

Grace 95th Women's Cursillo Friday, July 8, 2005 St. Charles Borromeo (A grown-up understanding of God's gracious gift)

Well, Good morning. Today I am going to give you permission to **forget everything you ever heard about grace**. Why? Because I'm not sure that we often understand the words we are given. Grace is a religious word. In our religion we have all kinds of terminology. We learn it when we go to catechism class or CCD or Catholic school. But we learn it in terms of the children we are, and children always think in pictures. So we picture grace. We picture grace as fluid, filling people up; or we picture grace in some other way, maybe like electricity flowing through wires. This is all well and good, but it more or less limits the real idea of grace. Grace is actually a great idea. It's an extraordinary idea. I want you to think about it in a new way. Really our Christian gospels are tremendous in what they offer us. So **in order to really get sometimes of what the gospel is offering, we have to let go of what was already there**. So I give you permission. You will not lose your faith if you just forget about what you think grace is. Maybe some of it you will bring back later and say, "Oh, well, that part of it is true," and so on, so you have a better appreciation.

Some people think that we should avoid all technical language. There is a famous priest from Detroit, or some place like that, and he was one of the big leaders—he was here—he was one of the big leaders in Small Christian Communities. He has a Polish name—I don't remember it. He used to say, "Don't use any technical language! Just avoid everything." But we can't! We can't because where does language come from? It comes from the world around us, and our culture just doesn't know about God. Our culture doesn't know about the good news of Jesus Christ. Our culture is not informed, and, therefore, the **language system** that we are born with, live with, grow up with, **isn't really good enough to refer to the wonders of God's self-disclosure**. That's what revelation is: God's self-disclosure. But if we start to understand words, we do have to use words—we have to make up words is what we are doing. We are going to make up words. Why? To refer to these new-fangled ideas that God is giving us. Don't think that God directly gives ideas to us, but rather **God touches us**, that **we experience God**, and we try to understand what that is all about and **we express it—that's how we end up with all our religious vocabulary**. But very often then we expect other people to pick up on the concepts—not we, I mean the Church—the Church expected people like you to just pick up on the concepts without really knowing the experience—that's not possible! You only have very dry concepts, very often boring concepts—**dry, boring concepts because it's not connected to life**. Jesus came to bring life. That's what we are really talking about when we are talking about grace. We are talking about life.

Now the word "grace"—does anyone want to say what you think grace means? You have already forgotten! All right! Well, it's related to the word "**gratuity**"—gratuity. What is a gratuity? It's something you don't owe. Now if you are a waitress, you may think people really owe you a gratuity, but that has to do with a sense of justice, but not a sense of legality. In law you do not owe a gratuity, or it wouldn't be a gratuity; it would be a service charge. So a gratuity is something you don't owe. Therefore, **grace is what is not owed**. So behind the idea of **grace is the idea of gift**—gift. Now it's not a simple

idea in this way that really everything is gift. If you go back to the Prologue of John's Gospel, which I think is one of the most beautiful parts of the whole Bible, "In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God. The Word was God." What you go back to, **there is nothing but God!**

Now my brother is not a Catholic. He is not a Christian. Why? Because he says, "Well, you all say that everything depends upon God, but what does God depend on?" Well, this is a mystery. Existence is a mystery—that's true. We can't actually explain anything. It's true to say that when we say, "Well, God did it," or "God does this," or whatever, that we are just using a word. We are actually—we are just filling in the gaps of our understanding. Our understanding can never get to God—**our understanding cannot get to God. God is mystery. Our understanding cannot get to being at all, reality at all.** We cannot explain why there is anything. We cannot explain it. It is beyond our reason.

So what are we going to do? Well, there are different options. We could just say, "Well, everything just is. It just happens to be. It happens by chance. Some people say that! Some people win a Nobel Prize saying that sort of thing! To me it's not satisfying. To the people who wrote the Bible it's not satisfying. The people who wrote the Bible believed that in the beginning there is nothing but God. There is one eternal being. **Everything that comes to be comes to be through God.** That's what it says in the Prologue of John's Gospel: "Nothing that came to be came to be apart from him." That means that we are all interdependent. Everything that comes to be is all dependent upon God, and therefore it's **all interdependent.** The real meaning of the vine and the branches starts out being about the creation itself. **The creation itself is this enormous vine in which every single part is related to the whole, and nothing makes sense apart from the whole.** So that's creation. Now in that sense what our Bible says, and even the Book of Genesis, is that creation itself is grace. Well it's gift. **God creates because God likes to create.** God is creating. God loves because God is love. God creates because God creates. That's just the nature of God. You cannot explain it. You are just describing, well, that's God's nature. God likes to create. He doesn't have to. He is not obliged to, but he wants to, likes to, desires to.

