



## Current Theological Developments in Justification: A Roman Catholic Perspective

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It may seem somewhat strange to reflect on current theological developments in justification from a Roman Catholic perspective. Would this not be the ideal topic for a Lutheran theologian? Notwithstanding that Lutheran theology is very much interested in the doctrine of justification, things have changed not only since the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ) in 1999 but also already in the time leading up to this important hallmark of ecumenism. There have been and still are theological developments in the Catholic theology of justification, and this contribution shows how the Catholic Church has theologially been addressing the issue of justification, and in what way the dialogue with Protestants has helped the understanding leading to the current developments with the JDDJ. Therefore, I shall try to combine a historical with a systematic approach.

Doing so I will start somewhat before the Second Vatican Council by drawing attention to some of the theological developments leading up to this council. After centuries of more or less simply attributing the “alone” to the churches of the Reformation and the “and” to the Catholic Church, Roman Catholic research on the Reformation broke with this order by stating—as Josef Lortz put it already in 1932<sup>1</sup>—that Luther’s basic teaching on the justification of the sinner by grace alone was “a good old Roman Catholic truth” which Luther merely unearthed again. The *Théologie Nouvelle*, going back to patristic sources, rediscovered also the teaching of the Fathers on justification. What statement, for instance, could sum up the core Reformation experience better than this: *Et de Dei misericordia numquam desperare*—of God’s mercy one should never despair—a phrase by Benedict of Nursia?<sup>2</sup> At the same time discussions on the doctrine of salvation were fostered by rereading Thomas Aquinas and his teaching on salvation

<sup>1</sup> Josef Lortz, *Geschichte der Kirche in ideengeschichtlicher Betrachtung. Eine Sinndeutung der christlichen Vergangenheit in Grundzügen*, Münster 1932, 247; id. *Die Reformation in Deutschland*, Freiburg i.Br. 1939, 177 and 183. Even if we only take Germany as an example it can be stated that Lortz who is renowned for his notion of “Luther as a Catholic” was followed by a whole series of Catholic experts in Reformation studies, such as the founder of the journal *Catholica* Robert Gorsche, *Simul peccator et iustus. Bemerkungen zu einer theologischen Formel*, in: *Catholica* 4 (1935) 132-139; Stefan Pfürtner, *Luther und Thomas im Gespräch. Unser Heil zwischen Gewißheit und Gefährdung*, Heidelberg 1961; Erwin Iserloh, *Luther zwischen Reform und Reformation*, Münster 1966; Otto Hermann Pesch, *Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquin: Versuch eines systematisch-theologischen Dialogs*, Mainz 1967.

<sup>2</sup> Benedict of Nursia, *Regula* 4, 74. For exploring more of the wealth of the patristic material on justification cf. also Irenaeus and Tertullian.

and grace in a broader than the merely neo-scholastic way.<sup>3</sup> Theologians like Karl Rahner (who was rather influential on Vatican II<sup>4</sup>) strove to reassess theological anthropology. As early as 1941 he published a series of lectures on the anthropological presuppositions of revelation under the title *Hearer of the Word*.<sup>5</sup> This anthropologically structured re-orientation of theology starts from the doctrine of grace and leads to a renewed understanding of the relation between secular history and salvation history: Jesus Christ is the culmination of salvation history, since he is the supreme, unparalleled, irreversible and thus eschatological way of God's self-revelation and self-communication in this world. The existential reality of human life is one in which God's grace indeed is always present and offered to the human being.

## 1. The Contribution of Vatican II: Some Examples

An important and certainly undisputed contribution of Vatican II is to have put justification in the broader context of salvation as a whole. Thus, although the latest council did not write a document explicitly on justification, it undoubtedly contributed to the development of the post-conciliar Catholic understanding of justification. Among the several starting points for post-conciliar reflection on justification which the Council provides, the theological vision of the human person which is closely linked and interwoven with Christology is the most obvious one. *Gaudium et Spes* states:

The Church firmly believes that Christ, who died and was raised up for all, (cf. 2 Cor. 5:15) can through His Spirit offer man the light and the strength to measure up to his supreme destiny. Nor has any other name under the heaven been given to man by which it is fitting for him to be saved (cf. Acts 4:12). She likewise holds that in her most benign Lord and Master can be

3 Cf. e.g. Henry de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études historiques*, Paris 1946; Hermann Volk, *Gnade und Person*, in: Johann Auer/Hermann Volk (Eds.), *Theologie der Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Munich 1957, 219-236.

4 Rahner has been nicknamed "the Holy Ghost writer" of Vatican II; cf. George Vandervelde, *The Grammar of Grace: Karl Rahner as a Watershed in Contemporary Theology*, in: *Theological Studies* 49 (1988) 445-459; 445.

