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Actual Grace and Our Cooperation



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Actual Grace and Our Cooperation

The Distinction between Sanctifying Grace and Actual Grace

In the natural order, God's creative Word is the source of all being and natures, and also the source of all movement. Both being and movement are indicated in the words: "Let there be light!" God gives to every creature the act of being in a certain nature, and He also gives to them the first impulse by which the things that have been constituted in being begin to move.

The same can be said, analogously, of the supernatural order. God is the source of *supernatural being or life*, and also the source of *supernatural movement*, by which creatures move toward salvation. Both supernatural being and supernatural movement are indicated in Jesus's words when He says: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10), and "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5).

The supernatural life that God gives to a rational creature is an abiding principle in the creature, unless it is lost through mortal sin. The supernatural movement that God gives is a transient and temporary impulse to aid us at a given moment. Both of these aids are gratuitous and supernatural and thus they both receive the name of grace. However they are two different types of gifts: one abiding (supernatural life) and the other transitory (supernatural aid or movement). These two types of grace are referred to as *sanctifying grace* (also called habitual grace), which is the habitual and abiding principle of supernatural life, and *actual grace*, which is a transient divine aid, a divine impulse enabling us to accomplish an action leading to salvation or sanctification.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines the two types of grace as follows:

The grace of Christ is the gratuitous gift that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it.... Sanctifying grace is an habitual gift, a stable and super-natural disposition that perfects the soul itself to enable it to live with God, to act by his love. *Habitual grace*, the permanent disposition to live and act in keeping with God's call, is distinguished from *actual graces* which refer to God's interventions, whether at the beginning of conversion or in the course of the work of sanctification.¹

This distinction between actual grace and sanctifying grace—corresponding to supernatural movement and supernatural being—can also be explained by distinguishing two different kinds of causes: the efficient and the formal

cause. An efficient cause is the cause that brings something into being or motion, whereas a formal cause is an intrinsic principle that makes something to be what it is. For example, the efficient cause of a statue is the sculptor and the strokes of his chisel, whereas the formal cause of the sculpture is its particular form imprinted by the chisel, by which it is precisely that statue. Similarly, a house painter and his paintbrush is the efficient cause of the painting of a wall, whereas whiteness is the formal cause of the white wall. Or again, the violinist and the strokes of the bow are the efficient causes of the beauty of a piece of music, whereas the formal cause is the pleasing proportion and harmony of the sounds themselves.

According to this analogy, sanctifying grace is a formal cause that makes the soul to be pleasing to God and partaking in the divine nature. Actual grace, on the contrary, is a supernatural movement of the soul imparted by God, and thus it is a kind of efficient cause, moving the soul to do supernaturally good acts. Actual graces are like the strokes of a divine bow or chisel, whereas sanctifying grace is the supernatural "harmony" or "divine proportionality" that is produced in the soul itself.

From this it can be seen that in order to act well on the supernatural level, we need both actual grace, to be the first efficient cause of the good act, and sanctifying grace, to be its first formal cause. In other words, we need actual grace to be the first mover of our supernatural acts, and we need sanctifying grace (and the theological virtues) as an intrinsic principle like a second nature by which our supernatural acts have a connatural quality, come forth with a certain facility, promptitude, and joy, and have a kind of foundation in our soul itself.

St. Thomas explains the difference between actual and sanctifying grace in *the Summa of Theology*, I-II, q. 110, a. 2:

Man is aided by God's gratuitous will in two ways: first, inasmuch as man's soul is moved by God to know or will or do something, and in this way the gratuitous effect in man is not a quality, but a *movement* of the soul [actual grace]; for "motion is the act of the mover in the moved." Secondly, man is helped by God's gratuitous will, inasmuch as a *habitual gift is infused by God into the soul*; and for this reason, that it is not fitting that God should provide less for those He loves, that they may acquire supernatural good, than for creatures, whom He loves that they may acquire natural good. Now He so provides for natural creatures, that not merely does He move them to their natural acts, but He bestows upon them certain forms and powers, which are the principles of acts, in order that they may of themselves be inclined to these movements, and thus the movements whereby they

¹ CCC1999-2000.

are moved by God become natural and easy to creatures, according to Wisdom 8:1: “she . . . orders all things sweetly.” Much more therefore does He infuse into such as He moves towards the acquisition of supernatural good, certain forms or supernatural qualities, whereby they may be moved by Him sweetly and promptly to acquire eternal good; and thus the gift of grace is a quality.

