Grace: What's Love Got to Do With It?

By Edward Vacek, S.J.

I. **Introduction**

I begin with a brief prayer: Gracious God, you are love, and in you we live and move and have our being. Send forth your spirit upon us, and we shall be recreated. Amen.

It is an honor for me as someone new on the faculty to be invited to join the many excellent scholars who have given this Yamauchi Lecture in Religion. It is humbling to do so as the first holder of the Stephen Duffy chair in Theology, since Fr. Duffy was such a brilliant theologian. This lecture serves as my homage to Fr. Duffy. He devoted two intellectually challenging books to the topic of grace.[1] I have written extensively on the topic of love.[2] In this lecture, I hope to bring our two interests together. I also pay tribute to Fr. Yamauchi, after whom this lecture is named, since this great teacher used to offer a course on grace.

Boiling down my topic into one simple point, I want to suggest that in its most fundamental use,[3] when we hear the five letter word "grace" we can replace it with a four letter word "love." By this I don't mean that God gives us many graces, one of which is love. Nor do I mean that out of love God puts some mysterious substance called grace into our souls. Rather, most fundamentally, grace is the emotion we call love. It probably will sound strange to you to hear that grace is an emotion. If so, let me make the claim only slightly less strange. Emotions are ways that we participate in reality, and so grace is an emotional participation by God in us and by us in God.

Let me begin with a brief, true story. A priest friend of mine had a student whom I'll call the "Tucson Tough." During the semester, the priest would make light conversation with this student. Occasionally he let her know that he was concerned that she seemed to be having a bad day. Gradually, as she came to trust him, he learned her story. Her mother had told her early in life that she was an unfortunate, out of wedlock mistake. Her mother blamed her since, the mother said, the pregnancy ruined her chance to become a nun. As a result of this kind of mothering, the student developed a very thick psychological skin. Emotions, she would coldly

announce, were a sign of weakness, and love was for saps. She didn't like to be touched or hugged by anyone. Yes, she engaged in sex, but after she had her orgasm, she would roll over and tell the guy to leave. She had no need for conversation either before or after their coupling. "What's love got to do with it! Who needs love when a heart is broken!"

The priest, however, showed her what a chaste love was like. He made clear that he wasn't going to use her, and she respected his celibacy. Trust built over several years. Eventually, to his surprise, she described him to many people as her best friend. Her heart softened greatly, and she even wanted to be carefully hugged. She grew to be extremely attached to her brother's young children. Now she lives with a Los Angeles man, and someday she may get married to him. If so, she wants her priest friend to preside at her wedding.

If you can feel what is going on in this story, then you have the basic theme of this lecture. All the rest of what I have to say is just to articulate what happened, and to analogize it to what grace is. Put simply, grace is God's love. And it transforms us.[4]

But note that the word "grace" has no clear meaning.[5] We may ask someone to "say grace" before meals, and we say that Mary is "full of grace"; we say that the sacraments dispense grace, and we say we received many graces while on retreat; and theologians say that grace is the Holy Spirit. There is a long leap from "grace" is a dinner prayer to "grace" is God. [6]

Roger Haight wrote, the word "grace" "is probably the most slippery word in the Christian vocabulary." Charles Ryrie writes that the topic of grace is "the watershed that divides Catholicism from Protestantism." And Richard McBrien writes "The relationship between nature and grace is as fundamental a problem as one will ever come upon in all of Christian theology."[7] So we are trying to understand a topic that is fundamental, divides major religions, and yet is impossibly slippery. My task is to resolve this question in fifty minutes, and to do so in a way that is understandable to a wide audience. I'll need lots of grace.

My title is "Grace: what's love got to do with it?" The reference to Tina Turner's song is deliberate. She pleads, "Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?" Grace is about hearts,

God's heart joining our deficient hearts.

A. Experiencing God

Stephen Duffy wrote, "To reflect on a doctrine's meaning is to . . . retrieve the central meaning it intends . . . [in] lived experience."[8] I will focus on the lived experience of grace.

Right away, you should be on guard, and for two reasons. First, I am going to talk about our human experience of love and especially our religious experiences of love. I've worked on the topic of love for over two decades, and I am utterly amazed at how many divergent things both educated and uneducated people say about love. For example, some serious scholars have written that we ought not love God but only our neighbor, and other scholars have written that loving God and loving our neighbor are the same thing. I find that most people talk as if Jesus got it wrong when he gave us two commandments. Some say all love is basically self-love, and others say self-love is not true love. So, I ask you to pay careful attention to our human experience of love. My task is to describe it.

There is a second reason to be on your guard. The Catholic tradition, unlike the Protestant tradition, says that you and I cannot experience grace.[9] So the best we can do is to listen to what authorities tell us it is. Fortunately or unfortunately, I belong to the tradition of Saint Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* which is all about the experience of God and how that makes an enormous difference in our lives. In my view, to be religious is to experience and understand life in terms of one's love relationship with God. And to be Christianly religious is to experience and understand life in terms of one's love relationship with the God of Jesus Christ.

These religious experiences come in at least three forms. In the first there is a direct experience of God, what some theologians describe as a mediated immediacy. In the second, which has been the focus of major theological discussions of grace, there is a sense of freedom or liberation or release from sin or from some other evil, which is not simply brought about by our own efforts. In the third, which perhaps is most common, such as when we speak of the many graces in our lives, there is an experience of the good things in life which are felt to be part of our

relationship with God.[10] I shall mainly concentrate mainly on the first form of experience which is central to a theology of grace, even though it is the most elusive. Put simply, it is the experience that God loves us and God loves me.

