

The Year of Grace in the Catholic Church

A definition of Grace:

**Grace is God's divine indwelling,
Whose source is Jesus Christ
Which heals
And transforms**



Did you notice?

The understanding of God's grace is God's life that dwells within us. By virtue of our Baptism we have God within us. The prayer that is prayed after the christening <Christ-ening> of a baby states: this child has been enlightened by Christ, may she keep the flame of faith alive in her heart. In John's gospel we hear Jesus instructing his disciples to "remain in my love". In 15: God's grace is God's love that is poured into our hearts and fills our lives.

As members of the Body of Christ we note that the ultimate source of this grace is Christ. He became human to share our life and he died and rose from the dead to save us. Our life with God emanates from God's initiative to come to us and share our existence.

The grace of God that we share is not for our perusal or our admiration, it is for action. The story of Christ is a dynamic one of friendship with disciples and the teaching and signs that accompanied his journey throughout Galilee and onto Jerusalem was filled with grace. This friendship led to a mission: his followers were called to heal and transform others. Our baptism charges us to be disciples who continue the task of Jesus in mending relationships and inspiring God's transformation of individuals.

Year of Grace prayer

Gracious God,

*You have blessed this ancient land
with many gifts, especially its people.*

*We thank you for the Year of Grace,
a time to start afresh from Christ.*

*You invite us to contemplate
the face of Jesus your Son,
that we may experience a new wave of grace,
and that the light of Christ
may burn more brightly in our lives.*

*Attune our hearts and minds
to the presence of your Holy Spirit,
that our Church may be transformed,
our relationships be healed,
and our nation grow in compassion and justice.*

*With the intercession of St Mary MacKillop,
who showed us new ways of living the Gospel,
we make our prayer
through Christ our Lord.*

Amen.

Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us.

Part A



What does the Old Testament say about God's grace?

God's Grace in the Old Testament.

In order to understand the riches of God's grace we can begin by noting several characteristics of this wonderful gift by reading the Bible, the Salvation story of the People of Israel. Five elements stand out as a preparation for the fullness of grace that is found in Christ.

1

In the Old Testament we hear God's Grace as a **promise** that is not only offered to Abraham and Sarah but to all their descendants. God never utters a word that doesn't work! By simply saying the word the cosmos was created. By making a promise God initiates the process that will achieve his goal.

2

Grace offers a **hope for the future.**

This is clearly seen in the person of Moses who not only envisions an escape from Egypt but also leads the chosen people toward their future, their promised land. Moses was somewhat reluctant at first but God taught him to trust in the hope that was offered.

3

God's Grace is seen in the many examples of **mercy** that is shown to his people. Since the story of the Israelites was one of failure and repentance we note that it is God's merciful grace that continually is present throughout their journey. God created humankind and knows the good things we can do as well as the depth of human weakness to which we sometimes descend.

"Have mercy on me God in your kindness". Psalm 50 is the classic prayer for God's forgiveness. The Church continues to pray this psalm every Friday morning. We must never forget the infinite care God has for his people and the infinite patience and forgiveness that is offered.

4

God's Grace is God's **love** for his people. "For you love is better than life" says the psalmist. Grace offers a life that is fuller and richer than we can imagine. The existence of the People of Israel is due solely to the gift of God's love for them. The story of God's relationship with them is one of his steadfast love through many centuries.

5

God's Grace is seen in the **gifts that he gives.** God offers his friendship and hospitality in his creation then gives guidance and a covenant to his people. God offers a gift of land for the Israelites to inhabit and an abundance of food and drink for the generations that follow.

Part B



Grace in Jesus Christ.

What do we learn in the New Testament about God's grace in the person of Jesus?

Firstly, we note that the same five elements <Promise/ hope/ mercy/ gifts/ love> offered to the descendants of Jacob are found in a richer, more potent and sublime form in the life and person of Jesus. This is not surprising since Jesus is God. His name means "God saves". He is "God from God, light from light, true God" as we profess each Sunday at Mass. He was working with the Father in all his dealings with the people of Israel.

All we have seen in the first Testament that describes some elements of God's grace is found fully in Jesus Christ. He is the embodiment of God's grace, God's love.