He creates to share. That's the second idea. So it's gift and it's sharing. **So creation itself is gift, and it's a sharing of God's own existence.** But that's not all. We wouldn't have Christianity with just that. We would have a world, and we would have what we are, nature to some degree, but that would be all we have. With **Christ we have more because Christ invites us into a very intimate relationship.**

Now **Christ** doesn't come out of the blue, so to speak. He is a Jew. He **comes out of a long tradition going back to Abraham.** Abraham was chosen for some reason—he was an honorable man. He and his wife, Sarah, were chosen to give life to all kinds of people, a multitude of people. And not only were they to give life to their own issue, but they were to give life to all of their neighbors, too. Abraham is called to be a blessing. That is demonstrated time and time again in the story: Abraham was a blessing. The community, called the community of the "Covenant"—**the Covenant is this community of people called by God to be a blessing.** Abraham was the first group, you might say, or the first fellowship of blessing. Later on it expanded to others, and pretty soon you have twelve

tribes in this confederation, this Covenant; and that's called "Israel." Israel had lots of ups and downs, but one thing never changes—God. **God's love for Israel never changes.** Israel is not very good to God. Israel is not very faithful to God, but God never changes.

Now this is unique in the history of the world, because in other nations—nations all had a god, gods or goddesses or lots of them. But what happened is if you have a particular nation with a particular god or series of gods and that nation experienced a defeat, they just threw their gods out. Well, they weren't any good. Forget them! Then they adopted the gods of their victors. It makes sense—"Well, these gods are really good. So we better have them on our side." It's very childish thinking, but it's the way human beings think. God is about power. God is about control. Whoever has control, that's the real god. Whichever god doesn't have control, that's not a real god, so we forget about it.

In Israel, no matter what happened through thick and thin, whether Israel was on the bottom or on the top, whether they were enjoying prosperity and peace or whether they were suffering exile or conflict—**one thing about Israel we have to say, they remained aware that God is still God.** Now that's not real fidelity in the full sense, but there is something there. There is a kind of faith there. Well, if things are bad, maybe we had something to do with it. Maybe we ought to look again at our behavior, at our keeping of the Covenant. So that's the background. Jesus comes from that background.

But when Jesus comes on the scene, he doesn't agree with all the teachers. They have all their laws. And how many did they have in the written Old Testament? Six hundred thirteen. But that wasn't enough either. So they started orally interpreting them, and that grew to ten thousand. When they were written down in the book called the *Talmud*, it runs between seventeen thousand and nineteen thousand pages. That's **a lot of laws.** Of course, there are also commentaries. **Jesus** didn't care for that approach. It is very clear he **broke with the authority of the scribes.** The scribes were the writers. He didn't teach like the scribes. He didn't just quote what somebody else said. **He had his own ideas.** That caused a lot of friction. Well, this **friction is going to happen whenever God comes into a people's life.**

Why? Well, **God's plan is to transform us. This is the second grace.** The first grace is the universe itself. **The second grace is the gift of divine life.** This is grace, really, more properly speaking, because it is totally gratuitous even in reference to the creation itself. So God created everything, and it's for free! It is a free lunch! Now you may say, "Yes, but I've got to work for lunch." That's true, but the mere fact that you can have lunch is gratuitous, the fact that the earth produces life, you didn't do that, so that's gift. But this is a second level of gift: "Grace upon grace," John says. "Grace upon grace." It's the gift of God's life, not just this life, not just what we are now existing, but the eternal life of God—that's the second grace, the second gift. And that's the purpose of the first, the way we think about it. **Why did God create the earth?** Well, eventually **to produce a people he could give his own life to.** That's what Jesus started talking about. People said, "What, are you crazy?" So they didn't like him.

