

with God. How can I be angry with the One who loves me so much that He was willing to die for me so that all my sins might be forgiven, and so that when I die I can go to heaven." That, dear friends, was a beautiful testimony of a dying Christian.

How can any of us ever be angry with what God allows to happen in our lives, when He has given us so much. And what more can we ask for our loved ones, or for ourselves than what is told us in this brief text, that "the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin."

"Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end." Amen!

JUSTIFICATION IN CONTEMPORARY ROMAN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY:

DOES IT DIFFER FROM THE POSITION OF THE COUNCIL OF TRENT?

By

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Introduction

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian church body in the world, and in the United States. All of us are no doubt acquainted with Roman Catholics, in many cases we have relatives who are Roman Catholics, and some of the members of our congregations are married to Roman Catholics. For all of these reasons it is important for us to understand Roman Catholicism, and to be able to answer questions about the Roman Catholic Church with clarity and accuracy.

Until recent times the relationship between the Evangelical Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches was almost always characterized by mutual suspicion and animosity. When the Council of Trent (1545-1563) defined post-Reformation Roman Catholicism in ways that seemed to contradict the Lutheran view on almost every doctrinal point, the die was cast for a division within Christendom that would appear to both sides to be irresolvable. During the four centuries that followed Trent there was very little cordial contact or communication between the two churches, or between the laity and clergy thereof. However, for the past 30 years or so there has been a "thawing" of sorts in this relationship. On the Roman Catholic side this has been due in large measure to the influence of the Second Vatican Council. According to David P. Scaer,

The Second Vatican Council, known simply as Vatican II, meeting intermittently from 1962 to 1965, changed church

direction. It will probably be considered the most important event for the Roman Catholic Church in this century. ...

Vatican II tried to remove barriers between Roman Catholics and Protestants, Jews, Mohammedans, and even unbelievers. Some Roman Catholic theologians are suggesting that their church recognize the Augsburg Confession, considered the first formal expression of Protestant Reformation faith. ... The anathema against Luther has not been lifted, but it would be no surprise to many if this happened. ...

The internal developments within Roman Catholic theology were complex and even contradictory, but the developments within the worshipping life of the people were clear. The basis of these developments was the fresh understanding of the universal priesthood of all believers, so essential to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. The mass was no longer recited in Latin but in the vernacular, and individual bishops had the liberty to offer to the laity both the bread and wine, thus correcting abuses of long standing. Protestant hymns including Luther's "A Mighty Fortress" were sung and more attention was paid to preaching. ...

The changes within Roman Catholicism have been real and internally disruptive. That church is simply not the same today as it was in 1945.¹

Since the reforms of Vatican II Roman Catholic worshippers have been able to hear and sing every week, in a language they can all understand, such evangelical liturgical texts as the *Gloria in Excelsis* and the *Agnus Dei*. The lessons from Holy Scripture are likewise read in the vernacular, and Catholic laity are also encouraged to own and read their own copies of the Bible. We joyfully welcome any developments among Roman Catholics which would bring about for them an increased exposure to the Scriptures and their Gospel message, and we sincerely pray that God will graciously work through the power of his Word to create and sustain faith. Yet not all the developments in the Catholic Church since Vatican II have been positive. The use of the

¹ David P. Scaer, in an added chapter in *The History of Christian Doctrine* by E. H. Klotzsche (Baker Book House, revised edition 1979), pp. 367-69.

historical-critical method of Biblical interpretation, and the teaching of theistic evolution in the scientific disciplines, have become the norm in many of the educational institutions of the Church, and have done much harm. "Liberation Theology" and similar theological trends and movements represent doctrinal aberrations that are arguably more serious than those which Luther and the other Reformers addressed in the sixteenth century.

A thorough analysis of all aspects of the doctrine and practice of the post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church, and of the changes which have occurred in recent decades, is far beyond the purview of this paper. We will therefore limit ourselves to a study of the *locus* of justification, both in its Tridentine formulation and as it is currently understood in modern Catholic theology. We have chosen this *locus* as the focal point of our attention because Lutherans, by definition, are preeminently interested in the way in which God's justification of the sinner is explained in the various corners of Christendom. Indeed, our Confessions describe the subject of justification as "the chief article of the entire Christian doctrine."¹ And in the words of Luther, as quoted in the Solid Declaration,

Where this single article remains pure, Christendom will remain pure, in beautiful harmony, and without any schisms. But where it does not remain pure, it is impossible to repel any error or heretical spirit.²

As a "barometer" for our analysis of Rome's doctrine of justification it would probably be helpful to have before us a brief summary of the Confessional Lutheran doctrine of the same. Article IV of the Augsburg Confession reads as follows:

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and

¹ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration III.6, in *The Book of Concord*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Fortress Press, 1959), p. 540.

