

A Feminine Image of Divine Grace
in Andrew M. Greeley's Ascent Into Hell

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This thesis will be devoted to the study of the images of Grace in Andrew M. Greeley's Ascent into Hell. The Practical Catholic Dictionary defines Grace as "...God's greatest gift to the soul. It is a supernatural and freely given gift which helps humans attain everlasting life." Greeley's thoughts on Grace are summed up in his afterward of Ascent into Hell. He uses story telling as he believes Jesus used parables. Greeley's definition of Grace is this:

Stories of God are designed to disconcert, to open us up to the power of God's shocking love and to disclose to us new ways of living in the world with the illumination and power that comes from love (Greeley, 490).

Greeley uses his story to show that those who deal with God by bargaining, by earning favor, or by winning God's gifts through their own efforts are usually confounded and do not receive what they seek. Those who have no right to God's love or compassion are the recipients of these gifts. Grace always has the last word on Justice in God's Kingdom.

Greeley's propositions in Ascent into Hell comes from an ancient assembly of bishops who responded to a heresy called Semi-Pelagianism which was common in certain parts of the Catholic Church in the fourth and fifth centuries. The Second Council of Orange in Gaul was convened in 529 and disputed Semi-Pelagianism which taught that divine Grace has a lesser role to human will in an individual's conversion to a life leading to salvation. Semi-Pelagianism teaches that humans can make the first choice for salvation without God's Grace or can earn God's favor and therefore His Grace. The Council of Orange taught that God's Grace is gratuitous, that it is freely given and that

it is the initiator or first principle which animates a soul to choose a way to salvation. The 179th Canon or teaching of the Second Council of Orange states:

If Anyone says that God's mercy is conferred upon us when, without God's Grace, we believe, will, desire, strive, labor, pray, keep watch work, ask, seek, knock, but does not confess that it is through the infusion and inspiration of the Holy Spirit that we believe, will or are able to do these things as is required, or if anyone subordinates the help of Grace to humility or human obedience and does not admit that it is the very gift of Grace that makes us obedient and humble, he goes against Paul the Apostle who says, "What have you got that was not given to you?" (ICor. 4.7 [J.B.]); and also "What I am now, I am through the Grace of God."(ICor. 15.10 [J.B.]

The traditional notion of Sacrament is defined as:

...outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual Grace...as sure and certain means by which we receive that Grace (BCP 857).

Greely simplifies this by calling a Sacrament "a reality that reveals the presence of Grace; the presence of God in action" (491).

Greely expands the traditional seven Sacraments to include a wide variety of signs of nourishment and welcome. Open doors, water, wind, fire, breasts, light, shelter, warmth, and other subtle and everyday things.

The central character in Ascent into Hell is Hugh Donlon, the son of a judge and a person who had all the best things life can offer. Hugh is given two great Sacraments of God's love and Grace: his mother, Peggy Donlon, and his one and only love, Maria Manfredy.

From the beginning of the story Hugh is destined for the priesthood. Hugh's father, Thomas bargains with God for the life of his wife after she has complications from the birth of

Hugh. Tom Donlon offers his son to God through the priesthood if God will allow Peggy to live. The act of petitioning God for a favor is something no Catholic theologian would begrudge a person. However, Tom Donlon's "trade off," Hugh for Peggy, is not an act that recognizes God's sovereign authority in the lives of his creatures.

Peggy Donlon recovers and tells her husband that she too asked God for life, but only so she could thank her spouse for all the love he has shown her. Greely uses this to show how God acts, freely and lovingly giving something to someone who may not deserve anything. Peggy asks nothing for herself other than to do an act of Grace for another person.

When Hugh is still a nursing infant Tom Donlon once again is shown the uniqueness of his wife. Late one night he awakes to find his wife nursing Hugh. There is a glow radiating from mother and child. Peggy's "eyes were afire with infatuation, possession and delight." She then offers her husband some of her milk. Tom is confused and shocked but Peggy draws him to her breast. Later Tom is troubled by the whole experience but still is thankful for it.

This is the first instance in Greely's work that demonstrates his definition of Sacrament, as a sign of God's shocking love. Peggy's behavior during Hugh's nursing is one that could describe God's relationship to us as that of infatuation, possession and delight. Infatuation many times implies passionate love, possession implies ownership and delight implies joy. All these things the Christian Scriptures

use to describe how God acts. The Song of Songs is a dialogue between a lover and the beloved. Since the early days of Christianity this has been interpreted as a love story between Christ and His spouse, the Church.