The gratuitous effect of God’s love in man’s soul that manifests itself as a *movement* in man’s mind and will by which he sees the moral good and seeks to put it in practice, is referred to as *actual grace*. The gratuitous effect of God’s love that is infused in the soul as a *supernatural quality*, giving it a participation in the divine nature and abiding in the soul in a habitual way, is called *sanctifying grace*.

Actual Grace

Actual grace therefore is the name given to God’s supernatural interventions in our will and intellect, both at the beginning of conversion, and throughout the process of sanctification.² Actual grace is a kind of divine impulse given to us in order to help move us towards salvation. Actual grace enables us to cooperate freely with the movement of grace, so as to turn ourselves efficaciously towards God and perform acts which contribute towards our salvation.

Actual grace differs from sanctifying grace in that actual grace is a *temporary* supernatural impulse or movement of God by which He excites and aids our faculties to perform particular salutary acts at a particular moment. Sanctifying grace, on the other hand, is a habitual and abiding “deification” of our soul by which our soul is somehow mysteriously elevated and made proportionate to God’s own ineffable beatitude and inner life.

For an adult to acquire sanctifying grace, many actual graces will first be necessary to move his faculties to seek God and undertake the work of conversion, aiding him to produce acts of faith, hope, charity, and contrition for sin. Thus in the justification of the adult, actual graces always come before sanctifying grace.

However, sanctifying grace has a certain natural or logical primacy with respect to actual grace, for actual grace is ordered to the acquisition of sanctifying grace through conversion, and once we possess it, actual grace is ordered to the increase and fecundity of sanctifying grace. The succession of temporary supernatural impulses (actual graces) are ordered to the birth and growth of the abiding divine life in us (sanctifying grace).

In the supernatural life, we need a gratuitous help of God on three levels: the level of being, the level of action, and

² See CCC 2000. The term “actual grace” first came into common usage after the Council of Trent. Nevertheless, the notion goes back to the Gospel and the Apostolic Tradition. It was one of the merits of St. Thomas Aquinas to distinguish clearly between actual and habitual grace (sanctifying grace).

the intermediate level of the infused virtues by which we act promptly, with facility and joy. Grace on the level of being is sanctifying grace. On the level of action it is actual grace. On the level of the virtues, grace works through the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, which flow from sanctifying grace as their root and principle.³

To grasp the notion of actual grace, we can use the analogy of parents aiding a very young child. The parents aid the child to walk by leading him on, giving gentle impulses to his limbs, and protecting him from a fall by gentle prods. Something similar happens with regard to acts that are ordered to our salvation. Since the works by which we work out our salvation are immeasurably above our nature, we are much less than toddlers in this field.

Furthermore, the toddler will grow up and no longer need the impulses and prods of his parents, whereas we shall *always* be less than toddlers in relation to the salvific acts by which we work out our salvation. We can never outgrow our need for God’s prodding and gentle impulses steering our intellect and will. We can never emancipate ourselves from this necessity of being aided continually by God’s gentle impulses. For the supernatural sphere will always remain infinitely⁴ elevated over our human nature. We can never become autonomous actors in the stage of salvation. Autonomy can only produce a falling away from salvation, a falling back to our own human level, or below.

Even though a person is in a state of grace, he still needs actual grace to be a first source of movement for the performance of supernatural acts (that is, all acts moved by charity). Actual grace serves to call us—knocking on the door of our heart and conscience—to particular acts of supernatural virtue.

