

Part I
THE GIFT OF LIFE

Section I

Happiness

In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe,

who is the refulgence of his glory,

the very imprint of his being,

and who sustains all things by his mighty word.

When he had accomplished purification from sins,

he took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty

on high— Heb 1:1-3.

SOME TWO THOUSAND YEARS AGO there lived one whose influence on the world is unique in history. He did not live in one of the great centers of civilization but in a remote corner of the world. He was not born with the material advantages that wealth and social position can give; he was born in a stable. He did not have a long career nor one which carried him into many countries; his life span was only thirty-three years; his activity was confined to an area of a few hundred miles. His life did not end on a note of triumph; he suffered the shameful death of crucifixion.

Yet today, twenty centuries later, this man is worshiped by hundreds of millions in every country of the world as the Savior of the human race. Through the centuries since his death millions have gladly renounced all that the human heart holds dear—home, family, riches and friends—to carry his name to other corners of the earth. He is loved throughout the world as no other person has been loved. His cross, once a symbol of a criminal death, is now displayed triumphantly atop churches throughout the world, a symbol of hope and love. His teachings have humanized and ennobled people and nations.

What is it that makes Jesus Christ unique among all people in history and accounts for the influence he has had and still has on the world?

The answer is, of course, that Jesus Christ was not merely a great teacher and religious leader; he is the Son of God. He is the Redeemer promised by God, who brought salvation to the human race, who ransomed all people by his death on the cross.

Jesus Christ is a true human being. He is the mediator between God and people of every age and time. No one can come to the Father except through him. Jesus Christ is also God. His teachings, therefore, are the word of God revealed to us.

Jesus Christ is *“the way, and the truth, and the life”*—*Jn 14:6*. It is by union with Jesus that people receive the life of grace. It is through the acceptance of Jesus’ teachings that we find salvation. It is by submission to Jesus’ rule that we find freedom as children of God.

Jesus said to his disciples, *“And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age”*—*Mt 28:20*. Although he ascended into heaven, and we can no longer see and hear him as did his contemporaries, Jesus in his great love for us remains with us in his Church. He continues to give life and truth and guidance to those who are joined to him.

1. What does Jesus Christ promise to those who love him?

Jesus Christ promises eternal happiness to those who love him. *“I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly”*—*Jn 10:10*.

2. Does Jesus Christ promise us happiness in this life?

Jesus Christ promises us happiness in this life. When Jesus became human he not only revealed himself as the image of the invisible God, he also restored to humanity that which had been lost to sin, the full beauty and majesty of our dignity as creatures made in God’s image. True happiness is the result when we live up to the dignity of the human person.

3. In what words did Christ tell us how to attain happiness in

this life?

In the Sermon on the Mount, which contained what are known as the Beatitudes, Jesus said:

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are they who mourn,
for they will be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the land.*

*Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be satisfied.*

*Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.*

*Blessed are the clean of heart,
for they will see God.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.*

*Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of
righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”—Mt 5:3-10.*

In the above passage Jesus promises us happiness. In fact the word “blessed” means “happy.” The Beatitudes are at the core of Christ’s teaching. They fulfill the promise made to the Jewish people by pointing beyond earthly happiness to the eternal happiness of heaven. The reward promised in each of the Beatitudes is primarily heaven.

The Beatitudes reveal the goal of human existence, the ultimate purpose of human acts; God calls us to his own beatitude. This vocation is addressed to each individual personally, but also to the Church as a whole, the new people made up of those who have accepted the promise and live from it in

faith—CCC 1719.

If we live according to this plan of Christ we shall have a foretaste of the happiness of heaven in this life. Christ tells us that we will be happy by doing for his sake the very things which we may think will make us unhappy. Christ tells us that we must not set our hearts on money, whereas many people appear to want even more money than they already have. Christ tells us that we must forgive our enemies and love them, whereas many people seem to want to “get even with” or at least avoid those who hurt them. Christ tells us that we must avoid all sin, that we must be willing to take a lower place, that we must suffer for him, etc. These are conditions which might seem to make us unhappy, but the Lord’s words tell us otherwise.

4. How is it possible for us to live according to these high standards set by Christ?

Christ has not only told us how to live; he has shown us by his example. What is more, he gives us all the help we need to follow his example. If we love Christ and try to follow his example, we shall receive the strength he promised when he said:

“I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in [them] will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing”—Jn 15:5.

