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The Means of Grace in Roman Theology

That things are not what they seem is an observation elicited frequently by a course of study in Roman Catholic dogma. At no point is this caution more necessary than in an attempt to comprehend the Roman Catholic idea of Grace and of the Means of Grace.

When the Lutheran Reformation eliminated that host of intermediaries and plenipotentiaries who obstructed the way to grace, it incredibly simplified certain fundamental concepts. Grace is the attitude of divine good will toward the sinner, nothing else. And the Means of Grace are the provisions which God has made to bring His favor to the individual. Fundamentally there is only one means, the Gospel-message. In its plural form the word would include the Sacraments, Baptism and Holy Communion, and such functions of the holy ministry as preaching and absolution.

The Roman handbooks list a bewildering array of topics under the head of Means of Grace. Francis Cassilly has written a textbook for use in Catholic high schools entitled *Religion, Doctrine, and Practice* (1926). Cassilly lists among the Means of Grace first of all Grace as Sanctifying and Actual, thereby advising us at once of a fundamental difference somewhere in the definition of grace, as distinguished from the Protestant concept. Among the Means of Grace there is listed next Prayer, with a special section on the "Hail Mary." Then the Sacraments. Then the sacramentals, such as the blessings of the Church, also holy water, the rosary, candles, crosses, and medals. Furthermore, religious ceremonies, genuflections, vestments, liturgy, processions, pilgrimages. Also the ecclesiastical year with its holy days, rogation days, the Corpus Christi, the devotion of the Sacred Heart, and the entire system of seasons and days, of which the author says that it unquestionably "could have come only from the inspiration of the Holy Ghost."

In all this variety of Means of Grace one is conspicuously absent—the Word.

Yet there is nothing haphazard or accidental about this classification of various functions, offices, institutions, and ceremonies as Means of Grace. The clue to the apparently heterogeneous scheme is found in the Roman Catholic definition of grace.

Grace

In Roman theology the term grace includes a number of religious ideas which are carefully defined in the handbooks of doctrine, however confusing may be their use in the literature of the Church generally. A large number of passages might readily be quoted in which the term grace is employed in its Scriptural sense. The grace of God is also to the Catholic God's forgiving love. So thoroughly is this concept of grace embedded in both the Old and the New Testament Scriptures that no theology which still has its fringe in the canonical writings can fail to employ the term in its native sense. Yet throughout the dogmatic and devotional literature of the Roman Church a constant shift in the meaning of the term grace is observed.

When the Protestant says that "without grace no one can enter heaven," he has in mind the pardoning love of God. When the Catholic teacher uses the same expression, he means "sanctifying grace"—that gift which Adam lost through the Fall, the gift "which had placed him in a supernatural state and made him a friend and child of God with a right and title to enter heaven."¹ The Roman theory assumes that, as Adam received a *donum superadditum* which made him pleasing to God, so every child of God may receive this "supernatural gift by which we are cleansed from sins, made holy, pleasing to God, and heirs of heaven." This gift is called "sanctifying grace," also "the grace of justification." "By it we are justified, that is, we pass from a state of sin to a holy and righteous state." Of this gift it is said that it is "a free gift of God and cannot be merited by naturally good works"—a limitation which makes confusion worse confounded because granting *some* merit to the works which are good,—though not *naturally* so. As a matter of fact, we are immediately informed that sanctifying grace "gives us a title to merit *by our good deeds.*"² More specifically, sanctifying grace "is restored by acts of faith, hope, and contrition," and when a person is in such a state, the Council of Trent declares life eternal to be strictly merited. If then it is asked by what means such "grace" may be obtained, we are told that there are two principal means—prayer and the use of the Sacraments.

1) Cassilly, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

2) Cassilly, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

That which preserves this system from becoming the baldest Pelagianism is the doctrine that good works "derive their value from the merits of Jesus Christ."

As distinguished from sanctifying grace, there is actual grace. Cassilly illustrates this doctrine by means of a comparison, thus: "One wintry day a team of horses was laboring to pull a heavily laden wagon up an ice-covered hill. Finally it was stalled; it could go no farther. An auto truck happening by, the driver saw the predicament of the stalled team and came to its relief by attaching his truck to the wagon-pole. With the assistance of the truck the horses easily drew the load up the hill." Now, in this case the natural powers of man are the team of horses, the grace of God is the auto truck, and so man, "by the union of his natural powers with grace, is enabled to perform the virtuous act or overcome the temptation." "Actual," then, is a term implying activity, the ability of man to do good and avoid evil, differing from sanctifying grace (which is "permanent") in this, that, "when the temptation passes or the good act is performed, the grace is no longer needed, and it ceases." It is more proper therefore to speak of actual graces (plural), — and this is the common Catholic usage, — "graces, like gentle rain from heaven, are constantly falling into our souls," etc.³⁾

It is only with this preview of the Catholic concept of grace that we are able to understand the doctrine of the means by which grace is conferred. These, as has been said, range from the "Hail Mary" and holy candles to the tremendous mystery of the Mass. Yet there are two features which characterize the Roman concept of the Means of Grace in a manner peculiar to that system. We have in mind the doctrines of the *opus operatum* and of the indelible character in the sacramental system.

