

Grace in the Spirituality of Josemaría Escrivá

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Among the rich legacy of works of spirituality that the holy founder of Opus Dei left us, we do not find any theological treatise or essay on grace. Thus a theological investigation of the concept of grace in St. Josemaría might seem ill-advised. This could easily become a formal exercise, betraying the lively experience of the reality of grace so evident in all of Escrivá's works. Therefore I will make no attempt here to present a systematic synthesis that seeks to attribute to Escrivá a conceptual system he himself had no interest in constructing. Nor is the topic focused from the point of view of abstract theological doctrine, which could obscure the organic intertwining of Escrivá's conception of grace with the living experience of the spiritual life. Rather than a dogmatic "De gratia" treatise, this investigation closely adheres to the spirituality of St. Josemaría as reflected in spiritual conversations, homilies and meaning-filled aphorisms. Only thus can we draw out what is truly distinctive in Escrivá's conception of grace.

In this effort, the concepts employed correspond to a terminology that is not strictly speaking dogmatic. Although we may take it for granted that St. Josemaría, as a theologian, held to the doctrine of grace as expressed in the Church's dogma (and this will become evident, even in small points, throughout this study), he rarely made use of a strictly dogmatic terminology. In his writings such traditional expressions as "external grace" and "internal grace," "actual grace" and "habitual grace," "created grace" and "uncreated grace" very seldom appear, although the reality expressed by them is always present. Something similar occurs regarding such theological doctrines as the relationship between "nature and grace," "grace and freedom," and "grace and works." Here too we find no thematic discussion of these questions, even though these realities often underlie, in a living and dynamic way, what he is considering.

In Escrivá's attractive approach to grace, the theoretical and theological aspects are found in the context of a lived religious experience and expressed in a personal language. At the same time, they result from the interaction of the spoken word and the interior response of the believer. Therefore this study will try to respect Escrivá's lively, existential expression of the mystery of grace, avoiding abstract theological discussions that would rob it of its originality.

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1. *Nature and grace in Opus Dei's spirituality.*

The founder of Opus Dei—like the apostle Paul—became an eminent herald of the mystery of grace, due in good part to the experience of his own path in life. One of his biographers gives us this summary of the great importance Escrivá attributes to grace: “The most important work, of course, is all done by God’s grace.”¹ The same author cites an expression of the founder regarding the first years of the Work: “I had nothing but my youth, God’s grace, and a good sense of humor.”²

Referring to the lasting impression of his parents’ example, St. Josemaría said in a letter written in 1971: “This is how our Lord prepared my soul, through their example imbued with Christian dignity and hidden heroism...so that later, with God’s grace, I could serve him as a poor instrument.”³

Even without the word “grace” being used explicitly, its omnipresence in St. Josemaría’s thought is seen in his frequent reference to *supernatural* realities. In present-day theology, the term “supernatural” is not always viewed in a positive light, since it is seen as fostering a simplistic “two-level” conception of the relationship between nature and grace. Such an approach, some theologians claim, could encourage an “extrinsic” conception of grace, opposed to the organic unity between nature and grace.⁴ But the use of the term “supernatural” does not necessarily entail any form of “extrinsicism,” since it is meant simply to stress the sublimity and superiority of God’s grace over everything created.

This reproach regarding unsuitable language is completely inappropriate in Escrivá’s case. As we will see below, he has a deep awareness of the unity between nature and grace, and he gives us a solid theological description of this relationship. He contrasts supernatural realities with a two-dimensional surface, seeing them as a “third dimension” in human existence. “People see only the flat surface. Their vision is two-dimensional and fixed to the ground. When you live a supernatural life, God will give you the third dimension: height, and with it, perspective, weight and volume.”⁵ The theologically relevant point is that this new dimension is not seen as a structure superimposed on existing reality, but rather as something pertaining to the whole of reality. But while intimately linked with it, it far surpasses it in meaning and value.

While maintaining the essential differences between nature and grace, between creation and redemption, we can attain a correct evaluation of Escrivá’s view of the supernatural order from the way he understands the natural

1. Peter Berglar, *Opus Dei, Life and Work of its Founder*, Josemaria Escrivá, Scepter 1988, p. 108.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 1-2.

3. Salvador Bernal, *A Profile of the Founder of Opus Dei*, Scepter 1977, p. 26.

4. Cf. Leo Scheffczyk, “Die Heilswirklichkeit in der Gnade” in *Gnadenlehre: Katholische Dogmatik VI* (edited by Leo Scheffczyk and Anton Ziegenaus), Aachen 1998, pp. 370-372.

5. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, no. 279.

world. As already noted, he does not give any theological explanation in his spiritual writings regarding this relationship which traditionally was explained (not altogether satisfactorily) with the help of the concept of "*potentia oboedientialis*" (obediential potency) and which modern theology expresses using the term "supernatural existential" (an expression not exempt from its own problems).⁶ But there are a number of texts that show how Escrivá saw this relationship as something interior and dynamic. The person who exists and loves is oriented to the gratuitous gift of grace, which is not an exterior addition to the person, but rather one's intimate completion and fulfillment. Especially significant is Escrivá's use of a particular term: "the way," or "man's way to holiness." This mode of speaking makes clear the human being's orientation towards grace.⁷

A solid foundation, although not strictly speaking a theological argument, for this relationship can be seen in Escrivá's view of the close connection between the natural and supernatural virtues. Some words of St. Josemaría make this organic unity very clear: "By living charity—Love—you live all the human and supernatural virtues demanded of a Christian. These virtues form a unity."⁸ Therefore Christian piety "also calls for the exercise of human virtues."⁹ In some words of spiritual advice addressed to married couples we read: "Husband and wife must grow in interior life and learn from the Holy Family to live with refinement, for supernatural and at the same time human reasons, the virtues of a Christian home. I repeat again that the grace of God will not be lacking."¹⁰ Such certainty can only be explained if it is rooted in the conviction that everything natural is under the directing influence of grace.

The same is true for the relationship between reason and faith: "If the world has come from God, if he has created man in his image and likeness and given him a spark of divine light, the task of our intellect should be to uncover the divine meaning imbedded in all things by their nature, even if this can be attained only by dint of hard work. And with the light of faith, we also can perceive their supernatural purpose, resulting from the elevation of the natural order to the higher order of grace."¹¹ This unity between the human and created world and the order of grace is reflected in human love: "We must be very human, for otherwise we cannot be divine. Human love, the love we experience on earth when it is really genuine, helps us to savor divine love. That is how we grasp the love by which we rejoice in God and which we will share in heaven when the Lord is *everything to everyone*."¹²

6 Cf. Scheffczyk, *op.cit.*, pp. 405ff.

7 Cf. Álvaro de Portillo, *Immersed in God*, Scepter, p. 142.

8. Josemaría Escrivá. *Conversations*, no. 62.

9. *Ibid.*, no. 102.

10. *Ibid.*, no. 108.

11. Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 10.

12. *Ibid.*, no. 166.

As a final consideration regarding the unified view of nature and grace found in the spiritual writings of the founder of Opus Dei, we can cite an absolutely original insight, specific to his spirituality: the theological meaning of work and its relationship to holiness. Finding in human work a means and a mediating instance of grace stems, according to Escrivá, from the story of creation, where work is seen as a facet of the human being's likeness to God. "Professional work...is a witness to the worth of the human creature. It provides a chance to develop one's own personality; it creates a bond of union with others; it constitutes a fund of resources; it is a way of helping in the improvement of the society we live in, and of promoting the progress of the whole human race...For a Christian, these grand views become even deeper and wider. For work, which Christ took up as something both redeemed and redeeming, becomes a means, a way of holiness, a specific task which sanctifies and can be sanctified."¹³

Certainly work serves as a means of sanctification only for the believer in the state of grace who sanctifies his work: from his work there comes, as a reflection so to speak, a renewed sanctification. Escrivá insisted that "every activity" can "become for you a means to serve our Lord and your fellow men."¹⁴ For "it is in the simplicity of your ordinary work, in the monotonous details of each day, that you have to find the secret, which is hidden from so many, of something great and new: Love."¹⁵ Work, with its objective relationship to man as well as to God, "gains the value of the Love with which it is done."¹⁶

In the love with which it is carried out, human work is already oriented towards the supreme supernatural love of God who, through the action of the Redeemer, definitively raised the natural order to the level of sanctity and salvation. But this bond is not something purely external to a human reality that is not in any way oriented towards this elevation. The love entailed by work is rather the interior feature that, so to speak, goes out to meet the supernatural love of God. From human work and its impulse towards the higher love of God there arises (and this is a significant element in Escrivá's spiritual thought) the passage from natural work to supernatural action and apostolate. This too finds its basis in natural work, in the same way that the human virtues required by one's work are indispensable for apostolic activity.¹⁷

However, with Escrivá's inclusion of work in the sphere of grace, a problem seems to arise that, if not confronted directly, could be seen as an objection against this theological approach. Human work, that is, a natural activity directed towards a particular goal, seems to contradict the gratuitousness of grace and nullify its character as an unmerited gift. This objection is directed not only to the first ascending step from nature to grace, which could be seen as some-

13. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Forge*, no. 702.

