

Sanctifying grace is increased by receiving the sacraments worthily and performing good works. The sacraments are sources of grace in themselves, meaning they always confer grace when received with the proper dispositions. Our good works, too, – even the most ordinary – merit an eternal reward if we are in the state of grace and perform them for the love of God. In this case, we do not strictly speaking, “earn heaven,” because even our merits are free gifts of God’s grace (see CCC 2006–2011).

### The Catholic Church: Home of Grace

Jesus Christ is the source of all grace. By His death on the cross, He merited for us infinite graces—sufficient for the salvation of every human soul. But to share in Christ’s life of grace, we must be united to Him, as branches to a vine (cf. John 15:5). For this purpose, Christ founded the Catholic Church to serve as a visible extension of His saving presence across time and space. Christ entrusted all the means of grace He won for us to the Catholic Church: the truth of Divine Revelation, the seven sacraments, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass—in short, everything we need to get to Heaven.

In truth, there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church. All who possess sanctifying grace are united to the Catholic Church, even if they are not Catholic and through no fault of their own do not know that the Catholic Church is the true Church of Christ. However, we should not overlook the difficulties of gaining and preserving sanctifying grace without being an actual member of the Catholic Church. These souls do not have the immense advantage of an infallible Church to instruct them in faith and morals, Confession to so easily foster hope and repentance, the Holy Eucharist to strengthen charity, and so many other means of grace abundantly available to Catholics. If we are Catholic, this should fill us with gratitude for the immense blessing of being a member of the one, true Church of Christ. If we are not Catholic, this should prompt us to seriously study the claims of the Catholic Church, to pray for divine light in discovering the truth, and to be ready to follow the inspirations of God’s grace wherever they lead us.

### Conclusion: “Am I saved?”

According to Catholic teaching, an equivalent question is, “Do I possess sanctifying grace?” If so, I am indeed on the path to Heaven and will be saved if I die in this state. If not, I am in danger of hell and will in fact be damned if I die without sanctifying grace. While this may sound overly simplistic, we must remember that possessing sanctifying grace means that we believe in God and all He has revealed, have hope in Him for our salvation, and love Him above all things. To love God above all things means to follow His commandments and repent of all mortal sins, by which we turned from God to love something else (e.g., comfort,

pleasure) above Him. Furthermore, none of this is possible without actual grace, the special help God provides us.

We can never be *absolutely* certain that we do in fact possess sanctifying grace, for God alone is our judge. However, we can have a high degree of *practical* certainty of possessing sanctifying grace if we are baptized, not conscious of unrepentant mortal sin, faithful to prayer, frequently receiving the Sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist, and striving to do God’s will in all things.

The entire Catholic life can be summed up in one word: grace. Let us make this most precious gift of God a chief concern of our life, and thereby secure a happy eternity! “For what shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his soul?” (Mark 8:36)

“Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls.” (1 Peter 1:8–9)

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# Am I Saved?

## The Catholic Doctrine of Grace



## Introduction

“Will I go to Heaven when I die?” The Catholic Church teaches that the answer ultimately comes down to a single question: at the moment of death, does my soul possess sanctifying grace? If the answer is yes, I am assured of being with God in perfect happiness forever. If the answer is no, I will suffer a miserable eternity separated from God in hell. The logical conclusion is that sanctifying grace is the most precious thing we can possibly possess, for without it we cannot attain the everlasting happiness of Heaven.

## What is Sanctifying Grace?

*Sanctifying grace* is a free gift of God’s love that confers on our souls a share in His own life, and *supernatural* friendship with Him. This friendship with God is called supernatural because it is beyond anything we could ever achieve by our natural power. Sanctifying grace makes us holy and pleasing to God, for by sharing in God’s life we become like Him and reflect His own goodness more deeply. By it, God enters our soul, making us His own adopted children and temples of the Holy Spirit. It clothes the soul with faith, hope, and charity (love), which we call, “the theological virtues.” With it, God gives us also the gifts of the Holy Spirit, making us docile to the promptings of God, that we might do good works for the love of God. It is easy to see why a soul possessing sanctifying grace, commonly referred to as “in the state of grace,” is on the path to Heaven. The soul in grace is assured of Heaven (if necessary, after some purification in purgatory) if at death it returns to God in this state.

## The Bad News: Life Apart from Grace

When we look around us, it is very apparent that we live in a broken, fallen world. How did this come to be? This was not God’s original plan. When God created Adam and Eve, our first parents, He endowed them with sanctifying grace and many other gifts. Unfortunately, Adam disobeyed God and forfeited these gifts, not just for himself, but—as the head of the human race—for his descendants as well. As a result of this *original sin*, we are all born into the world without sanctifying grace. Thankfully, in God’s mercy, He sent us His Divine Son Jesus to redeem us from sin and reopen for us the life of grace forfeited by Adam’s sin. By His suffering and death on the cross, Jesus offered God the Father a sacrifice of infinite value, making perfect satisfaction for our sins and winning for us all the graces we need to reach Heaven.