The Sacramental System

The Means of Grace, as the term is understood in Roman theology, is not primarily the Word, but the priestly function, more accurately still, that complex of priestly functions which we call the sacramental system.⁴⁾

Through the Sacraments, permanently instituted by Christ, the Roman church-member has the means by which, when rightly used, God is moved infallibly to confer grace upon the soul. But

3) The Catholic catechist will ask: "Are graces distributed equally? Why not? Did the great saints receive more graces than ordinary Christians? How do our graces depend on our own disposition? Do we always notice the graces we receive?" So Cassilly.

4) It should be noted that Gibbons ranks prayer above the Sacraments as a Means of Grace. *Faith of Our Fathers*, Ed. '92, p. 265. So the handbooks generally.

although the grace of God is equally present in all, they have each a specific effect and also differ in their ability to confer an indelible character. The theological handbooks endeavor to present, more or less successfully, this unity of purpose (with diversity of gift) by means of analogies from human life. Looking upon life as a conflict and the Church as the army at war with sin, Berthold of Chiemsee (*Tewtsche Theology*, 1528) points out that man is enrolled in this army through Baptism; Confirmation gives him the armament; Penance binds up and heals those wounded in the strife; Communion gives food to the soldier; and Extreme Unction serves the dying. Holy Orders sends the servants into the Christian battle-line, and Marriage supplies ever new additions to the forces.

Other unifying principles have been suggested. It has been pointed out that the seven sacraments are each opposed to one of the seven deadly sins, thus: in Baptism, humility opposes pride; in Confirmation, hope is opposed to avarice; in the Eucharist, love against envy; in Penance, righteousness against gluttony; in Extreme Unction, endurance against sloth; in Ordination, wisdom against anger; in Marriage, continence against impurity.

Again, it has been reasoned that Baptism and Penance concern faith, Confirmation and Extreme Unction concern hope, Eucharist and Matrimony concern charity, while Ordination is the means of supplying all the rest.

More artificially still, the Catholic writers of works of devotion draw an analogy between the seven sacraments and the five loaves and two fishes, Matt. 14:17 ff. Five sacraments are incumbent on every Christian, "even as bread is the universal food," while the fishes correspond to Ordination and Matrimony, which are left to the individual choice, "even as sea-food is a matter of personal preference."

The artificial nature of these parallels and analogies is evident. While impressive and even convincing to rude minds, they are not featured in the modern handbooks of instruction. Francis Cassilly says, rather matter of fact:

"The number and nature of the sacraments correspond most aptly with the needs of the temporal and spiritual life. As men by their natural birth are brought into the world, so by Baptism they are born to the supernatural life of grace and brought into the Church. Children must grow and get strong, and Confirmation makes us strong and vigorous in grace. Men need food to nourish them, and the Eucharist is the food of the soul. When people fall ill, they need a remedy to bring them back to bodily health; Penance restores life and health to the soul. All must die, and Extreme Unction gives us consolation and special grace to die

in peace and resignation; and it does more, for it brings back the former vigor of the soul by removing the remains of sin and sometimes restores the bodily health. Nations must have a government and civil rulers; the Sacrament of Holy Orders supplies spiritual rulers to the Church and keeps up its administration. Marriage makes the family and perpetuates the human race, while the Sacrament of Matrimony makes the Christian family, perpetuates the Church on earth, and fills heaven with saints." 5)

But now as to the features which have been superimposed upon the sacramental system by the doctors of the Church—the *opus operatum* doctrine and the Indelible Character. 6)

