, and our very exercise of them at any point in time, depend at all times on God giving being to all, activating all, and moving all in his own incomprehensible way as the Creator of all.

Grace is a special help from God – distinct from all the divine helps he ordinarily gives to keep thing in the world being and doing and going. God's actual graces and inspirations are given specifically to *persons*, and stir us inwardly yet freely to turn to God, to go to him, to believe in him, to love him, to repent before him, and to call upon him for mercy. But for his grace giving birth in our hearts to such holy loves and desires and intentions, you and I would not carry out any supernatural or saving acts at all. **It is by the grace of God at work in our hearts that we even desire to walk the *pathways of metanoia* and set out for the unapproachable Light in the heavenly places.** Saint Paul says it most clearly: "It is God who is at work in you both to will and to work according to his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

Hope consists of counting on the grace of God to bring us home to the Father's house. There are many difficulties and challenges on the way. The *pathways of metanoia* are not easy. "The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Mt. 13-14). To walk by the hard way and enter by the narrow gate requires special help from God – *grace* – at every moment. **Hope consists basically in reaching out to God for the help of his grace. It gives birth to prayer, to recourse to the sacraments, to the reading of Scripture, to looking for God. Hope such as this, Saint Paul says, "does not disappoint" (Rom. 5:5).**

What does he mean? Human beings naturally hope for many things: for good weather, for a good spouse, for a better job, for healing when we are ill, or for various problems to go away. Indeed, everyone hopes for a good life and tends to complain to God when it does not come to us. People naturally hope for all such natural goods from God and even plead for them in tears. God is good and hears our cries. He often answers our prayers for the blessings of nature to come to us. But Saint Paul is not saying that every hope for the blessings of nature to come to us is bound to be fulfilled with the help of God. In a world of many disappointments, sometimes devastating disappointments and inescapable hardships, such a claim would be obviously false. Every day of our lives many longstanding afflictions of many people stand before our eyes. Hopes for the blessings of nature are good, and we cannot live without such hopes. The Church, too, in her liturgy prays for the blessings of nature to come to us. Yet, **the hope of the Christian heart is at the same time far deeper. It is for something *more*.**

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Christian hope is for something more than all the finite goods of this world combined. The Christian heart hopes for *God* – to live something of his own supernatural and divine Life by grace, to go into the Light, and to know his Love forever. Hopes such as these can only be born from faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel of grace, and so long as anyone hopes for things such as these – hopes for God – the person shall never be disappointed. No one who ever believed in Jesus Christ and hoped to the end to go to the Father’s house was ever let down by God. Such is the meaning of Saint Paul when he said “hope does not disappoint.”

Yet, as we walk the narrow way that leads to Life, difficulties and challenges pile high. In a previous article, we spoke of building a dwelling in our hearts and fashioning an interior home for God to come and teach us. At any one point in time, however, our hearts might seem like anything but a suitable dwelling place for God. All of us have patterns of sin and are subject to bombardments with dark thoughts and disordered passions about ourselves, other people, and God. All of us struggle to pay attention in prayer, really listen to the Word, and follow the lead of the Spirit. All of us endure afflictions and trials of many kinds – troubles with health, wealth, relationships, family life, parish life, the state of the Church on earth, and our overall cultural and political situation as a society. Causes of discouragement and despair abound on all sides both inside and outside of us.

The fallen mind, faced with a world of many hostilities, spontaneously seeks a way to deal with all

of it. From an early age, the fallen mind tends to form many habits of *impulsive reaction* to the perceived pleasures and hostilities of the world and *to take control* to excess. Ironically, reaction and control are often rather effective. They work up to a point. They often help us get our way momentarily. Thus, they tend to become our habitual go-to strategies for everything. All such strategies for survival and flourishing, however, are really little more than self-reliance in disguise. **The habit of self-reliance is often so ancient in our stories, and so deep in our souls, the full extent of it normally remains an unconscious condition.**

The habit of self-reliance is often so ancient in our stories, and so deep in our souls, the full extent of it normally remains an unconscious condition.

Self-reliance, however, cannot save our souls. It does not give Life. God alone can give us the Life we seek, and he does so by grace. The opposite of self-reliance is to hope in God – to hope for his grace to work in us and transform us. Walking the *pathways of metanoia* means unlearning self-reliance and learning to depend on God more and more for his love and grace. **The Church teaches us this in every Mass. What is the last prayer we say before holy communion? The centurion's prayer: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed."**

It is a prayer of humility, hope, and healing. "I am not worthy" means my heart is not yet a completely suitable dwelling place for God. In fact, my heart is a mess in a thousand ways and much in need of healing and purification. **To say "I am not worthy" is an act of honesty,**

vulnerability, and humility about the actual condition of our own hearts before God. The same prayer, however, is full of complete confidence and hope in God: “but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” For Jesus Christ is the Good Physician and his grace is the true medicine for our souls. Those who put their hope in him, those who walk the *pathways of metanoia* with the centurion’s prayer in their hearts, shall not be disappointed.

Image courtesy of Unsplash.

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Works Of Love

JANUARY 18, 2023
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.

Editor’s note: This is part 22 of a series, “The Kingdom of Grace.” Part 21 can be found [here](#).

“The spiritual life consists principally in charity,” says Saint Thomas Aquinas. The ultimate goal of walking the *pathways of metanoia* is to receive the transformation of our minds by the light of grace so that we can come to behold God with the eyes of our hearts. After all, the ultimate purpose of life is to know God. Yet, the eyes of the heart grow in the

contemplation of God in proportion to the degree the heart becomes a burning furnace of charity.

The grace of God is really a special work of God, distinct from his work of pouring out the blessings of nature, in which God befriends us to himself in a supernatural and personal way (see the previous article on [The Friends of God](#)). Once we have been established by grace in a living and personal friendship with God, the call is to walk the *pathways of metanoia*. The walk begins with believing in the gospel. The walk is sustained by hoping in God through all our difficulties and trials. But the primary activity along the way, day in and day out, is simply to love. It is to love God with your whole heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. When love for the God who first loved us becomes the secret motivation and the energizing force behind *all* of our activities, then the heart has truly become a burning furnace of love. It is just a question of how brightly the flame shall burn.

