

## **Sanctifying Grace: The Mechanism of Holiness**

If you were at St. John Vianney or Holy Family last weekend, you'll know that Father Val and I have begun a homily series on the universal call to holiness. Each week, we'll look at a certain saint and trace the same themes. Whether you're hearing Father Val or me—whether you're at St. John Vianney or here—you're going to get the same principles of application and the same theology.

Last week was about 'what holiness is.' Holiness is simply being set apart by God for a particular purpose. That happens when we're conceived and it happens in a more particular way when we're baptized. We begin on the road to holiness when we come of age and choose to set ourselves apart for God's purposes. Our saint last week was St. John the Baptist, who has probably the best motto of any saint when we're talking about holiness: "He must increase, and I must decrease." That is our fundamental attitude as well if we're going to be on the road to holiness.

### **Sanctifying Grace—How Holiness Works**

So, if last week was what holiness is, this week is about the mechanism of holiness. What is that mechanism of holiness? The answer is sanctifying grace. In weeks three, four, and five, we'll focus on how we grow in holiness—some of the really important aspects if we're going to grow in holiness throughout our life. Today's Gospel is a perfect reading to begin to get at this. There are two groups. You have the nine for whom God did this beautiful thing—and their healing of leprosy is, I'm sure, permanent; it's not like their lack of gratitude means their cure will be reversed. But what did they miss out on? What grieves the Lord's heart is not the lack of gratitude; it's that something happened to them, but they did not—at least at this time—enter into relationship with the Lord Jesus. Relationship is the core of this. The nine who went: there are no marks of holiness in them simply because they were cured. The one who came back with gratitude and faith is the one on the way—potentially—to holiness. It's relational.

Now, the Church has a very clear teaching about how faith begins to come about—especially for one who is unbaptized. What begins to happen is that a person comes to faith and becomes oriented to the One who created them, the One to whom they are accountable. Recognizing accountability before the Lord, the next step of conversion is fear of the Lord: a recognition of sinfulness and a beginning to turn away from sinfulness and to turn to the Lord. That's what we expect to see from those preparing for Baptism: they demonstrate, in their hearts, by their actions, and by pursuing this road, that they recognize their relationship with their Creator, they come to faith in Christ, and they have hope of the forgiveness of their sins. In fact, for someone not in a state of grace—a baptized person

fallen out of grace—it's more or less the same process of coming back to conversion and confession and getting back on the road.

It's important to say, though, that salvation—with the divine gifts that come with it—cannot be earned. You can't earn salvation; there's nothing you can do to make salvation happen to you, and nothing you could have done that merited it for you. Our first reading is instructive as an image of salvation. We pick up in the middle of the episode: Naaman approaches the prophet, Elisha. Elisha doesn't even come to see him face to face; he sends out a servant who says, "Go wash in the Jordan seven times." Naaman is very angry because it seems a silly thing to do. He says, "Aren't the rivers of Damascus far better than this little stream that is the Jordan?" He finds it ridiculous. His servants prevail upon him, and he goes and washes—that's where today's reading comes in. After the fact, notice what he tries to do. It comes from a good place, but by offering a gift (which the prophet Elisha rejects), he's trying to pay Elisha for the miracle. Do you see the problem in terms of salvation? What he's asked to do is not a superhuman feat; it's something very simple and unmerited—and Elisha rejects any sense that Naaman can own it by paying for it. That is an image of salvation: you can't earn it.

For an adult approaching the font of Baptism, the Church teaches that this is, "for real and for sure," the moment when the divine life comes into them. Ordinarily, that is when a person is saved (people can be saved in other ways, but this is where it takes place). Salvation simply means "divine life inside of me." It's not just a future event—hoping to get into heaven; salvation is now. And for those with the divine life inside of them, that is salvation.

Let me shift from an adult convert to an infant who is baptized. At the moment of Baptism, many things take place, but two things happen in the little one's soul. First is the divine indwelling: principally, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in the heart. Second—today's focus, the mechanism of holiness—is the gift of sanctifying grace. The Holy Spirit is present in the soul, and sanctifying grace becomes real in the heart. Later, when that infant reaches the age of reason (about seven or eight—which is why First Holy Communion is ordinarily around seven or eight), the child is able to recognize himself in relationship to the Lord. He could know God at five or six; I'm not saying he can't. But self-awareness matures—understanding oneself and the world in relation to the Creator. At that time, presuming Baptism, sanctifying grace is in the soul, and the Holy Spirit is present in the soul; and now an additional reality can begin to operate: what Catholics call the virtue of charity—and that is something we do—loving God and neighbor with God's love.

