Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Sola Gratia, Solo Christo: The Roman Catholic Doctrine of Justification

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Introduction

The doctrine of justification was, as John Calvin stated, the "hinge of the reformation." James Buchanan provides us with the classic "reformed" definition: "Justification is a legal, or forensic, term, and is used in Scripture to denote the acceptance of any one as righteous in the sight of God." Understood in this way, justification is purely extrinsic to the sinner, inasmuch as he is justified solely on the basis of Christ's righteousness graciously imputed to him. The sinner does not become righteous himself, but because he trusts in Christ's work for him, he is considered innocent by God the judge. In this way, works contribute nothing to justification; it is by faith alone.

In contrast is the Roman Catholic position, which sadly, few evangelicals even bother to consider, let alone understand. In many cases, the issue is naively boiled down to justification by faith, on the one hand (evangelicalism), versus justification by works, on the other hand (Roman Catholicism). This crass caricature has little basis in reality, and hampers the cause for theological truth and Christian unity. In this essay then, I will summarize the Roman Catholic teaching on justification. To accomplish this task, I will consider the Council of Trent's "Decree Concerning Justification," the most even-handed and representative Church pronouncement on the issue to date. I will also consider a wide array of Catholic authors, both past and present.²

The Roman Catholic Teaching

Our study of the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification begins, as the Council of Trent suggests, with a discussion of original sin.³ The Council states:

The holy council declares first, that for a correct and clear understanding of the doctrine of justification, it is necessary that each one recognize and confess that... all men had lost innocence in the prevarication of Adam, having become unclean, and, as the Apostle says, by nature children of wrath. (Sess. VI, Chap. I)

¹ James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1961), p. 226.

² My goal is to set forth the Catholic position, not to critique it. Thus, I will not preface my remarks with such phrases as "the Catholic position says" or "in Rome's view." The reader should assume that all of the text represents the Catholic teaching. Now the Catholic view of grace and justification is very complex. Due to the scope of this essay, therefore, many subject areas (e.g., metaphysical questions, purgatory, indulgences, the mode of God's indwelling in the soul, etc.) relating to the Catholic teaching on justificaiton have been excluded. The reader should consult the footnotes, however, for elaboration on certain points.

³ For a Roman Catholic treatment, see A.M. Dubarle, *The Biblical Doctrine of Original Sin* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964).

Adam's sin involved the loss of his supernatural status as a son of God.⁴ The Roman Catholic doctrine of justification, therefore, is concerned essentially with "the restoration of that justice which Adam possessed prior to his sin, and which he loses by his sin." The Council of Trent itself summarizes the justification of the sinner as "a translation from that state in which man is born a child of the first Adam, to the state of grace and of the adoption of the sons of God through the second Adam, Jesus Christ, our Savior." (Sess. VI, Chap. IV)

As an outcast estranged from God's family, the sinner can do nothing to merit justification; he is dead in sin and in need of God's grace. The *sola gratia* then, is an integral aspect of the Catholic doctrine of justification, and is clearly affirmed by Trent, "...we are therefore said to be justified gratuitously, because none of those things that precede justification, whether faith or works, merit the grace of justification." (Sess. VI, Chap. VIII) It is impossible for man, as a sinner, to contribute anything to his justification; it is purely gratuitous.

Grace then, enables individuals to have faith, 8 repent, and be baptized. 9 Trent states:

Now, they (the adults) are disposed to that justice when, aroused and aided by divine grace, receiving faith by hearing, they are moved freely toward God,

⁴ Matthias J. Scheeben, an eminent German Roman Catholic theologian of the 19th century, explains, "It is a complete estrangement and separation of man from God as his supernatural end, and is met with on God's part not by a simple displeasure—involving disfavor in the moral sense—but by a forcible ejection from the state of the children of God, a stripping away of the supernatural raiment of grace." In short, the divine sonship of Adam was lost thru original sin.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 614-615.

