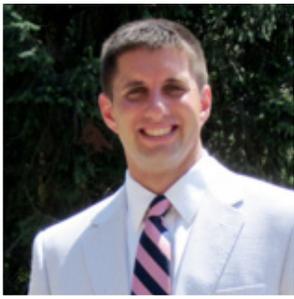


# THE FLOW OF GRACE

BY LEONARD DELORENZO

Sacred Heart Statue and Basilica  
of the Sacred Heart at Night



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As a single ring goes out from the bell tower into a warm, fading summer night, a young man—no older than 16—shifts ever so slightly in his seat. Outside, the palette of simmering pastels swirl sleepily in the western sky, as the daylight of this Tuesday in mid-July recedes over the horizon to draw strength for another day. Inside, this young man looks up from the middle of the fourth-to-last pew in Notre Dame’s Basilica of the Sacred Heart to see the people to his left rising. Hesitantly, he rises, too, and steps somewhat clumsily over the lowered kneelers toward the outer aisle of the nave. At the end of the pew, a college student—perhaps four years his elder—briefly and gingerly places her hand on the young man’s shoulder while he turns right to face the sanctuary. He is surrounded in front and behind by other young people his age, all of whom seem to move with an air of uncertainty not unlike his own. To his left are the many-colored stained glass images of saints who walked this way in days past, the speckles of daylight’s vestiges now dancing in their figures. Up above, layers of angels, stretched out as shapely instruments of praise, seem to float amidst the deep, celestial blue of a ceiling purposefully punctuated with a crisp array of stars. This young man is enveloped in an atmosphere that beckons him forward, as if onto a path prepared just for him. And though the stream of motion seems to go the way he begins to walk, his steps are his own.

**Where is he going?  
Where has he been?**

## Where he has been

Some months earlier, he received an invitation—likely from his parish priest, or youth minister, or campus minister, or even from a friend—to travel to the University of Notre Dame for a weeklong summer conference. He was told that *Notre Dame Vision* was “sort of like a retreat program, where college students help you grow in your faith and discover your gifts.” Not entirely sure how he felt about all that, he did know that several of his buddies were going and he liked Notre Dame football well enough, so he agreed to make the trip from Des Moines to South Bend the week after the Fourth of July.

When he arrived on campus 30 hours ago, he met his small group, which consisted of seven other high school students in his grade from all over the country: Spokane, Washington; Queens, New York; Brownsville, Texas; Santa Ana, California; Fairfield, Connecticut; Toledo, Ohio; and Biloxi, Mississippi. There were also two Notre Dame students who would be the group’s “Mentors-in-Faith” for the week. The patron saints of his group were Catherine of Siena and Juan Diego, whose images were on his and his group members’ nametags, as well as on three-foot poster boards his Mentors held in their hands.

After dinner and some icebreakers, he found himself in an auditorium with more than 360 high school students and 70 college Mentors. Together, they heard about “God’s Call for Us” and were invited to enter into this week—and their whole lives even—by bringing everything together, all parts of themselves, and asking Christ to be present in the midst of what might seem like a storm: the storm of a reintegrating life. He went to bed with the names from the Litany of Saints still echoing in his ears, the last words spoken on a long day of travel and orientation.

When he awoke this morning, he rejoined the group for morning prayer. In the first session of the day, he heard that every saint reveals how a specific, ordinary life can become holy because *Jesus himself drew near and walked with them* (Luke 24:15). Each saint is a witness to the truth that *this* particular life and *that* particular life were acceptable to God, whom the saints themselves accepted as their *own portion* (Psalm 119:57). With his group members, he shared what was going on in his life, listened to what was going on in theirs, and prayed—perhaps only half-heartedly—that the Lord Jesus would “draw near to us, now and always.” He learned that this is the basis of the “Call to Discipleship.”

Just a few hours before finding himself in the Basilica, he and the other 360 teenagers entered into an exploration of the “Call to Conversion.” The first image presented in this session was of an adoring father who cranes his neck towards the horizon in search of his wayward son, and who, when catching sight of his son *while he was still a long way off... was filled with compassion, so he ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him* (Luke 15:20).

