

Words As Bearers of Grace - by Sr. Margaret Dorgan, DCM

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WORDS AS BEARERS OF GRACE (Part 8)

Grace is God communicating to us through a variety of gifts. This kind of divine giving is named created grace to distinguish it from the supreme Gift of the Blessed Trinity's indwelling-what theologians term Uncreated Grace. One form of created grace especially important to us is words. Grace as words tells us something about God. It comes as a message attuned to our world of time and space. God makes use of words to establish an ongoing connection with creatures able to listen.

Scripture is the revealed word of God. Chapters of the Bible speak about our Creator's inner reality and especially about God's dealings with human beings. We learn more about the kind of God we turn to in prayer and worship. Some of the mystery is unveiled even as the wonder of the mystery deepens.

The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament contain passages that address us throughout our lives, sometimes like a murmuring of the Holy Spirit and sometimes like an insistent plea to get our attention. The prophet Jeremiah declares, "When I found Your words, I devoured them. They became my joy and the happiness of my heart" (15:16). Many centuries later, St. Therese of Lisieux wrote in a letter four months before her death, "I take up Scripture. Then all seems luminous to me. A single word uncovers for my soul infinite horizons" (Letter 226, p. 1094).

God has also given us sacramental words--words so effective that as part of ritual action they accomplish what they signify. Spoken phrases bring to pass the supreme sacrament of the Eucharist which transforms bread and wine. "This is my Body. This is my Blood." Grace comes to us through the awesome power of human utterance. Then we have the conversation of other men and women--our parents, our spouses, siblings, our children, relatives, friends, teachers. Their speech can be an avenue of help and inspiration. In fact, words have so much force that we learn to treat them carefully. All words do not convey grace. Some have power to serve evil. Outbursts of anger, of hatred, of violence. "I hate you. I'd like to kill you." Humiliating comments--disparaging, discouraging, deriding ones. "You're worth nothing. You'll never be any good." These are statements that destroy hope. Like Job, we want to reply, "How long will you torment me, and break me in pieces with words?" (19:2).

Sentences may embody deceit and spite. They can seduce and tempt. "Let's just try it. No one will ever know." All this is a betrayal of words which desire to be in their own distant way, earthly manifestations of the Divine Word Who became human. "I will watch my ways so as not to sin with my tongue. I will set a curb on my mouth" (Ps 39:2).

Words want to be harbingers of grace. The testimonies of the saints are that kind of exchange. Sometimes their writings are meant to instruct and other times they are simple ponderings of God's grace at work in human living. The letters and memoirs

of holy people are precious texts which enable us to look back over their lives and their response to God.

These communications take hold of our attention as if a voice from the past were talking to us. "I want you to listen to this because I have something to share with you." St. Therese of Lisieux says that "about to tell her story, (she) rejoices at having to publish the totally gratuitous gifts of Jesus" (Story of A Soul, p.15). The words of Therese in her account of her life and in her correspondence address us as vehicles of grace.

The French Carmelite writes in the first chapter of her autobiography, "It is with great happiness I come to sing the mercies of the Lord with you" (ibid). When she penned that sentence, she was addressing her sister Pauline. But later she knew God would use her writings for the benefit of many others. So now each one of us can be sure St. Therese is saying, "I come to sing the mercies of the Lord with you." Her song is a canticle of praise for God's grace.

Contact with saints through their writings is nourishment for our spirit. You've often heard it said, "You are what you eat." That statement applies to physical food, of course. But the food we take into our mind and heart is a diet that makes us become the person we are. Lots of junk food is available. Worse than that, there are plenty of tasty menus to poison our spirit. Today words fly on the wings of the Internet. Too often dialogue in films and television, or the lyrics of some popular songs, entertain even while they impoverish us. In their swift access to our attention, they have the power to build up or to destroy. We choose what to feed on.

The First Epistle of Peter sends greetings to those living among foreigners in the dispersion and says, "You are newborn ... you should be hungry for nothing but milk--the spiritual honesty which will help you to grow up to salvation--now that you have tasted the goodness of the Lord" (2:2,3).

With our free will, we choose what we consume. Let us say with the Psalmist, **"How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth"** (119: 103).

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