

Lasallian Reflection

THE DANCE OF GRACE & FAITH

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Applying ourselves to the presence of God is a most useful practice; be faithful to it.

- St. John Baptist de La Salle¹

There has been a lot of press over David Brook's new book, *The Second Mountain*. In one section, he talks about how "grace" is, or becomes, a part of our lives. Grace, he says, is not the result of a rational process, but instead can only be a totally free gift from God. You can't make grace happen. This is why: "We have this amazing ability to care about each other and to love each other and love God in ways that are beyond any normal requirement. So we're just made that way. And it is a gracious universe that gave us this capacity, and it seems to me it didn't have to be that way." That's well put. The next bit reminded me of a positive notion from the 17th century that emerged with Jansenism. He writes, "Faith and grace are not about losing agency. They are about strengthening and empowering agency while transforming it. When grace floods in, it gives us better things to desire and more power to desire them."²

In an article by Louis *Dupré* about Jansenism – a controversial movement during the time of St. John Baptist de La Salle – a surprisingly similar perspective is expressed. Beyond Jansenism's general impact of conveying an "unqualified pessimism about human nature," figures like Blaise Pascal also highlighted a "humble awareness of an unmerited union with God." And this deep awareness is not, and cannot be, something that comes from reason alone. "Only from God himself (in faith) can one learn about a total, intrinsic redemption that sanctifies one's attitudes and grants merit to one's works. Yes the object of faith itself, the 'mystery of Jesus,' is such that it blinds some while enlightening others. Only with 'eyes of faith' ... can we see the true reality

¹ De La Salle, John Baptist, *Interior Prayer*. Translated by Richard Arnandez & Donald Mouton. Edited by Donald Mouton. (Landover, ML: Christian Brothers Conference) Pg. 51.

² Brooks, David. *The Second Mountain*. (Random House Publishing Group, 2019) Pg. 255.

of this mystery.”³ Jansenism highlighted that it is only the grace of faith that provides the capacity to learn about God’s presence in Scripture, in nature, and in others. Pascal writes, “Those to whom God has given religious faith by moving their hearts are very fortunate, and feel quite legitimately convinced, but to those who do not have it we can only give such faith through reason, until God gives it by moving their heart, without which faith is only human and useless for salvation.”⁴ In other words, faith and grace empower agency while transforming it.

And what engages that dynamic in the lives of ordinary people? Do we just wait around until God decides to shower us with this grace? De La Salle provides a related insight in one of his meditations: “God gives two kinds of reward in this world to those who commit themselves untiringly to the work of the salvation of souls. First, he gives them an abundance of grace; second, he gives them a more extended ministry and a greater ability to procure the conversion of souls.”⁵ In others words, it is in the pursuit of one’s vocation, in the doing of good and faithful things, that God’s dynamic is engaged and that the seeds of faith, however conceived, are watered. Like any relationship, one’s relationship with God is also cumulative, multi-layered, built up through activity and attention. There are no shortcuts in the spiritual journey.

One of the best illustrations of this is provided in the novel *Brothers Karamazov*, when the Elder monk answers a genuine plea for guidance. “What will give me back my faith? ... How can it be proved, how can one be convinced?” ... [The elder answers] “By the experience of active love. Try to love your neighbors actively and tirelessly. The more you succeed in loving , the more you’ll be convinced of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. And if you reach complete selflessness in the love of your neighbor, then undoubtedly you will believe, and no doubt will even be able to enter your soul. This has been tested. It is certain.”⁶ However, if it is pursued for the sake of honor or the admiration of others, it goes nowhere. Active love is tied to active faith when they are aligned with genuine humility and pursued with pure desire. This careful integration needs at least as much care and attention as whipping up a hollandaise.

If grace, from God or from anywhere or anyone, is “unmerited love” lived out in daily life, then we are indeed inundated with invitations to jump into the deep ends of things. Thomas Merton: “For the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness. The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast. The more we persist in misunderstanding the phenomena of life, the more we analyze them out into strange finalities and complex purposes of our own, the more we involve ourselves in sadness, absurdity and despair. But it does not matter much, because no despair of ours can alter the reality of things, or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not. Yet, the fact remains that we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance.”⁷

³ Dupré, Louis. *Jansenism and Quietism* article in *Christian Spirituality: Post-Reformation and Modern*. (New York: Crossroad, 1989) Pg. 127.

⁴ Pascal, Blaise, *Pensees*. # 110.

⁵ De La Salle, John Baptist, *Meditations by St. John Baptist de La Salle*, trans. Richard Arnandez, and Augustine Loes, eds. Augustine Loes and Francis Huether, (Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Conference, 1994), Pg. 467 (M207.1)

⁶ Dostoevskly, Fyodor, *Brothers Karamazov*, Part 1, Book 2, Ch.4 - “A Lady of Little Faith” (Cf. <https://bloggingsbetter.wordpress.com/2009/02/11/1702>)

⁷ Merton, Thomas. *New Seeds of Contemplation*. (New Directions Publishing, 2007) Pg. 296.