Distinction between Operative and Cooperative Grace

Actual graces can be classified in different ways. Perhaps the most fundamental distinction is between operative and cooperative grace (also referred to as operating and cooperating grace). Through operative grace God works in us—illuminating our mind and inspiring our will with a good desire—without presupposing any prior act on our part or any free cooperation. Cooperative grace, on the contrary, presupposes a prior good will in the soul, already brought about by operative grace, and cooperates

³ See St. Thomas, *ST I-II*, q. 110, a. 3, ad 3. Sanctifying grace is always accompanied by charity, and vice versa. However, faith and hope, although they normally spring from sanctifying grace, can still be retained when sanctifying grace is lost through mortal sin. Faith and hope separated from sanctifying grace and charity are still supernatural gifts of God, but of themselves they are not sufficient for salvation, and are said to be “dead.”

⁴ Although sanctifying grace is a created and finite quality in the soul, the supernatural sphere can be said to be infinitely above us, because grace leads us to the infinite Good, to a participation in the very life of God.

with our free will so as to lead to the actual performance of a good or salutary act.

Operative grace is thus a first movement of actual grace in the soul by which the soul is attracted to the supernatural good. On the basis of an operative grace, the soul can then deliberate about how to do good and make a salutary choice. The good deliberation and the good choice are necessarily supported by God's actual grace, which *cooperates* with the first good movement of the soul by which it began to will the good through operative grace.

Whenever a sinner is suddenly attracted to repentance and a change of life, there is an operative grace that has attracted the mind and the will of the sinner towards God. Examples would be Christ's appearance to Saul on the way to Damascus, the calling of Matthew, or the desire aroused in the heart of Zacchaeus to see Christ as He passed through Jericho. Cooperative graces then continue to accompany the repentant sinner as he deliberates about changing his life and makes a salutary choice on the basis of the good desire awakened by operative grace. In the case of Zacchaeus, this would be, for example, his resolve to give half his goods to the poor and restore fourfold anything unlawfully taken (see Luke 19:8).

Operative grace is referred to by the prophet Isaiah when he says: "They have sought me that before asked not for me, they have found me that sought me not. I said: Behold me, behold me, to a nation that did not call upon my name" (Is 65:1).

Operative grace is thus the first in a series of actual graces, which does not presuppose any prior movement of the will. Cooperative grace refers to the subsequent action of grace which *supports* the movement of the soul to the good in its free actions of consent and choice, and which presupposes the good and salutary desire of the will which was first brought about by operative grace.

St. Augustine made this distinction in his work *Grace and Free Will*:

For He who first works in us the power to will is the same who cooperates in bringing this work to perfection in those who will it. Accordingly, the Apostle says: "I am convinced of this, that he who has begun a good work in you will bring it to perfection until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6). God, then, works in us, without our cooperation, the power to will, but once we begin to will, and do so in a way that brings us to act, then it is that He cooperates with us. But if He does not work in us the power to will or does not cooperate in our act of willing, we are powerless to perform good works of a salutary nature.⁵

Since operative grace is the work of God prior to the will's self-movement, it is efficacious of itself. However,

⁵ *Grace and Free Will* 17.33, trans. Robert Russell, in *St. Augustine: The Teacher, The Free Choice of the Will, Grace and Free Will* (Washington DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1968), 288–89.

the whole purpose of operative grace is to enable the will to consent freely to the movement of grace. This consent is worked by the will through the aid of cooperative grace. Thus the action of operative grace is perfected by cooperative grace. Cooperative grace, by its very nature requires the will's free cooperation. Thus cooperative grace is not efficacious of itself alone. God begins by working in the will without the will's cooperation, attracting it to Himself, precisely so that He can gain the free cooperation of the will in the process of salvation.

Thus the illumination and attraction aroused by operative grace is attributed to God alone, whereas the free action—involving deliberation and consent—accomplished through cooperative grace is attributed both to God's grace and to the person willing. St. Thomas explains this in *ST I-II*, q. 111, a. 2:

[1] Hence in that effect in which our *mind is moved and does not move, but in which God is the sole mover*, the operation is attributed to God, and it is with reference to this that we speak of "*operating grace*." [2] But in that effect in which our mind *both moves and is moved, the operation is not only attributed to God, but also to the soul; and it is with reference to this that we speak of cooperating grace*." Now there is a double act in us. First, there is the interior act of the will, and with regard to this act the will is a thing moved, and God is the mover; and especially when the will, which hitherto willed evil, begins to will good. And hence, inasmuch as God moves the human mind to this act, we speak of operating grace. But there is another, exterior act; and since it is commanded by the will, as was shown above (q. 17, a. 9) the operation of this act is attributed to the will. And because God assists us in this act, both by strengthening our will interiorly so as to attain to the act, and by granting outwardly the capability of operating, it is with respect to this that we speak of cooperating grace. Hence after the aforesaid words Augustine subjoins: "He operates that we may will; and when we will, He cooperates that we may perfect." And thus if grace is taken for God's gratuitous motion whereby He moves us to meritorious good, it is fittingly divided into operating and cooperating grace.