The Doctrine of Opus Operatum

Both the Augsburg Confession and the Apology have expressed the dissent of the Reformers from "those who teach that the Sacraments justify by the outward act and who do not teach that, in the use of the Sacraments, faith which believes that sins are forgiven is required" (*Augsb. Conf.*, Art. 13) and condemn "the whole crowd of scholastic doctors, who teach that the Sacraments confer grace *ex opere operato*, without a good disposition on the part of the one using them, provided he do not place a hindrance in the way." (*Apol. A. C.*, XIII, 18.) The argument by which Roman Catholic theology endeavors to establish the absolute efficacy of the Sacraments is one of the strangest combinations of Rationalism and of *argumentum ad hominem*, with an appeal to exegesis which ignores fundamental principles of interpretation. The argument as it is found in modern text-books of instruction goes back to the pre-Tridentine, when the apologists for the old system had to justify their doctrines against the criticism of Lutheran and the other reformers. The following is translated from the German (and an uncouth German it is) of John Mensing, whose *Antapology*, directed against the Augsburg Confession and its Apology ("*der kraftlosen vnd vngegründten Philipp Melancthonis Apologiae*") was completed in 1535: 7)

"When our theologians compared the Sacraments of Holy Church with those of the Jews, they raised the question whether in Christ's Sacraments there be a native power (*eynige kraft*), to work forgiveness of sins, since it is clear from the Scriptures that

5) *Op. cit.*, p. 178.

6) Both doctrines are held also by the Eastern Church, likewise the teaching that for effective administration of the Sacraments the inward intention of the priest is necessary. (See *Popular Symbolics*, p. 143 f.)

7) The section is quoted in *Die Vortridentinisch-Katholische Theologie des Reformations-Zeitalters, aus den Quellen Dargestellt von Dr. Hugo Laemmer*. Berlin, 1858, p. 220 f.

the Jewish Sacraments did not have this power. Paul, Gal. 4:9, calls these weak and beggarly elements—beggarly because they lacked the sufferings of Christ, without which they were ineffective. And still the Scripture testifies that the fathers, when they used such Sacraments, received forgiveness. Now, our theologians maintain that this did not occur *ex opere operato*, or by the power and virtue of the action itself. Rather, they maintain that forgiveness was conferred by reason of the faith in Christ on the part of those who used them, called by our theologians *opus operans*. Now, say our theologians, if we are to attribute to the holy Sacraments more virtue and power than we attribute to the Jewish Sacraments, they must be capable of giving grace to those who subject themselves faithfully. And this, they say, is *ex opere operato*, that is, by the very use of the Sacrament, even if *opus operans* (that is, devotion and faith) are not present, so long as by an obstinate wicked heart and secret unbelief they do not make themselves unworthy of grace.

“The Sacraments of the Old Testament gave the grace of forgiveness merely as a reward of faith. If the New Testament Sacraments are to do more, they will give forgiveness by the simple action that is being performed. The reason for this is the Passion of Christ, which operates through them. Such a work cannot be without power. It is true that in Baptism my faith is *opus operans*; but Baptism in itself, and viewed in absence of my faith, is *opus operatum*, where Christ works without me, and the effect is justification, or forgiveness of sins. And so our theologians are steeled (*gesegenet*—lit., protected as by a charm) against every argument of the Lutherans and Anabaptists when they confess that in the Sacraments of Christ is an invisible power and grace which works justification and forgiveness of sin, renewal, the infusion of grace and every virtue, without addition of any work of ours, simply permitting the Holy Ghost to grant it *ex opere operato*.”

The *ex-opere-operato* theory was established as official Catholic doctrine when the Council of Trent pronounced anathema upon any one “who would say that grace is not conferred *ex opere operato* through the Sacraments of the new law but maintain that faith in the divine promise is sufficient to obtain grace.” (Sess. VII, Can. VIII.)

The Jesuit dogmatician Christian Pesch, in the sixth volume of his *Praelectiones Dogmaticae*, discusses the proposition that “the Sacraments of the new law confer sanctifying grace *ex opere operato*.” He explains that by *opus operatum* is to be understood the very sacramental sign (as, for instance, the sprinkling of water upon the head of the candidate) together with the pronouncement of the words “I baptize thee,” etc. “Hence,” says Pesch, “the *opus*

operatum is opposed to the *opus operantis*, that is to say, opposed either to the merit of the minister or to that of the one receiving the Sacrament. Accordingly the meaning of the proposition is: "When a person receives the Sacrament in the prescribed manner, he receives sanctifying grace, not because himself or the minister deserve this grace, but by virtue of the sign instituted by Christ." 8)