Well, whenever God gets really too close, there is a little friction. And the whole plan that Jesus describes is transformation. Well, if God is going to **transform us into himself**, first of all that's possible because in the beginning we are made in the image and

likeness of God—believe it or not! **The first grace is the image and likeness of God.** But even if God wants to burnish that image and shine up that image and clarify that image, **there is going to be a little friction** because, meanwhile, well, various things have happened. Sin has entered the world. Grace has been rejected. People are endowed with freedom. They can go their own way—they do, well! So this causes friction when the transforming grace of God starts working on people.

But you have to keep in mind it is still God's work. Don't ever think, well, oh boy, I really have to shape up here. No, you don't have to shape up. **God will reshape you gradually, slowly, lovingly.** God will reshape you, but you don't have to do it. **It's not actually your job.** That was one of the things Jesus had against his own religion because it was so much about law and obligation and duty and what you have to do. He said, "You nullify the law of God and replace it with mere human tradition." A lot of human stuff! He really believed in the law of God. Actually he did. He said, "You can summarize the whole thing: love God; love your neighbor as yourself. That's it; go home." Wait a minute. What if your job is defining all this and teaching all this? You say, "Hey, you put me out of a job, Jesus. No thanks." So you understand the conflict.

Now as we try to understand—and the two great theologians of the New Testament are John and Paul. **St. Paul and John**, whomever, we don't know who he really was, the Beloved Disciple. They are both **theologians of love.** They are theologians of **grace.** They are theologians of what some people call "**mysticism.**" It has to do with **the intimate communion that God is trying to draw us into, and it's awareness of it.** Mysticism is the awareness of this gift. So while everyone is really invited into this gift, some people really are aware of it. Paul was. St. Paul was very much aware of it, and that awareness caused him a great deal of suffering. The beloved disciple was very aware of it. The Beloved Disciple has a special openness in his heart for love and was very close to Jesus, even physically. Even physically at the Last Supper, he was next to him. They used to eat on couches—which I think is hard to digest your food, but they used to eat on couches, and he was right by him, and he leaned his head on Jesus' chest. So they were close physically as well as emotionally and spiritually.

Now one thing we have to focus on is that **the invitation of God** is, in one sense, superfluous. If all I care about is living in this world, I don't really need it, and it isn't even going to help me. If all I care about is life in this world, if all I care about is what I can see and hear and touch and feel, this invitation is really superfluous. It's not going to help me succeed in life, contrary to what some people tell you. In itself the invitation to serve God might, in fact, get in your way of succeeding in life. It all depends on all kinds of other things. It's not going to take away pains and illnesses, although often openness to God does heal us. But it's not "easy street" in any way. So that's the first thing we have to keep in mind. So it is something **we freely respond to, if we do. Nothing will force us to.** That's one thing we have to keep in mind: God never forces himself on anyone. That's why there is always the image of the Holy Spirit as a dove. It's not a dove! Don't think of doves! Think of the descent of a dove. Did you ever see a dove descend? Very gently, very sweetly. Not like an eagle or a hawk. The Holy Spirit is not a hawk. The Holy Spirit is a dove, dovelike descent—very gentle. God never forces himself into our hearts. That's an essential issue of grace upon grace, grace in the second sense of this

intimacy with God. It's an invitation that we can freely reject. Of course, we could reject the first grace, which is life itself. You could kill yourself. That's rejecting life, too. But even deciding to live on earth and enjoying life on earth doesn't require the acceptance of this invitation, this invitation to intimacy with God and communion.

Now when Jesus comes he says, "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe." So the second word is a technical word, too, "repent." In Greek, it's actually *metanoia*. You are going to hear a lot of it if you ever study anything about the Bible. We cannot even translate it. There is no English word for this. It means "**beyond the mind.**" So Jesus is calling us to beyond mindedness. Go beyond what you think—go beyond what you think! That's what repent means. The word "repent" really is a poor translation, but it is English. It's not a good word because repent implies that I look back and regret or pull back. Repentance is calling back. This does not say look to the back at all. In fact, he is not interested in the past. He is interested in the future. He says that **if you are going to enter into the kingdom, you have to start thinking differently and looking differently.** So that's what conversion is, or repentance, or *metanoia*.