The distinction between operative and cooperative grace can also be applied to sanctifying grace. The first infusion of sanctifying grace at the moment of justification would be called operative grace, and that same grace, insofar as it is the habitual principle of works of charity, would then be called cooperative grace. St. Thomas explains this in the same article:

But if grace is taken for the habitual gift, then again there is a double effect of grace, even as of every other form; the first of which is "being," and the second, "operation"; thus the work of heat is to make its subject hot, and to give heat outwardly. And thus habitual grace, inasmuch as it heals and justifies the soul, or makes it pleasing to God, is called operating grace; but inasmuch as it is the principle of meritorious works, which spring from the free-will, it is called cooperating grace.

The notions of operative and cooperative grace are also expressed by various synonyms. Operative grace can also be referred to as *prevenient* grace, and cooperative grace as *subsequent*. Prevenient signifies that it comes before something else. Subsequent, that it follows on a previous movement of grace. Operative grace is thus prevenient, in that its action does not presuppose any prior movement on the part of the will; it comes before any consent on the part of the will. Cooperative grace, on the other hand, can be referred to as subsequent, because it always presupposes a prior operative grace by which the will is attracted to the supernatural end.⁶ Prevenient and subsequent grace are also called *antecedent* and *consequent* grace. Operative grace is antecedent because it comes before self-movement and consent on the part of the will. Cooperative grace is consequent because it continues the movement begun by operative grace in the free act of self-movement and consent.

Operative grace is also indicated by the Latin terms *excitans* (stimulating or quickening) and *vocans* (calling), whereas cooperative grace is called *adiuvans* (aiding or helping). Operative grace *touches* the heart and *calls* one to conversion, whereas cooperative grace *aids* one to consent and act freely on the supernatural level.⁷

The roles of operative and cooperative grace are manifested in Scripture in numerous places, such as Rev 3:20: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” The action of grace knocking on the door signifies operative grace. However, the purpose of the knocking is precisely that one open the door to Christ. This cannot happen without operative grace becoming cooperative, leading the will to consent and to move itself in the order of grace through conversion and the establishment of friendship with God.

Another example is John 6:44: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” God’s action of “drawing” or attracting the soul towards Christ is the work of operative grace. However, it must culminate in cooperative grace by which the soul freely comes and is converted.

The multiplicity of names for operative and cooperative grace comes from the great importance of this distinction, which is crucial in understanding the priority of God’s

6 See *ST I-II*, q. 111, a. 3: “Just as grace is divided into operative and cooperative grace on account of its different effects, so is it divided into prevenient and subsequent grace on the same grounds. There are five effects of grace in us: first, that the soul is healed; second, that it wills what is good; third, that it carries out what it wills; fourth, that it perseveres in good; and fifth, that it attains to glory. Since grace causes the first effect in us, it is called prevenient in relation to the second effect. Since it causes the second effect in us, it is called subsequent in relation to the first effect. And since any particular effect follows one effect and precedes another, grace may be called both prevenient and subsequent in regard to the same effect as related to different effects.”

7 See the Council of Trent, sess. 6, Decree on Justification, ch. 5.

grace and the necessity of human cooperation. The priority of God’s action is shown by the fact that operative grace must come first, presupposing nothing in the will. The necessity of human cooperation is shown by the fact that the *movement begun through operative grace, by its very nature, is meant to pass on into cooperative grace*, in which the will must also freely move itself in choosing salutary acts. *Operative grace becomes cooperative grace as soon as the will begins to cooperate with grace*. Operative grace fails to become cooperative grace, on the other hand, if the will refuses to cooperate. In this case, the movement of operative grace remains without fruit.

