11. The state of grace: how it is received, lost and restored, and who may receive Communion

In Catholic teaching, to be "in the state of grace" means to possess **sanctifying grace**: God's own life dwelling in the soul, which makes a person an adopted child of God, a "partaker of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4) and a temple of the Holy Spirit (CCC 1996–2000). It is distinct from **actual grace**, God's passing help to know and do good in particular moments (CCC 2000). With sanctifying grace God infuses the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity (CCC 1812–1813) and the gifts of the Holy Spirit (CCC 1830–1831). The state of grace matters for two things above all: whether a person who dies is saved, and whether a Catholic may receive Communion.

Received

Catholic teaching: Ordinarily through baptism; for an adult before baptism, by perfect contrition and love joined to the desire for baptism.

Key sources: John 3:5; Acts 2:38; Titus 3:5; CCC 1262–1266, 1258–1260; Trent Sess. 6, ch. 4

Increased

Catholic teaching: Through the sacraments (especially the Eucharist and confirmation), prayer and good works done in grace.

Key sources: CCC 1392–1395, 2010; Trent Sess. 6, ch. 10 and canon 24

Wounded

Catholic teaching: By venial sin, which weakens charity but does not destroy grace.

Key sources: 1 John 5:16–17; CCC 1862–1863

Lost

Catholic teaching: By any mortal sin: grave matter committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.

Key sources: Gal 5:19–21; 1 Cor 6:9–10; CCC 1855–1861; Trent Sess. 6, ch. 15

Restored

Catholic teaching: Through the sacrament of Penance (confession and absolution), or immediately by perfect contrition that includes the resolve to confess as soon as possible.

Key sources: John 20:22–23; CCC 1446, 1452, 1456; Trent Sess. 14

Required for

Catholic teaching: Worthy reception of Communion; dying in God's friendship and so reaching heaven (directly or after purification).

Key sources: 1 Cor 11:27–29; CCC 1385, 1415, 1030, 1033

1. How the state of grace is first received

- **Baptism.** Baptism forgives original sin and all personal sins and "makes the neophyte a new creature, an adopted son of God, who has become a partaker of the divine nature, member of Christ and co-heir with him, and a temple of the Holy Spirit" (CCC 1265). Infants receive it in the faith of the Church; adults must also have faith and repentance (Acts 2:38).
- **Grace comes first.** No one can merit the grace of justification (CCC 2010; Trent Sess. 6, canon 1). Trent describes how God's prompting grace leads an adult step by step: hearing the word, believing, fearing God's justice, hoping in His mercy, beginning to love Him, turning from sin and resolving to be baptized (Sess. 6, ch. 6). A person freely cooperates, but even the cooperation is moved by grace (ch. 5).
- **Before baptism.** An adult who repents out of love for God and desires baptism already receives grace before the sacrament (baptism of desire), which is why catechumens who die before baptism are not considered lost (CCC 1249, 1258–1260).

2. How it grows

Grace is meant to grow. The Eucharist increases union with Christ, forgives venial sins and strengthens against mortal sin (CCC 1391–1395). Confirmation deepens baptismal grace (CCC 1303). Good works done in the state of grace "merit" an increase of grace, because God has freely chosen to reward what His grace produces (CCC 2010–2011; Trent Sess. 6, ch. 10 and 16, canon 32). Prayer, fasting, almsgiving and the other sacraments also nourish it.

3. How it is lost: mortal and venial sin

Catholic teaching distinguishes two kinds of sin, following 1 John 5:16–17 ("There is a sin unto death… there is a sin not unto death"):

Mortal sin

"Destroys charity in the heart of man" and turns him away from God (CCC 1855). All three conditions must be present (CCC 1857–1859):

- **Grave matter**, specified chiefly by the Ten Commandments (CCC 1858);
- **Full knowledge** that the act is seriously sinful;
- **Deliberate consent**, a free personal choice.

