

All about Grace

St. Catherine Labouré and the Miraculous Medal

Grace is not a strange, magic substance which is subtly filtered into our souls to act as a kind of spiritual penicillin. Grace is unity, oneness within ourselves, oneness with God.

—*Thomas Merton*

Meeting the Miraculous Medal

Admiring the shiny, oval medal around my friend's neck, I commented on how pretty I found this delicate, unique piece of jewelry. Chuckling, with a soft kindness, without an air of condescension, she removed the emblem for what I thought was an opportunity to give me a closer look. I rubbed my fingers over the raised image of Mary on front of the medal, contemplating the numerous rays emulating from her fingers, then flipping it over to ponder the meaning of the "t" sitting atop an "M," both resting upon two hearts. "This," my friend finally interjected into the silence, "is a Miraculous Medal, and I want you to have it." Although I tried to refuse it and hand the medal back, she shook her head, insisting she was merely following the promptings of the Holy Spirit. She told me when I got home to look up the story, the promises, and the blessings that came with wearing a Miraculous Medal, which of course I did, and now some twenty years later, there is always one around my neck. Interestingly, years later, I would do

the same when questioned about the medal—feel the nudge of the Holy Spirit to pass that original medal to another seeking to know the abundance of God’s grace.

The Trouble with Unused Gifts

One Christmas, my sister gave me a Wii Fit. At first, I was a wee bit angry because maintaining a healthy weight and exercising have been a lifelong struggle for me. My immediate reaction to the gift was to be insulted and to make a secret vow never to use it. As I received and opened the present I honestly never intended to use, I thought, *How dare she point out where I need to make a change in my life?*

After she left, I shoved the console and all its accoutrements into the closet. Soon after, I learned that my mother’s type 2 diabetes now required daily insulin shots. At the same time, my father, who had had his first heart attack at thirty-four and a heart transplant at fifty-five, began a new battle with congestive heart failure. Both of my parents’ conditions, which can be inherited, are also conditions that studies show can be avoided by maintaining proper diet and exercise—exercise, like that encouraged by the fun and low-impact Wii Fit my sweet baby sister had just gifted me!

I realized that my sister’s gift had nothing to do with physical appearance. She was not commenting on my size or shape. Her gift came solely from a place of deep and abiding love for me. The gift was meant to give me a fighting chance at a full, wonderful life courtesy of a strong, healthy, and (hopefully) disease-free inside!

I misunderstood the intentions of God and his gift of grace in my life as well. I automatically assumed that the commandments, the “rules and regulations” of the Catholic faith, and the idea that God has a plan for my life were in place to tell me what to do. These “gifts” felt oppressive to me, and I failed to see God’s compassion within them. As with my misinterpretation of my sister’s gift, pride was blinding me from seeing the desire for my well-being overflowing in each of God’s gifts. God bestows faith, mercy, and especially grace generously on us, without cost, for one simple reason: “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8).

Everything God asks of us is ordered toward our good, our salvation, and his desire to have us in heaven with him forever. His gifts provide us the means to have strong, healthy, and virtuous insides. His

gifts are soul food, and we can consume as much of them as we want and never worry about becoming too, let's say, fluffy. But for these magnificent graces to be useful in our lives, we need to be willing to receive, open, and use them. God is never outdone in his generosity. We are the fool-hearted who neglect to embrace all he has for us.

The Blessed Mother appeared to St. Catherine Labouré and described the various elements of the “Miraculous Medal” image. The rays emanating from Mary's hands, which Catherine described as brilliant and dazzling, according to the Blessed Mother, “symbolize the graces I shed upon those who ask for them. The gems from which rays do not fall are the graces for which souls forget to ask.”¹ Imagine all that abundant grace, as symbolized by the illuminated rays from her hands, available from God for all people, unused by a world in such need of it; this extraordinary gift languishing because people fail to see their great need for it.

God's grace is freely given, a total bargain—since when did we stop loving a bargain? Yet the world disregards this generous gift, unaware of the goodness behind its offering, much as I first did with the Christmas Wii!

