C. If proper intention (3) is present, but faith (2) and repentance (1) are lacking, there is an obstacle to the grace of sacraments (i.e. Baptism and Confirmation) until the obstacle is removed, but the sacrament is valid. With sacramentals, the grace is given according to the faith of the receiver; but in this case, faith is lacking so no grace is received. An example of this is when holy water is desired for superstitious purposes incongruent with Baptism. It is not uncommon that poorly catechized Catholics are deceived into committing a sin against faith by turning to *brujería* that uses images of saints or holy water in costly, evil consultations - a practice that goes against the teachings of the Church. The sacramentals, in this case, are used to deceive and no grace is received at that moment, even if a request is granted.

D. If proper intention is absent and faith and repentance are lacking, the lack of intention invalidates the sacrament and it needs to be received again to receive the effects. Removing the obstacles of lack of repentance or lack of faith would still require the person to receive the sacrament with the proper intention to receive the effects of the sacrament through the sacrament. It is possible in cases of good faith, that God in his mercy may provide the same grace outside of the sacraments since he is not bound by the sacraments. With sacramentals, no grace is given. In such a situation, either superstition or indifference to religion could result. This could explain the situation that is spoken of when Jesus instructs his disciples to not throw your pearls to swine.

May our Mother Mary, who is full of grace and our mother in the order of grace, pray for our pilgrim community in 2024 so that it may be a time of opening our hearts to the generous grace of God in sacraments, sacramentals, and prayer. I especially ask us to be open to the graces in the Sacrament of Peace and Reconciliation including the desire to go to Confession frequently since in the sacrament with the correct inner disposition, we are not only granted forgiveness for our sins, but also receive the grace not to sin again.

+In Jesus and Mary,

Fr. Scott Giuliani, SOLT
Pastor of Divine Mercy Church

[1] Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1468
[2] DICASTERY FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings, 40
[3] DICASTERY FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings, 31



Pastoral Letter on Grace

ON THE OCCASION OF THE FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD, 2024

"We are who we are by the grace of God!"

To the Parishioners of Divine Mercy Church and their friends and family,

Praise be the Most Holy Trinity!

We are who we are by the grace of God! Sanctifying grace is where the life of God dwells in our souls. This is the grace that comes from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and is made available to us in Baptism. We grow in grace in the Church by participating in the sacraments, sacramentals, and prayers. The Kingdom of God is among us, and we enter and flourish in this Kingdom by grace. In the Catholic Church, we make a distinction between the sanctifying grace dwelling in our souls received in Baptism and the actual grace given to us on other occasions in Christian life. Scriptures speak of our Blessed Mother as full of grace. We are "who we are by the grace of God," (cf. 1 Cor. 15:10) as St. Paul proclaimed. If we are moved to prayer, it is the Holy Spirit that has given us the initial grace to be moved. "For we do not know how to pray as we ought, so the Holy Spirit makes intercessions for us with groanings." (Rom. 8:26)

In the sacraments, God is generous by sharing divine life with and through grace. St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us that we receive the effects of the sacraments according to our inner disposition. ***This year, as a parish, we want to be especially attentive to foster the proper disposition for the sacraments and remove the obstacles to grace in our lives.*** The removal of obstacles to the grace of sacraments is also a grace. St. Paul warned to "not receive the grace of God in vain." (2 Cor. 6:1) The sacraments are meant to produce the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our

lives. However, given the increase of secularism in our culture, there has been gradual indifference towards the gospel. We see it when people treat the Lord's day as a weekend, or when parents put greater importance on their children's grades than their religious formation, or in the new laws regarding Good Friday in Belize. People still profess to believe in God, but do not feel a need for grace in our lives.

The effects of secularization are affecting us even within the Church. We neglect to catechize our children, delay the reception of sacraments and willfully disobey the teachings of the Church. We are seeing indifference to grace among some circles. The decrease in the number of persons receiving the sacraments from Catholic homes and receiving sacraments without the necessary disposition are two examples. At times, children at catechetical age or adults who receive the sacraments may lack the necessary repentance or may lack faith. ***According to St. Thomas Aquinas, repentance and faith are necessary for the sacraments to be fruitful, that is, for the effects of grace in the sacraments to be received by the person.*** If there is no repentance or faith is lacking, the sacrament is valid but the grace is not fruitful until the obstacles to grace are removed. How many confirmations in the last year are valid but remain unfruitful due to an obstacle to grace in the one who received the sacrament? What do we do in our Catholic culture to resist the effects of secularism and remove the obstacles to grace in our families and Catholic schools? Are our Catholic institutions communities of grace or simply extensions of government services? Are we putting up obstacles to grace for the next generation by the way we live and witness our Catholic faith?

The practice of giving sacraments regardless of the preparation of the receiver in the Church is like planting during the dry season. The seed is planted, but it waits for the rain of grace to fall and bring fruitfulness. Furthermore, if the intention of the person receiving the sacrament is opposed to the effects of the sacrament, the sacrament is not only unfruitful but also invalid. This erroneous inner disposition is one reason why we need good preparation for the sacraments. If the proper intention is lacking, for example, the sacrament of Holy Matrimony can be later proven as invalid after a serious investigation. The pastoral attitude to think that the sacrament will take care of obstacles or even a misguided intention is opposed in the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas. As a church, we want to use preparation and our life of faith to help form the inner disposition necessary to receive the effects of the sacraments of the Church.

According to St. Thomas, three things are discussed when speaking about the disposition of the person receiving the effects of grace in the sacrament.

(1) Repentance
(2) Faith
(3) Proper Intention to receive the effects of the sacrament given

A. If all three (repentance, faith and proper intention) are present when a sacrament or sacramental is given, the effects of grace signified by the sacrament is given, and with the sacramental, grace is given according to the faith of the person.

B. If proper intention (3) and faith (2) are present, but repentance (1) is lacking, that is, one's will is knowingly ordered to sin, we usually use the term "living in sin" to describe this situation. There is an obstacle to the reception of the grace of sacrament until the obstacle is removed but the sacrament (i.e. Baptism and Confirmation) is valid. This is why the pastoral practice is to not give absolution in Confession when the effects would be unfruitful such as when a person intentionally and resolutely intends to continue in sexual intimacy with someone who is not their spouse. Absolution given without repentance (as shown in the intention to continue in sin at the time of the confession) would be an obstacle to the effects of the sacrament of Confession, which, namely, consists in restoring us to God's grace, joining us with him in an intimate friendship[1] and restoration to communion with the Church.

With sacramentals, actual grace is given according to the faith of the receiver, even when a person lacks repentance. Holy water and a priestly blessing are examples of a sacramental. The Church allows a priest to bless persons who are not conformed to God's will but who have faith and the proper intention (in the case of irregular relationships living in sin they "open one's life to God, to ask for his help to live better, and also to invoke the Holy Spirit so that the values of the Gospel may be lived with greater faithfulness"[2]). Sin can never be validated by Christ or the Church so giving a sacramental should always be seen as what classical theology calls, "'actual grace'--so that human relationships may mature and grow in fidelity to the Gospel, that they may be freed from their imperfections and frailties, and that they may express themselves in the ever-increasing dimension of the divine love."[3] ***Like the woman who reaches out in faith to touch the tassel of Jesus and is healed, so many have received the healing power of Christ through sacramentals according to their faith.***