5 Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word: Laying the foundation for a philosophy of religion*. Translation of the first edition by Joseph Donceel; edited and with an introduction by Andrew Tallon, New York, 1994. On his insights on justification cf. Karl Rahner, *Questions of Controversial Theology on Justification*, in: *Theological Investigations*, transl. K. Smyth, Baltimore 1966, vol. 4, 189-218. His review article *Zur Theologie der Gnade: Bemerkungen zu dem Buch von Hans Küng: Rechtfertigung. Die Lehre Karl Barths und eine katholische Besinnung*, in: *Theologische Quartalschrift* 138 (1958), 40-77 was included into *Fragen der Kontroverstheologie über die Rechtfertigung*, in: *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. 4 (1964).



found the key, the focal point and the goal of man, as well as of all human history. (GS 10)<sup>6</sup>

This clearly indicates a departure from a philosophical natural-law argumentation opting instead for making Jesus Christ the centre of ecclesial teaching on the human person and society. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a community-forming message, for Jesus' "life in the Spirit" is both exemplary and causative of the work of the Spirit sent by the Risen Lord to justify and sanctify the righteous. If Christians reflect on their filial relation to God by association with Jesus in the Spirit, this leads to reflecting the communitarian and fraternal aspects of life in Christ by his Spirit.<sup>7</sup> Also in this communitarian way it is Christ who "fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear" (GS 22.1).

This teaching on the human person does not only apply to Christians, but to all human beings since Jesus died for the benefit of all.

All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way (cf. LG 16). For, since Christ died for all men (cf. Rom 8:32) and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery. (GS 22.5)<sup>8</sup>

The Council's vision of the human person provides the context for the Catholic discourse on justification: in a Christological context it takes into account the communitarian nature of human life.

Even more concretely, yet without explicitly saying so, the Council is in keeping with the tradition of the "*solus Christus, sola fide, sola gratia*" of justification. Its notion of revelation in *Dei Verbum* preserves an immediateness of revelation and faith that meets the "*sola fide*"-criterion of the doctrine of justification.

In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Peter

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<sup>6</sup> English quotations of Vatican II documents are taken from the Vatican website.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Jared Wicks, *Justification in a Broader Horizon*, in: *Pro Ecclesia* 12 (2003) 473-491.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. also GS 32.5.

1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. (DV 2)

The self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ reaches the human beings directly and immediately. By the grace of God they believe in God who reveals himself. There is no mention of any intermediary element. Only in its second chapter *Dei Verbum* distinguishes between the revelation of God or the Gospel on the one hand, and Holy Scripture, tradition and preaching on the other, in short: various forms of transmitting this Gospel (DV 7-10). Faith itself is understood in *Dei Verbum* as the fruit of divine grace, not as some personal merit:

To make this act of faith, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving 'joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it.' (2nd Council of Orange, Can. 7) To bring about an ever deeper understanding of revelation the same Holy Spirit constantly brings faith to completion by His gifts. (DV 5)

The same concordance with the doctrine of justification is also true of the understanding of the Church as put forth in *Lumen Gentium*. The document sees in the church a result of the salvific action of God and not an independent mediatory institution on its own. "He [scil. the Father] planned to assemble in the holy Church all those who would believe in Christ." (LG 2) In the following two paragraphs the church is characterized as the work of the Son and the Spirit. *Lumen Gentium* 4 concludes: "Thus, the Church has been seen as 'a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit'." Thus constituted, the church is called to fulfill together with Christ his salvific mission.<sup>9</sup>

The conciliar understanding of liturgy reveals a close affinity to the criteria inherent in the doctrine of justification. It is Jesus Christ who operates salvation and introduces human beings into the glorification of God, for instance in the sacrament of baptism:

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<sup>9</sup> Ordained ministry is part of this, since it is grounded, on the one hand, in the service it renders to the people of God and, on the other, in a direct legitimation by God: "For the nurturing and constant growth of the People of God, Christ the Lord instituted in His Church a variety of ministries, which work for the good of the whole body. For those ministers, who are endowed with sacred power, serve their brethren, so that all who are of the People of God, and therefore enjoy a true Christian dignity, working toward a common goal freely and in an orderly way, may arrive at salvation." (LG 18)



Thus by baptism men are plunged into the paschal mystery of Christ: they die with Him, are buried with Him, and rise with Him (cf. *Rom.* 6:4; *Eph.* 2:6; *Col.* 3:1; 2 *Tim.* 2:11); they receive the spirit of adoption as sons 'in which we cry: Abba, Father' (*Rom.* 8:15), and thus become true adorers whom the Father seeks. (SC 6)

There is no merely anabatic understanding of the sacraments. This is clearly stated for all the sacraments in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 7:

In the liturgy the sanctification of the man is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs; in the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members. From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of His Body which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others.

And, as a last example, the hermeneutics in *Unitatis Redintegratio* seem to blend in well with ideas favoured by the doctrine of justification which highlights justification as the core and centre of Scripture: the notion of a hierarchy of truths, as developed in *Unitatis Redintegratio* 11,<sup>10</sup> even advocates such an understanding.

## **2. The Joint Declaration on Justification (JDDJ)**

Yet from Vatican II it was still a long way to go until the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church were able to declare together in 1999:

Together we confess: 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, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works. (JDDJ 15)<sup>11</sup>

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10 Cf. UR 11: "When comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists a 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their relation to the fundamental Christian faith. Thus the way will be opened by which through fraternal rivalry all will be stirred to a deeper understanding and a clearer presentation of the unfathomable riches of Christ."