"Repent, and believe." We have *metanoia* and we have belief. What is that? Belief—you know, we could talk about all kinds of beliefs. Well, that's not what he is talking about—beliefs. What do you believe? What is your opinion? No, this has nothing to do with opinion. Belief here has to do with trust. Think of it as a verb: to trust. **To go beyond your mind, and now trust in what is unseen.** We trust, okay; we always trust in what is seen. For example, you sit down in a chair. You see the chair; you believe the chair is stable; you sit in it. That's a kind of trust, but it's seen. What you are trusting is seen. You have a meal put before you; it smells good; you eat it. You trust it's not poisoned. If it smelled like it came from the barnyard, you would say, "Well, I'm not going to eat this!" You wouldn't trust it. But it smells good—you trust, because we are created actually to desire good things and to find desirable things good. It's part of our nature. So we find delicious food, we eat it. We trust it's good for us.

Now he is saying trust in what is not visible, which you can't smell. You can't smell if it's good or not. You cannot tell. You cannot touch. You cannot see. But you've got to trust. In what are you trusting? **You are trusting in the kingdom of God.** Well, now we could talk about the kingdom of England. It has borders. The kingdom of Scotland. We could talk about it. Or we could go into biology and talk about the kingdom of animals or the kingdom of minerals, or whatever. Those are specific categories. This is not like that at all. The kingdom—but it does have the idea of rule, **the rule of God, the power of God.** But here it is—now the power of God doesn't feel like power. It doesn't look like power. It doesn't feel like power. Jesus trusted totally in the power of the kingdom of God, but he suffered. He was betrayed. He died. Don't you remember what he said to Pilate? He said, "If my kingdom were of this world, my Father would send a legion of angels." So Jesus was trusting in a kingdom not of this world, not seen, but he was trusting in it at all times. **That's the door to this intimacy with God; it's trusting in what is not seen.**

Now in the Old Testament, the idea of Covenant, which refers to the people and the relationship with God—both—the Covenant is the people and the agreement, the relationship between them. It stressed responsibility. It stressed law. It stressed justice.

All those are good things, necessary for society. But in the New Testament, Jesus goes beyond that. He talks about more **abundant life**. When he talks about the kingdom, he talks about abundant life, life whose abundance overflows the boundaries human beings normally know. So it doesn't simply mean a banquet with lots of food, but it means a **banquet that gives life beyond life**, which, of course, will be—the sign of that is the Eucharist. So when we talk grace, we are talking about **the many ways in which the abundance of God's life comes to us**.

The sacraments are signs of it—not causes, not means, but signs of an abundance and a grace that is always with us. We are not forgiven only when we go to the sacrament of Reconciliation. That is a sign of the reconciliation, now possible because Jesus has accepted for the whole human race God's forgiveness. Don't forget, in order to get forgiveness, you have to give it. Well, Jesus gave it. That's how he changed the history of the world. He gave forgiveness. He, out of his own heart, accepted the grace of God, the abundant life of God, the abundant love of God, the forgiveness and mercy of God, and he accepted this; and he gave forgiveness to others—to his attackers, to those who persecuted him, abandoned him. Thus, he reconciled himself to the Father. The Father was always ready to reconcile himself to his creation—always. The Father never changed. **Jesus in his humanity changed the human race and made the human race receptive of this divine forgiveness because he was willing to share it and give it.** Up until then, it was a gift not received.

Some people say that a gift that is not received is not a gift, but I don't agree with that. It is a gift; it's just sitting there not received. It's like email. It's in your queue, but it's not going out. Well, **God really has sent all kinds of email messages and they are not being picked up by our machines.** Why? Something is wrong. So we make ourselves more acceptable, more open to these gifts and messages of love.

The kingdom brings the life of God in its power, in its potency, into the present moment, even as we live the life of God in earthen vessels. St. Paul talks about earthen vessels. It means the body, the bodies we have, earthen vessels. And, of course, if you know much about pottery, you realize pottery cracks all the time, so earthen vessels are cracked. They get cracked; they get broken easily. So that's what he is talking about. He says that our bodies are broken easily, but they are holding something which is really a treasure not made by hand. That treasure can even affect the vessel. So it is not unusual for people who come to God in prayer and in faith and trust to experience healings, physical healings of their body. That's grace, physical healing of the body. Or they experience healing of emotions in a relation, especially in Reconciliation. That's healing of the heart. That's also grace at work. **So grace works too. It's not a thing; it's the work of God.**

