No question has occupied more debate in the history of the Church than the necessity of grace. This question spawned several major heresies, especially Pelagianism and Jansenism. The answer to this question demands several distinctions. The most important is the distinction between the Condign or Integral Nature of man before the Original Sin and the Fallen Nature of man after the Original Sin.

When St. Thomas treats this question he begins with the necessity of grace to know truth. He makes an analogy between physical nature and spiritual nature. In the physical world, God gives the form to every determined kind of being and so his action is necessary for that being to act according to its nature. God’s interest and support, his movement is absolutely necessary as the ultimate source or first cause of any natural movement. In the same way, the action of the Holy Spirit is necessary for man to know any truth at all. This is because the natural light of reason is a participation in the very light of God Himself. This is what makes man a being willed for his own sake.
But, man is called to know truth, which is God Himself. He is called to an end by nature he cannot attain by nature because of the exalted character of the end. Thus, though God’s action is necessary to know any truth, no special movement on His part is necessary to know those truths about God and the world which are accessible to reason alone. But God must enlighten the mind in a special way, by a special action of the Holy Spirit if man is to know those truths, which are beyond his capability to know by natural reason. So, man must have grace to know about the Trinity and the Incarnation, but not to know about the fact that God exists. God could instruct some by faith and grace concerning His existence if their reasoning powers were not acute enough to discover this by themselves, as is the case with most of the human race after the sin. Still, God’s grace is not absolutely necessary for this.

As for doing good, man in the state of Original Justice can do goods, which are proportioned, to his nature without sanctifying grace. He can do all the works of the virtues without the further need of a supernatural elevation. But he cannot do those works which are necessary to inherit eternal life, to go to heaven without an interior change in his soul in which he is elevated to participate in God’s own life. This is because there is no means in human nature left to itself by which man could obtain a relationship of equality with God. Man’s acts have no proportion in and of themselves to the nature of God. So, even in the state of Integral Nature without the presence of sin, man needs grace to go to heaven and to do the works by which he tends to heaven while on earth. There is no power in the human will
sufficient to will supernatural goods. Man also needs the divine aid of actual grace to support him in willing and carrying out all goods of both sorts.

In Fallen Nature, man needs sanctifying grace to do both sorts of goods: those proportioned to heaven and those of which he is naturally capable. There is no such thing as a secular humanism in which man is able to be perfect, even in the natural grace without the healing of sanctifying grace. This is because man is now in a state in which he has fallen down from what he was to be by nature. He still needs grace to do works proportioned to heaven, but also needs grace for his nature to be healed. Actual grace is needed here also for both experiences. Man can do many good works without the aid of sanctifying grace; but he cannot do all the goods proportioned to his nature. St. Thomas uses the image of a sick man who can perform some healthy actions, but not all of them. He could walk, but not eat for example.

Man does not need grace in the state of Original Justice to love God above all things. Every nature, each in its own way, is called to love God above all things. Man can do the goods proportioned to his natural powers without the further aid of sanctifying grace in Original Justice and this includes loving God as the beginning and end of the world. In Fallen Nature, man needs grace to love God in this way.

God, however, has called man to love Him in a deeper way than all the rest of nature. Man is called to love God the way God loves Himself, as an object of communion with whom man shares life and blessedness, the final good of man. Grace is needed in both integral and fallen nature for man to love God in this way. This is the love of fellowship, of *koinonia*. This love is the special love to which man is called. In both states and in both loves, God’s aid with actual grace is needed.
Man could do the works of the Law without grace in Integral Nature, but not in Fallen nature. He could not do these works in either state with the proper interior intention of charity without grace.

Man, therefore, cannot merit eternal life without grace because there is no power in the will or the soul to do so. No one merits grace. Grace is prior to merit and necessary in order to merit. Even Jesus Christ did not merit the grace of the Hypostatic Union. This was a sheer grace given to Him and he merited our salvation in light of this prior grace.