Practice

■ In recent years the Church has revived the ancient Order of Christian Initiation (sometimes referred to as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults or R.C.I.A.) by which individuals can become full members of the Catholic Church. Attendance at Sunday worship is an integral part of the initiation process. Weekly attendance at Sunday Mass not only familiarizes the candidates (that is, those who will become catechumens and those Christians who will be received into the Catholic Church) with the order of service and the various practices and gestures of the Mass, but it also introduces them to the parish community. In the context of prayer the candidates are welcomed to the Church as they learn Church teaching and tradition. Usually at the close of the Liturgy of the Word the candidates are invited to leave the assembled body of worshipers to more carefully dwell upon the Word. Even if the candidates do not participate in this formal dismissal and remain for the Liturgy of the Eucharist, they may not receive Holy Communion until they are admitted to full communion with the Church.

Section 2

God, Our Father

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, then you will also know my Father. From now on you do know him and have seen him. . . . Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else, believe because of the works themselves”—Jn 14:6-7, 9-11.

THROUGHOUT HISTORY religions of different cultures and times have expressed their understanding of God as “Father.” Moses told the Jewish people that God was not only their Creator but also their Father. The Israelites saw God’s fatherly love present most particularly to the poor, orphaned and widowed. Likewise, Jesus called God “Father,” but he did so in an entirely new way. Jesus announced that God is not only our Father as Creator but that God is also Father eternally in relation to the Son, just as the Son is always in relation to the Father.

This is Christ’s great message: God is not a remote power who rules the universe from afar. He is our loving Father, who sent his only Son into the world in order that he might share his life with us.

God wants to unite us to himself. Therefore we must know him. We must know him not merely by observing the world about us, the work of his hands, but by hearing what he has told us of himself.

1. How can we speak of God?

When we speak of God we are necessarily forced to use human language. We can never have more than partial knowledge

of God’s omnipotence and, since human knowledge of God is limited, so too is our language about him. For example, we cannot name God except in relation to creatures because of our limited human means of thinking and knowing. But because God transcends all creatures, we must continually purify our language of anything limited, too imaginative or imperfect, so as to avoid distorting our image of God by expressions that fall short of God’s mystery.

2. Why is God called “the Father”?

God is the Father of all human persons because God has created all people. *God created [humans] in his image; /in the divine image he created [them]; /male and female he created them—Gn 1:27.*

3. What does it mean to call God “Father”?

When we call God “Father” we are using the language of faith. To call God “Father” does not mean to limit God to the male sex. God is neither male nor female, God transcends such categories. In fact, God has also been likened to a mother. In the Book of Isaiah God assures Israel: *As a mother comforts her son, /so will I comfort you—Is 66:13.* Likewise, David encourages Israel to hope in God *like a weaned child on its mother’s lap—Ps 131:2.*

The language of faith attempts to express meaning, and in this case we should understand that when we call God “Father” it is to help us appreciate the parental love God shows to us in several ways:

a) God provides for the needs of his children:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life and what you will eat, or about your body and what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Notice the ravens: they do not sow or reap; they have neither storehouse nor barn, yet God feeds them. How much more important are you than birds! Can any of you by worrying add a moment to your life-

span? If even the smallest things are beyond your control, why are you anxious about the rest? Notice how the flowers grow. They do not toil or spin. But I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of them. If God so clothes the grass in the field that grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith? As for you, do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not worry anymore. All the nations of the world seek for these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these other things will be given you besides”—Lk 12:22-31.

b) God loves us so much that he sent his Son to save us:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him—Jn 3:16-17.

c) God has shared his life with all people:

See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope based on him makes himself [or herself] pure, as he is pure—1 Jn 3:1-3.

4. How do we know that God exists?

We know that God exists from our observation of the world around us and by the use of our rational faculties as human persons.

a) Observation. Everywhere in nature we find beauty and order. To try and explain this beauty and order as a

result of chance is foolish. The incredible beauty of the world and its intricate order are obvious signs of an intelligence at work. The magnificence of a sunset coloring up an evening sky is at once beautiful to behold and yet fascinating to comprehend—the various gases of our atmosphere combined with heat, moisture and altitude all harmoniously working together for a few moments of glory. The awesome grandeur of the Grand Canyon, Niagra Falls or the Rocky Mountains leaves us speechless, while the details of their coming into being boggles our minds. Because of our observation of beauty and order in nature, we conclude that only a living, intelligent being could have created the universe.

- b) Reason. The human person has the ability to reason. This special attribute also allows us to know of God's existence. Our desire for truth, our sense of moral righteousness, the call of our own consciences lead us to reason that there is more to our existence and to life in general than meets the eye. Through this openness we perceive signs of our spiritual souls.