I ask you to reflect on your own experiences of human love and particularly religious love. That may be easier for the women than for the men, since by nature and nurture we men have a tendency to autism, in the sense that we are more insensitive to affective matters.[11] Indeed Cardinal Ratzinger, following John Paul II, suggested that women are much more naturally Christian than we men for this very reason.[12] By getting in touch with your experiences, I don't mean simply a belief that there is a God or that God loves you.[13] Rather, I hope that you have tasted God's presence in your life, affirming you, consoling you in your failures, and deepening your joy in success. In some situations, we experience God when we are tempted to lie, but we tell the truth and in doing so suffer negative consequences but also have a sense that we were part of the moral order and God's truth is in us. As yet another example, many of us experience a sunset, and we know that the sunset is not God, but we are transported through the sunset to be aware that God is also there, and even there for us. It is important to add that in such religious experiences, God is experienced, not inferred.[14]

When I started this project, my primary motive was just to make sense of this term "grace" that has often become an amorphous placeholder in Christian discourse.[15] What does the word "grace" mean? The more I studied it, the more I began to think that understanding grace as love would solve some of the most difficult and divisive theological topics of Christian history. I am sure it revises our understanding of God. So let me turn immediately to the meaning of love.

II. **Characteristics of Love**

So, if grace is love, what is love? I'll start with a very abstract, even boring statement: Love is an emotional, affirming participation in the dynamic tendency of the beloved to realize its goodness. Ordinarily, I'd prefer to say, "Love is a warm puppy," or "Love means to put the other first." But those kinds of statements lack generality. My plan is to explain parts of my definition and then apply them to the topic of grace.

A. Emotion

First, love is an emotion. Many people will immediately insist that love is not an emotion or feeling. In fact, for them emotions are either obstacles to good living or they are side-shows and hardly central. By contrast, citing the great New England divine, Jonathan Edwards, I want to say that "True religion is in great part a matter of the affections."

Christians are people who have affectively experienced at least some aspects of life as manifestations of God's love. They do so similar either to the way a woman sees love in the clinging arms of her child or to the way she sees love in red roses on Valentines day. They experience God's forgiveness when a friend offers to help them even though they have betrayed the friend. Christians feel elevated when enveloped by mystery. They feel sustained in times of trial. All human experience includes more than meets the eye. Christians experience God as the ultimate "Beyond-what-meets-the-eye." Particular religious experiences point to the more primal experience of God's love itself.

I said love is an emotion, and God loves us. But, does God have any emotions? Emotion like thoughts are subjective acts. But, we might appropriately ask, who can know what God is thinking let alone feeling? Well, actually, we often and with reason say we know that God knows everything that currently exists. So too we can know that God is concerned about the value of everything that exists. This concern is emotion. Doubtless, there is a great danger of anthropomorphism. Because of that danger, some theologians have denied that God even knows the real world.[16] But the alternative is to keep silent, and that itself is a denial of the Christian God.

1. Evaluative Cognition

The reason emotions are important is that our emotions relate us to the world. In the first pla ce, they tell us something about the world. They tell us whether something is good or bad, valuable or disvaluable. Anger tells us something negative has happened that is unjustified or unfair. Joy tells us that something deeply good has happened. When we meet people, there is something about them that we admire or fear or desire or love. Emotions are ways of knowing. Put most

simply, if we do not care, really do not care, then nothing is any more or less important than anything else. We could know that elephants and whales have brains that are three to six times bigger than a human's, but we would have no way to say whether humans are more important than these other animals.

There is little dispute among Christians that the biblical God evaluates us. God looks on creation and says, with satisfaction, this is good. The biblical God also has negative emotions. There is much that angers God. The flip side of God's love is that God hates whatever opposes God's love. And there is much to oppose, from hurricanes that strike New Orleans in the fall to the petty thievery that happens each spring at tax time. As Vatican II wrote, a guilty conscience is the unhappy voice of God.[17] These evaluations are emotions.

2. Directed to the Good

As an emotion, love is directed to the good in the beloved. That might seem obvious, but, at least on one understanding, it sharply divides Protestant theology of grace from its Catholic counterpart. The starting point for many theologies of grace is that humans are sinful or evil, and thus they need God's mercy, which then is described as the primary form of grace. The starting point, especially for many recent Catholic theologies, is that human beings are loved by God, and thus are able to live a religious life.[18] Both starting points can appeal to experience. I begin with interhuman experience. The qualities that we find in someone are diverse, both good and bad. It may be a person's physical beauty or sense of humor or ability at chess. All such qualities I will group under the heading of some good in the person. It should be added that we don't love just the quality, however, but love the person who has the quality.

But there is another reason why we are attracted to people. And that is because there is some bad quality in them or some missing quality. Commonly, a bad quality repulses us, but sometimes it attracts us. Commonly, we ignore what is not there, but sometimes our attention is drawn to what is missing. In fact, much ethical action is stimulated by what is bad or missing or could be. Have you ever at a party gone over to talk to the socially gauche bumpkin in the corner of the room just because he looks so lost? Have you ever bought a hamburger for a panhandler or been

moved to donate to the Cleft-Palate Foundation? These can be real forms of love, directed not to the good that already exists, but to the good that can be. In this sense, God's love reaches out not just to the good but also to what is evil. God loves sinners.

There are huge theological disputes about which of these two very different kinds of attractions most characterizes God's love and about the effect of that love. One divide is what God sees before justification. Another divide is what God sees after justification. The preposition can be taken in either a temporal or a theoretical sense. Some Christians hold that "before" means a particular moment in cosmic or personal history, such that there was only damnation in history prior to Jesus's death or prior to our accepting him personally into our life. Other Christians hold that even now God sees only our evil, but affectively God focuses instead on Christ's goodness. Some Christians hold that God sees the goodness of those whom God elects, but that God does not love those who are going to be damned. Other Christians like myself hold that God has always loved all human beings with a justifying love, so "before" refers only to an imaginary state of pure nature. Thus, we think that, from the moment of our creation, God affectively sees us as good, both as creatures and at least as potentially participants in God's own life. The "after" then refers to when, as is nearly inevitable, God is subsequently moved to heal the evil we bring on ourselves. Recall the priest and the Tucson Tough. Initially he talked to her as a good fellow human being, but, after hearing her story, he reached out in a new way since she was in such need.

