

A CRITIQUE OF LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF JUSTIFICATION BASED ON CATHOLIC TEACHING

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Hans Küng in his book *Justification* states that "the theology of justification lies at the root of the still continuing theological battle over the true form of Christianity, at the root of the greatest catastrophe that has befallen the Catholic Church in her two thousand year history."¹ Listed under questions in dispute between the churches in the *Common Catechism*,² the first joint statement of Christian Faith by Protestants and Catholics since the separation of the churches in the sixteenth century is the question concerning justification. It goes therefore without saying that the theology of justification remains a question of crucial importance among the churches for it touches upon the fundamentals of the Christian belief.

Much has been written on this question and the earlier writings of both Catholics and Protestants have tended to be polemical. More recent writings, however, show an increasing attempt at establishing common grounds.³ But for common grounds to be achieved, one should not gloss over the differences especially so if they involve fundamental principles of faith. As George Lindbeck wrote in his Foreword to Jared Wicks' book on Luther, *Man Yearning for Grace*: "Father Wicks has written with great learning, love for Luther and objectivity. His purpose however has not been to

1. Hans Küng, *Justification* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1964) 6.

2. Johannes Feiner and Lukas Visser, eds., *The Common Catechism: A Christian Book of Faith* (London: Search Press, 1975). This is written by both Protestants and Catholics. It puts forth the common basis of their beliefs without shirking the questions that still separate them. It is considered as marking the start of a whole new era in ecumenism.

3. The revision of the Catholic picture of Luther and consequently of the Reformation as a whole is shown in John N. Schumacher, "Changing Catholic Concepts of the Reformation," *The South East Asia Journal of Theology* 9, no. 2 (October 1967) 27-40.

promote goodwill or improve ecumenical relations but rather to search for the truth."⁴

It is with this spirit that this article is written. It is an attempt to understand Luther's theology of justification and to present a critique of it based on Catholic teaching as grounded in the Council of Trent and as developed by contemporary Catholic theologians. Its primary aim is to understand the theological foundations of the agreements and disagreements of the Catholic teaching with Luther's theology of justification.

LUTHER'S RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE⁵

After almost being struck dead by lightning in a thunderstorm, Luther made a vow to enter the monastery. In the spirit of medieval piety, he believed that peace and salvation depended not only on the grace of God in Jesus Christ, but also on the efforts of man to achieve holiness in his life and the cloistered religious life was where a man could reach the highest state of holiness. With much zeal, he rigorously followed the strict monastic life of prayer, fasting, vigil and choir. After a few years of peace, fear and despair overcame him as he realized the ineradicable sinfulness that lay at the core of his being, despite all his efforts at achieving holiness. He wrote:

I tried as hard as I could to keep the Rule. I used to be contrite and make a list of my sins. I confessed them again and again. I scrupulously carried out the penances which were allotted to me. And yet my conscience kept nagging me. It kept telling me: "You fall short there." "You were not sorry enough." "You left that sin off your list." I was trying to cure the doubts and scruples of my conscience with human remedies, the traditions of men. The more I tried these remedies the more troubled and uneasy my conscience grew.⁶

4. Taken from George A. Lindbeck's Foreword to Jared Wicks, *Man Yearning for Grace* (Washington, D.C.: Corpus Books, 1948) ix.

5. Wicks contends that understanding Luther's early theology as stemming from his interior struggles as a monk is not reliable as a principle of interpretation. Sources on Luther's personal life in the monastery are scarce and one can only glean a few hints in his early letters. He proposes a careful study of Luther's interpretative instrumentarium as a framework for understanding his theology. Wicks, *Man Yearning for Grace*, 9-10, 63, 265-68.

6. See Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972) 45.

Since even his frequent reception of the sacraments and other sacramental acts of the church did not help him, he fell into the abyss of despair, regarding himself as a damned man before the implacable wrath and justice of God. He later wrote:

Is it not against all natural reason that God out of his mere whim deserts men, hardens them, damns them, as if he delighted in sins and in such torments of the wretched for eternity, he who is said to be of such mercy and goodness? This appears iniquitous, cruel, and intolerable in God, by which very many have been offended in all ages. And who would not be? I was myself more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated him!⁷

Luther continued his theological studies at the University of Wittenberg and after a few years, he was awarded the degree of doctor of theology. He was appointed professor of Sacred Scripture and this opened to him a new door leading to his spiritual revival. His study of the Scriptures particularly the epistles of Paul and his reading of St. Augustine's anti-pelagian writings, especially his *De Spiritu et Littera*, were decisive in shaping his new consciousness of God. The "tower experience," that is, his religious experience in the tower of the monastery of Wittenberg where he studied and prepared his lectures is a key in understanding his spiritual conversion. The full force of his experience was drawn from his reading of the Epistle to the Romans 1:17: "The just man shall live by faith." The righteousness of Christ as promised to all who surrender to him in faith answered his deepest moral anguish for no longer was his righteousness hanging upon his poor and miserable efforts but only upon his share in the merit of Christ's suffering which he received through faith alone.⁸

Haight suggests that two structures emerge in Luther's religious experience.⁹ The structure of the first moment of the experience is characterized by a sense of fear of the absolute holiness of God before whom man can only conceive of himself as totally sinful. Before God as *mysterium tremendum*, the awful and terrifying

7. Cited in Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1950) 59.

8. Luther's religious experience is summarized from Chadwick, *The Reformation*, 43-46 and August Franzen, *A History of the Church*, rev. and ed. by John P. Dolan, trans. Peter Becker (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1965) 263-70.