Thus through both observation and reason we are able to discern that we are part of an existence far greater than ourselves. Humans throughout history have identified the existence of a source, a force, a being that knows no time, is not defined by our limits, and is both the cause and final goal of all life. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, we have consistently called this being God.

5. Has God told us of his existence?

God has told us of his existence in the Bible, the Sacred Scriptures. Through the author of the Book of Genesis, for example, we learn that God revealed himself to humankind from the very beginning. In the story of Adam and Eve, God invited our first parents to know him as a loving Father.

In the story of Noah, God made a covenant never to destroy

the human race, and in the story of Abraham, God made the Hebrews his “chosen people.”

When God spoke to Moses in the Book of Exodus, commanding him to lead his people out of Egypt and into the promised land, he even told Moses his name: “Yahweh” or “I Am”:

“But,” said Moses to God, “when I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘the God of your [ancestors] has sent me to you,’ if they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what am I to tell them?” God replied, “I am who am.” Then he added, “This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you”—Ex 3:13-15.

God has also revealed his existence through his only Son, Jesus Christ:

In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe—Heb 1:1-2.

6. What has God revealed about himself?

God is a spirit. He is the one limitless, almighty, all-knowing spirit. He does not need anything or anyone outside of himself. He depends on nothing and on no one, but all things depend on him. Yet God cares for and sustains all the things which he has created. And he calls people to become his adopted children.

Although in many ways God is incomprehensible to human beings, from the various authors of the Bible, whom God inspired, we do learn the following:

a) God is love:

We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us. God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in [them]—1 Jn 4:16.

b) God is all good. He created the world in order to show forth his glory and to share his happiness with the beings he created:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts!” they cried one to another.
“All the earth is filled with his glory!” —Is 6:3.*

c) God shares his divine life with us:

He has bestowed on us the precious and very great promises, so that through them you may come to share in the divine nature, after escaping from the corruption that is in the world because of evil desire—2 Pt 1:4.

d) God loves all people and wills that we be saved:

*With age-old love I have loved you;
so I have kept my mercy toward you—Jer 31:3.*

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him—Jn 3:16-17.

. . . who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth—1 Tm 2:4.

e) God is all-merciful, and he shows his mercy most clearly in his readiness to forgive any sinner who repents:

Merciful and gracious is the LORD, /slow to anger, abounding in kindness. . . /As the heavens tower over the earth, /so God’s love towers over the faithful. . . /But the LORD’s kindness is forever, /toward the faithful from age to age—Ps 103:8, 11, 17.

“I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance”—Lk 15:7.

f) God is all knowing:

No creature is concealed from him, but everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account—Heb 4:13.

*He plumbs the depths and penetrates the heart;
their innermost being he understands.
The Most High possesses all knowledge,
and sees from of old the things that are to come:
He makes known the past and the future,
and reveals the deepest secrets—Sir 42:18-20.*

g) God is just:

*A faithful God, without deceit,
how just and upright he is!—Dt 32:4.*

*Eternal life to those who seek glory, honor, and immortality
through perseverance in good works, but wrath and fury to those
who selfishly disobey the truth and obey wickedness—Rom 2:7-8.*

h) God is infinite, there is no limit to his life:

Great is the LORD and worthy of his praise—Ps 145:3.

*Your throne stands firm from of old;
you are from everlasting, LORD—Ps 93:2.*

i) God is unchangeable:

*All good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down
from the Father of lights, with whom there is no alteration or
shadow caused by change—Jas 1:17.*

j) God is eternal, he had no beginning and will have no end:

*Before the mountains were born, /and the earth and the world
brought forth, /from eternity to eternity you are God. /A thousand
years in your eyes /are merely a yesterday—Ps 90:2, 4.*

“ . . . before Abraham came to be, I AM”—Jn 8:58.

The LORD shall reign forever and ever—Ex 15:18.

k) God is all-powerful:

*O LORD, great are you and glorious, /wonderful in power and
unsurpassable. /Let your every creature serve you;*

*/for you spoke, and they were made, /You sent forth your spirit,
and they were created; /no one can resist your word
—Jdt 16:13-14.*

1) God is everywhere:

*Where can I hide from your spirit?
from your presence, where can I flee?
If I ascend to the heavens, you are there;
if I lie down in Sheol, you are there too.
If I fly with the wings of dawn,
and alight beyond the sea,
Even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall hide me,
and night shall be my light”—
Darkness is not dark for you,
and night shines as the day.
Darkness and light are but one—Ps 139:7-12.*

Practice

■ Now that we have learned why God can properly be called our Father, we can pray the Lord’s prayer with more understanding and meaning. The beauty of the “Our Father” is that it not only describes but also expresses our relationship with God.

