

In Christ 1985-2

The Contemporary Relevance of Justification by Faith*

The conversations which have taken place in this country between Lutherans and Catholics since 1965 reached their high point with the agreed statement on *Justification By Faith*, in September 1983. The topic is both historical and contemporary. It is historical since it requires studying again the positions of Martin Luther himself, of the Lutheran Confessional books, and of the Council of Trent. This itself requires an effort to investigate and summarize the historical precedents which in the first decades of the sixteenth century led to an impasse: there were on the one side an older theology, contaminated both by vagaries in popular piety and by questionable political interests among princes and bishops, and on the other side, a newer theology, that of Luther, which applied Ockham's razor radically to theological and ecclesiastical excrescences that were not necessary to the effective transmission of the gospel and had become, in part, dysfunctional. The topic is also contemporary, since we, as well as our predecessors in the sixteenth century, need to face the questions of how we are related to Christ, the only Saviour, and what means have been placed by God at our disposal to share in the life and work of the risen Christ.

The historical question was formulated, in the sixteenth century, in the sharp antithesis: Are we saved by faith alone through Christ alone? or are we saved by faith in Christ with our response of love to divine grace, so that we also contribute something to our own salvation?

The contemporary question needs to be expressed in a different way: Granted that it is by Christ alone that we are ultimately saved, is faith in Christ to be experienced primarily in one's personal reception of divine grace? or is it experienced first of all in our living the gospel in commitment to the oppressed, the poor, the sick members of humanity?

Naturally enough the agreed statement starts with the historical question. After an overview of the history of the doctrine of justification before, during and after the sixteenth century, the text surveys Catholic developments since World War II, especially in the light of the Second Vatican Council, and some Lutheran developments in relation to the Helsinki assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (1963) and recent hermeneutical perspectives. It then proposes reflections on, and interpretations of, this history in terms of the traditional concerns and

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emphases of each tradition, concerning forensic justification, the sinfulness of the justified, the sufficiency of faith, the notion of merit, the theology of satisfaction, and the criteria of authenticity for truly Christian behaviour. The text continues with an exploration of some perspectives for reconstruction, by looking at the growing agreement of Lutheran and Catholic exegetes in their understanding of the main passages of the New Testament on justification. It establishes a list of contemporary theological convergences in areas that are connected with justification. It finally concludes on a declaration which encapsulates the participants' agreement on the basic question of justification by faith.

This framework highlights two chief aspects of the statement on justification, historical and theological. A historical judgement is passed on the meaning and relevance of past controversies. The evolution of both Lutheran and Catholic theology since the sixteenth century is undeniable. The Second Council of the Vatican did not focus attention directly on justification, but rather on revelation and the Word of God in Scripture, with their consequences for the life of the Church. It did not feel bound to repeat today the language of the Council of Trent, which, of course, it did not reject. Given the ecumenical concerns of Vatican II and its two popes, John XXIII and Paul VI, this may be taken to imply that the doctrines of justification that are operative in the two Churches, Lutheran and Catholic, were no longer seen as so many high walls surrounded by barbed wire. This is, admittedly, still ambiguous. If theologies of justification are not deemed to be divisive, is this due to convergences and at least implicit agreements in doctrine? Or is it because we, and the modern mentality in general, no longer care about what Martin Luther or the Council of Trent wanted to say on justification? Have we now reached an agreement by commitment to a common understanding of how God works through Christ in relation to us, or by a progressive erosion of the question that divided Christians in the past? Do we *de facto* agree because we have committed the problem to oblivion?

The impact of the 'Declaration' which ends our document should be precisely to affirm the continued relevance of justification by faith. This is the theological aspect of the agreement. Let me quote the first sentence of the Declaration: 'We believe that God's creative graciousness is offered to us and to everyone for healing and reconciliation so that through the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, "who was put to death for our transgressions and raised for our justification" (R. 4.25), we are all called to pass from the alienation and oppression of sin to freedom and fellowship with God in the Holy Spirit . . .' (n. 161).

Here the gospel is identified without the polemical undertones that were frequent in the sixteenth century. Justification is not defined against someone else's formulation, but in common, as expressive of our joint need for, and recognition of, the sovereign power of the divine

graciousness that calls us to life in Jesus Christ. Faith is no longer contradistinguished from love, whether seen as a God-given, infused, complement of faith, or as the supreme work which shows faith to be active and fruitful. There is only one divine gift, undeserved by man, 'which is granted and made known in faith, and which comes to fruition in our love of God and neighbour, as we are led by the Spirit to bear witness to the divine gift in all aspects of our lives' (n. 161).