² Weimar Edition 31.255; quoted in Solid Declaration III.6, p. 540.

that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.¹

Article III of the Solid Declaration tells us

that a poor sinner is justified before God (that is, he is absolved and declared utterly free from all his sins, and from the verdict of well deserved damnation, and is adopted as a child of God and an heir of eternal life) without any merit or worthiness on our part, and without any preceding, present, or subsequent works, by sheer grace, solely through the merits of the total obedience, the bitter passion, the death, and the resurrection of Christ, our Lord, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness. The Holy Spirit offers these treasures to us in the promise of the Gospel, and faith is the only means whereby we can apprehend, accept, apply them to ourselves, and make them our own. Faith is a gift of God whereby we rightly learn to know Christ as our redeemer in the Word of the Gospel and to trust in him, that solely for the sake of his obedience we have forgiveness of sins by grace, are accounted righteous and holy by God the Father, and are saved forever.²

The truly catholic character of the Lutheran teaching is confirmed by the following statement from St. Ambrose, the fourth century bishop of Milan, which is quoted in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession:

But the world was subjected to him [God] through the law; for by the commandment of the law all are accused and by the works of the law none is justified, that is, by the law sin is recognized but its guilt is not relieved. The law would seem to be harmful since it has made all men sinners, but when the Lord Jesus came he forgave all men the sin that none could escape and by shedding his blood canceled the bond that stood against us (Col. 2:14). This is what Paul says, "Law came in to increase the trespass; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20) through Jesus. For

after the whole world was subjected, he took away the sin of the whole world, as John testified when he said (John 1:29), "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" So let no one glory in his works since no one is justified by his deeds. But he who is righteous has it as a gift because he was justified after being washed. It is faith therefore that frees men through the blood of Christ; for "blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Ps. 32:1).¹

Trent's Position on Justification

The Council of Trent offered an official, definitive response to the claims and teachings of the Reformation, and its decrees and canons are still considered to be binding for members of the Roman Catholic Church. (In this regard, however, we do observe that a large number of Roman Catholic theologians seem to be willing to "submit" to the doctrinal standards of their church only in a qualified and less-than-wholehearted manner, similar to the way in which many theologians in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America "subscribe" to the *Book of Concord*.) Lutherans are usually very familiar with those Tridentine canons, from the sixth session of the council, which deal directly with "justification by faith," and which condemn it. Those which have most often been quoted by Lutheran historians and polemicists are:

Canon 9. If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will, let him be anathema.

Canon 11. If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the *charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost*, and remains in them, or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema.

¹ Augsburg Confession IV (German), in Tappert, p. 30.
² Solid Declaration III:9-11, pp. 540-41.

¹ Ambrose, Epistle to Irenaeus; quoted in Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV:103, in Tappert, pp. 121-22.

Canon 12. If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ's sake, or that it is this confidence alone that justifies us, let him be anathema.

Canon 20. If anyone says that a man who is justified and however perfect is not bound to observe the commandments of God and the Church, but only to believe, as if the Gospel were a bare and absolute promise of eternal life without the condition of observing the commandments, let him be anathema.¹

To the Lutherans of the sixteenth century, and of the centuries that followed, some of these statements seemed almost blasphemous. J. T. Mueller's interpretation of their meaning, written in 1934, is highly illustrative:

The Roman Catholic sect is the greatest enemy of the Christian Church; for all Christians live, move, and have their being in the doctrine of justification by faith. But this doctrine the papacy does not permit its adherents to accept and believe. It rather reviles and curses the Scriptural doctrine of justification by faith (*c.f.* Council of Trent, Sess. 6, Cans. 9, 11, 12, 20) and trains its followers to seek salvation by works. The Church of Rome has murdered thousands bodily for their adherence to the doctrine of justification by faith and millions spiritually by teaching them to trust in justification by works.²

From the perspective of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, we would have to say, at the very least, that the above-cited Tridentine canons do not follow "the pattern of the sound words"³ of St. Paul and the other New Testament writers in their teaching on justification. Yet if we want to understand the intended meaning of these canons, we cannot simply assume that they are operating with "Lutheran"

¹ The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, in *Creeds of the Churches*, Third Edition, edited by John H. Leith (John Knox Press, 1982), pp. 421, 422-23.

² John Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (Concordia Publishing House, 1955), p. 368.

³ 2 Timothy 1:13, Revised Standard Version.

definitions of the terms "justification" and "faith." We know what those words mean to us, but what did they mean to the bishops and theologians at Trent? When we examine and evaluate Trent's canonical rejections of "justification by faith," we must do so within the broader context of that council's other pronouncements, and in light of its own understanding of the words "justification" and "faith."

According to Trent, justification

is not only a remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man through the voluntary reception of the grace and gifts whereby an unjust man becomes just and from being an enemy becomes a friend, that he may be *am her according to hope of life everlasting*.¹

When Trent speaks of "justification," therefore, it is using that term in a "broad" sense. To borrow some Lutheran theological categories, Trent's definition of justification includes not only the "alien" righteousness of Christ, imputed to Christians when their sins are forgiven, but also the "inherent" righteousness which is present and active in the life of a believer but which, on this side of the grave, is always incomplete. Correctly understanding the Tridentine definition of justification allows us, then, to understand how Trent can speak of the "increase" of justification:

Having, therefore, been thus justified and made the friends and *domestics of God*, advancing *from virtue to virtue*, they are renewed, as the Apostle says, *day by day*, that is, *mortifying the members of their flesh*, and presenting them as instruments of justice unto sanctification, 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...²

In regard to "faith," Trent speaks of it as

the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and root of all justification, *without which it is impossible to please God* and to come to the fellowship of His sons; and we are

¹ The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, p. 411.