The doctrine of the *opus operatum* was completely developed by Bellarmine, whose propositions again were analyzed and refuted by Gerhard. (*Loci, sub* "The Sacraments in General.") Bellarmine as well as the later dogmaticians 9) have endeavored to cover up the mechanistic theory of the Sacraments involved in the *ex opere operato* by pointing out that, while the recipient and his faith have nothing to do with the efficacy of the Sacrament in conferring grace, the recipient, by his faith and repentance, supplies a fertile soil for the operations of divine grace. "As there must be in the wood a capacity of being set on fire if a flame is to be produced, even so there must be on the part of the recipient preparation and co-operation in order that the Sacrament might do its work" — a line of reasoning which adds to the inconsistencies in the doctrine of the Sacrament and, worst of all, makes the favorable, or receptive, attitude of the parishioner the true cause of that infusion of grace or accession of virtue which Roman theology has substituted for the free gift of divine pardon. John Perrone, S. J., in his *Praelectiones Theologicae*, 10) seeks to show that Sacraments confer their grace by an "inner virtue," by adducing proof from the Scriptures, the fathers, and the unanimous teaching of the Church. All texts which establish the power of the Sacraments to confer grace are cited to prove that this power is exerted by the mere outward performance of the prescribed act. This has been consistently the method of proof ever since Catholic dogmaticians were compelled to justify their mechanical view of the Means of Grace after the foundation had been shaken by the first onslaught of the Reformers. 11)

It adds to the confusion when Roman theology makes the

8) Pesch, *op. cit.*, 4th edition, 1914, Vol. 6, p. 46.

9) For instance W. Wilmers, *Lehrbuch der Religion*, 7th edition, 1912, IV, 218 f.

10) Ratisbon, 1856, Vol. II, p. 267 ff.

11) In the popular presentation little or nothing is made of the inherent power of the Sacrament, its efficacy *ex opere operato*, emphasis being laid on the need of proper disposition. For instance, in Cassilly both teachings are united in the sentence: "It is to be noted that the Sacraments, according to the institution of Christ, give grace of themselves and not by virtue of the minister or recipient, though the disposition of the recipient may be a necessary condition." (*Op. cit.*, p. 179.)

effectiveness of the Sacraments depend upon an entirely subjective factor, the purpose in the mind of the officiating priest. This is the famous doctrine of the Intention.

The Intention

On the one hand, the Roman Church teaches—and to this Protestant theology has never objected—that the validity of the Sacrament depends neither on the faith nor on the moral probity of the minister.¹²⁾ This does not mean, however, that, in order that the Sacraments may be administered *properly (licite)* the minister may be an unbeliever or living a reckless life of sin. On the contrary, one who is not in a state of grace, sins mortally if, knowing such a condition of his soul, he nevertheless administers a Sacrament. But this does not affect the *validity* of the sacred act. The theologians distinguish between an administration *licite* and *valide*. There is no *valid* administration unless there is present the intention of the priest.

Here the Aristotelian distinction between matter and form enters in. If the matter of Baptism is changed, there is no Sacrament, as when another liquid than water is used. Or the form is altered (and in this terminology, form is equivalent to essence), and here the intention of the speaker enters as a decisive factor. It is possible to use conventional words in a subjective manner, as when instead of intending that Baptism confer grace, the priest speaks with this intention: "I baptize thee—for the purpose of cooling thee off." The sacramental word can only then be effective when the intention to do what the Church does is present.¹³⁾ The dogmaticians develop with great ingenuity the exact meaning of intention. They distinguish it from mere attention, also from mental distraction, which may be a venial or even a mortal sin, but does not, like the absence of intention, affect the essence of a valid Sacrament.¹⁴⁾

The Scripture proof for the Intention is derived from 1 Cor. 4:1, Luke 22:19, and John 20:23.

The disquieting doubt of the Roman Christian whether his baptism had been valid and whether in the absence of such valid Baptism he be properly confirmed, married, ordained, is not overlooked by the dogmaticians. The handbook of Perrone refers to the circumstance, "*quod in Catholicorum doctrina necessario anxietas animi oriri debeat, num quis fuerit rite baptizatus, caeteraque sacramenta sibi rite fuerint collata.*" His answer is

12) *Valor sacramentorum neque a fide neque a probitate ministri pendet.* Pesch, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

13) Wilmers, *op. cit.*, p. 240 ff. So all the dogmaticians since Trent.

14) Pesch, *op. cit.*, p. 123 ff.

that there is a justifiable moral certainty that the rite is celebrated with the proper priestly intention; that is, the chances are infinitely against the occurrence of such a lapse.¹⁵⁾

It is difficult to follow the dogma in all its ramifications, as when Wilmers asserts that the *actual* intention is not necessary (though desirable), that the *habitual* is not sufficient, and that the *virtual* is required and is sufficient.¹⁶⁾ In the end, the Catholic doctrine of Intention defies all attempts at definition, since it is, on the one hand, made an absolute and sufficient condition of a valid rite, while, on the other hand, the Sacrament is held to be effective by its inner constitution (*ex opere operato*), yet with the condition, in the recipient, of preparation "by making fervent acts of faith, hope, love, desire, contrition, and humility."¹⁷⁾

