

Contemporary Catholicism

Lesson Three—The Church Stands or Falls

Justification

Luther called the doctrine of justification the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls. The Smalcald Articles condemn the Roman Catholic Church for twisting this doctrine. But Lutherans today might legitimately ask, “Does the Catholic Church still teach this doctrine incorrectly?” To answer the question, we will look briefly at contemporary Catholic teaching on justification.

1989 The first work of the grace of the Holy Spirit is conversion, effecting justification in accordance with Jesus' proclamation at the beginning of the Gospel: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Moved by grace, man turns toward God and away from sin, thus accepting forgiveness and righteousness from on high. "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.

1. According to this paragraph, what does man do in conversion and what does God do?
2. How is that different from what the Bible teaches?
3. What does the catechism include in the concept of justification? What authority does it quote?

1993 Justification establishes cooperation between God's grace and man's freedom. On man's part it is expressed by the assent of faith to the Word of God, which invites him to conversion, and in the cooperation of charity with the prompting of the Holy Spirit who precedes and preserves his assent:

When God touches man's heart through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, man himself is not inactive while receiving that inspiration, since he could reject it; and yet, without God's grace, he cannot by his own free will move himself toward justice in God's sight.

4. According to this paragraph, what does justification do?
5. Why is this not correct?
6. Does the Catholic Church believe in an equal partnership between God and man?

1996 Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.

7. How is this definition of grace different from the one you learned?

2001 The preparation of man for the reception of grace is already a work of grace. This latter is needed to arouse and sustain our collaboration in justification through faith, and in sanctification through charity. God brings to completion in us what he has begun, "since he who completes his work by cooperating with our will began by working so that we might will it:"

Indeed we also work, but we are only collaborating with God who works, for his mercy has gone before us. It has gone before us so that we may be healed, and follows us so that once healed, we may be given life; it goes before us so that we may be called, and follows us so that we may be glorified; it goes before us so that we may live devoutly, and follows us so that we may always live with God: for without him we can do nothing.

2002 God's free initiative demands man's free response, for God has created man in his image by conferring on him, along with freedom, the power to know him and love him. The soul only enters freely into the communion of love. God immediately touches and directly moves the heart of man. He has placed in man a longing for truth and goodness that only he can satisfy. The promises of "eternal life" respond, beyond all hope, to this desire:

If at the end of your very good works . . . , you rested on the seventh day, it was to foretell by the voice of your book that at the end of our works, which are indeed "very good" since you have given them to us, we shall also rest in you on the sabbath of eternal life.

8. How do Catholics understand "our collaboration" as coming about?

9. What does "man's free response" mean in this context? How does that enable us to understand the previous paragraph?

2010 Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life. Even temporal goods like health and friendship can be merited in accordance with God's wisdom. These graces and goods are the object of Christian prayer. Prayer attends to the grace we need for meritorious actions.

10. According to this paragraph and the ones we've already looked at, what can't we merit, or earn?

11. What specific things does the catechism say we can earn?

12. What does it mean that we merit eternal life?

13. Has the Catholic Church changed its teaching on justification since Luther's day?