Many people fall into the trap of thinking that what will set the heart on fire, or stir up the fire of divine love, is a special subset of morally good acts such as prayer, fasting, sacramental confession, Eucharistic adoration, spiritual direction, or similar religious practices. All such acts are good and holy, of course, but it would be a major mistake to think that growing in grace and charity can happen *only* through such a special subset of morally good acts. Great dangers lurk in thinking so. One might lose sight of the spiritual value and significance of ordinary life and the natural order of things. One might begin to judge and condemn fellow members of the mystical body of Christ who are not as given to specifically religious or spiritual practices, but are much more occupied with things like banking, engineering, and law. One might even begin to think that holiness is exclusively the domain of priests, religious, monks, and nuns whose state in life

dedicates them to a more extensive practice of specifically religious kinds of activities such as celebrating the liturgy.

When we make the mistake of thinking that only the specifically religious or spiritual sorts of acts really serve spiritual growth and transformation, union with God and contemplative prayer, we inevitably end up wondering what the rest of life has to do with the spiritual life. What about doing the laundry? What about mowing the lawn, paying the bills, taking the car in for repairs, dealing with teachers at school, bearing bureaucratic hassles, making business deals, planning investments, resolving problems in family relationships, and all the other more or less mundane tasks of daily life? What do any of these things have to do with the Kingdom of Grace? More than one housewife and mother has become perplexed about her spiritual life once the presence of a beloved husband and children come to make it practically impossible for her to spend hours in adoration, rosary, and spiritual reading anymore. Some even begin to wonder whether they can really grow close to God.

The truth is that *any* work of charity tends to enkindle the fire of supernatural love that begins to burn in our hearts from the first moment of our baptism. A work of charity is *any* morally good act carried out for the love of God and neighbor. Works of charity are motivated by the knowledge of how God has first loved us – especially in Christ crucified. Works of charity are born from the desire to return love for Love received. The point of doing any and all such works of love is simply Jesus. The point is to love him, to please him, to slake his thirst for love. When our works of love spring from such motives and desires, each one becomes a way of participating personally in the immeasurable torrent of divine Love pouring forth upon the world. God allows us to have a hand, so to speak, in spreading his Love. Our works of charity become his way of doing so.

The work need not be of a particularly religious or spiritual sort. It need not be prayer, fasting, Eucharistic adoration, confession, or spiritual reading. It can be running out to pick up Chinese food for the family. The work need not be of heroic magnitude. In principle, it is possible to shovel the snow for an elderly woman across the street with as much love in your heart as one of the North American Martyrs. The measure of love is not the magnitude of the outward act, or even the torments it involves, but the depth of love secretly at work in the heart. One way or another, *all* works of love have their place in the spiritual life. In fact, the Kingdom of Grace demonstrates its greatness – and truly conquers the world – when the flame of love burning in our hearts permeates the whole of life and energizes all of our activities. In this way, the loving hearts of a handful of Christians can secretly leaven whole societies beginning with the little things at hand in the lives of each of us.

God has been gracious enough to befriend us, and the proper response to him as our beloved Friend is to do him whatever little works of love we can given the means available to us at the present moment in our lives. Our neighbor is our opportunity. For what we render to our neighbor we render to God (Mt. 25:31-46). Works of love cleanse the eyes of the heart and begin to illuminate them for higher perceptions of the Most High.

All works of love are capable of doing so. It is important to note the point well. For over the next several articles we are going to discuss in detail many more specifically religious and spiritual kinds of acts such as participating in the sacraments, prayer and *lectio divina*, the need for silence and vigilance, and the tremendous role of the Virgin in the spiritual life. Without pausing first to note well the primacy of *love* in the spiritual life, the significance and importance of *all* works of love in *all* domains of life, one might all too easily reduce the *pathways*

of metanoia to an excessively narrow subset of more specifically religious and spiritual activities. But the *pathways of metanoia* are not so specific. *All* good works, when done in a spirit of love for God and neighbor, serve the growth of grace and the transformation of the world around us. Indeed, all works of love are profitable unto everlasting life.

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This is part 23 of the Kingdom of Grace.



The Heavenly Bread

FEBRUARY 15, 2023
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: This is part 23 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 22 can be found [here](#).

On the *pathways of metanoia*, the Church sets before us many ways to grow in the life of grace: prayer, meditation, silence, the Rosary, *lectio divina*, spiritual reading, works of love in daily life, and many more. All such practices are good and have their place in the spiritual life, but one stands out from them all. One alone is the true center for us all. The Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life" (CCC 1324). How shall we understand this teaching of the Church?

The simple truth is that the Father loves us. In his great love for us he has poured out all the blessings of nature – the whole world is a gift of God. Yet, it was not enough for God to create all of nature. He also created human beings in his very image. He loved us further still by endowing human beings from the beginning with the gift of grace. Even more, when the first human beings fell from grace by their sin, God loved us all further still by sending his eternal Son into the world to die on the cross for us. After rising from the dead, the Lord Jesus

breathed upon us the Spirit of Love he shares with the Father (Jn. 20:22). The plan of God all along has been to show us his *excessive* love. The point of doing so is for us to come know his Love. For the more we know his Love, the more we shall really live his Life.

The Lord Jesus instituted the Eucharist so that our lives might be totally imbued with his Love. The purpose of giving us the Eucharist was for all future generations of people, regardless of their time and place, to have a way to participate personally in his sacrifice – to join in the great act of love by which Jesus Christ offers himself to the Father. We do so, we participate or join in Christ's own act of sacrifice, by going to Mass or the Divine Liturgy. We just need to go down to St. Leo's to catch the 8:30 Mass, and we are actually with Christ himself in his own act of offering pure worship to the Father. The celebration of the Eucharist is his sacrifice taking place in our midst. More on the Eucharist as a sacrifice in a later article.

In a previous article on *The God of Grace*, we said that grace is primarily God's gift of himself to us. Grace, in its primary sense, is God saying, "Here, have Me." God gives himself to us first of all in baptism, for through that sacrament we become *The Temple of the Trinity*. Yet, God gives himself to us in every holy communion too. For in every holy communion, Jesus Christ gives himself to us completely—body, blood, soul, and divinity. The love of God is excessive indeed. More on the Eucharist as a sacrament in a later article.

When the Lord Jesus instituted the Eucharist, his intention was for us to organize our hearts around the Eucharist. Though our weeks might be busy and our schedules might be full, the real reason to live is on Sunday. The real reason to live is the Eucharist. For what could be greater than the Eucharist? A thousand other words or acts might *feel* better on the natural level. A conversation with a friend, a

gentle stroll through the outdoors, or just relaxing at home might *feel* better than going to Mass or Divine Liturgy, but in *truth* there is nothing on earth greater than the Eucharist. There is no greater Love in our midst.

