

# MADE RIGHTEOUS THROUGH THE INFUSION OF LOVE: JUSTIFICATION IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC TRADITION

On 15 June 1520 Pope Leo X (d. 1521) promulgated the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* condemning several of Luther's views after Luther refused to recant. Everyone was clear that Luther had explicitly contradicted Catholic teaching on many matters, but as odd as it may seem to us today, it was not initially clear whether justification was among those matters. *Exsurge Domine* condemns Luther's rejection of the sacrament of penance, his rejection of indulgences, his rejection of purgatory, his rejection of the infallibility of the pope or of an ecumenical council, his teaching that sin remains in the justified, and his teaching that faith suffices when doing penance and participating in the Lord's supper. While many of these issues are closely related to justification, Luther's teaching regarding justification itself is nowhere condemned or even mentioned. This was largely because the medieval Western church had no official teaching on justification. The late medieval church was home to a variety of understandings of justification, and this variety was part of the reason that the Lord raised up Martin Luther and the other Reformers of his generation to clear up much of the confusion that had been sown.

This article will primarily consider the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the most important early modern council of the Catholic Church, which promulgated by far the most important statement concerning justification in the entire Catholic tradition. Indeed, the Council of Trent introduced an important innovation in the conciliar history of the West. Before Trent, no council had ever set forth a definition of any doctrinal point; the councils had merely condemned various errors and promulgated brief creedal formulae. In contrast, Trent not only included various condemnations of what it saw as deviant teaching but also set forth a positive definition of several doctrines, justification being the most important. The Protestant Reformation, in other words, forced the Catholic Church to set forth its own official stance on justification and other matters so as "to put an end to the doctrinal uncertainty from which the Church had suffered

so long and to replace the preachers' instructions with which the faithful had had to be satisfied, by an official, systematic teaching supported by the authority of the General Council" (Jedin 2:240). Given the Catholic commitment to the infallibility of an ecumenical council, little historical evaluation will be required for the Catholic tradition after Trent. Once the Council had made its determinations, Catholic teaching on justification was more or less settled, since Catholic theologians, if they are to remain Catholic, are not allowed to dissent from its teaching.

As we will see, the Protestant view of justification, or at least certain of its features, found plenty of Catholic defenders both before and at the Council. In some cases, the defenders of the Protestant view prevailed, and Trent moved Catholic teaching regarding justification closer to the truth. In other cases, the defenders of the Protestant view were overpowered, and Trent moved Catholic teaching regarding justification further from the truth. While we can affirm that the Council genuinely reformed some of the most egregious errors of late medieval theology, we must ultimately conclude that the resultant Catholic understanding of justification still falls short, in various ways, of the truth as we understand it (Campbell et al. 2:125-128).

## Justification and Merit

One of Luther's primary targets in late medieval theology was the prominent teaching that the believers can, should, and must merit the grace of justification by their own natural resources alone (see the Patristic through Luther article [18-33 in this issue]). Thankfully, the Council of Trent clearly and emphatically rejected this egregious error in late medieval theology. It did so, in part, due to the rediscovery of the decisions of the Second Council of Orange (529; henceforth Orange II), which strongly affirm the priority of grace in justification. In accordance with the decisions of Orange II, the Council of Trent agrees with Luther and the other Reformers that the believers can in no sense merit the grace

of justification by their own natural powers. Chapter 5 of its “Decree on Justification” insists that “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” (Denzinger §1525). Chapter 8 affirms that “we are said to be justified gratuitously because nothing that precedes justification, neither faith nor works, merits the grace of justification” (§1532). Canon 3 declares, “If anyone says that without the prevenient inspiration of the Holy Spirit and without his help, man can believe, hope, and love or be repentant, as is required, so that the grace of justification be bestowed upon him, let him be anathema” (§1553). According to the very important chapter 7, what merits justification is “the most beloved only begotten Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who, ‘while we were enemies’ [Rom 5:10], ‘out of the great love with which he loved us’ [Eph 2:4], merited for us justification by his most holy Passion on the wood of the Cross

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and made satisfaction for us to God the Father” (§1529). In this respect, the Council of Trent agrees not only with Luther and the other Reformers but also with Augustine, Bernard, Aquinas, Gerson, Bradwardine, Gregory of Rimini, and many others. Nothing that precedes justification, the Council insists, merits that justification. Justification is not something earned by the believers in any way; justification is bestowed entirely by God’s free gift of grace.