⁶ The Council of Orange, in condemning the Pelagian and semi-Pelagian heresies, states, "If anyone asserts that we can, by our natural powers, think as we ought, or choose any good pertaining to the salvation of eternal life, that is, consent to salvation or to the message of the Gospel, without the illumination and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who gives to all men facility in assenting to and believing the truth; he is misled by a heretical spirit..." (Canon 7) For a good discussion of the Catholic teaching, see Louis Bouyer, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1956), pp. 43-58.

⁷ Michael Schmaus, a Catholic dogmatician, sums it up nicely, "Man needs something, as vital to him as his daily bread, which he himself cannot earn. Grace is for him a matter of life and death; yet he cannot obtain it through his own efforts. Thus he must learn that grace is a gift. The ultimate reason for this is that God is absolute transcendence, and no amount of effort or exertion on man's part can bring God within his grasp." *Justification and the Last Things* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1977), p. 21.

⁸ Trent states, "...we are therefore said to be justified by faith, because faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and root of all justification, without which it is impossible to please God and come to the fellowship of sons..." (Sess. VI, Chap. VIII)

⁹ In the case of the infant, "the process has simply the character of an ineffable, supernatural generation, to the exclusion of all cooperation between the person generated and his begetter. With adults the case is different... Hence the grace which comes down from above is met by an ascent from below; the descent of the supernatural into nature is matched by an effort of the latter to raise itself. In this case also the activity of God, regarded in its power and efficacy as the communication of supernatural existence and life, remains a true generation." Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, p. 633.

believing to be true what has been divinely revealed and promised...and they begin to love Him as the fountain of all justice, and on that account are moved against sin by a certain hatred and detestation, that is, by that repentance that must be performed before baptism; finally...they resolve to receive baptism, to begin a new life and to keep the commandments of God. (Sess. VI, Chap. VI)

In this process, the sacrament of baptism is the instrumental cause (Sess. VI, Chap. VII) of justification. ¹⁰ In baptism, the sinner is endowed with new qualities, ¹¹ and passes from a state of enmity towards God to a state of grace; he is adopted into God's family as a son. In short, justification in the Catholic view is the gift of divine sonship, lost in original sin, and regained in Christ.

Justification understood in this way involves both the imputation of sonship and the infusion of Christ's grace. These two aspects are inseparable, for as God imputes family standing to the sinner, the sinner does in fact become a member of the family; sonship is no legal fiction. ¹² God effectuates what He declares. Hence, when God declares the sinner righteous, it is more than a mere legal declaration. It is a creative and transformative action whereby God takes someone and breathes into Him that Spirit of sonship which cries, "Abba!" "Father!" Gratuitous, therefore, means more than the

¹⁰ Emile Mersch S.J. states, "In the order of logical succession, the first effect of baptism will be the destruction of original sin and all other sins. By joining a man to the Church, the sacrament joins him to Christ in His union with men, that is, to Christ who gives Himself to mankind in His passion and in the Mass. And Christ who thus gives Himself is Christ who destroys original sin and all sins. By uniting us to Christ finally, baptism unites us to the Son, to God, to the Trinity; it incorporates us into Christ and confers on us divine adoption, grace, the supernatural life, and the indwelling of the whole Trinity." *The Theology of the Mystical Body* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1951), pp. 561-61.

¹¹ The three theological virtues, faith, hope, and love are infused into the soul. Schmaus states, "...in the divine act of justification man is given the capacity for a divinizing life in faith, hope, and love. Actually this teaching of the Council of Trent does not differ from the idea of regeneration put forward by the Reformers, which refers simply to the justifying action of God himself in man." Justification and the Last Things, p. 83. In Calvinist doctrine, regeneration leads to faith, which in turn leads to justification. Thus, justification is preceded by an infusion of new qualities, i.e., an inner transformation which produces in the individual an orientation towards faith and works. The Calvinist then, finds himself in the same camp with the Catholics in placing regeneration before justification in the order of salvation. To many Lutherans, this amounts to denying the sola fide. If justification depends on an inner transformation, then it is no longer justification by faith alone. See for example, Edward Boehl, The Reformed Doctrine of Justification (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1946), pp. 195-196; Robert Brinsmead, "Further Observations on the Order of Justification and Regeneration," Present Truth 5/6 (September 1976), p. 17. Also of importance is the Norman Shepherd controversy at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. The views of Professor Shepherd were vigorously debated because he did not make clear the distinction between faith and works in justification. He maintained that inasmuch as they are both the result of God's regenerating work, there is no warrant for separating them; they are both equally necessary for justification (even if faith is given priority). Professor Shepherd eventually left Westminster because of the controversy.

