

Made just and holy by the grace of Christ, received through faith

From Catholic dogmas on eternal life, we turn to dogmas on how we *reach* that goal. Who enters heaven, and what makes them ‘eligible’ for it? How are we sinful human beings ‘*made just*’ – not *self*-righteous but righteous *in God’s sight* – and so set surely on the path of salvation? This is the scriptural question of ‘justification’ (a word used differently here from its typical meaning of showing how a person’s action is legitimate). St Paul introduces the concept especially in *Romans* and *Galatians*, contrasting justification and salvation through faith in Christ with the supposed righteousness from keeping the Jewish Law.

This question ‘How are we saved?’ was central to the Protestant Reformation (1517), with Luther insisting on justification ‘by faith *alone*’. Responding to the crisis convulsing the Christian world, the Catholic Bishops at the Council of Trent (1545-63) first reaffirmed in the *Decree on Sacred Scripture and Traditions* (1546) the authority from which all matters must be decided; and set forth in the *Decree on Original Sin* (1546) the plight of the human race without Christ. The Council then turned to the fundamental issue, and in the *Decree on Justification* of 13th January 1547, the Catholic Church gave the reply of apostolic faith to these grave questions. (DS 1520-83; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* nn. 1987-2029)

In summary: having lost innocence through Adam’s sin, the human race could not rise from the slavery of sin and death by its natural powers or even the Law of Moses. But God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, the second Adam, to redeem both Jew and Gentile, making ‘expiation by his blood...for the sins of the whole world’. ‘But even though Christ died for all, still not all receive the benefit...only those to whom the merit of his Passion is imparted’, by being reborn in Christ and receiving the grace that makes them just. The justification of the sinner is this transition ‘to the state of grace and adoption as sons of God’ through Christ. (DS 1522-24) After the promulgation of the Gospel, this cannot take place without Baptism, or at least the desire for it.

Even the first beginning and preparation for justification that happens in adults is from God’s grace given through Christ, ‘his call addressed to them without any previous merits of theirs’. Sinners ‘awakened and assisted by his grace are disposed to turn to their own justification’ by freely assenting and cooperating. Man ‘is not entirely inactive while receiving that inspiration, since he can reject it; and yet, without God’s grace, he cannot by his own free will move toward justice in God’s sight.’ (DS 1525) [The Church thus reaffirmed (with Protestants) the primacy and necessity of grace (against the ancient Pelagian heresy that our natural good works could save us); but also reaffirmed our free cooperation, under grace (against some Protestant views).]

[Infants being baptised receive justification (constituted by the *ongoing inner state* of sanctifying grace) with no spiritual preparation needed.] But adults, from the help of the Holy Spirit’s promptings of grace, *predispose themselves* for this justification. Conceiving faith from hearing the Word, they believe God’s teachings and promises, especially justification by Christ’s grace. Realising they are sinners, they turn ‘from the fear of divine justice – which gives them a salutary shock’ – to the hope of God’s mercy in Christ. ‘They begin to love God as the source of all justice’, and repenting their sins, ‘they determine to receive Baptism, to begin a new life, and to keep the divine commandments’. (DS 1526)

This ‘is followed by justification itself, which is not only the remission of sins but the sanctification and renewal of the inner man through the voluntary reception of grace and of the gifts, whereby from unjust man becomes just, and from enemy a friend, that he may be an heir in hope of eternal life.’ (DS 1529) ‘Justification has been merited for us by the Passion of Christ

who offered himself on the cross as a living victim, holy and pleasing to God, and whose blood has become the instrument of atonement for the sins of all men. Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. It conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just by the power of his mercy. Its purpose is the glory of God and of Christ, and the gift of eternal life.’ (*Catechism* n. 1992; cf. DS 1529)

In justification we are inserted into Christ and anointed with the Holy Spirit: our sins are forgiven and the gifts of faith, hope and charity are infused into us. Faith alone, without hope and charity, does not make us living members of Christ’s Body: ‘faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead’. (*Jas* 2:17) *Living faith* ‘working through love’ (*Gal* 5:6) is what gives eternal life. (DS 1530-31) ‘We are said to be justified through faith (*Rom* 3:22) because faith is the beginning of man’s salvation, the foundation and root of all justification’ without which we cannot please God; (cf. *Heb* 11:6) and we are ‘justified gratuitously (*Rom* 3:24) because nothing that precedes justification, neither faith nor works, merits the grace of justification’. (DS 1532)

The justified must still keep the commandments, which God’s grace always makes possible for them. ‘Those who are sons of God love Christ, and those who love him keep his words, as he himself testifies, (cf. *Jn* 14:23) and this they certainly can do with God’s help’, for which we pray. We cannot avoid all venial sins, which do not lose us justification. However, the grace of justification *is* lost ‘not only by unbelief, which causes the loss of faith itself, but also by any other mortal sin, even though faith is not lost’. (DS 1544; cf. *I Cor* 6:9-10) Restoration of grace and charity is still available through repentant confession in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. (Unlike Baptism, Reconciliation does not always remove all need for purification in purgatory, so we continue in penance for these sins once forgiven.)

We cannot know with absolute certainty of faith that we are in the state of grace, or (without special revelation) that we will persevere to the end in this state and so be saved eternally. There is no doubt of Christ’s merits or the power of the Sacraments, yet we do not have certainty of our inner dispositions. But knowing our weakness, we place ‘firmest hope in God’s help’, and pray for his special gift of final perseverance. Working out our salvation ‘with fear and trembling’ (*Phil* 2:12), we battle ‘the flesh, the world, and the devil’, (DS 1541) taking the way of the cross. Unless we are unfaithful to his grace, God will bring his good work to completion.

As Christ’s members, the justified truly merit further growth in grace by the good works done in him. [A Protestant anxiety about Catholics has been that we are really Pelagians, boasting to God of our merits and good works. (Cf. *Eph* 2:8-9) In truth, Catholics find no grounds for ‘boasting’ to God, since we know our very merits are from Christ’s grace, indeed show forth its power.] In Christ, the justified merit heaven itself (which is both grace and reward, that they will attain provided they die in the state of grace); they also merit ‘increase of glory’. (DS 1582)

Thus teaches the *Decree on Justification*. Its concluding 33 canons with anathemas are Trent’s infallible declarations on the subject. This has been an area of division from Protestants, but ecumenical dialogue has shown that the differences – today, at least – are often matters of words (such as shades of meaning of the word ‘faith’). A milestone was the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999) by the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation.

So we rejoice in the central truths of salvation: we are forgiven, justified and sanctified by God’s grace gained by Christ’s death and resurrection, received through faith in him. Conferred in Baptism (or restored in Reconciliation), sanctifying grace (a supernatural sharing in God’s own life) goes hand in hand with living faith, that works through charity and confidently hopes in life eternal. Those dying in the state of grace – those with faith, hope and charity, with any mortal sins forgiven – are those who will reach heaven.