Finding Faith

After only a year in the Bible study group, God's grace opened my heart to hear his calling our family to adoption. After years of discerning continually in prayer if or how to expand our family, I began to feel a strong call to the idea of adoption. Although I had become pregnant four times, the two pregnancies between the births of my sons were a near-fatal ectopic pregnancy and then a miscarriage. Although we were open to life and to God's will, I was nervous about another pregnancy.

I'd not thought of adoption since the day in eighth grade nearly thirty years earlier, when, after falling in love with ASL, I ran into the kitchen to announce to my mother my desire to have a child that was deaf. Aware of genetics and even how morose a wish to give birth to a child with a hearing loss of any kind, the idea of adoption began to kindle in my heart. Now, as the adoption issue resurfaced in my mind, my mother reminded me of this childhood wish, and these seemingly crazy desires of my youthful heart began to seem like finding that

missing piece of a thousand-piece puzzle. As Psalm 37:4 reminded me, “Take delight in the Lord, / and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

Each day I prayed (okay, begged) for clarity on things like where we should adopt from, how would I know which child to choose, and where we would ever find the money. I wasn’t at all sure I wanted an infant—while babies themselves are adorable, I was approaching forty and had considerable reluctance to plunge back into infant care with all the diapers, bottles, and sleepless nights.

The more I prayed for clarity and direction, the more the Holy Spirit filled my heart with joy at the idea of adopting a child who was not an infant and most likely would not be able to hear. Following this nudge of the Spirit, my sons and I began taking ASL classes. We had nothing to lose in following this inspiration. In the end, if I had heard correctly, this step of faith would glorify God; if I were wrong, the boys and I would have learned a beautiful language and filled those long two years of waiting with something fun and valuable.

A year into the adoption process, we received a call from the adoption agency informing us they believed they’d found the perfect match for our family—a three-year-old, sweet little girl who was deaf. Due to her deafness, she was living in a foster home rather than an orphanage, in China. The thought of adopting from China—a communist country literally half the world away (which meant a very long flight for this not-so-brave passenger) instilled acute anxiety in me. And yet we could not ignore the many signs that this petrifying adventure was part of a plan God had placed before us.

Even our choice of adoption agency had been carefully orchestrated by God’s loving hand. In February 2007, at the time we were considering starting the adoption process, I was running a preschool program in my home. On Friday at pick-up, a parent who had just completed an amazing adoption from Kazakhstan got my attention before leaving with her child. She said, “You are going to think I’m crazy, but I feel like I’m supposed to tell you to consider China Adoption with Love (CAWLI).” She knew our family had begun praying about the possibility of starting our own adoption journey.

The next day, my husband, Kevin, and I spent the day at a team-building meeting. After sharing our crazy high school romance and our journey from being near atheists to a solid Catholic family, we

mentioned that we were now considering the possibility of adoption. One of the other team members came up to us and said, “You need to contact CAWLI. It is adoption for dummies. You’ll love how easy they make it.” I hadn’t told him about my conversation with the preschool mom or that we were even considering China.

On Sunday, while I was helping with our church’s youth choir, God gave me one more undeniable sign. Excited by the previous two days’ signs, I shared with three young Chinese American sisters the possibility of our adopting from China. That evening, one of them emailed that they’d been hired to play their Chinese dulcimers (stringed instruments) at an adoption agency fundraiser. Want to guess which agency? Yes, CAWLI again—and I hadn’t mentioned the name of the agency to them!

Kevin and I discussed all the complications an international adoption could entail: large travel and adoption costs, our fear of flying, leaving our boys behind for more than two weeks, and the uncertainty of visiting a communist country. Yet we felt called to follow this path, so we registered with CAWLI. After sixteen months, they reached out to us about a three- (nearly four-) year-old girl in need of a home. Although she was much older than I had anticipated, the minute I saw the photograph of her sweet little face, which oddly resembled my younger sons’, I knew she was the child God chose for our family. Now, we had to prepare ourselves for the reality of traveling halfway around the world to China. Funny how grace veiled certain facts, such as that travel would include a total of six flights, three on Chinese airlines! If I had spent any time contemplating the logistics of how we would get this child home, I am not sure I could have followed through with it. I appreciate the grace sufficient in the moment that God promises and clearly delivers!