This determination of the Council of Trent has remained the teaching of the Catholic Church to this day. The 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, for instance, insists that “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” (2010). In the 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, Catholics confess together with (some) Lutherans that “by grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit” (15).

For this we can surely thank the Lord. It is a testament to

the power of Luther’s Reformation, and the release of conscience it offered, that the Catholic Church learned from its mistake and condemned some of the excesses of late medieval theology. In this respect, Witness Lee’s (d. 1997) evaluation of Luther’s significance applies even to the Catholic Church:

During the sixteenth century the Lord was able not only to recover the truth concerning justification by faith but also to work this truth into His Body through Martin Luther, a vessel prepared by Him. Since that time the church has been unable to lose that truth. (CWWL, 1973–1974 1:308-309)

The medieval church clearly did, to a significant degree, lose sight of one of the most basic truths concerning justification, namely, that it is granted to the believers freely by God’s grace without any merit on their part. It seems highly unlikely that the Western church, even its Roman Catholic part, will lose it again (Campbell et al. 2:128-130).

### How God Justifies

While we can certainly applaud Trent’s strong affirmation of the priority of grace in justification as a clear correction of late medieval teaching, Trent’s teaching on justification still falls short of the truth concerning justification as we understand it. Despite their general agreement with Luther regarding the priority of grace in justification, the bishops and theologians gathered at the Council of Trent were divided regarding how to rightly understand justification itself. Several prominent Catholic theologians were of the mind that Luther’s account of justification was not only right but also generally in line with that of Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas, and Jean Gerson. While these same Catholic theologians disagreed with Luther on many other matters, they pleaded that the Catholic Church not condemn justification by faith simply because Luther taught it. To condemn justification as understood by Luther and the other Reformers, they warned, would be to condemn many of the patristic writers and medieval and contemporary theologians that all Catholics held in high regard.

Among the pre-Tridentine Catholic defenders of the Protestant view of justification, Gasparo Contarini (d. 1542) is perhaps the most significant:

We should not rely on the righteousness inherent in us, by which we are made righteous and do good works. Instead, we ought to rely on the righteousness of Christ, which is imputed to us on account of Christ and the merit of Christ. Indeed, it is by this latter [righteousness] that

we are justified before God, that is, considered and reputed righteous. (Brieger 594)

We attain to a double righteousness. The one is inherent in us, by which we begin to be righteous and are made partakers of the divine nature and have charity poured out in our hearts. The other in truth is not inherent, but is given to us with Christ, the righteousness, I say, of Christ and all His merit. (CC 7:28)

Contarini does not deny that the believers are made inherently righteous in their justification, but he does not think that this suffices for their justification before God. Their approval by God rests primarily on the righteousness of Christ imputed to them because they are “grafted into Christ and have put on Christ” (7:29). Contarini thus fully agrees with Luther that inherent righteousness, even the righteousness imparted into the believers by God, is insufficient for justification. Only if they are in Christ can the believers be truly accounted righteous in God’s sight.