¹² Canon F. Cuttaz states, "With God, no abstraction or fiction is possible. He does not call anyone His child unless He has made him His child. He does not love anyone with a Father's love unless he is really His son." *Our Life of Grace* (Chicago, Illinois: Fides Publishers Association, 1958), pp. 78-79.

¹³ John Henry Newman sums up the matter with his usual eloquence, "Justification is an announcement or fiat of Almighty God, which breaks upon the gloom of our natural state as the Creative Word upon Chaos;

receipt of divine favor. What God imparts in the gift of grace is Himself, nothing less, and this life-giving divine gift is a metaphysical, ontological communication of Christ's sonship.¹⁴

This internal renovation is essential. For individuals are both imputed with Adam's guilt and infused with his corrupt nature; they are declared sinful, and at the same time, they really are sinful. Hence, justified persons are both imputed with Christ's righteousness and infused with His life;¹⁵ they are declared righteous because, in virtue of Christ's indwelling life and holiness, they really are righteous.¹⁶ The remission of sins is possible because the grace of Christ is infused into the person, making him a child of God. By virtue of this new filial relationship, the individual is no longer subject to the wrath of God.¹⁷

God's judgment then, is directed towards a child in the second Adam, and not a rebel criminal in the first Adam. This helps explain why justified persons need not be perfect themselves; they are justified by virtue of their new relationship to God as sons. The judgment is taking place then with regard to Christ's grace alive in the individual, at whatever degree of growth; the indwelling grace of Christ justifies sinners.¹⁸

that it declares the soul righteous, and in that declaration, on the one hand, conveys pardon for its past sins, and on the other makes it actually righteous." *Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification* (London, Oxford, and Cambridge: Rivingtons, 1874), p. 83.

¹⁴ "Hence divine sonship formally consists in an impression of the hypostatic likeness of the Only-begotten Son of God..." Joseph Pohle, *Grace: Actual and Habitual* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1929), p. 360.

¹⁵ Robert W. Gleason S.J. states, "The two, infusion of grace and remission of sin, are simultaneous in the order of time, but in the order of casual priority the infusion of grace is prior, since it brings about the remission of sin." *Grace* (New York: Sheed & Ward, Inc., 1962), p. 97.

¹⁶ Scheeben explains, "To join together again the severed strands of the supernatural bond with God, no mere change of the direction of man's will can suffice. If man is to be reunited to God as Father, God himself must raise him up again to His side, and through the Holy Spirit must pour forth into man's heart filial love for Himself. If the sinner is to be freed from God's disfavor, it will not at all suffice for God to cover up the sinful deed with the cloak of forgetfulness, and simply remit the guilt in response to the sinner's repentance. To forgive the sin fully, God must again confer on man that favor and grace which He had bestowed on him before he sinned. God must again draw man up to His bosom as His child, regenerate him to new divine life, and again clothe him with the garment of His children, the splendor of His own nature and glory." *The Mysteries of Christianity*, pp. 615-616.

¹⁷ Scheeben elaborates, "That is to say, as long as we think of ourselves merely as God's creatures and bondsmen, we can be objects of the divine wrath and abhorrence on account of the guilt we have loaded upon ourselves... God is ever entitled to adequate satisfaction, which the creature himself can never render. But if...we pass from the condition of bondage to the bosom of God by a supernatural birth, that is, if we become God's children, we immediately cease to be objects of God's wrath and abhorrence." Ibid., p. 619.