14. *Ibid.*, no. 684.

15. Josemaría Escrivá, *Furrow*, no. 489.

16. *Ibid.*, no. 487.

17. Cf. *ibid.*, no. 927.

thing attained “from below.” It also affects apostolic activity, always demanded in the state of grace: the apostolic work that ought to bear fruit and contribute to the sanctification of the world. The founder of Opus Dei asked those entrusted to him to launch out in an untiring apostolate and a determined effort to bring about the kingdom of God. At the same time he warned energetically against laziness and mediocrity. For example: “We should never have time on our hands, not even a second—and I am not exaggerating. There is work to be done. The world is a big place and there are millions of souls who have not yet heard the doctrine of Christ in all its clarity. I am addressing each one of you individually. If you have time on your hands, think again a little. It’s quite likely that you have become lukewarm; that, supernaturally speaking, you have become a cripple. You are not moving, you are at a standstill. You are barren, you are not doing all the good you should be doing to the people around you, in your environment, in your work and in your family.”¹⁸ In these demands one finds a noble zeal for apostolic work and ardent dedication. However, the energetic vocabulary could feed a suspicion of activism, an excessive insistence on accomplishment and confidence in one’s own powers, devaluing the role of grace.

But in reality these demanding calls are theologically well-grounded. In the first instance, in the ascent—through the mediation of love—from the natural order to the level of grace and apostolate, love by its very nature refuses to demand or seek anything for itself; rather it recognizes the freedom of God, the giver of grace. In the second instance (that of the apostolic activity of a Christian in the state of grace) we find the clear conviction, constantly present, that every acting in grace stems from grace and is never carried out by itself. That is to say, every human operation is a cooperation with grace.

The character of this human activity in the apostolate, based on the foundation of divine grace, is clearly expressed in the need for prayer in all apostolic action and in the intertwining of all one’s activities with contemplation. For to the extent that prayer imbues and vivifies one’s work, it cannot be separated in any way from divine grace. “I really do believe that a serious danger of losing the way threatens those who launch out into action—activism!—while neglecting prayer, self-denial and those means without which it is impossible to achieve a solid piety: receiving the Sacraments frequently, meditation, examination of conscience, spiritual reading and constant recourse to our Lady and the Guardian Angels... Besides, all these means contribute, in a way that nothing else can, to making the Christian’s daily life a joyful one, for, from their hidden riches, flow out the sweetness and joy of God, like honey from the comb.”¹⁹

Therefore, in Escrivá’s energetic way of stressing the role of human activity in the spiritual life, one can see a totally sound view of the relationship between

18. Josemaría Escrivá, *Friends of God*, no. 42.

19. *Ibid.*, no. 18.

nature and grace. He emphasizes the dominant and effective role of grace, while avoiding the Protestant error of attributing to it universal efficacy.

But grasping Escrivá's spiritual teaching on grace requires more than just seeing its fundamental dogmatic integrity. One needs to go deeper and contemplate the concrete action of grace in the Christian.

2. *Grace as strength for the way: conversion and vocation*

Traditional Catholic teaching, in approaching grace as an integral part of Christian life, draws a distinction between assisting actual grace and sanctifying habitual grace. But first, in proper scholastic fashion, we need to give a conceptual definition of the essence of divine grace. Obviously this does not entail a complete unveiling of the mystery of the essence of grace. Even though in some editions of the founder of Opus Dei's works one can find in the index such topics as "essence and effects of grace,"²⁰ no real definition is given. The references do not go beyond the analogies of "light," "strength," "power of God,"²¹ "love, mercy, and affection."²² Specific theological terms such as the distinction between *gratia actualis* and *gratia habitualis* (sanctificans) play no substantial role. But this does not mean that these realities are not present. Otherwise one's theology of grace would be, as in Protestantism, greatly restricted.²³

The distinction between actual and sanctifying grace appears in the context of Escrivá's spiritual theology, making use of terminology that is a function of the dynamic and personal mode of his thought (God and man face-to-face). This terminology is associated with what Escrivá sees (significantly, as early as his first book) as "the way" of man towards God and towards holiness: a continuous movement, also present in work, to which God corresponds with an equally dynamic and permanent action, which turns man's path in life into a salvific path. Dogmatic theology would here use the concept of "cooperating grace." Escrivá also sometimes speaks of the "help" God provides, but then relates this generic term with man's life as a way or path; and he understands God's help, above all, in the sense of a decisive point of departure, as the grace of conversion.

