



**Articles on Catholic Theology and Teachings -  
Part 10 -  
The Catholic Doctrine of Justification by Grace**



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Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. --Acts of the Apostles 2:38

What does Justification mean?

In Catholic theology justification is a term that means the cleansing of sin in a person, and the communication by grace of "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:22) " through Baptism. Catholics believe that mankind has inherited original sin through Adam. The original sin destroyed the righteousness originally attributed to our first parents and created the chasm of sin between God and man. Sin separates us from God and thus by justice causes death of the soul in hell. "For the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23)". The Council of Trent affirms that original sin creates a weakness in human nature and calls this weakness of will concupiscence. Concupiscence weakens the will of man toward evil and warps his nature towards selfish passions rather than the love of God. Human nature and the Jewish law of the Old Covenant are incapable of allowing man in his natural faculties to rise above the fall of mankind and the temptations of Satan.

Because of the infinite love and mercy of God, Jesus Christ willingly paid for our sins by his suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection and thus merited the redemption of humanity. This means that provided humans cooperate by act of free will with God's grace, a person can be justified by the grace of God and become a new creature in Christ. Justification of the soul is a work of grace by the Holy Spirit. With this in mind, we can define justification as the transformation of the soul from the state of original sin to that of grace and divine sonship through Jesus Christ.

What is Grace?

God's gift of salvation was one of pure love. He desired humanity to join him in heaven, but he could not force us to accept

his gift of love. Upon creating humans, he endowed us with free will so that we could freely return his infinite love with love.

Thus God could only attribute the salvation of Christ's passion (his crucifixion and resurrection) to those who freely returned his love in faith and hope.

Jesus Christ alone can merit our initial justification and sanctification through his Passion and Resurrection.

Once grace is imputed in the soul, faith, hope and charity can merit the increase of justification and sanctification.

Faith without good works is dead faith (James 2:17).

The seven Sacraments of the Church increase grace and thus justification in the believer.

Prayer for those of the Body of Christ and ourselves can merit increasing grace for others and ourselves.

Christian suffering has a redemptive role by allowing us to cooperate with Christ's Passion and suffering.

Rejecting God's love and grace through mortal sin results in lost justification.

Venial sin weakens charity, but does not cut us off from Christ because venial sin (although offensive to God) is not a rejection of the heavenly Father.

No person can have an assurance of their salvation unless they receive an extraordinary revelation from God.

The Blessed Virgin Mary, full of grace, is the perfect model of Christian faith, hope and charity in God's created creatures.

By the grace of God, we commend ours to participate in the divine life of Christ. Let us pray for the conversion of souls and give thanks to Jesus Christ for his loving and willing redemption of the world.

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Instead, the Holy Spirit offers the theological virtue of hope that leads us to desire the kingdom of heaven, the love of Christ and the fellowship of the Spirit. By hope a Christian can ask God for perseverance in his friendship and love. Even if a person mortally offends God and rejects his grace, Christ offers us the Sacrament of Reconciliation for the forgiveness of sin and the recovery of sanctifying grace. God is always willing to embrace his prodigal sons and daughters provided they repent and ask of forgiveness in his holy Sacrament.

The Virgin Mary is the supreme model of grace in all of God's creatures

The holy Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin Mary, is the epitome of Christian grace. Her willing participation in the birth of Jesus Christ, her life of Christian virtue and the sorrow endured by her in Christ's Passion provides the ultimate example of faith, hope and charity for the Body of Christ. The angel Gabriel proclaims to the Virgin Mary, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women (Matthew 1:28). Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus, is thus granted the fullness of grace from God and attains the highest perfection of any created creature. In her humble love for God, she willingly participates in the redemption of Christ (the second Adam) as the second Eve. Thus Catholics venerate Mary as the role model by which we give undying love to our Lord, Jesus Christ. We echo the words of Mary filled by the Holy Spirit, "Because he hath regarded the humility of his handmaid; for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. Because he that is mighty, hath done great things to me; and holy is his name. And his mercy is from generation unto generations, to them that fear him (Matthew 1:48-50).