“No one comes to the Father, unless the Father draw him.” (John 6:44)

God gives actual grace to aid man in his preparation to receive sanctifying grace. For a person to receive sanctifying grace, he must be turned or converted to God. The person must be open to the turning, but while he is open or preparing himself, God Himself is turning. So, no further grace is needed to receive the interior aid, which God gives a person to turn themselves to Him. But the fact that they are prepared to receive sanctifying grace is due to God turning them. They receive the experience. This is not a passive reception in the sense that it is inert. But it is passive in the sense that it is received as befits a reasoning and free being. The great Scripture text, which expresses this, is: “Restore (Convert) us to thyself, O Lord, that we may be restored (converted)” (Lam. 5:21 quoted in CCC n. 1432)

A person remains radically free not to prepare himself. He can simply not allow his will to be moved or turned by the Lord. Sufficient preparation consists in
man being displeased with sin and having affection for God insofar as his lights allow him to do so.

One in sin cannot arise from sin without grace. This is because sin is an offense against God and when the act of sin ceases, the stain, the fault and the punishment still remain. Since grace is the beauty of the soul, the stain of sin is the loss of grace. Only God can give grace back to the soul. The fault is a disordered appetite and we can only finally turn from this if God gives us the power. Sin deserves eternal punishment and so no act of man can resolve for this punishment. Only God can do this. When the act of sin ceases, the debt (*reatus*) remains. Only God can resolve for this.

In the state of Original Justice man could avoid sin without sanctifying grace, but not without actual grace. In the state of Fallen Nature, man cannot avoid sin without sanctifying grace. He can avoid mortal sin if he is given grace, but not all venial sins, even after the reception of grace.

Some people believed that grace was given to man so that he no longer needed God's aid to live the life of grace. Man could avoid sin and do good by his own power without the aid of a further actual grace to sustain and support him. The Pelagians thought this was true in Fallen Nature. The Jansenists thought this was true in Integral Nature. Both were wrong. The first grace elevates man to participate in divine life and begin by his acts to merit heaven. This is such a sublime and supernatural activity that God's aid and the assistance of actual grace
are constantly needed for the daily life of infused virtues, which this grace entails. This is because no created thing can act without divine motion and support. Also because it is not possible for us to know ourselves fully and direct our actions perfectly. God’s grace which is union with His divine nature is not given to us so that we can then act on our own without it. Even the saints in this world pray every day, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” The Divine Office begins most hours with the psalm verses which the monks of desert were accustomed to recite all day like we recite the Rosary, “O God, come to my assistance: Lord, make haste to help me.”

Finally, when one receives grace, he receives the habit of mind by which he can stand firm in virtuous practice in the face of sorrow and fear and also the habit of perseverance. But that he actually perseveres in each and every daily act in living the life of grace demands further actual grace, divine aid and assistance. No more habitual or sanctifying grace is needed for this, but God’s aid and assistance is. Grace is given to some, to whom final perseverance is not given. One who has grace, must continually pray for final perseverance, for, “Many are called, but few (that is, less) are chosen.”

THE DEFINITION AND KINDS OF GRACE
READ: SUMMA THEOLOGIAE, I-II, 110-111
Grace must involve an interior change in the very essence of the soul of man. Luther taught that grace was forensic justification. This was as though man came into a court condemned of a capital crime and God, the judge, chose merely to overlook the crime without any punishment which would resolve for the evil and make the criminal a worthy citizen again. Luther used to call man in the state of grace “a lump of dung covered by snow.” St. Thomas is of the opposite idea. He compares the love of God to human love and demonstrates that real human love has to respond to a real good in the being of the other. The same must be true, *mutatis mutandis*, with divine love.

Human love is expressed as grace in three ways.

1) The love of someone for someone else as in the phrase, the soldier enjoys the king’s grace.
2) The gift given by the lover to the beloved as a sign of his grace as in the phrase, “I confer this grace on you.”
3) The gratitude of the Beloved for both the love and gift of the Lover which is expressed in thanksgiving as in the words used by Romance languages to express thanks, e.g. gracias and grazie.