9. Roger Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1979) 84-85.

God of might and power, man is a puny creature. The structure of the second moment can be seen in paradox. It is discernible at that point when from the abyss of spiritual torment and despair a man perceives the face of a loving God behind the holy and overpowering God; he grasps the mystery of his mercy beyond his justice and wrath. And paradoxically only when he falls into the abyss and loses his last claim on salvation does he perceive God's hand as it were reaching out for him in one magnanimous act of mercy and love. The paradox of this experience lies in the simultaneous occurrence of human despair and of divine mercy. Luther's religious experience laid the foundation of his theology of justification.

LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF JUSTIFICATION

In this part of the article, we seek only to present Luther's theology of justification and not to argue with him. A critique of his theology presupposes a careful and objective reading and study of his writing. However, a thorough and in-depth study of his theology of justification is not within the scope and objectives of our investigation. Only certain key themes will be discussed with references to pertinent writings and letters.

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

Justification by faith alone is the fundamental principle of Luther's Theology of Justification. This means that man's justification is totally God's gratuitous gift. All of salvation is God's and only by abandoning himself in *faith* as a response to God's gratuity is man justified.

All men are sinners and none are approved by God. Salvation can only come to them, *unearned*, by virtue of faith in Christ. Christ has earned it for us through his blood. For our sakes, he has become God's "mercy seat" and so God forgives all the sins that we have committed in the past. In this way, God shows us that His own righteousness which he confers through the medium of faith is our only help.¹⁰

10. Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961) 27.

FAITH AND GOOD WORKS

The relation of faith and good works in his theology is short of clarity and precision. One struggles to determine the exact relation between these two realities as the positions he takes appear to be contradictory in his writings. In his *Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* he writes: "It is impossible to separate works from faith just as it is impossible to separate heat and light."¹¹ But in his *Commentary on the Galatians*, Luther stresses the exclusiveness of faith as opposed to a positive relation of faith and works:

Thus have we always most certain and sure arguments which necessarily conclude that justification cometh by faith alone. For how do works avail to justification, seeing that Paul is so earnest both against the law and works, and saith plainly that we must be dead to the law if we will live to God? But if we be dead to the law, and the law be dead to us, then hath it nothing to do with us. How then should it avail anything at all to our justification? Wherefore, we must needs say, that we be pronounced righteous by grace alone or by faith alone in Christ without the law and works.¹²

In the same *Commentary*, "he opposes the doctrine of faith formed by charity as the sublime camouflage for justification through works."¹³ However, in other sections of his *Commentary*, he does not deny the value of good works though he insists on the priority and primacy of faith. He endeavors to see a positive relation of good works and faith.

First there must be a tree, then the fruit. For apples do not make a tree but a tree makes apples. So with faith; first it makes a person who afterwards performs works.¹⁴

11. Ibid. 24.

12. Martin Luther, "Commentary on the Galatians," *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, 121. This work, written in 1531, shows a striking example of how Luther's statements, in the context of polemics, can be decisively affected. While much of the material of this commentary is polemical, there are instances, as indicated later in the paper, where he attempts to work at a certain positive relation between the polarities he is engaged with. A strain of "nervousness and peculiar uncertainty" seems to run through the entire commentary.

13. Peter Manns, "Absolute and Incarnate Faith — Luther on Justification in the Galatians' Commentary of 1531-1535," *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*, ed. Jared Wicks (Chicago: Loyola Univ. Press, 1970) 124.

14. Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians," *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, 54 vols. (Saint Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1963) 26:255.