11 Cf. *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, in: Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer, William G. Rush (eds.), *Growth in Agreement II*, Geneva et al. 2000, 566-582, published in German in 1994, cf. also [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html).

Some of the obstacles and impediments were due to misunderstandings, some of them even reaching back to the Reformation times, others were due to different theological approaches. After all in the Apostles' Creed we do not confess of Jesus Christ that "for us and for our *justification* he came down from heaven", but "for us and for our *salvation*." And the Bible when describing salvation offers justification as a prominent, but not as the only paradigm. Salvation is broader than justification. Does not the fact *that* we are saved dominate over the way *how* we are saved?

Given the brevity of my contribution I cannot retrace all the steps leading up to this agreement, but I would like to look more closely at four crucial points where the dialogue with Protestants has helped the Catholic understanding: 1) reception of justification by *faith* alone, 2) rejection of the idea that *grace* is also a reality in the human person itself, 3) rejection of any *cooperation* of the person in his/her justification, and 4) the Reformation doctrine of the *assurance of salvation*. In all this it is important to distinguish between the *doctrine* of justification and the gospel's *message* of justification (JDDJ 13).

## 2.1 The Long Journey: From Wittenberg and Trent via Malta to Augsburg

The JDDJ did not come right out of the blue. It was a long way from the Council of Trent to Vatican II and beyond. Since the 1960s there were several precursors of ecumenical consensus documents on the national and international level: already in 1972 the so-called *Malta Report* of the Lutheran-Catholic Study Commission stated in the course of a short section on the doctrine of justification that "today [...] a far-reaching consensus is developing on the doctrine of justification",<sup>12</sup> but that further treatment of the subject itself and its implications is needed. The Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue in the USA with *Justification by Faith* (1985)<sup>13</sup> and the German study *Lehrverurteilungen kirchentrennend?/The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do they still divide?*,<sup>14</sup> which was stimulated by the Pope's visit to Germany in 1980, both led to important insights. On the international level in 1993 *Church and Justification*

<sup>12</sup> *The Gospel and the Church*, Report of the Joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic Study Commission (Malta-Report), N° 26, published in: *Lutheran World* 19, 3 (1972) 259-273.

<sup>13</sup> *Justification by Faith*, in: *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, Minneapolis 1985.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg (eds.), *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?* Minneapolis 1990.



followed as a study document of the LWF and the PCPCU.<sup>15</sup> In the same year both sides decided to take stock and to summarize the wealth of available materials in a short document, the JDDJ.

Undoubtedly, there were also some reservations in the run-up to the JDDJ, e.g. in January 1997 the poll against the JDDJ signed by 160 professors of Protestant theology in Germany<sup>16</sup> or the “repair requests” by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in summer 1998.<sup>17</sup> But in the end the JDDJ brought the ecumenical dialogue to a new stage by displaying the church-wide and church official reception of the dialogue results already achieved.

In 2006 the World Methodist Council joined in the *Statement of Association with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, enhancing the agreement by underlining even more forcefully the connection between justification and sanctification.

## 2.2 The Main Convergences

Before we deal with this part, a short introductory note: Theology is “interpreting,” namely to express the word of God in the language of our times. And ecumenism is “interpreting,” namely transcribing the language of one church into that of the other and vice versa. What a Protestant Christian describes as “justification” may mean in classical Catholic teaching “redemption” and is dealt with under the heading of “doctrine of grace.” On the other hand, Catholic theology designates with “justification” above all the effective side of God’s salvific action in the human being that is rebirth, renewal, and holy life. In this case Protestant theology does not exclusively speak of “justification,” but also of “sanctification” that means the fruits or consequences of justification. Also the concept of faith is used differently: Protestants mean the radical acceptance of reconciliation by God; Catholics think in terms of faith acting in love. Similarly with the rest of the justification terminology it needs to be

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15 *Church and Justification, Understanding the Church in the Light of the Doctrine of the Justification*, in: Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer, William G. Rush (eds.), *Growth in Agreement II*, Geneva et al. 2000, 485-565, published in German in 1994.

16 The poll which was originally published on 28 January 1998 in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* is reprinted in: epd-Dokumentation 7/1998, 1-4.

17 Antwort der katholischen Kirche auf die Gemeinsame Erklärung zwischen der katholischen Kirche und dem Lutherischen Weltbund über die Rechtfertigungslehre (25. 6. 1998), in: *Einig im Verständnis der Rechtfertigungsbotschaft? Erfahrungen und Lehren im Blick auf die gegenwärtige ökumenische Situation*. Eröffnungsreferat von Bischof Karl Lehmann bei der Herbst-Vollversammlung der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz in Fulda und Dokumente zur gemeinsamen Erklärung über die Rechtfertigungslehre, 21. September 1998 (Der Vorsitzende der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz Nr. 19), 67-72.

re-examined whether the same terms perhaps mean something else, and vice versa, whether different terms do not state the same thing. The JDDJ follows exactly this method of interpretation of “confessional idioms” taking into account that the dogmatic development and formulation of the religious truth is not the religious truth itself. Right from the outset this approach implies the possibility, even the fact of manifold phraseology and multifaceted models of expressing the one faith. Different languages, explanations and emphases may coexist and rather enhance than hinder each other. Ecumenically speaking, all sides are confronted with the same task of putting to test the doctrine of justification by exploring what it means to transmit the faith handing it down to future generations.