So grace is creation itself. Grace is God's invitation to divine intimacy and eternal life. And grace is also the work and action of God moving into human life even in the present moment, bringing with it the signs of the kingdom, which are healing—well, we had them yesterday in the gospel. **Healing of the sick—what? Raising the dead**—in this case they don't mean the dead in a grave. It means the dead, people who have no life, who are just walking around, but they are dead inside. Bring life to the dead, **cleansing the lepers.** Lepers are all those excluded from community, bring them

together. Then finally the fourth one is **expelling evil**. So the kingdom comes. **The grace of God comes from the kingdom, and as it works within the brokenness of our bodies and our lives and our relationships, it brings healing and wholeness and vitality.**

Now Jesus is aware of the fact that as we grow up, we are given all kinds of false information. We are falsely informed by the world around us. So he works slowly; **God's grace works slowly to reform us in his image and likeness.** But you can see, even in the stories of Scripture, how the blind see. Remember when John the Baptist's disciples go to Jesus and say, "Are you the one who is to come?" He says, "I'm not going to answer that question. But I will tell you this: go back and tell John what you see. And what is it you see? You see that the blind see, the lame walk, the poor have the good news preached to them." That's the kingdom; that's grace in action.

Now in many dialogues in the New Testament **Jesus tries to get someone**, like for example the Samaritan woman or Nicodemus, **to respond.** Remember the story of the Samaritan woman? And he offers her—what? What does he offer her? He says, "If you only knew who was asking you for a cup of water." What does he ask for? A cup of water—right? And she says—what does she do? Does she say, "Oh, here is a cup of water?" No. She says, "You are asking me for a cup of water! You, a Jew, asking me, a woman and a Samaritan?" So she is thinking about, well, what are the rules here, and, of course, he is breaking them. So she is a rule person; he is not. Then he says, "Well, if you only knew who was asking you for a cup of water, you would ask him and he would give you living water." What is living water? **In the Bible living water means an experience of God. So he is offering an experience of God.** And what does she say? "But you don't even have a bucket." Now John is really funny. John's Gospel is really full of all kinds of humor. So you should be laughing when you read it. You know, I think it's funny.

In Nicodemus—Nicodemus comes and he says, "Jesus you know about life and everything." Jesus says, "Let me tell you something. Unless you are reborn, unless you are begotten from above, unless you receive a birth that is different from just physical birth, you are never going to enter into the kingdom of God." And Nicodemus says, "Well, what do you mean?" And then Jesus says to him, "You mean you think you are a teacher"—he was a rabbi—"You think you are a teacher of Israel, and you don't even know this?" This is kind of basic. **So this whole idea: a new life!** Then he is trying to get Nicodemus to respond. What does Nicodemus do? He argues with him. "Well, how can that be? How can I be born again? What am I going to do—go back into my mother's womb?" See, this is what happens all the time. **God is offering us God. God is offering us life. We are thinking in our little terms** about things and about what we want, what we need, and we don't even understand what's happening. **But God keeps at it.**

Now there are two consequences **if we do accept God's invitation.** Number one, **we do have to change**, but not to worry. As I said, **God will do the changing, a little bit at a time.** Reading the lives of the saints or reading even Scripture will give you a clue to how the changes will be taking place, but all in good time. **But the second great change is you will live forever.** You will live in eternity. You will not die. Your body will pass into the ground eventually or be cremated, but you will not.

Now what about if you reject God? Will you live forever? Not really. If a person rejects God, you won't really live forever. Is there immortality of the soul? I don't know. It's not in the Bible. Will he live in some sort of state? Maybe so, I don't know; that tends to be the general presumption, but it won't really be them. You have to think about who are you. **If you are going to start to know Christ, you are going to be changed, and that changed person can live forever.** But a person totally dependent upon this earth and everything earthly, well, how could that live forever? When the body dies, who will be left? What will be left; what identity will be there? I don't know. I have no answers to that question. But the offer is in the Scripture to those who accept Christ. They will live forever.

Now, as I said, **God does the work of changing, but we need to kind of more or less be aware and cooperate.** It's better to cooperate than not cooperate. If we don't cooperate, we lose anyway, so cooperating is better. **That means we learn how to affirm what God wants.** When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he said, "Pray for first things first, **for the kingdom of God to come and for the will of God to be done on earth.**" But we usually have other priorities. **Sometimes in order to respond to grace, we just have to get out of the way.** There are times when getting out of the way of God is what we need to do. But, again, the **foundation is trust in God. The motivation is love.**