He who wants to be a true Christian or to belong to the kingdom of Christ must be truly a believer. But he does not truly believe if works of love do not follow his faith.¹⁵

Peter Manns provides a key to the seeming contradictions in Luther's writings. He asserts that Luther is not attacking good works in themselves but he is opposing self-justification through works. He views good works not as a condition of salvation but only as a necessary fruit and result.¹⁶

The Christian who is consecrated by faith does good works but the works do not make him holier or more Christian for that is the work of faith alone. Good works do not make a good man but a good man does good works.¹⁷

Although, as I have said, a man is abundantly and sufficiently justified by faith inwardly, in his spirit, and so has all that he needs, except insofar as this faith and these riches must grow from day to day even to the future life; yet he remains in this mortal life on earth. In this life he must control his own body by fastings, watchings, labors, and subject it to the Spirit so that it will obey and conform to the inner man. . . . In doing these works, however, we must not think that a man is justified before God by them, for faith, which alone is righteousness before God, cannot endure that erroneous opinion. . . . Since by faith the soul is cleansed and made to love God, it desires that all things, and especially its own body, shall be purified so that all things may join with it in loving and praising God. Hence, a man cannot be idle, for the need of his body drives him and he is compelled to do many good works, to reduce it to subjection. Nevertheless, the works themselves do not justify him before God, but, he does the works out of spontaneous love in obedience to God.¹⁸

Good works are simply and purely outward signs. They proceed from faith like good fruits, prove that the man himself is already righteous at heart in God's sight. We shall be justified apart from works, although when justified, we shall not continue without works.¹⁹

15. Ibid. 27-30.

16. Manns, "Absolute and Incarnate Faith," 130, 207.

17. Martin Luther, "Freedom of a Christian," *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, 69. Written towards the end of 1520, this work of Luther is reckoned among his very best. "Luther speaks in terms that are eloquent in their simplicity of the relation between saving faith and good life," writes Bernard M.G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation* (London: Longman Group, 1981) 58.

18. Ibid. 67-68.

19. Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," 28.

In this light one can perceive the consistency in Luther's thought vis-a-vis the seeming contradictions in his writings. Central to his theology is the total gratuity of justification. When understood with this central affirmation as a basis, the relation of good works and faith is logically consistent. For Luther, salvation is not within man's power to achieve through good works but only within man's capacity to receive through faith. Good works are not prior to faith but are only the fruits and effects of the grace of salvation realized in the surrender of faith. Thus he denies the necessity of good works as a condition of salvation but affirms their necessity as the fruit or effect of faith. The consistency of his theology is obscured however, when his thought is directed against a position contrary to his own. In the context of polemics he tends to overemphasize the principle being challenged or denied, thereby obscuring whatever valid aspect it may contain. Moreover it makes him appear to deny completely what is valid about the other side.

SIMUL JUSTUS ET PECCATOR

The belief that a person is at the same time both sinful and righteous, a sinner in fact but righteous by the promise of God is one of the basic declarations of Luther's theology of justification. The grace of God envelops him like a veil cast over him but underneath it, he remains a sinner.²⁰ In his heart is a perduring radical evil which continually stirs him up against God. "This is the evil that poisons all the discrete deeds even the good ones at their root."²¹ In his *Lectures on Romans*, Luther identified this perduring inclination to evil (concupiscence) as sin itself: "Therefore actual sin (as the theologians call it) is strictly speaking the work and fruit of sin and sin itself is that passion and concupiscence or that inclination toward evil and resistance against the good."²² Thus, the sinner after being justified is no less a sinner than before.

On account of faith in Christ, God does not see the sin that still remains in me. For so long as I go on living in the flesh, there is certainly sin in me.

20. Philip Hughes, *A Popular History of the Reformation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Hanover House, 1957) 106.

21. Otto H. Pesch, "Existential and Sapiential Theology — The Theological Confrontation between Luther and Thomas Aquinas," *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*, 72.

22. Cited in Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace*, 90.

But meanwhile Christ protects me under the shadow of his wings and spreads over me the wide heaven of the forgiveness of sins, under which I live in safety. This prevents God from seeing these sins. My flesh distrusts God, is angry with him, does not rejoice in him. But God overlooks these sins and in his sight they are as though they were not sins. This is accompanied by imputation on account of the faith by which I begin to take hold of Christ and on his account God reckons imperfect righteousness as perfect righteousness and sin as not sin even though it really is sin.²³

SUMMARY

Briefly, Luther's theology of justification is based on two central affirmations:

1. Only through faith is God's grace made accessible to man for his salvation. Good works do not complement faith as a condition of salvation but are only the necessary effects or fruits of faith.

2. Grace saves man apart from any intrinsic change effected in him. Even when justified, man is no less a sinner than before. He is declared righteous through the merit of Christ's righteousness but he remains in fact a sinner through and through.

A CRITIQUE OF LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF JUSTIFICATION BASED ON THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

GRATUITY OF JUSTIFICATION

The council begins by recognizing the helplessness of man in sin:

The holy Council declares that for a correct and clear understanding of the doctrine of justification it is necessary that each one admits and confesses that all men having lost innocence through the sin of Adam became unclean and according to the apostle were "by nature children of wrath" (chap. 1).²⁴

It asserts the inability of human existence to be justified by its own power. The absolute need of grace for justification is one of

23. Luther, "Lecture on Galatians," *Luther's Works*, 26:231-32.

24. "The General Council of Trent: Decree on Justification (1547)," *The Christian Faith*, ed. J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, 2d ed. (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1976) no. 1925.

the central affirmations of the Council of Trent. With this, Luther's theology of justification is in continuity.