St. Thomas says that each further sense depends on the prior ones. So, Thanksgiving depends on gifts, which in turn are an expression of love. Man’s love always responds to a good in the soul, which he finds there already existing. Man’s love must truly respond to a good really existing in the soul. Were someone love someone thinking there was a real good present which was not there, this would not be true love but false love. In the last two senses, the gift and response, love entails something truly in the soul.
God's love differs from man's in that when God loves someone, he creates the
good in him or her by his gift. His love does not have to find a prior good in the
person, but makes the person good in loving him. The first good God creates in a
being by loving it is existence. Everything, which exists, exists and moves as an
expression of divine love. "God saw everything, and it was good."

But towards man, God has a special regard. In addition to the primary love
by which He creates good in all things, God also creates a special good in man. His
love towards man is a special love. He loves him in the most complete and simple
sense of the word (simpliciter) because He elevates man to be like Him. He gives
him a self-communication of His nature. This is not only given to men, but also to
angels. This communication in nature is completely beyond the power of human
nature. Man cannot attain it. He can only receive it.

Grace is a participation in the life of God. It introduces us into the
intimacy of the Trinitarian life: by Baptism the Christian participates
in the grace of Christ, the head of his Body. As an ‘adopted son’ he can
henceforth call God ‘Father,’ in union with the only Son. He receives
the life of the Spirit who breathes charity into him and forms the
Church. (CCC n. 1997)

Since God communicates his nature to man, this must involve a change
which is not just a psychological change. The change is ontological. God creates a
new quality in the soul. This is a supernatural quality of life. It is metaphysically
an accident, which is not an unforeseen event. An accident in philosophy is a being,
which can only exist in another being as opposed to a substance, which is a being,
which can exist in its own right. Grace is an accident like health. In fact, it is the
health of the soul. The body can exist without health, but not in natural wholeness. In the same way, the soul can exist without grace, but not with natural wholeness. This is because without grace, man cannot arrive at heaven, his natural destiny.

The soul is the life of the body as form; God is the efficient cause of the soul. But, God is the life of the soul through grace as form. Man is not corrupted and changed substantially into God. He still remains man. But, he receives an accidental form, a quality by which he is elevated to partake of divine nature. As the soul is the life of the body, so God is the life of the soul. What is substantially in God is accidentally in the soul.

Grace is less perfectly in the soul than the soul subsists in itself because it is a supernatural habit. But it is nobler than the nature of the soul since it expresses a participation in divine goodness itself. Grace is also not the same as virtue. Virtues are in the powers of the soul. Just as human virtues which are acquired by human acts perfect human powers of intellect, will and emotions and make them more disposed to free actions according to man’s nature, so grace is an interior change in the essence of the soul which enables man to form virtues according to God’s nature. There are called supernatural infused virtues and theological virtues. These virtues perfect man according to a new standard, which is God’s own inner nature.

The subject of grace or its material cause is then the very essence of the soul itself. One could summarize the nature of grace using the four cause of Aristotle in this way:

**Final Cause:** The Vision of God and love for this vision on earth
**Efficient Cause:** God Himself acting in a prepared soul
**Formal Cause:** An accidental quality by which the soul can know as God knows and love as God loves
**Material Cause:** The Essence of the Soul

One could schematize the relation of grace to nature as follows:

Grace $\Rightarrow$ virtues $\Rightarrow$ meritorious actions $\Rightarrow$ GRACE
Essence $\Rightarrow$ powers $\Rightarrow$ actions of nature $\Rightarrow$ NATURE

The primary division of grace is between that which makes a person pleasing to God, also called *gratia gratum faciens* (henceforth GGF) and the grace which is freely given, also called *gratia gratis data* (henceforth GGD). In modern terminology, GGF is sanctifying grace and GGD is charismatic grace. What is the difference between the two? Charismatic grace is freely given by God and not based on prior merit, but it has to do with the sanctification of others. Sanctifying grace is freely given, not based on prior merit and is the sanctification of the person who has
Charismatic graces in the Church are either ordinary (e.g. power of the priest to consecrate at Mass or the infallibility of the Pope) or extraordinary (e.g. tongues, preaching, healing, etc.) The extraordinary graces are enumerated in 1 Cor. 12. One can exercise both these graces and the ordinary charisms and be in the state of mortal sin. Not so sanctifying grace. This is a true quality or habit in the soul which is the true interior change spoken of in the previous lesson.