Need this gift of justification still be preached today? No doubt, the modern fascination with self, our smugness over human achievements in the many fields of technology, the explicit claim of a few and the vaguely implicit surmise of many that the world is totally understandable and makes perfect sense apart from the God-hypothesis, have brought about a human self-consciousness which is very far from Luther's 'terrified conscience'. If there is a terrified conscience today, it is not terrified by sin and the anticipation of God's judgement; it is terrified by the prospect of old age, sickness and death. But this anguish is easily, though provisionally, overcome by absorption in the tasks of this world, whether selfishly in the pursuit of happiness, or unselfishly in commitment to various social works and revolutionary struggles. The Declaration sees the gospel of justification as the way to personal freedom: 'This gospel frees us in God's sight from slavery to sin and to self' (R., 7.6). But this is not an individualistic emphasis on self-salvation. For, 'We are willing to be judged by it in all our thoughts and actions, our philosophies and projects, our theologies and religious practices. Since there is no aspect of the Christian community or of its life in the world that is not challenged by this gospel, there is none that cannot be renewed or reformed in its light of by its power' (n. 162).

Contemporary concerns about salvation and related themes are much less individualistic than in the sixteenth century, heir to the Renaissance, which had rediscovered Roman literature after the medieval age of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had rediscovered Roman law. This is duly acknowledged in our document. The text even contains a brief allusion to 'liberation theology': 'The most recent Catholic theology is marked by a growing concern to overcome any suspicion of individualism or privatism in the theology of grace. The free and gracious gift of justification, according to Edward Schillebeeckx, cannot be experienced except by those who lose themselves for the sake of others. The Uruguayan liberation theologian Juan Luis Segundo warns that a paralyzing concern for one's personal justification could detract one from the communal task of building the kingdom. The Brazilian Leonardo Boff, although concerned to remain in continuity with the Council of Trent, prefers to speak of liberation rather than justification. The term, liberation, he holds, designates the same reality, but "now elaborated in terms of its dynamic, historical dimensions". These themes from contemporary Catholic political theology and liberation

theology converge, as we shall see, with the stress on corporate service in certain recent Lutheran theologies of justification' (n. 81).

This Lutheran emphasis occurs in the discussion of the Helsinki assembly, where a critique of the individualism of the Reformation was voiced: 'The Reformation witness to justification was said to have been in a threefold "Babylonian captivity" of "doctrinalization, individualization and spiritualization".' Hence, the text continues, 'justification should be understood as focusing on the entire human race and on "amnesty for all"'. This universalist emphasis parallels a similar concern on the Catholic side' (n. 84).

These two passages are descriptive. As such, they may not embody a consensus of the dialogants. In fact, I do not see how a consensus could be obtained on such a broad front. A good deal of discussion would be required to clarify the concepts of doctrinalization and spiritualization, which, moreover, do not necessarily pair with individualization. Likewise, one should question to what extent and in what way the task of Christians is 'to build the kingdom'. I would myself think that the task of bringing human justice to human society is not a good image of the coming of the eschatological kingdom of God. One should also discuss what sort of relationship may link together one's personal justification in God's eyes and by God's action through Christ, which is acknowledged by faith, one's commitment to the human and spiritual welfare of others in the traditional works of mercy, and one's hope and eventual struggle for a structural reorganisation of society that would make it an effective instrument of justice and love for all its members. These three levels of experience and action are obviously not identical. Is one of them a condition for the other two? I would not think so. Yet one dimension of justification by faith, as its theology was chiselled out by Luther in the fire of his own anguish for himself and for the Church, was precisely that justification does not remain abstract; it is not a private experience of a quasi-mystical order; it cannot be a Sunday affair unconnected with the ordinary tasks of one's working days. By its very nature it has a corporate dimension at two levels. First, it is the fruit, not of one's merits, concerns, desires, or even hopes, but of our common Saviour, Jesus Christ, in and through whom alone God addresses himself to all humankind. Second, it does not remain sterile, bottled up in the clean vacuum of one's inner world, but it is carried out into daily life and bears fruit in works of love and justice.