We are said to be justified gratuitously because nothing that precedes justification neither faith nor works, merits the grace of salvation, for if it is by grace it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace (chap. 8).²⁵

THE NATURE OF HUMAN COOPERATION

But the Council does not take the total gratuity of justification to mean the exclusion of man's cooperation. This is stated in one of the corresponding canons appended to the chapters where the same doctrine is expressed in the condemnation of opposite errors:

If anyone says that the free will of man, moved and awakened by God, in no way cooperates by an assent to God's awakening call, through which he disposes and prepares himself to obtain the grace of justification and that man cannot refuse his assent if he wishes, but that like a lifeless object he does nothing at all and is merely passive, anathema sit (can. 4).²⁶

The Council's teaching in stressing man's free cooperation does not deny that justification is *totally* God's grace including man's free cooperation. In the work of salvation all is from God, and in no way can man claim anything that is exclusively his which does not have God as the source.

In adults the beginning of justification must be attributed to God's prevenient grace through Jesus Christ, that is, to his call addressed to them without any previous merits of theirs. Thus, those who through their sins were turned away from God, awakened and assisted by his grace, are disposed to turn to their own justification by freely assenting to and cooperating with that grace. In this way, God touches the heart of man with the illumination of the Holy Spirit, but man himself is not inactive receiving that inspiration, since he can reject it; and yet, without God's grace, he cannot by his own free will take one step towards justice in God's sight (chap. 5).²⁷

25. Ibid. no. 1935.

26. Ibid. no. 1954.

27. Ibid. no. 1929.

THE CORRECT UNDERSTANDING OF GRATUITOUS JUSTIFICATION THROUGH FAITH

What does man's free cooperation mean? The Council of Trent indicates the dispositions necessary for this. The fundamental disposition is faith, for it is only in faith that the mystery of God's gratuitous love in the redemption of Christ is made accessible to man. "Faith is the beginning of man's salvation, the foundation and root of all justification without which it is impossible to please God" (chap. 8).²⁸ However faith is only the first radical step towards God and here Catholic teaching goes beyond the "sola fide" of Luther's theology. It declares that man, struck with the profound sense of his sinfulness before the all-holy God, is confronted with God's holy justice. But with hope and confidence in God's mercy, he turns away from sin, hates evil, resolves to love God and is determined to keep his commandments and to constantly renew himself through the sacraments (chap. 6).²⁹ These dispositions of faith, fear of God's justice, hope in his mercy, hatred for sin and evil, love for God and obedience to his commandments, a firm determination to lead a new life and to renew oneself through the grace of the sacraments mark man's active cooperation with grace. The stress on faith alone in Luther's theology implies the exclusion of these other dispositions. Bouyer writes:

It is beyond doubt that Luther closely linked the subjective side of justification by faith, personal religion in fact, with denial of the objective value of the sacraments and of all the other means of grace.

Once faith is present, there is salvation, but there is nothing in the sphere of salvation existing apart from faith itself, and faith in its turn has no content outside itself.³⁰

The Council declares:

If anyone says that nothing is commanded in the gospels except faith and that everything else is indifferent, neither prescribed or prohibited, but

28. Ibid. no. 1935.

29. Ibid. no. 1930.

30. Louis Bouyer, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, trans. A.V. Littledale (Westminster: Newman Press, 1956) 140.

free; or that the ten commandments in no way concern Christians, anathema sit (can. 19).³¹

Again to say that man must respond freely to God's grace is not in any way to deny that justification is completely God's work. But man's cooperation is his preparation, his readiness to receive God's gift of justification. The example given is the necessity of a container to be clean for it to be used as a container for food, but this is not the cause for its being used for food. The person's decision to use it is the cause. In analogy, man's cooperation is not the cause of justification; it is God's free decision.³²

While man's part does not merit justification in the strict sense of merit, it is clear that man's readiness partly determines the measure of God's justice that is received, although it must be said that in the last analysis, the measure of justice is measured by God's generosity.³³

What is implied here is the basic difference between the Tridentine teaching and Luther's theology on the nature of human cooperation with God's grace. Tridentine teaching without denying the total gratuity of justification assigns a more intrinsic value to man's cooperation in the work of justification. For Luther, that all of justification is God's work means that man can do nothing of the slightest value; he cannot dispose or prepare for it. Tridentine believes that grace does not suppress what is human but in fact restores to it its fullest powers.³⁴

THE MERIT OF GOOD WORKS AS A RESULT OF JUSTIFICATION

Having given human cooperation with grace a more intrinsic value, the Council declares:

Thus not only are we considered just, but we are truly called just and we are just, each one receiving within himself his own justice according to the measure which the "Holy Spirit apportions to each one individually

31. "The General Council of Trent: Decree on Justification (1547)," no. 1969.