Therefore, what traditional theology calls actual grace appears in the first place under the name of conversion, which unites divine action and human effort. "Conversion is a matter of a moment. Sanctification is the work of a lifetime."²⁴ Conversion brings "new lights" and joy, as our Lord "makes you dis-

20. Cf. *The Forge*, 291: index entry "grace."

21. As in *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 114

22. *Ibid.*, no. 162

23. Cf. Leo Scheffczyk, "Vielgestaltigkeit und Reichtum der göttlichen Gnade," in *Der Mensch zwischen Sünde und Gnade* (edited by Anton Ziegenaus), Buttenwiesen 2000, pp. 11-30.

24. *The Way*, no. 285.

cover” once again so many realities.²⁵ One is led by God to “react,”²⁶ to feel “sorry for your venial sins. For, until you are, you cannot begin to have true interior life.”²⁷ It is a moment like Lazarus’ awakening from the rigidity of death: “If you hear God’s inspiration and follow it—‘Lazarus, come forth!’—you will return to Life.”²⁸

In accord with the image of human life as a way or path, conversion means a “change of direction,”²⁹ opening oneself to a commitment of love: “Loving you—this is what my life is going to be all about.”³⁰ It is the moment when the soul who has found God exclaims: “Nunc coepi! —Now I begin!”³¹ One hears the call: “Change now, when you still feel young. How difficult it is to put things right when the soul has aged.”³² “You told me, Father, that after my past life it is still possible to become ‘another’ Saint Augustine.” And Escrivá, the experienced director of souls, replied: “But you have to cut out sin courageously from the root, as the holy Bishop of Hippo did.”³³ The disposition of soul that makes this change possible is rooted in humility: “To be converted you must climb via humility, along the path of self-abasement.”³⁴ Escrivá finds in the parable of the prodigal son the best image for the conversion worked by God’s grace, in cooperation with man: “Our Father God, when we come to him repentant, draws, from our wretchedness, treasure; from our weakness, strength...The return of a son who had betrayed him is enough for him to prepare a banquet.”³⁵

Conversion brings with it the interior riches of a life of faith: “There are some who pass through life as through a tunnel, without ever understanding the splendor, the security and the warmth of the sun of faith.”³⁶ Escrivá sees this faith, in accord with his personalistic dynamics, not only as faith in the sense of doctrinal content (though this aspect is never absent), but above all as life with God in Christ: “Live your faith cheerfully, keeping very close to Jesus Christ.”³⁷

The conversion worked by grace acquires in Escrivá’s spirituality a very specific meaning, one that is often found in doctors of spirituality but that in Escrivá takes on a distinct character. Conversion is seen as a continual renewal and a constant beginning again on one’s spiritual path, which requires the assistance of actual grace, even when there is a vital and loving union with Christ, but especially when one has lost the grace of union with our Lord. In the first situa-

25. *Ibid.*, no. 29

26. Cf. *ibid.*, no. 326.

27. *Ibid.*, no. 330.

28. *Ibid.*, no. 719.

29. *The Forge*, no. 32.

30. *Ibid.*, no. 202.

31. *Furrow*, no. 161.

32. *Ibid.*, no. 170.

33. *Ibid.*, no. 838.

34. *Ibid.*, no. 278.

35. *Friends of God*, no. 309.

36. *The Way*, no. 575.

37. *The Forge*, no. 448.

tion: "For a son of God each day should be an opportunity for renewal, knowing for sure that with the help of grace he will reach the end of the road, which is Love."³⁸ The second situation involves the reality of cooperating grace: "And if at a certain moment you should fall or suffer some setback (not that it has to happen), all you have to do is to apply the remedy, just as, in the normal course of events, you would do for the sake of your bodily health. And then: off to a fresh start!"³⁹ The spiritual life is seen here as a determined struggle,⁴⁰ one that presupposes the constant action of actual grace.