3. Affecting

Another feature of emotions that is crucial for understanding grace as love is that emotions are, if I may put it colorfully, bi-polar. I have just argued that they are directed to the goodness or badness of some object. Now I observe that our emotions also affect or change us who have the emotion. Whether our emotions calm us or excite us, they change us. Indeed, for most people the way emotions affect us has been more obvious than the fact that emotions teach us about the world. To love someone is to focus on them, but it is also to be changed, often far more than any change in our beloved.

While what I have just said may seem unproblematical, it raises a huge question about nature of God. If God loves us, do we make a difference to God? Does God care about whether we live or die, play or pray? It comes as a shock to me and to most Christians to learn that the traditional answer is that, No, we make no difference to God and God is not affected one way or the other by whether we sin against or sacrifice for others. The theological explanation is the immutability of God.[19] Who we are and how we live make no difference to God because nothing can make a difference to God.

This theological position, of course, flies in the face of our scriptures and the experiences they inscribe. The God of Athens and the God of Jerusalem are different. One would, for example, have to imagine God the "Father" looking on Jesus on the cross and being indifferent to that scene. The redemptive activity of Jesus would make no difference to God. Indeed, St. Ignatius's *Exercises* come close to recommending something similar when it encourages "indifference." [As I shall observe later, the material of the First Principle and Foundation, however important and powerful it is, is really contrary to much in the actual meditations themselves.] But, as we have seen, emotions are bipolar. Not only are they directed to their object, in this case Jesus bleeding on the cross, but they also affect or modify those feeling the emotion, in this case, not only Mary but also Jesus's heavenly parent.[20]

The implications of this bipolarity of emotion in God is that we make a difference to God. Who we are and how we live, whether well or poorly, affects God. We are like a child in a mother's womb. Our growth affects God. That is, God's emotional life is dependent on us.

4. Unwillable–Love and Freedom

The fourth characteristic of emotions is that we cannot directly will ourselves to have them. This feature addresses and, I think, solves the original and enduring theological controversy on grace. In an anti-Pelagian mood, the tradition has insisted that we have no freedom to love God unless God first takes the initiative. Since we Jesuits frequently have been accused of Pelagianism for our emphasis on freedom–and since I like being a Jesuit–I resist this line of thinking. But I want to give it its due weight.

To begin, I have to put the point negatively. Not only love, but all emotions are not willable. We cannot just will ourselves to be fearful or to be angry. Similarly, we cannot just decide to love someone. We can will ourselves to give food to the poor, but we cannot will ourselves to love them. I'm reminded of an Iraqi colleague of mine who once said that he hated 95% of the people he loved. By this meant, he had negative feelings toward most people, but nevertheless, as I often observed, he almost unfailingly did good things for them.

The fact that we cannot simply will ourselves to have emotions is, actually, not peculiar to emotions. Try to see a large elephant in front of you. You can try to imagine such an elephant, but you cannot see one. The reason behind this inability is that to see requires something to be seen. Like seeing, emotions require an object of some sort and they follow a certain logic. Blaise Pascal famously held that the human heart has reasons that human reason does not know. The reasons of the head are directed to what things are; the reasons of the heart are the values that it sees. The head's reason tells us that the baby is a girl, but a mother's heart tells us she is precious.

So do we lack freedom to love God? As an initial response, I want to observe that we can prepare ourselves or put ourselves in the position where a particular emotion likely will arise. We cannot see an elephant in front of us, but we could go to India or to the zoo and then we might see one. So, similarly, we can look for something good about persons we dislike, and then we might be moved to love them. This ability is one of the most important ethical tools we human beings have for living a moral and religious life. The common exhortation by spiritual writers that we should each day say prayers of thanksgiving is designed to help us love God by suggesting that we look for something for which we are grateful. Each of us can, for example, follow the psalmist who says, "I give thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made" (Ps: 139:14). Taking this approach of looking for something good, however, makes me still a semi-Pelagian.

The anti-Pelagians insist that grace creates even the very movement to look for gifts from God. But allow me a human analogy. Recall the Tucson Tough. She could not find anything good in others and in life in general. Several of her friends had committed suicide, one through drugs,

another by stepping in front of a train, still another through walking into the ocean. But the priest's care for her would not let her go all the way to despair. Gradually, her hardness softened. She began to trust. Eventually she began to love. She found innocent beauty in her brother's children. The priest's love for her unlocked her ability to love others.

Similarly with God toward us. We all have some rudimentary capacity to experience being loved, which received the fancy Latin term *potentia obedientalis*. When we are loved, this *potentia* is evoked and now becomes our own virtuous love, sometimes called a supernatural existential.[21] We might compare this process to the ability to speak. All of us here have a capacity to understand words and reply. But if no human had ever spoken to us, this very capacity would not and could not have developed.

When God takes the initiative, just as when our parents took the initiative to help us to speak by speaking to us, God does not force or "make" us love, but rather invites us. As Duffy wrote, "Love nourishes our being and autonomy as persons; other forms of causality affect us as objects."[22] The language that God causes grace, that is, causes us to be able to love, is misleading. It suggests that grace is a thing that can be caused, whereas personal love cannot be efficiently caused by an outside "force." Rather, God's love invites us into the mystery that is God. When we experience this invitation, then we are moved to love.

But how does this happen? Usually, this occurs through a two-step process. The first step can begin with a positive or a negative experience. Postively, we experience some good and we are attracted to it.[23] Then we realize that the good is a gift from someone who cares about us. The gift may be a mother's breast or it may be an old woman's kind smile. In the millions of instances such as this, we may begin to feel that someone cares about us. That doesn't have to happen, and most people use most goods of creation without a moment's sense of gratitude. Worse, they may think they earn all the good things that are in their lives. But at times, we become aware of the giftedness of life. And, then, as a richer experience, we feel that the gift-giver is affectively and affirmatively involved in our life. Put simply, we feel loved.