In addition to sanctifying grace, the interior aid of God is also a grace. This is called actual grace. Since it is not a quality in the soul, but merely divine aid, it does not in itself sanctify, but aids one to convert or live conversion. Two definitions of sanctifying and actual grace might read as follows:

Sanctifying grace: a created supernatural gift, a divine habit of being infused by God, which permanently inheres in the soul by which we participate in the divine nature of God Himself.

Actual grace: a temporary supernatural act of God by which He directly and interiorly enlightens the understanding and strengthens the will for the purpose of moving the person to a supernatural act.

Sanctifying grace is a habitual gift, a stable and supernatural disposition that perfects the soul itself to enable it to live with God, to act by his love. Habitual grace, the permanent disposition to live and act in keeping with God’s call, is distinguished from actual graces which refer to God’s
interventions, whether at the beginning of conversion or in the course of the
work of sanctification. (CCC n. 2000)

NATURE AND GRACE LESSON TEN

THE CAUSE OF GRACE

READ: SUMMA THEOLOGIAE, I-II, 112

The question of the cause of grace here refers to the efficient cause of grace.
The efficient cause is the source of a given change or action in a being which that
being did not possess before. The efficient cause of the statue is the sculptor. The
efficient cause of the steam is the fire, which heats the water. The efficient cause
imparts the form to a being, which did not possess that form before.

Grace is a supernatural form. It is the health of the soul. Man is enabled to
participate in God’s nature, to know as God knows and to love as God loves by
grace. This is a form, which is completely beyond the capability of human nature to
produce. There is no power in man to obtain grace. God then is the only efficient
cause of grace. After the coming of Christ, the human nature of Christ is the
instrument by which God gives grace. The sacraments are extensions of that
human nature. They are like the tools to the hand, which is connected to the
divinity. The sacraments are the extension of Christ's flesh throughout time and space. Thus, they participate in God imparting grace because Christ institutes them as extensions of his own flesh and person.

Though God is the sufficient cause of God, God never acts in anything against its nature. Since the nature of man involves freedom in all moral experiences, the reception of grace also presupposes that man is open to this reception by acts of free will. Sanctifying grace requires some preparation to be received in freedom. God however aids the soul to this preparation by actual grace and no prior preparation is required to have God's help in this.

Man's preparation is from God moving and the free will being moved. If preparation is looked at from the point of view of the free will, grace is a sheer gift and God does not have to give it to anyone. But, if preparation is looked on from God's point of view, then God necessarily gives grace to one whom He finds prepared. This is not a necessity of coercion as though God was forced by the justice of man or his works to bestow grace on the human being. It is a necessity of infallibility because God has infallibly promised that He will give grace to those whom He finds prepared and God always keeps his promises. In a sense, God binds himself. “Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from Him, comes to me.” John 6:45. The fact that one does not receive grace is due to lack of preparation then. The first cause of loss of grace is not God, but man.
It follows then that the measure of grace received by each soul is due to its measure of preparation. All do not experience grace equally then. “But to each one of us is given grace according to the measure of the giving of Christ.” Ephesians 4:7.

On the part of the object, which is God’s own divine nature, God gives himself equally to all. But on the part of the subject’s receptive capability, the one who is more freely prepared to receive grace experiences the mercy and love of God more. However, since God is the initiator in preparation, God must impart his love more to one than to another. In fact, the Church has a hierarchy of holiness like the hierarchy of being in creation. No one, for example, will ever be as loved by God or made as lovable by God’s love as the Virgin Mary. She is his bride and therefore the highest human person (Jesus being a divine person) in the hierarchy of heaven.