Unintentional ignorance, strong emotion, external pressure, fear, habit and psychological factors can reduce or remove culpability (CCC 1735, 1860). A person who dies in mortal sin without repenting is separated from God forever by his own choice (CCC 1033, 1861).

Venial sin

A lesser sin, or a grave matter committed without full knowledge or full consent. It weakens charity and disposes a person toward mortal sin, but does not break the covenant with God and is forgiven through contrition, prayer, works of charity and the Eucharist (CCC 1862–1863, 1394, 1458).

Examples of grave matter in Catholic teaching include apostasy, heresy and schism (CCC 2089); deliberately missing Sunday Mass without a serious reason (CCC 2181); receiving Communion while conscious of mortal sin (sacrilege, CCC 2120); murder and abortion (CCC 2268–2271); adultery and fornication (CCC 2380, 2353); serious theft or fraud (CCC 2408–2414); and perjury (CCC 2152). Whether a particular act is a mortal sin for a particular person depends on all three conditions; the Church judges acts, but "we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God" (CCC 1861).

Faith can remain when grace is lost. Trent taught that grace is lost by every mortal sin, not only by unbelief, but that faith itself is lost only by sins directly against faith; a Catholic in mortal sin can still believe, though his faith is "dead" without charity (Sess. 6, ch. 15 and canon 28; Jas 2:17).

4. How it is restored: confession and contrition

- **The sacrament of Penance** is the ordinary means, which the Fathers called "the second plank of salvation after the shipwreck which is the loss of grace" (CCC 1446, quoting Tertullian). The penitent's acts are contrition, confession and satisfaction (penance); the priest gives absolution (CCC 1450–1460).
- **Confession of mortal sins.** All mortal sins one is aware of after careful examination must be confessed, by kind and number (CCC 1456; Trent Sess. 14, canon 7). Venial sins need not be confessed but confessing them is recommended (CCC 1458).

- **Perfect and imperfect contrition.** Sorrow arising from love of God above all ("perfect contrition") forgives venial sins and also mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to go to confession as soon as possible. Sorrow from lesser motives such as fear of hell ("imperfect contrition" or attrition) is sufficient with sacramental absolution (CCC 1452–1453).
- **The early church.** Restoration after grave sin was ancient but stricter. Hermas (2nd century) allowed one repentance after baptism (Mandate 4.3); Cyprian (*On the Lapsed*, 251) and the Council of Nicaea (325, canons 11–14) set long public penances for those who had denied the faith. Repeatable private confession spread from the 6th–7th centuries, and the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) required annual confession.

5. What the state of grace has to do with salvation

- **Dying in the state of grace** means dying in God's friendship: such a person is saved, entering heaven directly or after the final purification called purgatory (CCC 1023, 1030).
- **Dying in unrepented mortal sin** means freely chosen, final separation from God (CCC 1033, 1035). The Church has never declared that any particular person is in hell.
- **Perseverance is a gift.** No one can be absolutely certain of final perseverance apart from a special revelation, but all should have firm hope in God's help (Trent Sess. 6, ch. 12–13 and canon 16; CCC 2016).
- **Can a Catholic know he is in the state of grace?** Not with the certainty of faith, because "we cannot rely on our feelings or our works" (CCC 2005; Trent Sess. 6, ch. 9). But a person can have a confident moral certainty, and the Catechism quotes St. Joan of Arc's answer at her trial: "If I am not, may it please God to put me in it; if I am, may it please God to keep me there" (CCC 2005).
- **At the end of life** the Church offers confession, the Anointing of the Sick and Communion as *Viaticum* ("food for the journey"), together called the last rites (CCC 1524–1525).

6. Being worthy to receive Communion

Because the Eucharist is Christ's body and blood and the sign of full communion in faith, Catholic teaching sets these conditions for receiving it (Latin Church):

1. **Baptized and in full communion** with the Catholic Church, sharing its faith in the real presence (CCC 1398–1401; other Christians only in limited cases, Code of Canon Law can. 844).
2. **In the state of grace.** "Anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion" (CCC 1385; also 1415, 1457). Canon law adds an exception: if there is a grave reason and no opportunity to confess, a person may receive after an act of perfect contrition that includes the resolve to confess as soon as possible (can. 916).

