

A GRAMMAR OF SANCTIFYING GRACE

Back in the day, John Henry Newman (1801-1890) wrote something he titled *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870). Keying off Newman's title, I call this homily a "Grammar of Sanctifying Grace."

Today all three New Testament readings held some reference to the Holy Spirit. In the Acts of the Apostles we heard of Peter and John joining Philip in Samaria to confirm the baptized: "Then they laid their hands on them [i.e. the baptized] and they received the Holy Spirit" (Acts 8:17). From Peter's first letter to the faithful in Asia Minor we heard this: "Christ ... being put to death in the flesh ... [is] alive in the spirit" (1 Pet 3:18). Lastly, the Gospel of John contains this: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you" (Jn 14:15-17). It is this last (quote) which is the focus of reflection today.

The passage opens with a conditional: "If this, then that; if you love me, then you will keep my commandments" (Jn 14:15). The specific content of the conditional aside, the concept is itself understood easily enough. In life, one often has to do one thing in order to obtain something else. But the Gospel verse that follows the conditional is rendered in a structurally ambiguous manner.

After Jesus announces his *if-then* condition, he continues, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever" (Jn 14:16). By opening that sentence with the word "and," the translator has – perhaps inadvertently – raised a question about what Jesus really says. Is the verse that begins, "And I will ask the Father" part of the initial

condition? In other words, is Jesus saying, “If you love me, then you will keep my commandments and if you keep my commandments then I will ask the Father to give you the Holy Spirit”? In other words, is Jesus telling me that I cannot just *assume* or *presuppose* that the Holy Spirit is always dwelling within me? Is Jesus telling me that at any given point I may not actually have sanctifying grace within me?

Alternatively, Jesus’ two statements need not be related to one another at all; each could stand alone. Jesus conceivably might be saying, “I have two separate points. First, if you love me, then you will keep my commandments. Second, no matter what happens I am going to ask the Father to give you the Holy Spirit and he is going to do that.” In this conception I might be justified in *assuming* or *presupposing* that the Holy Spirit is always within me. I could maintain that I am never without sanctifying grace.

You see the problem: how you interpret the relationship between these two consecutive verses will determine the theological conclusion you draw from them.

As Catholics, and drawing on Church teaching, we lean towards understanding the second verse as containing within it an implied conditional that continues and completes the first verse’s conditional.

“Grace is, as it were, a participation in the divine nature. That is the definition always quoted by theologians. It [i.e. this definition] is to be found in the Second Epistle of St. Peter (1:3-4)” (Charles Journet, *The Meaning of Grace*, 23). Since grace is a *participating*, the human being is free to participate or not just as he or she might choose to participate or decline to participate in anything else to which one is invited. Though God wants everyone to have sanctifying grace, wants the Holy Spirit to dwell in everyone all the time, the fact is that it is not something that automatically happens, not something one can just assume. The human being must be open to

receiving the Holy Spirit and must be diligent in maintaining his body and soul as a fit dwelling for the Holy Spirit. To have sanctifying grace within you, to have the Holy Spirit within you, requires you to act. A passive, indifferent, nonchalant, or lackadaisical attitude toward sanctifying grace simply will not do. Although no one can merit grace, one can act, can live, as if he or she wants grace.

The consequences of living without God dwelling within a person are too horrific to entertain. The thought of it should set one shuddering. Pure hell.

Still, “Catholic doctrine ... [says that] apart from a private revelation [which is very rare], I cannot have a certainty that is absolute and infallible of being in the state of grace” (Journet, 75-76). The reason that I can’t have absolute certainty on this is because to know infallibly that the Holy Spirit is dwelling within you is to “see the very Source of grace directly, is – in fact – to see God face-to-face in this lifetime” (Journet, 76) and that is something no one can reasonably expect to experience in his or her earthly life.

Though absolute certainty regarding one’s state of grace at any given time escapes a person, the Church does say that the person can have “a practical or moral certainty” (Journet, 77) of grace within. Indeed, the Catholic Church insists that moral certainty of indwelling grace “is indispensable to us.... According to St. Thomas Aquinas, I know, with moral certainty, that I am in the state of grace if the things of God fill my heart, satisfy my desires; if the things of this world do not hide all else from my view ...” (Journet, 77).

“The conclusion to be drawn [from all this] is contained in the words of St. John of the Cross, ‘Fear, but with confidence.’ Fear, for you may not be in grace; but not with a fear that would prevent your acting ... or stifle all your good impulses. [...] But do not have, either, a presumptuous confidence, a comfortable self-assurance. No, indeed, you must be on the cross. I

am afraid because I am well aware that if God were to exact a strict account I should be lost; but I know too that He loves me with a love of which I can have no idea in this life. In this way I veer between my wretchedness and his love; but my faith keeps on telling me: God's love will be victorious, for it is greater than my wretchedness" (Journet, 78-79).

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Readings:

Acts (of the Apostles) 8:5-8, 14-17.

Psalm 66:1-7, 16, 20.

1 Peter 3:15-18.

John 14:15-21.