Next he listened to three of the college Mentors share their personal stories of “Grace, Sin, and Conversion,” witnessing to how they, like the saints before them, were struggling to accept the love of God but who all, through no merit of their own, were unmistakably touched at some point by the grace of forgiveness and healing that exceeds their imaginations. These are some of the very same Mentors who guffawed and galloped around the quad during icebreakers the day before, who listened attentively to him and the other high school students in small groups throughout the day, and who intentionally spread themselves out among the hundreds of teenagers similarly clad in summer attire. From them he heard how it is grace, not sin, which reveals who we really are. He heard

one of the Mentors, near the end of her story, declare, “I have cheated, but I am not a cheater.” Another Mentor talked about his liberation from the shame of a pattern of sinfulness that had once disordered his life on a daily basis, while the third narrated her conversion “from dissatisfaction to gratitude.”

With these faith-filled reflections fresh in mind, the young man retreated with the rest of his small group to perform his own examination of conscience. His Mentors shared a prepared guide with him, from which he was prompted to call upon the God *who searches me and knows me; who knows my resting and my rising; who discerns my purpose from afar; who created my inmost being; who knit me together in my mother’s womb; who can see if there is any evil way in me and who will lead me along the path to eternal life* (Psalm 139). In the quiet of his mind and heart, in the recesses of his soul and through the probing of his yearning spirit, he looked honestly upon himself. He began to claim his own past and personal history.

In the light of a flickering faith, he began to see all that he has been but should not have been, and all that he should have been but was not. He even glimpsed something of who he hopes to be, though he could not quite see how to become that person. He collected these thoughts, wrote them down, and carried them with him as he walked silently over to the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, where he would take his seat in the middle of the fourth-to-last pew in the nave.

## Where he is going

Neither the people in front of or behind him can see it, but there is a weight he carries as he steps up the side aisle towards the sanctuary—the weight of falsehood. He carries the stories he told himself about himself that restrict who he is to single regrettable events, to feelings of unworthiness, to seemingly unbreakable habits. Slanted stories that others have told him about himself weigh heavy upon his heart: stories about how he is not good enough, smart enough, talented enough. He remembers himself according to his achievements and his failures, as if who he is were about what he could or could not do—as if he were of the species human *doing* rather than human *being*. At one time or another, he has taken these stories as true, though deep down he knew them to be false. He has given himself over to these stories and thus limited the radical profundity of who he most basically is.

The perpetual acceptance of these untrue stories is how Dante described the misery of the *Inferno*. The breaking out from this centripetal pull into the new life of an undetermined future is how Søren Kierkegaard imagined forgiveness in *Works of Love* and what Desmond Tutu testified to in *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Opening up to the grace that moves us out of our delimiting self-defining narratives is how C.S. Lewis separates the pitiable Napoleon Bonaparte from the purgative pilgrim in *The Great Divorce*, as well as Uncle Andrew from Digory and Polly in *The Magician’s Nephew*. The choice to believe in a love that is greater than all our attempts to resist it is what permeates the moment in which this young man now abides. It is a moment touching radical freedom.

The steps he is taking are steps out of those suffocating pseudo-narratives. Tonight is not about sin; it is about freedom. This Reconciliation Service is not so much about the past as it is about the future—or, more precisely, it is about claiming a past and allowing it to be opened up into an unlimited future. After all, what is a state of unforgiven sin but a kind of death, a paralysis, a locked cell from which there is no outward movement. To remain in unforgiveness is to be one who only has a past, a past which is interpreted by something else, by someone else, by some narrative about who you are that reduces you to something you have done, some way you have been, some trespass you have committed. To be in

need of forgiveness but not to receive it—or, more likely, not to accept it—is to be closed to “what-may-be” because of “what-has-been.” The steps this young man takes now are the steps of one who truly, albeit imperfectly, seeks to reclaim his past as his own and gain a future that is open to new interpretation by passing through the portal of healing, redeeming love.

As he passes the altar and ascends the steps to the apse, the choir in the loft above concludes Bernadette Farrell’s *Restless is the Heart* and a pregnant silence starts its descent from above. The echoes of the song’s last line are now settling upon the floor:

...all the earth shall remember and  
return to our God.