¹⁸ The legal satisfactory aspect of the atonement is not denied by Catholics. Scheeben, for example, recognizes the "infinite value of Christ's satisfactions, by which the debt is literally paid and cancelled." Ibid., p. 617. What is primary, however, is the paternal act of the father with regard to the child, not the juridical act of the judge, with regard to the criminal. Now the child has been a criminal, so Christ dies to take the punishment and in his suffering, he does have that vicarious role.

In this study, we have referred to God's grace in several different ways. First of all, the supernatural enlightenment of the understanding, enabling people to shun evil and do good, is called "actual grace". An initial act of faith, for example is a result of "actual grace." We have also seen that "grace is an inward gift communicated by God to the soul, in virtue of which man is made holy and pleasing to God, a child of God, and heir of heaven." This abiding quality in the soul is called "habitual" or "sanctifying grace." As long as the individual retains this grace, he remains justified. Now this grace is nothing less than the presence of God in the soul. For as we have seen, grace is an abundant provision, an ontological substance, and not just a subjective attitude of favor.

The justified person continually seeks to obtain this grace. The Council of Trent states:

Having, therefore, been justified and made the friends and domestics of God...they, through the observance of the commandments of God and of the Church, faith cooperating with good works, increase in that justice received through the grace of Christ and are further justified, as it is written: He that is just, let him be justified still. (Sess. VI, Chap. X)

Understood in this way, it is clear that justification is a process, and not merely a once and for all act.²⁴ The sinner is reborn as a son of God. After the birth process, however, the Father expects for that life to be nurtured, to be cultivated by the son. In other words, the Father has not simply given sonship as a welfare check; He has given life that is to be

¹⁹ "It is called actual because it is not permanent or inherent, but a transient divine influence upon the soul." W. Wilmers, S.J. *Handbook of the Christian Religion* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1921), p. 282.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ ibid.

While sanctifying grace removes sin from the soul in baptism, the inclination towards sin, or concupiscence, remains in the justified person. Now a person can commit venial sin and remain in a state of grace, but he loses this grace by committing mortal sin. As Trent states, "...it must be maintained that the grace of justification once received is lost not only by infidelity... but also by every other mortal sin." (Sess. VI, Chap. XV) See Peter Fransen, S.J. *The New Life of Grace* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1969), pp. 250-272.

²³ As Cardinal Newman states, "....He justifies us, not only in word, but in power, bringing the ark with its mercy seat into the temple of our hearts; manifesting, setting up there His new kingdom and the power and glory of His Cross." *Lectures on Justification*, pp. 102-103.

²⁴ In defense of this idea, some Catholics point to the justification of Abraham cited in Romans 4:3: "For what does the Scripture say? And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." In this passage, Paul quotes from Genesis 15:6 in order to show that Abraham was justified by faith and not circumcision (in order to refute the judaizers), for he was not circumcised until Genesis 17. The Catholics maintain that Paul also refutes the evangelical interpretation, for it is apparent that "Abraham was," as Myles M. Bourke points out, "put into a condition of friendship with God (cf. Is. 41:8) by his first response to the call and promise of God narrated in Genesis 12:1" "St. Paul and the Justification of Abraham," *Bible Today* 10 (Feb. 1964) p. 649. Abraham was justified in Genesis 12, before he was declared righteous in Genesis 15. This declaration, therefore, could not, as evangelicals believe, refer to Abraham's conversion; in this passage then, justification is a process.

lived out. The inheritance of salvation is then the natural culmination of lifelong growth in filial dependence, obedience, and maturity, all of which require the subsequent cooperation of the regenerated person with God's operating grace.