"With the coming of Christ grace and truth have come to us" Jn 1:17 In Christ "we have suddenly known that God is love" 1 Jn 4:8.

So any perusal of the Gospels will note God's saving grace at work in the words and actions of Christ. We can note two elements of this mission of Christ: healing and transformation. Almost every chapter of the gospel recounts a story of healing a person who is suffering, or presents an account of a life-changing event that occurs when someone encounters Christ.

The grace of Jesus heals people and heals our world.

Look at any of the miracle stories and note the amazing power that is before the crowds and the followers of Christ. Little wonder the gospels state that so many people were coming to Christ for healing. Some of the sick had to be lowered down through the roof! Jesus cures all who believe in him. His death and resurrection repairs broken humanity, heals world history for he is the "lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". Observe any story of Christ's healing and you see the power of God's saving action, God's amazing grace.

God's grace transforms.

The people Christ encounters in the fields, beside the sea, in homes and in the temple, who are open to God's grace, are all changed. God's grace transforms human life. We have our own favourite Gospel stories of conversion: Zacchaeus who gives half his money away and repays fourfold any one he defrauded because "salvation came to his house" when Jesus visited. The call of Matthew from his tax office or the fisher men from their nets, are narratives that highlight the grace of God at work in people. The dramatic change in the disciples at Emmaus is a story of God's powerful transformation of a dispirited couple.

Part C



The Church - a sign of God's grace.

The signs of God's love in the Catholic Church can be seen in our liturgies that celebrate the divine indwelling we share as baptised members of God's church. First and foremost is the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Note that the mass continues the five themes of grace found in the Old Testament: God's Promise and mercy, his hope and love, and the gifts that he shares.

The Eucharist is the re-enacting, the re-actualising and remembering the death and resurrection of Christ. Within the mass, Christ's presence is celebrated with the bread and wine that we offer on the altar. These are transformed into his Body and Blood. Our reception of the Eucharist each week heals and transforms us just as Jesus shared his grace with the ones he encountered during his earthly ministry.

Since the Church is the Body of Christ we are able to see many examples of God's healing and life changing grace in her life and mission. With Mary as Mother of Divine Grace we have a model of authentic discipleship in her life and fidelity to the work of her Son. She is full of grace, filled with God's healing and life-changing love for all humanity.

God's grace in the Church heals our parish, our community, our world.

Look at the work of your local parish. Note the St Vincent de Paul volunteers who collect for the soup kitchens, or the ones who visit the nursing homes. Check out the websites of the Catholic charities and hospitals here and overseas. Peruse the story of the religious orders ministering today to the marginalised in our midst. Google the account of St Damien and Blessed Marianne of Molokai and marvel at the healing that their lives brought to the lepers on that island.

God's grace heals and the Body of Christ has, for two millennia, continued to respond with the energy God's Holy Spirit gave us at Pentecost: a potential unleashed to fire our imagination and galvanise our spirits to care for others. The story of the Church is a vast landscape of immense service to humanity.

God's grace transforms our parish, our community, our world.

The transformation of people we can observe in our Church. Each year we have a cycle of celebration that takes us from Advent to Pentecost. The essence of this journey is our mission to change, and become more like Christ. The prayer groups, retreats and reflection days in parishes and schools all intend to answer the simple question: what is the small thing that Christ is asking of me today? What in my life do I have to change so that the image of Christ may come to perfection within me? How can God's grace transform me?

Our Colleges are replete with groups that foster a change in our lives. The counselling departments, the pastoral care periods, the restorative justice programs and social justice ventures all intend our transformation. Our Religious Education classes are not primarily about information concerning the Church in history: the aim is the transformation of the individual, conforming the lives of the student to the person of Christ. This is not merely the task of the teacher it is God's initiative and his saving plan for each and every person he created.

Our Lenten collections and fundraising for the missions are supposed to change us, not merely to lighten our wallets or diminish the credit card. The Church is an enduring symbol of God's healing and transforming grace. Our schools and colleges should be places alive with ambitious ventures and novel ideas that strive to make God's amazing grace strongly felt in our midst and keenly observed by the wider community.