Another college Mentor directs the young man forward to the first side chapel, in which he can already see the bronze statue of the Return of the Prodigal Son, who has collapsed into the arms of a father that gazes adoringly upon his long lost love. In the space of these final protracted steps, a new song emerges from a soprano’s voice—a *cappella*—providing the last words he will hear before settling into the quiet of the confessional:



You are all I am not,  
You are all that I am.  
Break down these walls,  
Take all my brokenness,  
Rebuild me to shelter your name...



**Moving Toward the Cross,  
Notre Dame Vision Rite of Penance**

## Hope to Bring

The journey from the pew in the back of the Basilica; the journey of the last two days; the journey begun some months ago; the journey of his life to this point: all these journeys converge upon this place. It is quiet. Waiting for him is a man he does not know, wearing a white alb and draped with a purple stole. This is one of the score of Holy Cross priests who have been hearing the confessions of young men and women like this one for nearly two hours tonight. This priest is part of the congregation called to be “men with hope to bring” (*The Constitutions of the Congregation of the Holy Cross* 8.118). Is he ever more a hope-bearer than right now? Sitting before this young man who has traveled far, this Holy Cross priest embodies the trust of God and His Church to bring the hope of the Gospel even here, where the light of truth illumines the shadowy recesses of the human heart.

For most of his life, this young man’s religious imagination formed around the image of a distant “God,” a figment whom Christian Smith once

described as a “Divine Butler” or “Cosmic Therapist” (*Soul Searching*, 165). This “God” was neither interested, nor invested, nor accessible. He was somewhere out there, out of sight and, for the most part, out of mind. As Simone Weil rightly admitted, “The infinity of space and time separates us from God. How are we to seek for him? How are we to go toward him? ... We are incapable of progressing vertically. We cannot take a step towards heaven (“The Love of God and Affliction” in *Waiting for God*, 79).” This “God” is out there. There was no way for this young man to get to Him.

But in this moment, there emerges the possibility of something different. What if there is a deeper, even more unlikely truth? Perhaps, God is right here. Perhaps this is the occasion for a long-desired heart-to-heart. Perhaps the actuality of this moment—a human encounter: gestures, words, communication—really *is* the visible sign of an invisible reality. Maybe He is not a distant God after all. Maybe “God crosses the universe and comes to us... [and] over the infinity of space and time, the infinitely more infinite love of God comes to possess us” (Weil 79).

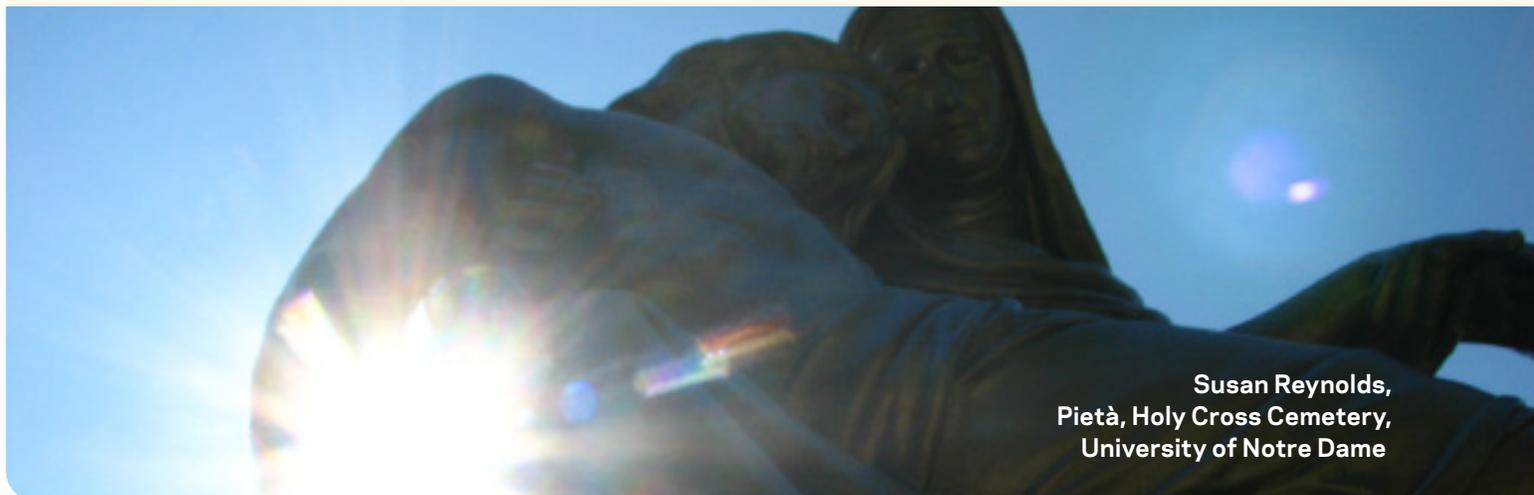
What if God really is the One whose transcendent Love was emptied into our humanity; who accepted all that we are and redeemed us for all we were not; who suffered, died, and was buried; who even descended into hell, which imprisons all those who are locked in false stories, self-deceptions, and prideful rebellions? If this Love entered even into hell, then even in our waywardness—in the extremity of our corruption and self-alienation—we are outflanked, as it were, by the Love of God. We are never outside of His reach to *restore [us] to health and heal [our] wounds* (Jeremiah 30:17). And no matter how lost or unsure or unworthy he may think himself to be, this young man, too, is firmly *within the wings of God’s embrace* (Psalm 91:4).