"Sanctifying grace" is precisely the means by which the children of God "grow up," so to speak. We have seen how this grace is infused in individuals through baptism when they are first justified, incorporating them into God's family. Simply put, the rest of the sacraments²⁵(especially the Eucharist) are covenantal dispensers of divine grace, ²⁶ whereby the children of God receive spiritual food to help them further mature in the family.²⁷ Inasmuch as the justified person continually seeks to obtain this grace through the sacraments and by doing good works, justification is indeed by works.²⁸ The *sola fide* then, is not a part of Catholic doctrine.²⁹

One effect of "sanctifying grace" is the power of merit, i.e., the capacity to win heaven as a reward. Now, if grace is gratuitous (as its name indicates), and merit is an effect of grace, then merit too is gratuitous. But how is this so? As a plethora of biblical passages indicate, there is a direct connection between works performed and an individual's future standing in heaven. 30 Simply put, this is God's free promise to the justified person to

²⁵ It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the Catholic sacramental system in any detail. For a good introduction, see Colman E. O'Neil, O.P. *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments* (Staten Island, New York: Alba House, 1964).

²⁶ While this grace is conveyed *ex opere operato*, the sacraments are of no positive value without real faith. Louis Bouyer, the distinguished French Oratorian, explains, "The guiding principle of Catholic ascetical teaching has always been the necessity of a personal effort from each individual – from which no person or thing can absolve him--to appropriate the spiritual riches of faith and the sacraments...neither adherence to the faith of the Church, nor the sharing in its rites and sacraments, are of the least value to us apart from an effort no one can make in our stead, the effort to carry faith in our lives, to make the grace of the sacraments fecundate our lives. Without this interior response, authentic and personal, so we are assured by the whole Catholic tradition, the most scrupulous observance of the externals of religion, the most verbally correct profession of the faith of the Church will, in effect, be quite useless to us and will serve to our own condemnation." *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, pp. 112-113.

²⁷ Joseph Pohle explins, "Being our father by adoption, God is bound to provide us with food worthy of a divine progenitor. The food He gives us (the Holy Eucharist) corresponds to our dignity as His children, sustains us in this sublime relation, and at the same time constitutes the pledge of a glorious resurrection and an eternal beatitude." *Grace: Actual and Habitual*, p.360.

²⁸ Works in the Catholic sense, however, are themselves gratuitous. Gleason states, "Our justice is still gratuitous even when it depends upon our works, because the radical principle for all merit is itself the original gift of grace. While our justification implies activity on our part, still the only reason that we can act in the divine order is the original gift of grace..." *Grace*, p. 92.

²⁹ Obedience and faith are inseparable, and are both a result of grace. Cardinal Newman's observation clears up the matter, "It seems, then, that whereas Faith on our part fitly corresponds, or is the correlative, as it is called, to grace on God's part, Sacraments are but the manifestation of grace, and good works are but the manifestation of faith; so that whether we say we are justified by faith, or by works or by Sacraments, all these but mean this one doctrine, that we are justified by grace, which is given through Sacraments, impetrated by faith, manifested in works." Newman, *Lectures on Justification*, p. 303.

reward his actions when that person obeys His commands.³¹ When God rewards meritorious works, therefore, He is simply crowning His own achievements in the justified person as a result of the Holy Spirit working in him.³² As Augustine states, "When He rewards man He rewards only His own gifts."

Summary and Conclusion

Due to the limitations of time and space, I must draw this study to a close. To summarize, we saw that the original justice, or the divine sonship, of Adam was lost through original sin. Justification, in the Catholic sense, is the restoration of that sonship through the second Adam, Jesus Christ; sinners are reborn through baptism as sons of God. In this process, justification is purely gratuitous. The Holy Spirit works in the sinner, effectuating in him an orientation towards faith and good works. Through baptism, he is imputed standing in God's family and infused with Christ's grace.

Justification then, involves both the legal remission and the actual removal of sin. The forgiveness of sins is possible precisely because the justified person stands in a new relationship to God as a son. Because the grace of Christ is in him, original sin is blotted out, actual sins are remitted, and grace is continually imparted to overcome concupiscence. The justified person continually seeks to obtain "sanctifying grace" through the sacraments (which in the case of adults, we are useless without real faith) and by doing good works. In this sense, individuals are justified by works as well as faith, but always by grace alone and Christ alone. Justification is a process, therefore, whereby higher standing is progressively conferred upon children growing up.