32. G.N. Buescher, "Justification, Dispositions For," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 8: 92.

33. *Ibid.* 93.

34. Bouyer, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, 46, 51.

as he wills" (1 Cor 12:11), and according to each one's personal disposition and cooperation (chap. 7).³⁵

This counters Luther's implicit claim that by faith alone, man receives justice through the merit of Christ. As a consequence of the more intrinsic value given to human cooperation, the Council asserts that justice or grace is capable of increasing and is meant to increase. It actually grows by good and meritorious works which the just do in keeping the commandments (chap. 10).³⁶

If anyone says that the justice received is not preserved and even increased before God through good works, but that such works are merely the fruits and signs of the justification obtained and not also the cause of its increase, anathema sit (can. 24).³⁷

This counters Luther's "sola fide", by which he saw good works as fruits or effect of faith but having absolutely no necessary relation to justification in its proper sense. The Council of Trent does not cancel out the *creative tension* that is at the core of the mystery of divine-human encounter.

If anyone says that the good works of the justified man are the gifts of God in such a way that they are not also the good merits of the justified man himself or that by the good works he performs through the grace of God and the merits of Jesus Christ (of whom he is a living member) the justified man does not truly merit an increase of grace, eternal life and provided he dies in the state of grace, the attainment of this eternal life, as well as increase of glory, anathema sit (can. 32).³⁸

35. "The General Council of Trent: Decree on Justification (1547)," no. 1529.

36. Ibid. no. 1937. It is important to stress that man's free activity has a real relative value. The good works of a man of faith are truly *meritorious*. Merit should not be understood in terms of things received from God but rather in terms of the person himself growing in authenticity as he responds more and more to God's grace through good works. P. Gregory Stevens, *The Life of Grace* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963) 63. In a real sense man is saved by both his act of faith and his good works which are intrinsic to his faith. It is essential to see that Catholic doctrine, unlike the extremes of *Pelagianism*, which views man as the sole agent of salvation and *Lutherianism*, which views God as the sole and absolute agent of salvation, never sets up an either/or understanding of the reality of God's gift and man's cooperation. God's initiative is always asserted but it is not an initiative which takes away man's response; rather the reality of God's generous call necessitates the reality of man's deep, personal and free cooperation. Ibid. 54, 64-65.

37. "The General Council of Trent: Decree on Justification (1547)," no. 1974.

38. Ibid. no. 1982.

LOSS OF JUSTIFICATION

A corollary of the aforementioned doctrinal canon is the teaching of the Council that once received, the grace of justification can be lost and is actually lost by personal sin (can. 23),³⁹ but may be regained through repentance and sacramental confession or the desire for it (chap. 14).⁴⁰ The entire document of the decree on justification is built on the concept of a triple justification: the initial justification received in baptism, the sacrament of faith, the increase of this justification through the merit of good works, and the justification lost through sin which cannot be recovered by faith alone without reference to the sacrament of reconciliation.⁴¹

STATE OF A PERSON AFTER JUSTIFICATION

A more crucial difference which separates Tridentine teaching from Luther's theology concerns the state of a person after justification. According to Luther's theology, even after justification man remains a sinner and is always a sinner. According to Tridentine teaching,

it is inconceivable that God could justify a sinner without changing him in reality or forgive sin without deleting it. The Catholic theology takes God's gracious and forgiving love seriously. Grace transforms the sinner, God's merciful love re-creates the sinner into a just man, son of God.⁴²

The difference lies in the approach to the reality of sin. In Luther's view, sin or sinfulness is identified with what Catholic teaching calls concupiscence, the inclination to evil that is innate in man. In the decree on original sin, the Council of Trent declares:

If anyone denies that the guilt of original sin is remitted by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ given in baptism, or asserts that all that is sin in the true and proper sense is not taken away but only brushed over or not imputed, anathema sit. The Council, however, knows and professes that

39. Ibid. no. 1973.

40. Ibid. no. 1944.

41. Refer to the introductory part of "The General Council of Trent: Decree on Justification (1547)."

42. P. De Letter, "Justification in Catholic Theology," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 8:90.

concupiscence or the inclination to sin remains in the baptized. Since it is left for us to wrestle with, it cannot harm those who do not consent but manfully resist it by the grace of Jesus Christ. . . . The Catholic Church has never understood that it is called sin because it would be sin in the true and proper sense in those who have been reborn, but because it comes from sin and inclines to sin (can. 5).⁴³

SUMMARY

In summary, the Catholic teaching according to the mind of Trent affirms Luther's "sola gratia" as the foundational principle of Christian theology of justification. "Sola gratia" means that all justification is God's grace. Even the capacity of man to receive the grace of justification through faith is the work of grace. Justifying faith is in fact the first and fundamental grace. That justification is totally God's grace including man's cooperation means that man cannot claim anything that is his without having God as the source.