The young man's presence here makes manifest his choice to risk believing in a Love that is greater than all his attempts to resist it. It is a moment touching radical freedom. As he begins to speak, his freedom becomes real.

What the young man says and how he says it—these things are not known. The weight of sin, the tinges of regret, and the sharpness of shame were all welcome to enter with him here, but they are not bidden passage to leave.

- This confessional is a tomb, where sins are laid to rest and the soul of this burdened one is quickened to new life in Christ.
- This is where contrition—even if imperfect—is at least the seed of a willingness to pierce through the enclosing stories he has told himself about himself, stories based in sins, fears, and falsehoods.
- This is where confession is the beginning of a new story, where history truly does become prelude and the pages of future chapters await verses written in creativity and freedom.
- This is where absolution seals the tomb upon sin, where the God who exceeds his imagination *will swallow up death for all time* (Isaiah 25:8).
- This, at last, is the place from which penance will begin as the first fledgling steps of that new life, a life lived in response to He who sweetly commands him to *rise and do not be afraid* (Matthew 17:8), who says that I *delight in you* (Isaiah 62:4) and who Himself confesses that *you are precious in My eyes and glorious, and I love you* (Isaiah 43:4).

The tomb is closed and will soon be empty.



Susan Reynolds,  
Pietà, Holy Cross Cemetery,  
University of Notre Dame

What does God do with those sins, the ones left behind in the tomb of this confessional? The marks of the sins remain and are transformed, but the sinning itself, where does it go? Maybe it is like the darkness of a cloistered room that is suddenly illumined when the curtains are swiftly drawn. It would not be enough, though, to imagine the curtains being removed—the roof itself would be raised, the

walls whisked away, and the room made completely naked to the resplendent rays of light. What did the light do with the darkness? It seems a silly question when put like that. *Where, O death, is your sting* (1 Corinthians 15:55)?

For this young man, the light now dawns upon the dark places. And hope is rekindled. And a future is born.

## Flow of Grace

He rises now for the second time this night. He looks up to see the path he traveled; he begins his journey back. Slowly, pensively he makes his steps towards the stairs, passing by the Mentor who was the last person he saw before the mysterious silence, and then turns left towards the center aisle. These steps are not of one who trudges but of one who is beginning to stride, for he has the hope (*Constitution* 8.122).

While he walks up the center aisle, the few remaining young people who had been sitting behind him are now themselves walking down the outer aisle—two stages of the journey home. Those angels drifting in the stars above see this young man moving within the flow of grace, though they know all too well that this dance requires his willful steps.

As he nears the last pews in the nave, three rings go out from the bell tower high above. In the span of two rings, how far has he traveled to meet the God that crossed infinity for him? Across measureless space, he walked back into the deepest, truest story about himself, the story into which he was once plunged and from which he was never really separated: he is Christ's, the beloved of God. This is the glorious weight he carries now as he turns that last corner into the fourth-to-last pew and begins to slide across the polished wood.

Tomorrow he will join again with these hundreds of high school students and 70 college Mentors to explore his free response to this most basic story about himself. But right now, sitting in the middle of this pew, he rests. He is home.