The negative experience in the first step occurs when we feel some emptiness or some evil in our lives. We may feel fragmented or incomplete or insufficient. We may feel isolated due to the rejection of others. Or–standard in the Christian tradition–we may feel cut off from the goodness of life due to our sin.[24] Then we may experience a release from the disorder we have been feeling. We begin to feel an experience of purposefulness, or we are moved to ask forgiveness, or rejection is modified or replaced by acceptance.[25] Again, we may then have a sense that all is right with the world, that is, God accepts us and affirms us.

When we feel someone loves us, we also feel that she has attuned herself to our own affections, rhythms, needs, and tendencies–to the dynamism that is our very existence. She is present in our life. So the very coming to awareness that we are loved by God, however dim it might be, is to become aware of the God involved in bringing us to life, to sustained life, and to ever fuller life. The attraction to a good as good for me becomes an awareness that we are gifted which in turn can then be experienced as an invitation to co-respond or unite with this love. That is, to love God and self with God's love.[26]

Alternatively, we sometimes feel another's affirming presence in our life, quite apart from any gift. Each of us, I hope, have had moments when people encouraged us to do what we didn't think we could do, and their encouragement enables us to do it. This encouragement is not external to us, but becomes part of our own energy. We become attuned to their affective confidence, and in doing so we gain our own confidence. In this alternative, we feel directly loved and moved by that love.

We can feel directly loved by God. God then is not the "gift-giver" but rather the one who is experienced as alive in us, or as critiquing us as a step towards reformation, or as providing a sense of meaning. As Rahner technically puts the point, we have an apriori self-transcending spirit, but we do not have a religious experience until we experience God already near and involved in our personal life.[27] As Pascal noted, we would not seek God if God had not first found us.

This experience of being loved and then wanting to respond is confusing or frightening to some people. It clashes with their fear of being moved by or becoming dependent on another. So they resist. They don't want to be loved since that would require them to change. But the experience of being loved can also feel like liberation. In the case of the Tucson Tough, she was no longer confined to being a loveless self. As she grew more trusting, she then began to be able to respond in a way she could not do before, for example, she adored her brother's children. She became freer. As Haight writes, God's love "engenders a security and self-possession that frees a person for others and for the world."[28]

In an odd sort of way, God's love also frees us to be at peace even in our sin. This experience, I suggest, is behind Luther's insight that even though we are sinners we need not be anxious.[29] God accepts us in our sinfulness, and that sense of being accepted is itself liberating. After a child has run away from home, the first task is not to chastise and improve him but, like the Prodigal father, to welcome him with open arms. Reformation of life can come later.[30]

The Jesuit in me – or is it the Pelagian in me?– to talk about another way freedom is related to grace. This way is essential to all moral living, even though it is ignored in most popular discussions of freedom. Once we experience ourselves invited by some event to love God, we then have the freedom to consent or dissent to the emotion that arises in response. We humans exercise freedom as consent/dissent all the time. The emotions set us in motion, and then we resist or yield to them. We are walking down the street and we see some attractive person. We feel inclined to strike up a conversation. Then we realize that we are late for an appointment, and we freely set aside the inclination as we head into the office. On another occasion, we decide that the appointment can wait, and we yield to and affirm the desire to stop and talk. Similarly, John Calvin notwithstanding, I think we can resist God's invitation. Or we can freely accept it.

Another concern theologians have had is to insist that we cannot earn God's love. There is something true and something misleading in this claim. We human beings want to be loved. If we are willing to wear short skirts or drive fast cars in order to get someone to love us, we also

are tempted to earn God's love by doing good works. But even among humans, love is not something that one earns.[31] Similarly, love is not a reward for good behavior. Heaven is not the reward of the just, but rather the fulfillment of a love relationship that has been growing.

We can, however, deserve love. Parents create their children without any merit on the part of the child, but once created the child deserves their love. Similarly, human beings deserve God's love. Once created, God ought not ignore or despise them. Indeed, as I have already suggested, the worse we are, the more we evoke that particular kind of love we call God's compassion. This love, like all love, is freely given even when deserved. Freedom should not, especially in the case of God, be described as God's ability to hate, ignore, or love the good.[32] Put another way, God is not free to sin against God's own nature.

B. Affirming

After describing love as an emotion, the next part of my definition of "love" is that it is "affirming." I use "affirming" in two related senses. Recall the Tucson Tough. My priest friend described the evolution of their relationship like this. First, he was moved to relate to her like a human being who, like all other human beings, has an interesting story. Second, he related to her as a human being who had a sad story.

So the first meaning of love as affirmation is to say "Yes, I want you to be." If we love someone, we want them to exist. And we are frustrated when they cease to exist. Similarly, God says to each one of us: I want you to be. Then God confirms that affirmation by all the people and all the social structures that make life possible. We can call the latter affirmation by the name "social grace." Social grace refers, for example, to American democracy and to Loyola University.

In the second sense, to affirm is to say "I want you to develop in ways that are appropriate to you." If those we love are intelligent, we want them to develop their intelligence. We want them to grow emotionally. If they are experiencing difficulty, we want to help them get back as much to normal as possible. Each person is a dynamic set of tendencies. These tendencies need, on the one hand, to be fostered. On the other hand, they need to be integrated into a coherent

life. It is a matter of prudence whether to emphasize a particular tendency, e.g., an artistic ability, or to emphasize its integration, e.g., need to earn a living to support a family.

To speak of love as affirmation, however, can be to encourage something dangerous. It can be taken to mean that people might want to change us into someone we are not.

We might assume that God's idea of us could not be foreign to us. But those of you who are familiar with classic theological controversies about grace and nature will recognize that matters are not so easy.[33] Love both affirms us as we are but also encourages us to be other than we presently are. Does God's love overcome our sinfulness and then affirm us restored to be just who we are by nature?[34] Or does God's love affirm us apart from or inspite of what we are, say out of love for Christ? Or does God's love give us a supernature that is different from who we naturally are? Theologians have wrestled with such questions for almost two millennia.