3. **The Eucharistic fast:** no food or drink except water and medicine for one hour before Communion; the elderly, the sick and those caring for them are exempt (can. 919).
4. **Right intention and reverence**, knowing whom one receives.
5. **Not under a penalty** such as excommunication, and not obstinately persisting in manifest grave sin; in those cases the minister is to withhold Communion (can. 915).

- **Venial sins do not bar Communion**; the Eucharist itself forgives them. It is not ordered to forgiving mortal sins, which belongs to Penance (CCC 1394–1395).
- **Minimum obligations:** Catholics must confess grave sins at least once a year and receive Communion at least once a year, during the Easter season (the "Easter duty"; can. 920, 989; CCC 1389, 2042).
- **Spiritual communion:** those who cannot receive are encouraged to unite themselves to Christ by desire and prayer.
- **Divorced and civilly remarried Catholics** who have not obtained an annulment may not normally receive (CCC 1650). Pope Francis's *Amoris Laetitia* (2016, note 351) opened the possibility of access in some cases after pastoral discernment, which remains debated.
- **Scrupulosity:** moral theologians teach that a sin is not mortal unless all three conditions are certainly present, and those who are scrupulous are advised to follow a confessor's guidance rather than repeatedly abstaining.

Scripture and the early church. Paul warns that whoever eats or drinks "unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord," and that each should examine himself first (1 Cor 11:27–29). The *Didache* tells Christians to confess their sins before breaking bread "that your sacrifice may be pure" (14.1) and admits only the baptized (9.5). Justin Martyr says only those who believe the Church's teaching, have been baptized, and live as Christ commanded may receive (*First Apology* 66). Cyprian rebuked those who received Communion after denying the faith without first doing penance (*On the Lapsed* 15–16).

7. The debate

Reformed and Baptist criticism

- **Salvation becomes unstable.** A believer who can fall in and out of grace many times has no settled assurance, contrary to John 10:28–29, Rom 8:1 and Heb 10:14.
- **All sin is deadly.** "The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23) and whoever breaks one commandment is guilty of all (Jas 2:10); grading sins as mortal and venial has no clear basis.
- **Christ's blood cleanses all sin** for those who confess to God directly (1 John 1:7–9); a priest is not needed.

- **Grace is God's favor** (*charis*), not a quality or substance in the soul that can be gained and lost.
- **Fear and scrupulosity.** The system can leave sincere Catholics anxious about whether they may receive Communion or will be saved.

Catholic response

- **Scripture distinguishes sins.** John speaks of sin "that leads to death" and sin that does not (1 John 5:16–17), and Paul warns believers that those who do certain works "shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal 5:19–21; 1 Cor 6:9–10; Eph 5:5). Jesus spoke of greater and lesser sin (John 19:11).
- **Christians can fall.** Branches that do not remain in Christ are cut off (John 15:6); "if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off" (Rom 11:22); see also Heb 10:26–29.
- **Grace is real participation in God's life**, not only favor: God's charity is "poured forth in our hearts" (Rom 5:5) and believers share the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4).
- **Reformed and Baptist churches also recognize grave sin** through church discipline (1 Cor 5:1–13) and ask members to examine themselves before the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:28).
- **Confession is Christ's own provision** (John 20:22–23), and the Catholic answer to fear is firm hope and frequent use of the sacraments, not presumption.

Across the traditions

How each major tradition understands grace, losing and restoring it, and readiness for Communion, from its own documents.

Catholic

Catholic teaching holds that sanctifying grace is first received in baptism (or, before baptism, by perfect contrition joined to the desire for it), grows through the sacraments and good works, is weakened but not destroyed by venial sin, and is lost by mortal sin: grave matter committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent. It is restored through the sacrament of

Orthodox

Orthodox teaching holds that those who sin after baptism are more guilty than the unbaptized, having thrown away God's help, and that the way back is the sacrament of penitence, which asks contrition, a full purpose of amendment, faith in Christ and hope in His mercy. Before Communion each person examines his conscience and cleanses it by penitence, with fasting, prayer and often

Penance, and anyone conscious of grave sin must confess before receiving Communion.

