

My Sacred History

I'm not sure where the notion of applying the biblical perspective of sacred history to one's own personal history of grace originated, but I want to give credit to the late Fr. Walter Lallemand for introducing me and a dozen or more other young adults and late teens to it in the Fall of 1977 at a weekend retreat at "Le Chamador" retreat house in Ste. Dorothee, Laval. Fr. Walter explained to us how clear it is in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures that our God is a personal being who definitely intends to enter into personal relationships with people. You can check this out for yourself from Genesis to Revelation, from Adam and Eve to the promised second coming of Christ.

Although the concept is simple to understand, it is not necessarily easy to apply it to oneself. In order to help you along, a few points may clarify the steps that may help you enter into this reflection exercise. As far as I can recall, the exercise was a meaningful one for all the young people with whom I had gathered for that weekend retreat in 1977. We were on retreat – we had left the busy routine behind for a weekend and were in a relaxed atmosphere and a safe place, surrounded by friendly people. We had the opportunity to find a solitary corner and time to be quiet and reflect on what was proposed to us, where we could notice whatever inner movements happened within us in the course of doing the exercise. All that helped. However, if you can't have access to such conditions, then you may be able to find ways of creating a similar set of conditions by extending several shorter moments of solitude and quiet over a longer period of time.

That being said, what does it mean to consider my life as a history of God's grace to me – as a "sacred history"? Quite simply, we start with the belief that all that comes to us from God is grace, that is, a freely given gift for our good, designed to bring us into communion with God. The divinely inspired Word of God in the Bible reveals God's intention from the beginning of creation to enter into a personal relationship with human beings. God has given us life and continues to give life to each succeeding generation, and in addition offers us life that will bring us beyond the grave into an eternal dwelling with Him. God began to relate to specific individuals, then with more individuals, and finally with a whole nation.

In the lives of biblical characters and of the Chosen People, there were seasons and changes, like the ebb and flow of ocean tides; so too in our lives and in our relationship with God. The events and God's words to his People have come to us because at some point somewhere, someone took the time to remember, tell others, and eventually record it in writing. Very simply, that's what this faith exercise is all about – reflecting, remembering, and recording. Then as time passes, there is benefit in reviewing our personal record of God's grace – our "sacred history" and in prayer we allow God to show us the pattern which reveals how faithful and loving our Father has been to us all along. All you need is some paper or a journal type notebook and a pen. If you like order, then you can also have some foolscap (scrap paper) on which you can write memories in whatever order they come to your mind and then enter them into your journal in whatever order you prefer.

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So what is it exactly that we want to record? You want to record God's grace to you. How can we know what's a grace from God and what isn't? And just what is grace anyway? Let's define grace as something God gives a person that helps them function well or better, or helps them relate to others better, or helps them connect with God better, or simply helps them be a better person. To have a sense of what this could look like, consider a car. Once a car has been built, it can function by itself, in the sense that it has all it needs within in order to function. We can take for granted that there is a human operator. However, as complete and independent as the car is, at some point it will need to take in more gasoline, oil, and replacement parts. We could call these natural graces – all that God has put around us to allow us to take in whatever we need to continue functioning as we were intended to. When the car comes to a body of water, it needs to go over a bridge, to be taken onto a ferry, or train, or airplane. At this point, it is being lifted up above its normal plane of operation, and it is brought further ahead in its itinerary. We could call these supernatural graces, because they lift us up above obstacles and limits that we normally cannot transcend by our own resources or by our nature and design.