The key to bringing these disparate views together is, I propose, to consider what relationships do to us. One mistaken tendency of our imagination is to think of ourselves as isolated individuals who then tack on this or that relationship as sort an accidental feature of our selves. But if we consider who we are in the existential order, we realize that we depend on others for almost everything about our identity. Our physical, psychological, cultural relationships help create our identity. Without them we would, so to speak, just be bodies floating in outer space. Rather, to be is also to be related. We would not have our identity without parents or foster-parents, without earth and country, without Martin Luther or other religious saints. More to the present point, because God created us we are creatures and because God loves us, we are the beloved children of God. That's who we are. God's love gives us a new identity. Salvation is nothing more than living into this relationship with God.

An older way of describing grace turned it into a thing that we had more or less of, like money in a bank account. Sacraments were said to be outward signs instituted by Christ to give grace. That is, we receive the sacrament, and we get grace, much like from a vending machine. We put in our time and out came a certain amount of grace. Only our inadvertence or small hands

prevented us from carrying away all the grace that it dispensed.[35] Whether people experience much at all at mass, they came away assured that they had somehow received grace, at least if they had not explicitly resisted it.

Rather, grace is love, and it is not dispensed or conferred or distributed. It is given, but only in the way that love is given. And it is received only in the way that love is received, namely, in in our affections and mind and will.[36] In other words, grace is not hidden but can be experienced. The giving and receiving may be dramatic, as in a confession of sin; but it may be ordinary as when a Eucharist is rather like a regular coffee date with a friend in which we share our week and recount old stories, and therein increase our friendship. We sometimes come to realize how important such meetings have been when for some reason they stop, e.g., a friend moves away. In other cases, we might realize only a spiritual hunger inside, e.g., we wonder why, having left religious practice, there is a sense of emptiness in our core.

A Scholastic maxim was that "grace builds on nature," which then sometimes was described as the supernatural on top of the natural. That had the downside of imaging our spiritual life like a two-layer cake, only one layer of which we could taste.[37] Indeed, Aquinas's original maxim was that "grace perfects nature."[38] A better way to understand grace is that our own nature is expanded when we love, beyond food and friends, also God. Just as loving a wife perfects a husband, so, in a different register, loving God perfects our humanity. We have this-worldly activities and implicit or explicit religious activities. Contemporary Catholic theologians tend to hold that there is in reality no "pure nature." All we have is our graced self, that is, a self loved by God and a self that either responds or does not respond. Still, we can act as if God has not first loved us. In greater and lesser ways, we can love creation apart from God. We can also love God apart from creation, we can love creation as a gift from God, or we can love God and creation as part of our mutual love relationship with God.

C. Participation

Implicit and underlying almost everything I have said thus far is the idea that love is a form of participation, the third part of my definition of love. This term itself needs explaining. Some

times we partake, as when we eat our share of the Thanksgiving dinner. Other times we participate in a large event such as Mardi Gras. If we were a bus driver trying to get through a parade, we might be closer to the parade than many people, but we would not be participating since it would be to us just an obstacle. It sometimes happens, however, that when we are near a parade we get caught up in the excitement and then we can be said to participate. Similarly, people pay fantastic amounts of money in order to be in the super bowl stadium. They could see better if they watched on TV, but there is nothing like being there with all those people cheering and booing. Even those watching at home enjoy the game more if watched with others or with the sense that a hundred million other people are doing the same.

When we do participate, our own emotions and thinking and willingness are affected, and in turn we affect the emotions and thinking and willingness of others who also are participating. One biblical metaphor for this participation is the body of Christ. And as St. Paul observes, when one member of the body succeeds, all can rejoice with her. When one member suffers, all can suffer with her. Paul had a sense of participation.

When God loves us and we accept that love and then love God in return, we begin to participate in God's own life. What does this mean? Again, we can understand this new life by reflecting on loving a human friend. We begin to be attentive and concerned about what they like and dislike, what they know and want to know. We are affected by their successes and failures. Similarly, when we love God we share in God's life. We are concerned about what God is concerned about. We want to share in some of the activities God is involved in.[39] For example, if God wants to forgive sinners, we will want to forgive those who have offended us. We do so not as an imposed obligation, but as part of sharing in God's own life.

The language of having divine life in us, or of sharing in God's life, or of divinization does not mean that we are literally gods.[40] Divine indwelling means that God is attuned to and engaged in all that is going on in our lives and that we become attuned to and engaged in some of what is going on in God's life. Unfortunately, indwelling often is imaged physically. Rather spiritual indwelling occurs when someone is on our minds and hearts. We are affectively invested in them, and their life becomes affectively part of our own life. As Jules Toner writes, using a

strange phrase from Dante: when I love you, I in-you me . . . and I also in-me you.[41] The "in" is affective, not physical. So too in our relationship with God. When we dwell in God we are attuned to the emotions and thoughts and decisions and activities of God. We affectively affirm at least a few of those. We say Yes to God's love for God's own self and for the rest of creation, including ourselves. In this sense, the form of God's inner life becomes partially the form of our own life. That is, we are "divinized."

Thus, for one person to participate in the personal lives of other persons is to think their thoughts with them, to be involved in how they make decisions, and above all to feel what and how they feel.[42] Aquinas wrote of the way in which one person may be in another: "as the known is in the knower and the loved is in the lover." In other words, we bring the beloved into our life. At another point, however, Aquinas changed his mind and wrote that lover is in the beloved.[43] In other words, we move out into the beloved's life. From what we have seen about the bipolar nature of emotions, I think that Thomas was right both times. Love means both I in-you me and I in-me you.