This account of “double righteousness” found an adamant defender at the Council of Trent in the person of Girolamo Seripando (d. 1563), general of the Augustinian order, who was asked by the Council to draft its “Decree on Justification.” According to Seripando, “We are designated righteous because we are something of Christ, namely His members, participants in the righteousness of Him who alone is righteous truly and simply” (CT 12:669). In his initial draft of the decree, we read:

Beyond that most pure and most perfect righteousness of Christ, our Savior and Head, which is poured into His whole Body, that is the whole church, communicated and applied to all His members through faith and the sacraments; by the merit of this same Redeemer of ours, grace, or charity, is poured into their hearts, who are justified through the Holy Spirit who is given to them. (5:825)

Seripando distinguishes between a righteousness that is poured into the whole Body united to Christ as Head and a righteousness that is imparted to those so united to Him. According to Seripando, the believers are first righteous because they are in Christ. Once in Christ, they are then made inherently righteous by the Christ to whom they have been united. The primary error of the Protestants, he thinks, is that they grant a righteousness by union but not the additional, inherent righteousness that follows from that union.

There is much that we disagree with in this account of justification. We consider union with Christ to be the sole basis upon which God accounts righteousness to the believers without the additional requirement of an infused and

inherent righteousness. But we can still appreciate the prominence that these pre-Tridentine Catholic theologians gave to the believers’ union with Christ. Justification, as understood by them, is not primarily a making inherently righteous; justification is primarily an accounting righteous based on union with Christ.

Regrettably, while this theory of “double righteousness” found some staunch supporters at the Council, it was ultimately rejected by an overwhelming majority of those present. In an address to the Council that lasted two or three hours, Diego Laínez (d. 1565), soon to be the second general of the Jesuit order, offered twelve arguments against an imputation of righteousness in justification, insisting instead on the sufficiency of inherent righteousness for justification without an additional accounting of union with Christ. Laínez won the day, and much to Seripando’s dismay, his

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draft was modified to insist that the “single formal cause” of justification—its single, essential content or constitutive element—is a righteousness infused into the believers by God for their spiritual renewal:

The single formal cause is “the justice of God, not that by which he himself is just, but that by which he makes us just,” namely, the justice that we have as a gift from him and by which we are spiritually renewed [*cf. Eph 4:23*]. Thus, not only are we considered just, but we are truly called just and we are just [*cf. 1 Jn 3:1*], each one receiving within himself his own justice. (Denzinger §1529)

Trent’s insistence that there is but a “single formal cause” of justification that is an inherent righteousness within the believers was a direct rejection of the “double righteousness” championed by Seripando and others. This infused righteousness—renewing the believers so that they are “not only...considered just, but...are truly called just and...are just”—is the sole content of the believers’ justification. According to the Catholic position, God justifies the believers by making them inherently righteous. God considers them righteous, in other words, because He has made them



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such by an infusion of inherent righteousness. This infused righteousness and this righteousness alone justifies the believers, and Trent rules out any appeal to union with Christ to supplement this inherent righteousness.

Trent's first mistake, then, is to insist that justification consists primarily (indeed solely) in the interior change that God works within the believers. We grant, of course, that there is an interior change worked by God in justification. The faith produced in the believers by the transfusion of Christ through the preaching of the gospel is certainly an interior change, and this faith is certainly righteous, but it is not that righteousness on account of which God approves the believers according to His standard of righteousness. God approves the believers as righteous in His sight because, and only because, He sees them in Christ and Christ in them. Justification is through faith not primarily because of what faith is but because of faith's relationship to Christ. Faith justifies because it is produced by the Christ who has been transfused into the believers and because it brings them into an organic union with Christ as righteousness. The righteousness by which they are justified is not, as Trent insists, that "by which he makes us just" but Christ Himself, whom the Father has made righteousness to us by putting us into Him (1 Cor. 1:30). Christ Himself, and nothing else, is the righteousness that serves as the basis of justification before God.

Trent's second mistake in its understanding of justification is its insistence that the infused and inherent righteousness by which the believers are justified includes not only faith but also hope and love (*caritas*, 'charity'):

In the very act of justification, together with the remission of sins, man receives through Jesus Christ, into whom he is inserted, the gifts of faith, hope, and charity, all infused at the same time. (Denzinger §1530)

According to Trent, to say that the believers are justified "by faith" does not mean that faith suffices for justification (it clearly does not suffice, in Trent's view). Instead, justification is "by faith" because faith is the first of several things infused into the believers by God in the single moment of justification: "We are said to be justified through faith because 'faith is the beginning of man's salvation,' the foundation and root of all justification" (§1532). According to Trent, faith is the first but not the only thing infused when God makes the ungodly righteous in justification. Hope and love, at least, are also infused, and these infused and inherent virtues of faith, hope, and love together constitute the inherent righteousness by which the believers are justified, or made inherently righteous, in God's sight.