Though our weeks might be busy and our schedules might be full, the real reason to live is on Sunday. The real reason to live is the Eucharist.

We sometimes hear of the “Sunday obligation.” To go to Mass or the Divine Liturgy on Sunday is indeed an obligation, but those who understand in the depths of their hearts what the Eucharist really is scarcely feel it as an obligation. Rather, the Eucharist is our joy and our all. We *want* to go. For the Eucharist is the true fountain of Life. Innumerable graces flow from the Eucharist into our souls, and innumerable graces flow into our world. For the Eucharist is Jesus Christ himself, and “from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace” (Jn. 1:16).

Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity is a good example of someone whose heart was organized around the Eucharist. The point might come as a surprise, since we normally think of her as a great saint of the *interior* life. True, Elizabeth was acutely aware of the indwelling Trinity. She was given to selfless gazing upon God and aimed to be wholly surrendered to his action in her soul. But she also knew well how her interior life thrived in connection with the Eucharist. For certain crucial moments of grace in her life were woven together with the Eucharist.

She made her first holy communion at the age of nine, and, following a local custom, she immediately afterwards visited the local Carmelite monastery. After learning her name was Elizabeth, the prioress said the name meant “happy little house of God.” At that moment, Elizabeth received a light, and

something of the truth of who she was dawned on her. She awoke in a new way to God dwelling in her soul. The illumination was a fruit of her first holy communion. A few years later, at the age of fourteen, it was during her thanksgiving after holy communion that she received the inspiration to vow herself to perpetual virginity. A few years later still, she did something unusual for her day. She obtained permission to receive holy communion for eight days in a row during the octave of Corpus Christi. When it was over, she felt yanked from the Eucharist. She told of the experience in a poem, and summarized her whole attitude towards the Eucharist: “I want this heavenly bread.”

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This is part 24 of the series of the Kingdom of grace. The bold emphases are mine, not the author's.



The Eucharistic Sacrifice

MARCH 21, 2023
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: This is part 24 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 23 can be found [here](#).

The wonders of the Eucharist are so many and so marvelous that no one could ever tell them all, but one marvel is how the Eucharist is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. **Whoever participates in the celebration of the Eucharist joins the eternal Son in offering his sacrifice to the Father in the Spirit, and the more lovingly one participates in his sacrifice the more fruitful it is for the spiritual life.**

The Law of Sacrifice

It might come as a surprise to many contemporary westerners, but **human beings naturally desire to give their hearts to God.** The fall of the first human beings and

the fact of sin have obscured this desire in many ways, but they have not destroyed it. Furthermore, **human beings also desire to give a *sign or expression* of the gift of their hearts to God.** Such is the meaning of sacrifice in the sense we are using the term here. **A sacrifice is primarily an inward gift of one's heart to God, but it is also an outward gesture or sign of the gift of one's heart to God.** The **inward** the gift of one's heart to God is sometimes called the *spiritual sacrifice*. The **outward sign** or gesture by which one expresses the inward spiritual sacrifice is sometimes called the *outward act* of sacrifice, and in the outward act of sacrifice there is also a *thing offered*, e.g. a lamb of sacrifice in the old testament.

Down through the centuries, in many lands throughout the world, human beings have offered sacrifice of various kinds. It is a common human phenomenon. The many pagan systems of sacrifice, for example, testify that **human beings have a deep and common instinct for sacrifice.** Pagan sacrifices, of course, are based on ignorance and confusion about the one true God, and are offerings misdirected to false “gods,” but the phenomenon of pagan sacrifice shows nonetheless that **God has written into human nature a desire to offer him sacrifice. The desire is natural and good even though, like other natural desires, it is susceptible to distortion.** One can even go so far as to say that all human beings live under the *law of sacrifice*. We are bound to offer sacrifice to God in some way or another and we naturally know it. The big question is *how*. **What form of sacrifice is the one that the living and true God really wants from us?**

Human beings do not know how to answer the question by our own lights. Reason can teach us such things as mathematical truths and basic moral truths and even the truth of the existence of God, but reason cannot tell us what form of

sacrifice really pleases God. Rather, God alone can reveal it to us. It was for this purpose, in order to teach human beings of the one true God and how to worship him aright, that God called the patriarchs of old, established the covenants with them, and laid down the law of Moses with its sacrificial rites. God's course of instruction in how to worship him was gradual and took place over centuries. He taught the people of Israel to offer him sacrifice and specifically how to do so. The process served to heal to some extent the wholesome and good desire of human beings to offer sacrifice to God as well as **liberate it from the misdirected sacrifices of paganism**. The sacrifices of the old law were also a preparation and prefiguration of the one form of sacrifice that would in the end truly please God.

God's course of instruction on sacrifice came to fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ, and the final lesson was most astonishing. What the Lord Jesus revealed is that the one form of sacrifice truly pleasing to God is not any of those we can discover by our own lights as the pagans try to do, nor any of the sacrifices laid down by Moses in the old law, but the one that he himself would offer personally to the Father. **The true sacrifice was revealed when Jesus offered himself to the Father through the Spirit on calvary** (Heb. 9:15). His was a voluntary acceptance of death and a death of love for the Father. It is the one and only sacrifice that truly pleases God and makes reparation for the sins of mankind.

The Sacrifice of Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ is the great High Priest (Heb. 4:14-5), and every priest is appointed by God to offer sacrifice (Heb. 5:1). In Jesus Christ's sacrifice, like all sacrifices, there was an **inward spiritual sacrifice, an outward act of sacrifice, and a thing offered to the Father. His *spiritual sacrifice* was**

a special act of his heart. It was an interior act of love and obedience to the Father who had called him to lay down his life out of love (Jn. 10:18). The Lord Jesus freely chose out of love to heed the will of the Father (Mk. 14:36). On account of this special call, unlike **the priests of the old law who offered external things in sacrifice such as lambs, in Jesus Christ's sacrifice the *outward act* of sacrifice was to offer himself—his own body, blood, soul, and divinity—to the Father.** The sacrifice of Jesus, therefore, is unique. **He is both the High Priest who offers the sacrifice and the very thing he offered in sacrifice.** “Behold the Lamb of God,” John the Baptist had said pointing to Jesus (Jn. 1:36).

