

## Occasions of Grace

Can you recognize an occasion of grace when you see one? That's not as easy to do as it seems, because grace most often takes unexpected forms.

In St. Louis, an unexpected occasion of grace has come to visit us. His name is Eugene, and he is a little baby from *Ternopil'*. He is at Children's Hospital: he has already had a number of operations, and he still has a few to go. Eugene brought his mother with him. They found their way to us, bringing nothing but their need. In their emptiness, they are perfect receptacles for our love. Their very presence is an invitation to us, an invitation to become channels of God's love – in short, an invitation to become grace, to become credible icons of Christ. This is an invitation which Christians refuse only to their peril. In their need, these visitors help us to become the Christians that we claim to be. We pray that our love will help them find God's healing: may they find strength in their weakness, may their brokenness be changed to wholeness, may their fear be transformed into courage, may their solitude be transformed by our welcome. Eugene can have a great potential – provided we help him over this obstacle. This little occasion of grace invites us to become grace, and is graced in return. St. Paul would call this “grace upon grace”.

This family's situation, dramatic as it is, is merely the most recent rehearsal of the immigrant plight. The centennial of St. Nicholas Cathedral reminds us that four waves of immigrants have now come to these shores – as indeed does next year's centennial of the St. Louis Parish! These immigrants have brought skills and talents to contribute and a lifetime to fill. However, they also have brought their own particular needs: they needed a welcome, a country to populate and build, and the freedom to reach their potential. This country has struggled to offer what was needed. We are all beneficiaries of the grace occasioned by that decision to leave everything familiar, to come to “America”. If we were not here, we would be different people; we have been shaped by our adopted homeland. Divine providence has brought us here for a reason: salvation comes to us and through us as a result of the lives we lead in this country, as a result of the rich blessings which we enjoy here. We can say with the apostles on Mount Tabor, “Lord, it is good for us to be here.”

I am reminded of Wally and Adelaide Russell, two wonderful people who took me in when this French major first moved to the Washington, DC area in search of a job. When I asked what I could do to repay them for their kindness, they were very clear: “We don't need anything from you; pass the good you have received from us on to someone who needs your help.” Isn't that exactly what God says to us? After all, what does God, Creator of heaven and earth, need from the likes of us? Nothing. Нічого. Nada. Zilch. There are, however, many things that we have to offer, and many needy recipients toward whom God asks us to direct our gifts. The God who doesn't need our gifts asks us to share those gifts with those who need them.

Theologians use the fancy Greek word *oikonomia* to refer to an “economy” of salvation. The Cross is a symbol of this “economy”. The vertical beam represents the salvation which comes down to us, as God fills our emptiness with His own Divine Life. We must not, however, forget the horizontal component, where salvation comes through our care of God's earthly “household”. Interdependence is integral to God's plan, as we

are grace for one another – calling forth and offering gifts as our status directs. This is how God’s salvation comes into the world, as Jesus shows us in the famous parable:

"Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’ " **Matthew 25:34-40 (NKJV)**

Salvation comes to us through our interdependence. God intends us to be occasions of grace for one another. God has given the St. Louis community little Eugene. Who are the occasions of grace that God puts into your life to coax you toward salvation and the fulfillment of God’s Kingdom?