² The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, p. 414.

therefore said to be justified gratuitously, because none of those things that precede justification, whether faith or works, merit the grace of justification.¹

Yet Trent does not endorse the Lutheran *sola fide* formula, due in part to the fact that Trent defines the term "faith" in a very different way. For example, Trent can make the following statement about the continuation of "faith" even in those who have forfeited their salvation:

Against the subtle wits of some also, who by *pleasing speeches and good words seduce the hearts of the innocent*, it must be maintained that the grace of justification once received is lost not only by infidelity, whereby also faith itself is lost, but also by every other mortal sin, though in this case faith is not lost; thus defending the teaching of the divine law which excludes from the kingdom of God not only unbelievers, but also the faithful [who are] *fornicators, adulterers, effeminate, liars with mankind, thieves, covetous, drunkards, railers, extortioners*, and all others who commit deadly sins, from which with the help of divine grace they can refrain, and on account of which they are cut off from the grace of Christ.²

"Faith," according to Trent, does not involve a heartfelt, personal trust in the promises of God, but is merely a mental acceptance of the doctrines of the church. (And, of course, no genuine Lutheran has ever claimed that this kind of faith justifies us.)

Therefore, when Trent anathematizes "justification by faith," it is not so much anathematizing the actual Lutheran doctrine but a non-existent doctrine of "justification and sanctification" by "correct doctrine." Most Roman Catholic historians now acknowledge that the Tridentine fathers did not really understand the Lutheran teaching, due largely to the fact that they defined "justification" and "faith" in different ways, and that Trent therefore condemned only a caricature of the Lutheran/Protestant position. P. De Letter, for example, writing in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, speaks of "the Council of Trent's overtly anti-Protestant bias, which stiffened the oppositions and blurred or left

unmentioned the points of contact between the Catholic and the Protestant doctrines."¹ De Letter admits that "Few, if any, Protestants, past or present, would recognize their faith" in the views attributed to them by Trent.²

Positively speaking, Trent describes "the justification of the sinner" as "a translation of the 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 Saviour."³ Trent does not embrace the *sola gratia* principle in the form in which it was used in the Lutheran construction, but as a partial corrective to some of the more crass forms of medieval semi-Pelagianism. Trent does emphasize the absolute priority and necessity of divine grace in the conversion and justification of the sinner. Under the category of "preparation for justification," especially in regard to adult converts to the Christian faith, Trent declares that

the beginning of that justification must proceed from the pre-disposing grace of God through Jesus Christ, that is, from His vocation, whereby, without any merits on their part, they are called; that they who by sin had been cut off from God, may be disposed through His quickening and helping grace to convert themselves to their own justification by freely assenting to and co-operating with that grace; so that, while God touches the heart of man through the illumination of the Holy Ghost, man himself neither does absolutely nothing while receiving that inspiration, since he can also reject it, nor yet is he able by his own free will and without the grace of God to move himself to justice in His sight. Hence, when it is said in the sacred writings: *Turn ye to me, and I will turn to you*, we are reminded of our liberty; and when we reply: *Convert us, O Lord, to thee, and we shall be converted*, we confess that we need the grace of God.⁴

¹ P. De Letter, "Justification," in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. VIII (McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), p. 87.

² De Letter, p. 90.

³ The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, pp. 409-10.

⁴ The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, p. 410.

¹ The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, p. 413.

² The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, p. 418.

Evangelical Lutherans would not recognize here a fully acceptable form of teaching concerning the grace of God, but it is an improvement over some of the expressions regarding "free will" which had often antagonized Luther and the other Reformers. Also under the category of "preparation for justification," Trent makes some interesting statements about the importance of "hope" and "trust" in a person's relationship with God, demonstrating that it does not promote the crass "justification by works" doctrine sometimes attributed to it:

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, believing to be true what has been divinely revealed and promised, especially that the sinner is justified by God *by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*; and when, understanding themselves to be sinners, they, by turning themselves from the fear of divine justice, by which they are salutarily aroused, to consider the mercy of God, are raised to hope, trusting that God will be propitious to them for Christ's sake; 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, when they resolve to receive baptism, to begin a new life and to keep the commandments of God.¹

From a Lutheran perspective we might say, therefore, that Trent's teaching on justification, when carefully analyzed, may not be as "bad" as we might have thought it was, but at the same time it is still not as "good" as it could be. There are two very basic problems which remain in the Tridentine system:

1. The distinction between "justification" and "sanctification," so crucial to Lutheran theology, is not recognized, and the two kinds of righteousness associated with each category, "alien" and "inherent," are blended together. And when a Christian's right standing before God is attributed to this blended "righteousness," rather than exclusively to the gracious imputation of *Christ's* righteousness, then the absolving and

¹ The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, pp. 410-11.

liberating message of the Gospel is seriously distorted. There is also, as it were, a "frame-shift" in the Tridentine approach, so that the kinds of things Lutherans would say about justification, Trent says about the *preparation* for justification; and the kinds of things Lutherans would say about sanctification, Trent says about justification. Trent does teach that justification is the work of God, yet God's justifying grace is presented not in the form of a divine promise to be believed, but in the form of a divine process to be experienced. Lutherans do teach that the "experiential" righteousness of a believer's sanctification will of necessity manifest itself in God-pleasing "fruits" of the Holy Spirit, and in the good works that naturally flow from a genuine faith. But Lutherans also recognize that, in this life, this righteousness is never untainted by sin. From the perspective of the New Testament, and especially the writings of St. Paul, the "inherent" righteousness of sanctification is not, and cannot be, in whole or in part, the righteousness which avails before a holy God and brings reconciliation with him. A penitent Christian who looks to this imperfect righteousness as a factor in his or her acceptability to God cannot be fully comforted by the certainty of God's complete and unconditional acceptance in Christ, on the basis of Christ's *perfect* righteousness, as revealed in and bestowed through the Gospel.