Since grace is a supernatural habit, only God can know who is engraced with absolute certitude. God sometimes enlightens the engraced person by special private revelation that he is in the state of grace in order to prepare him for some very difficult work like martyrdom. Most Christians though only have a relative certainty that they are in the state of grace. Someone who does what he can to live the Christian life and is not aware of being in serious sin can be relatively sure he is in the state of grace. St. Thomas says that a person can have some knowledge he has grace if he “is conscious of delighting in God and of despising worldly things” and “is not conscious of any mortal sins”. This knowledge is imperfect. The Catechism invokes the classic example of Joan of Arc to prove this principle. She was asked if she was in the state of grace. This was a trick question. Had she
answered “yes”, she would have been burned as a heretic because no one can know for sure that they are in the state of grace. Had she answered “no”, she would been burned as a witch because all she did would have possibly been a result of the inspiration of the devil. She answered, “If I am not, may God put me there; and if I am, may God keep me there.” (Cf. CCC n. 2005)

JUSTIFICATION – GOD WORKS IN US
READ: SUMMA THEOLOGIAE, I–II, 112


There is another division of grace, which was not treated in that section because it is not a division between kinds of grace as such, but only effects of grace. This is the division between operating and cooperating grace. These are not two kinds of grace, but two effects of the same sanctifying grace. How do they differ? Operating grace has two elements; cooperating grace has three. In operating grace, God moves and the soul is moved (freely). In cooperating grace, God moves, the soul is moved and in turn moves all of the other powers of man to the moral acts of ordinary life. Operating grace is also called justification. Cooperating grace is also called merit.

St. Thomas begins to examine this question by making a distinction between the virtue of justice and justification, which is what Aristotle calls, metaphorical justice. The virtue of justice is in the will and has to do with a disposition to give rights to others. Justification refers to a rightness of order within the person himself. It is not a disposition but an ordering of the intellect, the will and the emotions within themselves because they are ordered towards the true ultimate end.
of man. In this inner ordering or righteousness, the emotions are subject to the intellect and will and the intellect and will are subject to God. Adam was created in this state before the sin. For everyone after the sin, justification involves a change not just from being without justice but from being in a state contrary to righteousness. Man after sin suffers from concupiscence with means that he has lost inner ordering and now all his powers go their own way. He experiences darkness in the intellect, rebelliousness in the will and does not really enjoy being virtuous in the emotions.

Justification now is a movement from the state of sinfulness involving forgiveness of sins to a state of being in grace. Justification thus includes two conditions now in the time after the Original Sin: the forgiveness of sins and the divine indwelling of the Trinity without which there could be no forgiveness of sins. This is what conversion means.

The first work of the grace of the Holy Spirit is conversion, effecting justification in accordance with Jesus’ proclamation at the beginning of the Gospel: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Moved by grace, man turns toward God and away from sin, thus accepting forgiveness and righteousness from on high. ‘Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inner man.’ (CCC n. 1989)
Justification cannot just be an overlooking of sin on the part of the offended party, as Luther tended to suggest. It must truly involve the presence of habitual or sanctifying grace in the soul. Sin is an offence against God and sin can only truly be forgiven when the mind of the offended party has been reconciled with the offender or when we are at peace with God. God can only be at peace with us because of our natural capacity for Him when his love creates a new form in us which is union with his own divine nature. This peace with God is sanctifying grace. Forgiveness of sins must be the presence of the divine form of God's own life in us. “[God] gave himself to us though his Spirit. By the participation of the Spirit, we become communicants in the divine nature . . . For this reason, those in whom the Spirit dwells are divinized.” (CCC n. 1988)

In an adult, there must be a movement of free choice to experience justification and the presence of grace. John 6:45 says, “Everyone who hears the Father and has learned from Him comes to Me.” Learning entails an act of free choice because in order to learn one must consent to what the teacher is explaining. The movement of free choice would not be necessary for someone who did not have the possibility of freely choosing like infants and the insane. They can be justified by baptism. Their catechesis and consent occur after they have reached the age of reason and is to a justification already experienced.