Now, the essence of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is simply the offering of himself out of love and obedience to the Father, but the manner in which he offers himself and the conditions under which he does so vary. **At one very special point in time, the eternal High priest offered himself to the Father under a certain specific set of conditions on calvary. Yet, he offers himself still even now under quite a different set of conditions in glory.**

On Good Friday, the Lord offered himself to the Father under conditions of rigor. His body was pierced, his blood poured out, his thirst was ineffable, his mother wept at his feet. He commended his spirit to the Father, he breathed his last, and he died on the cross. In enduring all of this freely out of love, in the depths of his heart **Jesus offered a singular and unique *spiritual sacrifice* to the Father.** The spiritual sacrifice of the Lord was his heart's devotion to the Father in love even unto death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). At that point, on Good Friday, **his *outward act* of sacrifice took place in a bloody manner.** Throughout it all he offered himself up as the sacrificial Lamb, yet on that day—up to the point he actually expired—**he was the Lamb in the process of being slain. The moment he gave up his**

spirit and died on the cross, however, Jesus became once and for all the *Lamb Once Slain*.

Good Friday does not need to be repeated and it never shall be. The bloody conditions under which he once offered himself have passed away. The torments of Good Friday have given way to the joy of Easter Sunday, and the joy of Easter Sunday abides forever. **From the moment he rose from the dead, in addition to being the Lamb Once Slain, Jesus also became *the Living One*** (Rev. 1:18). Though his outward conditions have changed radically since Good Friday, the Lord Jesus has never taken back his heart's inward *spiritual sacrifice*. In the depths of his heart, he has never taken back the love, the obedience, and the gift of himself he once offered to the Father on the cross. Even after he died, all through his journey into the great abyss, **the heart of Jesus remained fixed in a state of love, obedience, devotion, and offering of himself to the Father.** The same inward and heartfelt sacrifice continued through the events of the resurrection, the appearances to the disciples, and the course of his ascension. **Even until now, the Lord Jesus never ceases to offer himself from his heart to the Father in love. But he does so now in the eternal sanctuary under quite a different set of outward conditions than on Good Friday.**

For the High Priest lives now and forevermore under conditions of glory in the heavenly places. His heart of love and devotion to the Father persists in eternity. His spiritual sacrifice goes on, yet he shows his spiritual sacrifice outwardly in a new and different manner than on Good Friday. **Now and forevermore, he shows the Father his glorified wounds, the trophies of his victory over sin and death, and he never ceases to intercede on our behalf for the outpouring of the Spirit.** Instead of a weeping mother at the foot of his cross, he

has now the Virgin of the Assumption at his side in her glorified body. Instead of being surrounded by mockers, he is surrounded by the souls of the Saints who praise him. **The eternal High Priest still offers himself outwardly to the Father, but now in an unbloody manner. He offers to the Father not the Lamb in the process of being slain, but the Lamb Once Slain.** His offering of the Lamb Once Slain takes place now under conditions proper to the paradise of Light and the place of radiant joy. Yet, in essence, the sacrifice is the same. Whether his worship be under the conditions of calvary or heaven, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8).

The Eucharistic Sacrifice

Now what stupefies the mind with wonder beyond compare is that while he was still on earth **Jesus Christ established a specific, concrete, and practical way for people of all future times and places to take part in his sacrifice to the Father.** For on the night before he died, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and said: **“this is my body...take this all of you and eat of it.”** He also took wine, blessed it, and said: **“this is my blood...take this all of you and drink of it.”** The Church has always taken these words literally. In the sacred banquet of the Eucharist, after the words of consecration, what looks like bread is not bread and what tastes like wine is not wine, but is actually the body and blood of Christ. In the same words at the last supper, Jesus also commanded us to eat his body and drink blood. For in *John* 6:41-69, the Lord told us repeatedly that **to eat his flesh and drink his blood is truly necessary for our salvation.** At the last supper, he set up a way for all of us actually to do so. He commanded the twelve: **“do this.”** In these words, Jesus essentially ordained them priests of the new covenant.

When the Lord Jesus ordained the twelve as priests of the new covenant, he bid them to celebrate this sacred banquet so that all who would believe in Jesus, would be baptized in him, and would repent of their sins might have a way to partake in his sacrifice. The priests of the new covenant provide the way. For in the ordination of a priest, God marks a man's soul with a special and indelible seal. **Thanks to the seal of the priesthood on his soul, the priest on earth is connected to the Eternal High Priest in the heavenly places in a special and supernatural way. Thanks to the seal of the priesthood, when the priest on earth speaks the words "this is my body" over the bread and "this is my blood" over the wine, the bread and wine on the altar are changed into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ himself.** Thanks to this change, called transubstantiation, he who is now the Lamb Once Slain and the Living One is present *both* in heaven *and* on earth – present in the eternal sanctuary on high *and* present in our sanctuaries on the earth. Heaven and earth meet on our altars.

The specific, concrete, practical way the Lord Jesus himself has provided for you and I [me] to take part in his sacrifice is **simply to go to Mass** (or the Divine Liturgy as it is called in the Christian East). From one point of view, we can say that **in the Eucharistic liturgy Jesus Christ himself—body, blood, soul, and divinity—is present in our midst on the earth.** He is present in the sacrament of the altar. From another point of view, we can say that his Church on earth—the baptized faithful taking part in the celebration of the liturgy—are in his midst in heaven as he worships the Father and offers himself as the Lamb Once Slain. It takes faith to believe both. It takes faith to believe that what looks like bread and tastes like wine are actually the body and blood of Jesus Christ. It takes faith to believe that the ritual words and gestures of the liturgy are really our participation in Jesus

Christ's own heavenly offering of himself to the Father. Yet so it is. **The Eucharistic sacrifice calls for us to “walk by faith and not by sight”** in the very act of worship itself (2 Cor. 5:7). The truth is, however, that when you and I participate in the celebration of the Eucharist, we actually take part in the Lord Jesus Christ's own sacrifice of love to the Father and we do so in several ways.