Conclusion

Since this article was quite long and thorough let us recap:

Justification is a term that means the cleansing of sin in a person, and the communication by grace of "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:22) " through Baptism.

Christ has redeemed the whole world, but we must freely choose to cooperate in the redemption.

Justification includes the forgiveness of original and personal sin, restoration of the interior man and sanctification of the soul through grace. Thus justification and sanctification occur together and are not exclusive of each other.

Grace is a free gift of God that imputes divine life into the soul as well as the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity.

Sanctifying grace of the soul must normatively be received through the sacrament of Baptism. Through baptism, God adopts us as his sons and daughters. This is why Catholics baptize infants.

Human experience shows that people often have a tendency to draw toward evil and selfish passions. This misplaced love

for the things of our natural world is a result of the original sin of mankind and the continuing temptation of Satan. In order to

help humanity choose God over selfishness and temporal happiness, the crucifixion of Jesus brought forth a new gift: the gift of grace.

Grace is the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call. The Church teaches us that grace moves us to participate in the life of God and moves us to begin and sustain a relationship with our Creator. Grace not only assists us in

living the Christian life through purification of our hearts, it literally changes our souls by infusing divine life to heal the wounds of

sin. Grace is wrought through the work of the Holy Spirit, and grace is what initially moves our hearts to conversion and repentance.

Justification by Grace

The theology of the Church holds that Christ's passion not only merited the forgiveness of sin, but also the gift of grace. Grace, wrought by the Holy Spirit, is a gift that heals the soul and sanctifies it. Sanctifying grace, the grace that communicates supernatural life into the soul, is received through the sacrament of Baptism. Baptism marks the beginning of justification by forgiving all personal and original sin as well as communicating sanctifying grace. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit, a person receives supernatural disposition to live and act with God's call.

Justification and Sanctification are one

The Council of Trent helped to clarify and reinforce the Church's doctrine of justification, by focusing on sanctification as part of justification. The Council's decrees laid to rest the heretical doctrines of the Protestant Reformers by insisting that justification of the believer is not a forensic declaration of a person's righteousness, but an actual interior purification of the soul. Justification truly makes the soul just through grace. Thus the sanctification of the soul is a necessary part of justification. Sin is not covered or concealed, but is literally cleansed away by purification of sanctifying grace. Justification consists of one act of God that includes forgiveness of sin and sanctification of the soul. Thus a justified person is truly made pleasing to God.

## The Sacraments

The Council further explains that the instrumental cause of grace is by the holy Sacraments of the Church. The Sacramental system, instituted by Christ, is one of the means by which grace is transmitted. Baptism, which we have already explained, is the necessary means by which a person receives sanctifying grace. Because grace can be lost by mortal sin, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is the normative way by which a person can receive sanctifying grace after it has been destroyed through mortal sin. The sacraments also serve to increase justification of the soul, through the increase of grace. The holy Eucharist, especially, is the nourishing food of the soul. The doctrine of increasing grace means that the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity can be strengthened and increased. St. John notes that "...he that is just, let him be justified still: and he that is holy, let him be sanctified still (Rev 22:11)." Thus the Church rightly teaches through Scripture and Apostolic Tradition that supernatural faith, hope and charity are gifts of grace that can be increased through the Sacraments.

## The Doctrine of Increasing Justification

The Ecumenical Council of Trent, definitively proclaimed that "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, by mortifying the members of their own flesh, and by presenting them as instruments of justice unto sanctification, they, through the observance of the commandments of God and of the Church, faith co-operating with good works, increase in that justice which they have received through the grace of Christ, and are still further justified (Council of Trent, Sixth Session, Chapter 10)". Thus the council the redemptive role of suffering in the Mystical Body of Christ, as well as the increase of grace through good works.

