

# SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND GRACE

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The spiritual life is really about one thing: it's about our cooperation with grace.... Grace—God's love—is surging into the world at all times, according to God's purposes, God's will. Our job is pretty simple: it's to notice it and once we notice it to cooperate with it, get on board with it. Cooperate.

Whether that grace is coming directly to me, or to someone else. Whether it is according to my expectations or outside my expectations... Wherever it appears, get on board, cooperate with it!

When the ego takes over, the flow of grace is blocked. That's the central tragedy of sin. God's love wants to surge into the world, but He gives us the privilege of cooperating with it. We can block it if we make our own ego central.

—(2013, a sermon by Robert Barron quoted by L.Michael, 2013)

This extract from a sermon by Fr Robert Barron speaks to the essence of this topic Spiritual Formation and Grace. Simply put, grace is God's love in the world. The goal of a Christian person and of spiritual formation is for every person to live in a way that they are awake to God in their heart and in the world around them. To enlarge our understanding of the significance of these concepts let us first look at an understanding of God that underpins these two concepts and invites us to 'an embodied and fulfilled spiritual life'. (Nouwen, 2006) Second, we will expand on the meaning of grace. Third, we will develop an understanding of spiritual formation and indicate the practical ways that we may encounter grace.

This topic is relevant for all Christians. Many Catholic organisations are taking an express interest in spiritual formation. Often this is a component of broader programs to maintain or foster the character or ethos of

schools, hospitals and other such ministries or services. An investigation into these programs is a topic for consideration in the future.

## *What is God Like?*

Despite recent positive experiences of religion and religious education, the common depiction of God in Western society is of an unreal, remote, distant and problematic figure. (Borg, 1997) I have a page of cartoons which depict caricatures of a 'God figure' who is on a cloud and variously acting like a policeman who shakes a finger and notices when we do wrong, a puppeteer who controls our lives by pulling strings, a disconnected figure who does not care to intervene in crisis situations, and so on.

These limited images of God are inadequate for adult Christian faith. They are misunderstandings of God and make it impossible for contemporary Christians to genuinely believe that God is real. Marcus Borg helpfully names this way of speaking about God as distant and remote, as 'supernatural theism'. This 'God is 'out there', created the universe a long time ago and now watches over it. Occasionally God intervenes in the world, especially in the events reported in the Bible.' (Borg, 1997) This is at the basis of a style of Christianity which is about believing in God in order to go to heaven, anticipating a judgement at the end of life on earth that involves weighing up good deeds and faith in order to access eternal reward.

Fortunately, the Christian tradition has consistently affirmed a more comprehensive understanding of God as 'the encompassing spirit'. We, and everything else, are in God.

The sacred is a nonmaterial layer or dimension of reality all around us. God is 'right here' rather than 'out there'. God is immanent, dwelling with and within us. God is also transcendent. This means that God is beyond the universe, more than the universe. Affirming both the otherness and closeness of God, acknowledging God as transcendent and immanent, is termed panentheism. 'Panentheism' affirms that God is both more than the cosmos and everywhere present. (Borg, 1997) This 'Spirit model' promotes a way of living the Christian life that stresses relationship, intimacy and belonging.

Within the Scriptures there are a number of specific metaphors for God that explain how God engages with the world. These include the key spirit metaphors of wind and breath, and other non-anthropomorphic metaphors of rock, pointing to God as a place of safety and refuge, of fire which warms, protects and purifies, and of light, which guides and reveals.

Sometimes God is envisaged as a mother, creating and nurturing. The quality of God as compassion is related to the Hebrew word for womb. God as compassionate spirit feels for us as a mother feels for the children of her womb. A common Christian metaphor for God is father. The scriptural roots of the term describe an intimate father who is close at hand and who may be trusted to give good gifts to his children.

The wisdom of God is personified as a woman, Sophia. This wise woman is important in Proverbs, Wisdom and Sirach. Sophia is especially associated with the Spirit's presence in the world right now. For the Israelites she was also *Shekinah*, the divine indwelling who accompanied them in their history. Sophia as a metaphor for Spirit suggests closeness and presence, guidance and nourishment. (Borg, 1997)

Images of God as lover or spouse and of us as God's beloved are found in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Hosea and Song of Songs use the lover-beloved imaginary to



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portray the relationship between us, the beloved and God, the lover. This is an arresting image for the divine-human relationship as it indicates a relationship of extraordinary intimacy, involving delight and yearning.