However, while the Council of Trent accepts the fundamental principle of "sola gratia," it rejects Luther's "sola fide" for the following reasons:

1. It takes the total gratuity of justification to mean the exclusion of man's active cooperation with grace.

2. It absolutizes faith as the *only* necessary means by which God's grace is made accessible to man. It believes that there is nothing in the sphere of salvation existing apart from faith, for once faith is present, there is salvation. Thus, it denies the objective value of the sacraments and the other means of grace. The Council accepts faith as the beginning of salvation and as the primary but not the only disposition for the gift of justification.

3. It denies absolutely the relation between God's grace and man's action. Thus it assigns no intrinsic meritorious value to man's good works. Consequently, it believes that by faith alone, men receive justice. The Council claims that God's grace does not suppress man's proper activity but in fact restores to him the power to act with freedom. Thus it declares that:

- a) Each one receives within himself his own justice according to the measure the Holy Spirit apportions to each individual as

43. "The General Council of Trent: Decree on Original Sin (1546)," no. 512.

He wills and according to each one's disposition and cooperation (chap. 7).

b) Man is not inactive while receiving inspiration, since he can reject it (chap. 5).

c) Justice or grace is capable of increasing and is meant to increase through good and meritorious works (can. 24).

d) The grace of justification can be lost and is actually lost by personal sin (can. 23) but it may be regained through repentance and the sacramental confession or the desire for it (chap. 14).

4. And finally the Council declares its fundamental opposition to Luther's belief that grace saves man apart from any intrinsic change effected in him. The Council takes God's graciousness and forgiving love seriously as actually recreating the sinner into a just man, a son of God.

A CRITIQUE OF LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF JUSTIFICATION BASED ON THE WORKS OF SOME CATHOLIC SCHOLARS

From an ecumenical point of view, Catholic scholars have acquired deeper understanding of the method and presuppositions which underlie Luther's theological formulations. Otto H. Pesch, O.P. provides a key to understanding in greater depth Luther's formula, *simul justus et peccator* in terms of Luther's framework of meaning.⁴⁴ In the categories of Scholastic theology, *simul justus et peccator* is a metaphysical absurdity for the same man cannot be at once ontologically both sinner and righteous. But in more recent years, advances have been made toward a more positive understanding of this Lutheran formula. Pesch points out that St. Thomas thought of sin and grace in terms of the category of quality which ontologically characterizes a personal subject. In this sense, "just as the body cannot be both hot and cold at the same time, so the same man cannot be at once both sinner and righteous."⁴⁵ Luther, on the other hand, thought of sin and grace not in terms of quality, but in terms of personal relationships. Thus, for him, sin and grace can be opposing relations in which one and the same person may be involved. Sin is man's relationship with God which he himself has broken. Grace and righteousness are

44. Pesch, "Existential and Sapiential Theology," 69-74.

45. Ibid. 70.

God's continuous offer of love and forgiveness despite man's sinfulness, and they prevent him from becoming totally depraved or iniquitous.⁴⁶ Understood in this light, there is no metaphysical absurdity in saying that a person is unworthy and yet loved, sinful and yet forgiven.

Pesch sees the originally fundamental opposition to Luther's formula as reduced to a simple difference of theological method. The difference between existential and sapiential theology provides a basis for understanding Luther's formula. His formula is a classic example of existential theology which understands faith in the context of the individual's personal subjective condition. In contrast, sapiential theology far removed from the I-Thou encounter, tends to view God in the third person, creation and man in the objective order. It is a theology in which the act of faith does not play an immediate, thematic role.⁴⁷

Lortz points out Luther's use of paradoxical thought, most clearly present in his *simul justus et peccator*. Whether the "contradictory tension denies the positive as appears to be the case or actually affirms it in a more intense manner,"⁴⁸ is a decisive question. In contrast to scholastic thought which seeks to harmonize actual contradictions, Luther "forces the apparently or actually contradictory concepts together as tightly and sharply as possible, in order to derive from their opposition the proof of their truth, including the truth of both."⁴⁹ Lortz has taken a positive position on Luther's *simul justus et peccator*.

It is clear that the dialectical tension in no way denies objective being, but rather presupposes it. More concretely, the assertion of remaining sinful must not deny a true, somehow ontological justification. We do not do justice to Luther's thought with the idea of purely imputative justification in a wholly external forensic or nominalist sense.⁵⁰

Bouyer points out "sola gratia" as the vital principle of Luther's doctrine and spirituality. It is in its very essence a genuine Christian doctrine and is accepted as such by Catholic tradition.⁵¹ Unless

46. Ibid. 70-71.

47. Ibid. 73.

48. Joseph Lortz, "The Basic Elements of Luther's Intellectual Style," *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*, 15.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid. 16.

51. Bouyer, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, 43.

the present writer is mistaken, K  ng seems to be saying that "sola fide" is the very expression of the essence of "sola gratia." It is the assertion of the total incapacity of man to justify himself. It recognizes man's poverty before God who gives all. Justification is realized through faith alone; no work not even a work of love can justify man. Faith which is a trusting self-abandonment to God's grace is the only condition for justification.⁵² We have something to say about this in our conclusion.