St. Paul explains to the Christians in Rome, "For we account a man to be justified by faith, without the works of the law (Romans 3:28)." In this epistle to the first Jewish Christians, Paul warns the people not to consider themselves justified by the Mosaic Law expounded in the book of Leviticus. Because Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Covenant, St. Paul tells us that Christ's Passion has merited the gift of grace, "But now without the law the justice of God is made manifest, being witnessed by the law and the prophets. Even the justice of God, by faith of Jesus Christ, unto all and upon all them that believe in him: for there is no distinction: For all have sinned, and do need the glory of God. Being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption, that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:21-24)." St. Paul explains that works of the law such as circumcision and ritual cleansing are not required for justification, because grace is the perfect gift of Christian justice and faith. St. Paul's reference to "the Law" does not include the works of righteousness done through grace and the theological virtue of charity. St. James' epistle attempts to clear up the difficulties of those we mistakenly feel that justification is imputed by faith alone without consideration of works of righteousness in grace. He tells us, "What shall it profit, my brethren, if a

Sin takes two forms; that of mortal (deadly sin) and venial sin (sin that offends charity). The Catechism of the Church tells us "sins are rightly evaluated according to their gravity (CCC 1854)" and that there is a distinction between sins, that of mortal and venial sin. "Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God's law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him (CCC 1855)." Venial sin is a sin of less serious matter that weakens charity and impedes the exercise of virtue. The bible testifies to the differentiation between mortal and venial sin. St. John's epistle tell us "there is such thing as deadly sin, about which I do not say that you should pray (1 John 5:16)". The Tradition of the Church affirms that mortal sin destroys sanctifying grace of the soul and cuts the sinner off from the body of Christ. Scripture again affirms Tradition when Jesus compares the Body of Christ, the Church, to a vine. The members of the Church are warned by Christ, "Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned (John 15:6)." Indeed St. Paul writes, "Know you not that the unjust shall not possess the kingdom of God? Do not err: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, Nor the effeminate, nor liars with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor railers, nor extortioners, shall possess the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). Thus a mortal cuts us off from the Body of Christ until the sinner is moved to repentance in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Can we have a definitive assurance of our Salvation?

No, St. Paul and St. John's epistles warn us that justification can be lost. Thus without an extraordinary revelation from God, we cannot be assured of our salvation or justification. The Council of Trent tells us, "If any one saith, that he will for certain, of an absolute and infallible certainty, have that great gift of perseverance unto the end, -unless he have learned this by special revelation; let him be anathema (Council of Trent, Sixth Session, Cannon 16)". Assurance of salvation is a presumption upon God that we can infallibly judge the state of our souls. The Bible is very clear that only God and God alone can judge a person's soul. Paul writes, "For we must all be manifested before the judgement seat of Christ, that every one may receive the proper things of the body, according as he hath done, whether it be good or evil (1 Corinthians 5:10)." Paul also emphasizes that salvation and justification are not a one-time event, but a lifetime process that we must work out with participation in grace. He tells us, "Wherefore, my dearly beloved, (as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but much more now in my absence,) with fear and trembling work out your salvation (Philippians 2:12)". Because justification can be lost and Christian truth demands that it is a process and not a one-time event, there can be no infallible assurance of salvation.

church (Colossians 1:24)." He also says, "And if sons, heirs also; heirs indeed of God, and joint heirs with Christ: yet so, if we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified with him (Romans 8:17)."

This does not mean that Christ's redemption is lacking, or that his suffering was not enough for the redemption of the world. It only means that we are chosen to offer up our sufferings for the expiation of the temporal punishment deserved by our sin and the free participation in the life of Christ. Christ merits our redemption and forgives our sins but the punishment and penance for our selfish actions must still be. Paul's letter to the Colossians notes that by offering our own sufferings for the body of Christ, we can make up for those members of the body of Christ whose sufferings are lacking. Thus the body of Christ, the Catholic Church, offers the collective suffering of its members for the expiation of temporal punishment and follows in the Passion and sufferings of the Head of the body of Christ, Jesus Christ.

