

Understanding Grace more deeply



The mark of genuine contrition is not a sense of guilt, but a sense of sorrow, of regret for having taken a wrong turn; just as the mark of living in grace is not a sense of our own worth but a sense of being accepted and loved despite our unworthiness. We are spiritually healthy when our lives are marked by honest confession and honest praise.

Jean-Luc Marion highlights this in a commentary on St. Augustine's famous Confessions. He sees Augustine's confession as a work of a true moral conscience because it is both a confession of praise and a confession of sin. Gil Bailie suggests that this comment underlines an important criterion by which to judge whether or not we are living in grace: "If the confession of praise is not accompanied by the confession of sin it is an empty and pompous gesture. If the confession of sins is not accompanied by a confession of praise, it is equally vacuous and barren, the stuff of trashy magazines and tabloid newspapers, a self-preening parody of repentance."

Gil is right, but doing both confessions at one and the same time is not an easy task. We generally find ourselves falling into either a confession of praise where there is no real confession of our own sin; or into the "self-preening parody of repentance" of a still self-absorbed convert, where our confession rings hollow because it shows itself more as a badge of sophistication than as genuine sorrow for having strayed.

In neither case is there a true sense of grace. Piet Fransen, whose masterful book on grace served as a textbook in seminaries and theology schools for a generation, submits that neither the self-confident believer (who still secretly envies the pleasures of the amoral that he's missing out on) nor the wayward person who converts but still feels grateful for his fling, has yet understood grace. We understand grace only when we grasp existentially what's inside the Father's words to his older son in the parable of the prodigal son: My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But

we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

The older brother would not be bitter if he understood that everything his father owns is already his, just as he would not be envious of the pleasures his wayward brother tasted if he understood that, in real life, his brother had been dead. But it takes a deeper grasp of what grace is to intuit that, namely, to grasp that life inside God's house dwarfs all other pleasures. The same is true for the convert who has given up his wayward life but still secretly rejoices in the experience and sophistication it brought him and nurses a condescending pity for the less-experienced. He too has not yet really understood grace.

In his book, *The Idea of the Holy*, now considered a classic, Rudolf Otto submits that in the presence of the holy we will always have a double reaction: fear and attraction. Like Peter at the Transfiguration, we will want to build a tent and stay there forever; but, like him too before the miraculous catch of fish, we will also want to say: "Depart from me for I am a sinful man." In the presence of the holy, we want to burst forth in praise even as we want to confess our sins.

That insight can help us to understand grace. Piet Fransen begins his signature book on grace, *The New Life of Grace*, by asking us to imagine this scene: Picture a man who lives his life in mindless hedonism. He simply drinks in the sensual pleasures of this world without a thought for God, responsibility, or morality. Then, after a long life of illicit pleasure, he has a genuine deathbed conversion, sincerely confesses his sins, receives the sacraments of the church, and dies in that happy state. If our spontaneous reaction to this story is: "Well, the lucky fellow! He had fling and still made it in the end!" we have not yet understood grace but instead are still embittered moralizers standing like the older brother in need of a further conversation with our God.

And the same holds true too for the convert who still feels that what he's experienced in his waywardness, his fling, is a deeper joy than the one known by those who have not strayed. In this case, he's come back to his father's house not because he senses a deeper joy there but because he deems his return an unwanted duty, less exciting, less interesting, and less joy-filled than a sinful life, but a necessary moral exit strategy. He too has yet to understand grace.

Only when we understand what the father of the prodigal son means when he says to the older brother: "Everything I have is yours", will we offer both a confession of praise and a confession of sin.

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