



2018-04-09

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## BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

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English 295

March 30, 2018

### Flannery O'Connor and Transcendence in the Christian Mystery of Grace

A common theme in Roman Catholic author Flannery O'Connor's literature is the concept of grace. Grace is defined by Catholics as "the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life" (101). Grace then is this supernatural divine power or force that God extends to mankind. This divine force is believed necessary as through Adam and Eve's transgression, Christians believe that man is totally depraved and unable to do good and destined for eternal suffering in Hell. To avoid this fate, through the sacrifice of His perfect Son, Jesus Christ God is able to extend divine grace to humanity. Those who accept this grace become adopted by God as His sons and daughters and become worthy of being saved from hell in heaven. In addition, grace becomes a "free and undeserved help" in life through giving supernatural aid and miracles in the lives of the faithful. Many Christians agree with Catholics on this idea of grace. Yet within Christianity, grace has been the source of such contention and debate that it was a major factor in the Protestant Reformation (42).

The resulting fallout of the Reformation has created a labyrinthine environment within literature for Christian authors to traverse, mainly as the different understandings of grace also influence the understanding of God. On the one hand you have a just God who waits until one is worthy through action to send His grace to change that individual overtime but immediately cuts

off access to that grace if one's actions don't comply with His will. Or on the other hand, you have a God who is merciful and loving yet ignores human freewill by predestining souls to be caught by his grace and be changed and eligible for salvation, even if they are the most hypocritical individual and by justice's standards aren't worthy of heaven (46). Contemporary Christian authors as a result are at risk of having their theological identity criticized and questioned if their portrayal of grace and God doesn't align with their specific branch of Christian identification. This frequently occurred to Flannery O'Connor as several critics argued that the violence in her stories doesn't connote the appearance of grace, even going as far as saying her orthodoxy was debatable(114). However, by examining the different views of grace and comparing them with Flannery O'Connor's stories "Greenleaf", "The Enduring Chill", and "Revelation" it can be seen that Flannery O'Connor's vision of grace transcends strict adherence to Catholic or Protestant understandings of grace. This transcendence happens through interweaving of the merciful offerings of actual grace of Catholicism with the inescapable and forceful grace of Protestantism. Through this, Flannery O'Connor portrays the biblical God who tailors the acceptance of His grace in a way that will lead a chosen soul to salvation in a way mysterious to man but perfectly known to Him.

First, the original foundation for the principles of grace must be discussed. From Luke's account that with Christ "the grace of God was upon him."(King James Bible Luke 2:40), the apostle created a link of Christ's holiness and perfection to this grace given by God the Father. And later on, the apostle Paul connects this same grace is what resurrected Christ from death, delivered through the Holy Ghost (KJV Romans 1:4). From the apostles than comes the idea of grace being this supernatural force used by God. This becomes significant later on as Paul presents man's state before God:

As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one...for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God (KJV Romans 3:10-12, 23).

In other words, according to Paul, man is wicked and sinful and unworthy of the entering the presence of God who is pure holiness and righteousness. Not only that but that man is unable to do good, not even one individual. But it is through Paul's teachings and Peter's declaration that a connection is made to Christ's grace and man's salvation. For Paul declared to Rome after declaring man's depravity that man is able to return to God "being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus"(KJV Romans 3:24). Paul is then stating that the grace of God has the power to redeem men from sin – which is called justification in Christianity - and save them from hell after death to be restored to God in Heaven – which is called salvation. This adds deeper meaning than to Peter's declaration that "through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved"(KJV Acts 5:11). So from the surviving words of the apostles comes the knowledge that Christ lived, he died and was resurrected through divine grace administered by the Holy Spirit. Also from the apostles comes the fact that mankind is evil and not worthy for Heaven, and because God loves us He offers us grace, which justifies or redeems us from sin and allows us after death to be saved in Heaven instead of hell. And yet while the apostles clarify what is grace and where it comes from and why it's important, they are mute on who gets to receive God's grace and how it works in daily life and with sinners.

Centuries after the deaths of the apostles, the Roman Catholic Church offered an answer in the form of the Catechisms, a summary of Christian principles of belief. The Catechisms state:

The fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man's free acting through his collaboration, so that the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful . . . Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life (102).