It is essential to recognize that this affective participation is not the same as purely intellectual knowledge. Too often Christianity gets reduced to believing a set of propositions. A religious studies professor can know Christianity 1000 times more than the average Christian. One can be an atheist and know the bible inside and out. But you are a Christian only if the values found in the *Catechism* and the Bible are affectively alive in you. When our child excitedly sings the alphabet song to us, we excitedly receive her, not any new information.. Luther saw that faith "is not an intellectual assent, as in Scholasticism, but an infinitely more complex attitude toward and relationship with God."[44]

Theologians following Karl Rahner often speak of this process as receiving God's self-communication. God gives God's own self. In the life, death and resurrection of Christ, through the scriptures, through the Church, and in a million other venues, God communicates what is important to God and therein communicates God's own self.[45] Above all, what is important to God is God's own self as God, but after that what is important is God's creation. For us to

"share in God's life," then, is to share in God's acts of love, knowing, and willing directed toward God and creation. In this process, we engage in genuine dialog with God in time and history.[46] This communication happens, however, only if we receive it with our heart, not simply with our intellect. Indeed, the objectifying power of the intellect too often is a substitute or an obstacle to the heart's encounter with God. Love, personified as the Holy Spirit, is God's own life, and we receive divine life only by taking part in this love.

We are not capable, of course, of sharing in all that another human being feels and even less can we feel all that God feels. But we can do so somewhat, and over time we develop this ability. To do so is to grow in a friendship with God. Of course, we can and often do fail in becoming attuned to God affective, intellectual, and volitional acts. We find ourselves, for example, unable to share in God's compassion for our enemies. But even then, we might acknowledge that God is compassionate, and eventually we might come to share God's compassion for them. Sharing personal life is quite different from sharing material things. The latter typically have to be divided in order to be shared. But sharing spiritual things multiplies them. On the social level, sharing the language and culture of one's age enables a society to live on and diversify in all its members. On the personal level, sharing one's hopes and fears with a friend means that now two people have those hopes and fears, though each in a different way. More importantly, through this sharing they share lives. Theirs is a unity in difference. On the one hand, the recipient commonly shares the communications of her friend not as her possession, though they have become part of her, but as they are alive in the friend who disclosed them to her. On the other hand, if the friend's sharing is genuine (and not simply emotional diarrhea or an emotional tape played for any half-willing listener), then she who shares also grows through the sharing. Similarly, on the one hand, we who receive God's love share in God's own life. On the other hand, God takes on new life in those of us to whom God gives God's self. God's love is brought to perfection in us (1 Jn. 4:12). This happened in Jesus, but it also happens in us who imbibe Jesus's Spirit.

The last point on the topic of participation is that love creates a "we," a friendship that for all the infinite differences between God and ourselves, is nevertheless a genuine unity. In a friendship,

the friends act not only for one another, but they also act with one another and for the sake of their friendship. Sometimes, for example, they share a meal together just to be together, which for Christians often takes the form of Eucharist. Put simply, we are friends with God, we are adopted children in God's family. This love, for which I use the Greek term *philia*, is central to Christianity. Typically, Christian theology has focused on God's love for us or our love for God, but it has insufficiently underscored the communal life, the friendship, shared by God and us. In a full love, we not only give to the beloved, not only receive from the beloved, but also share with the beloved.

III. God's Nature

To think about God's love should change our view of God. I propose that Christianity needs to shift and has shifted from God as a sovereign to God as love. Both attributes have their place. The theology of grace, oddly enough, has been dominated by a desire to assert the sovereignty of God. I have tried to explain what a theology of grace might look like if we begin with the Johannine assertion that God is love. Let me put the point in a provocative way.

Is God a narcissist? That is a strange question, of course. I use it to wake us all up as we near the end of this lecture. The question points to a common way of talking about God primarily as sovereign and not as love. God is an absolute authority. As Sovereign, God decides right and wrong. We are but servants and our eyes should be focused exclusively on God. The danger of imagining God as a narcissist is not far behind. Narcissism is not the same as thinking that one is the most important person, at least not if one is the most important person. Rather, narcissism refers to persons who cannot see and affirm that others have a goodness that is different from their own. It is all about them.

God has too often been described as a narcissist in two ways, one deriving from the Aristotlean tradition and one from the Platonic. In the first way God is necessarily like a narcissist, since the immutable God cannot be moved by anything outside God's self. Certainly, God who is happiness itself cannot be sad about what others are going through. Something similar has been said of Christians in heaven. They will be so happy that they will pay no attention to any friends

or family burning in hell except perhaps to praise God's justice. This way of picturing God and Christians is hardly the picture of love. The Christian God rather is revealed in the one who left a happy heaven and who suffered and died so that others may have forgiveness and life.

The prelude to St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* starts off with a sovereign God of majesty. The first principle and foundation says that God made us to praise, reverence, and serve God. That sounds like narcissism. God created us just so that God would have someone to praise and serve him. Most curiously, the text from Ignatius then completely reverses this one-sidedness when it says that we are to praise and serve God as a "means" to save our souls. So, at first we might ask, is God completely self-centered? And, then, similarly, are we humans just basically self-centered? In either part of this famous principle, there is no mention of God loving us for our sakes or of our loving God for God's own sake. Nor is there any mention of sharing friendship with God

Fortunately, there is a stronger dynamic that sets in once the actual four weeks of the *Exercises* begin. This other perspective may be the reason that many Jesuits in our day tend to begin the *Exercises* with a focus on its last meditations which are all about God's love for us pouring down upon us. Indeed, the bulk of the Retreat is devoted to seeing in Jesus's life how God loves us for our own sake and how we in return can love for God's own sake and how we can share life with God. God gives up heavenly sovereignty for the more humbler role of being a child, being a servant, being a healer, being one who is crucified, and only after all that being exalted. God comes to serve, not to be praised, reverenced, and served. This is far from narcissism. Furthermore, the retreatants are to become companions, that is, friends of Jesus and they are invited to share life with him. Even that hardest of hard parts of the *Exercises*, the third degree of humility, makes sense as a way of sharing life. Otherwise it would be masochistic. This is far from being self-centered.