I am faint with love. His right hand is under my head his left arm embraces me (Sg. 2.5a,6).

You have ravished my heart...my bride you have ravished my heart with a glance... (Sg. 4.6 [J.B.]).

The Grace God gives through Peggy to Tom Donlon is the Grace of unconditional love, which is the sign of the love that is given when none is deserved.

Hugh Donlon grows up and goes to the seminary. One summer during vacation he goes to his parents summer cabin and meets a wonderful girl who he immediately likes. She opens the front door when he arrives and Hugh wonders who she is. Hugh's family is not at the house so Hugh is entertained by the girl. When she finally tells Hugh who she is, Maria Manfredy, his younger sister's best friend Hugh is surprised. He is shocked to find out that she is only seventeen, but he soon realizes that she is not a typical seventeen year old.

After talking a bit more about a childhood experience that they shared and how Maria cherished it she begins to cry. Hugh, trying to comfort her, has the sudden, driving impulse to kiss her. He stops because his parents arrive home.

Hugh is drawn so strongly to Maria that he realizes there is something very special about her. Maria, he begins to feel, might be a threat to his vocation to the priesthood. While he is afraid of her he still wants to know her more and more. The

strong attraction is the same one that a soul feels to God after the first "taste" of Grace.

Hugh's parents Peggy and Tom are charmed by Maria and notice that there is an attraction between Hugh and Maria. Peggy begins to wonder if Maria is a threat to Hugh's vocation.

Maria suggests they all go for a midnight swim and Hugh and his parents agree to the idea. After swimming Maria, while sitting on the dock, begins to talk about the beauty God created in the nature around them. Peggy adds that her family should be grateful to God for sending Maria to them so they may appreciate the night. On the way back to the house after swimming, Hugh and Maria lag behind Hugh's parents. In unspoken agreement they stop at a gazebo. Hugh tells Maria how amazing he thinks she is and he wants to kiss her knowing she'll let him. But Hugh remembers his vocation and feels that to kiss her would be going against it so he decides not to. Hugh asks himself: "Why do temptations have to be so pathetic and so lovely" (22).

Hugh's infatuation with Maria shocks and excites him, yet he feels he must resist it. His seminary education tells him how bad sins of the flesh are but he feels that Maria is somehow different. Hugh still feels that Maria's uniqueness might be good and that life is full of hard choices and his he made for priesthood, not for Maria. Hugh does not yet realize that Maria is God's Sacrament to him. Resisting Maria, Hugh feels, is a measure of his toughness.

Hugh's parents, while admiring Maria, feel that there is something dangerous to their son's vocation about her. But they

too can't resist the temptation of her Grace. Hugh's father remembered:

That little Italian girl made a simple thing like swimming a Sacrament, a revelation of God's Grace. Very neat, very pointed, very simple. He did make the lake and the sky and the moon and us. Sometimes we Irish have to be reminded of the sacredness of such things (26).

During that summer Hugh and Maria fell in love but the seminary always clouded the relationship. Hugh thought of the role his mother played in his vocation but decided that it was his. Hugh felt his call to the priesthood...

...[was] attributed to the demanding religious faith in which he had been raised, a faith that challenged him to do his best even...when it was difficult (27).

Hugh also remembered his last year of elementary school, how during a retreat a priest explained how to receive God's mercy:

He told the boys they were cisterns of filth and that their dirty thoughts would lead them to an eternity of suffering in the deepest flames of hell. "If you want to avoid hell," he said, "you must follow the call of God and become a priest. God gives everyone a call to the priesthood...You can turn your back on a vocation, you can waste it away. But if you do, you will be consumed by the fires of hell for all eternity" (28).

All of Hugh's life he felt he must earn the Grace and mercy of God, not realizing the Grace and mercy were always there. They are things that can't be earned.

Once during the summer Hugh demands that Maria "do better" at packing a sail from his boat. Maria responds angrily and Hugh admits he must always follow "the rules." He blames it on his "Irish conscience." Maria does not live, act or behave by "the rules." She does not need to earn Hugh's love or anyone else's, she simply is who she is and offers herself freely. She

demonstrates how God acts, not following rules or laws but drawing straight with crooked lines.

Hugh's father observes Hugh during the summer as seemingly being fought over by Peggy and Maria.

"Hugh...momentarily appeared between the two women... [they] seemed to be fighting for him, one in the name of an over-arching God, the other in the name of young love. Tom knew who would win. He was not sure that she ought to win or that her victory would make her happy for very long" (42).