The JDDJ concentrates itself on a “consensus in basic truths” (JDDJ 40) and “illuminates from there the traditional differences.” *Differentiated consensus* is the key to understanding the document. Thereby one disregards the controversial terminology of opposite positions in the past and is looking for an agreement on the matter itself by virtue of which former opposing views appear in a new light. This process makes it necessary to renounce the former poignant confessional formulae which were mutually excluding when making joint statements. In ecumenical dialogue no side should burden the other with a reversal to one’s own confessional formulae. That does not exclude that one comes to terms and agrees on the matter so that each side can recognize again its own faith in the formulation of the others.<sup>18</sup>

In JDDJ 17 it is said together with, what since the 16<sup>th</sup> century constitutes, the core of the Protestant message of justification. If this is valid, the mutual doctrinal condemnations of the Reformation era do no longer affect the churches today.

We also share the conviction that the message of justification directs us in a special way towards the heart of the New Testament witness to God’s saving action in Christ: it tells us that as sinners our new life is solely due to the forgiving and renewing mercy that God imparts as a gift and we receive in faith, and never can merit in any way. (JDDJ 17)

### 2.2.1 Faith

The main consensus reached in the JDDJ consists in the common understanding

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<sup>18</sup> On this cf. e.g. Annemarie C. Mayer, *Dissens über den Konsens? – Modelle ökumenischer Hermeneutik auf dem Prüfstand*, in: *Ökumenische Rundschau* 52 (2/2003), 157–173.





of faith and justification. Let us recall once more: the theme of “faith” was at the centre of the disputes during the Reformation period. Luther relied on Paul and translated Rom 3:28 “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law” by including the word “alone.”<sup>19</sup> The human being is justified “apart from works prescribed by the law by faith *alone*.” This formula triggered forth the persistent misunderstanding as if according to Lutheran doctrine the believer is saved without good works, without obedience to God’s commandments. However, the good works necessarily follow from the justifying faith. Yet they are not a condition of the justice of man before God, which would be added on to the believing in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

For the fathers of the Council of Trent, faith was the beginning of a process of justification which culminated in receiving baptism: Baptism and faith were linked that closely for them because baptism includes the Church’s confession of faith (DH 1532). As this process begins, faith is also called by them as “foundation and root of the whole justification,” but faith needs to include hope and love (cf. 1 Cor. 13:13). Today Lutherans, Methodists and Catholics can say together in JDDJ 25: “We confess together that sinners are justified by faith in the saving action of God in Christ.” This joint statement was possible because all sides now share the comprehensive Pauline idea of faith. If the Catholics continued to work with the narrow notion of faith as consent to the doctrine of the church, then one would have to continue to say with the Council of Trent that such a belief can only be the beginning of justification. Now it can also be declared together: “... whatever in the justified precedes or follows the free gift of faith is neither the basis of justification nor merits it” (JDDJ 25). This is the “by faith alone” of the Reformation—even though this formulation is deliberately avoided by the method of the “differentiated consensus.” As to the “renewal of life,” the declaration rightly says that it “necessarily follows from justification and without which faith does not exist” (JDDJ 26). The relation of the sequence is crucial. The good works do not precede justification but follow from the justifying faith. Something precedes justification which establishes it, but these are not the good works but the saving action of God in Jesus Christ and baptism as an action of the Holy Spirit. JDDJ 27 clarifies: “the Catholic understanding also sees faith as fundamental in justification. For without faith, no justification can take place.”

### 2.2.2 Grace

Grace and faith are now understood as personal categories. With regard

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Luther’s translation of Rom 3:28. “So halten wyrs nu, das der mensch gerechtfertiget werde, on zu thun der werck des gesetzes, alleyn durch den glawben” (WA DB 7.39, 1522-1546).

to grace it can therefore be confessed together that forgiveness of sins and righteousness are “these two aspects of God’s gracious action [which] are not to be separated” (JDDJ 22). If Catholics “emphasize the renewal of the interior person through the reception of grace,” then “they do not thereby deny that God’s gift of grace in justification remains independent of human cooperation” (JDDJ 24). That means: even if one looks at God’s gratuitous bestowal of the grace (*gratia increata*) from the angle of its effect (*gratia creata*)—as renewal of the person and renewed qualification to activity—every appearance must be avoided as if it would be an active cooperation of man, perhaps even on the same level.

### 2.2.3 Human “Cooperation”

In the Catholic tradition the common speaking of human participation in preparing justification and its reception does not contradict the fundamental agreement insofar as the Catholics, according to JDDJ 20, “see such personal consent as itself an effect of grace, not as an action arising from innate human abilities.” In JDDJ 20 the Catholic position regarding the participation of human beings is defined exactly in such a way that “persons ‘cooperate’ in preparing for and accepting justification by consenting to God’s justifying action.”