This lack of cooperation is indicated in the parable of the sower who sows good seed on the road, where it remains completely without fruit. Operative grace was given, but no cooperation ensued. In the rocky or weed-filled soil some cooperation follows, but not such as to ensure final perseverance. The obstinate lack of cooperation with the movement initiated through operative grace is referred to in Scripture as the “hardening of the heart” or the “stiffening of the neck.” A classic text is Ps 95:8: “Harden not your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness.” God frequently complains that the Israelites “did not listen or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck, that they might not hear and receive instruction” (Jer 17:23).

As will be seen below, the doctrine of operative and cooperative grace eliminates the opposing errors of Semi-pelagianism and Lutheranism. Semipelagianism in effect denies the necessity of operative grace. Lutheranism denies the possibility of cooperative grace.

The Necessity of Actual Grace for the Performance of Salvific Actions

Since the supernatural sphere always remains above us, it is apparent that we can never do salvific actions without the supernatural aid of God who gives a divine impulse to our spiritual faculties, prodding us into supernatural movement.

This crucial point of Catholic doctrine was brought into relief and made more precise on the occasion of the *Pelagian heresy* in the early fifth century. Pelagius was a British monk with a reputation for asceticism and moral probity, who asserted that the natural moral strength of man, especially as strengthened by asceticism, is sufficient of itself to enable man to attain to salvation and sanctity without the need of any divine impulse (or habit) aiding our spiritual faculties. Christ’s redemption was principally necessary to give us instruction and example.

Pelagius, influenced by Stoic philosophy, laudably sought to defend the truth of man’s possession of free will. Unfortunately, he understood free will as implying complete autonomy in self-determination, thus absolutizing human freedom. From this he concluded that an internal

aid of God in a human act (as in actual grace) would destroy its freedom. Thus he wrote that “it is not free will if it needs the help of God.”⁸

As a consequence, Pelagius and his followers tended to change the meaning of the word “grace,” equating it with a supernatural instruction.

As seen above, Pelagianism also carries with it fundamental errors concerning original sin and its consequences, the necessity of Baptism, and the effects of the sacraments. It is clear that the Pelagian heresy fails to consider the immeasurable gulf separating nature and grace, and the impossibility for man to perform salvific acts without the divine aid moving our faculties. Pelagius, apparently, considered us to be more than toddlers with respect to the supernatural, such that the divine impulse would not be strictly necessary. He held that the grace of faith is sufficient for the avoiding of sin, and that actual grace to excite and inspire our will to freely and efficaciously love God and His will would not be necessary.

The providential defender of the Catholic doctrine on grace against Pelagius was St. Augustine. Certain Augustinian positions in this matter were then infallibly promulgated by the Magisterium of the Church. In the Council of Carthage, approved by Pope Zosimus, the Pelagian position on the non-necessity of actual grace for salvific acts was condemned in the following canons:

Can. 4. Again, whoever says that the same grace of God through our Lord Jesus Christ helps us not to sin only for this reason, that through it the understanding of the commandments is revealed and opened to us that we may know what we ought to strive after and what we ought to avoid, but not because through it is given to us the love and the strength to do what we have recognized to be our duty, let him be anathema. For since the Apostle says: “Knowledge puffs up, but charity builds up” [1 Cor 8:1], it is very impious for us to believe that we have the grace of Christ for knowledge which puffs up and not for charity which builds up; for both are the gift of God: the knowledge of what we should do and the love to do it, so that built up by charity we may not be puffed up by knowledge. Just as it is written of God: “Who teaches man knowledge” [Ps. 93:10], so also it is written: “Charity is from God” [1 Jn 4:7].

Can. 5. It has likewise been decided that whoever says that the grace of justification is given to us so that we may do more easily with grace what we are ordered to do by our free will, as if even without grace we were able, though not easily, to fulfill the divine commandments, let him be anathema. For concerning the fruits of His commands the Lord did not say: “Without me you can accomplish with greater difficulty,” but rather: “Without me you can do nothing” [Jn 15:5].⁹

This teaching was confirmed eleven centuries later by the Council of Trent:

⁸ Quoted by St. Augustine in *De gestis Pelagii* 42 (PL 44, 345).