Admittedly, the joint statement on justification does not try to assess Luther's own theological systematisation of the corporate dimension of faith. There certainly would have been no agreement (even, I believe, among Lutherans) on the exact scope of Luther's conception of the two kingdoms and on its relevance today. This, as I see it, is a theological-political construction that is not necessarily entailed by the doctrine of justification by faith. It does help, however, to make two points. Firstly,

the two kingdoms, of God and of humanity, are not and cannot be identical. Luther duly distinguishes them. Neither one is a condition for the other. It was a European disaster that, only a few decades after Luther, this distinction came to be lost, in both Catholic and Reformation lands, by the political doctrine of the divine right of kings. And we should not make the mistake today of believing that some form of democratic organisation, or of power to and for the people, must be entailed by the Christian prayer for the coming of the kingdom of God. Secondly, the two kingdoms – or the two cities, or whatever other metaphor may be more telling today – stand in an unequal relationship. The expectation of a gracious, unmerited kingdom of God may well inspire Christian believers to co-operate with others for the betterment of human society here and now, or for its transformation tomorrow, yet the betterment of human society is by no means an effective preparation for the coming of the kingdom of God.

This remark brings in a dimension of the joint agreement on justification that may be in danger of passing unnoticed, because the text itself, while it indicates it, does not make a point of underlining it. This is the critical dimension of justification by faith, or justification by faith as a critical principle.

In contemporary ecumenical discussions on justification there is no great difficulty for Catholic theologians to recognize that justification by faith, as described in article IV of the Augsburg Confession is an acceptable formulation of the principle of salvation of sinful human beings through the sole mediation of Christ. For the article asserts, 1°, that men are not justified before God by their own strengths, merits or works; 2°, that they are justified before God freely, because of Christ, through faith; 3°, that this takes place when they believe that because of Christ they are received into grace and their sins are remitted; 4°, that God 'imputes' this faith as justice. Thus the article amounts to a forceful statement of the doctrine of redemption. Catholic theologians generally would hold that other formulations of the doctrine are possible. Some would prefer, for instance, to put the accent on transformation by grace, or on being made a new creature, or on receiving sanctifying grace. But no one would quarrel with the idea that what God does to make a sinner holy, and which may be described in various ways, is done entirely by God through Christ without any merit or previous co-operation on one's part.

Indeed, the Council of Trent, at its fourth session, formulated at length a doctrine which, as I read it, goes a long way toward the Lutheran formulation. Admittedly, several readings of Trent have been made. The one which is included in the common statement, n. 50-57, stresses the differences with Lutheran language more than I have myself done in my recent book, *Justification: An Ecumenical Study*. It emphasizes both the process of sanctification, of which justification is identified as the

beginning, and the necessity, for saving faith, to *consisting* through the charity poured in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. These points, without being opposed to the *Augustana*, stress other aspects of a complex act, whereas the *Augustana*, following Luther, goes to the heart of the act without paying much attention to the periphery or the sequels. The periphery belongs to human experience and human psychology when attracted by the grace of justification. The centre is God's own action. To investigate the periphery in the human soul and psyche is other than, but not a contradiction of, what is seen when only the centre, the divine act, is contemplated. For myself, I understand the Council of Trent as affirming the same thing as the *Augustana* and Luther stress, namely, the unique centrality of Christ and divine grace in justification, but as also enshrining this in more peripheral considerations of what precedes and follows justification in the life of the person who, from impious, is made pious (to use Tridentine language). Further, the degree of agreement on justification as such was obscured by mutual misunderstanding on the nature and role of charity or love. Trent, following Thomas Aquinas, saw charity as an infused, unmerited gift granted by God as the form of faith, without which faith, like formless matter in Aristotelian hylomorphism, has no life and, strictly speaking, no being. Melancthon, however, following Luther, identified charity as a human work which crowns the life of faith as its fruit, but draws all its meaning and value from the faith which informs it. Again, Catholic theologians, to the extent that they are still versed in the scholastic theology of the theological virtues, may be surprised at this shift in the concept of love, but they can also admit the Lutheran problematic as a possible theology of the matter.

In other words, justification by faith as a doctrine that can be related to, and understood in the light of, other doctrines, is not a very hard point to accept for Catholic theology.

The difficulty emerges when justification by faith is made into a universal principle that provides a privileged vantage-point for the whole task of theology and even of the Church. That is of course the general meaning of the familiar expression, that justification is *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*, the point on which the Church stands or falls. It is entailed by Luther's repeated assertion that justification by faith is the gospel, or the heart of the gospel. Such language is likely to surprise Catholic theologians, who do not usually focus the meaning of the word, gospel, in this way. The gospel for them is rather the good news in general, the sum total of the teaching and work of Jesus Christ, witnessed to in the Scriptures and knowledge of which has been transmitted through the Church's tradition. But again, Catholic theologians could easily accept this language if it were simply a matter of clearly defining one's terms.

