Columns



The author looks at the sunrise over Ireland's County Wexford and the River Barrow in January 2022. (Kathryn Press)



by Kathryn Press

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The coffee mug in our kitchen reads: "Every day is a gift; that's why they call it the present." I think this saying would have made Jesuit Fr. Jean-Pierre de Caussade smile. In his book *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* (sometimes translated as *Abandonment to Divine Providence*), de Caussade challenges us to look for God in the ordinary, everyday events of life — indeed, to expect Him!

Seeing God in everyday life takes practice. It is a lens that colors what we see and how we see it. The key is to recognize that it's God who takes the initiative, not us. He is the giver of all good gifts and it is our job to recognize and receive them. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, this is the work of grace: "being looked upon by God, our being touched by his love."

The teacher in me likes categories. The theology teacher in me likes defining grace according to category: sanctifying and actual. (On the topic of grace, YOUCAT or an adult catechism published by your bishops' conference, will provide give detail beyond what I've written here.)

Sanctifying grace makes us children of God and sharers in his divine life. We see this especially clearly through the sacrament of baptism. That's good and beautiful and I'm thankful for it. But it's the *actual* graces that have captured my attention lately.

Actual graces are all those other ways God assists us in life. This kind of help is totally free and completely undeserved. It doesn't violate our free will. Categories for actual grace include:

- Sacramental grace (e.g., receiving the grace of forgiveness for my sins through the sacrament of reconciliation)
- Graces of state (e.g., graces given to parents for raising their children)
- Charisms (particular expressions of the Holy Spirit given for the good of the church).

There are other categories to describe actual graces that are less frequently discussed. In his Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius of Loyola counsels us to ask for a grace of retreat. If God is constantly giving us the help we need, St. Ignatius advises us to expect it and then look for it. There is also the grace of the office, which God gives to people in leadership roles, such as to the pope, or the leader of a country or religious congregation. The roles and responsibilities associated with leadership are many and human capabilities are limited. With their openness, God gives those in authoritative positions help beyond their capacity.

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Without wishing to sound heretical, I propose an additional kind of actual grace: grace of place. Are there physical, geographic locations we find ourselves where, when we are open to them, God gives us an outpouring of divine assistance?

When the Israelites wandered through the desert for 40 years, they received manna daily until they reached the Promised Land. Sounds like a grace of place. Surely St. Joseph experienced this grace when the Holy Family fled Nazareth to Egypt. He would have had to have found work to support Mary and Jesus during their time there, a kind of divine assistance unique to that place in his life.

As a young girl, Edel Quinn wanted to join the Poor Clares. When poor health made this impossible, God called this young Irish missionary to serve as an ambassador for the Legion of Mary. She gave her whole heart to the people of East Africa and is buried in Kenya. Grace of place. Mother Teresa writes about teaching in the Loreto convent in Kolkata and how her heart yearned to be with the poor in the slums just outside her door. Her call within a call was a grace of place. The shanties and hovels were holy ground for her. It's where God longed to meet her and she God.

Two years ago I returned to Ireland as a missionary. Moving and changing ministries in the middle of a pandemic had its challenges. When I look back on this time, I'm struck by how many graces God has given me and I name them as graces of this place.

I don't especially like meeting new people or talking to strangers. Making small talk doesn't come easily to me. In Ireland God gives me the grace of joy in the encounter. I like knowing what I’m doing and doing it well. The grace of place for me is the freedom to be in the present moment. I like planning, punctuality, and efficiency. Here God gives me flexibility and peace.

For each of my natural desires or preferences, God has given me a strength beyond. (I know, because I've tried on my own faculties!) The graces he's given me these past two years seem more tangible than ever before. Maybe they'll last and become habitual graces. Maybe they won't. Either way, I'm thankful.

St. Patrick tells us in his Confession how the voice of the Irish people came to him in a dream and begged him to "walk again among us." He writes, "Where did such a

great and life-giving gift come from then, to know and love God, even at the cost of leaving homeland and parents?" It was a grace of place!

Where and when has God given you the grace of place?