Because the single formal cause of justification includes not only faith but charity, Trent teaches that it is possible to have faith and not be justified: "The grace of justification, once received, 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" (Denzinger §1544). Trent thus clearly claims that faith does not suffice for justification. Many, it argues, lose the grace of justification but retain faith, meaning that it is possible to have genuine faith and not be justified.

This is a clear contradiction of the Scriptures, which repeatedly claim that believing is sufficient for justification (Acts 13:39; Rom. 3:26, 28, 30; 4:5; 5:1; Gal. 2:16; 3:8, 11, 24). Love is required for subjective justification, but faith, and faith alone, is identified by the Scriptures as sufficient for initial, objective justification. Indeed, what we call "objective justification" is called by the Scriptures justification "by faith." Catholics contend that when the Scriptures speak of justification by faith, they always mean justification by faith "operating through" or "formed" by love. But the Scriptures associate love not with objective justification but with the regeneration that follows justification (Rom. 8:10). The apostle John thus always identifies the love within the believers as a sign of their regeneration, not a sign of their justification (1 John 3:14; 4:7; 5:1). Faith, not love, is what the Scriptures identify as the sole requirement for justification, and because the Scriptures frequently and consistently distinguish faith and love (e.g., 2 Pet. 1:5-7), we consider it too much at odds with the Scriptures to insist that everywhere they speak of saving faith, they mean faith "operating through" or "formed" by love. The Scriptures do not require our emendation and certainly not on so many occasions. Justification is identified with faith at least ten times in the Scriptures (see above) and nowhere with love.

Trent's third mistake in its understanding of justification likewise follows from this Catholic insistence that God's accounting righteous is according to inherent condition. The Council teaches that no sin remains in those who have been justified:

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, let him be anathema.

For, in those who are reborn God hates nothing. (Denzinger §1515)

Several at the Council, mostly Augustinians, were appalled

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at the statement that “God hates nothing” in those who have been reborn and called for its removal. The Augustinian Stephen d’Sestino’s pleading with the Council is instructive:

There exists in the justified, however good they are and however much they exist in grace, a continuous battle with wickedness; and would that the victory were frequent rather than rare...I beg you, fathers, that you recognize our infirmity; and thus we should not set up nor fashion man cured in every part, nor righteous in all respects; but rather one who is infirm and carnal until this mortal shall put on incorruption, and this corruptible immortality. Therefore, let us not speak of transcendent things; let us not square the circle through logic. Let us speak concerning what each of us experiences within himself. (CT 5:609)

The argument of these Augustinians was that the Council’s proposal regarding inherent righteousness as the single formal cause of justification to the exclusion of indwelling sin was at odds with the experience of the believers, including those gathered at the Council themselves. Regrettably, the pleading of the Augustinians was denied by the Council, which unambiguously rejects Luther’s teaching that indwelling sin remains in those who have been justified. While the Council affirms that “concupiscence or the tinder of sin remains in the baptized” and explains that Paul “occasionally calls [this concupiscence] ‘sin,’” it argues—following Augustine, no doubt—that this concupiscence is not called sin “in the true and proper sense” (Denzinger §1515). We do not feel the same liberty to correct the apostle. We prefer, rather, to stand with the apostle Paul, and with the Spirit who inspired him, to simply call what remains within us “sin.” We do not see this as a challenge to the infallibility of the God who accounts us righteous despite our remaining sin. God accounts us righteous not because of what we are inherently, whether righteous or sinner, but because of what we are in Christ and what He is in us.