Peggy is one image of God's Grace, Maria another; yet both are demonstrations of how God acts. God, like Peggy, can be a jealous lover drawing, enticing, beckoning, but always freely giving so that the choice to be drawn, enticed, beckoned is up to the individual person. Maria freely gives without drawing, enticing, or beckoning. She simply waits after making her presence known, much as God does in solitude, silence and waiting, but always being present.

Peggy finds herself attracted to Maria, her attitudes, her mannerisms and her freedom, as she says "how could God object to someone so sweet?"

He seemingly succumbs to Maria, he forgets seminary, priesthood, vocation; it is only Maria he thinks of. Hugh himself drew the lines in which they showed tenderness and respect for each other. Maria would not draw any lines; she was free and open.

Hugh's mother and father finally tell him they are aware of what is happening between Maria and him. They even tell him if he should choose to leave the seminary Maria might be the ideal girl to marry. Hugh reacts coolly telling them it's just a

summer romance, nothing lasting. He is lying to himself and to them. Later as he feels guilty he admits he doesn't want to end the relationship: he knows he can't. He doesn't want to stop it.

Maria finally brooches the subject of the relationship with Hugh by asking him to marry her. She offers herself totally to him. Hugh protests that he is called to priesthood and Maria tells him he is in the seminary for his family.

...you'll satisfy that crazy Donlon notion that if something is hard, maybe impossible, then it is what God wants. And if something is fun and will make you happy it is sinful...I'm not as good a Catholic as you Donlons maybe, but I know God wants us to be happy. If you become a priest because you think you have to, Hugh, you're not doing what God wants (56).

He denies he is doing anything he doesn't want to just as he denied his love for Maria to his parents. He becomes caught between his mother's constant calling and Maria's mere free presence.

Before the summer ends Maria decides she has to lose her virginity sometime and Hugh might as well be the boy she gives herself to. Maria knows Peggy senses what could happen, yet neither of them hate each other. One day Hugh and Maria go to pick raspberries and during the expedition it begins to rain. Both of them run to a family friend's nearby unoccupied cabin and start a fire to dry their clothes. After wrapping themselves in towels Hugh starts some coffee but stops when he sees Maria come out of the bathroom. He gently pulls her towel off and tenderly caresses her face, then the rest of her body. Maria internally gives assent to Hugh's touch. But Hugh

suddenly stops, cries out as if in pain and throws himself on the sofa. After a long silence Hugh apologizes to Maria who tells him he has nothing to be sorry for. The storm ended and so did the summer. Hugh and his father drove Maria to the train station on the day she had to return home. Hugh and Maria exchange a simple kiss and the relationship seemingly ends.

Maria offered her greatest gift to Hugh, her love and along with it her virginity and body, for a human being's love is traditionally consummated through the joining of bodies. She knew Hugh still planned on returning to the seminary and still because of her great love for him she offered herself with no strings attached. She was to give something to Hugh that he had no right to, but she felt that to give herself she might help Hugh see he did not have to earn anything.

Hugh could not see beyond the belief which stated sex was dirty and hell awaited those who engaged in it outside of marriage where it is only tolerated for procreation. He couldn't draw the parallel between God's giving His son to die so humans might have Grace and live and Maria's offering of her body so that he might see that he didn't have to earn her love-- or God's.

Maria is hard to forget about back at the seminary but by sheer determination and toughness he puts her out of his mind -- most of the time.

Two years after his summer with Maria Hugh goes on a family mission to try to lure his younger sister back to the family nest. Marge, his sister, has become a Las Vegas showgirl. He

doesn't try guilt or coercion, but he uses the same methods as Maria had used with him, presence and offering. Marge has no intentions of returning, but Hugh lets her know he cares for her and loves her unconditionally. Maria taught him well and though he feels he has to earn Grace, he can show others they need not earn it. God waits patiently for humans to respond just as Hugh will wait for his sister to return as he knows she will.

Ten years after his summer with Maria finds Hugh a priest in a wealthy parish with a psychotic pastor and an alcoholic fellow associate. He is a wonderful priest; most of the people love him, but he is unhappy. His pastor is an autocrat bordering on sociopathy and Hugh is running the parish almost solely on his own. He is tired, worn out, but he feels he must continue because God wants him to.

Hugh's priesthood started in the turbulent years during Vatican II when the whole Catholic Church as an institution was shaken to its foundations. The clear cut answers to questions Hugh learned in the seminary of the 1950's were not at times relevant to the questions asked in the mid 1960's. During these years Hugh's Sacrament or gift of Grace, Maria, is absent from his life. He hears from her once, a post-card, telling of her marriage to a Naval officer and congratulating him on his ordination.