In one's daily life, "suns of heaven are needed and personal efforts, small and constant, to shake off those inclinations, those vain fancies, that depression: that mud clinging to your wings."⁴¹ It's a question of beginning again and again: "To rectify. A little each day. This must be your constant concern if you really want to become a saint."⁴² "Your life cannot be the repetition of actions which are monotonously all the same, because the next one should be more upright, more effective, more full of love than the last. Each day should mean new light, new enthusiasm—for Him!"⁴³ "Every single day, do what you can to know God better, to get acquainted with him, to fall more in love with him each moment, and to think of nothing but of his Love and his glory."⁴⁴

Escrivá's spiritual teaching thus follows the main lines of the Catholic doctrine on grace, which interweaves the power of grace (a gift man is incapable of meriting) with human cooperation. He was well aware of the danger of a Pelagianism that puts the accent on justification through works. But he also warned: "People have often drawn attention to the danger of deeds performed without any interior life to inspire them; but we should also stress the danger of an interior life—if such a thing is possible—without deeds to show for it."⁴⁵ Thus he took a clear stand against a "sola gratia" position that might try to present itself as apparently Catholic, which would see all salvific action as rooted in grace and thus seek to renounce all human "co-causality." Escrivá presents us here with a clear and correct application of the Augustinian principle: "*Qui te creavit sine te, non te iustificat sine te.*"⁴⁶ Escrivá warns against a tepid love that leads to a false tranquility and comfort-loving passivity, which he sometimes referred to as "laziness." "You must fight against the tendency to be too lenient with yourselves. Everyone has this difficulty. Be demanding with yourselves! Sometimes...relying on flimsy excuses, we become too easygoing and forget about the marvelous responsibility that rests upon our shoulders. We are content with

38. *Ibid.*, no. 344

39. *Friends of God*, no. 94.

40. Regarding Christian life as struggle cf., for example: *The Way*, nos. 707-733; *Christ Is Passing By*, nos. 73-201.

41. *The Way*, no. 991.

42. *Ibid.*, no. 290.

43. *The Forge*, no. 736.

44. *Ibid.*, no. 737.

45. *Ibid.*, no. 734.

46. St. Augustine, *Sermo* 119, 13.

doing just enough to get by. We let ourselves get carried away by false rationalizations and waste our time, whereas Satan and his allies never take a holiday.”⁴⁷

These demands imbue Escrivá’s spirituality with features that are decidedly active, with a zeal to do and to act (without being waylaid by an external “activism,” since the power of interior grace is always present). These demands become even more pressing when seen in relation to the reality of the great adversary and enemy of all that is good, namely, the Malignant One, whose reality Escrivá never denied. Here the Christian life takes on the clear character of a battle, with the action of grace spurring the Christian to a renewed resistance and confrontation with the enemy. “Don’t be troubled if, as you consider the wonders of the supernatural world, you hear that other voice, the intimate, insinuating voice of your ‘old self.’” “The world, the flesh and the devil are a band of adventurers who take advantage of the weakness of that savage you bear within you.” The reality of this continual struggle leads him to show understanding for those he is guiding, while encouraging them to mobilize their strength: “It’s hard! Yes, I know. But, forward! No one will be rewarded—and what a reward!—except those who fight bravely.”⁴⁹

Escrivá also frequently alludes in his spiritual writings to the reality of vocation in Christian life. In one’s vocation there shines forth clearly the feature of God’s sovereignty in granting his grace, while human cooperation is limited to a certain suitability of the person which is never the cause of the vocation. He tells one of his early followers that his vocation “is the greatest grace God could have given you.”⁵⁰ But the term here does not refer to a “religious” vocation. “Your perfection consists in living perfectly in the place, occupation and position that God, through those in authority, has assigned to you.”⁵¹ A call from God is already contained in one’s profession in the world as the place for seeking holiness, in the triple aspect of sanctifying oneself, sanctifying one’s work and sanctifying the world. The first vocation is undoubtedly the choice of a person by God to be a Christian. Here one finds included the call to carry out apostolate and to heal and sanctify the world. Escrivá, whose words are filled with echoes of Sacred Scripture and the Fathers, cites in this context a text from Clement of Alexandria regarding the life of Christians in the world: “Since we are convinced that God is to be found everywhere, we plough our fields praising the Lord, we sail the seas and ply all our other trades singing his mercies.”⁵²

Since sanctifying oneself and sanctifying the world are closely united in Escrivá’s spirituality, the lay person’s vocation to sanctity, the call to follow Christ and serve God that imparts to all the baptized a common priestly character, nec-

47. *Friends of God*, no. 62.

48. *The Way*, nos. 707, 708.

49. *Ibid.*, no. 720.

50. *Ibid.*, no. 913.

51. *Ibid.*, no. 926.

52. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7, 7 in: *Friends of God*, no. 66.

essarily gives rise to apostolate. The call “to a Christian life, to a life of holiness, to a chosen life, to life eternal”⁵³ directed to everyone, already entails an apostolic dimension: “Children of God, bearers of the only flame that can light up the paths of the earth for souls. The Lord uses us as torches, to make that light shine out.”⁵⁴ “Our task as children of God is to get all men to enter, freely, into the divine net; to get them to love each other. If we are Christians, we must seek to become fishermen like those described by the prophet Jeremiah with a metaphor which Jesus also often used: ‘Follow me and I will make you fishers of men,’ he says to Peter and Andrew.”⁵⁵ This is especially true for the priesthood: “it is an apostolate!”⁵⁶ In the ministerial priesthood Christ’s being and acting are clearly expressed, insofar as the priest “is always another Christ.”⁵⁷ Here the vocation to the apostolate is seen as a gift of grace. Certainly this also entails a special feature that marked the life of Christ: it is carried out under the sign of the cross. “To be a Christian, and in particular to be a priest—bearing in mind, too, that all of us who are baptized share in Christ’s priesthood—is to be at all times on the Cross.”⁵⁸

Let us turn now to the relationship, always stressed by Escrivá, between nature and grace, between the natural human virtues apostolate requires and the supernatural gifts. As he always insisted: “We must be very human, for otherwise we cannot be divine.”⁵⁹ Here we find a clear statement of the organic unity between nature and grace, a bulwark as it were against any “extrinsicism” in his teaching on grace. But this organic unity between the natural and supernatural orders can never lead us to forget that our nature is a wounded nature. Therefore the elevation and perfecting of nature by grace and its orientation, continually renewed, to the supernatural order cannot be accomplished in any other way than under the sign of the cross. Thus Christ’s “disciples, if they really want to imitate him, have to convert their existence into a co-redemption of Love, with their own active and passive self-denial.”⁶⁰

3. *Holiness, the goal of the path of grace*

In Escrivá’s spiritual theology, both “conversion” and “vocation,” which correspond to the concept of actual grace, are oriented towards the goal of sanctification, in which grace—corresponding to the technical expression “sanctifying grace”—has become a permanent reality of divine life in man. The Founder of Opus Dei’s dynamic and personal conception of grace explains why for him it is not characterized by the concept of created grace, understood as an accident

53. *The Forge*, no. 13.

54. *Ibid.*, no. 1.

55. *Friends of God*, no. 259.

56. *The Forge*, no. 582.

57. *The Way*, no. 66.

58. *The Forge*, no. 882.

59. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 166.

60. *Furrow*, no. 255.

inherent in the soul, but by the state that results from acts of sanctification: holiness. This state can only be thought of as united to a person, to the person whom that state turns into a saint.

There is no need to stress that the acts required by conversion and by one's vocation, which lead a person towards sanctity, can never be separated from sanctity. Since the state of grace never acquires an unbreakable firmness in this world, the person in the state of grace, the justified person, always needs the help of actual graces. Such a need arises not only for ontological reasons (as in the scholastic tradition, which taught that a supernatural habit can become a being in act only through an actual divine impulse⁶¹), but also because of the weaknesses and temptations a justified person is subject to, which require a continual struggle to remain in grace and holiness. This reality reinforces the character of struggle in the Christian life (a point Escrivá frequently insisted on), through a continual conversion and a renewed "yes" to one's vocation, for which the justified person needs actual grace.⁶²

This struggle also involves the duty of permanent prayer, above all to keep alive a fervent apostolic zeal.⁶³ To keep up one's battle for holiness and preserve the vigor of one's first love, one needs to pray for perseverance: "Constancy, that nothing can shake. That is what you need. Ask it of God and do what you can to obtain it: for it is a great safeguard against your ever turning from the fruitful way you have chosen."⁶⁴ The "way" that Escrivá traced through the milestones of conversion and vocation reaches its earthly goal in holiness. But this goal is not the definitive eschatological goal. Therefore the "way" continues forward even after one's justification, although on a more elevated plane.

The inseparable coupling of the efficacy of actual grace and the life of holiness is also reflected in the constant human effort and self-sacrificing dedication that must always be present in the apostolic life Escrivá characterizes as marked by the Cross. A Christian in the state of holiness, then, continues to need to cooperate agilely and to fight. This could lead one to view Escrivá's conception of grace as weighing one down with constant demands, and thus as failing to reveal the beauty and happiness of a life lived in sanctifying grace. In reality however, his constant concern to attain a life of holiness shows us the splendor of a life in grace, and the deepest motive for optimism when reflecting on supernatural realities.