Finally, just as it's possible to make changes to a car that would totally transform it and allow it to exceed the capability of its original design; so too we can receive from God inner transformation that make us capable of reaching goals that were quite unreachable before, such as flying or navigating on water. These could be called extraordinary graces. Now this analogy is not perfect, because in fact we already have both a natural or human life and a supernatural or divine life, into which God introduced us at Baptism. In the course of our life, we come to innumerable opportunities for transformation as we come up against the events of life – both the joyful and the painful. You can begin to see how we could benefit from reflecting on how we receive these resources or natural graces, uplifting conveyances or supernatural graces, and transformations or extraordinary graces. On the surface, we could be talking about getting a job, getting sick and recovering, finding a spouse, learning to exercise, having a breakdown and undergoing therapy, having a vacation, going on a retreat, receiving sacraments, reading the Bible, gaining/losing a friendship, experiencing the death of a loved one, going to school, volunteering at church, being touched by others, being moved by an experience of giving of ourselves, and any number of other human experiences.

What makes it a grace? At some point on our part there is a decision not to consider everything that happens as a coincidence and not to look at life and the world as a hopelessly muddled mess of random occurrences. In other words, at some point we need to have some kind of personal or real connection with God, or realize that God has connected with us/me. That is how it all begins. Then through the lens of what it was like for me to experience that connection, with all its subsequent effects, I can begin to recognize other connections from God. Like in the example of the car, what I am conscious of receiving or experiencing can be natural and be part of my ordinary living and functioning. What makes it a grace may be the realization that I could not myself produce what I need and that even for the simplest thing I depend on others, or that it came to me more easily with the help of others.

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Other times, something comes to us that is completely beyond our ability to get for ourselves, but it comes anyway in a manner that simply cannot be explained. At this level, God likes to use other people to intentionally or unwittingly deliver the “care package” to us. This is also the domain of public and private miracles, or simply put, effects that cannot be readily explained as to their origin or manner of operation: healing, reshaping of our mind or strongly held views or opinions and prejudices, change of heart, “coincidences” that are so extraordinarily improbable that they can only be called “God-incidences”, and so on. At this level, we also have inner experiences of God that produce in us the very same effects as in our relationships with living, breathing, visible human beings with whom we relate in the world; only the effects come after opening ourselves to God and awaiting an answer. We find God behaving as a real person. The unexpected answer is even more startling.

The sharpness of these impressions of God's real presence, power, love and intervention in our lives varies in accord with the makeup of each person – including the use of all our senses and faculties: physical sensations (on the skin, sights, sounds, inner “gut” sensations, tastes, smells, feelings of pressure or heat, and so on) thoughts, memories, imagination, intuitions, dreams, day dreams or visions, and so on. Some of these experiences seem to be more impressive than others, but their value has nothing to do with their dramatic quality, but rather with the effect they have on us. The bottom line on God's part is that He wants to communicate with us and has the autonomy and authority to choose whatever means He pleases and for whatever motives are his. The lives of the saints show that God seems to prefer to use the ordinary events of life in order to leave particular impressions on us, or to nudge us in the direction we need to go in order to get closer to Him. On our part, the bottom line is that because of the nature of the experience, we are left with the impression or conviction that it is God who has just connected with us.

Finally, there is the category of experiences that transform us to the very depths of our being. God is pleased to use anything and everything to bring about in us all the transformation we need in order to become capable of entertaining his presence and accepting his love; since we have a short time on earth in order to prepare for the onslaught of God's love in heaven, which will last for all eternity. If we can't stand the heat of God's love, then how will we ever accept or want to be in heaven with Him for eternity? As you can see, the stakes are very high from our point of view, and because God is a loving Father, the stakes are very high for Him too – He deeply wants for us to be ready to accept the intense fire of love which He is in Jesus with the Holy Spirit, and for which He has created us with a capacity to receive, to give, and to grow.

So, as you get into this exercise of reflecting, remembering, and recording your “sacred history” with God, look upon it as a kind of pilgrimage – wandering into what may at first be the unfamiliar landscape of a life upon which you may not have reflected very deeply or very much as yet. No matter how familiar you are with reflection on God's action and grace in your life, there is always a lot more room for learning and growth. You can anticipate having the delight of coming to see how God has been consistently present to you all along.