The following paragraph clarifies that Lutherans do not object this. Their rejection of speaking of “cooperation” is understood according to JDDJ 21 as rejecting “any possibility of contributing to one’s own justification, but [they] do not deny that believers are fully involved personally in their faith which is effected by God’s Word.” Likewise JDDJ 24 emphasizes the activity of human will (even if, of course, the effect of the unmerited divine grace remains unchallenged!). Above all it is a concern of JDDJ to show that Catholics, in speaking of the good works, strive “to emphasize the responsibility of persons for their actions, not to contest the character of those works as gifts, or far less to deny that justification always remains the unmerited gift of grace” (JDDJ 38). And it is further pointed out that Lutherans also know the “concept of a preservation of grace and a growth in grace and faith,” that they however emphasize “that righteousness as acceptance by God and sharing in the righteousness of Christ is always complete” (JDDJ 39).

The main consensus in the matter of justification (and “cooperation”) has been reached as all sides can declare “that all persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation” (JDDJ 19). That is to say: God needs to bestow everything on human beings—vis-à-vis God they can in no way look at



their own efforts—not even “partially.” Cooperation can only exist in the sense that the heart is involved in the faith, if it meets the word and accepts the faith.

## 2.2.4 Assurance of Salvation

Even concerning the question of “assurance of salvation” it can be confessed together that the believers in spite of their weakness can “rely on the mercy and promises of God ... and so be sure of this grace” (JDDJ 34). Likewise this for the Catholics means that one could not entrust oneself totally to God in faith “and at the same time consider the divine promise untrustworthy” (JDDJ 36). These statements remove the old misunderstanding that this is an over-estimation of the safety of their own position of grace (which Trent called *fiducia*). Here again the deepened understanding of the concept of faith is crucial.

## 2.3 The Remaining Differences

There are, however, limits of agreement. The sections on the continuing sinful existence of the justified (“*simul iustus et peccator*” JDDJ 28-30) did unfortunately not succeed in formulating a consensus on the matter. Why could not both sides agree that the baptized person believing in Jesus Christ is indeed “in Christ” free of sin but that this cannot blend out the empirical situation of life in which he or she remains challenged by the power of sin and concupiscence?<sup>20</sup> Catholic theology underlines in the Christ event the incarnation of God which finds its completion on the cross and in the resurrection. Through the fall the human being has lost the supernatural grace of holiness. His/her nature is “wounded,” but in principle he or she stays “capable of encountering God.” This wounded human nature is healed through Christ’s incarnation. Justification thus is a statement of facts given through the incarnation, completed on the cross and sacramentally mediated by the church, in which the individual believer participates. “The great conversion, i.e. faith, is made up of many little conversions.”<sup>21</sup> Here lies the root of the Catholic appreciation of the sacraments, for by really and effectively communicating the divine grace which God promises and bestows through them the sacraments support the human nature in achieving those many little conversions. So, actually, the question is: Justification *in* the Church or *in and through* the Church? Cajetan reached the following conclusion: If Luther summarizes “assurance of hope” and “assurance of faith” to “assurance of salvation” of the individual Christian, the church is excluded

<sup>20</sup> In Catholic theology *concupiscentia* does not comprise a personal element of decision and is therefore not (yet) sin.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger/ Benedict XVI., *The Augsburg Concord on Justification: How Far Does it Take Us?*, in: *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 2 (2002) 5-20; 15.

from the interior of the act of faith. For him that means that Luther is about to build a new church. Thus, the Catholic misunderstanding was that the Church is excluded in the Protestant act of faith. The Protestant misunderstanding was that Catholics only receive salvation by way of ecclesial authority of the Magisterium. But just as there is no faith without the church for Protestant Christians, this is true also for Catholics. Yet what still needs to be debated is in what way the church has to be structured in order to fulfill its task best. Thus, the question of the connection between the article on which the church stands and falls, and the understanding of the church remains unsolved. In JDDJ 43 precisely this issue of the relation between justification and church is excluded, and its clarification is designed as a task of further dialogue. The statements in JDDJ 18 are connected with this question and they insist on the criteria function of the doctrine of justification for the orientation of the whole teaching and practice of the church pointing towards Christ.

The crucial formulation is traced back to requests for change by the Catholic Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith preceding the JDDJ and reads as follows:

When Lutherans emphasize the unique significance of this criterion, they do not deny the interrelation and significance of all truths of faith. When Catholics see themselves as bound by several criteria, they do not deny the special function of the message of justification. Lutherans and Catholics share the goal of confessing Christ in all things, who alone is to be trusted above all things as the one Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5f) through whom God in the Holy Spirit gives himself and pours out his renewing gifts. (JDDJ 18)

The distinction between the religious positions is (unnecessarily) confusing. Together they say: the doctrine of justification is an “indispensable criterion” and not just part of the Christian teaching of faith. But at the same time the Catholics speak of “several criteria.” Therefore it is particularly unfortunate that no mention is made what these other criteria might be. Might, for example, the Catholic dogma of infallibility be one of them? This fear is unfounded. With this affirmation Catholics just want to see the doctrine of justification integrated into the whole Christological and Trinitarian context of salvation. For the Roman Catholic side it is rather unusual to speak of the article of justification as *the* criterion in such a way as Lutherans are already doing it since the times of Luther. Christology or Trinitarian theology are not an “instead of,” are not the Catholic alternatives, but only different names for the same thing. The function of this



criterion is to show that there is only *one* mediator between God and the human person. This criteriological function can be developed into various directions, also in a Christological or a Trinitarian way.