His few bright moments occur when he is closely working with and loving his people. Greely uses these times to show that while the Grace that is Maria is not physically present there are other smaller images of it present. These times are

when he is functioning as a priest, a dispenser of Grace through one of the traditional seven Sacraments. An example:

----"Bless me, Father, because I have sinned," a lisping voice no more than seven years old..."I missed my morning prayers, I was disobedient sixteen times and I committed adultery three times."

---"You really should tell God good morning when you wake, shouldn't you?"

----"Yes, Father."

----"Sixteen times is a lot to be disobedient, isn't it?"

----"My little sister is a lot more disobedient than that."

----"Uh-huh...Now, how did you commit adultery?"

----"I called my mother a shit behind her back."

----"That wasn't very nice."

----"It was terrible, Father. I love Mommy, and I don't want to go to hell."

---"God loves you too much to let you go to hell. That's a bad word, especially about Mommy. But God is like your Mommy: He doesn't stay mad at you."

----"Mommy would be awful mad if she knew I called her a shit."

And Mommy would die of laughter if she were listening to this. Stay a comic angel, little guy.

---"Well, we just won't tell her and we won't use that word again, okay?"

----"Yes, Father."

Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven made?, Hugh thought...(115).

Greeley uses this dialogue again to remind his readers that Grace first comes and the individual responds for or against it. He also uses it to further his feminine images of Grace. Hugh tells the child that God is like his Mommy, God doesn't stay angry with us, and then Hugh thinks to himself the child's mother would die of laughter if she heard the little one's confession of adultery. God smiles at our responses to his gifts of Grace and our own responses to the freedom he gives us.

Hugh meets Maria's husband, Steve, who is in town for a lay-over before returning to his Naval command in Viet Nam. Maria suggests he attend Sunday Mass at Hugh's parish and say hello. Maria and her two sons are moving back to Chicago until

her husband's tour of duty overseas is over. Hugh thinks of calling her but decides against it. He becomes like a soul who refuses the Grace God offers, yet Maria, like God, will continue to offer her gift.

Into Hugh's life comes Sister Elizabeth Ann, a young nun who teaches in the grade school of Hugh's parish. She is a beautiful woman who seems full of life. From the beginning Hugh's priest-friends take a dim view of Elizabeth Ann (or Liz as Hugh is soon to call her). They feel she and other young progressive nuns like her will be problems to themselves and others because of their rapid reforming ideas. Liz is a bit of a radical, Hugh thinks, but she's very sensitive to him and the children she teaches.

Liz runs into problems with the pastor and Hugh protects her. A friendship soon develops after Hugh has challenged the pastor. Liz is also impressed with Hugh's warmth and response to the people. Though she feels him a little dated in his theology she is very taken by one of his sermons.

We must remember, that we do not earn God's forgiveness by our sorrow or by our reparation. God's love is given. It is always there, waiting patiently for us. We need only to turn to Him to receive it. He is pleased with our efforts but even He is even more pleased with us. You cannot earn God's love because He gave it to you before you started to earn it. No more than any love can be earned. Love is always given before the effort to win it or it will never be won (123).

The people are a little uncomfortable with this sermon; it made it a little too easy. They think it is a strange new doctrine, something from Vatican II. The people had always been taught they must suffer, fast, and mortify themselves; Father Hugh.

contradicts that. Protesting phone calls came in, and Hugh quoted to the chapter and verse of the Canon on First Grace being an unearned gift from the Documents of the Second Council of Orange. He fought and defended what he preached and what the Church herself taught. But this was for everyone else not for Hugh; he had to earn God's love and Grace.

The years went by, Hugh's sister Marge returned to the family and the Church just as Hugh felt she would. Maria again dropped into Hugh's life, at Marge's wedding; she complimented Hugh on the sermon he gave at the nuptial Mass where he spoke of Marge and her husband being Sacraments of God's love to each other. He also preached of forgiveness and how it was freely given. However nice she felt it was she who told him he didn't believe a word of it; that he believed God forgives everyone but a Donlon. She tells him he thinks he has to earn God's love. Again he met Maria, but he closed that chapter in their lives. Again Maria, like God, would wait.

