



Theology Corner

Vol. 107 – May 3rd, 2020

Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“What does it Mean to be Justified?”

The Catholic doctrine of justification is one of the most misunderstood topics that come up often in conversation with people from different faiths. A lot of the misunderstanding comes from Catholics who don't have a firm grasp of it themselves. What does it mean to be justified? How are we justified? Do we have any power to justify ourselves by working hard for our salvation? These are a few questions we should consider today. Justification refers to a rightness of order within a person. The need for justification comes about with the fall of man as the effect of Original Sin made it so that humanity was in a state *contrary* to righteousness. For man to be justified entails both the forgiveness of sins and being in a state of friendship with God (i.e. in the state of grace). This state of friendship with God cannot happen in us without God making himself present to us in our soul and sanctifying us from within. St. Paul makes it clear to the Ephesians when he says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; this is not your own doing, it is a gift of God, not because of works, lest any man should boast.” (Eph. 2:8-9). This gift is given by the grace present in our soul – this is the indwelling of the Trinity.

Don't let anyone tell you that Catholics believe justification is earned. In order to justify ourselves, we would have to remove the impediment (sin) between us and God *and* we would have to somehow force us to re-enter into a friendship with him. Imagine performing a good action like giving money to a homeless person on a street corner and then saying to God, “There, now you *owe* me eternal life!” Sounds crazy, doesn't it? It's because God does not owe us anything. Eternal life can only occur by a free gift of God who willingly invites us into his love. That's why we use the term “grace” which comes from the Latin word *gratia* which means “favor” or “gift.” The heresy of Pelagianism taught that man has the **active power** to be justified, even though grace makes it easier for him. Conversely, Protestantism teaches that man does not even have a **passive power** to be justified, but that justification is a pure miracle. Neither of these are correct since Pelagianism doesn't take into account the fact that there is no human power to force God to owe us eternal life. Moreover, Protestantism doesn't take into account the fact that man was created in grace in the beginning and our nature was made imperfect after the fall. Therefore, grace doesn't *destroy* our nature, but *perfects* it by restoring us to a life where we know as God knows and will and God wills.

The Catechism points out that the effects of justification are *conversion, detachment from sin, and acceptance of God's righteousness* (CCC, 1989-1991). Justification begins with conversion, which is when man is moved by grace to turn away from sin and turn towards God. This, of course requires repentance, the renunciation of sin, and an assent of faith to God. Conversion entails a movement by grace by a divine initiation. God **calls** us, but it must be **answered** by a cooperation between God's grace and man's freedom. Since we are called up into a relationship with God, it has to be a *real* relationship; there is no authentic relationship if one or both parties are not free. We should know that man cannot move himself toward justice in God's sight without grace, but he can in the process of being moved by God, resist grace by his own free will. Again, this is because while there is no active power in man to bring about his own justification there *is* an active power to reject this gift by refusing to consent to the work of God going on *passively* within us. We read in Matthew 22:14 that even though many are called, few are chosen. This does not mean God decides to send people to hell as some may interpret it. Rather, this is a case in which God *offers* grace equally to all but only those who are prepared to cooperate with him freely, *receive* it.

We are indeed justified by faith through baptism, but this is not a one-time deal. *Baptism* is a one-time deal because it produces the first grace received from God which disposes our soul to him as we are adopted into his family and given a share in his life as a result of Christ's work on the cross. But considered from the aspect of this justification taking *effect* in our soul, it is a process of being continuously sanctified by God's grace. While the work of Christ is truly once and for all, the effect of justification can be lost if we cease to allow our minds and hearts to be moved by him in faith and charity and thus remove ourselves from our relationship with God. Don't let this happen! Let us all allow our justification to fully take effect by participating in the life of God by a reciprocation of his love and by allowing him to transform us by conforming our whole being more perfectly to Christ. It is through this process that we may be left with nothing but the presence of God within us. Let us, then, petition to God, “Send forth your Spirit, O Lord, and you shall renew the face of the earth.”