

Grace of God: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Grace, in the Christian understanding, is the unconditional love, the free, and undeserved favor of God. Grace, in this context, is not of man, but of the Divine through which the knowledge of truth is gained— truth that surpasses man's natural knowledge and experience; by which the soul is likened to the Divine. In this paper, an attempt is made to decipher (through phenomenological inquiry) the experience of grace in the life of a middle-aged individual and how it provide resilience in the functioning of ones' everyday life. The paper also discusses the possibility of the essential nature of the experience of Gods' grace as it look into the subjective experience of the individual.

Keywords: *Grace, Graceful Ageing, Phenomenological Inquiry*

Art Thou not mighty, God Almighty, so as to heal all the diseases of my soul, and by Thy more abundant grace to quench even the impure motions of my sleep!

-The Confessions of St. Augustine (1909)

It was in the year 1873, Spafford wrote the ever enduring words of the hymn: “It Is Well With My Soul.” Spafford had lost his only son of four years to scarlet fever in the year 1870, his property and investment were decimated by the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, was greatly hit by the economic downturn of 1873, and lost his four daughters in a ship wreck that same year. But he wrote:

*When peace like a river, attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea billows, roll, -
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to know, It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

The pain that Spafford endured during the period of three years (1870-1873) culminated into a melodious “it is well with my soul,” as a thanksgiving to the Divine love. It is not in the ways of man to give thanks when sorrow strikes, nor is it in his nature to see the essence of the ways of the Divine (Aquinas, 1920). It is only through grace that the essence of God is

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revealed. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "...the created intellect cannot see the essence of God, unless God by His grace unites Himself to the created intellect." And it is through this same Divine grace that "the power of understanding" is added. The endurance and understanding that comes through the knowledge of truth is hidden from man, but is showered in abundance through Divine grace.

Grace is not of man, but of the Divine through which the knowledge of truth is gained— truth that surpasses man's natural knowledge and experience. Grace is that through which man's nature is healed, it is the vine through which the thirst for enlightenment arises, and is sought. Grace is that in which God's gift pertains, which is the first and foremost the free gift of God (O'Riordan, 1962), transcends the notion of value (Outka, 1972), through which creation is manifested (Kaylor, 1976). Grace is that, according to Aquinas (1915), "which restore in us the image of God, after which we were made." Grace is that through which life everlasting is merited (Aquinas, 1915). So was revealed to St. Paul, in his second epistle to the Corinthians, of God's grace, "My grace is sufficient for thee" (2 Cor. xii. 9 KJV).

Gratia, in Latin, is the translation of the Greek word *charis* which also means charisma, charm, favour, or kindness (Watson, 1959). To Jordan (1988), grace is an "experience of condescending love, conciliatory compassion and unfailing fidelity." He further describes the gratuitous nature of grace, and how it is the unmerited and undeserved gift of God. Grace as a divine inspiration has been shown to indicate the experience of a spiritual assistance from the Divine that furthers one's emotional and psychological developmental processes, enhancing self-efficacy, as well as change of one's world-view to a relatively positive one, all culminating to a transformed self (Gowack and Valle, 1998; Kaplan, 2005; Thrash and Elliott, 2004; Bronte and Wade, 2012).

Al-Ashqar (2005) wrote of the value of grace and mercy, terming them the only way through which Paradise could be achieved, not by the virtue of deeds alone. According to the Mother (1956), grace is that Presence through which the state of the world is perceived, because of which we understand and have the strength to carry on. Grace is that which calms us, and leads us toward a goal that is higher than the preferences of our everyday life. And it is because of the presence of the Divine grace that one has joy, and a sense of being complete. Gowack and Valle (1998) in their work with the volunteers for the care of the terminally ill found that grace was the source of energy, peace, and joy in their selfless service.

In *Summa Theologiae (Prima Pars)*, St. Aquinas (1920) writes that supernatural beatitude is attained by God's grace. Beatitude is the feeling of utmost bliss and happiness. Beatitude, according to St. Aquinas, is twofold, the accomplishment of which may be attained by the detailing of the distinction between philosophical knowledge and divine revelation, that is, of the distinction between the natural and the supernatural (Marshall, 2011). The natural ability of a man as a man is attained by him naturally. Our natural capabilities as human are that which comes to us naturally. But nature is not sufficient for the attainment of that which is supernatural. Hence the attainment of a supernatural beatitude is in itself out of the abilities of

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a man: for, the desire of such supreme beatitude in itself, according to St. Aquinas, is out of the nature of man. It is only through the grace of God that such may be desired, and thus attained. As such, man may be capable of natural knowledge, of philosophical thoughts, and natural beatitude; but it is through the grace of Divine that things that are of the Heaven are revealed.