Liz and Hugh grew closer and Hugh was not only drawn by her charm, but also by some of her new theology. After a while though Hugh thought it might be an excuse for the physical attraction he felt towards her. Because of Hugh's attraction for Liz and his frustration, Hugh becomes involved with a parishioner, he slides into a deep depression and only his time with Liz is the brightness in his life. Liz is transferred from the parish because of her new theology and clashes with the pastor. After his own clash with the pastor, Hugh leaves the parish. He is offered a chance to study demography and reluc-

tantly accept his bishop's offer of continuing education. Liz is also studying at the university and she has become deeply involved in radical Catholicism. Her place of residence is called Christ Commune and includes married priests and nuns, ex-priests and nuns and so-called Christian Marxists. While Hugh is not interested in the so-called "New Religion" he is interested in Liz and goes along with her friends and ideas.

Maria again appears in Hugh's life and Hugh again rejects her Grace but still is touched by it. Liz and Hugh finally consummate their relationship with sexual intercourse. Hugh feels guilty, Liz angry. Liz eventually becomes pregnant and Hugh turns to his old seminary spiritual director, now rector of the seminary, Monsignor Martin who tries to dissuade Hugh from marrying Liz. Hugh now focuses his need to earn love on Liz instead of God, on obligations instead of Grace. Monsignor Martin tells Hugh:

"You don't love her, Hugh, not one but."

"I think I do, Monsignor."

"Then you're kidding yourself. Don't do it, Hugh; it won't be a happy marriage. Then there will be other women. You won't be able to control yourself once you've gone off the deep-end. The demons will drag you to hell."

"Harsh words, Monsignor, demons, hell--Do you mean that seriously?"

"I'm not talking everlasting hellfire, Hugh. I'm talking man-made hell. Marry that woman and you'll take your first step in you own descent into hell" (136).

Finally, Greeley reaches the point in his work where the final step down to Hugh's own created hell takes place. He has rejected God's Grace through Maria and even Peggy, his mother's measure of God's Grace.

The hell Greeley speaks of through Monsignor Mart~~in~~'s words is the human created hell of the Old Testament; the hell of the Apostle's Creed: "...He [Jesus] descended into hell..." The hell Adam and Eve created by their disobedience to Yahweh in Eden. The place where the souls of the just went before the coming of the Christ who would open the gates to bring them to the Father. As an ancient homily for Good Friday, when Christ dies and was put in the tomb puts it:

Christ has gone to search for our first parents, as for lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness...he has gone to free Adam and Eve...finding them He says, "Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead and Christ will give you light. Out of love for you and your children I command by my own authority all those held in bondage to come forth...I did not create you to be held prisoner in hell. Rise up from the dead for I am the life of the dead. Rise up and leave this place, for you are in me and I am in you; together we form one person and cannot be separated...For the sake of you who left the Garden, I was betrayed in a garden and I was crucified in a garden...My sleep in the grave will rouse you from your sleep in hell...Enter now the Kingdom prepared for you, and with you all the souls of the just who sleep" (Kelly et al, 25).

Hugh creates his own hell first by his turning from Grace as Adam and Eve did, but also by trying to earn and gain what was already there, just as our first parents tried to gain knowledge when already they had Grace. The descent into the hell is not the salvific descent of Christ but the descent of Adam and Eve. His choosing marriage to Liz which is turning from God and turning to one who will help in his destruction completes the descent. The Grace of God in Hugh's life, Maria, must descend into Hugh's hell to bring him to a life of Grace. Initially, Liz did not want to marry, abortion was out of the question, and she would have the child alone. Hugh too

wondered to himself if Liz should go away and bear the child; he had often advised young women not to marry when they were in the same situation. Hugh finally decides he truly loves Liz and will marry her. Liz, after deciding that she would leave her religious community pregnant or not, agrees to marry Hugh. Hugh attempts to apply for a dispensation from his commitment to the priesthood. He is told that to receive a dispensation he must say he was not free to make a fully human choice, that he didn't understand celibacy, and that his salvation depends on entering the married life. While Hugh agrees to do this just to receive the dispensation, he becomes infuriated when the vice chancellor, Monsignor Cronin, reacts badly to his announcement that the woman is pregnant.

Hugh's father, Tom, tells his wife that Hugh is leaving the priesthood to marry. She is bitterly against it. Peggy tells Hugh to leave the priesthood if he must, but not to marry Liz. "You are going to create for yourself a life of unending misery" (239). Hugh realizes the similarities between what his old spiritual director, Monsignor Martin said and what his mother said.

Hugh decides to go ahead with the marriage and it takes place in a civil magistrate's office. Three weeks after the ceremony Liz spontaneously aborted what turns out to be not even a fetus but a malformed embryo. Liz and Hugh settle down to a dreary life. Liz became pregnant again soon after the miscarriage. Hugh became a commodities trader at the Board of Trade after his father and brother-in-law bought him a seat.