The divine indwelling is not something we own. The Holy Spirit's presence in the soul is the cause of the effect—the mechanism—which is sanctifying grace. In a sense, the indwelling

is God’s personal presence to a soul now made like Him by sanctifying grace. Sanctifying grace makes us like God because it is the divine life within us. You have a divine Person within you, and you have the divine life within you. Sanctifying grace is habitual—always at work in the soul of someone in a state of grace. Charity, by contrast, is something we act on: we begin to love God back; we choose to love God and neighbor. That’s how it all fits together. The Holy Spirit’s indwelling makes friendship with God possible; in charity, by acts of love, we live that friendship.

### **Life in the State of Grace**

Here’s the image I’d like you to use for sanctifying grace. Sanctifying grace is your bank account. When the Lord says to lay up treasures in heaven, this is what He’s talking about—you actually have a bank account. Picture it this way: presuming we are in a state of grace and not in mortal sin, you are in your Father’s house—a beautiful place, expansive, essentially the garden of Eden. That’s the divine indwelling: you dwell in Him and He in you. In addition to your Father being present and loving you, He has given you an inheritance—that’s your bank account. He put all the “money” in before He gave it to you; the account is yours. As long as you are in the Father’s house, you can make deposits, investments, and withdrawals as you see fit, because it’s your account. The Lord gave it to you; you didn’t earn it—but once given, it is yours. It’s best to consult your Father on investment strategies—He’s the financial wiz. We’re talking about grace, not money; consult Him on how best to invest, because your goal as a Christian is to have the biggest “account” possible on the day you die.

What happens if I leave my Father’s house? This is the parable of the Prodigal Son. If I leave, which I have permission to do, I lose the divine indwelling—the presence of the Holy Spirit (and with Him the Father and the Lord Jesus) in my soul. I lose that because I’ve left the house. I also lose total access to my bank account—my account is offline now. There is no sanctifying grace and no divine indwelling. This is why mortal sin really matters; it’s not a good state to be in. In this state, I may still have faith—that’s why it’s dangerous to say, “Well, I still have faith, so I must be okay.” Not necessarily. Mortal sin does not extinguish faith; I still know my Father exists (though after ten or twelve years I might forget). But anything I do outside the indwelling of the Holy Spirit or sanctifying grace does not merit. Nothing I do will merit me anything; I can make no withdrawals, deposits, or investments in my account.

Here’s the great thing about being Catholic: we can come back to our Father’s house. That’s the Prodigal Son—and why it’s linked with the Sacrament of Penance, Reconciliation: a beautiful opportunity to return completely to our Father’s embrace. Here’s the question: a baptized person in mortal sin who comes back into a state of

grace—back into the Father’s house and presence—do they get access to their bank account again? Yes. The more interesting question (a bit of a trick): when you come back and get access, is there more, less, or the same as when you left? St. Thomas Aquinas teaches we don’t actually know; it depends on the person. If we come back with greater repentance and reliance on the Lord, you can have more in your account than when you left. That can happen; it doesn’t excuse sin. Someone who commits a serious sin and gets to Confession right away probably has about the same. It’s possible that after many years away your account is lower, because you’ve lost some fervor that needs to be rebuilt within the state of grace. But the Lord’s investment strategy is far beyond ours. There’s nothing to despair of—trust in the Lord and continue to rely on Him.

### **Growing in Grace**

Last point before I end with a saint. Sanctifying grace is meant to grow. When we come to the Eucharist—next week we’ll talk especially about the ways sanctifying grace grows—we are meant to ask the Lord to help us grow in holiness and confidence in Him, in us, and working through us. St. Frances of Rome is a beautiful example. Baptized as an infant, she had sanctifying grace and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit from the beginning. At eight or nine she showed a strong desire to love God. At eleven, she felt called to religious life; her father said no. Upset, she went to her priest in tears; he asked, “Are you crying because you want to do God’s will, or because you want God to do your will?” That convinced her that the Lord was calling her—at least at that time—to marriage. She married; it was a happy marriage, with the usual challenges with children. She once said, “A married woman must, when called upon, leave her devotions to God at the altar and find Him in her household affairs.” One day, while praying the psalms, she was interrupted five times for household duties. Returning the fifth time, the psalm text appeared written in gold ink—she took it as a sign of the Lord’s affirmation of doing what was needed, though it wasn’t her preference. An aristocrat, she lived simply; her extended family didn’t understand her simplicity. During the plague, she lost two of her three children. From that sorrow she recognized the necessity of medical care and dedicated herself to hospital work and caring for the sick. During political turmoil her family was exiled and the estate buildings literally destroyed—very difficult. Returning, she was further purified; instead of rebuilding to former specifications, they rebuilt essentially as a hospital. Her oldest son, Battista, did not understand his mother, wasn’t close to the faith, and struggled with her piety; in the end, she reconciled him and he returned to the faith. After returning to Rome, she began to receive visions—confirmations that she was on the right path—beautiful reflections, especially on the Eucharist. Dear friends, as we receive the Lord in the Holy Eucharist, let us ask Him to increase His grace in us, so that we may glorify Him in all things. Praise be Jesus Christ.