On the negative side, Peter Hacker in his critique of justification by faith alone⁵³ shows how Luther's understanding of faith is incompatible with the understanding of faith in the New Testament. He describes the nature of faith in Luther's understanding "as reflexive, a sort of faith that bends back on its own subject in its very act. It is a kind of faith which is rigorously self-directed."⁵⁴ Faith in the New Testament is a radical self-abandonment to the mystery of the Person of Jesus. The focus lies outside of the individual's existence and it draws its certitude from beyond it. The question in Matthew 9:28 provides a clue: "Do you believe that I am able to do this?"⁵⁵ He criticizes the overstress on trusting faith as coinciding with salvation itself. In Luther's understanding, the objective existence of salvation coincides with the subjective consciousness of being saved. As a matter of fact even the very consciousness of being saved can create the reality of salvation itself.⁵⁶ The context and spirit of Luther's notion of faith is most clearly expressed by Gerhard Ebeling who wrote: "Faith is not a precondition of salvation but is the certainty of it and as such it is itself the event of salvation."⁵⁷ Hacker points out the danger of this notion of reflexive faith. It is a faith that trusts itself and, so, even if psychic peace is not grace itself, it becomes so by the power of one's assertion.⁵⁸ Hacker's criticism is supported by Lortz who singles out Luther's exaggerated subjectivism as his one great flaw. Because of his "inability to submit the subjective elements of

52. K  ng, *Justification*, 250-51.

53. Peter Hacker, "Martin Luther's Notion of Faith," in *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*, 85-105.

54. Hacker, "Martin Luther's Notion of Faith," 87.

55. *Ibid.* 91-92.

56. *Ibid.* 93.

57. Cited *ibid.* 93-94.

58. *Ibid.* 104.

his religious experience within the framework of supra-personal authority Luther cuts himself off from the Church."⁵⁹

Bouyer shows the influence of nominalism in Luther's thought which he considers most present in Luther's presupposition that there is nothing real or of value outside of God. Thus, he denies that man's actions can be meritorious in themselves, even after the intervention of grace.⁶⁰

But a prisoner, like Luther, of the nominalist categories, he was incapable of formulating clearly the true answer: that grace is grace, a pure gift of God, not in giving us nothing real, but in giving us, in so far as we remain dependent on it, the reality we are incapable of acquiring by ourselves. . . . His whole treatise aims at showing, not how grace regenerates nature but that nature is so deeply impaired that it cannot do something efficacious for salvation.⁶¹

This basically stems from the belief that "God is great only in the degree that the creature is little. He is sovereign if the creature is pure nothingness."⁶² Thus to attribute any capacity to regenerated man to merit anything in the proper sense of the word is to deny God's divine majesty. To say that grace gives man the power to do acts good and meritorious in themselves, notwithstanding his total dependence on God is to destroy the gratuitousness of God's action.⁶³ This notion is contrary to the view of God and man in Scripture. That there is an infinite distance between the all-holy God and sinful man is asserted in Sacred Scriptures but with equal force it is also asserted that the goodness inherent in man comes from God. God is sovereign and holy not because man is abandoned to his depravity but because He rescues man from it.⁶⁴

SUMMARY

In summary, these are the main points discernible in the works of the authors just discussed:

59. See Schumacher, "Changing Catholic Concept of the Reformation," 33.

60. Bouyer, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, 151.

61. Ibid. 156.

62. Ibid. 147.

63. Ibid. 146.

64. Ibid. 147.

1. That the fundamental opposition of Luther's *simul justus et peccator* with Catholic teaching is reduced to a simple difference in theological method. When understood in the categories of Luther's experiential theology, it is dispossessed of its purely nominalist sense which is the fundamental basis of the Catholic opposition.

2. "Sola gratia" as the vital principle of Luther's doctrine and spirituality is essentially a genuine Christian doctrine and is accepted as such by Catholic tradition.

3. It is suggested that "sola fide" be understood as the very expression of the essence of "sola gratia," that is the total incapacity of man to justify himself apart from grace. Thus, only by faith, a trusting self-abandon to God's grace, is he saved.

4. There is criticism of "justification by faith alone," where faith is understood as a reflexive faith, having the self as its focus and the very faith experience as its source of certitude. In Luther's thought, the mere assertion of self in one's subjective faith-consciousness can constitute a certitude about salvation. But this leaves us with no objective structure to test this subjective faith-consciousness.

5. The influence of nominalism in Luther's thought is clearly present in his denial of man's action having an intrinsic meritorious value even after the intervention of grace. To assign an intrinsic value to man's acts is, in Luther's mind, to compromise or destroy the totality of God's gratuity. This betrays the influence of nominalism which cancels out any possibility of relation between God and man.