A group of images describes God as a companion who travels with us. In Exodus we read of the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the desert. God as shepherd is another such example as the shepherd travels with his or her sheep but also leads them to water, food, and shelter, protecting them and seeking out the lost.

The Spirit model of God and the various scriptural metaphors, affirm a very ancient model of God and a heartening vision of the Christian life. These metaphors emphasize the nearness of God, evoking closeness, relationship and connection. The use of human images of the sacred, for example mother and father, suggest that there is a personal dimension to the relationship with God. The non-human images, for example rock, fire and breath, maintain that God is not simply a person. Drawing on the two sets of images suggests that God is personal, while at the same time more than a person.

Unlike a set of intellectual conclusions about God, metaphors have an affective dimension. Imaging God as lover, shepherd, companion or breath has an impact on us. As a result, the central dynamic of the Christian life becomes relationship- with God, the world, and each other. 'The Christian life is about turning toward and entering into relationship with the one who is already in relationship with us- the

one who gave us life, who has loved us from the beginning, who loves us whether we know it or not, who journeys with us whether we know it or not.' (Borg, 1997)

### *What is Grace?*

Christians believe that God has been present and active in the lives of the people whose stories form the basis of the Scriptures. Christians believe too that the action of God continues to be experienced in human life. The words of Rahner eloquently describe how a person experiences grace.

When someone experiences laughter or tears, bears responsibility, stands by the truth, breaks through the egoism in his or her life with other people; where someone hopes against hope, faces the shallowness and stupidity of the daily rush and bustle with humour and patience, refusing to become embittered; where someone learns to be silent and in the inner silence lets the evil in his or her heart die rather than spread outwards; in a word, where someone lives as he or she would like to live, combating his or her own egoism and the continual temptation to inner despair—there is the event of grace. (Rahner, 1971)

Grace operates in people and is manifest in their lives.

Grace is ... a divine life source, a source of God's revelation, life, and love communicated and offered to all human beings freely by a God who longs for human beings and communities to love God back in all ways at all times. (Ekstrom, 1995)

There are a great variety of ways in which individuals experience God's grace. Grace is God's love for human beings, a love that affects, converts and transforms human freedom and loving into a love that is accepting and forgiving. This love enables a person to live with more depth and capacity. This love is offered to all and operates in all people. God's grace is at work transforming individuals and through people's actions, the world is being transformed. (Haight, 1979)

As a concept, grace emphasizes the qualities of the love of God for human beings.

This love is experienced as merciful and forgiving. God's love is a positive force that heals and cures selfishness and enables one to love God in return. The effect of God's love is transforming and enriches life as a result of being touched with God's love. God's grace frees people from their sin, from fear and from the limits that they can put on themselves. Experiencing God's love engenders a security that frees a person for others and the world. Grace liberates people from a terror of death and releases a constructive energy for hope in people's hearts. (Haight, 1979)

The effect of grace is essentially social and urges the human person toward expansiveness and self-transcendence. God's grace is driving and sustaining all human goodness and love. God is at work in the world in loving human freedom and in the lives of self-transcending persons, thus God's action becomes visible and real in the world. Those who are dedicated to the concerns of the poor and those who are neglected are effective agents of God's action in the world. God's action in and through human loving is moving toward the goal of creating a world or kingdom of communion, harmony, peace and reconciliation. (Haight, 1979)

### *What is Spiritual Formation?*

The goal of spiritual formation is that the person lives in such a way that he or she is awake to God in his or her heart and in the world around him or her. The heart is the place where the essence of the person exists. 'The heart is our hidden centre...the place of decision, ... the place of truth...the place of encounter, ...the place of covenant.' (*Catholic Church.*, 1994) The heart is that secret, deepest place within us where our spirit, soul, and body come together in a unity of self.

Spiritual formation involves an inward journey to the heart. The first task is to look within, reflect on life and seek God and God's activity right there. People who identify and articulate the movements of their inner lives

are able to slowly remove obstacles to seeing and responding to the presence of grace in their day to day experiences.

Similarly, Borg speaks of the purpose of the spiritual life as 'the opening of the heart.' (Borg, 2004) To understand what it means to have an open heart, let us look firstly at the metaphor of the closed heart. Borg expands on what it means in human experience by making connections with other key biblical metaphors.

When we have a closed heart we are blind, that is we have limited vision. We are closed in our own world and we do not perceive accurately.

- A closed heart affects the mind and the reasoning process. We can deceive ourselves and justify positions that support our own self-interest.
- A closed heart lacks gratitude and is insensitive to wonder and awe. The world looks ordinary when our hearts are closed.
- A closed heart and exile go together. Self-centred, the heart is cut off from the larger reality. Separated and disconnected, it is estranged and in exile.
- A closed heart lacks compassion and is unable to feel the suffering of others. Similarly the closed heart is insensitive to injustice.