Grace is also mentioned by St. Aquinas (1920) as the “charity of God” by which the soul is likened to God. Thus, the likeness of God is bestowed upon us by grace. Grace is again received only through the acts of faith: a faith in the existence of the free gift of God, a faith in the grace of God, a faith in God. “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God” (Eph ii. 8 KJV). The illumination of grace in an individual’s life is thus rooted in faith. And faith is caused by “that which moves man inwardly to assent,” it is that which object is the “First Truth”; “Faith is the substance of things to be hoped for,” (Aquinas, 1917) and the substance that is the likeness to which is found in each genus, the first thing in the genus that contains the others. “Faith is, after all, a human response to a revelation” (Meissner, 1969). This gift that is also the “charity of God” dispenses from us a charity of heart, as our soul is likened to God. That is to say, through sanctifying grace the actual act of grace bears witness in an individual’s life. In his first epistle to Corinthians, St. Paul wrote, “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.” (1 Cor. xiii.2 KJV) As was taught in the parable of the fruitless fig tree by Jesus, one that does not give fruit shall be cut down (Luke xiii. 6-9 KJV).

Meissner (1964) attempted to demonstrate the comparative development of the psychosocial and the psychosexual development with the process of spiritual growth under the influence of grace. He concluded that man’s relation to grace positively influences his capacity for self-realization, and achievement of a true personal autonomy and freedom. His basic principle remains that grace works in and through the resources of the ego, and grace, at the same time, supports the proper functioning of the ego, and is the energizing and dynamizing principle that makes this spiritual growth possible via transformation and reintegration of the psyche. Sengupta (2011) in her study on growth of motivation delineated asceticism as a functional need in the process of inner growth of an individual; a basic need in our journey to self-awareness and realization that may lead us to a better understanding of the meaning of our own existence. “Asceticism” refers to Sri Aurobindo’s concept of motivation, of how man’s basic drive is toward transcendence, and his motivation is “that of the soul towards the Divine,” wherein the Divine is pre-existent in man. The divine self is thus the spiritual self; and the spiritual growth of man is eminent in the archetypal notion of grace in the Divine, that is, a spiritual existence of the self in the grace of the Divine. This brings us to the context of a spiritual being, wherein a man strives to be likened to the Divine. Such is the notion of spirituality- that subjective experience of the Divine that transcends time and space. Studies in the experiences of spirituality (Larson et al. 1998; Sawatzky et al. 2005; Galanter et al. 2011; Kohls et al. 2011) as well as religiosity (Propst, 1980; Bennett and Rigby, 1991; Green and Elliot, 2010; Abdel-Khalek and Lester, 2012; Nandal et al. 2013) have found them to be

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a coherent factor in the wellbeing and positive health of an individual. Spirituality and religiosity, in this sense, pertains to a better sense making of meaning which may facilitate an individual in understanding and eventually accepting the suffering and hardship of life (Scharlach and Fuller, 1994; Smith et al. 2003; Koenig, 2009). The difference between spirituality and religiosity here in our study entails the preference of adhering to a dogma of a religious person. Nevertheless, the subjective experiences of the Divine are not undermined in the true essence of religiousness.

The concept of grace has been dealt with in a number of papers, specifically in trying to understand its religious as well as psychological nature (eg. Watson, 1959; O’Riordan, 1962; Meissner, 1964, 1969; Outka, 1972; Kaylor, 1976; Jordan 1988; Gowack and Valle, 1998; Kaplan, 2005; Bronte and Wade, 2012). The focus in this paper is on locating and conceptualizing the resilient and teleological nature of grace by using phenomenological enquiry. Hence, a phenomenological investigation for the experience of “feeling grace” was carried out on a middle aged individual. A single participant was chosen for this research purpose as an in-depth psychological study on the human experience, that is the phenomena of the essence of grace, was the focus of the research. Further studies may involve a wider range of participants. Also, the fact that grace as a psychological factor may be influenced by other factors is not being taken into consideration. This is because the current study, as we have already mentioned above, want to stay as close as possible, as well as, be true to the structure of the participant’s experience.

EXPERIENCING GRACE

The participant is a middle aged woman residing in a quiet countryside. She married at a relatively young age of 16, without any social or financial support from either her parents or her husband’s parent. She lost her second child (a daughter) to cancer at the age of 8 years. Becoming a working woman to help support the family with her husband, and taking voluntary retirement due to the need of the money, her family had come a long way. At age 50+, she is now a graceful grandmother. She is still happily married to the same person, socially active, and respectfully religious.