In one way, **in the liturgy we join in the *spiritual sacrifice* now taking place in the heart of Jesus Christ our High Priest. For thanks to baptism our hearts have been joined to his heart** in the sanctuary on high in the heavenly places. We have received *The Grace to Be Jesus* on earth. By grace we share in his relation to the Father, and our prayer is *The Filial Prayer* of Jesus Christ himself. Having been united with him in baptism, we too are called to lay down our lives by living, loving, and suffering on earth in a manner worthy of our calling as Christians. **The love and obedience of our hearts is a spiritual sacrifice, yet the spiritual sacrifice of our hearts is united to the spiritual sacrifice of Jesus Christ himself. In the Eucharistic liturgy,** together with Jesus *we* offer all that we have, all that we are, all that we love, and all that we suffer to the Father of lights. For we have received all from the Father, every good and perfect gift, every gift of nature and grace, every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Jas.1:17; Eph. 1:3). The only appropriate response to our Father is to worship him. How to do so, how to live in the liturgy the union of hearts with Jesus Christ in offering sacrifice to the Father, is the topic of the next article in our series.

In addition to spiritual sacrifice, **in the liturgy we also join the eternal High Priest in offering his *outward sacrifice* to the Father. We offer the outward sacrifice not in the bloody manner in which it once took place on calvary, but in an unbloody manner as it now takes**

place sacramentally in our sanctuaries. Thanks to seal of the priesthood and the ministry of priests, we now have the very body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ himself on our altars on earth. Consequently, like our eternal High Priest in the heavenly places and together with him, we too can now offer up to the Father in an unbloody manner from our altars on earth the Lamb Once Slain. Jesus Christ offered himself once in a bloody manner on Good Friday, he now offers himself in an unbloody manner in the heavenly places, and at the same time he also offers himself in a sacramental manner on our altars here on earth through the ministry of priests. It is all one and the same sacrifice taking place in different manners.

Finally, **in the liturgy we partake of the sacrifice in the sense of eating the *thing offered* – our paschal Lamb. Under the old law, in certain rites the priests would eat the lamb of sacrifice after it was slaughtered.** Yet, those rites were merely a prefiguration of greater things yet to come. When Jesus Christ appeared as a High Priest of the good things that have now come to us, he not only became the Lamb Once Slain, but **left himself on our altars so that we too—his priestly people—might eat of the Lamb Once Slain.** Yet, unlike the priests of the old law, **we do not eat a dead lamb but the Living One. The body, blood, soul, and divinity we consume in holy communion is the flesh and blood of the living Jesus Christ in glory. The sacrificial Lamb we now eat is Life itself. The effects of doing so are more than words can tell,** and a later article in our series shall spell out some of the fruits of receiving holy communion.

Father James Dominic Brent, O.P. is a Dominican Friar who lives and teaches at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. Several of his homilies, spiritual conferences, interviews, and radio spots can be found on his personal Soundcloud site. He frequently lectures for the Thomistic Institute and appears on Aquinas 101.

This is part 25 in the series Kingdom of Grace

Fr. Perozich comments —

As you read this article, note the structure Fr. Brent uses:

- 1. What Jesus did in His passion.*
- 2. What Jesus does now in heaven.*
- 3. What we do to unite ourselves to Him and to His action, that is doing our PART (Petition, Adoration, Reparation, Thanksgiving) with attention to what we are doing, in what we are participating.*

Participation In The Sacrifice

APRIL 12, 2023
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.





Editor's note: This is part 25 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 24 can be found [here](#).

"All the faithful should be aware that to participate in the Eucharistic Sacrifice is their chief duty and supreme dignity," said Pope Pius XII. Yet, how are the faithful supposed to do so practically speaking?

An elderly lady once told me that when she was growing up long before the Second Vatican Council, the Sisters in her Catholic school taught all the students to **play their PART at Mass. PART stands for Petition, Adoration, Reparation, and Thanksgiving.**

In his passion, the Lord Jesus offered up petitionary prayer to the Father, and he does so still even now in the heavenly places. On the cross, Jesus pleaded "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"

(Lk. 23:34). In heaven, **he pleads now for the Father to send forth the Spirit and renew the face of the earth.** In order to join the Lord heart to heart in his worship of the Father in the liturgy, the first thing we need is a heart for petition or intercession. **One of the most basic functions of Christians in the world is to plead with God and call down graces upon people, and the best place to do so is together in the celebration of the Eucharist.** Many petitions go up to God throughout the course of the Mass. Our role is to listen intently to them, make them our own, and concur with a heartfelt “Amen.” It is also important, of course, to send up our own personal petitions for particular people whom God has brought into our lives or put on our hearts. We might well be the only people who really pray for them, and it might well be that Providence has planned for our prayers in particular to be of special help to them. **Only in eternity shall we see the fruits of prayer.** In the meantime, we simply keep asking. “Pray at all times without growing weary” (Lk. 18:1).

In his passion, as well as in his heavenly worship now, the Lord Jesus adores the Father. To adore someone is to acknowledge with love the outstanding qualities of the person. Adoration connotes being in awe over some special goodness we are beholding. People stand over the crib of an infant and just adore what they see. Adoration in the heart naturally tends to spill over into words and gestures of love and praise. People who adore an infant tell of how sweet and cute the child is and flash smiles at the opening and closing of tiny fingers. In a different and more exalted way, the Lord Jesus lives in awe before the Father. **All the words and deeds of the Lord reveal the depths of his adoration.** In order to join the Lord Jesus heart to heart in his worship of the Father, we too need a heart full of adoration for God. “Adore the Lord in his holy court”

(Ps. 96:9). The words and gestures of the liturgy are designed to be signs of our heartfelt respect, adoration, and gratitude. When we stand at Mass, it is a ritual gesture. **Standing shows respect to a person.** (Everyone stands when a judge enters a courtroom.) **Sitting** for the readings is not just a moment to relax, but **a gesture that signals attentive listening** (like Mary of Bethany sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to him). **Kneeling during the Eucharistic prayer signals a more profound awe before what is taking place.** When our minds correspond to the posture of our bodies at Mass, our participation is fruitful indeed.