2. The proclamatory theological approach of the Scriptures is replaced by the speculative theological approach of the medieval Scholastics, so that an undercurrent of rationalistic syncretism permeates the entire Tridentine construction. Confessional Lutheran theology allows two paradoxical assertions to stand side by side within the symbiotic tension of its law-gospel dialectic, namely that those who are lost are lost by their own hardness of heart alone, and those who are saved are saved by God's grace alone. Lutheran theology avoids the extremes of determinism, on the one hand, and Pelagianism, on the other, through a proper distinction and application of law and gospel. In contrast, Tridentine theology seeks to find its balance in an awkward *harmonization*, or unnatural *synthesis* of law and gospel, giving due emphasis

neither to the complete spiritual incapacity of fallen humanity, nor to the complete sufficiency and recreative power of God's forgiveness.

Justification in Contemporary Catholic Theology

As we now jump ahead to a study of the way in which Trent's teaching is interpreted in post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism, we must note at the outset that Vatican II did not reconsider, or make any specific pronouncements on, the doctrine of justification. However, the spirit of open theological inquiry which Vatican II engendered has, in the past several years, facilitated and encouraged a renewed discussion of justification among Roman Catholics, and between them and other Christians. We must be familiar with this ongoing "discussion," and not only with the sixteenth-century pronouncements of the Council of Trent, if we want to know what kind of justification theology is actually being taught and preached in the Catholic Church of today.

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According to Peter, Trent's position regarding the attainment of justification is that

Human assets do not suffice — not the works of nature, nor those of the Mosaic law, nor those in general which are still possible for a free choice that is not destroyed, however weakened it may be. Human works of whatever kind are not of themselves enough; God's grace given through Jesus Christ is needed. . . .

¹ Carl J. Peter, "The Decree on Justification in the Council of Trent," in *Justification by Faith, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, edited by H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess (Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), p. 228.

But the issues are not thereby all resolved. One could hold that fallen human beings need such grace merely to *facilitate* their living as God wishes and meriting life everlasting. The unspoken assumption would be that free choice could accomplish both but just barely and only with the greatest difficulty. Trent would have none of this. To live righteously one needs to be *enabled* and *empowered* by God's grace. That grace is an inspiration and aid that comes from the Holy Spirit. It is given prior to the passage of human beings from sin to forgiveness. Without it no one can believe, hope, love, or repent in such a way that the grace of justification is bestowed. . . .

For Trent, because of the divine promise in Christ, eternal salvation (heaven) is both a grace and a reward for the justified adult who hopes in God and perseveres to the end in good works. But justification is only a grace for the sinner, who has no merits; nowhere is it proposed as a reward for works of nature, free choice, or some combination of these with divine grace.¹

In discussing Trent's teaching on the "preparation for justification," Peter describes the nature of "faith" in a way which he hopes will be acceptable to Lutherans:

The process does not begin with fear or with repentance. It begins with faith. That faith comes from God's grace enabling the sinner to accept freely God's revelation of human sinfulness and promise of forgiveness. In more contemporary terms this faith, which accepts that revelation and promise as *true*, is incipiently self-involving for the sinner. It is not a detached and impersonal awareness of the truth of just any proposition; it is an appreciation of the truth of a general situation that involves the believer and calls for a reaction. In this faith the general need of forgiveness comes home personally to the sinner, who is struck with a fear resulting from a keen awareness of the distance between God and self. Such fear is beneficial in directing the sinner to the divine mercy promised in Jesus to all the unworthy, and therefore to himself or herself as well. Devastated by the prospect of divine

¹ Peter, pp. 220-21.

justice, the sinner is brought by grace to hope when confronted with the prospect of divine compassion. In context, hope means confidence that the forgiveness God has promised to all in Jesus will be given to the one who has come to believe, fear, and hope here and now.¹

Peter seems to be aware of the fact that he will have a difficult time convincing Lutherans to accommodate themselves to Trent's teaching on the cooperation of the human will in conversion and justification. With the use of what the Reformers might have called "subtle sophistry," the logic of which is not always easy to follow, Peter nevertheless does make a valiant attempt:

Receiving the grace one could reject is the believing, fearing, hoping, beginning of love, repenting, and desire of baptism that were described above. That receiving, one recalls, is a choice against rejection. Not to reject the grace one is well able to reject is freely and as a result of God's grace to refrain from doing what a sinful creature could do on his or her own resources, namely, sinning yet more. As a whole that preparation is God's work; his grace precedes, accompanies, and completes it; to that grace all that is positive in the process relates entirely and not just partially. As a whole it is also the work of the unjustified human being who does not do altogether nothing when all he or she does as a result of grace is not to sin further at any stage of the process. ...

For all that is positive in the process leading to justification, God is decisive; for the fact that more sin does not occur by rejecting the grace leading to justification, the sinful human being is decisive. In the second case decisiveness has reference to what does not happen although it could. Called by grace to be justified, the human being does not respond: "I prefer to remain the way I am, God!" That restraint, that refraining from uttering a sinful refusal to the invitation of God's grace, does not suffice to start, maintain, or complete the process leading to forgiveness and new life; there God is

decisive just as the human would be in further sin and possible damnation.¹

In his discussion of the "causes" of justification, Peter notes first that, according to Trent,

The agent at work is the merciful God, whose *efficient causality* is expressed in terms that deserve special attention. Under no obligation to do so (*gratuito*), God not only washes clean and sanctifies (1 Cor. 6:11) but also signs and anoints the sinner with the Holy Spirit of promise, the pledge of our inheritance (Eph. 1:13ff.). ...