A Little Miracle in China

On the morning before we finally met Wu Feng Hua (aka Faithy), I woke up with a red, swollen, and terribly painful stye in my eye. I’d never had one before but knew these things don’t get better on their own. Panic began to settle in as it worsened throughout the day. As you can imagine, I was nervous about visiting a Chinese doctor since it was the middle of the swine flu epidemic but wanted to get better

so I could meet Faithy the following day. My thought all day: *Blessed Mother, I need a miracle*. I didn't have time to be unwell, nor did I feel comfortable seeing a doctor in China; I just wanted to focus on being with my new daughter. Trusting in the power of prayer and the promised graces of the Miraculous Medal, I got on my knees and prayed, confident Mary would help me. I put the medal against my eye—the oval shape fit perfectly—and prayed for intercession and healing, closing with a Memorare and a Hail Mary. Within an hour, my eye was healed!

Grace Abounds for All of Us

Each of us has desires that God longs to fulfill for us. Some are so minute they are fulfilled without our ever recognizing that grace played a role. Sometimes he plants the idea in our hearts early in our lives, like my desire to adopt a child. Other times he works through circumstances to lead us along the right path.

The path God had in mind for us sent us on a mission that took us across a continent and an ocean; your mission is just as important, even if it takes you no further than your kitchen table. Either way, it takes courage to seek and to find the Lord's will for our lives. If your heart is open to what he asks, I can guarantee that God will send you all the graces you need to fulfill his plan for you!

But how do we know when a desire is God's guiding hand and when it is simply something we want for ourselves? How do we know when something is God's will—and when it is our own? How do we discern the Holy Spirit's nudges in our hearts and not confuse them with our will and desires? How do we truly "take delight in the Lord" so that he may "give [us] the desires of [our] heart" (Ps 37:4)? Simply—yet not always so easily—we do so by accepting the gifts of grace that are abundantly and readily available. By participating in the sacraments, spending time with scripture, and communicating with God in prayer, we open the wellspring of graces necessary for navigating this life.

Sacramentals, such as holy cards and medals, can be powerful aids to receiving holy light shining within us to show us the right path. For me, the floodgates of grace opened when I discovered the promises of the Miraculous Medal. Mary's explanation of the dark and light

rays² awakened in me a desire to never leave grace unclaimed. Every time I look at my little girl, I am reminded of the power of grace and shudder to think of what our family would have missed without her coming into our lives. And what might have become of Faithy, who faced so many challenges (more on those later), had we not obeyed those promptings of the Spirit?

The most important thing is to *place yourself regularly in God's presence* and ask him to show you his plan. Spend time with Jesus in the Word of God and in his eucharistic presence, as did St. Catherine Labouré, whose Miraculous Medal has been a source of great comfort and inspiration to me on my spiritual journey. According to St. Catherine:

Whenever I go to the chapel, I put myself in the presence of our good Lord, and I say to Him, "Lord, here I am. Tell me what You would have me do." If he gives me some task, I am content and I thank Him. If he gives me nothing, I still thank Him since I do not deserve to receive anything more than that. And then, I tell God everything that is in my heart. I tell Him about my pains and my joys, and then I listen. If you listen, God will also speak to you, for with the good Lord, you have to both speak and listen. God always speaks to you when you approach Him plainly and simply.³



St. Catherine Labouré

Catherine Labouré, known to her family as Zoé, was born in Burgundy, France, on May 2, 1806. Tragically, her mother died when she was only nine years old. Following the funeral, Catherine retired to her room, climbed upon a chair, carefully removed the statue of the Blessed Mother from the wall, kissed it, and said: "Now, dear Lady, you are to be my mother."⁴

A dream of St. Vincent de Paul affirmed her desire to enter religious life. Catherine began her novitiate with the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul on April 21, 1830, at their convent

in Paris, and on January 30, 1831, she took her vows. It was in this convent that Catherine would experience two Marian apparitions.