⁹ Denzinger 104-105. These canons were repeated again by the Council of Ephesus; see Denz. 137-138.

Canon 1. If anyone says that man can be justified before God by his own works, whether done by his own natural powers or through the teaching of the law, without divine grace through Jesus Christ, let him be anathema.

Canon 2. If anyone says that divine grace through Christ Jesus is given for this only, that man may be able more easily to live justly and to merit eternal life, as if by free will without grace he is able to do both, though with hardship and difficulty, let him be anathema.

Canon 3. If anyone says that without the predisposing inspiration of the Holy Spirit and without His help, man can believe, hope, love or be repentant as he ought, so that the grace of justification may be bestowed upon him, let him be anathema.¹⁰

Doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Necessity of Actual Grace

Among the Scholastics, St. Thomas Aquinas brought the Augustinian doctrine on grace to its fullest perfection. He explains the necessity of grace for acts conducive to our eternal salvation in *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 5:

Acts conducing to an end must be proportioned to the end. But no act exceeds the proportion of its active principle; and hence we see in natural things, that nothing can by its operation bring about an effect which exceeds its active force, but only such as is proportionate to its power. Now everlasting life is an end exceeding the proportion of human nature, as is clear from what we have said above (q. 5, a. 5). Hence man, by his natural endowments, cannot produce meritorious works proportionate to everlasting life; and for this a higher force is needed, which is the force of grace. And thus without grace man cannot merit everlasting life; yet he can perform works conducing to a good which is natural to man, as “to toil in the fields, to drink, to eat, or to have friends,” and the like.¹¹

¹⁰ Canons on Justification, Session VI, 1547, Denzinger 811-813.

¹¹ This doctrine is further developed in article 6 of the same question: “The preparation of the human will for good is twofold: the first, whereby it is prepared to operate rightly and to enjoy God; and this preparation of the will cannot take place without the habitual gift of grace, which is the principle of meritorious works, as stated above (a. 5). There is a second way in which the human will may be taken to be prepared for the gift of habitual grace itself. Now in order that man prepare himself to receive this gift, it is not necessary to presuppose any further habitual gift in the soul, otherwise we should go on to infinity. But we must presuppose a gratuitous gift of God, Who moves the soul inwardly or inspires the good wish [through actual grace]. For in these two ways do we need the Divine assistance, as stated above (a. 2,3). Now that we need the help of God to move us, is manifest. For since every agent acts for an end, every cause must direct its effect to its end, and hence since the order of ends is according to the order of agents or movers, man must be directed to the last end by the motion of the first mover, and to the proximate end by the motion of any of the subordinate movers; as the spirit of the soldier is bent towards seeking the victory by the motion of the leader of the army - and towards following the standard of a regiment by the motion of the standard-bearer. And thus since God is the First Mover, simply, it is by His motion that everything seeks to be likened to God in its own way. Hence Dionysius says in *On the Divine Names* 4 that “God turns all to Himself.” But He directs righteous men to Himself as to a special end, which they seek,

St. Thomas's doctrine is based on the principle of proportionality. Nothing can work above its own level, unless it is moved by a higher agent. A paintbrush in the hands of Raphael can work above the level of a mere inanimate paintbrush, only insofar as it is moved by the mind and hand of a great artist. A paintbrush lying on a table unused and undirected by an artist is completely incapable of producing a great work of art. There is no proportion between the paintbrush in itself and a great work of design. But in the hands of Raphael the disproportion is overcome. Likewise, an arrow by itself is disproportioned to being shot to the center of a target. But in the hands of an expert archer it is proportioned to hitting the target.

In the same way, there is absolutely no proportion between human acts and the supernatural beatitude that is proper to God alone. Our human acts are even less—infinite less—proportioned to our supernatural beatitude than the unused paintbrush to a great painting, or the arrow to the target. However, if God moves our human acts by inward inspirations, then the disproportion can be overcome.

God upholds nature in its being and also in its movement. He is the First Mover of all natural movement and activity. He provides a first impulse for every chain of movement. Without the foundation of the divine first movement, nothing in the created universe would ever move.