Justification is a movement of free choice, which is twofold: the renunciation of sin and the movement of faith to God. There are four aspects of this movement of free choice: the infusion of grace from God the mover, the movement of free choice to God from the one moved, the movement of free choice rejecting sin which is also moved by God and the forgiveness of sins itself which is the termination of the movement of justification. This can be seen in the questions asked at baptism:

Do you reject Satan?
And all his works?

And all his empty promises?

Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth?

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died, and was buried, rose from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father?

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting?

Since God is an infinite agent who brings about justification, He does not depend on a long preparation. In all natural changes there is a gradual change from one condition to another. This can be the case with justification. The Apostles had three years of instruction by Christ; St. Augustine had about thirty. But God does not have to bring about such a change successively. He can bring it about in an instant as is witnessed in the most famous conversion in the history of the Church, the conversion of St. Paul. This is a moral change and God is not limited by the lack of malleability of the matter, in this case the free choice of the soul. He can dispose it to choose for him in an instant.
From the point of view of the manner of working, the greatest work of God is creation because God brings something into existence from nothing. But creation is completed in the categories of time. Justification consists in God raising a created soul to the categories and experience of eternity. Justification finishes in the nature of God Himself. For this reason, one justified soul from the point of view of the work itself is greater than the whole created universe put together. “The good of grace in one is greater than the good of the nature of the whole universe.” (Summa Theologiae, I-II, 113, 9, ad 2.

Justification is miraculous if one looks at it from the point of view of human power to bring it about. The Pelagians taught that man could merit justification by his own power. All grace did was allow man to do what he could have done by his own power but just in an easier way. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is no active power in man by which he can attain grace. Every work, which can be done by God alone, is miraculous in this sense.

Sometimes the manner in which justification is carried out is beyond the customary order and in that sense is miraculous. An analogy would be when a sick man recovers his health instantaneously completely beyond the skill of art or nature. St. Paul’s justification was like this, but not the other Apostles.

But for something to be completely miraculous there can be no passive potential in the nature of the thing for the particular action. For example, there is no power in asses to prophesy or in the wind and the sea to be calmed by the word
of a man or a body to rise from the dead by the work of a man. Yet, Balaam’s ass prophesied and Jesus raised the dead and calmed the wind and sea by his word. This is not the case with grace. There is a natural capacity in man for God and therefore for grace because of the presence of the intellect. “The soul is naturally capable of grace.” (ST, I-II, 113, 10, corp.) “You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” St. Augustine.

The one thing, which must be crystal clear, is that no one merits justification by works. Man can prepare himself to receive the justification of grace by allowing God to move his free will, but this is not a human motion in origin. It is only a human motion in effect. The primary cause is God.

MERIT-GOD WORKS WITH US

READ: SUMMA THEOLOGIAE, I-II, 114


Perhaps no idea in the whole tract on grace has caused more difficulty than that of merit. For many, the term suggests that man can claim something in justice before God. A recent document of agreement between Catholic and Lutheran theologians states that if the term “merit” were only changed to “reward” or “wages”
that this would go a long way to resolving the difficulty. After all, Scripture is clear that one receives one’s reward by doing things to the least of the brethren. Christ separates the just from the wicked in the Last Judgement on this basis. (Matthew 25:31-46)

The term merit has been used by Catholic theology to express the second great effect of grace, which is cooperating grace. All this term seeks to express is that when God gives a participation in his supernatural life, He gives it so that it will bear fruit. The fruits are the good works of infused virtues given by God in baptism. To experience these good fruits man must cooperate from his free will in the gifts given by God, a cooperation which God initiates with sanctifying grace and sustains with actual grace. This allows man to actively participate in his own salvation.