In terms of merit the cause is Jesus Christ, who out of love (Eph. 2:4) for us while we were yet sinners (Rom. 5:10) won justification for us by his suffering and cross. ...

The sole *formal cause* is the justice of God, not that by which he is himself just but that by which he makes us just. This is the justice... by which we are renewed and by which we are not only reckoned just but are so in fact. Each of us receives his or her own justice according to the measure meted out by the Holy Spirit, who distributes to each as he wishes and according to the proper disposition and cooperation of each recipient. When the merits of Jesus Christ are communicated to sinners, something happens. Through the Holy Spirit the charity of God is poured forth into the hearts (Rom. 5:5) of those who are justified. The latter are engrafted into Christ and united with him; they receive not only the forgiveness of sins but also faith, hope, and charity. What is it that is within a justified person and that makes him or her just in his or her own distinctive way? That is, in the council's terms, to ask about formal causality; to this question Trent answered: "A created justice distinct from that of God and Christ!"²

With all due respect we must respond to this last point by saying that such an understanding of justifying righteousness is "distinct from" that of St. Paul the apostle!

In the concluding paragraph of his essay, Peter imploringly writes:

¹ Peter, p. 224.

² Peter, pp. 225-26.

Trent clearly meant to maximize the role of faith in all justification, do Lutherans today regard the results as sufficient or at least as not deficient to the point of being necessarily church-divisive?¹

While we recognize and appreciate the emphases on grace and faith which Peter's interpretation includes, Confessional Lutherans cannot respond in the affirmative to Peter's question as posed above. Even when putting the best construction on Trent's teaching regarding grace and faith, that teaching cannot ultimately be disentangled from the pre-suppositional flaws (a basic law-gospel confusion and a spirit of syncretism) which color and shape the Tridentine formulations.

Another participant in the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue is the Jesuit scholar Avery Dulles, also on the faculty of Catholic University of America. In an essay on the doctrine of justification in contemporary Catholic theology, Dulles states at the outset that

The theology of justification in Roman Catholic teaching has undergone no dramatic changes since the Council of Trent, which gave the classic response to the problems raised by the Reformation. The general thrust of Trent was to reduce justification to an element or aspect of grace. Catholic theologians have felt more at home with the theology of grace, viewed in its transforming impact on the recipient (rather than simply as God's graciousness), and have generally given only passing attention to justification as God's forensic deed on behalf of sinners. Justification is rarely discussed at length except in polemics against, or dialogue with, Protestants.²

Dulles also notes, however, that

In the twentieth century there has been a strong movement away from Scholasticism, especially in its modern forms. In part the new tendency was supported by the Thomistic revival, which led to fresh interpretations of the Angelic Doctor. Even more powerfully, it has been supported by other trends such as the biblical revival, the patristic revival, and

¹ Peter, p. 228.

² Avery Dulles, S.J., "Justification in Contemporary Catholic Theology," in Anderson et al., p. 256.

personalistic phenomenology. As a result of these movements, the leading Catholic theologians of the past generation have considerably modified the theology of grace found in early twentieth-century Scholastic manuals.¹

Dulles then summarizes some of the more influential treatments of justification by recent Catholic theologians, who often wrote in response to the concerns of Lutheran and Reformed theologians, and who sometimes were influenced by them.

Under the heading, "Imputed and/or Inherent," Dulles writes:

In reaction against some Protestant statements that stress the alien or extrinsic character of justification, Catholics have tended to emphasize that righteousness is really communicated to the recipient, who becomes inherently just. God's justifying sentence is regarded as effective and thus as producing what it declares. Not untypically Karl Rahner, while admitting that the objective event of God's act in Christ is causally prior to any change in the redeemed, holds that the subjective justification of the individual is really identical with that individual's sanctification. He criticizes Hans Küng for leaving it unclear whether justification and sanctification are two aspects of a single process or two successive phases. Piet Fransen, like Rahner, holds that justification and sanctification are "simply different approaches, through different symbolisms, to one identical reality: that through grace we share in the divine life."²

It may be helpful at this point to see how Lutheran theologian Robert Kolb addresses some of these concerns in his newly-published book, *The Christian Faith*:

Some Lutherans have understood Luther's teaching regarding the pronouncement of righteousness upon the sinner in an unclear manner. They have thought that Luther was suggesting that "God says I am righteous, and we will let him believe that. But that is not really the case. The fact of the matter is, I am a sinner. But I will be glad to let God think otherwise

¹ Dulles, p. 257.

² Dulles, p. 257. The Fransen quotation is from *The New Life of Grace* (Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 55.

even if his view of me is not the real me." This "unreal" understanding of God's justifying Word tends to place the center of human reality in human consciousness, in human activity. Luther did not believe that was the case. Luther placed the highest level of reality in God's Word and in his gracious disposition toward his children. When God says that we are righteous, that we are his children, nothing can be more real. All reality came into being through God's Word. We still experience how sin permeates all our thoughts, words, and deeds, weakening the best of our own righteousness (Is. 64:6). But that experience does not determine the ultimate reality of our life, even here and now. God's Word, which has re-created us through its pronouncement of our innocence and righteousness, is the ultimate reality of our lives.¹

Returning to Dulles' essay, we read that, Rahner's and Fransen's viewpoint notwithstanding,

many Catholic theologians regard justification language as indispensable. Hermann Volk, for example, holds that imputation is an essential aspect of the event of justification, for according to Paul righteousness is given by grace through the merits of Christ, which are reckoned to the believer. Ricardo Franco takes the term justification in the active sense as signifying primarily God's judgment which creates a new bond between the human person and God. In this sense, he insists, justification is not a mere synonym for the infusion of grace. It signifies not simply that we are made just but that we are acknowledged as such by God, whose eschatological judgment determines both our present condition and our ultimate destiny. Because of the centrality of the forensic element, it would be wrong to imagine that we are pronounced righteous because we are inherently such. Rather the reverse: any inherent righteousness of ours is consequent upon God's gracious, creative sentence of pardon, involving non-imputation of the sins we have committed. ...