In his passion and in his heavenly worship now, the Lord Jesus offers to the Father reparation for the sins of the world. On the cross, the Lord Jesus offered himself in the process of being slain. Now in heaven, however, the Lord offers himself as the Lamb Once Slain and Living One. It is all one and the same act of the sacred heart offering to the eternal Father something of such great value that it outweighs all the sins of the world. No matter how great the sins of the world may be at any one point, the offering of the body and blood of Christ is always far greater. In order to join the Lord Jesus heart to heart in his worship in the liturgy, we too need a heart intent on making reparation to the Father. What shall we offer to him? We should be intentional about offering him the Eucharistic sacrifice on the altar. It is good to make these words our own: "Eternal Father, I offer you the body, blood, soul, and divinity of your dearly beloved Son our Lord Jesus Christ in atonement for our sins and those of the whole world." **When the priest elevates the host at Mass we too should lift up our hearts, and offer ourselves along with Christ to the eternal Father. We should offer up to God all of our sufferings, sorrows, burdens, and trials just as Christ did on Good Friday. We should know**

also that when we offer it all up in love, it will surely have big effects upon the world. It is high time for Catholics to recover a sense of what it means to *Offer It Up* and realize again how powerful it is to do so. By offering up our sacrifices in union with the sacrifice of the Lord on the altar, together with him we obtain from the Father new graces for the world.

Finally, in his worship both on Good Friday and now in the heavenly places, the Lord Jesus abounds in gratitude and thanksgiving. In order to join the Lord Jesus heart to heart in his worship of the Father, we too need a heart full of gratitude. **To count one's blessings is perhaps the most basic religious exercise of all.** In our weakness, we all tend to focus on our struggles and sorrows, but **it is much more fruitful for us to focus instead on our blessings and literally start counting them.** One simple thing to do is to get out a rosary, go through the beads one by one, and on every bead name a blessing and make a quick act of thanksgiving to God for it. When we count all the blessings God has poured forth upon us, **the memory of his blessings gives birth to gratitude and thanksgiving** — the original meaning of the word “eucharist.” “How shall I repay the Lord for his goodness to me? The cup of salvation I will raise, I will call on the Lord’s name” (Ps. 116:12-13).

Pope Pius XII tells us that the faithful are to participate in the liturgy “not in an inert and negligent fashion, giving way to distractions and day-dreaming, but with such earnestness and concentration that they may be united as closely as possible with the High Priest.” It is often difficult not to give away to distractions and lose concentration or zeal for worship in the celebration of the Eucharist, but we can always ask for the grace to participate more lovingly, devoutly, and attentively. Prayer to the holy angels before Mass is very helpful in this matter. So, too, is a period of silence and recollection. But when it comes to remaining united as closely as possible to the

High Priest during the liturgy, now you know how. Play your PART at Mass.

Father James Dominic Brent, O.P. is a Dominican Friar who lives and teaches at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. Several of his homilies, spiritual conferences, interviews, and radio spots can be found on his [personal Soundcloud site](#). He frequently lectures for the [Thomistic Institute](#) and appears on [Aquinas 101](#).

part 26

The Effects Of Holy Communion



JUNE 22, 2023
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: This is part 26 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 25 can be found [here](#).

The primary cause of the growth of grace is the Eucharist, and receiving holy communion has many wonderful effects in us.

It comes as a surprise to many people to hear that the Eucharist is a *cause*, but realizing this simple truth helps us to receive the effects or fruits of holy communion. Just as food nourishes a child and causes the child to grow strong in the bodily life, so **holy communion nourishes our souls and causes us to grow strong in the spiritual life – the life of grace.** Besides causing growth, food also has many other effects on our bodily life. Food serves to recover us from sickness, preserve us from becoming sick in the future, and energize us when we have grown sluggish. **Holy communion works similar effects in the spiritual life of grace in our souls.**

It is rather impossible to sum up all the effects of receiving the Eucharist, but it is common for the Saints to realize the grandeur of receiving holy communion even once. **For the**

Saints, each holy communion is a big deal. Down through the centuries, they have composed many prayers to prepare themselves well for the event, and their prayers show us what they expect from the sacrament. One preparatory prayer from Saint Basil of Caesarea is particularly rich and tells of many effects of holy communion. The central part of the prayer goes like this:

“Show compassion, therefore, O Lord, and do not accuse me, a sinner, but deal with me according to Thy mercy; and let these Holy Things be for me unto healing, and purification, and enlightenment, and preservation, and salvation, and unto sanctification of soul and body; unto the driving away of every phantasy and evil practice and activity of the devil working mentally in my members; unto confidence and love toward Thee, unto correction of life, unto steadfastness, unto an increase of virtue and perfection, unto fulfillment of the commandments, unto communion with the Holy Spirit, as a provision for life eternal, as an acceptable defense at Thy dread tribunal, not unto judgment or condemnation.”

Saint Basil expects a great deal from holy communion. **His list of petitions is extensive** and repays meditation. When we consider it with care, we have to ask: **is there anything he does not expect from the sacrament of the altar?**

Holy communion gives light. Saint Thomas Aquinas was known to lean his head against the tabernacle and beg God for enlightenment. Saint Basil hopes for light through the reception of holy communion.

Holy communion heals us in the sense of forgiving venial sins. It purifies us in the sense of diminishing the tendencies towards personal sin. It also preserves us from future sins. Many people testify to a noticeable difference in their lives when they come back to Church, confess their sins, and begin receiving holy communion regularly. **If patterns of sin persist in our lives, the question is not why the sins persist if we**

are receiving holy communion. The question is where you and I would be if we were *not* receiving communion.

Holy communion drives away demonic activity. Many people seek out the assistance of exorcists, but exorcists spend a great deal of time simply urging those who come to them to receive holy communion more frequently and devoutly. The enemy does indeed prowl about like a roaring lion, but **the sight of the Eucharist terrifies the enemy much more.**

Holy communion causes an increase of virtue. The key here is to *ask* for specific virtues to come to us through holy communion. Is it humility you seek? Greater patience and kindness toward others? Purity and chastity? Courage in the face of fears? Greater trust in God? When we are at Mass, we should pray for such good qualities to come to us through the sacrament. They will come. With the help of the sacrament, we will grow into them gradually.

Holy communion provides us what we need to go into next life. It has always been the sense of Christians that the one thing a person needs most on the brink of death is holy communion. One's first holy communion is a great event in the spiritual life, but so is one's last holy communion. Traditionally, the last holy communion is called viaticum or food for the journey. Normally, it is received after one's final absolution and final anointing. The anointing prepares the soul to be separated from the body in a death like Christ's, and viaticum prepares the soul for the journey to God and to stand before him in one's particular judgment. How blessed are they who die in his friendship!

