"THEY SHALL NEVER PERISH"

A Good Afternoon to you and to each of my esteemed listeners! Welcome to EWTN's Open Line Tuesday edition! I'm Barbara McGuigan, alive and most grateful to be back with you after my two-week speaking trip to New Zealand and Australia. Thanks be to God and to your prayers, my time "down under" was very fruitful. I felt God's graces surrounding me as I witnessed to life and love. All is grace! God's airwaves are open and here are the numbers to call:

In North America call 1-800-585-9396

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Our email address is always Openline@ewtn.com

Yes, my brothers and sisters in Christ, all is grace! How else could we have such a strong desire to do God's perfect will? How else can we, especially the many young adults I had the privilege of speaking to and with, even begin to accept God's perfect plan for life and love – especially in a culture that buys the lie of moral relativism? How else could married couples embrace God's perfect plan for the marriage act and shun contraception, sterilization and in vitro fertilization?

It's by God's grace...all things in Christ Jesus.

I was so edified by the dear souls I providentially encountered! The Holy Spirit moves mightily and not surprisingly, when truth is being spoken. So it was not coincidental when I received Fr. John McHugh's meditation for the Fourth Sunday of Easter from the Gospel of St. John 10:27-30...all about the Good Shepherd. After seeing hillsides of sheep all over the New Zealand countryside, it was a grace for me to hear such a gospel. May I share with you some of Fr. McHugh's words? He entitled his sermon, "They shall never perish."

The Lord sends grace into our lives in all kinds of ways. Grace may come as a burst of light into your mind…as a surge of strength to your will that lifts you up beyond anything that, of yourself, you could do…as a searing realization: "what I did was shameful and wrong; I wish I had not acted that way." Grace may come in a way that moves and inspires as nothing else ever did.

In practice, however, grace touches us in and through ordinary things; we do not realize the Holy Spirit is acting on us at all. You tell someone, "You always do a good job."

He says, "I do? Well, I suppose I have to live with myself." Is he telling the whole truth? No. If he always does a good job that is because he is being touched by grace. We are a fallen race and we need grace even for those virtues that would seem to be mere natural things. A man who is always responsible, decent, wholesome, compassionate and

kind is within the realm of grace. We cannot put limits to the ways grace may come into our lives. Grace may come as the first gleam of dawn that breaks through the murky secular world in which we are, that lifts us up and inspires us. Grace may be a burst of lightning that terrifies us and knocks us down as it did to St Paul while he was still a persecutor of the Church and the Lord smashed into his life to say to him out of that blinding light: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

Every now and then, however, grace comes in such odd ways; we begin to think that the Lord has a divine sense of humor.

There was a man who lived on skid row. He was raised in a Catholic family, he went through twelve years of Catholic school. But, as the saying goes, he 'ran with a bad crowd' and . . . and. . . . you can fill in the rest of that miserable template for yourself. Now he is on skid row where he exists from day to day in the way those around him do: by begging, by stealing, by scrounging what he can get. A Fundamentalist preacher goes among them every now and then to pass out small copies of the New Testament. This man accepted his copy gladly, not because it was the New Testament but, because the paper was like tissue, very thin and ideal for rolling cigarettes. And that is what the man did. He used the pages of the New Testament to make his own cigarettes. In time he smoked his way through the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Luke. He had gone through nine chapters of the Gospel of John when his tobacco ran out. So he started to read what was left of his New Testament, beginning with this Chapter 10 from which we get our Gospel today. As he read about the Lord as the Good Shepherd, the words on the page became the instruments through which God touched him. His life rose before him, his wretched state of soul; in his misery he got up, made his way to the nearest church, sat in the back and he made an Act of Faith in the Real Presence. There, all alone, he sobbed out his soul before God as he kept saying, "God help me."

He broke out of the kind of life he had been living; he got his old job back because he had outstanding talent and they were glad to see him again. For the rest of his life he would take delight in standing before groups to introduce himself as

> ". . . the only man in the world who smoked his way through the Gospels and back into Faith and the grace of God.

Now let us look at this passage that made such an impact on the man on skid row.

My sheep hear my voice, I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish. No one shall snatch them out of my hand. . . .

Those who listened to the Lord were as familiar with sheep as you are familiar with cars and how to drive to work on the freeway. Sheep were part of the culture of the age as driving a car is part of ours. They knew all about sheep even if they themselves were not shepherds but, possibly, fishermen or farmers or officials or soldiers or housewives; they knew how sheep were cared for. Flocks would graze together during the day but

towards evening each shepherd would assemble his own sheep to lead them out to the shelter he had made. How, you might ask, did they separate their own sheep from all the rest? It was quite simple. The shepherd would stand up in the field, he would give his own special call or sing in an odd way, or he would whistle, all of which they still do in those countries where the Lord grew up. The shepherd's sheep would gather around and he would lead them to where he wanted them to go. When Jesus said,

. . . my sheep hear my voice . . .

those listening nodded their heads; they knew what he was talking about.

The Lord sees the glory He means you to come to, your glory. All through your life the Holy Spirit is forever sending you little bursts of light and strength, what the Catechism calls actual grace. These are God's programmings to bring you to that glory the Lord has in mind for you: your unique glory. And, once again, there is no way to describe in full how grace may enter our lives. God may act on us in quiet inspirations where we think, "I should do this" or "I should give that up."

Grace may come in moments of success or relief or comfort or joy in which we say,

"Thank God!"