So there are three great virtues: faith, hope, love. Faith is trust. Hope is looking forward to the work of the Spirit, depending on the work of the Spirit. And **love is God himself, the very essence of God.** "God is love," and God's love is not conditioned. So it isn't that God loves you when you are good and when you—and that's the problem Jesus had with the disciples, and with the other people of his time. They thought well, God would be nice to them if they were nice to God. He said, "That's petty." God is good to even bad people. "The sun shines on the good and the bad; the rain falls on the just and the unjust." God is God, and God loves because God loves because that's what God does! So don't think of God in this petty way. Tit for tat—there is no tit for tat! God is always loving us. We can reject God though, because he won't force himself upon us. I mentioned that earlier. So it's this back and forth between God's never ending love and our freedom to reject it. **We are free to reject it. But he never changes his mind about us.** That's why the Christian gospel is so positively hopeful. I mean there are people, it could be—I don't presume this—but it could be a person could repent on his or her deathbed. God can do it! I believe probably on everyone's deathbed they are given this extraordinary grace to repent, if they want to.

Now there was a time when I was called to the home of a Mafia person. His wife called me. He was dying. I said, "Does he want to see me?" She said, "I don't know; why don't you go up there?" So I went up there. I called him by his name and I said, "Your wife called me. She said you might want to confess and receive the absolution of the Church and anointing of the sick and the last rites." He looked at me and said, "No." He died right that night. So some people do reject him; they have the power to do so. Now maybe he changed his mind. I didn't go back, of course.

So, 1 John 4:9 says, "God is love." And the mystery is not that we love God, don't forget. It's that **God loves us. That's the great mystery.** But, of course, we are God's!

You love your children even when they are totally undignified—you love them anyway. Sometimes when they get older there are sometimes when you may have to say, “Look, you can’t come home now.” You might have to do that, but you still love them even when you say that. So God is like that, only more so.

John 10:10—who has a Bible? Do you want to look up the fourth gospel? I’ve got one right here, but I just thought you might have one. John 10:10. Who wants to read it?

[A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.]

So Jesus says he comes so we can have life and have it in abundance.

Finally, the last thing I am going to say about the kingdom is: Jesus describes it as like a buried treasure, that you go and sell everything you have so you can buy the property where the treasure is buried so it will be yours. See, that’s one thing about God though, God is jealous. It says in the Old Testament, “I am a jealous God.” Now what does that mean? It means he can’t be one among many of your favorite things. No, **the kingdom has to be the very favorite thing, worth everything else.** It’s like the pearl of great price. You find a pearl—sell all the other pearls; buy that one. If it isn’t that valuable to you, forget it! It has got to be that important. It’s the pearl of great price. It’s the treasure buried in the field that’s worth selling everything in order to purchase it.

Now going back to Nicodemus, Jesus says, “Flesh begets flesh, spirit begets spirit.” Now flesh and spirit operate very differently. We have to keep that in mind. How does flesh operate? It operates through cause and effect. Flesh operates the way everything does in the world. If I picked this up and dropped it, you know very well what would happen. It would go down and it would probably break because it looks like it’s glass. Glass things break when they are hit with great impact. We know the **physical world. We know it operates according to laws. The spirit doesn’t work according to those laws.** “Flesh begets flesh.” You know how babies come into the world. But “spirit begets spirit.” Spirit doesn’t work according to the laws of the flesh, the laws of cause and effect, the laws of physical science. Spirit is free—spirit is free. **It works according to the law of freedom.** So this rebirth he is talking to Nicodemus about, this new life, is something that has to come freely. **It has to be given and received freely. So the sign of it is Baptism, but Baptism doesn’t effect it until people receive it freely into their own spirit.**

Now here is a problem. We have infant Baptism. Isn’t that nice? Well, it is, actually. We like to have our babies in our Church. We like to have our babies part of our family of faith. But there is a problem. **Because the spirit is free, we can’t make anybody grow up.** Physically their hormones will force them to grow up, but there are no spiritual hormones. Nothing forces anyone to grow up spiritually, in the Spirit. So we have all kinds of babies in the world in grown-up bodies. That’s really what we have. That’s really the major problem in our Church. We have a lot of grown-up babies. They are just infantile. They have no growth. They have life, just like a baby has life. Look at a baby; it has everything I have: the thumb, first finger, second, and so on, fingernail—just not as big, not as developed. It’s got everything. Well, that’s the way people are. They have

everything, but it's all undeveloped, **undeveloped spiritual lives**, baby lives; and nothing can force them to grow up—nothing—not God. There are no hormones and there are no chemicals and there is no pill to take to make people grow up. That's the problem of our Church. The grace is there—no lack of grace—but is there responding? Not enough!