Among all the wonderful effects of holy communion, however, one stands out above them all. **Holy communion sparks a renewal of charity in our hearts. Like nothing else, the sacrament animates, energizes, and vitalizes *The Friends of God*.** In the words of Saint Basil, it produces "confidence and love toward Thee." Each time you and I receive

holy communion, we should expect a new propulsion of love for God to break forth from the depths of our souls, and we should be on the lookout for it. A new surge of love is sure to come up from our hearts after holy communion. It might not happen immediately. It might be later in the day or when things quiet down. It might not be so noticeable as a great earthquake or a roaring fire, but perhaps be more like a gentle breeze (1 Kgs. 19:5-18). Yet, it will happen. New love will come. Guaranteed.

When we receive holy communion, the friends of God receive a renewal of love in our hearts. Since love unites people, the whole Church in heaven and on earth becomes more united. The union amongst us wrought by holy communion might not be so observable to our senses. The Church on earth appears rather divided in many ways. In the supernatural order of things, however, the situation is quite different than what meets the eye. Those who belong to Christ, those who belong to him not only in show but in reality by living in a state of sanctifying grace, are in fact being united more and more to Christ and to one another through every holy communion. Thanks to the mighty sacrament of the altar, the mystical body of Christ grows together. Together we grow in *The Grace To Be Jesus*.

Father James Dominic Brent, O.P. is a Dominican Friar who lives and teaches at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. Several of his homilies, spiritual conferences, interviews, and radio spots can be found on his [personal Soundcloud site](#). He frequently lectures for the [Thomistic Institute](#) and appears on [Aquinas 101](#).

part 27 follows below

part 27



Spiritual Dispositions For Holy Communion

AUGUST 24, 2023
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.



Editor's note: This is part 27 of a series, "The Kingdom of Grace." Part 26 can be found [here](#).

Holy communion works many and wonderful effects in us, but the spiritual dispositions with which we receive the sacrament makes a difference in the effects. **Certain spiritual dispositions open us more fully to its immense working power of the Eucharist.** This point needs some explanation.

When the flame of a burning match touches dry paper, the paper catches on fire easily and burns very quickly. When the same flame touches damp paper, the paper might catch on fire just barely and burn rather slowly or just smolder. When the flame touches saturated paper, the paper does not catch on fire at all or even smolder very much. In all three cases, the cause is the same – the same flame. The effects that flow from the flame, however, are conditioned by the state of the paper.

So, too, it is with holy communion and our souls. To receive holy Communion is to be touched with the flame of eternal Love. **Yet, the state of our souls at the moment of reception conditions *The Effects of Holy Communion* on us.** Certain qualities of mind and heart, sometimes called *subjective dispositions* or *spiritual dispositions*, are more suitable than others for receiving the many and wonderful effects of the sacrament. When we have the proper dispositions, the effects of holy communion go deeper, run stronger, and endure longer in us than when we lack the proper dispositions. What, however, are the proper dispositions?

The first and most minimal condition is to be in a state of grace. Saint Paul says "everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup" (1 Cor. 11:28). Those who eat and drink in a state of serious sin, without first repenting of their sins, not only

commit the sin of sacrilege but endanger their own souls still further. **When received in such a state – a state of serious sin without repentance – holy communion actually has the *opposite* effect of sanctification. It results in further loss of respect for holy things and perhaps eventually even the loss of faith altogether.** It is “why many of you are weak and sick and a number of you have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 11:30). The most ancient liturgy on record summed up the situation simply: “If any man be holy, let him come. If any man be not, let him repent.” (*Didache*, 10:6). The Church still teaches the same thing today but with greater clarity about the need for recourse to the sacrament of penance. “Anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion” (CCC 1385).

To be in a state of grace is the minimal disposition necessary to receive holy communion, but when it comes to receiving Love why would anyone settle for the minimum? Further more specific dispositions open us to receive more fully the effects of holy communion.

We need *faith* in the Eucharist. Faith in the real presence brings us under the influence of Jesus Christ’s working power in the sacrament. It is good to recall often, but especially in preparation before Mass, how the appearances of bread and wine are merely appearances. In reality, the **sacrament is truly the body and blood of Jesus Christ himself. In this sacrament, God himself comes to us in love and floods us with his grace.**

We need *humility* before the Eucharist. Holy communion is not something owed to us as a matter of natural justice, but is an undeserved supernatural gift – a grace. At the Last Supper, Peter was surprised when Jesus stooped down to wash his feet. **In every Mass, however, the eternal Son of God does something more**

astonishing still. He stoops down to feed us with his own body, blood, soul, and divinity – his very Life – in the Eucharist. Who can fathom being served by God? Who can say he or she deserves such Love as this?

We need *confidence* in the Eucharist. Confidence consists of counting on God for good things to come. In every holy communion, many good things are coming to us. Many graces. God alone knows what graces he will bestow upon each of us in each holy communion. **Each and every one of those graces is particularly adapted to our personal needs according to God's eternal designs for our lives.** When we approach with confidence in the Eucharist and the mighty working power of the sacrament, then we are free to forget ourselves, our plans to perfect ourselves, and our weaknesses and imperfections too. Growing in holiness is not about us. It is on Him.

We need *desire* for the Eucharist. Friends desire to eat together and to be together. So it is with the Lord Jesus. "With desire have I desired to eat this pasch with you" (Lk. 22:15). Knowing by faith his desire to eat with us and to be with us, **the only appropriate response is to desire to eat with him, to be with him, indeed, to desire *Him*.** The only proper response is to desire the sacrament, to desire his grace, to desire the God who comes to us in such an accessible way. The more we desire, the more we shall receive (see Mt. 5:6).

We need *reverence* for the Eucharist. Reverence is primarily an interior acknowledgment of the greatness and majesty of God, but reverence in the heart normally shows itself in outward behaviors of various sorts. When it comes to the Eucharist, we demonstrate *physically* that we recognize this to be no ordinary food but the Bread of Life. We wear nicer clothes to Mass. **We come to the sacrament fasting** (minimally for

one hour). We make the sign of the cross and genuflect when we come into the Presence. We offer various prayers and gestures over the course of the liturgy. When it comes to the actual reception of holy communion, there are two ways one might do so at present. One might receive on the hand or on the tongue. The ancient Church knew the practice of receiving on the hand, but it was a local custom in certain places, an exceptional thing, and did not last over time. Receiving on the tongue eventually became the universal practice of the entire Church for more than a thousand years. The Latin Church now permits reception on the hand and it is not a sin. **Receiving on the tongue, however, demonstrates a special reverence for the Eucharist. To this day, reception on the tongue remains the norm in all the churches of the Christian East.**

Faith, humility, confidence, desire, and reverence. Spiritual dispositions such as these serve to open our hearts to receive more fully the effects of holy communion. Let us ask God to grant us dispositions such as these and seek to cultivate them – especially before Mass. For with such qualities of mind and heart, there is no telling what marvels the Eucharist shall work for us.