¹ Robert Kolb, *The Christian Faith* (Concordia Publishing House, 1993), p. 162.

In speaking of inherent righteousness or sanctification, Catholic authors today try to bring out more clearly than did some post-Tridentine authors that the righteousness of the creature always remains a gift; it is a participation in the righteousness of God, given in Christ. ... Our righteousness is, so to speak, the imprint upon us of the righteousness of Another. In that sense the Reformation categories of *iusiuria aliena* and "imputed righteousness" convey an important truth that Catholics do not wish to ignore.¹

Even if Dulles is, as it were, "putting the best foot forward" in his summarizing of the views of these theologians for a Lutheran audience, some of the statements he makes are truly remarkable. One is forced to wonder how the views of Volk and Franco, if Dulles has accurately represented them, can be reconciled with the canons and decrees of Trent. It would seem that in some respects Trent is simply being ignored; or, that its pronouncements are being "reinterpreted" beyond what their context would honestly permit in order to accommodate a more "Lutheran" position on some questions.

But, of course, not all modern Catholic theologians sound so "Lutheran" in their discussions of justification and related themes. Dulles writes:

Drawing on certain elements of Rahner's sacramental theology and of Paul Ricoeur's doctrine of symbol, Regis Duffy, an American sacramental theologian, maintains that theology would do better not to take its departure from biblical or dogmatic concepts, which are derivative from, and inadequate to, the experienced mystery. Categories such as "imputed" and "imparted" justification are static, dichotomized terms expressing limited aspects of a dynamic event more concretely symbolized by worship. Sacramental symbolism suggests the inexhaustible richness of a mystery which is at once objective and subjective, forensic and moral, communal and individual. The manner in which we worship shapes and manifests our real definitions of justification, no matter what definitions we may verbally profess. ... Baptism and the Lord's Supper

¹ Dulles, p. 258.

symbolize the commitment to participate communally in the actualization of the kingdom. Justifying faith, therefore, cannot be merely cognitive or fiducial; it must include the "new obedience" of love.¹

It is, of course, important to recognize the crucial connection that exists between the church's confession of the Gospel and the church's worship. We must be ever diligent that we do not employ liturgical forms which give testimony to a different "gospel" than the one we want to proclaim. Yet it seems that Duffy's mystical, experiential approach, as outlined above, allows "the tail to wag the dog" as far as this connection is concerned. The Lutheran Reformers were very appreciative of the ability of the church's liturgy to mold and shape the faith of the people, but they believed that the Biblically-defined message of justification by faith may, and indeed must test, weigh, and judge the rites and ceremonies of the church. When there were incongruities, adjustments were made in the church's worship so that it conformed to the Gospel, and not in the Gospel so that it conformed to the church's worship. The Reformers declared in their Confessions:

The purpose of observing ceremonies is that men may learn the Scriptures and that those who have been touched by the Word may receive faith and fear and so may also pray.²

Places, times, persons, and the entire outward order of worship are therefore instituted and appointed in order that God's Word may exert its power publicly.³

So in our churches we willingly observe the order of the Mass, the Lord's day, and the other more important feast days. With a very thankful spirit we cherish the useful and ancient ordinances, especially when they contain a discipline that serves to educate and instruct the people and the inexperienced.⁴

Among us the ancient rites are for the most part diligently observed, for it is false and malicious to charge that all

¹ Dulles, p. 263.

² Apology XXIV:3, p. 250.

³ Large Catechism I:94, in Tappert, p. 378.

⁴ Apology VII/VIII:33, pp. 174-75.

ceremonies and all old ordinances are abolished in our churches. But it has been a common complaint that certain abuses were connected with ordinary rites. Because these could not be approved with a good conscience, they have to some extent been corrected.¹

In regard to the *sola fide* formula, with which Tridentine Catholicism traditionally has had little sympathy, Dulles observes in his essay that

Hans Kung, among others, has made a strong case for the acceptability of this formula. For him it makes good sense when it is used to express the fact that in justification the sinner stands with empty hands, receiving everything as a sheer gift from God. Faith, in this formula, includes trust in the Lord from whom one expects everything. In the Pauline sense faith is the radical surrender of boasting or self-glorification.²

However, a popular universalistic trend in modern Catholic theology would seem to counteract any renewed appreciation of justification by "faith alone," since those who have *no* recognizable Christian faith of any kind are also described, by some theologians, as recipients of God's justifying grace. Dulles summarizes the controversial but very influential views of Karl Rahner on this topic:

As Rahner puts it: "What is brought to effective manifestation in the dimension of the Church in the sacraments is precisely *that* grace which, in virtue of God's universal will to save, is effective everywhere in the world where man does not react to it with an absolute denial." ... Rahner, holding that all grace is in a hidden way related to Christ and the church, speaks of "anonymous Christians," meaning those who live by the grace of Christ without awareness that they are so doing. Rahner's thesis has been an object of much debate. Rahner himself attaches no importance to the term "anonymous Christian," but he does insist that it is possible for non-Christians and even atheists in good faith, even

¹ Augsburg Confession, epilogue to XXI,4,5 [Latin], p. 48.