## 2.4 Evaluation of the Results

Despite the remaining differences the agreement was considered by Lutherans, Catholics and Methodists as a crucial breakthrough in the process of ecumenism and important for the unity in faith for various reasons: emerging from the key points of the controversy there is now the offer of new possibilities to properly speak together, even if in a different way, of the one and same gospel. There is also a kind of mediation between the specific forensic aspect and a wider meaning of justification. What is absolutely new is that for the first time since the Reformation period the church leadership has *authoritatively* responded to the question of justification.

But one must not expect too much: the declared commitment of JDDJ is to be a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification, and not yet a draft for a concord to establish church fellowship. As a “basic consensus” it wants to legitimize the churches to practice the yet existing community of faith with a clear conscience and with good reason and to deepen it. It is not expected that right now full church fellowship can be established which would find its expression in Eucharistic communion. There is still a long way to go. But the JDDJ is opening up this way. It clears barriers which blocked the way until now, namely the mutual official condemnations of the Reformation times.

On the basis of the JDDJ one can now address those problems still existing between the churches. The JDDJ poses challenges on the theological, pastoral and church leading levels. In order that the JDDJ can bear fruit, its entailing consequences need to be taken seriously. As for the ecclesiological consequences, the following—at least on the Catholic side—should be taken to heart: If one talks of the action and work of the church, right from the outset any misunderstanding must be excluded as if the church as a community or its officials befit an activity parallel to the action of God’s grace—either in addition or at the same level of cooperating with God.

The JDDJ was like a Copernican shift in perspective: Instead of throwing only shadows on the common from the perspective of the still dividing issues, it re-evaluates the differences in the light of the common. Precisely because the churches involved thus meet in their Christological-soteriological centre, the

basic consensus “of confessing Christ in all things” (JDDJ 18) exists among them. The JDDJ is just a first step and more need to follow. Cardinal Cassidy judged the situation correctly when he said: “What has been achieved in the dialogue on justification by faith ... needs to be brought into the heart of our churches, into the midst of the life of our communities. These insights need to give impetus to our church members to a renewal in hearts and minds, to a reversal in our attitude towards each other.”<sup>22</sup>

### 3. Some Issues for Further Theological Consideration

#### 3.1. The Passing on of the Meaning and Content of the Doctrine of Justification

If the JDDJ is just a first step and more needs to follow, then, first, that which has been discovered together needs to be passed on in the common witness. That is more significant than is commonly thought. Theology is “interpreting,” namely to express God’s word in the language of our times. To translate the present traditional statements of faith into the language of today’s secularized world is the ultimate ecumenical mission of our churches.

##### 3.1.1 Everyday Usage of the Term “Justification”

“To justify” is a term of our everyday language. The dictionary explains it as follows: “to show justice or rightness of (person, act, etc.)” or “to account for.” We use the term “justification” mainly when it is questionable whether we acted rightly and we use the word above all reflexively. One is justifying oneself, rarely others.

On the other hand it is true: We “justify” ourselves *against others*. Justification must be accepted by the others. “Justification” in our everyday language means: “I did the right thing, I am innocent.”

“Justification” aims at the relationship between two or more persons. It is an inter-personal event. It is not purely juridical, legally set up, but possesses a side where confidence enters the play. Justification thus reaches another dimension which consists in diminishing or even losing the confidence. And if confidence is lost, the crucial question is: How can this confidence be regained?

<sup>22</sup> Thus Idris Cardinal Cassidy at the Ninth Plenary of the LWF in Hong Kong, cf. KNA-ÖKI *Dok. No. 16*, 12 August 1997, n. 7, p.2.



### 3.1.2 Theological Usage

The theological term of justification also applies to a distorted personal relationship—that between God and the human being. The breach of confidence is caused by the human being and consists in sin. The relationship of confidence between God and the human being is disrupted by sin. The turning point can only come from God. He—as the offended—needs to approach the human being.

This is done in a unique way in the life, suffering and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God accepts the human breach of confidence; he “carries the sin of the world,” as we pray together in the “Lamb of God.” In the forgiveness of sin, God enforces a justice which is very different from human justice. Justice is not selective acting, but being. Justice is the proper relation of the human being to God and as such engenders a proper relation to one’s fellow human beings.

Let us keep in mind: “Justification” in our everyday language means “I did the right thing, I am innocent.” In theological language, however, it is quite the contrary—acquittal of the guilty, concretely it is the justice by God of a sinner because Christ has on behalf of him atoned for him. “Justification” is not self-righteousness, but someone else’s justice, namely God’s.