There is also the Platonist strand in theology that tends to make God a Narcissist. All of creation, the Platonist says, is but a pale reflection of God's supreme goodness. Hence when God sees a creature, God at best sees merely a reflection of God's own self. That sounds very

much like the myth of Narcissus who looked into pool of water, saw a reflection of himself and fell in love with his own reflection. This too is not faithful to the Christian story. The *Spiritual Exercises* portray a Jesus who is very much other than God in heaven. For instance, Church teaching insisted that Jesus had a mind and a will that were not the same as God's.[47] Hence he pleaded with God for a different course of action in the garden of Gethsemane. Similarly all of us have a goodness that is not God's. God loves us and not just a reflection of God's self.

There is another tradition, different from that influenced by Aristotle and Plato. It is a tradition where relationships are central. That is the tradition I have been discussing tonight. In that tradition, sometimes referred to as a relational metaphysics, we are children of God. Like a parent, God does see God's self in us, but also like a parent God sees that we are different from God and have capabilities that God does not have. Most basically, God does not have our love unless we give it to God. I hope our discussion tonight gives us all some insight and incentive to do that.

In conclusion, recall the story of the Tucson Tough. Like Tina Turner, she had been abused. Like the singer Tina Turner, she asked quite seriously, "Who needs a heart when heart can be broken.? And like the singer Tina Turner, she concluded, "What's Love God to do with it?" And then the Tucson Tough met someone who had experienced God's love and had come to embody God's love. And God's love changed her life. That's grace!

1. *Dynamics of Grace* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1993); *Graced Horizon* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992). Duffy wrote mainly about what other people said on grace. Hence, while one can get a sense of what he thought through his evaluations of the various authors, one cannot securely claim to know what he himself would write on grace.

2. *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Life* (Washington, DC: Georgetown, 1994); "Toward a Phenomenology of Love Lost," *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 20 (Spring 1989): 1-19; "Love for God–Is It Obligatory?" *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1996): 221-47; "Divine-Command, Natural-Law, and Mutual-Love Ethics," *Theological Studies*, (December 1996): 633-53; "Religious Life and the Eclipse of Love for God," *Review for Religious*, 57 (March-April 1998): 118-37; "The Eclipse of Love for God," *America*, 174 (March 9, 1996): 13-16.

3. Most theologies of grace, however, have concentrated on what grace does rather than first showing what it is. Thus, they focus on grace as help, not on grace as God's presence. They focus on the changes in us rather than first on God's love itself. Among the many effects of grace are that it makes us righteous, or it heals us, or it saves us, or it forgives our sins, or it elevates us, or it helps us, or it gives us power to act, or it opposes reliance on works, or it produces good works, or it liberates our freedom, or it liberates us from the world, or it or it calls us, or it guides us, or it prepares us, or it completes us, or it confers true merit, or it justifies us, or it sanctifies us, or it divinizes us, or it gives us God's own life, or it glorifies us.

4. Stephen Duffy offers a summary of the recent shifts in theological understanding of grace: "Contrary to neo-scholastic theology the accent would rest on grace as God's personal presence (uncreated grace), not as accidental habit qualifying one's mode of being (created grace); on grace at the center of ordinary life, not as hovering on the margins of another world; on grace as the self-realization of persons, not as merely healing fallen nature's wounds; on grace as permeating personal and social life and not easily distinguishable in itself, not as separate from nature and wholly eluding consciousness; on grace as God's self-offer permanently, universally present in the quotidian, not as scarce, offered intermittently in privileged sacramental enclaves. . . . [It is a] "world of grace." Stephen Duffy, "Experience of Grace," *Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner"* ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (New York: Cambridge, 2005), 58-59. I hope to alter this further by describing how love understood as love, moving toward a mutual love, reshapes our understanding of grace.

5. Boiled down, the best approximation of the meaning of grace is "a favor or a gift from God" This means that nearly everything can be a grace. The problem, however, of saying that everything can be a grace is that it doesn't really help us to understand what we mean by grace. The most fundamental problem, however, is that speaking of favors or gifts overlooks the love itself that God offers. Roger Haight, S.J., *Experience and Language of Grace* (New York: Paulist, 1979), 6-8, 148.

6. Consider further some of the multiple ways the word grace is used. There is sanctifying grace, actual grace, habitual grace, habitual entitative grace, habitual operative grace, elevating grace, indwelling grace, infused grace, created grace, uncreated grace, prevenient grace, sufficient grace, efficacious grace, operative grace, mediate grace, immediate grace, cooperative grace, irresistible grace, sustaining grace, justifying grace, supernatural grace, natural grace,

external grace, interior grace, illuminating grace, redemptive grace, saving grace, forgiving grace, medicinal grace, states of grace, and perhaps many others. In addition to all those technical terms, the tradition speaks in more existential terms such as participating in God's own life, or the pouring of love into our hearts, or being gifted by the Holy Spirit, or dwelling in God and God dwelling in us. The many convoluted theological debates arise from trying to explain what the existential terms mean.

7. Haight, *Experience and Language of Grace*, 6; Charles Ryrie, *The Grace of God* (Chicago: Moody, 1963), 10-11; Richard McBrien *Catholicism* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1980), 158-59 (all in italics); also Duffy, *Graced Horizon*, 12.

8. Stephen Duffy, "Genes, Original Sin and the Human Proclivity to Evil," *Horizons* 32 (2005) 210-34 at 211.

9. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), #2005 ; for the contrary, see Haight, *Experience and Language of Grace*, 10; Denis Janz, *Westminster Handbook to Martin Luther* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 54-55; Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 227-28.

10. Elizabeth Dreyer, *Manifestations of Grace* (Wilmington, DL: Michael Glazier, 1990), 173, 181.

11. Christine Gudorf, "Gendered Identity Formation and Moral Theology," *Applied Ethics in a World Church*, ed. Linda Hogan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 109-16. For a contrary study, see Kristi Klein and Sara Hodges, "Gender Differences, Motivation, and Empathic Accuracy: When It Pays to Understand," 27 (June 2001) 720-30.