The Catholic perspective than is that grace comes into one's life as a process, which is initiated by God, but than, is furthered by man's continual acting in accordance with His will and law. By doing so, God's grace changes them into being able to do good works and receive further grace from God. Within this view God offers grace to all but requires a man's own initiative and will for it to be received into their lives. This echoes the teachings of the apostle James that "Faith without works is dead" (KJV James 2:17). Furthermore, Catholics recognize there exist 4 differing types or forms of grace in which God interacts with humanity. For the sake of critiquing Flannery O'Connor we will focus on three of those graces – sanctifying grace, habitual grace, and actual grace. By understanding these versions of grace, it not only increases our understanding of Flannery O'Connor's theology but also the issues that led to the Protestant Reformation and the differences between Catholic and Protestant theology on grace.

Both Catholics and Protestants believe in sanctifying grace, which is the grace, which "perfects the soul itself to enable you to live with God, to act by His love," (St. Mary). This grace is permanently instilled into one's soul by God after accepting His grace and it is the

cleansing and healing power that removes sins and prepares man to return to Him after death. But as mankind is fallen and not naturally disposed to do good continually, this grace is strengthened through habitual grace which is “the permanent disposition to live and act” in alignment with God’s will (St. Mary). This grace is what changes a man’s nature into becoming more willing to do good works and resist evil. And the way one receives this habitual grace and realigns them with God’s will is through actual grace. The St. Mary of Nazareth Catholic Church defines actual grace as “a supernatural kick in the pants, your wake up call. It gets your will and intellect working so that you can seek out and keep sanctifying grace” (St. Mary).

In a sense, actual grace provides a brief revelatory experience or an epiphany through the Spirit that opens the eyes of the individual to their rebellious state before God and invites them to repent and return to God through action. This process of acting on actual grace is called conversion. And converted individuals are able to receive the influence of habitual grace, which changes their nature and allows sanctifying grace to remain with them. By having this sanctifying grace with them, the repentant Christian within Catholic theology is justified before God and allowed entrance into heaven after death. Flannery O’Connor identified herself with the Roman Catholic Church and it was this theology that surrounds her characters in her stories. Critic Jessica Riedmueller points out that not only was Flannery O’Connor a Catholic but one “living in Georgia and writing about her Fundamentalist Protestant neighbors. Writing mostly during the 1950s, when Catholicism struggled to survive among the Southern Protestant denominations, O’Connor formed her fiction and her characters according to the teachings and dogmas of the Church”(101).

This distinction on her situation and audience is important because several critics wrote on Flannery O’Connor’s apparent misuse of these beliefs in her stories and as a scapegoat to

explain away the darker elements in her works, mainly the violence and traumatic experiences suffered by her main characters. One critic, Kathleen G. Ochshorn, wrote her rejection of O'Connor's use of grace as an "uneasy cloak" to justify the violence in her stories and denied the claim of Flannery O'Connor that her stories end on a note of salvation (201). And while Ochshorn was mainly criticizing "A Good Man is Hard to find", violence is a recurring element in Flannery O'Connor's works. In "Greenleaf", after days of futile bargaining for removal and attempted capture of the Greenleaf family bull, Mrs. May's attempt to kill the beast ends with her being gored to death. Shepherd in "The Lame shall Enter First" loses his young son Norton to suicide after neglecting him for a wild foster boy named Rufus in futile attempts to reform him. And while the violence isn't horrific to Mrs. Turpin in "Revelation" or existent for Asbury in "The Enduring Chill", Mrs. Turpin still gets violently attacked by another patient that leaves her with a bruised eye and Asbury in the end of his tale is left in the grips of a self-afflicted life long illness.