Finally, we saw that one of the benefits of being in a state of grace is the ability to merit the reward of heaven. God is a faithful father, promising to reward the good works of justified persons. In doing so, He crowns his own achievements, for even the most pious saint is ever dependent on God's grace.

As I stated in the introduction, a critical evaluation of the Catholic view is beyond the scope of this study. Yet, I think a few brief comments are in order. First of all, this study has forced me to abandon some false notions I have had for some time now, including my belief that Roman Catholic doctrine and the *sola gratia* are mutually exclusive. Furthermore, the stereotypical picture of Catholicism (among evangelicals) is that of a

³⁰ For example, Matt. 10:42, 19:29, 25:35-40; II Cor.4:17, 5:10, II Tim. 4:7-8. See Cuttaz, *Our Life of Grace*, p. 239.

³¹ Cuttaz states, "God's pledge to reward good works by the gift of new degrees of participation in His happiness is an effect of His love for His children. It makes them share even now in His own divine life, thus giving them the means of intensifying at will their supernatural life and dignity and their future beatitude." Ibid., p. 243.

³² Gleason explains, "It is with no abdication of His limitless rule that He graciously binds Himself to reward our good actions. In doing so He rewards His own goodness, for the source of all merit is the gift of grace...It is only His promise to reward us that enables us to claim a reward." *Grace*, pp. 173-174.

legalistic system unconcerned with saving faith in Christ. While this may be true sometimes in practice, it has no place in the actual teaching of the Catholic Church.

Secondly, I find appealing the way in which Roman Catholics explain justification through the covenant family idea, 33 without ignoring the imputative legal aspect. In fact the imputative aspect is naturally explained within the framework of the covenant family. In the natural realm, a father imputes family standing to his new born son, not on the basis of any works done on the son's part, but because of the seed of sonship alive in the son as a result of the father. In the same way, God the Father declares us to be heirs in His supernatural family. But just as the birth process in the natural realm, God expects His children to grow up, and, He is glorified in raising them up in His likeness, making them stronger and wiser. The inheritance of eternal life, therefore, is the reward of filial obedience and maturity. This in essence, is the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification. The strongest case for the Catholic view is made by those who explain justification in this way, and yet, paradoxically, many Catholics themselves seem unaware of the covenant family paradigm. 34

On the negative side, I still, as a Calvinist, affirm the notion of the perserverance of the saints. Yet, it is clear that in the Catholic view, the threat of losing one's salvation and falling out of a state of grace is very real. I must confess, however, that this misgiving is made without really having made an effort to understand the Catholics on this point. Indeed, the Catholic doctrine of grace is very complex; I have only scratched the surface in this essay. Further study on this important issue, I think, would prove fruitful for evangelicals.

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³³ The family is the covenantal motif throughout Scripture, according to some theologians. The eminent Roman Catholic OT scholar D.J. McCarthy, for example, understands the covenant in terms of a family relationship. See his *Treaty and Covenant* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1963), p. 177.

³⁴ M.J. Scheeben, writing in the 19th century, makes this important appeal, "...both factors comprised in justification—the remission of sin and the assimilation to our supernatural end—are rooted in the grace of divine sonship and are based on that grace. At one and the same time the grace of sonship expels all guilt from us, and infuses into us a love for God which is the love of a child or a friend.

For this reason the Council of Trent, when propounding the true nature of justification, could confine itself to the statement that it is "a transference from the state in which man is born a son of the first Adam to a state of grace and adoption of the sons of God."

In these words the Council singles out the element that imparts to Christian justification its supernatural, mysterious character. We must cling to these words and make them our point of departure, if we would appreciate the full excellence of justification. If all the theologians had done this, the notion of justification would have escaped the shallow and muddled treatment that has so often disfigured it." Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, pp. 622-623.

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