Liz felt that the job was something only a "capitalist" would do and opposed Hugh's taking it. He began the work with much gusto and enjoyed it more than he did his marriage to Liz who turned out to be moody and depressive. Liz began to work as a Director of Religious Education in a parish and really didn't care for the job. Hugh finally received his dispensation and Liz was released from her vows. They were married in the Church. The marriage is a stormy one, Liz's black moods and Hugh's constant drive to earn more money on the trading floor strain it to the limits. Two children are brought into the world through their union. A boy and a girl both spoiled by Liz and turned from their father by her.

Hugh, occasionally, is asked by people at the Board of Trade to hear a confession, counsel and comfort. Old parishoners call on him for advice. Hugh, who has all but abandoned his belief in the Roman Catholic institution, feels uncomfortable and yet touched by the requests. He never refuses to help.

Despite his marriage people still recognize him as a "priest forever." It is only through these moments of being a dispenser of Grace taht he feels any Grace in his own life. Yet as the people at Christ's crucifiction said of Jesus, "He saves others but he cannot save himself." (Matt. 28.42A) Hugh will not save himself because he will not accept the Grace to attain salvation.

Maria and Hugh never see each other though they live in the same city and work in the same area. Maria has become vice

president of a bank, her husband is an MIA in Viet Nam and she is raising two boys. She hears of Hugh through Peggy who she sees occasionally.

Hugh makes it big at the Board of Trade and settles an old score from his days at his first parish. He literally destroys a fellow trader who double-crossed him. He is also involved sexually with the trader's wife. He enjoys the pain he is inflicting on people. Yet, when he is alone, he thinks of Monsignor Martin's demons and his descent into hell. Hugh becomes involved sexually with the trader's daughter and relishes the discovery of the affairs when the trader walks in after Hugh and the trader's wife have just finished having sex. After this incident Hugh swears off other women and is filled with guilt, but does not seek Grace.

Hugh and Liz try a second honeymoon in Corfu. Hugh will try anything to patch the marriage. Liz agrees but is the same moody Liz in Greece that she was in the States.

In Corfu Hugh runs into Maria who is also vacationing there with her husband who has just been released from a POW camp in Viet Nam. Hugh and Liz, Maria and her husband have dinner together but the affair is strained by Liz's liberal views of U.S. involvement in Viet Nam.

Hugh seeks Maria out to apologize. Maria, of course, accepts and Hugh tells her about his life after leaving the active ministry. He shares his pain with her, his infidelities and the troubles of his marriage:

"From the very beginning, Maria, I've done everything I could, absolutely everything. I don't know what

more I can do." Maria exploded. "How like a Donlon. Do! Do! Do! Why not just try being for a change!" "I don't know what you're talking about." He sounded angry. Too bad for him..."You are too busy keeping all your Goddamn rules ever to to be anything for her or the kids" (368).

Maria and Hugh go for a swim and talk of the days they shared at the lake the summer they first met:

"Oh God, Hugh, I have to say it. Despite the bad things that have happened and the ugly chains you've tied around yourself there's as much beauty in you as there was that first day" (371).

Hugh makes a sexual advance and this time, unlike the first, Maria ends it. Hugh trying to earn Grace again loses it.

Five years after his last sight of Grace, or Maria, finds Hugh as the United States Ambassador to the People's Democratic Republic of the Upper River, a small African nation. Hugh accepted the presidential appointment as a term of public service, but also to atone for his greed. He had become one of the chief traders at the Board of Trade. Hugh was going to expiate his sins, but expiation is like contrition: it does not make a person free.

Dante in his seventh ring of the Inferno speaks of the place where Hugh has let himself be:

Fraud of the other sort forget both love
[human and divine]
Of kind, and that love too whence is begot
The special trust that's from above.

Hugh's fraud is the kind that is not betrayal of just human love but Divine Love or Grace. It is fraud of trying to earn the love that first "begot the special trust that's from above." The trust from above being the offer of Grace and the strength to attain salvation.

Yet even in the Democratic Republic of the Upper River, Hugh was touched by God's Grace in a small way. He was called upon to be an instrument of Grace through his priesthood. A marine guard's request for confession, an embassy employee's need for spiritual counseling and comfort only a priest could give, thought Hugh.

Grace especially touches Hugh when he goes to check on a Peace Corps team that is being held by insurgents in the interior of the country. A member of the team is the daughter of one of Hugh's first parishoners, Laura Kinkaid. He caes greatly for the girl and during the rescue mission is himself captured along with Liz. Together with the Peace Corps team and his wife Hugh must endure humiliation at the hands of the soldiers. The women are about to be raped and tortured, Liz screams for Hugh to absolve them.