CONCLUSION

Luther's doctrine of "sola gratia" in its essence expresses the foundational principle of all Christian theology. Justification by grace alone stresses that only God can draw man to reconciliation with Him through the merits of Jesus Christ. Unless He makes the gift of Himself, all human effort is futile in achieving union with Him. All of justification is God's gift, including man's response of faith. There is nothing good that man can call his own which does not have God as the source.

However, Luther's doctrine of "sola gratia" departs from Catholic teaching when he takes "sola gratia" to mean denial of all

human agency even his free action under the grace of God. A prisoner of nominalist categories, he was incapable of seeing the *creative tension* between God's pure grace and man's meritorious action under the influence of grace. Thus, in Luther's mind, to assign any intrinsic value to man's good works is to destroy virtually the gratuitousness of grace.

That good works must be the fruit of justification is accepted by both Catholic teaching and Luther. However, while Luther denies their meritorious value, Catholic teaching affirms it. The affirmation that good works as being meritorious means that to a certain degree they have a bearing on God's gift of justification, though finally all comes from God's freedom. As the Council of Trent declares, "each one receives within himself his own justice according to each one's dispositions and cooperation" (chap. 7). Luther holds that all men receive equal justice through faith in the merits of Jesus Christ. This theological assertion of Luther is open to consequences which compromise the seriousness of divine justice and of human freedom and responsibility. All the more so if justification by faith is understood (as Luther seems to do) in terms of faith as reflexive, having the self as its focus and the very faith experience as its source of certitude. So there is a danger that anyone by the mere assertion of his subjective consciousness of faith can claim the certitude of salvation, notwithstanding his moral laxity and irresponsibility.

But given the context of his times, one can understand Luther's position. A deeply religious man, Luther saw the exterior acts of piety being exaggerated and the practice of indulgences being subject to misuse and abuse, as blatant violations of the primacy of God's grace in the work of salvation. As Jedin concludes: "Luther fought down a Catholicism in himself which was not Catholic."⁶⁵ And, certainly, one can also add that his struggles as a monk which brought him down to the abyss of spiritual torment and despair left in him a very real "trauma of work-righteousness." This explains his inability to deal with good works dispassionately in his writings.⁶⁶

Judging from the results of our research, we may rightly concede to K  ng his claim that "sola fide" is the very expression of

65. See Hubert Jedin, "Luther, A New World," *Chicago Studies* 5 (1966) 59.

66. Lortz, "The Basic Elements of Luther's Intellectual Style," 26.

the essence of "sola gratia." In the same vein, Karl Rahner writes that faith comes from "God's absolute and gracious initiative alone."⁶⁷ In this sense "sola fide" is continuous with Catholic tradition. However, Luther's understanding of "sola fide" is open to meanings whose implications compromise some basic principles of Catholic tradition. If "sola fide" implies that there is nothing in the sphere of salvation existing apart from faith, understood by Luther as primarily subjective personal faith, then it denies the symbolical and ecclesial nature of the sacraments which Christ has willed to be means of grace for men. When "sola fide" is taken to mean that good works, under the influence of grace, have absolutely no bearing on God's gift of justification, then it compromises the seriousness of divine justice and of human freedom and responsibility. And this is all the more so, when justification by faith, as pointed out earlier, implies that by the mere assertion of one's subjective consciousness of faith, one can claim the certitude of salvation. However, Luther's understanding of faith as a personal and interior act which engages man at his deepest center, though it may not constitute the whole of Christian faith, expresses a most vital meaning of faith.

The Council of Trent, because of the categories of the times and the situation of polemics, was deterred from seeing a truthful insight in Luther's *simul justus et peccator*. As mentioned earlier, when it is understood in terms of the categories of Luther's experiential theology, it is dispossessed of its totally nominalist sense. For how true it is that the tension of sin and grace is present in the hearts of men as Solzhenitsyn expresses it with such literary power:

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were only necessary to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times he

67. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Kevin Smyth (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966) 4:207.

is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood. But his name doesn't change, and to that name we ascribe the whole lot, good and evil.⁶⁸

The reality that lies at the heart of a mystery is a unity of polarities, a synthesis of opposites. Whenever one polarity is absolutized to the exclusion of another, the truth of the mystery is subjected to reductionism. But perhaps, to come much closer to the truth, one must allow the mystery to be unfolded with its polarities in *creative tension*. No Catholic or Protestant teaching can claim that it has, with final clarity, understood the mystery of grace and the free action of man under grace. As Avery Dulles writes:

Perhaps, after all, the task of Theology is not so much to solve as to continue to wrestle with these problems. Theology, in conformity with St. Augustine's famous dictum, seeks in order that it may understand; but it understands in order that it may seek still more. If we so understood that we no longer had to seek, it would not be the God of revelation that we had found.⁶⁹

68. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 168.

69. Avery Dulles, *Revelation Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) 182.