These violent, heartbreaking, and downright cruel consequences for these characters actions seem in direct contrast to any form of grace within Catholic theology and yet Flannery O'Connor frequently defended the use of violence in her works. In analyzing "A Good man is Hard to Find", Flannery O'Connor wrote:

"...in my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is the one which is implicitly in the Christian view of the world."  
(210)

If you replace reality with “truth” and connect grace to “actual grace” as found within Catholic theology, than it can be argued that Flannery O’Connor’s stating that God uses violent experiences as a vehicle for revelatory actual grace to come into her character’s lives, the forcefulness of which opens their hardened hearts to allow God’s sanctifying grace in and change them. But it can be argued what good this does if in the act of receiving God’s actual grace the individual dies before repenting, as in the case of Mrs. May. Because prior to her death, the main portrait of Mrs. May given to readers is her racist beliefs of the Greenleaf family in separating them and calling them “those people” (318), her dismissal of Mrs. Greenleaf’s religious action though she didn’t believe or actually practice her own faith (317), and her glee in killing the Greenleaf bull while ignoring Mr. Greenleaf’s obvious personal distress (330). Actions and behaviors, which would not warrant divine approval and the bestowal of grace but a reserved spot in Hell according to Catholicism.

While Catholicism is silent on how Mrs. May could be able to receive grace with her behavior, Protestantism does have an answer: Mrs. May is saved by grace alone, regardless of her works. Protestants follow Paul’s admonition to the Ephesians, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast"(KJV Ephesians 2: 8-9). Put simply, for grace to enter one’s life simply having faith in Christ is enough. And whereas Catholics believe God requires good works as necessary for continual access to His grace, protestant Dewey D. Wallace Jr. wrote: "Redemption is entirely a gift of God quite apart from human merit . . . [T]he elect were chosen before they did good works in order that they might do them" (Strong). Thus a version of God is created in which certain individuals in fallen humanity have already been saved by God, regardless of their works and that, through His sanctifying grace they are than changed into

beings wherein He can work good through them. Within that moment of her death than, God's sanctifying grace cleansed Mrs. May of her sins and saved her.

But the scriptures then present a conundrum within Protestantism: since mankind is rebellious and deprived and totally enslaved to Satan because of the fall of Adam and Eve, man could rebel against receiving God's grace and the truth of their situation (KJV Galatians 5:17). In his commentary towards John 6:41-45, John Calvin provides an answer:

The statement amounts to this, that we ought not to wonder if many refuse to embrace the Gospel; because no man will ever of himself be able to come to Christ, but God must first approach him by his Spirit; and hence it follows that all are not drawn, but that God bestows this grace on those whom he elected. True, indeed, as to the kind of drawing, it is not violent, so as to compel men by external force; but still it is a powerful impulse of the Holy Spirit, which makes men willing who formerly were unwilling and reluctant. (Calvin).

So though man has the freedom to reject grace, by the power of His Holy Spirit, God can lower the rebellious nature and sinful barriers in the hearts of those He chooses to elect. Reading "Greenleaf" from this perspective than it could be seen how Mrs. May is considered "saved" at the end of her story if the bull's attack is framed than as an act of grace by God to save his wayward daughter by forcing her to face the revelation of her true nature and sins through death, knowing that his grace would than redeem her from her sins and allowing her entrance into heaven after her death.

However, in his essay on "Preparation for Salvation", Puritan Perry Miller explains why the early Puritan leaders, a sect of Protestantism, changed the nature of this doctrine of irresistible grace and salvation or "regeneration" as they called it:

Had the mechanism of regeneration still been phrased exclusively in the language of Calvin, as a forcible seizure, a holy rape of the surprised will, there would have been no place for any period of preparation, which would have been conceivable only as the first moment of an effectual calling (261).

The problem than that comes from this view of grace is also the issue that is brought up in “Greenleaf” – the role of Mrs. May’s agency in receiving grace and salvation. Framed this way by Calvin, Protestant grace seems to come from such a loving and merciful God that He bypasses our freedom to make choices to decide our destiny for us and whether we are saved or not. And even if one is rebellious and resistant, God almost forces His Spirit and grace into the individual to break them and force them to become righteous and worthy of salvation, like spiritual assault. Nor does it help that Flannery O’Connor describes the attack with the imagery of the bull having “buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover” and having one horn pierce her heart and the other horn bringing her up in an “unbreakable grip” (333), as a lover – or in this case, rapist – would.

It than seems that one comes at an impasse with these differing views of grace in reading Flannery O’Connor’s works. For either O’Connor’s God is just in requiring good works before He bestows actual grace yet breaks this law to save horrible characters such as Mrs. May or God is so loving He performs the equivalent of spiritual assault by bypassing justice and agency and forcing souls He’s chosen into accepting salvation. But in reading her stories where death is not the vehicle of grace, such as “Revelation” and “The Enduring Chill”, one can see an interesting pattern that appears prior to the climatic reception of grace.