Sources: CCC 1258-1266, 1385, 1446, 1452, 1855-1863, 2010; Council of Trent Sess. 6, ch. 4 and 15; Sess. 14; Code of Canon Law can. 916.

confession; grave sin can bar a person until repentance. The Orthodox Confession of Peter Mogila distinguishes mortal sins, which exclude from God's grace, from lesser sins.

Sources: Longer Catechism of St. Philaret, Q 305-306, 341, 351, 353; Orthodox Confession of Peter Mogila (approved Jassy 1642), Part III, Q 17-18; Confession of Dositheus (1672), Decree 17.

Lutheran

Lutherans teach that those who fall after baptism are forgiven when they return in repentance: contrition and faith in the Gospel or absolution. The Augsburg Confession rejects the claim that the justified cannot lose the Holy Spirit, and the Smalcald Articles say open, deliberate sin drives out faith and the Spirit. Private absolution is kept, but listing every sin is not required. Worthiness for the Sacrament is faith in Christ's words 'given and shed for you'; the weak and troubled in faith are its truly worthy guests.

Sources: Augsburg Confession XI, XII.1-7, XXV.1; Smalcald Articles III.3.43; Small Catechism, Confession and Sacrament of the Altar; Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration VII.68-71.

Reformed

Reformed confessions teach that every sin deserves damnation, yet no sin is so great that it damns those who truly repent, so they do not grade sins as mortal and venial. True believers can neither totally nor finally fall from grace, though they may fall into grievous sins for a time and lose their comfort until they repent. Communicants examine themselves first; the ignorant and scandalous are kept from the table by church discipline, and unworthy receivers take the elements without receiving Christ.

Sources: Westminster Confession 15.4, 17.1, 17.3, 29.7-8; Westminster Larger Catechism Q 171-173; Heidelberg Catechism Q 81-82.

Anglican

The Articles teach that not every deadly sin after baptism is unpardonable: Christians may depart from grace and fall into sin, and by God's grace rise again. The 1662 Prayer Book calls communicants to examine their consciences and repent, warns open and notorious evil livers not to come, offers the troubled 'the benefit of absolution' from a minister, but does not require confession. The wicked receive the sign without partaking of Christ. Communion was for

Methodist

The Methodist Articles teach that after receiving the Holy Spirit believers may depart from grace and fall into sin, and by God's grace rise again; repentance is never to be denied them. Wesley urged Christians to receive Communion as often as they can and answered that unworthiness is no reason to stay away. The United Methodist Church keeps an open table: Christ invites all who love him, earnestly repent and seek to live

the confirmed, or those ready and desirous to be confirmed.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles XVI, XXV, XXIX; Book of Common Prayer (1662), Holy Communion, opening rubrics and exhortations; BCP (1662), Order of Confirmation, final rubric.

in peace, and unbaptized people who come are guided toward baptism.

Sources: Methodist Articles of Religion XII, XVIII; John Wesley, Sermon 101 'The Duty of Constant Communion' I, II.7-10; This Holy Mystery (UMC General Conference 2004), 'Invitation to the Lord's Table'.

Baptist

Baptists hold that all true believers endure to the end and will never fall away from the state of grace, though they may fall into sin through neglect and temptation, grieve the Spirit and bring discipline on themselves. The Lord's Supper is a symbolic ordinance for baptized church members, and each is to examine himself before coming ('let a man examine himself', 1 Cor 11:28); the ignorant and ungodly are unworthy of the Lord's table.

Sources: Baptist Faith and Message 2000, arts. V, VII; Second London Confession (1689) 17.1-3, 30.8; 1 Cor 11:28 (KJV).

See also: Assurance and "once saved, always saved"; Confession to a priest; Who may receive Communion?.

Last reviewed November 10, 2026