Here we should note an important characteristic of Escrivá's conception of grace (clearly based on his own personal experience) that gives it its intimate dynamism and vitality. Without employing the terminology of "created grace"

61. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *S.Th.* I. II. q. 109 a. 9.

62. Cf. *The Way*, nos. 707-737.

63. Cf. *The Way*, no. 89.

64. *The Way*, no. 990.

(which the author leaves to the side, while recognizing its necessity), this approach soon attains what traditional theology (perhaps without giving sufficient weight to the theological data) calls “the retinue accompanying sanctifying grace,” seen as including not only the theological virtues, the infused moral virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but also the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the entire Trinity in the soul of the just person. Thus, without trying to resolve the problems regarding “created grace” and “uncreated grace,” he gives priority to uncreated grace over created grace. Uncreated grace (which is God himself in his free self-gift to man) can be seen as the essence of the state of grace, for whose actualization created grace provides the foundation. This way of viewing grace leads to the reality that grace, at its highest level, is not a gift distinct and separable from God, but is identical with the Trinitarian Giver, who here gives himself to the creature in a mysterious personal union.

Thus Escrivá expresses the life of holiness as the union of the person in grace with the divine life of the three divine Persons. The conceptual richness we find here is quite remarkable. Although the diverse concepts are related among themselves, each one has a distinctive connotation. This enables us to begin to grasp the rich variety and living plenitude of personal grace.

Included among these expressions we find: “friendship with Christ,” “presence of God,” “divine filiation,” “union with the Holy Spirit,” “divinization,” “love,” “spiritual childhood,” “the coming of the Holy Spirit,” “participation in divine Life,” “identification with Christ.” All express the reality of grace and holiness through a personal relationship. Human relationships, however close, always maintain a certain distance. But in the relationship we are considering, the intimacy attained has no human analogy. It leads one to see the grace of sanctification as a union with the divine persons, as a penetration of the divine Spirit in the human mind, as a harmony between the Word of God and the creature’s voice.

This intimate union sheds new light on the meaning of the three theological virtues. Faith “disposes our intelligence to give assent to the truths of revelation, to say Yes to Christ;”⁶⁵ it gives us “our supernatural outlook,”⁶⁶ but it is also an entrusting and abandoning of ourselves to our Lord. Faith leads us to “sense in our hearts the love, the compassion, the tenderness of Christ’s gaze upon us, for he never abandons us...If we have faith in our Lord, in spite of our failings or, rather, with our failings—we shall be faithful to our Father, God; his divine power will shine forth in us, sustaining us in our weakness.”⁶⁷

The supernatural virtue of hope has a similar effect, “because hope encourages us to grasp hold of the strong hand which God never ceases to reach out to

65. *Friends of God*, no.191.

66. *Ibid.*, no. 194.

67. *Ibid.*

us, to keep us from losing our supernatural point of view...I am convinced that unless I look upward, unless I have Jesus, I will never accomplish anything.”⁶⁸ In contemplating “the divine interlacing of the three theological virtues which form the backing upon which the true life of every Christian man or woman has to be woven,” it is hope in God which sets us “marvelously ablaze with love, with a fire that makes the heart beat strong and keeps it safe from discouragement and dejection, even though along the way one may suffer and at times suffer greatly.”⁶⁹

The life springing from union with God in Christ Jesus experiences a new impulse through the Holy Spirit and his gifts. “Don’t forget that you are God’s temple. The Advocate is in the center of your soul: listen to him and be docile to his inspirations.”⁷⁰ The Holy Spirit’s gifts are dispositions that foster his direct action in the person in grace, especially when facing extraordinary demands and tasks. For “even without talents, fame or fortune, we can be effective instruments if we go to the Holy Spirit so that he may grant us his gifts.”⁷¹

The conviction, based on faith, of a personal unity of life and action with the divine Persons opens up a spiritual plenitude and supernatural richness that transforms a Christian’s life in the world into a lofty adventure, despite the experience, always present, of human weakness and sorrow. But the immense gift of grace towers over the smallness and weakness of all that is earthly and fosters an attitude towards life marked by confidence, joy and optimism.

The first expression of this supernatural joy, seldom mentioned when referring to the topic of grace although closely connected to it, is gratitude. Escrivá frequently stresses this deep attitude of a person marked by grace, well aware of the etymological connection in Spanish between grace (“gracia”) and giving thanks for a gift received (“gracias”). In doing so, he also stresses the personal character of the relationship grace entails. The awareness of having received the gift of grace should lead a person to a deep feeling of gratitude.