In reading “Revelation” and “The Enduring Chill” from strictly a Protestant view of grace, the climatic moments of the stories previously mentioned could be seen as the vehicles for

divine grace. For Mrs. Turpin it is after seeing the vision of the mixed procession of the righteous and societal outcasts “rumbling toward heaven”, that she leaves and wanders visibly changed in her making her “slow way” home in contemplation of the vision she’s received (R.). For Asbury, it is after the realization he is going to live a long but illness riddled life that the “last film of illusion” that hid the truth from his sight was removed and he saw the presence of the Holy Ghost in the form of the water stained bird with an icicle in his beak on his ceiling began to descend (382). These experiences are forceful moments when the truth of the character’s self-delusions is violently torn away, forcing them to see the truth of their actions and sins. But amidst this Protestant backdrop of forceful sanctifying grace, strokes of catholic actual grace can be seen throughout these stories. These moments of actual grace can be argued in the repetitive interactions of Mrs. Turpin, Asbury, and Mrs. May with individuals they have a combative relationship with – Mary Grace for Mrs. Turpin, Father Finn and Mrs. Fox for Asbury, and Mr. Greenleaf for Mrs. May. This can be argued because each of these characters brings truth or enlightenment to the character yet is resisted strongly by the main character. Mrs. May frequently walks away from Mr. Greenleaf in their discussions of the bull, even at the point where she asks him to get his gun to kill his family’s own bull (330). Mrs. Turpin, prior to Mary Grace’s attack, becomes more and more agitated at the hateful glares she’s receiving from Mary Grace in each of her conversations (497). And after Mary Grace’s statement of her as a “warthog from hell”(500), Mrs. Turpin fights against believing that message until she angrily confronts God about it (507). And Asbury continues to try to force his mother to accept what’s wrong with him is “way beyond” her and Doctor Block’s help (367) and after criticizing Father Finn’s theology, spirals into an existential crisis after Father Finn’s speech saying the Holy Spirit wouldn’t come until he saw himself as he was – “a lazy ignorant conceited youth” (377).

What these all have in common is at the heart of each of these interactions is the main character being confronted by another about their actions or behavior and the continual forceful rejection of that message. This supports a statement made by Flannery O'Connor on the human condition that "all human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and change is painful" (1001). Because divine grace is all about changing and subjecting the individual's will to God's will and to do good works instead of the naturally inclined bad, the human soul is stubborn to resist any and all forms of grace. It could than be argued that all these characters – Mrs. Fox, Mary Grace, Mr. Greenleaf, and Father Finn – all work in Flannery O'Connor's short stories as instruments in God's hands in extending invitations of actual grace to her most stubborn and human characters. This goes in line with another statement Flannery O'Connor made on the appearance of these moments of grace as "gestures":

The action or gesture I'm talking about would have to be on the anagogical level, that is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. It would be a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make. It would be a gesture, which somehow made contact with mystery (209).

Though Flannery O'Connor was speaking of the gesture made by the Grandmother to the Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find", these gestures of grace can be seen throughout her stories. For in Mrs. Turpin's statement "What you got to say to me?" to Mary Grace (500) and her angry shout "Who do you think you are?" to God (507), is the recognition that her encounter with Mary Grace was divinely influenced. And yet it wasn't until she acknowledged the truth of Mary Grace's statements than did she experience her vision and receive sanctifying grace and recognized the need to change. The same goes for Asbury; as it is only after his mother and Dr.

Block reveals he isn't dying does Asbury have his revelatory experience. And it could be argued that if Mrs. May had heeded the advice of Mr. Greenleaf, her death would've been avoided.