God may send grace to us in moments of terror in which we cry out,

"Oh, no! Oh, no!"

The greatest graces often come in darkness, in agony, in pain where we have to struggle to believe in God at all. There is, literally and truly, nothing more important than to permit the Holy Spirit to touch us through what He sends into our heart and mind and soul, no matter how it comes. Ask the Lord every day that you will accept whatever grace He might send.

Jesus goes on, "I know them and they follow me."

This question may sound shocking: Can religion be unreal even when it is orthodox and sound, even when we say the Creed and receive the Sacraments or we are devout? Can religion still be unreal? .When is religion real? Religion is real when the Lord becomes Someone who looks, who calls, who loves, who says, "Come."

Up to then, our religion may be a lot of things we do, rituals we perform, a culture we were born into, a framework around our lives, in ideology, a movement or cause we are involved in. Religion can even become a weapon by which we discharge our self-hatred on those around, all in the name of God, you understand. Religion may be many things and some of them can be, and, in history, have been very strange and cruel indeed. God is one who looks, who calls, who loves, who says, "Come." Then – only then – is religion real.

When grace breaks through the overcast in which we live, everything becomes different. Providence comes into focus for what it is: the Lord knows what He is about. He is using everything to draw us to Himself. Providence is His Wisdom and Power and Love in our lives. This becomes real only as we let ourselves be touched by His grace through our good-will. If there is no surrender of our will to God we may hear the words

of Faith, we may even repeat them, but they are only words, nothing more . . . only words.

The Gospel goes on, "I give them eternal life." There are many lines and phrases in our Faith that we hardly ever advert to; we do not think on what they mean for ourselves. We stand every Sunday to proclaim that we are looking to. . ." life everlasting. Amen."

What comes on the screen of our imagination is an existence that … well … goes on and on and on forever and ever. Would you want that? No, of course not. The reality in the phrase is gloriously different: the "life everlasting" that the Church asks us to look forward to is Life with a capital L of which everything that can be called life in this world, vitality and health and friendship and reunion and joy and love, everything we call "life" is only a flicker. . Death is when we come into Life and this is what we stand to proclaim our hope in.

Jesus says, "I give them eternal life."

When will He do this? In the world to come, certainly, but even now we carry within us the first spark of that glory and this is what grace is: the seed of our glory. As grace takes hold, if it does, grace becomes a light within the mind; we become heavenly. All of this the first Christians were told in Letters that Saints Paul and Peter and John and James and Jude, sent to them, in lines like these:

> Because you are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with heartfelt mercy, with kindness, meekness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you. Over all these virtues, put on love, which binds the rest together and makes them perfect. Christ's peace must reign in your hearts, since as members of the one body you have been called to that peace. Dedicate yourselves to thankfulness. Let the word of Christ, rich as it is, dwell in you. In wisdom made perfect, instruct and admonish one another. Sing gratefully to God from your hearts in psalms, hymns and inspired songs. Whatever you do, whether in speech or in action, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus. Give thanks to God the Father through him. – Colossians 3:12-17

The Gospel goes on as the Lord says, "No one shall snatch them out of my hands."

That is a strange, discordant, even terrible, line. The question arises: if the Lord is all-powerful, if He looks with infinite love at each one, if He keeps on sending us grace, how, it might be asked, could any one, or any power, snatch them out of His hands? But that is what is there; that is what He said. As Jesus was about to enter into His Passion, He put everything into perspective. "This is their hour and the hour of the powers of darkness."

There are demons loose upon the earth. They retain their natural power as angels and angels are as naturally superior to us as we are to dogs and cats and crocodiles. Demons work on our minds and our wills to turn us into earthly reproductions of what they themselves are. Recall how the Gospel described them. When the men possessed by devils encountered Jesus, the Gospel tells us that the devils in them shrieked horribly. Jesus cast them out and as they came out of those they possessed they screamed what all the damned are driven to say: "What have we to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth?"

Can devils snatch us out of the realm of grace, out of the Lord's hand? The answer is a terrifying: Yes. We have the Lord's word that that is possible: they can snatch souls

even from Him. But they can never do so as long as we come before Him every day to say,

I am weak; I am sinful; I am forever skidding back into some self-will. Oh God, I wish I could be different. Please help me.

Keep saying that and no devil can ever touch you. No power on earth or in hell can snatch you out of the Lord's hand if you cry out to Him for the grace you need one day more . . . today.

My brothers and sisters, I welcome your comments and questions. It is a grace to speak with you. When sin abounds, grace abounds. Mother Church and her faithful are abounding in grace these days... Suffering brings purification. Our Holy Father, a soul who wears a crown of thorns, recently said, "This pain is grace because it is renewal."

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Closing: Many, many thank you's for your excellent calls and insightful emails. Without you there would be no Open Line.

John Henry Cardinal Newman is about to be beatified by Pope Benedict XVI. I found an amazing quote of his, so very appropos for these difficult days we live in:

> "Christ … offers you His hand; He is rising; rise with Him. Mount up from the grave of the old Adam; from groveling cares, and jealousies, and fretfulness, and worldly aims; from the thralldom of habit, from the tumult of passion, from the fascinations of the flesh, from a cold, worldly, calculating spirit, from frivolity, from selfishness, from effeminacy, from self-conceit and highmindedness. Henceforth set about doing what it is so difficult to do, but what should not, must not be left undone: watch, and pray, and meditate." – Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman

Until next week on Open Line, Blessed be God and May the Lord and Giver of Life mightily bless you! Bye for now!