Escrivá’s numerous appeals to be grateful are valid for all Christians: “Look: you are bound to show yourself very grateful to the Lord, precisely because you have received it all in one go. Just as it would strike a blind man if he suddenly recovered his sight, while it does not even occur to others to give thanks because they see.”⁷² Hence, for the founder of Opus Dei, thanksgiving is an indispensable element in one’s personal relationship with God: “Make sure that your thanksgiving comes pouring out from your heart every day.”⁷³

68. *Ibid.*, no. 213.

69. *Ibid.*, no. 205.

70. *The Way*, no. 57.

71. *Furrow*, no. 283.

72. *Ibid.*, no. 4.

73. *The Forge*, no. 866

But giving thanks is only a first expression of the joy that, through divine grace, imbues Christian life with vitality. For if our Lord is truly nearby—*Dominus prope est*—then the person in grace is called to “serve God with joy!”⁷⁴ And then it is also true that: “Now that you have given yourself to God your happiness cannot be taken away.”⁷⁵ From the depths of one’s soul there blossoms forth, as an expression of one’s self-giving to God, the joy and peace that St. Paul links together (*Rom 14:17; Gal 5:22*).

In highlighting the rich spiritual legacy that union with the God of grace brings, Escrivá not only breathes new life into the doctrine of grace but also displays the Gospel and the Christian faith as a message of joy and as the religion of true spiritual happiness. When today religion is often reduced to human goals and Christianity to its social utility, Escrivá stresses a redemptive communion with God that transcends all human dimensions, proclaiming the splendor of Christianity as the religion of grace.

Nevertheless, the founder of Opus Dei well knows that the excellence of grace in this world should only be seen as a partial beginning and a pledge. It is meant to grow, with the limited and finite reaching towards what is unlimited and infinite. It yearns to reach its plenitude in heaven. Therefore grace here on earth is already a beginning of glory, an “incipient glory,” just as the plenitude of heaven is “a consummated grace.” Here too Escrivá’s view of grace shows its harmonious wholeness as he directs our eyes, with an eschatological perspective, towards the fullness of grace in heaven. To speak of grace and not consider heaven would be a deep contradiction.

This eschatological perspective has great importance for Christian life. To know where one is traveling one needs to know what the goal is. The path of grace would be a path without meaning if faith and hope in reaching heaven were lacking. That many Christians view the life of grace as lacking in savor and dynamism stems, in part, from not seeing heaven as a real goal. Therefore Escrivá encourages his hearers in a homily: “let us...go right to the core, to what is really important. Look: what we have to try to do is to get to heaven. If we don’t, nothing is worthwhile.”⁷⁶ And he advised “keep on lifting your eyes up to heaven as you go about your work, because hope encourages us to grasp hold of the strong hand which God never ceases to reach out to us.”⁷⁷ Here he is alluding not simply to a longing glance but to a determined effort to reach the goal, compatible with the reality of the trials and apostolic hardships from which it blossoms. For those who are following the path of salvation “at the end of the road a garden of paradise awaits them, eternal happiness, heaven.”⁷⁸

74. *Furrow*, no. 53.

75. *Ibid.*, no. 88.

76. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 76.

77. *Friends of God*, no. 213.

78. *Ibid.*, no. 130.

This realism in regard to salvation is firmly grounded in the Gospels, including the very human concern for the reward. Seeing life as a struggle entails the thought of the prize of victory: "It's hard! Yes, I know. But, forward! No one will be rewarded—and what a reward!—except those who fight bravely."⁷⁹ Escrivá recalls St. Paul's promise that "each will duly be paid according to his share in the work?"⁸⁰ What one reaps will be a function of what one sows.⁸¹

Escrivá, in giving us his fullest view of heaven, asks: "what will it be like when all the infinite beauty and greatness, and happiness and Love of God will be poured into the poor clay vessel that the human being is, to satisfy it eternally with the freshness of an ever-new joy?"⁸² Heaven is the definitive fullness of grace, union with the divine Persons in love, joy, holiness and glory. Here we see the dynamic and personal character of Escrivá's thought, which permits one to grasp the heights and depths of the Catholic faith.

79. *The Way*, no. 720.

80. *Ibid.*, no. 748.

81. Cf. *Furrow*, no. 863.

82. *Furrow*, no. 891.