² Dulles, p. 265.

though they lack explicit faith in Christ, to be justified, to live in the grace of Christ, to have the gift of faith, and to attain eternal salvation. In so holding Rahner seems to be supported by a number of important texts from Vatican II...¹

In view of their position regarding the universal efficacy of Christ's redemptive mediation, Rahner and many other contemporary theologians argue that grace is omnipresent, at least as offer, and that therefore every free moral act, considered in the concrete, is either an acceptance or a rejection of the proffered grace. In that case "every morally good act of man is, in the actual order of salvation, also in fact a supernaturally salutary act." Correspondingly, any act not sustained by grace is, in its concrete actuality, a sin.²

We had earlier observed that a misunderstanding and co-mingling of law and gospel lay at the root of much of Trent's theological confusion. It is interesting, therefore, that Dulles' essay includes a section on Law and Gospel, in which he notes that "several Catholic commentators have observed" that "the doctrine of law and gospel, as the twofold form of the word of God, stands at the heart of Luther's entire system and provides the structural framework for his doctrine of justification."³

Dulles then admits that

The duality of law and grace has a good biblical foundation, especially in Paul. The law-gospel dialectic, proposed in an unacceptable form by Marcion, is detectable in certain passages of Origen and Augustine. Medieval scholastics such as Robert of Melun and Thomas Aquinas, in their treatises on the relationship of the old law to the new, foreshadowed some of Luther's insights. Thus the law-gospel contrast, as Gotlieb Söhngen observed, has a Catholic past. Nevertheless it was not thematically taken up by Trent, nor has it been in modern Catholic systematics. Walter Kasper regards it as

¹ Dulles, p. 262. The Rahner quote is from "Introductory Observations on Thomas Aquinas' Theology of the Sacrament in General," in *Theological Investigations* (Seabury Press, 1976), 14:158.

² Dulles, p. 264. The quotation is from Rahner, "Nature and Grace, in *Theological Investigations* (Helicon, 1966), 4:180.

³ Dulles, p. 275.

regrettable that law and gospel never became a major theme in Catholic theology.¹

We would add that we, too, regard it as regrettable. If both parties at the time of the Reformation had used the same organizing principle in their theological language, then maybe there might have been a better understanding between them, and Luther's proposals for theological reform might not have seemed so strange to his opponents.

In the concluding paragraph of his essay, Dulles summarizes the overall Catholic attitude toward the enduring challenge of the Lutheran Reformation, and toward the theological task as it is being carried out in the post-Vatican II Catholic Church:

Ever since the Reformation Catholic theology has been striving to correct what it regards as Luther's imbalances without falling into imbalances of its own. Trent, while it did not canonize the categories of Scholasticism, was powerfully influenced by the theology of the schools, against which Luther had himself reacted. Trent therefore gave strong emphasis to human responsibility and to the created gifts of grace, and this emphasis became excessive in post-Tridentine Scholasticism. Contemporary Catholicism, in search of a more theocentric outlook, has borrowed heavily from the mystical tradition and from post-Kantian transcendental philosophy. Dissatisfied with the anthropology of Aristotle, this theology draws on modern personalist phenomenology. Distrustful of the objectifying categories of the Scholastic tradition, the new Catholicism is strongly oriented toward mystery and symbol. A theology that approaches justification in terms of uncreated grace and symbolic actuation may perhaps succeed in transcending the impasses of the sixteenth century and inaugurating a fruitful dialogue with Lutheranism.²

The Roman Catholic Church is in a state of theological transition. It is clearly a transition *from* the Scholastic method, but what it is a transition *to* is still undetermined. Until this is made clear we can expect to hear many different voices coming out of Rome. Some of these, under

¹ Dulles, p. 276.

² Dulles, p. 277.

a Lutheran analysis, are seen to represent not an evangelical *correction* to the Scholasticism of the past, but an even further *departure* from the faith of the apostles and ancient catholic Fathers. But others *do* sound almost "Lutheran."

One of the most well-known examples of a "Lutheran" in the Roman Catholic Church is Georges H. Tavad, a participant in the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue and a member of the Augustinians of the Assumption religious order. Over the years Tavad has earnestly endeavored to rehabilitate the reputation of the most famous Augustinian monk, but he is not the only Catholic scholar who has tried to do so. James Atkinson, an Anglican, makes the following observations about the published views of several "Lutheranizing" Catholic writers:

Harry McSorley is of the opinion that Luther was reacting against the semi-Pelagianism of [Gabriel] Biel and [William of] Ockham, whose *devotio moderna* was a departure from traditional Catholic thought, and that decadent scholasticism was wrong in teaching that to be acceptable to God, a man had to do "all that in him lies" and thereby merit forgiveness. Luther's protest was in full accord with Augustine, Anselm, Bernard, Gregory of Rimini, and the second Council of Orange: Aquinas, Trent, Vatican II are quoted to support McSorley's views. In his book *The Christian Dilemma* (1952) Willem van de Pol makes a similar argument, suggesting that the Reformers were battling against a dominant semi-Pelagianism that they understood to be implicit in Catholicism and that there is nothing incompatible between Luther's doctrine of justification and Roman orthodoxy. Louis Bouyer makes similar claims in *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, asserting that Luther's view of salvation "is in perfect harmony with Catholic tradition, the great conciliar definitions on grace and salvation, and even with Thomism." And in his book *Protestantism* (1959), Georges Tavad states that there is no real contradiction between Roman Catholic theology and Luther's gospel; he refers to the eclipse of the gospel in Luther's day, and asserts that Luther's doctrine of justification is compatible with Catholicism. [Hans] Küng's

research shows that McSorley, van de Pol, Bouyer, and Tavad are essentially right in arguing that the rampant semi-Pelagianism of Luther's day was also condemned by the Catholic Church.¹