This does not mean that Catholics go out of their way to look for suffering and hardship. Suffering, in itself, is a result of sin and evil manifested by the fall of mankind. Such acts as fasting, prayer and the offering of hardships to the Lord are beneficial. However, purposeful undue suffering and pain can in fact be a sin. In fact, the Church does attempt to correct and alleviate the temporal suffering of mankind (such as natural disaster victims, the hungry, the persecuted etc.) What Paul is really talking about is the unavoidable suffering that is a part of temporal life. A good Christian will accept the hardships of life that can not be alleviated. With good Christian humility and charity a suffering person will offer their suffering for the Body of Christ and its head, Jesus Christ.

#### Can Justification be Lost?

St. Paul warns us that justification and sanctification are a life-long process, and we should be vigilant not to turn against God and lose our justification. Paul's letter to the Hebrews is particularly powerful, "For if we sin willfully after having the knowledge of the truth, there is now left no sacrifice for sins, But a certain dreadful expectation of judgment, and the rage of a fire which shall consume the adversaries (Hebrews 10:26-27)." Paul assures us that those who take justification of grace for granted and continue to rail against God and defy cooperation with grace can lose their justification. Paul also warns Christians to be vigilant, "But I chastise my body, and bring it into subjection: lest perhaps, when I have preached to others, I myself should become a castaway". Paul tells us that he himself must resist the temptations of the flesh lest he be cut away from the Body of Christ.

Like St. Paul, we must constantly guard against mortal sin, the sin of will against God. Mortal sin is that which cuts us off from Christ. Those who have been justified through the grace of baptism can still sin against the Lord. Grace does not take away the gift of free will and because of this a Christian can still choose to sin.

man say he hath faith, but hath not works? Shall faith be able to save him? And if a brother or sister be naked, and want daily food: And one of you say to them: Go in peace, be ye warmed and filled; yet give them not those things that are necessary for the body, what shall it profit? So faith also, if it have not works, is dead in itself. But some man will say: Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without works; and I will shew thee, by works, my faith. Thou believest that there is one God. Thou dost well: the devils also believe and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? (James 2:14-17)."

Thus the holy Catholic Church proclaims that charity and good works enliven and work with faith and hope for the justification of man. Good works are not meant for the glorification and boasting of man, but for the glorification and love for God, the members of the Body of Christ, and indeed all men. We must take to heart Christ's two commandments: "Jesus said to [the Pharisee]: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. And the second is like to this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments dependeth the whole law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40)."

Is obeying the commandments and precepts of God necessary for Justification?

In the Gospel of Matthew, a young rich man asks Christ, "Good master, what good shall I do that I may have life everlasting? [Jesus] said to him: Why asketh thou me concerning good? One is good, God. But if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. [The young man] said to him: Which? And Jesus said: Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness. Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. The young man saith to him: All these I have kept from my youth, what is yet wanting to me? Jesus saith to him: If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come follow me (Matt 19:16-21)". Contrary to the doctrine of the Reformers, we must note that Christ never said that faith alone would supplant good works and obedience to God's laws. Jesus message in the Gospels tells us that if we truly believe in Christ we will obey his commandments, be baptized into a life of grace and thus receive divine sonship in Christ. The gift of grace imputes forgiveness of sin, sanctification of the soul and the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. God's grace works within us to move us to new, divine heights of faith, hope and charity. By cooperating with the grace of Baptism, we can do good works out of faith and love for Christ.

## The Theological Virtues

Justification of the soul imputes the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. These virtues make Christians capable of acting as the children of God and meriting eternal life. The Catechism of the Church tell us that "faith is the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us, and that Holy Church proposes for our belief, because he is truth itself (CCC 1814)." Hope is a virtue "by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit (CCC 1817). Finally, charity is the virtue "by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God. (CCC 1822)." The virtues of faith, hope and charity allow us to aspire to the divine love of God. Rather than become a slave to God, the grace of God allows us to partake in the virtues of the Spirit to truly become adoptive sons and daughters of the Father.