Catholics, then, understand justification to be the divine action by which God makes the believers inherently righteous. He makes them righteous in an instant, and He makes them wholly righteous. The role of union with Christ in justification was not entirely ruled out by the Council of Trent, and post-Tridentine Catholics have sometimes appealed to union with Christ in their accounts of justification, but the Council’s rejection of “double righteousness” seems to have pushed justification by union into the shadows for much of the post-Tridentine Catholic tradition (Campbell et al. 2:131-140).

## Justification and Penance

The medieval church had, long before the dawn of Luther’s Reformation, made the ancient practice of penance one of its seven official sacraments. All medieval Christians were required to participate in the sacrament of penance at least once per year on pain of exclusion from the life of the church, and the medieval church was so committed to this teaching and practice that it persecuted many who dissented regarding this innovation, and some unto death. The Council of Trent thus introduced no innovation when it taught that penance is one of the seven sacraments, but it did introduce an innovation when it insisted that “this sacrament of penance is necessary for salvation for those who have fallen after baptism” (Denzinger §1672). In doing so, the Catholic Church asserted a much stronger connection between the sacrament of penance and justification than had previously been defined. A significant debate arose during the medieval period regarding the necessity of the sacrament of penance for the restoration of the grace of justification. Some argued that it was entirely possible to be reconciled to God apart from the sacrament. In contrast, others argued that all restoration of the grace of justification is caused, in some sense, by the sacrament of penance. The Council of Trent ruled in favor of the latter position, insisting that all restoration of the grace of justification depends on the sacrament of penance, thus ruling out the possibility of extra-sacramental justification:

The council teaches that, although it sometimes happens that this contrition [i.e., inward remorse] is perfect through charity and reconciles man to God before this sacrament is actually received, this reconciliation, nevertheless, is not to be ascribed to contrition itself without the desire of the sacrament, a desire that is included in it. (§1677)

The sacrament of penance, then, is not simply one means of justifying reconciliation with God alongside other extra-sacramental means. It is, rather, the *only* means by which the grace of justification can be restored after baptism, according to Catholic teaching. We cannot possibly evaluate in detail here the close connection between salvation and the sacraments, which is held so dearly by so many of the Lord’s people. We can only state firmly that we wholeheartedly disagree with the view that justification is received sacramentally, and we refer the reader to our brief statements regarding justification and baptism on page 13 in the biblical presentation article of this issue (Campbell et al. 2:140-142).

## Justification and the Assurance of Salvation

After “double righteousness,” the second most contentious

issue related to the doctrine of justification at the Council of Trent concerned the “certitude of faith,” or what we prefer to call the assurance of salvation. The early church affirmed nearly unanimously that the grace of justification can be lost, but at least some of the patristic writers assured the believers that they could be certain of their justified status before God in the present moment. The medieval period in general, and the late medieval period in particular, engendered a variety of views on the degree of certainty regarding one’s possession of the grace of justification. The Protestant recovery of the assurance of salvation forced the Catholic Church to clarify its own position.

Prior to the Council of Trent, no council of the Catholic Church had said anything explicitly about the assurance of salvation. Those gathered at the Council were convinced that something needed to be said, but determining what should be said proved to be a difficult task. Thankfully, the Council of Trent does not rule out the possibility of the assurance of salvation; quite to the contrary, the majority of those present at the Council were in favor of assurance, harnessing various arguments from the Scriptures, patristic writers, and medieval theologians in its defense. According to John-Baptist Moncalvius, the assurance of salvation is so certain a truth that not even the Protestants could sully it: “[The certitude of faith] is so true an opinion that the heretics were entirely unable to corrupt it with their poison of wickedness” (CT 5:535).