On the night of July 18, 1830, a beautiful child, dressed in white and emanating heavenly light, awakened Catherine Labouré from her sleep with the words “Sister, sister, sister.” She followed the child to the chapel, where all the candles were lit, as if for midnight Mass. Catherine saw a beautiful woman walk in and sit on the chair used by the director of the community. Catherine reported, “I went closer and, throwing myself on my knees, rested my hands on the knees of the Blessed Virgin. At that instant, I tasted the sweetest joy of my life—a delight beyond expression.”⁵

In addition to the rays radiating from “Mary’s jeweled fingers,” Catherine saw an oval appear around the Blessed Mother, with the words “O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.” The word *recourse* can be defined as “a source of help in a difficult situation” as well as “a turning to someone or something for help or protection”; both meanings illuminate the type of relationship Mary longs to have with us—all rooted firmly in the abundant grace of God.

On the reverse side of the medal shown to Catherine in the apparition, was a letter M intersected at the top with a cross and a bar (representing the altars of the world). Underneath was the Sacred Heart of Jesus crowned with thorns and the Immaculate Heart of Mary pierced by a sword. Twelve stars surrounded the entire image. The interweaving of Mary’s initial and the cross shows Mary’s part in our salvation and her role as Mother of the Church. The twelve stars signify the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles, who represent the entire Church as it surrounds Mary. They also recall the vision of St. John, writer of the Book of Revelation, in which “a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (12:1, NABRE).⁶

The Miraculous Medal

I knew nothing. I was nothing. For this reason God
picked me out.

—St. Catherine Labouré

Mary instructed Catherine to have a medal made according to this model presented in the apparition. Catherine heard Mary say to her, “Everyone who wears it around their neck will receive great graces. Graces will be abundant for those who have confidence.” After the medal was fabricated and distributed, many miracles began to be attributed to the graces Mary promised, and the medal, first referred to as the Medal of the Immaculate Conception and the Medal of Our Lady of Graces, would eventually become known as the Miraculous Medal.

The Miraculous Medal is unique as the only medal whose design was provided to us by Mary, under the title of Our Lady of Grace, along with the promise of graces to be bestowed upon those who faithfully wear it.⁷

The Blessed Mother’s message to Catherine involved the abundant grace God had available and longed to share with his beloved adopted children. Where in your life could you use an outpouring of grace? In these moments, make a habit of repeating, as many times as you desire, the words engraved on the medal, “O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.” Boldly ask the Blessed Mother to bring your petitions to her Son and to give you the graces necessary to know, accept, and follow God’s will in whatever situations you have brought to her.



Adopting a More Tangible Faith

Growing in Grace with Scripture

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, “Abba, Father!” The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in

fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (Rom 8:14–17 NRSVCE)

Sitting on a hillside at a Christian music festival, in July 2007, surrounded by thousands of people, I flipped nervously through the pages of my Bible seeking affirmation for our recent decision to adopt from China. As a woman with acute anxiety, I found every aspect of adoption stressful and scary—beginning with where to adopt from and how to find the money; followed quickly by how, with my paralyzing fear of flying, I could possibly travel to China; and moving on to my overwhelming uncertainty regarding how to harmoniously assimilate her into our family and properly raise her given the language barriers. Adding to these worries all the insecurities and concerns I held about my parenting, given the missteps and mistakes I'd already made raising the boys, I questioned God's plan. How could I reconcile the desire and conviction I'd felt back in eighth grade with my adult uncertainty as to whether the grace of God could strengthen me to do what I dreamed?

The above scripture suddenly came into view, and as I read the words, peace enveloped my whole being. It was not I but God who would do all of it. By my own adoption into the Christian family, I could lean into the love of my Abba to accomplish whatever would be asked of me in this adoption, as well as in all the moments of my life. Whatever suffering might come would be nothing compared to the glory that awaits. God chose us to be this little girl's family, and through cooperation with all the graces he'd shower on us during the process and beyond, I would embrace and trust in his plan!

Uncovering Grace

1. Think back to all the gifts you've received in your life. Which have you treasured the most? Did they come for a special occasion when you were expecting a gift, or were they completely unexpected? How about gifts that, although well-meaning, remained unused? What lessons drawn from presents received can you apply to better accept God's many gifts?
2. Where in your life would you like to see a strengthening of grace? Is there a particular relationship or circumstance where you would like God to heal and strengthen you? How do sacramentals serve