The Catholic doctrine on the necessity of actual grace applies this principle to the supernatural realm. God must uphold us in supernatural *being* (once we have been justified), which He does through *sanctifying grace*, and He must also be the First Mover of all supernatural *movements* of our soul, which He accomplishes through *actual graces*.

Christ tells us that without Him we can do nothing. Without the inspiration of God's grace, we are impotent to produce works conducive to our salvation. Without grace we would be like undirected paintbrushes or arrows, incapable of any salvific action. We need God's grace to direct us to a supernatural end, and give us the impulse necessary to reach it.

This direction of God is not merely instruction, as Pelagius thought. It is not enough to know God's will through the Law and the Gospel, if God does not *move our heart* also to accomplish God's will through the aid of His actual graces. This necessity can easily be seen from our analogy. It would not be enough for the archer to point the arrow in the right direction, if he did not also shoot it! This is because the arrow does not have the power either to direct

and to which they wish to cling, according to Psalm 73:28, "it is good for Me to adhere to my God." And *that they are "turned" to God can only spring from God's having 'turned' them. Now to prepare oneself for grace is, as it were, to be turned to God; just as, whoever has his eyes turned away from the light of the sun, prepares himself to receive the sun's light, by turning his eyes towards the sun. Hence it is clear that man cannot prepare himself to receive the light of grace except by the gratuitous help of God moving him inwardly.*"

itself or to impel itself to the target through its own power alone. And the human being, likewise, has no power to propel himself to a supernatural end without being moved by a divine archer, even if he has already been enlightened and directed by faith concerning his supernatural end. This is because the natural faculty of the human will is not proportioned to a supernatural and divine end.¹²

This principle has great practical implications. All conversion has its first impulse in God's inward inspirations. This principle is crucial for Christian humility. We can never glory in any work of grace or conversion, for it was moved and inspired by God's *prevenient* (predisposing) *grace*. We have no more reason to glory than the paintbrush or the arrow.

Nevertheless, our analogy is deficient in that the rational creature alone is *free to resist the divine inspiration*.¹³ It is true that the arrow and the paintbrush can also fail to produce their intended effect through their own defectiveness. However, man can *freely* resist the movement of God (or, on the other hand, freely cooperate). When we act according to God's grace, His is all the glory. When we sin and resist grace, ours is all the blame.

Actual Grace and the Preparation for the Reception of Sanctifying Grace

A mitigated form of Pelagianism common in the fifth century came to be known as Semipelagianism, which consists in holding that the *first movements* of the adult towards grace come from the activity of his free will alone, without the necessity of a prior operative or "prevenient" grace. For example, the action of prayer to invoke God's grace could be thought to be an action of our free will alone which initiates the process of conversion. This is false, however, for *the very act of turning to God to invoke His aid requires His helping impulse*. He moves us to freely pray for His aid through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Since the very decision to invoke God's aid is itself an action ordered toward supernatural salvation, it must be aided by the gentle impulse of God's actual grace. The entire work of conversion, from its beginning to its completion in final perseverance (dying in a state of grace), must always be supported by the impulses of actual grace.

Semipelagianism was condemned in the Second Council of Orange in 521. Although this was a local council, the following canons were approved by Pope Boniface II and thus have the force of solemn definitions. The third canon condemns those who say that "the grace of God can be conferred because of human prayer, but that it is

12 There is also another universal reason for the necessity of a divine impulse to move our will to salvific acts. God is the universal first mover of all movement in the world, whether natural or supernatural: "no created thing can put forth any act, unless by virtue of the Divine motion" (ST I-II, q. 109, a. 9).

13 The blessed in heaven (men and angels) can no longer resist grace because they see God face to face.

not grace that prompts us to pray.” The fifth canon of this council condemns those who say that the “beginning of faith and the very desire of faith . . . inheres in us naturally and not be a gift of grace. This grace is the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴

The condemnation of semipelagianism means that God always takes the initiative in the work of our salvation. Our role is not to be the first mover in the conversion of our souls, for that belongs to God, but rather to cooperate with the grace of God that He gives to us so, moving us to seek Him.

¹⁴ DS 373, 375.