To a certain degree, and at particular times, we all experience 'closed hearts'. On some days we sense we are more open than others. Busyness, tiredness, preoccupation may limit our capacity to be open. The mild form of closed heartedness results in a critical stance, insensitivity, self-centeredness and self-interest. The more extreme expressions of closed or hard hearts are seen in violence, brutality, arrogance and greed.

The opening of the self to God, the sacred, is the essential task of the Christian life. How do hearts become open? Hearts become open through the grace of God, through the action of the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God operates in 'thin places'. This term comes to us from Celtic spirituality and the belief that

God is right here where we are as well as beyond us. The Celts named particular geographic places as 'thin places' because that was where had they experienced God as particularly close, suggesting that the divine reality broke through into the ordinary world. 'Thin places are places where the veil momentarily lifts, and we behold God, experience the one in whom we live and move and have our being.' (Borg, 2004)

Thin places can be physical places such as the traditional places for pilgrimage in the Christian tradition, including Jerusalem and Rome. Mountains and high places are also important in many religious traditions. In general people are aware of environmental locations that are significant because they are associated with their own encounters with God, for example, waterfalls, the seaside, the desert, the night sky.

The concept of a 'thin place' refers to more than a physical location. 'A thin place is anywhere our hearts are opened' (Borg, 2004). Thus a thin place is any means by which we become present to the sacred. This can include music, poetry, literature, visual arts and dance as they can all mediate an encounter with God. The encounter can happen anywhere and at any time. Moments of grief, hardship and illness can become thin places.

Particular people can be thin places. Persons through whom we experience the presence of the Spirit of God are a thin place for us. Jesus, the saints and the many admired people of all faiths are thin places.

Many Christian practices, serve to mediate an encounter with God. The use of sacred words and rituals in liturgy and sacramental actions serve to awaken us to God's action and to separate us from the everyday. Within liturgy, music can become a thin place, sometimes this it is through the performance of music or it may be in participatory singing.

All the sacraments are means of grace, symbols of how we encounter God. Homilies too can be thin places. The preaching of the

Word is meant to create a place where our hearts can open. The Scriptures themselves are a thin place for individuals and groups. When read well, the readings can become sacramental. Key words of the liturgy are thin places. It may be that The Lord's Prayer or other phrases that we know 'by heart' move us and open our hearts. Repeating words at the level of our hearts and not our heads can shift us into a thin place. The liturgical seasons and celebrations of the Church year also have great power using symbols and rituals to awaken us to God's action.

Individual spiritual practices also help us to become receptive. Personal prayer, meditation, times of silence, journaling, retreats and fasting all bring our attention to the opening of our hearts or the action of grace.

When formal opportunities are provided for Christian spiritual formation, participants are introduced to practices and disciplines that enable the journey to the heart or the opening of the heart. Particular traditions offer a range of practices that suit particular personalities. Throughout life's journey certain practices may become helpful for a time. The important thing is that the people live in a way that they are awake to God in their hearts and in the world around them.

### **Conclusion**

Cooperation with grace, opening ourselves to God's love, is essential not only for the

spiritual life but for life itself. As humans we struggle to keep our hearts open to God's action, we struggle to cooperate with grace. 'The problem is not to make a spiritual life happen but to see where it actually is happening'. (Nouwen *et al.*, 2010) Our task is to recognize that God acts in such a way as to enrich and nourish us and that we are already in the spiritual life. Once we accept the reality that God is speaking to us, that God is present to us we begin to see the greatness of God in daily events.

Living with an open heart is a pathway to an embodied and fulfilled life. When we have open hearts we can see more clearly. We are alive to wonder, we are full of gratitude. With an open heart we are capable of compassion and have a passion for justice. We are alive with grace and in relationship with our God. By following the inner movements of the spiritual life, we are led by the Spirit of God, again and again, to the place of the heart where we can be made whole. (Nouwen *et al.*, 2010)

For those involved in the work of spiritual formation it is essential that programs include opportunities to clarify and develop an understanding of God that is informed by tradition and that promotes 'an embodied and fulfilled spiritual life'. (Nouwen, 2006) Spiritual formation and spiritual formation programs ultimately affirm that all of life, all of Christian spiritual formation is really about one thing, our cooperation with grace....'Grace-God's love surging into the world at all times.' (Michael, 2013)

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