The Indelible Character

The Council of Trent pronounced a curse on all who deny that in Baptism, Confirmation, and Ordination the soul receives a spiritual and indelible mark, or character. This accounts for the fact that these sacraments may not be repeated. The character is held to be indelible during the present life and in that which is to come, the latter indeed by an argument *e silentio* (because the councils do not limit the character to the present life).¹⁸⁾ As to the exact nature of this character, Catholic theology has no descriptions that go beyond adducing those texts which refer to the seal imprinted upon the believer, 2 Cor. 1:21, 22; Eph. 1:13; 4:30. The inadequacy of these texts was pointed out by Chemnitz in his *Examen*¹⁹⁾ and by Gerhard in his criticism of Bellarmine. Cassilly explains that Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders "cannot be repeated because they imprint an indelible spiritual character, or mark, upon the soul. As a brand upon cattle shows

15) Perrone, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

16) Referring to the last-mentioned type of intention: "Wer mit einer solchen Meinung wirkt, verrichtet menschliche, das heisst, aus Ueberlegung und Freiheit hervorgehende, Handlungen, und eine solche Meinung ist in Wahrheit eine Einwirkung des Willens auf den sakramentalen Akt." (Wilmers, *op. cit.*, p. 243.)

17) Cassilly, *op. cit.*, p. 179. There is no space here to enter into attrition and contrition and the possibility of receiving the benefits of a Sacrament when in mortal sin without knowing it. Nor can we stop to analyze the strange dogma that a Sacrament can be received "validly but without obtaining grace." As when Cassilly defines: "One who receives Baptism, Confirmation, Extreme Unction, Holy Orders, or Matrimony unworthily receives them validly, that is, he is actually baptized, ordained, married, etc., though without obtaining any grace." (*Op. cit.*, p. 180.)

18) Wilmers, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

19) *Exam. Conc. Trid.*, p. 2, in can. 9, *De Sacramentis*.

who the owner is, this spiritual mark shows that the person belongs to Christ in a special manner. This character remains forever, even in the next life, where it will be a badge of joy and glory to the elect and of shame to the lost." And this is as far as the doctors go. They call the character a "supernatural quality of the soul by which man in a peculiar manner becomes conformed to Christ, the High Priest, is set aside for divine service, and receives a special relationship to grace." This is the definition of Pesch. It is not a physical potency but rather a moral power by which the individual is made capable of receiving or administering sacred things. Pesch finally dismisses the discussion of the character by designating it as a "*passibilis qualitas*." (!!) Whether it be located in the essence of the soul or in its faculties, has also been disputed by the scholastics. Aquinas held that it was affixed to the intellect, Scotus found it in the will, while the Jesuit theologians referred it to the soul's essence. Pesch finds the solution in the opinion, held by many doctors, that there is no real distinction between the essence of the soul and its faculties!

And here we shall terminate our survey of that farrago of unprofitable, self-contradictory, man-made dogmas which the Church of Rome has substituted for the simple doctrine of the Means of Grace.

THEODORE GRAEBNER

Der Pastor als Synodalglied

Es gibt hier auf Erden eine wunderbare Gemeinschaft, so innig und intim wie keine andere. Es ist dies die heilige christliche Kirche, die Gemeinde der Heiligen. Wer immer an Jesum Christum als einigen Heiland glaubt, ist ein Glied dieser Gemeinschaft. Diese ist über die ganze Welt zerstreut. Sie ist unsichtbar. Aber diese Gemeinschaft gibt sich zu erkennen. Christen an einem Orte tun sich zu Gemeinden zusammen. Und mehrere Gemeinden bilden größere Kirchenkörper. Da die Glieder der Kirche einen Leib bilden, so liegt es in der Natur der Sache, daß die Christen sich umeinander bekümmern, in Gemeinschaft miteinander treten und füreinander sorgen. Als die Apostel hörten, daß Samaria das Wort Gottes angenommen hatte, schickten sie alsbald eine Deputation dorthin und richteten die Glaubensgemeinschaft auf. Und als in Antiochien eine christliche Gemeinde gegründet war, wurde sie von Propheten aus Jerusalem besucht, Apost. 11, 27. Ferner lernen wir aus den Briefen der Apostel, daß zwischen den Gemeinden in Asien und Griechenland ein reger Verkehr bestand ohne eine eigentliche Synodalorganisation.

Auch wir erkennen außerhalb unserer Synode alle rechtgläubigen Gemeinden und Kirchenkörper als Glaubensgenossen an und interessieren