## How is Sanctifying Grace Obtained?

Sanctifying grace is gained through faith at Baptism, “the sacrament of faith” (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [“CCC”] 1236, 1253). Through the Sacrament of Baptism, both original sin (the deprivation of sanctifying grace, inherited from Adam) and actual sin (the guilt of sins we

have committed ourselves) are washed away, and we become children of God and heirs of heaven. Sanctifying grace, once obtained, is a habitual quality that remains abiding in the soul unless driven out by serious sin.

## Can Sanctifying Grace Be Lost?

Yes, sanctifying grace is lost through every mortal sin. Mortal sin is a serious violation of God’s law done with full knowledge of its gravity and full consent of the will (CCC 1857). Grave sins cause grave harm. Some examples include missing Mass on a Sunday or Holy Day of Obligation without a serious reason (for Catholics), sexual activity outside of marriage, using artificial contraception, intentionally getting drunk, or willful outbursts of hatred, to list a few. As its name implies, mortal sin kills the life of sanctifying grace in the soul; the two cannot coexist. We can see why mortal sin makes us deserving of hell when we consider that by it we fundamentally reject God and prefer something inferior to Him (CCC 1855). Venial sins, or lesser violations of God’s law, do not deprive us of sanctifying grace but still harm us by making us less fervent in the service of God and more disposed to commit mortal sin (CCC 1863).

## Regaining Sanctifying Grace

If we have the misfortune to commit a mortal sin, God does not abandon us. With His help, we can regain sanctifying grace through the Sacrament of Penance, also called Confession. When we confess our sins to an authorized Catholic priest, God forgives us and removes the guilt of the sins (cf. John 20:22-23). We must confess all mortal sins committed since our last good confession in kind (what the sin was) and number (approximately how many times we committed it). We also must be truly sorry with the firm purpose of not committing those sins again.

The best motive for being sorry for our sins is that they offend God, who is all-good and deserving of all our love. This is known as “perfect contrition.” Yet even sorrow based on fear of God’s punishments (known as “imperfect contrition”) is sufficient to receive forgiveness of our sins in the Sacrament of Penance. Nevertheless, perfect contrition has this great benefit—that it obtains the forgiveness of mortal sins and restores sanctifying grace immediately, even before reception of the Sacrament of Penance. We must still intend to go to Confession as soon as we can, but we are saved from hell if we die in the meantime. Therefore, if we ever commit a mortal sin, we should immediately beg God’s pardon, and ask for assistance in making an act of perfect contrition. This can be as simple as raising our hearts to God in pure love and praying sincerely: “O my God, help me to make an act of perfect contrition. I am truly sorry I ever offended You, because You are so good, and I love You above all things!”

It is important to note that, even if we have made an act of perfect contrition after committing a mortal sin, we may not receive Holy Communion until we actually go to Confession (CCC 1415).

## Preserving Sanctifying Grace

Nobody can acquire sanctifying grace, nor persevere for long in retaining it, without the special help of God. This special help of God is called *actual grace* because it enables us to perform acts conducive to our salvation. Unlike sanctifying grace, which *abides in the soul* as a stable quality, actual grace is a supernatural help of God *coming from without*, which enlightens our mind and strengthens our will to do good and avoid evil. Actual grace is *transient*, meaning it is temporary in character and given to us at distinct moments when God sees we need it. For example: an inspiration to pray during a moment of temptation, a desire to practice virtue when listening to a homily, or a deeper realization of the evil of sin when preparing for Confession. Because we have free will, we can choose whether to cooperate with or resist these graces. God in His goodness is constantly sending us actual graces. We should strive to always be on the lookout for them and accept them, since the more we cooperate with God’s grace, the more graces we will receive (cf. Matt 13:12).

Actual grace is absolutely necessary for our salvation. Without actual grace, we could never believe, hope, love, or repent as required to receive sanctifying grace in the first place (cf. *Council of Trent Session 6, Decree on Justification*, Canon 3). Similarly, the Church teaches that nobody can persevere in the state of sanctifying grace without the special help of God—i.e., without actual grace (Ibid., Canon 22). Sooner or later we would give in to mortal sin and lose sanctifying grace. Even those in mortal sin would be unable to repent without the assistance of actual grace.

There are many ways to obtain greater gifts of actual grace. The principal ways are prayer and the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist. We can also gain actual grace through good works and the many means offered by the Church, such as attending Mass, spiritual reading, and the devout use of sacramentals (e.g., holy water, the rosary, the scapular, the miraculous medal). Even illness and suffering can be the occasion of grace from God, if we endure it with Christian virtue. We should strive to view our entire life in the light of grace.

## Growing in Grace

The *state* of sanctifying grace is a binary condition of the soul: we either possess it or we do not. However, the *amount*, or *intensity*, of the sanctifying grace we possess can be increased. Our degree of glory in Heaven is determined by the intensity of the sanctifying grace we possess when we die.