Despite the majority in favor of the assurance of salvation, the minority who rejected it was large enough and strong enough to stop the Council from explicitly affirming such assurance. In fact, several at the Council were convinced that if the Catholic Church were to endorse such assurance, the battle against the Protestants would surely be lost. After accusing several present at the Council of favoring Lutheranism, Dionysius Zannettino (d. 1566) pleaded with the Council not to explicitly endorse assurance:

If this falsity of the Lutherans is conceded, the entire decree on justification would be ruined, and the error would be worse than before. (CT 10:586)

We wish, of course, that the Council of Trent had fully endorsed the assurance of salvation, but we can thank the Lord that it at least left this possibility open to all its members, and we hope that more Catholics will take advantage of what Trent allows. Still, even this somewhat positive result of the Council of Trent (its refusal to condemn assurance) is sullied by its recommendation of doubt concerning salvation:

Whoever considers himself, his personal weakness, and his lack of disposition may fear and tremble about his own grace. (Denzinger §1534)

While the Council refuses to condemn the assurance of salvation, it clearly endorses the cultivation of doubt regarding the believers’ standing in grace.

Doubt concerning one’s standing before God is certainly a common occurrence among believers, but the appropriate response to those suffering such doubt is not to encourage and cultivate it but to shepherd into full assurance. This is the pattern of the apostles’ teaching, and the ministry of Watchman Nee (d. 1972) and Witness Lee (d. 1997) has helped us see this pattern clearly. The New Testament identifies at least three proofs of our salvation on which we can base our assurance: faith as the sole condition for salvation, the Holy Spirit’s witnessing with our spirit that we are children of God, and our love for the brothers.

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A first and basic proof of salvation offered to us in the Scriptures is the consistent assertion that the only requirement for salvation is that we believe into Christ. Some Catholic theologians have insisted that we cannot be sure that we have believed, and thus we cannot be sure that we have fulfilled even this most basic requirement for justification. For instance, Robert Bellarmine (d. 1621) argues:

The adversaries err in deducing an absolute conclusion from a conditioned antecedent. For these propositions—“He who believes in the Son has eternal life” (John 3:36) and “In this one everyone who believes is justified” (Acts 13:39)—are conditioned, as if it were said, “*if* anyone believes in the Son, he has eternal life” and “*if* anyone believes in Christ, he is justified.”...

From these conditional propositions, [only] a *conditional* conclusion can be rightly drawn. Therefore, I, *if I believe*, have justification and eternal life. However, the *absolute* conclusion that the adversaries desire requires the absolute assumption that I, indeed, believe in the Son. (6:165)



Since Bellarmine is convinced that no one can know that he or she is justified, he is also forced to argue that no one can know that he or she believes.

We strongly reject, of course, the view that we cannot know that we believe. The Scriptures do not, as Bellarmine wrongly claims, include only “conditional propositions” regarding faith and salvation. Paul, speaking to Peter, makes a statement of fact: “We also have believed into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of faith in Christ and not out of the works of law” (Gal. 2:16). The “we” here seems to refer not simply to Paul and Peter but to “we [who] are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles” (Gal. 2:15). Paul thus has no problem speaking of Jewish Christians in general as having believed and thus having fulfilled all conditions for justification. Paul does not say, “We Jewish Christians, *if we have indeed believed*, are justified out of faith.” He simply assumes and states that this is the case. John, likewise, tells us that we who believe may know that we have eternal life: “I have written these things to you that you may know that you have eternal life, to you who believe into the name of the Son of God” (1 John 5:13). John does not say, “You have eternal life *if you believe*” but, to paraphrase, “You, who believe, have eternal life,” and this he wrote not simply to the “fathers” in the churches but also to the “little children” and “young children,” that is to say, to the newer and younger believers in the churches (1 John 2:12-19).

Indeed, the New Testament’s common reference to “the believers” implies that there is little mystery as to who these believers are. The New Testament simply assumes that we know not only that *we* believe but also that others believe likewise. Paul, for instance, instructs Timothy regarding slaves that “those who have believing masters should not despise them, because they are brothers; but rather they should serve them, because those who recompense them for the kindly service received are believers and beloved” (1 Tim. 6:2). Slaves, here, are assumed to know not only whether they themselves believe but also whether their masters believe. If the Scriptures assume that we can know that others believe, we can certainly know this regarding ourselves. Catholics often counter by arguing that justifying faith is always faith “operating through love” or at least faith “formed by love” and thus that we cannot know that we believe in a saving way. But this is clearly contrary to the Scriptures’ way of speaking. The Scriptures everywhere assume that we *can* in fact know that we believe, and they identify believing as the sole condition for salvation. To claim that these two types of faith are of fundamentally different sorts—the one saving and the other not—is to ascribe to the Scriptures an ambiguity far beyond what we can allow.

