

AMAZING GRACE LOST AND FOUND

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A WELL-ORGANIZED synod or consultation engaging the committed membership of our contemporary Australian Catholic Church would be an exciting prospect. Given that our Bishop's Conference could not see the way clear for such an event the Year of Grace which seemingly comes in its place may well be not such a bad idea!

Though there has not been one consistent meaning given to Grace over the years it does draw into its spell many of the matters that determine our present faith life for better or worse. There are the issues of the interrelationship between God and us; sin especially Original Sin; the value of the human and the natural over against the supernatural; the relationship between Church and world; the place of sexuality in general and in particular in the transmission of that so-called Original Sin; questions of salvation, justification and merit; freedom and determinism; authority; dogma versus opinion and surely many more.

Within this world encircled by Grace there is a conglomeration of stories that have been assembled over the centuries in our efforts to grasp some understanding of this immeasurable gift. These stories have taken their contexts from the evolving historical eras from which they have emerged and which therefore ebb and flow in their ability to contain and transmit the mystery involved. Too often in our Church culture we find it difficult to accommodate change; 'what has been must always be' leads us too easily into a morass of statements that confuse and even stifle the overall message. Whenever we come to a project such as this Year of Grace we must be prepared for some serious changes and we are well warned

of this in the preliminary literature. Change in the context of conversion means new thinking and new values! We must be ready to have our hills leveled and our valleys filled in! (Isaiah 40.4)

Some time ago the late, great Jesuit psychiatrist James J. Gill, speaking of our attempts to understand sexuality over the years said: 'So many are victims of ignorance and dysfunctional myths/[stories] that need not exist. These distortions and 'ignorances' are causing great pain and awful behavior and are a burden to the Church and its mission to evangelise'. These words are prophetically true of sexuality as Bishop Geoffrey Robinson is courageously reminding us and equally true of our teaching about Grace!

In Church we have a worrying tendency of moving on from one position to another without pausing to say why we are changing from what has been or what there is about the new that is different and promising to be better. My guess is that it has something to do with our fear of making a mistake and the damage that this might do to our perceived credibility. Be that as it may, in this question of Grace there must be a lot of attention given to this task of sorting and explaining.

One, though not alone, who must surely take a big hit in this process is the great Saint Augustine. If today we are seeing Grace as predominantly in the context of relationships, we will have to face the claim that this great man was in the words of the eminent English Catholic psychiatrist Jack Dominian, 'an emotional disaster as far as relationships go'. Though he used a language of love he spoke out of a particular set of traumatic experiences

and heavily cited his understandings in the context of objective philosophical categories thereby feeding into the stream of western theological consciousness some of the most problematic myths that still linger in the ecclesiastical air we breathe.

It is my firm conviction that there is no way forward without an exhaustive audit of what we have been saying about original sin, grace, sexuality and so many issues such as those mentioned summarily above. Who will identify and nominate the questions for consideration and direct the resources to address them? For me the answer is clear; it must be the People of God loud, clear and unhindered. What resources need to be applied to this task? Whatever resources will be deemed to be necessary, modern scholarship has much to offer and the talk of possible E Conferences and such like is promising. Any move to censor the voice of scholarship in order to protect the sensibilities of 'God's little people' should be treated for what it is, a diabolical temptation!

So far we can take heart from the efforts employed to structure and promote the Year of Grace that is to begin on Pentecost Sunday. The use of helpful technology and people to organize structures is clearly evident. What is not so encouraging is the emphasis that shone through in the initial video presentations. Was I alone in thinking there was an intention to try to move forward without tackling some of the challenging questions? Was there a smell of 'peace at any price' when that is too high a price to pay in this instance? Were there signs of an attempt to move forward in faith without the necessary pain and death that have always accompanied sorties into questions of 'Grace'? Dietrich Bonhoeffer would have us recall that there is no such thing as cheap grace!

If this sounds like a call to arms then that is what it is. There is more than enough wisdom and understanding out there to usher us into a new era. Languishing in a crippling malaise we are challenged to look for the prophets and call them forward with all the



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encouragement we can muster.

Maybe this Year of Grace comes to us as a second best but it has about it signs of the Spirit breathing. The task for all of us who care is to make sure the Spirit is not stifled!

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What better call could there be for us than that we dedicate the year to ponder the amazing gift that is grace? That surely is our very *raison d'être* as the People of God. Like so many precious realities of our Christian life, grace has been buried deep in fields of human thought and imagery over the years and now challenges us to find its reality anew in our times.

In a monumental work on Grace, Piet Fransen prophetically chose to present his insights with a story something like this...

A girl was born to a single mother who gave her up at birth; her foster home was dysfunctional and she grew up in a world without love. Consequently she was always fighting to find space and security. She was blind to beauty, unable to trust and had nothing to look forward to.

She was living life at a lower level than what a human is meant to live. She sought her pleasure and relief in following her basic instincts and desires. In her world starved of love, there was more darkness than light, more death than life. Her appearance betrayed her experience; she felt worthless and unwanted,

and presented herself as such.

Living nearby was a young man who had been raised in the midst of loving parents, brothers and sisters. He understood the world as embraced by a loving God who invited him to join in bringing life and beauty to all about him. His vision saw beyond appearances to possibility. His experience led him to trust and have faith in a benevolent and caring providence. He had space in his heart to enjoy, to care and to share.

One morning the miracle happened, the two met. Her pain and deprivation struck him but he could see beyond the exterior to a latent beauty within. His heart opened to embrace her seeing in her a place of possibility. He wanted to connect with her and give her life as he had been given!

At first his overtures were rejected as just another attempt to use her for his own ends; she had no other experience.

Slowly his persistence wore through her protective surface to the embers of a dream

that still smouldered within. Slowly in his presence her vision began to change and she started to experience herself differently. She started to have some space to receive *into*. Beauty began to come to her and as she grasped it she was caught up by its drive to expand. Slowly she became capable of love.

There would be many falls; time and again she would have to start anew and act ‘as if’ she lived in a world bathed in beauty, in life and in love. Always, it was as she began again to act ‘as if’ that she would find out again that it was. Eventually her faith and hope flowered into a degree of love that would allow her to so open up and give herself that she could begin to find herself in another.

A true story! Yes; and it is an example of a force that has come amongst us and continues to draw us into its transforming power. That force has many names! It is love, it is truth and beauty, it is the touch of God as Father, Son and Spirit and it is Jesus too; and in all of this it is Grace.

The rule of law substituted for the law of love is in reality a pandering to our human weakness.

‘I was brought up in a Church which cherished the will and intellect. We had a theology which was saturated with reason and law, and even now we are expected to submit our mind and will in obedience to authority.

All this made affinity with love somewhat difficult.

Not that love does not need reason, will, discipline and rationality; but in fact the roots of love were learned in our childhood when feelings were predominant and the main means of conveying affection to us. We are steeped in the signals of symbols of feelings, and we cannot be effective lovers without a major use of feelings.’

—Fr Joseph Rheinberger, DD.