To understand merit, then, one must understand exactly which is meant by the term in theology because it is an analogous term. Merit is a kind of reward and normally it means something given in strict equivalence to someone for something he has done according to the virtue of justice. A contractor builds a house and merits a certain payment based on the contract and the work performed. If the one who contracted the work does not pay, then he is guilty of injustice. This is called condign merit, which is merit in strict equality. This is the normal experience of human reward in human affairs.
There can be no such merit in divine affairs. For one thing there is only the strictest inequality between God and the human person. God is infinitely distant from all his creatures. No one merits the first grace from God. No one can merit justification. Yet, in light of justification, God who acts according to his wisdom in all his creation never acts against the nature that he himself has created. In the case of man, this means that any effect of God’s in which man must morally participate demands his action according to his free will if that is possible. God inspires the good work in us by both his gift of sanctifying grace and by actual grace. Man so inspired acts according to the lights God has given him. This means that in every Christian work, whether it be a cup of water to a child, writing a symphony or suffering an insult with a hidden act of patience, if done from charity or from the motive of the love of God, that both God and the Christian work. Each works according to his own mode of action. By God’s will, God has determined that the salvation of the human being will be given not only according to God’s part in the action, but will also proportionately correspond to man’s part. Each person received the reward of heaven according to a proportionate equality the proportion in which he acts from his part in his free will under the inspiration of grace. This is called condign merit. By God’s wisdom and will, man is rewarded proportionately according to his own participation in the work.

So, the foundation and initiation of all human merit is justification and the first grace given by God alone. No one merits grace or justification; but they merit
the reward for a life lived in freedom as a result of being changed continuously by
divine love: heaven.

Man in the state of integral nature could not merit heaven without grace
because this is a supernatural effect. No human nature has any principle or power
in it sufficient to merit heaven. In fallen nature there is a second reason for the
necessity of grace in merit. There is an impediment to grace in fallen nature – sin.
Grace is necessary to merit for a second reason for man in fallen nature, because sin
must be forgiven in order for man to merit heaven.

In every meritorious work, there are two factors, which must be considered.
The first is the act of the free will of man. From this point of view there is no
condign merit possible before God, but only congruent merit. But the Holy Spirit is
also present working in each of these acts. From this point of view, God rewards
the work condignly. He rewards his own gifts. “I will make in him a fountain of
living water welling up to eternal life.” (John 4:14)

One’s enjoyment of God in heaven is determined by this merit which is
different for each person. Since merit is a loving cooperation between God and the
soul, each person’s place in the hierarchy of heaven is determined by that
cooperation which is an expression of charity. One knows God more in heaven
depending on how much one has loved him on earth. This love begins in practical
works of charity according to the duties of one’s ordinary state.
God gives these gifts freely. This is the meaning of parable of the 11th hour when all work differently but receive the same reward. All merit in this sense is repugnant to grace. “If from works, they not from grace.” (Romans 11:6) Also, as to the nature of the work itself, no one can merit who does not already have grace. This is because God completely exceeds the proportion of our nature and also because in fallen nature, the impediment of sin must be removed.

Christ, a divine person with a human nature, merits the first grace for us by condign merit because He is the Word made flesh. But for all human persons, merit involves two things: the movement of God and human cooperation by free will. By congruent merit, one can merit the first grace of conversion for another. This is because God loves his special friends. Friendship is a union of love. Because of the union of love, which God has with his friends, He wants to love those men love as they love them. God fulfills the will of man as to the salvation of another if we pray and work for them, provided they are not completely disposed against it by lack of preparation. There are several classic examples of this in history: the conversion of St. Paul which is attributed to the prayer of Stephen, the conversion of St. Augustine which he always attributed to the prayers and tears of mother and the conversion of the murderer of Maria Goretti which he attributed to the prayers of forgiveness of Maria Goretti as she lay dying.

As to perseverance in grace, one must also make a distinction. Since the reward of heaven is a result of the prior grace given to man, one can merit the continual perseverance in grace when one is in heaven by congruent merit. One
cannot merit the grace of final perseverance here on earth, though. This is why one must continue the pray for final perseverance every day and watch unceasingly for the final coming of Christ, first in one’s own death and then in glory at the end of time.

“You are glorified in the assembly of your Holy Ones, for in crowning their merits you are crowning your own gifts.” Preface I for Holy Men and Women, quoted in CCC n. 2006.