### 3.1.3 Special Content of the Term

Since the times of St Paul “justification” is *one* way of expressing the whole of God’s salvation by grace through Jesus Christ in the Spirit, and as such it stands alongside other ways of expressing the same, e.g. “redemption,” “rebirth,” “new life,” “kingdom of God,” etc.<sup>23</sup>

More than these other expressions “justification” focuses the overall salvation it expresses on overcoming “sin.” “Justification” means for human beings to

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23 This is not just *my* Catholic view but genuinely Lutheran, as proved in the document “On Justification” by the Fourth General Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in 1963: “The Reformers believed that Justification is indeed an image present in the earliest Christian tradition, but as one image among the many used to set forth the significance of God’s deed in Jesus Christ. We also recognize that in the writings of Paul, Justification moves from the rank of one picture among the many to that of the dominating image, the one which shapes and controls the comprehension of the Gospel. But some of the writers of the New Testament do not even use the word Justification and seem quite confident that they can communicate the Gospel in its fullness nevertheless.” (no. 4) Document No. 3 *On Justification*. in: Reports of the Fourth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation July 30 – August 11, 1963, Helsinki, Finland, Geneva 1963, 3-43; 7. Cf. also *Proceedings of the Fourth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, Helsinki, July 30-August 11, 1963*, Berlin/Hamburg, Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1965, 556 pp.

become what they previously were not, “just.” But the notion of sin causes the strangeness of the term which we can see very often today. The use of the term “justification” can even block a contemporary understanding of the issue itself. Today the notion of “guilt” is much more familiar than that of “sin”<sup>24</sup> since it signifies what human beings owe each other and fail to come up with. As to the assurance of salvation the question has also changed fundamentally today. It is no longer a question of the assurance of grace of a certain, unchallenged God, but rather about the issue of an assurance of God, that is to say whether and how God can be experienced. All this indicates that today we cannot suppose an unquestioned consciousness of the existence of God—and in consequence of this—any awareness of his commandments and our violations of them. Thus the order: firstly awareness of sin, secondly promise of forgiveness does not work any longer. Our contemporary experience of life and world is more often than not an experience of absurdity and “godforsakenness,” mostly without even an awareness of a lack of God.

Without an awareness of God there is no awareness of sin. Does this mean that we should dispense completely with “justification” or make do without sin in our understanding of “justification?” By no means, on the contrary, it is exactly the advantage of the term “justification” that it expresses what other terms for our salvation in Christ do not express, the reality of sin. But only if the message of “justification” relates to the experience of hopeless constraints and restriction and of a lack of freedom, as human beings experience them concretely in their everyday lives, this message can develop its freeing force and redeeming effect.

The topic of “justification” prevents that the Christian faith is reduced to a merely pleasant confirmation of claims to freedom of all sorts—above all with regard to human and ecclesial laws—and becomes a wonderful complement of an optimistic life style. We cannot understand justification at all without a notion of sin. Yet, once again, the order, first awareness of sin, then being promised salvation is reversed nowadays. In as much as we become able to believe in a God loving us without restraints and preconditions in the midst of all our negative experiences in this world in which we have to live, only in so far we become capable of recognising our own share in causing these negativities. Seen in the light of our belief in God they need to be called “sin.” Faith in the love of God and awareness of sin grow alongside each other and together with each other. As our good works are the consequence of justifying faith, so today

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24 On sin as an uncommon word cf. already Josef Pieper, *Über den Begriff der Sünde*, Munich 1977.





also awareness of sin is the *consequence* of this justifying faith, no longer its starting point.

To reformulate the doctrine of justification in the light of such experiences means to tell the world and the human beings the good news of God's loving presence *without* presupposing an experience of sin *as sin*. For in contrast to the term "guilt" the term sin *per definitionem* includes our relation to God and this is exactly what under contemporary conditions no longer goes without saying.

In other words: we have to show that exactly this question after God is the basic meaning of the doctrine of justification. This is true already for historical reasons: The scope of Luther's doctrine of justification is not so much to answer the question of our salvation, but to prove God to be God.<sup>25</sup> We are being saved "by faith alone" not because we are sinners, but because by this faith God actually establishes his relationship to us. This is the reason why the article of justification is the article on which the church stands or falls. Seen in this way this article—despite all misunderstandings—can be regarded as identical with believing in and confessing the triune God of the gospel—and it is not an isolated single *topos* of dogmatic theology.

The pressing questions: What may I hope? What gives relevance to my life, a life which is so insignificant for the whole of humankind and the world in general that it could be dispensed with—if there was no God who called me by my name? A life which might be drowned in the midst of all the injustice of this world—if there was no God to assure that justice will prevail in the end? These questions are not aimed towards a nameless "highest being," a "necessary reason of the universe" or an "objective of the evolution." They aim at a God whose faithful love proves certain and reliable together with the certainty of his existence and reality.