■ Two other prayers which Catholics use regularly are the “Hail Mary” and the “Act of Contrition.” These traditional prayers have a beauty and simplicity that can help in developing a solid prayer life. However, Catholics are not limited to such traditional forms of prayer; rather we are also encouraged to study and meditate on Sacred Scripture as well as offering our personal prayer from within our hearts.

Section 3

The Gift of Divine Life

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him—Jn 3:16-17.

WHEN JESUS SAYS, “I came that they might have life, and have it more abundantly” —Jn 10:10, he is speaking of divine life, that gift of God which allows us to share in the very life of Christ.

By the power of the Holy Spirit we begin the process of rebirth by an inner conversion. We reject our sinful ways and embrace God’s life by accepting his gift of grace. Joined to the death of Jesus we die to our former ways, thereby gaining a share in his resurrected glory. We are reborn to a new life as adopted children of God and become members of his Body, the Church.

Throughout this rebirth and because of it, we are justified—that is, our sins are forgiven and we are renewed in holiness. Justification enables us to actualize our true human freedom by cooperating with God’s grace in building up the Body of Christ. The gift of divine life restores us to our original role in God’s plan for creation.

1. What does God want for us?

God wants what we want—for us to be happy. This natural desire for happiness was placed in the human heart at the time of creation. God placed it there in order that we might be drawn toward him, who is the only one that can truly satisfy our desire. In other words, God calls each of us to God’s own happiness. This ultimate happiness is sometimes described as being God’s

“beatitude.” It is our entering into or sharing in God’s glory, in God’s divine life.

2. Does the divine life make us divine?

The divine life makes us divine in the sense that we share God’s life. It does not make us divine in the sense that we become God or “part of God.” Such an idea would be absurd. Even in heaven, seeing and loving God face to face, we shall never lose our identities, our individuality, our complete dependence on God.

3. Why is this ultimate happiness called supernatural?

It is called supernatural because we cannot merit or earn it; it is a gift from God. This kind of happiness it is not anything we can understand or imagine. It is *super*-natural, that is, above the natural.

4. How does a sinner gain such happiness?

It is the Holy Spirit who makes it possible for a sinner to realize this ultimate gift. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit sinners are “justified.” Justification is the result of God’s offer of mercy which takes away sin and sanctifies the entire person. The sinner, through God’s invitation, is made holy and becomes an adopted child of God.

5. What does “adopted child” of God mean?

As creatures we are made in the image and likeness of God. Through the divine life of grace, however, we are transformed from within and take on an inner likeness to God.

6. What is this grace of the Holy Spirit?

“Grace” is a simple word that describes a beautiful but complex

reality. First of all grace is a gift—a favor—that is freely given by God. Grace is something that we never earn or deserve. Second, grace is a participation in God’s very life. It is our sharing in the intimacy of the Trinity. Third, grace is the source of our becoming holy or sanctified. Through the divine life of grace we are empowered to live as God lives, that is, to know God as he knows himself and to love him as he loves himself.

7. Does that mean we have no choice about being holy?

God’s offer of his love requires our free response for it to be effective, for us to be sanctified.

8. How do Christians experience the mystery of grace?

While grace which justifies and sanctifies is present everywhere and at all times, it is true that God’s life of love is experienced in a unique way in the sacramental life of the Church and in special gifts (or charisms) which are gifts of the Spirit for the good of the Church and the salvation of the world.

9. Are we able to know whether we “have grace”?

Grace is supernatural. It is not something we can know or experience like other aspects of our life. While we can never be absolutely certain of grace, by observing our own good actions and those of others we can learn to trust in the presence of God’s grace.

Practice

■ Grace is part of everyday life. At home, school, or at work—alone or with others—God seeks to break through our mundane senses and reveal his will to us. These moments of insight and special strength can be understood as grace. The better we become at recognizing these moments for what they truly are, the better will we be able to take advantage of God’s gift of grace.

■ One special way of developing a better awareness of grace is to meditate. Prayer can be expressed in words, but it also can be the gathering of our hearts and minds in silence, allowing our pretenses to fall, and experiencing God’s presence. Such unstructured prayer is not always easy, but in the long run it is worth the effort.