*Father James Dominic Brent, O.P. is a Dominican Friar who lives and teaches at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC. Several of his homilies, spiritual conferences, interviews, and radio spots can be found on his [personal Soundcloud site](#). He frequently lectures for the [Thomistic Institute](#) and appears on [Aquinas 101](#).
Image courtesy of Unsplash.*

part 28 below

This is part 28 of a series, “The Kingdom of Grace.”

Behold The Lamb Of God

DECEMBER 14, 2023
FR. JAMES BRENT O.P.

It was the evening of August 21, 1879. In the little village of Knock in western Ireland, a group of more than twenty people stood in the midst of a heavy downpour. They were witnessing a vision of heavenly figures made of light appearing on the gable wall of Saint John the Baptist Church. The luminous figures spoke no words but held their posture in place for over two hours. As people looked on, some went to tell others, some remained in prayer, some tried to touch the figures in the apparition. The attempt to touch them proved futile. Hands simply passed through light to feel the stone wall of the Church. The witnesses, who were later examined by ecclesiastical authorities and declared trustworthy, offer a common description of what they saw.

On the far left was Saint Joseph with hands folded in prayer. Next to him was Our Lady wearing a crown of gold, her eyes and hands lifted upwards to heaven in prayer. Next to her was Saint John the Evangelist wearing something like a Bishop’s mitre. His one hand was holding a book of the gospels; his other hand was lifted up as though preaching. Next to Saint John, however, was the central and brightest figure in the whole scene. Standing erect on a raised altar, there was a bright white Lamb, head lifted high. Above the Lamb was a radiant cross. The altar, the Lamb, and the cross were surrounded by luminous angels. The vision lasted about two hours, and popular piety refers to the event as a Marian apparition. That is partially true, but the larger truth is that it was a *Eucharistic* apparition.

Recently, I made a pilgrimage to Knock. Over the very place where the apparition took place, against the same gable wall of the same Church, one now finds the “apparition chapel.” The chapel has large white statues of each figure, carved according to the instructions of one of the original eyewitnesses, all arranged in place to replicate the vision. The focal point is the Lamb. The Lamb stands erect on an altar fastened high on the wall, but on the ground below stands another altar for the celebration of Mass and Adoration.

When I first arrived, I entered the apparition chapel during Eucharistic Adoration. Tired from travel yet overjoyed to arrive, I sat down directly in the center of the chapel to take in the awesome sight of the white figure of the Lamb on the elevated altar. I pondered how wonderful it must have been for the visionaries actually to see the Lamb made of light – wholly luminous – to catch a glimpse into heaven like Saint John of old on the isle of Patmos. But gradually my eyes descended from the white statue of the Lamb, and fell upon the host in the monstrance beneath it.

At that moment, looking now at the consecrated host, something like thunder clapped in my soul.

Instantly, I realized how every day of my life as a priest I take into my hands the actual Lamb of God, lift him up before the people, and say: “Behold, the Lamb of God.” The people see neither a luminous figure of the Lamb nor a stone replica, but the actual Lamb of God in my hands. I asked myself: how many times have I lifted up the Lamb without really realizing what I was doing or saying? In that moment, in the light of grace, I realized what a great thing it is for anyone to behold the Lamb of God even once during the elevation at Mass.

It is a far greater thing than the most extraordinary of mystical visions.

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It was Saint John the Baptist who first proclaimed: “Behold the Lamb of God!” It is holy mother Church who joins his words to the Eucharist during the final elevation at Mass. The wisdom of joining the prophetic words of Saint John to their fulfillment in Jesus Christ present in the Eucharist is most sublime. It is a summons to contemplation. A good mother points things out to her children, and tells them what they are seeing so that they might look and learn the world. “Look,” a mother says to her children, “a blue jay.” Similarly, holy mother Church holds up the Eucharist and says “Behold, the Lamb of God.” The sight and the lesson are far too much for the soul to take in all at once. The elevation of the Eucharist is a passing moment, and necessarily a brief one, in preparation for holy communion. Even repeated celebrations of the Mass, even many glances upon the elevated host together with the command to behold the Lamb of God, are not enough to internalize the truth the moment contains. All too often, the gesture can become routine, and perhaps the moment even becomes mindless.

In order to capture the sublime wisdom set before us in the words and gesture of the elevation, in order to linger in the light of the immense truth that the moment contains, the practice of Eucharistic Adoration has developed over the centuries. Eucharistic Adoration is basically a prolongation of the final elevation at Mass, but a prolongation of the moment outside of the Mass, so that we might heed at greater length the call of John the Baptist to behold. Eucharistic Adoration is essentially a sustained beholding of the Lamb of God. It is also the perfect response to the forerunner’s prophetic command: *metanoete!* Mind your God!

We grow in grace by walking the pathways of *metanoia*. We take up practices by which the eyes of our hearts are turned from preoccupation with lesser things to the sight of higher things – to supernatural mysteries and heavenly sights coming down to us even now from “the Father of lights” (Jas. 1:17). Of all the gifts

coming down to us from on high, none is greater than the Eucharist. The Lamb of God is in our midst, on our altars, in our tabernacles. How could love fail to pay him any notice? How could love *not* want to mind him for a good long period of time?

Eucharistic Adoration is a school of contemplation. It is a simple way for busy people to let go of their busy-ness, to step back from the rat race that our lives have become, and to recenter on what really matters in life. What really matters is God. In Eucharistic Adoration, the Lamb of God is silent, but his silence speaks louder than words. From the silence of the monstrance, the Lamb speaks to the heart of a Love beyond all telling. He tells of the Love that drove him to the cross, to the tomb, and to the third day resurrection. Slowly, with practice, beholding the Lamb of God grows into beholding the heart that has so loved men.

In the vision at Knock, they say, the Lamb was the brightest figure of them all. Do you, too, want to see the luminous Lamb? Seek him in a monstrance near you.

There you will find him before your very eyes.

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*Photo of the Apparition Chapel at Knock, Photo Courtesy of
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