

## Systematic Theology: Appendix D

# The Roman Catholic View of Justification

---

*The quotations in this appendix are from the noted Roman Catholic theologian Ludwig Ott and his standard theological work: Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma.*

The traditional Roman Catholic understanding of justification states that for justification to begin, one must first be baptized and then (as an adult) continue to have faith:

“The instrumental cause of justification is the Sacrament of Baptism. But the justification of an adult is not possible without Faith. As far as the content of this faith is concerned, the so-called fiducial faith [this is the Protestant view of imputed justification based on the merit of Christ] does not suffice.”

The faith that simply trusts in Christ for forgiveness of sins is not enough. It must be a faith that accepts the content of the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

The result of this Roman Catholic view of justification is that people cannot be sure if they are in a “state of grace” where they experience God’s complete acceptance and favor. The Council of Trent declared, “If one considers his own weakness and his defective disposition, he may well be fearful and anxious as to the state of grace, as nobody knows with the certainty of faith—which permits of no error—that he has achieved the grace of God.” To this statement Ott adds the comment:

“The reason for the uncertainty of the state of grace lies in this, that without a special revelation nobody can with certainty know whether or not he has fulfilled all the conditions which are necessary for the achieving of justification. The impossibility of the certainty of faith, however, by no means excludes a high moral certainty supported by the testimony of conscience.”

Moreover, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, people can experience varying degrees of justification.

“The degree of justifying grace is not identical in all the just, and grace can be increased by good works. The Council of Trent declared that the measure of the grace of justification received varies in the individual person who is justified, according to the measure of God’s free distribution and to the disposition and the co-operation of the recipient himself.”

The logical consequence of this view of justification is that our eternal life with God is not based on God’s grace alone, but on our merit as well:

“For the justified, eternal life is both a gift of grace promised by God and a reward for his own good works and merits.”

To support this view from Scripture, Ott mingles passages that talk not only of justification, but also of sanctification (a process that *does* vary from individual to individual), various spiritual gifts (which differ from individual to individual), and eternal reward (also varies according to the individual). To classify all of these passages under the category of “justification” blurs the issue and makes forgiveness of sins and right standing before God a matter of our own merit, not a free gift from God. This destroys the heart of the gospel.

That is what Martin Luther so clearly saw, and that is what gave such motivation to the Reformation. When the good news of the gospel truly became the good news of totally free salvation in Jesus Christ, then it spread like wildfire throughout the civilized world. But this was simply a recovery of the original gospel.