A second proof of justification offered in the Scriptures is Paul’s word that “the Spirit Himself witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:16). While Catholics would not openly contradict the apostle Paul, Johann Adam Möhler (d. 1838), the preeminent modern Catholic apologist, does not think that this witness precludes doubt:

Undoubtedly, according to the sentence of the apostle, the Spirit testifies to the spirit, that we are the children of God; but this testimony is of so delicate a nature, and must be handled with such tender care, that the Christian in the feeling of his unworthiness and frailty, approaches the subject only with timidity, and scarcely ventures to take cognisance of it. (156)

Möhler argues that Paul’s word here should not be taken as license to be assured of salvation. In fact, he seems to counsel that the believers ignore this witnessing within them,

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“scarcely [venturing] to take cognisance of it.” In doing so, he does precisely the opposite of what Paul says the Holy Spirit Himself is doing. There is, we believe, deep within every believer the inner witness that he or she has been begotten of God, and because this begetting is based on God’s justification (Rom. 8:10), the believers can be fully assured of their standing before God. Paul says that this inner witness comes not only from the believers’ own regenerated spirit but also from “the Spirit Himself” (Rom. 8:16). The Spirit of the Son, sent into their hearts by the Father, causes the believers to cry out to Him, “Abba, Father!” (Gal. 4:6). The fact that the believers, sinners though they are, can spontaneously and sweetly call the righteous God “Father” is, to us, one of the greatest proofs of their salvation, and if the Holy Spirit witnesses to this same testimony, then neither Möhler nor anyone else has the right to take this testimony away from the Father’s own children. We would hardly praise a human father who encouraged his children to doubt that they are in fact his children, and we cannot imagine that our divine Father would wish such doubt upon any of His own. Any proper human father would

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grieve to learn of such doubt in his children, and we surely believe that the Father is likewise grieved that so many of His children entertain such doubt with respect to His fatherhood.

A third proof of justification offered in the Scriptures is the believers' love for all of God's children: "We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers" (1 John 3:14). Catholics call this kind of assurance, an assurance based on manifestations of our salvation, "moral certitude." It is, regrettably, the only proof of salvation admitted by the majority of Catholic theologians today. Those Catholics in favor of such proofs from manifestations in our living tend to elaborate on the required extent of these manifestations to a much greater degree than the Scriptures themselves do. Only "men of outstanding holiness can have moral certitude which excludes any serious act of fear, but not the possibility of fear" (Nicolau et al. 3B:169-170). These stringent requirements for moral certitude are clearly much higher than those evident in the Scriptures. As already mentioned, John tells even "little children" among God's people that they can know that they have passed out of death into life based on their love of the brothers, and we do not think that this love for the brothers is anything other than an inward affection for all those begotten of our Father. The believers' instinctive love for all those begotten of the Father is a sure sign that they have themselves been justified and begotten of the Father, despite all their failures to live out this love in a practical way. Just as our failings in our relationships with our brothers and sisters in the flesh do not discount our instinctual love for them, so the failings of the believers in their relationships with one another do not discount the instinctual love that all of God's children have for one another. This instinctual love for the children of the Father is one of the greatest assurances to us that we, too, have been begotten of the same Father (Campbell et al. 2:142-151).