## 3.2 Justification in an Interreligious Context

Christianity is not the only religion seeking this God. In an inter-faith context justification stresses the salvific universality of Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup> *Deus fecit hominem rectum*—God made human beings right (Eccl 7:29b)<sup>27</sup>—a phrase much exploited

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25 Cf. Martin Luther, *Sermon on Ps 26*, WA 17 I, 232,35: "meine Iere [...] lesst Gott sein unsern Herrn Gott und gibt Gott die ehre"; on the whole question cf. Philip S. Watson, *Let God be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther*, London 1947.

26 In this point the JDDJ is totally in keeping with *Dominus Jesus. On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ*, Rome 2000.

27 The original meaning is: "God made human beings straightforward and honest."

in the doctrine of justification during the last 2000 years. Yet this phrase is taken from the Old Testament, the Jewish Bible.<sup>28</sup> This, however, also constitutes one of the still unresolved problems: If justification is already an Old Testament Jewish concept, what about the “Law” of the Jews as opposed to the Gospel? Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt (1928-2002), one of the pioneers of renewed Jewish-Christian relations after the Shoah in German Protestant theology and a severe critic of the JDDJ, wrote: “Protestants and Catholics agree with each other [scil. in the JDDJ] persistently leaving Judaism out of consideration. They even agree with each other at the expense of the *truth* of the OT and Judaism.”<sup>29</sup> Marquardt pleads for an Israel-sensible formulation of the doctrine of justification in the JDDJ, whereas the churches—according to his view—still formulate their tradition of justification against Moses and the law. Regarding its content God’s grace comprises the gospel and the law, but regarding its form it is the gospel, grace as such. But instead of clarifying this, the churches even foster an anthropological-soteriological distrust “against the ‘being of man in acting’ as the theological definition of his nature.”<sup>30</sup> Thus Judaism relentlessly keeps asking Christianity: Is the belief in justification by Christ a mere receiving? Or is this belief only genuine under the presupposition that it becomes visible by the recipient’s *imitatio Christi*, his or her assimilation with Christ. Marquardt pleads for a Halakic reformulation of the Christian doctrine of justification. At any rate, the value of the revelation history of the old covenant remains a thorn sticking in the flesh of the doctrine of justification.

#### 4. Conclusion

After all this it is not so easy to try to define justification; perhaps this could be a working definition: “Justification is the epitome of God’s salvific action through Jesus Christ, in as much as it unexpectedly and undeservedly takes away human sin. By this God convicts man of his sin, puts him into a new ‘just’, i.e. right relation to himself, thus renewing him in his very being, freeing him;

<sup>28</sup> On justification in the OT cf. also JDDJ 8.

<sup>29</sup> Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Vom Rechtfertigungsgeschehen zu einer Evangelischen Halacha*, in: Die Lehre von der Rechtfertigung des Gottlosen im kulturellen Kontext der Gegenwart. Beiträge im Horizont des christlich-jüdischen Gesprächs, Stuttgart 2002, 43-75; 43: „Protestanten und Katholiken einigen sich konsequent am Judentum vorbei. Sie einigen sich auf Kosten der Wahrheit des AT und des Judentums.“

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 46: „ein anthropologisch-soteriologisches Mißtrauen gegen das Tun schüren: gegen ein ‚Sein des Menschen in der Tat‘ als seiner theologischen Wesensbestimmung.“



and thus even against man's will he graciously has his way as creator over man."<sup>31</sup> Justification stands for reconciling the sinful human beings to God and that is also the key to our reconciliation with one another so that we—literally—can do justice to each other.

I have tried to present some highlights in the discussion on justification on the Roman Catholic side since Vatican II. Yet since I started somewhat before the Second Vatican Council, I would also like to offer some concluding remarks from that very period and remind my readers of what Karl Barth wrote to Hans Küng concerning his doctoral thesis on justification (handed in at the *Institut Catholique* in Paris in 1957):

All I can say is this: If what you have presented [...] is actually the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, then I must certainly admit that my view of justification agrees with the Roman Catholic view; if only for the reason that the Roman Catholic teaching would then be most strikingly in accord with mine! Of course, the problem is whether what you have presented here really represents the teaching of your Church. This you will have to take up and fight out with biblical, historical, and dogmatic experts among your coreligionists. [...] For my part, I can only acknowledge and reflect upon the fact that you have presented considerable evidence in support of this sort of understanding and interpretation of the teaching of your Church.<sup>32</sup>

And now, I ask, could a Reformed perspective on the doctrine of justification go hand in hand with this "teaching of the Roman Catholic Church" or even agree with it?

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31 Otto Hermann Pesch, Art. *Rechtfertigung/Gerechtigkeit*, in: NHTG 4 (1991), 332: „Rechtfertigung ist der Inbegriff für Gottes Heilshandeln durch Jesus Christus, insofern es unerwartet und unverdient die Sünde des Menschen aufhebt. Darin überführt Gott den Menschen seiner Sünde, versetzt ihn in eine neue, 'gerechte', das heißt: richtige Beziehung zu sich, erneuert ihn eben dadurch in seinem Sein, bringt ihn zu seiner Freiheit und setzt so den Schöpferwillen über den Menschen gnädig gegen dessen Widerstand durch.“

32 Hans Küng, *Justification. The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (40<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition), Westminster John Knox Press 2004, lxviii.