12. Edward Vacek, S.J., "Feminism and the Vatican," Theological Studies, 66 #1 (March 2005), 159-77.

13. For the other view, however, see: *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #154-56.

14. Haight, *Experience and Language of Grace*, 10-11.

15. Joseph Sittler, *Essays on Nature and Grace* (Philadelphia: Fortess, 1972), 14-15.

16. Stephen Duffy, "Early Church Fathers and the Great Councils: The Emergence of Classical Christology," in Earl Richard's *Jesus: One and Many* (Wilmington, DL: Glazier, 1988), 440.

17. "Church Today," #16, *Documents of Vatican II* ed. Walter Abbott, S.J. (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

18. T. Richard Snyder, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 35; Stephen Duffy "Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic Soteriologies," *Pro Ecclesia* 9 (Fall 2004): 434-59 at 440.

19. Duffy, "Early Church Fathers and the Great Councils," 439-41; Haight, *Experience and Language of Grace*, 64.

20. Duffy, "Early Church Fathers and the Great Councils," 451-52.

21. Karl Rahner, S.J., "Grace," *Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Seabury, 1975), 590.

22. Stephen Duffy, "The Quest for Freedom in a Culture of Choice," *Yamauchi Lectures in Religion* (New Orleans: Loyola , 2002), 36-38; Duffy, *Graced Horizon*, 15; Duffy "Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic Soteriologies," 441; for a contrary view that grace is a "physical cause," see the early twentieth century *Catholic Encyclopedia*, under "Actual Grace, p. 4

<http:///www.newadvent.org/cathen/06689x.htm>.
23. Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 149.
24. Benjamin Peters, "'Apocalyptic Sectarianism': Theology at Work in Critiques of Catholic Radicals," *Horizons* 30 (2012) 209-29 at 220.
25. Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 159.
26. Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 149-50.
27. Duffy, "Experience of Grace," 43-45; Karl Rahner, S.J., *Spiritual Writings: Karl Rahner*, ed. Philip Endean (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 56-60.
28. Haight, *Experience and Language of Grace*, 153-54; Stephen Duffy, "Quest for Freedom," 34-36; Dreyer, *Manifestations*, 175-76.
29. Janz, *Westminster Handbook to Martin Luther*, 55.
30. Haight, *Experience and Language of Grace*, 155-56. "In psychological terms, just as a person gains his or her identity in others' reaction or response, so here the Christian gains an "absolute identity," one that is ultimately positive, even though it includes judgment, because of God's love. Persons can accept themselves, both their present and their past, in spite of the finitude, sin, irresponsibility, that have gone to constitute the self. This is an enormously liberating experience." Brian McDermott, S.J., *What Are They Saying about the Grace of Christ?"* (New York: Paulist, 1984), 12-20.
31. Duffy, "Quest for Freedom," 33-34.

32. Duffy, *Graced Horizon*, 27-37. Duffy rightly complains about an exaltation among humans of free choice "in which nothing or no one coerces or compels, dtermines or necessitates choice." Oddly, this seems to be the standard view of the sovereign God's freedom, which theologians were so anxious to protect; Duffy, "Quest for Freedom," 11.
33. Karl Rahner, S.J. "Grace and Freedom," *Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Seabury, 1975), 600-01. Rahner writes that there is an unresolvable tension here between God's action and our freedom. I think the resolution comes when see God's action as an invitation to respond in love. Stephen Duffy, *Graced Horizon*, 9; Duffy "Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic Soteriologies," 442.
34. Duffy, *Graced Horizon*, 16-17; Duffy, "Early Church Fathers and the Great Councils," 459.
35. Peter Fransen, *Divine Grace and Man*, rev. ed. (New York: Mentor-Omega, 1965), 115.
36. Rahner, "Grace," 592.
37. Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 156; Duffy, *Graced Horizon*, 13; Duffy, "Experience of Grace," 46-47.
38. Peters, "'Apocalyptic Sectarianism,'" 223, referring to Summa Theologiae I.1.8.2, also I.2.2.2.
39. Edward Vacek, S.J., "God's Action and Ours," Emmanuel, 90 (September 1984), 370-76.
40. Duffy, *"Experience of Grace,"* 44; Duffy, "The Early Church Fathers and the Great Councils," 460.
41. Jules Toner, S.J. *Love and Friendship* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette, 205), 108-09.
42. Richard Cote, *Universal Grace* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1977), 63, writes "Love alone unites friends to the extent that they share one another's existence completely and wholeheartedly. In

loving friendship the element of self-giving finds its deepest expression, since the gift that is given is ultimately always the givers themselves. It is at once the gift of personal being and the gift of being truly personal. More than any other interpersonal relationship, love reaches and transfigures the center of those who are loved. Not only do such people come to possess themselves more authentically, but the uniqueness of their person is given its hitherto undisclosed real value. At this level friendship attains a degree of spiritual intimacy that suspends, as it were, the laws of matter, surpasses our conception of time and space, and passes through the closed doors of corporeality and human opaqueness. A new sphere of existence is created and something quite unique takes place: the free self-giving of one person to another." Similarly, Dreyer, *Manifestations of Grace*, 167: "We pay attention to the person; we spend time with and listen to the person; we ask questions; we find out about the person's history, likes and dislikes, talents, shortcomings. We may even consult other persons who know her well to get other insights and perspectives. . . . it is possible to do all these things *really*, and discovering this God is at the heart of any experience of grace. God is the person who wishes us well in all things, who *wants* to tell us who God is, who *desires* to know us and be known by us."

43. David Coffey, *Grace: The Gift of the Holy Spirit* (Sidney: Catholic Institute of Sidney, 1979), 12-15, referring to Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.8.3 & 1.43.3.

44. Haight, *Experience and Language of Grace*, 93.

45. Duffy "Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic Soteriologies," 436. Cote, *Universal Grace*, 55-59; Rahner, "Grace," 591.

46. Rahner, "Grace," 589.

47. Duffy, "Early Church Fathers and the Great Councils," 463-64.