He did not want to die, although he wasn't quite sure why. His life was such a waste--failed priest, failed husband, failed father, failed human being. Would God forgive him? Was there a God? He tried to do his best...Maria had faulted him there. Do, do, do, she'd said. What else was there (403)?

To Liz's plea Hugh thought:

An odd time to think of God, God? There was no God. How could there be a God? Hugh said the words. "I absolve you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (403).

Hugh and his party were rescued just in time. Back at the Embassy Hugh and Laura sat and talked abot what she will do back in the States. She tells him she is entering the Poor Clares, a cloistered order of nuns. Hugh is amazed:

"Why" was all he could say.

"Why any love, Hugh? Since I was tiny I've known some-

one loved me and wanted me specially. I don't know why He does. He doesn't insist. He doesn't even push. he just waits. He won't love me any less if I say no. Only I don't want to say no" (410).

Laura becomes an exposé of God's Grace, and how it acts in her life. She tells Hugh how she is going to respond to it. Grace again is shown to Hugh, he knows it's present in the world. But still he doesn't respond to it. Not yet.

Shortly after his river adventure Hugh receives a call from Washington telling him he is under investigation for Commodities fraud. He is accused of stealing ten million dollars. Hugh's brother, Tim, who shared the Board of trade firm with Hugh, and was the family's black sheep lost the money on the Commodities floor and was allowing his brother to unjustly pay for the sin. He, however, wrote out a notarized statement accepting guilt but hid it. No one, however, knew this at the time of Hugh's indictment. Hugh's lawyer arranges a lesser sentence with the judge on the case. But the judge has a grudge from school days against Hugh and Hugh ends up with an eighteen month sentence in a federal prison. Hugh is betrayed by Liz too at this time, she takes the children and leaves him.

Again in prison, Grace finds Hugh, if only for him to be a dispenser of it. Other inmates came to him with problems, for confession, and once Hugh gave the Sacrament of the Sick to an inmate who suffered a heart attack. Again, only for others, never for himself was Grace possible.

Liz filed for divorce and asked for everything: the money, the children, the house. Hugh pleaded nolo contendere.

Shortly afterward Sean Cardinal Cronin, the same Monsignor

Cronin who was against Hugh's dispensation and marriage years ago came for a visit. Cronin was now head of the Archdiocese where Hugh was a priest. Cronin wants him back in the priesthood after he finishes his sentence. Hugh is swayed and begins to wonder. Hugh finds out shortly after Cronin's visit his brother, his wife and two children were killed in a plane crash in Puerto Rico, apparently after running away together. Maria sees him at the funeral and finds out from Cardinal Cronin that Hugh was set up and innocent; something she knew in her heart but did not worry about the details. She seeks and finds Tim's hidden letter that will exonerate Hugh.

Maria in doing this not only becomes his savior in the flesh, but begins to become his chance for spiritual salvation.

Back in prison Hugh makes his peace with God. Though he still can't accept Grace, he is sorry and in his way wants to do the right thing.

On the day that Hugh was to leave prison he thought of how his family and friends expected him to go back to the priesthood. He was beginning his climb out of his hell; he had a long, slow climb back before he could be alive again. Where could he make the climb better than in the priesthood?

Maria wanted Hugh for a husband and this time wasn't going to lose him. His mother wants him back as a priest but she'll be happy if he's happy anywhere. Maria and Peggy call a truce. Each recognizing that they share Grace and Hugh needs that. Maria arranges to pick Hugh up at the prison and has made reservations for the two of them at a resort.

Maria becomes Hugh's Christ: she makes her descent into hell so Hugh may end his ascent into hell. Maria approaches Hugh bearing Grace, the thing that will give him salvation. By her own authority and that of the God she has spoken for, she draws forth Hugh from the hell he has created for himself, just as did Adam and Eve. Maria calls him forth as Christ called Adam and Eve.

Hugh and Maria finally consummate the love they felt for each other: "Maria stood before him totally naked--solemn and clear eyed--a woman giving herself wholly and without conditions (470). Maria offered her body and her love as God offers His Grace and love. After their first love-making Maria asks if Hugh enjoyed it and Hugh admits he did. He tells Maria, though, he feels he must go back to the priesthood.

"Now Hugh, I hear you love me, but you are still obliged to go back to the priesthood because you must do penance for your sins...I don't believe a word of it and neither do you."

"I must seek forgiveness Maria."