Jesus also said to Nicodemus, “The Spirit blows where it wills.” That's another point to think about. It's one thing to say that God is our daddy, which is Abba, Father, Daddy. **Jesus wants us to relate to God as we would relate to a good father.** Now some of us maybe didn't have a good father. But even if we didn't have a good father, we know what a good father should be like. Well, that's God, a good Father, a good Abba. We also can relate to the daddy of Jesus being the Son of God because, well, we are human and we kind of know what it is like to be human, so to have a brother—it's not too hard to figure out what that is. But the Spirit—what does that mean? Father, Son, Holy Spirit! Well, **the Spirit is the one that blows where it wills.**

Now that's a fact: the Spirit blows where it wills. So how are we going to get more Spirit? Well, guess what? **We are not going to get more Spirit. We are going to be open and wait.** I, in my own life, the most graced period of my life was one summer when I was fired. I was working for the YMCA and they didn't have enough campers, and so they said, “Well, we've got to let you go.” And I went home—no job. I was already graduated from college. I was headed for the seminary, but I needed pocket money, so I had nothing. My parents said, “Well, good. You can stay here, but we are leaving.” So I was all alone for thirty days, and I later found out it was a thirty day retreat. I didn't ever hear of a thirty day retreat, but there I had one. **I was really touched very deeply by the presence of God,** but I don't think I ever would have been if I hadn't been fired and left, fired and abandoned. Here I was. As I look back at that, it was one of the greatest moments in my life. And I think God had something to do with my being fired—I really do. And I think God had something to do with my parents going on this long trip. Of course, it was their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. But it all worked together. And that's the way grace does, too.

Grace is providential. Grace can work around all kinds of obstacles. A young girl, sixteen years old, was just on a trip, a camping trip from St. Francis in Bolingbrook. She said she was walking on this little hike and she found a tree that had fallen down. It was a big tree. She had always admired trees, and thought how great the trunks were and beautiful and strong and the beautiful branches. Then she looked at the roots. She said, “My God, the roots are more magnificent than the rest of it.” She said, “Some of them were fine like filaments, and some were very strong.” And she said, “The roots had clumps of dirt and stone.” She was thinking about this. She said, “Well, really the roots are like our souls.” We don't see them, and yet they have all this life and they are giving us all this strength and they are supporting us. But they have clumps of dirt and stones. Stones are like our sin; they are hard places. But the roots, because they really are God's life, they really go around the stones.

So God's work in us is remarkable. And **sometimes what we think is the worst possible thing, is the best possible thing. God works around the obstacles that grow in our experience. So grace comes; it's in God's own providential time and place.** So we don't worry; we just wait. **Sacraments are signs, not causes of grace.** You don't go

to sacraments to get grace. **God's grace is all around us all the time. Sacraments signify this grace.** So the Spirit of God blows where it wills. We do not control God. And if you are trying to control God, you are wasting your time totally.

As we grow, of course, conversion now, *metanoia*, works on all levels of us: physical, emotional, mental, intellectual, artistic, every part of us. Our spirit, our will, everything has to be affected by grace, because this is a total job, this idea of grace, **a total personal renewal, not just a makeover.** It's a total renewal from inside—out.

Now as we are transformed, **we start to understand the inner life of God.** God actually gives us a share, and we can really refer to God as Father, and eventually in the **beatific vision we will see God as Jesus does,** and know God as Jesus does, because Jesus says, "No one knows the Father except the Son." So we will now have the Son's knowledge of the Father in the beatific vision. **That's the ultimate grace,** the beatific vision. But, meanwhile, we will have little intimations and we will be able to call God "Father." We will be able to have Jesus as our brother. We will be able to understand it. He suffered everything we could suffer—and more! And we will know something about the Spirit that blows where it wills and directs our lives.

So, in summary, God's grace is a gracious gift of his own life to creatures. **Grace refers to the call, the invitation, and all the helps that God gives for us to enable us to respond to him,** to cooperate with him, and to fulfill what is really his mind-boggling offer, which the fathers of the Church said, "to become God." That's really what this life is about—**becoming God**—nothing less, because when we have God's life, we are divine. That's the grace talk.