

# HOW CATHOLICS UNDERSTAND GRACE

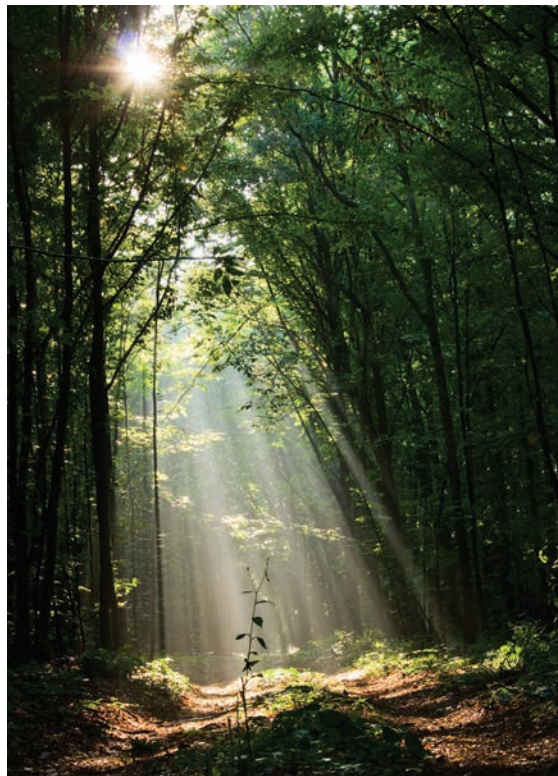
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*What must I do to be holy? If I do everything right, will I be assured of redemption? Can I earn salvation?*

The question of holiness and God's grace—God's powerful force of love within us, implanted by God and sustained by God—is as old as Adam and Eve and is the root of a 600-year-old debate between Catholics and Lutherans. Christians, like Jews, have always agreed that woman and man were created in the image and likeness of God (see Genesis 1:26). Among Christians, the argument has been over the extent of damage done by the original parents' sin. We are born with original sin; what is its effect?

We all know the gulf between how fully we love and how fully God wants us to love. Evidence abounds, within our hearts and in human society, that human nature falls short of perfection, is flawed. But how flawed are we?

Some of the Church's deepest struggles have been about this doctrine of grace. Even in New Testament times, we see different approaches in response to the differing situations of the local Churches. Saint Paul writes of the "righteousness of faith" in Romans 1:17 and again in Ephesians 2:4–10. Yet the Apostle James writes that faith without works is dead (James 2:17). Writing to the Galatians (5:6), St. Paul strikes a balance,



speaking of "faith working through love."

Back in the 1500s, Martin Luther and his followers had declared *sola fide!* Faith alone! That is, we are saved by grace alone. Nothing we do can earn our salvation. Catholics have insisted all along that salvation comes to us by God's grace and our cooperation with it. That's a blend of faith and works, a position defined at the Council of Trent (1545–1563).

## BOOTSTRAP THEOLOGY

Saint Augustine, the "Doctor of Grace," forged his understanding of grace in the fifth century against Pelagius, a rigorist who held that humans can become perfect through their own efforts. Pelagianism is sometimes called "bootstrap theology," referring to the notion of pulling yourself up by

your bootstraps. Some say, in today's culture of acquisition and workaholism, Pelagianism never left us. If we can buy happiness, do we really need grace? Pelagius was ultimately condemned as a heretic at the Synod of Carthage (North Africa) in 418. Bootstrap theology was roundly rejected.

Augustine had stressed that God's free gift of grace—not our actions—plays the critical role in our salvation. But the issue was by no means put to rest at Carthage. Within a

## A NEW LOOK AT GRACE

by Bill Huebsch

- Grace is God's self-communication to us.
- It's experienced as a divine loving energy (or power) that comes from God alone, is completely free, and is offered to every human being.
- Grace alone can make us whole. It lets us be precisely who we're made to be.
- It is received and celebrated in community with each other.
- Sanctifying grace is God's free and generous gift, sometimes called the "state of grace," that ongoing disposition to live and act in keeping with God's call.
- Actual grace is the effect in the human personality of that gift. It is God's support for us in individual instances.

hundred years, a group of monks in southern France, seeking to stand out against those who were Christian in name only, adopted an austere lifestyle. They saw the role of grace in salvation but overemphasized the power of human will. Thus they became known as semi-Pelagians. Their views were rejected by the Synod of Orange in 529.

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