The procedure followed for the analysis is an adaptation of Colaizzi’s (1973, 1978) six-step procedure. The transcript data were re-read a number of times to get the feel of the data. Once assured that the data were understood as originally intended by the participant, phrases and sentences that best represented or explained her experience were extracted as the protocol summary. The next step was to transform the protocol summary into significant statements that best reflected the essential meaning of her statements. Similar significant statements were then clustered together to form theme clusters which ultimately gave us a structural summary. After formulating the structural summary, the participant was contacted to ask if the descriptive results did indeed compare with her experiences, and whether any aspect of her experience was omitted. The new relevant data were incorporated and the analysis was re-done. From the final structural summary, comprehensive thematic structures were extracted. Through-out the whole process one has to always remember to stay as close as

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possible to the data. The last step include putting the comprehensive thematic structures into constituent themes, all culminating into a comprehensive constituent summary that best reflects the experience of the participant.

Six constituent themes were identified:

1. Acclamation and expression of faith
2. Blessing and guidance received
3. Healthy intra- and inter-personal relation
4. Change of heart and yearning
5. Humility and support
6. Living in the Lord and belief in heavenly abode

Acclamation and expression of faith. This theme was evident in her recurring exclamations of praises for the Lord. These proclamations were made after her narration of a blessing or a positive event in her life, a realization of how little she could have done in such situation, and the acceptance of a Higher Power at work. For example: *“What or who am I to receive such blessings? Hallelujah!”*, *“The Lord had used my hand to save my baby’s life back then. Hallelujah! I didn’t even know how to pray or thank the Lord back then, how good the Lord was (and is) to me!!”*, *“Ever since that, the way we talk or what we usually talk about in our house changed. Even my children began to yearn for the Lord. Praise be the Lord”*, *“But through that experience all my children started yearning for that place called heaven. Praise the Lord!”* Also worth noting is the stream of negative events that consequently turns into blessings in her life. She narrated the event of her child’s death and ended the event with *“Praise the Lord.”*

Blessing and guidance received. This theme was the richest in the participant’s statement. She identified the events in her life as blessings from the Lord. Some examples are: *“He has blessed me aplenty”*, *“Blessings can be seen in the faces of not only my children, but my 6 grandchildren as well.”* She also identified the guiding nature of the Lord in her life accounting to the Lord’s kindness and grace to her everyday life. Examples of such statement are given below: *“The Lord was always guiding me even when I didn’t know Him”*, *“The Lord guided me...”*, *“The Lord has been very kind and good to me”*, *“How good the Lord was (and is) to me!!”*, *“My third child was still a baby, and I would go to the women’s convention (conference) with him on my lap. But the way I could go was all God’s grace”*, *“The Lord had used my hand to save my baby’s life back then.”*

Healthy intra- and inter-personal relation. Another theme that was evident was the healthy intra and inter-personal relation. The statement reflected the song *“Count Your Blessings Name Them One by One....”*, that is, acceptance of not only the past, but being happy and satisfied with the choices that she had made. For example: *“All of them (my children) are self-sufficient”*, *“I got married to the one who really loves me and whom I really love...”*, *“Through my dying daughter (cancer at 8 years of age), I and my whole family saw the goodness and grace of the Lord”*, *We were all at peace with her death.”*

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Change of heart and yearning. This theme was reflected in many of the events that followed after an experience of the Divine. In the statement she had mentioned of the Divine's presence in her life and the way He had changed her life. Examples are given below: *"Ever since that incident, the way we talk or what we usually talk about in our house changed", "I gave up my smoking habit in the name of Jesus ever since that day", "The Lord had lifted me", "In the year 1980, I started having a yearning for the Lord", "Even my children began to yearn for the Lord", "But through that experience all my children started yearning for that place called heaven."*

Humility and support. Another theme that was reflected was that of humility and a sense of support from God. There is a sense that every good comes of the Lord, and the Lord is at work. It is not because one has done so great a deed to receive such blessings, but it is because and only because the Lord is good, it is all in His grace. For example: *"What or who am I to receive such blessings?", "I am hoping and I believe that God will be good and kind to let me complete this term with good health", "...my aspiration was just to sell vegetables or make a tea hotel to earn money....", "I never even once saw myself as a leader. But the Lord had appointed me as one."*

Living in the Lord and belief in heavenly abode. This theme evolved from a sense of personal experience with the Divine within the family of the participant. When their daughter was on her death bed she had visions which further strengthened their faith in the Lord, as well as the existence of a Home. *"She (her dying daughter) saw Jesus when she was about to die", "As she said she saw Jesus coming to take her up to heaven, and even said that the place where she was going was majestic and beautiful", "She was very happy that she was going to Jesus...."*