On a personal note, the present writer was enrolled in two classes in the Graduate School of Theology at the University of Notre Dame in the summer of 1985. *The Experience and Language of Grace* by Jesuit scholar Roger Haight was the textbook for one of these classes, called "The Theology of Grace." The instructor offered little if any criticism of Luther's theology, which was discussed for an entire class period. The following excerpts are from Haight's chapter on Luther:

In his lectures on Romans and Galatians the themes of the forgiveness of sins and God's non-imputation of the evil that is in man begin to emerge with more and more clarity. Gradually the *essence* of justification came to be seen by Luther as *forgiveness of sin*. In terms of Law and Gospel, that is, the two words of God, commandments and promises, one is justified when he or she receives the word of God's mercy, benevolence and forgiveness. Grace is God's word of forgiveness. Because people remain sinners and unworthy, their righteousness is imputed. "So Paul says in Rom. 4[.3] that Abraham's faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness' because by it he gave glory most perfectly to God, and that for the same reason our faith shall be reckoned to us as righteousness if we believe." Because of this core of "the forgiveness of sin," imputed justice or reckoned righteousness, Luther's doctrine of justification often became characterized by Catholics as "mere imputation." In the sharp realism of Scholastic language, grace is conceived of as a created mode of being in the soul, a habit and new nature that effected a new way of being of the soul and consequently of the human person. Because in Luther the person remains a sinner, it was thought that for him grace had no created effect in human "being" or existence. And on his part, Luther simply denied the Scholastic conception of grace: "Grace must be properly

¹ James Atkinson, *Martin Luther, Prophet to the Church Catholic* (The Paternoster Press, 1983), pp. 138-39.

understood as the 'favor of God,' not as a 'quality of soul.' In effect, then, the Scholastic mind tended to regard "mere imputed justice" as no justification at all. Whereas the essence of justification is real forgiveness of sin, and paradoxically Luther could insist on this, it is also much more than this. Thus the interpretation of Luther's doctrine of justification as "mere imputed justice" is simply erroneous. Although Luther thinks in terms of relationships, one's relationships with Christ effect a *radical* and *real* change in the human person....

Luther asserts that a person's salvation is effected in utter and absolute gratuity and through the work of another, Christ. Faith, then, is not a work or a self-initiated act; it is a self-surrender and pure reception that renounces all efforts of self-justification. ... It is not an intellectual assent, as in Scholasticism, but an infinitely more complex attitude toward and relationship with God. ... Faith *is* the certainty of the trust in God's gift and fidelity. To speak of uncertainty in faith is to cancel the very act of faith. The certainty of faith that Luther is talking about is not a category of knowledge, that is, certain knowledge, as it is in the Thomistic discussion. Rather it is a way of existing. Quite simply, then, when Trent and Luther said no and yes respectively to the question of certainty of grace and salvation, they were not responding to the same question.¹

As we might expect, however, Haight does not endorse every aspect of Luther's teaching as he understands it:

Luther's spirituality has the advantage of its total anti-Pelagianism. Our inability to earn salvation, our radical dependence on grace, is affirmed not only *before* but also *after* justification. God's acceptance of a person is radically distinguished from his or her ethical and moral behavior. And...Luther's conception of the Christian life is supremely

¹ Roger Haight, S.J., *The Experience and Language of Grace* (Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 91-94. The first quote is from Luther, "The Freedom of the Christian Man," in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, edited by John Dillenberger (Doubleday & Company, 1961), p. 60. The second quote is from B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason* (Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 129.

altruistic: by justification through faith the Christian is freed to serve the neighbor without an eye for self-sanctification. However, by the same token, Luther's view of the human person seems to be demeaning. Moreover there is a tendency toward a dualism and separation between the two kingdoms and the inner and outer spheres of human existence. And because of this there is a danger of not integrating people's external and this-worldly behavior into their religious faith-life.¹

Conclusion

We are naturally curious as to whether the Catholic Church's pro-Luther revisionists really have a firm grasp on the full range of Luther's thought. We also wonder if some of them might be engaging in a certain amount of wishful thinking, engendered by a spirit of ecumenism which could be blinding them to certain irresolvable contradictions. It is clear to us that the main insights of the Reformation on the *locus* of justification have *not* been embraced by the Roman Catholic Church as a whole, and that the basic assertions of Trent, albeit often recast in non-Scholastic categories, still predominate in Catholic teaching. Yet if we sincerely believe that Luther's faith was based on God's Word, and that God's Word has intrinsic power to convert those who hear and read it, should we be all that surprised occasionally to find new "Luthers" emerging in an otherwise heterodox communion as long as God's Word is also present and active in some form? To the extent that a better and more faithful confession of the Gospel is heard in some corners of the Roman Catholic Church — in spite of the inconsistencies which may accompany it, or the overarching shadow of Trent, or the remnants of Scholasticism, or the invasions of historical criticism — then to that extent we say: *Deo Gratias!*

David Jay Webber +

The Name of Jesus, 1994

¹ Haight, p. 95.