"That's nonsense. Remember your sermon at Marge's wedding? Forgiveness is there to begin with. It's given, just as it was to that poor woman in the Bible they were going to stone to death..."

She put her hands on his head. Sacred love offering her benediction...

..."Maria, I must climb out of hell...I can't..."

"No you don't. You can't escape that way. You should stretch up your hands to God. And let Him pull you out." She put his hands about her waist and pulled him back to her. "This way."

"Hugh I love you...I always loved you and I always will, no matter how much you hide from me" (472).

They made love again, and Hugh felt a slight reflexive guilt, but shrunk it away. "He did not possess, he was possessed" (473). He suckled her breast and Maria held his head to it,

Hugh forgot everything but love and hope.

Hugh returned home and all his priest friends and family assumed he'd return to the active ministry. Hugh saw the Cardinal who welcomed him back and offered him a place in his Archdiocese. Hugh attended the Liturgy of Good Friday right after seeing the Cardinal. Afterwards an ancient hymn for Good Friday stuck in his mind:

The royal banners forward go
The cross shines for in myst'ry glow
Where he, by whom our flesh was made,
In that same flesh the ransom paid...

There with its steel of cruel spear
His side was pierced, where there appear
Of blood and water hollowed streams,
To cleanse the souls he now redeems... (483).

Hugh leaves the Cathedral to go home and thinks of Maria. How Maria opened her arms just as Christ did on the cross embracing the whole world.

Near Maria's house he sees Maria kneeling over a crumpled figure on the ground. An old Irish grandma from the neighborhood had a heart attack while out walking. Hugh immediately remembers his priesthood and goes to the woman.

"It's alright Granny." Hugh said. "I'm a priest. I'm here to help. God loves you, Granny. He's coming to take you home."

"Ah no, Father,...God will never forgive me; I'm the greatest sinner that was. During the Black and Tan Wars and the Troubles, I committed the most terrible sins. I'm an evil old woman, I'm going to hell for certain."

"...You're sorry for all the sins of your life?" Hugh held her hand fiercely; he would not let her die until she was ready.

"I am Father, I am. It's too late, I'll never be forgiven."

"Stop that, woman," Hugh ordered sternly. "I'll not have you talking that way about God, and you yourself on your

way to join him. He's forgiven everyone already, and that's a fact. God loves us..."

"He's a tricky one, isn't He?"

"Lovers always are, Granny, you know that"

"There's truth in that, Father, right enough. Quick now Father, give me absolution; say the words; He's coming for me, He wants me now; I'll not escape Him this time." The woman sat up as if trying to embrace an invisible lover.

"I absolve you from all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...and grant full pardon for everything you've done wrong in your whole life."

"He's here now Father and Himself smiling like a young man in the hedges of Galway" ...For a moment she smiled... ..then slumped forward (484).

Hugh finally accepts what he himself says to others: God loves his creatures, that's a fact. No one can earn it. It's there and offered to be taken.

Hugh Donlon is the central character in Andrew Greeley's work on the gratuity of God's Grace. Grace is given, the Catholic Church teaches, through Sacraments, signs of a deeper reality. Maria Manfredy becomes an eighth Sacrament complimenting the canonical seven numbered by the church. Maria also parallels some of the canonical seven. Hugh swims with Maria and is renewed, he feeds at her breast and on her body receiving spiritual nourishment, and she lays her hands on his head, strengthening him by her love. These are parallels of the Sacraments of Initiation, Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, by which all Catholic Christians receive their gifts of God's Grace. Maria acts as God would: lover, friend, bechoner, parent, and teacher. Maria causes Hugh to reach up to be pulled out of his hell. She helps him reach up to Christ's open arms on the cross, to reach and accept the embrace of Grace, love and salvation. Humans accept Grace and begin a relationship with

God, who gives love; enough to forgive and accept a human's chance to follow and attain salvation. Christ's sacrifice on the cross earned the salvation that is already there for humans to take.

For our sake he opened his arms on the cross,
He put an end to death and hell and revealed the
resurrection...He earned a holy people...

(Eucharistic Prayer II)

Hugh makes his final profession of his faith in Grace in the last sentences of the book. It makes small his attempts to earn salvation.

The ancient Greek Easter greeting leaped out of his mouth, an explanation for everything.

"Christ is risen, Maria, Alleluia."

"Bet you don't think I know the answer to that.

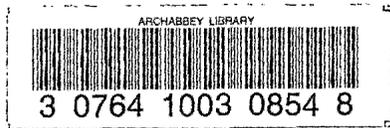
"He is risen, indeed, Alleluia" (487).

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