This was again further reflected in their life and ways of living, as well as anointing the Lord's Hand in each and every blessing received. All culminating in a life lived in the Lord. Examples are given below: *"Ever since that, the way we talk or what we usually talk about in our house changed. Even my children began to yearn for the Lord. Praise be the Lord", "But through that experience all my children started yearning for that place called heaven. Praise the Lord!", "Blessings can be seen in the faces of not only my children, but my 6 grandchildren as well", "The Lord was always guiding me even when I didn't know Him", "The Lord has been very kind and good to me...", "How good the Lord was (and is) to me!!...."*

SUMMARY

From the literature gathered and the narration of experience of grace provided by the participant, we may say that grace is first and foremost an experience of *Divine Providence*. David, feeling very well the providence of his Lord, exclaimed, "...though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (Psalm xxiii. 4 KJV). Here, *Divine Providence* is taken in the context of the felt presence of God's guidance. A Providence of the Divine that accumulates to a life of a

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committed and personal faith in the Divine (O’Riordan, 1962), the sense of being blessed in addition to the security of guided-ness, all of which culminates in the formation of not only an optimistic outlook but also a sense of security providing one with an inner strength and agility. This may ascertain one in the everyday activities of life that everything is well and in place. The sense of spiritual guided-ness is prevalent in the participant’s narration of her experiences. Researches relating to the notion of spiritual guided-ness pertaining to spirituality as a coping mechanism have found it to be beneficial in dealing with daily hassles (Hathaway, 1992; Belavich, 1995), posttraumatic symptoms (Peres et al. 2007; Laufer and Solomon, 2011), illnesses that are disabling, critical or terminal (Yates et al. 1981; Kaye and Raghavan, 2002), and in maintaining a good mental and physical health (Seybold and Hill, 2001; Ghobari and Sadri, 2006). The evidences listed here suggests the capacity for an individual to give into the care of a Higher Being, make peace with whatever life may bring at the same time hoping for the best of situations, especially in times of troubles and suffering; all things shall eventually pass with the guidance of the Lord. Prayers and meditations are shown to be an archetypal method of dealing with stress. Even the most reasonable man prays in his own significant way in the most trying of his times.

Experiencing grace is also, thus, the experience of a change of heart, and a yearning for the Divine that culminates to a transformation of the self. It is that humbles one, it does not make one proud, does not make one think one is above others, and it engraves the sense of Divine Providence in one’s life. The grace of the Lord, herein, have a psychological impact on the individuals’ ego, deriving a faith in the Unseen and the unexplained, ascertaining humility and humbleness in relation to the ego-self, pertaining to accepting the processes of life as it goes through different stages and experiences (Meissner, 1964, 1969). It is that which lifts our heart and our spirit even in the darkest of all time and make one say “*it is well with my soul...*” The experience of grace is thus the experience of *Metanoia*: it is not just a change of heart and mind, but a transformation of the soul that leads to reflective healing through revelation (Friesen and Guhr, 2009; Myers, 2011), it is the transformation of the self-involved ego to a life of communion with the Lord and others (Branch, 2009). And in His Grace we find the ability to be grateful not just to God, but “to all for all they happen to give” (Menzel, 1975), in the process of which one becomes a relatively selfless individual thus improving upon one’s interpersonal as well as intrapersonal relationship (Wagenseller, 1998; Smith, 2005; Bronte and Wade, 2012). A personal experience with the Divine, an interpersonal relation with God as a person, is thus the experience of the Divine Grace that touches the heart and changes the life of an individual.

Experiencing grace is also the experience of the *Beatific Vision*—namely, direct communication with God, of knowing and loving God, of always living in the Lord, an attainment of that “perfect happiness”, the belief in a heavenly abode, and the experience of a heaven on earth. And it is by grace that this intellectual sight is endowed to us through which we ‘see’ God (Tinkle, 1988). This intellectual sight that perceives the knowledge and the wisdom of the Divine is the *Beatific Vision* (Hamilton, 1935) that “leads us whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not, towards the supreme goal, that is, union with the Divine,

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the awareness of the Godhead and union with Him” (The Mother, 1956). Herein lies the essence of happiness, which endows a man with resilience of ways - a strong sense of inner support (Yates et al. 1981; Scharlach and Fuller, 1994; Kaye and Raghavan, 2002; Smith et al. 2003; Koenig, 2009; Green et al. 2010). Such ways leads man to ask, ‘How does man strives to live on after being through so much?’, ‘How does man overcome the sufferings and losses he acquires, and how does he get back up?’ Aquinas (1920) contends that man’s perfect happiness consists in knowing the first substance, namely, God.