But justification by faith – and this is clearer in the works of Luther

himself than in the *Augustana* – is not the gospel simply in a literary or rhetorical sense. It is the gospel insofar as it should be the criterion for everything Christian. In its critical function, it should be the higher principle from which Christian theology should envisage everything, including itself. It thus becomes a methodological or metalinguistic principle for Christian thought and life. The reason for this is simple: since it defines the nature of faith, and faith is the source and medium of a believer's standing before God, justification by faith normatively affects all aspects of a believer's life and thought. In the words of the Council of Trent, which do converge here with Luther's universalizing view of faith, 'faith is the . . . foundation and root of all justification . . .' (D-S, 1532). Without foundation and root nothing grows, and everything that grows does so by virtue of the nurture that reaches it through its foundation and root. Foundation and root are not a beginning or starting point that can be forgotten or abandoned; they are the effective principle of life for the entire plant. This critical dimension of justification has usually been overlooked by Catholic theologians. For what reasons? Though I cannot prove it, I suspect it is because something else has in fact functioned in modern times as universal criterion, namely, the watchfulness of the *magisterium*. However, Vatican Council II makes it clear that the Church's authority or *magisterium* is not 'above God's word but ministers to it' (*Dei Verbum*, n. 10). It follows that the *magisterium* itself must be guided by faith, and that it also stands under judgement insofar as its decisions reflect or obscure the sovereignty of Christ which is expressed precisely in the principle of justification by faith.

Justification by faith as the critical principle for all Christian life and thought should enable us today to perceive the ties between justification in its traditional scope and meaning, and the contemporary concern about liberation. In particular, it poses the question whether liberation can become for today and tomorrow the kind of universal principle which justification was in Luther's theology.

As a critical principle, justification by faith tells us something about ourselves, our Churches, our social and political commitments. In the words of the Declaration which I have quoted, 'This gospel frees us in God's sight from slavery to sin and self. We are willing to be judged by it in all our thoughts and actions, our philosophies and projects, our theologies and religious practices. Since there is no aspect of the Christian community or its life in the world that is not challenged by this gospel, there is none that cannot be renewed or reformed in its light and by its power' (n. 162).

The criterion that is implicitly proposed for all Christian life by the theologies of liberation is that a doctrine or attitude is truly Christian only if it contributes to the liberation of our brothers and sisters from all structures of oppression. But liberation from structures of oppression, even if it does count as a Christian duty and can receive a motivation

closely related to faith in Christ as the only mediator and the ultimate liberator, is itself a human task, requiring the commitment of human intellectual, spiritual and material resources. In other words, it must itself be set under judgement. It cannot replace justification as the chief category that helps us understand what the gospel truly is. And it must itself be gauged with the measure of justification by faith. Like any advance in civilisation, it is ambiguous, pregnant with possibilities for good and for bad. From a merely human point of view, a process of political and social liberation must always be criticized, so that intending liberators will not use means of oppression to fulfil their purpose and, if they win the struggle, turn themselves into oppressors. From the point of view of the gospel, liberation from human oppression is not liberation from sin. Liberation from sin implies, in the familiar phrase, freedom from 'the world, the flesh and the devil'. But this cannot be a human work. It can only be the fruit of the gratuitous act by which God does not impute our sin to us but looks at us through his beloved Son, Jesus Christ. Justification by faith reminds us of the necessary limitations in the process of human liberation.

I would personally go further, though perhaps not all theologians, whether Catholic or Lutheran, would accompany me. I would also say that justification by faith reminds us that the Kingdom for which we pray in the Lord's prayer is not of this world, that we should not expect that we or our descendants will enter it in this world, that it does not lie ahead of us beyond the horizon as a futuristic transcendence or a substitute for transcendence, and that no generous utopia is even a remote likeness of the Kingdom of God. In the words of the French poet, Baudelaire, who wrote them in his journal, 'Theory of true civilization: it consists in erasing the effects of original sin.' But in this case, true civilization does not exist, and it cannot exist, as long as even the greatest saint in our eyes is, in God's eyes, *simul justus et peccator*.¹

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1. The argument of this paper is related to my recent publications, *Justification: An Ecumenical Study*, New York: Paulist Press, 1983, and, in collaboration with Mark Edwards: *Luther: A Reformer for the Churches*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983.