### Justification and the Security of Salvation

While the majority of those present at the Council of Trent at least affirmed the possibility of the assurance of salvation, no one at the Council wished to defend the security of salvation. Even if the believers can know that they are saved, those gathered at the Council were unanimously agreed that the believers can, at any moment, lose that salvation. As we have seen, the Reformed were the first to recover the truth concerning the security of salvation, and they are the only major Christian tradition to maintain this great and precious truth. The standard teaching prior to this recovery was that salvation can be lost, and at the Council of Trent

the Catholic Church strengthened its commitment to this ancient error: "Let no one promise himself any security about this gift [of perseverance] with absolute certitude, although all should place their firmest hope in God's help" (Denzinger §1541).

In certain respects, we find it odd that the Catholic tradition so adamantly rejects the security of salvation. We are especially attentive to the organic character of salvation (i.e., to its intimate relationship with the divine life), and in this we find the Catholic tradition closer to the truth than many Protestant traditions. While the Catholic tradition broadly understands regeneration as a real participation in the divine life, certain Protestant traditions more often understand regeneration to be roughly equivalent to the impartation of faith, with little attention to the believers' being begotten in the divine life. Given our understanding of the close relationship between regeneration and security, it is difficult for us to understand why Catholics hold that regeneration is a participation in the divine life but deny the security of salvation. Most people recognize, intuitively, the moral failings of parents who terminate their relationship with their children, either literally or figuratively, and we lament that so many of the Father's children could imagine that He would act toward them in such a way, bestowing and retracting life at will, and giving His children no way of knowing what their standing is before Him at any given time. In our view, once the Father has committed His life to one of His children, He does not retract it.

To approach the matter from yet another organic angle, when the believers are justified and regenerated, they become not only children of God but also living members of the organic Body of Christ. Just as Catholics have maintained the truth concerning regeneration much more faithfully than most Protestant traditions, so, too, Catholics have much more faithfully maintained the truth concerning the organic Body of Christ. We thus find it odd that Catholics are often closer to the truth concerning the organic Body of Christ but farther from the truth regarding the security of salvation. Just as all human beings cherish their own bodies, so too does Christ the Head (Eph. 5:29), and we find it hard to believe that Christ will suffer the eternal loss of any of His members. The truth concerning the organic Body, then, provides another organic proof for the security of salvation. At the close of this age, the Lord's Body will be complete, not missing any of His members. The Lord does not have temporary members. Once He has incorporated a believer into His organic Body, that member cannot be removed (Campbell et al. 2:152-155).



## Conclusion

While there is much to be said for the view that Trent's account of justification is nothing more than a faithful out-working of Augustine's own understanding (and that of Aquinas after him), we have evaluated Trent much more extensively than we did those earlier, patristic and medieval writers, who did not have the benefit of the help rendered to the church through Martin Luther. Despite the shortcomings of his account, Luther is the one whom the Lord used to open up the truth concerning justification by faith. In our view, all who come after him must consider what they will do with the light and help that the Lord provided through him. While the various Protestant traditions have received his help and some have continued to further advance the church's understanding of justification by faith, the Roman Catholic tradition clearly and decisively rejected

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this help at the Council of Trent. Against Luther's contention that faith apart from love suffices for justification, Trent insists—following Augustine and Aquinas—that love is the central justifying factor within the believers. Against Luther's insistence that the believers can be assured of their salvation and the Reformed teaching that the believers' salvation is eternally secure, Trent commits itself fully to the ancient errors that the believers ought to doubt their salvation and that their salvation can be lost. Against the Reformed disentanglement of justification and the sacraments, Trent strengthens the Catholic position on the connection between them. And while several Catholic theologians before and at the Council appealed to the believers' union with Christ in justification, this view was decisively rejected by the Council. Perhaps it is because of this rejection of the light and help offered by the Protestant Reformers that the Catholic tradition ceases from this point on to contribute anything to the understanding of justification by faith. It has maintained much of the advance made during the patristic and medieval periods, but it has not offered anything more of positive value. This ceasing to be a positive

contributor to the ongoing advance of the church's understanding of this truth is perhaps the strongest indictment of the Roman Catholic tradition with respect to the truth of justification by faith (Campbell et al. 2:163-165).

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