The experience and acknowledgement of grace in one’s own life is, thus, having as an inner guide, which in the Jungian terminology is referred to as Sophia (the Wisdom of God), or the Archetype of the Wise Guide. An inner guide, because with grace comes not only the understanding of the ways of nature, but also understanding the ways of God which is grounded in reality (O’Riordan, 1962). The understanding of nature in the sense that through grace comes the living experience of everyday life, of relating to those around you, and of being equally capable in forming personal relationship and maintain them as well. It is wisdom that also gives us the capacity to understand the ways of the Lord through which life is lived in the knowledge that “the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job i.21 KJV). It is eventually something that is perpetual. In the life of the participant, grace thus becomes that medium through which she experiences a religious luminosity whereby she acquire a new meaning and perspective in life, a spiritual firmness, or even an invisible inner support (von Franz, 1968). Hence, grace is that through which spiritual growth is made possible (Meissner, 1964), through which one becomes a more individuated being with a better sense of Self, and an overall understanding of life and its ways enabling us to accept with humility any weakness or failures that may come our way (O’Riordan, 1962).

CONCLUSION

In Christian world-view, man is in a state of fallen nature due to the Original Sin, consequently living the curse of toiling on the land till the end of his life and the labour pain. Having lost the Paradise, lamentation, exodus and sin has befallen upon humankind. With the dawn of consciousness, he has also become subjected to moral and health deficiencies, and the inevitable aging and death. Living a life of manifold shortcomings and a life made up of a variety of vulnerability and vulgarity, it is the grace from above, as a vital-spiritual principle, which sublimates the individual, making him capable of infused virtues and enables him to perform meritorious acts. Although the life of Paradise is lost, grace is still conferred in abundance upon us through the infused virtues, the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the institution of the sacraments as the sensible signs of grace to furnish us with greater security and greater confidence: “Where sin abounded, grace did more abound” (Romans v. 5 KJV).

In Christian tradition, grace is a transpersonal quality inherent in the soul which makes us partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter i. 4 KJV), causes us to enter into communion with the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians viii. 13 KJV) and establishes a fellowship with the Holy Trinity (1

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John i. 3 KJV). It is a mode of being, a state of soul that has transforming effects and a foretaste of the Beatific Vision, making the individual partake in divine goodness.

Grace is discerned and realized, leading to a relatively permanent change in behaviour by transcending moral and physical impediments, thus prepare for and perpetuate a virtuous life through prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. These enlisted theological virtues play a vital role in removing obstacles or in supplying positive means to press onwards towards spiritual goals beyond Maslow's lower level needs. Prudence as a virtue allows us the capacity to choose the right judgment and the right path so that one may not stray from the goal. Justice frees us from personal desires that binds us to selfishness, cleansing our soul so we may deliver what is due to others. Fortitude armors our soul with patience and endurance, strengthening us through trials and temptations. Temperance, plying on the pleasure principle of the super ego, enables us delay of gratification so we may follow the right course.

Reception of grace facilitates human faculties into action which enlighten the mind, strengthen the will and aid in increasing the measure of grace that has been divinely granted. Grace received through divine charity helps in perfecting the exercise of the infused virtues. To live a life of salutary acts, grace blesses the individual with the gifts of the Holy Spirit: the gift of understanding that begets tranquility; the gift of knowledge that brings us an awareness so we may *know* God; the gift of fear that begets the virtue of temperance; the gift of wisdom that may discern for years of experience begetting an insightful love and understanding of the Divine; the gift of counsel so we may not falter and in turn gives us the virtue of prudence; the gift of piety so we may perform our duty to God in spirit; and the gift of fortitude strengthening us in spirit.

The soul is nurtured by these virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit in the presence of grace. The experience of grace is, thus, an experience of the Divine in everyday life. It is a life of grace not when they have lived a handful number of years, but when they have lived long enough to experience Divine Providence, Metanoia, and Beatific Vision. As St. Thomas Aquinas had written in *Summa Theologiae* (Dreyer, 1990), through grace are given the gifts of love, wisdom, and understanding for our enjoyment. His basic premise is that grace is primarily the gratuitous gift of God, given out of the abundance of God's merciful love. Grace within a person is the outcome of God's mercy, and God alone is the cause. So says in the book of Psalms, "...goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Psalm xxiii. 6 KJV).

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