Commenting on a statement Flannery O'Connor made to her friend Betty Hester on the need of violence in the work of divine redemption, John D. Sykes Jr. wrote:

She [Flannery] suggests that violence, like suffering, death, and the grotesque, has a divine purpose. This...assertion also goes against the modern grain, which may countenance violence in form of war and even revel in it for its entertainment value on stage and screen, but condemns it from a moral point of view. For O'Connor, the violence of sin requires a divine counter violence that receives violence and turns it against itself in the interest of peace. (127)

In another quote, Flannery O'Connor wrote: "I don't know if anybody can be converted without seeing themselves in a kind of blasting annihilating light, a blast that will last a lifetime" (). This is a connection to the apostle Paul's conversion experience where in the violent revelation of his sinful rejection of Christ and the murdering of His disciples led to literal blindness until the truth was accepted (KJV Acts 9:1-9,18). This is an interesting comparison to make, as out of the twelve apostles only Paul seems to have required the Lord to use such forceful means to move him towards conversion. And it also is found in the New Testament that while Christ is gentle in his interactions with the disciples, his actions become increasingly harsher with the Pharisees and Sadducees that refuse to acknowledge the truth of His divinity. This ultimately escalates to the use of violent force by the Savior to cleanse the temple in front of all the Jews and forcefully decrying "Make not my Father's House an house of merchandise" (KJV John 2:16), forcing all of the Jews to see the truthfulness of their deprived state and an invitation to return to God through Christ. As the scriptures state that God is the same "yesterday, today, and forever" (KJV

Hebrews 13:8), than it isn't a far leap suggested by Flannery O'Connor that if God would use different means including violence to bring people to accept Him in the New Testament, than it stands to reason He would continue to do so now.

The recognition that personal revelation requires different avenues for different individuals even transcends the biblical narrative. Critic Scott Forschler found a connection between Flannery O'Connor's revelations through violence to the violence found within the koans – religious stories of Zen Buddhism. In comparing the two different theologies, Scott wrote:

Like the Zen masters, O'Connor recognized that the particular egoistic obsessions of different characters required different responses, different ways of humbling or crushing their egos, to reveal the reality they had been hiding from. Some needed to be shot every minute of their lives, while others needed to have their mothers killed, or merely their hopes and dreams. No single solution fits every problem (65).

Meaning that within both Buddhism and Flannery O'Connor's Christianity can be found this recognition that the different impediments blocking revelation required different methods to be removed. The focus of Flannery O'Connor's stories is in the breaking down the prideful and sinful hearts of her characters to the reality of their fallen state, the hopes of which would turn them to Christ and salvation. And for this to happen, sometimes-significant force, violence, and even death is used by God to pierce these hearts for his grace to enter in. Yet this isn't the divine grace solely found within either Catholicism or Protestantism, for it can be forceful or violent in humbling the proud yet can also be patiently and repeatedly offered in more merciful forms through conversation with individuals. The grace of Flannery O'Connor than is the grace of the God found with the Bible, the God that shows patience and mercy to all yet is also capable of

using force and violence as vehicles to deliver His messages of truth and grace to His wayward and stubborn children.

It is a struggle for all who associate grace with something positive to imagine that God would use violence to redeem souls. But as the Lord commanded His prophet Isaiah to write in the Old Testament to ancient Israel when they were questioning their God: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord”(KJV Isaiah 55:8-9), the true transcendence of Flannery O’Connor’s grace in her stories lie in that it operates within the mysteries of God’s thoughts and actions. In a way, Flannery O’Connor’s stories remind readers that God’s *modus operandi* – or way of working - is beyond human comprehension. And that it is only within moments of revelation and receiving grace does one come in contact with that mystery. So the reason Flannery O’Connor’s portrayal of grace doesn’t align with strictly a Protestant or Catholic interpretation is probably because Flannery O’Connor wasn’t concerned with the correct portrayal of grace. As critic Emily Strong wrote: “It is also possible that O’Connor wasn’t quite as concerned with the Catholic version of grace as she was with conversion through any means”(108). As the prophets and apostles of the Bible, Flannery O’Connor crafted her works as vehicles for which readers could come in contact with divine grace and the mystery of God. The open-ended nature of her stories invite the reader to question truly what lengths a loving God won’t go through to reclaim even the most stubborn and human of his children. She also leads readers to challenge their perception of God, whose thoughts and actions will forever transcend human knowledge and reasoning – be that a Catholic or Protestant understanding. And ultimately, hopefully returned more humbled to reality and in a state receptive to receiving our own invitation of actual grace.

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