### Faith, hope and charity prior to Baptism

One might ask that if faith, hope and charity are theological virtues imputed by grace, how could a person be moved to conversion to Christianity or experience faith, hope and charity prior to Baptism. It should be emphasized that the Holy Spirit leads a person to Christianity through an act of actual grace. In addition, faith, hope and charity can exist in the natural state of man prior to baptism. However, the motive for natural charity is often misplaced. Works of natural goodness found among the unbelieving person is often for love of mankind rather than God. Natural faith can aspire and lead one to God through the work of the Spirit, but baptism is needed to bring sanctifying grace to the soul to purify it and impute supernatural faith, hope and charity. The Catechism notes that "the faith required for Baptism is not a perfect and mature faith, but a beginning that is called to develop...For all the baptized, children or adults, faith must grow after Baptism. (CCC 1253)."

### Baptism of Infants and small children

The Catholic understanding of justification by grace calls all men, women and children to justification by the cleansing water of rebirth. Since Baptism is normatively necessary for justification by grace, baptism is not reserved exclusively for adults or children who have reached the age of reasoning. Christ said, "Suffer the little children, and forbid them not to come to me: for the kingdom of heaven is for such (Matthew 19:13)." Although faith in Christ leads to Baptism in adults, infants cannot be expected to harbor intellectual faith in Christ. Instead, the faith of a child's family is asked so that the child can grow in faith with the loving support of the family. Baptism is the sacrament of faith, and through supernatural grace leads a growing child (or adult) to deeper faith, hope and love for his Creator. It is a precious gift that should not be withheld from any person, be they young or old. Indeed, it is a sad thing that some Protestant denominations such as Baptists and evangelical

Protestants withhold Baptism from their infants. For those and other children, who are denied Baptism by no fault of their own, the Church offers its prayers and commends those infants who have died without Baptism to the mercy and love of God.

### Merit

Merit is defined by the Catechism as "recompense owed by a community or a society for the action of one of its members, experienced either as beneficial or harmful, deserving reward or punishment (CCC 2006)." In Catholic doctrine, merit is a result of God's fatherly decision to associate man with the work of his gift of grace. It must be emphasized that the original work of justification and sanctification must be attributed to God himself. Man cannot merit the initial grace of the Holy Spirit. It is a free, undeserving gift of God. However, by the grace of Baptism, as adoptive sons and daughters of God, we can merit for ourselves additional graces of sanctification through Christian charity and good works. It is always the gift of God's love that brings forth merit through charity. St. Augustine proclaims the Church's position in his cry to God, "You are glorified in the assembly of your Holy Ones, for in crowning their merits you are crowning your own gifts." Prayer is a central part of Christian life, for it is through prayer that we can merit the increase of grace and theological charity for others in the Mystical Body of Christ as well as ourselves.

We must not believe that, "God owes us something." For the gift of grace is exactly that, a free and undeserved gift. It is only by our acceptance of grace through Baptism, that we can associate our works with that of grace from God. St. Paul tells us, "And if sons, heirs also; heirs indeed of God, and joint heirs with Christ: yet so, if we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified with him (Romans 8:17)". St. Paul emphasizes that by the grace merited from Jesus Christ's suffering, death and resurrection we can be co-heirs with Christ and participate in merit by grace. Thus good works done in faith, hope and love for God, after justification of Baptism, can merit further increases in grace, justification, and sanctification. We participate with God in good works because of our love for him as our heavenly Father.

### The Redemptive Role of Suffering

Christ desires for us to participate in his Passion, and thus suffering within the Body of Christ has a redemptive role. Because baptized Christians are part of the mystical Body of Christ, Jesus Christ the head of the body asks its members to participate not only in his resurrection and grace, but also in the suffering of his Passion. St. Paul firmly evinces this doctrine, "Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in my flesh, for his body, which is the