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## WHAT IS GRACE?

*Grace* is a word we meet often in the liturgy, in scripture, and in spiritual writings. What does it mean? To understand it better, let's turn to a saint recently declared a Doctor of the Church, Thérèse of Lisieux. This French Carmelite nun, who died at the age of twenty-four at the end of the nineteenth century, was not trained to be a great scholar or theologian. In fact, her education looks exceedingly deficient as measured in a contemporary assessment. She made many mistakes in grammar and punctuation. But her high intelligence and profound spirituality have left us pages that arouse us to strive for richer and fuller lives. If Church World readers are willing to explore with St. Thérèse the treasures of the Catholic doctrine of grace, she will be our guide in subsequent issues.

"Everything is grace" ( *Her Last Conversations*, p. 57). These words of St. Thérèse are often quoted. "Everything is grace." If she were to speak to any one of us today that is what she would say. She would listen to you tell her where your life is right now and how you got to this point. She would not shake her head over your shortcomings, over my shortcomings. She would say to you, to me: "Everything is grace." Wait a minute, St. Thérèse. Did you really hear me? My struggles, my failures--and maybe I'll mention some of my successes so she'll know me better. Each of us will tell her the hopes we had that didn't come to pass and the hopes we still have. And she'll say to you, to me. "Everything is grace."

In those three words, Thérèse does not mean it makes no difference what I do, what I reject and what I select. I cannot walk toward something I know takes me away from God. I cannot choose evil and think grace is in that choice. Thérèse is explaining that God is never distant. Wherever we are, in that exact place, God is with us, wholly concerned about our well-being, available when we call out for help and even before we call out. In fact, God is so present that even when I choose evil, even when I have moved beyond goodness, beyond the blessed sphere of grace--even then grace pursues me. Grace reaches out to me, urging me: "Come back. Come back to the blessedness of friendship with God."

We cannot evade our God. Psalm 139 asks, "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence?" (7) The love that created us never stops entreating us, always wanting to enclose us in its divine embrace. Grace is God's gift to us, speaking through every circumstance of our lives.

Thérèse explains how she will tell her personal story, "It is not my life properly so called that I am going to write; it is my thoughts on the graces God deigned to grant me". She continues, "To me the Lord has always been merciful and good, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Ps 102:8) ( *Story of a Soul* , p 13, 15). Merciful and good. Over and over again the word *mercy* appears in Thérèse's writings. The first paragraph of her autobiography declares, "I shall begin to sing what I must sing eternally: 'The mercies of the Lord'" (Ps 89:1). What St. Thérèse has left us are her reflections on how grace shaped her life. And that is an invitation

for each of us to reflect on our own lives, to ponder how grace has molded us year after year after year.

Let's take a longer look at grace, at what it is. The view is longer because we are going back to Scripture, to see what the inspired writers tell us. In the Old Testament, we find several words that convey the meaning of grace. There is the Hebrew root " *hen* "H-e-n. In a physical sense, this word means to lean over, watch someone. It also means to bend over with kindness, with protection, with love. It conveys favor, good will.

The Latin word for grace, "gratia," has multiple meanings, one of which is thankfulness. "Deo gratias" is translated, "Thanks be to God." Grace as God's gift to us certainly calls for our gratitude. One is grateful for being graced. The Eucharist is a ritual of worship that thanks God for the grace given us in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

St. Thérèse appreciates being who she is. Think about that. Did you ever thank God for making you the unique person you are? There is no pride in this. You are being grateful in acknowledging the One Who designed you and formed you, the divine Crafter Who took the human material supplied by your mother and your father, and gave the world what it has never had before: You.

When you hear the lines of *Happy Birthday to You* , know it is also a song of praise to your Maker. Celebrate who you are and ask Jesus for the grace to become what God calls you to be. Light the candles!

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(All quotations of St. Thérèse are from the editions of ICS Publications.)

Continue with [ST. THÉRÈSE AND GRACE Part Two](#)