

What does it mean to be in the state of grace?

Dear **Father Kerper:** As a boy, I learned about the necessity of being in the “state of grace.” I’ve always wondered: What exactly does that mean? How do we know whether we’re in it or not?

Your great question leads us to examine two crucial matters often overlooked. First, how should Christians understand their human condition on earth? And second, what is the connection between the earthly lives of human beings and their only possible outcomes: endless happiness and total fulfillment in eternal life (Heaven) or the perpetual anguish caused by freely choosing something other than God (Hell)?

Let’s begin by correcting one terrible — but very common — misunderstanding. Many people define the “state of grace” as the absence of mortal sin. Yes, grave sin is incompatible with the “state of grace,” but this minimalistic understanding is akin to saying, “I’ve been hugely successful in life because I’ve never gone to jail.” There’s more to life than not getting convicted of crimes; and there’s much more to the “state of grace” than avoiding mortal sin.

To grasp the beauty of living in the “state of grace,” we need a clear definition of “grace.” Simply — and shockingly — put, “grace” is God! Allow me to refine this idea: “Grace” is God in that God freely communicates himself to human beings, thereby enabling human beings to become like God. Grace actually transforms human beings into “gods” by adoption. This sounds bizarre, even heretical, but the New Testament boldly



Francesco Guardi,
The Four Evangelists and the Holy Trinity with Saints

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proposes this idea and many Greek-speaking Church Fathers spoke of the “deification” of human beings.

How does this work? Through sanctifying grace, which is uncreated, God draws close to us, even to the

point of union, somewhat like the marriage of a man and woman. The presence of this “grace” — God’s own life — restores us to God’s own “image and likeness,” thereby empowering us to be become truly “God-like,”

notably through mercy and love. Moreover, “grace” draws us into the life of the Trinity. When, we pray, for example, we always pray in union with Christ, who speaks to the Father ceaselessly.

This “state of grace,” which begins on earth at the moment of Baptism, extends forever into eternity. Here we find the essential connection between grace and liberation from death. By nature, human beings all eventually die. There’s no escape. However, when God touches us through “grace” we begin to share in his qualities, one of which is immortality. Being in the “state of grace,” then, liberates us from eternal death.

Now, let’s consider the opposite condition: A person who falls out of the “state of grace” through mortal sin loses the necessary linkage with God and is necessarily excluded from the joy of eternal life.

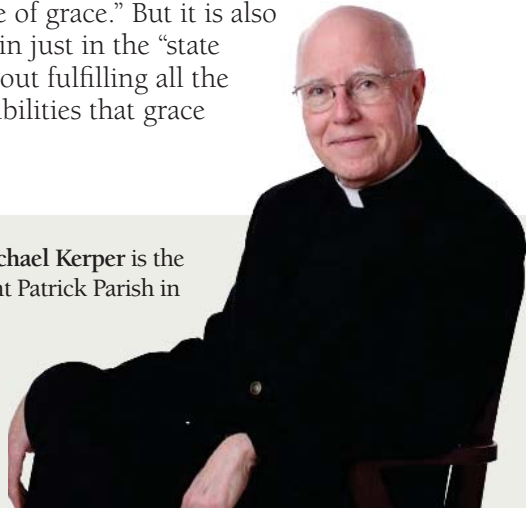
This seems horribly unfair, so we need to understand “mortal sin.” This term refers to a free, conscious, informed, consensual decision to do something gravely wrong. It is a choice *against* the goodness of God. Note well: God does not move away from the sinner; rather the sinner, through his or her free act, blocks off God’s life-giving grace. This, of course, kills the relationship with God, who is the source and preserver of life.

Now, to the second part of your question: How do I know whether I’m in the “state of grace”? Frankly, we can never know this with absolute certainty. Nor should we conclude that any other person is *not* in the “state of grace.”

While we can’t have certainty, the regular practice of Confession is an enormous help. A frequent, thorough, and brutally honest examination of conscience will compel us to see habits, attitudes, and specific serious sins that pull us away from God’s goodness, thereby possibly blocking God’s life-giving grace. But, as I mentioned at the outset, the “state of grace” is not just the absence of sin; it’s also the amazing opportunity to live fully as a “deified” child of God, sharing fully in God’s life now and forever.

Leon Bloy, the great French Catholic writer who died in 1917, once said, “The only true tragedy is *not* to become a saint.”

Surely, this tragedy happens if we fall from the “state of grace.” But it is also tragic to remain just in the “state of grace” without fulfilling all the amazing possibilities that grace provides.



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