Salvation – A Reflection by Deacon Sabatino – Part 1

For Catholics, being challenged by our Protestant brethren with questions about our salvation can be unsettling, and even embarrassing. Why is it that Protestants seem so sure of their salvation, while Catholics are left uncertain as to their eternal destiny? The answer to this question, and ultimately the answer to our Protestant brethren, is that Catholic theology and Protestant theology diverge on this most important issue, forming the foundation for all further protests against Catholic teaching. Ultimately, if this issue of man’s salvation is resolved, all other problems that exist between Catholic and Protestant theology will fall away. Over the next couple weeks, we will consider this topic in some detail, working toward a Biblically-based, authentic Christian concept of salvation.

The first step in our journey must be the consideration of terms. What do we mean by the terms salvation, justification, and sanctification? Being saved by God, or salvation, obviously includes the reality of being saved from something or someone. This something is the devil and his dominion. When we speak of man’s salvation, we mean “the freeing of the soul from the bonds of sin and its consequences and the attainment of the everlasting vision of God in Heaven” (Attwater, Catholic Dictionary). Thus, salvation is, at the same time, our separation from the dominion of the devil and our union with our creator, by which we receive that which God planned for mankind before the fall. To a certain extent, Catholic and Protestant theology is in agreement on this point.

In defining our second term, justification, we come to our first problem. What is justification? For Catholics, justification is the process by which the soul is transferred and transformed from its former state of separation from God, to its proper state of union with its Creator. This process of justification enlivens man’s soul with the life of God—sanctifying grace—thus refashioning man in the image and likeness of God. In Catholic theology, justification can be considered from two perspectives: active and passive. “In its active sense, Justification is the act of God declaring and making a person just; in its passive sense, it is the change in a soul which passes from the state of sin to that of sanctifying grace or justice” (Attwater). It is from this distinction that we can properly consider the Protestant position. For Protestants, justification is simply considered from the “active” position, and even then only partially. Justification, from a Protestant perspective, considers only the reality of God’s declaration; a declaration which has no real power of transformation, but only that of juridical judgment. To understand this position more clearly, consider a judge in a courtroom who declares a defendant to be guilty or innocent of all charges. In this situation, the declaration of the judge does not change the actual culpability of the person on trial, but simply declares a judgment to be recognized by all. Please notice that if the person on trial is guilty of a crime but declared innocent, the person remains guilty, but without the consequences of his illicit action. For Protestants, justification is simply God’s declaration of man’s freedom from sin and death, and does not effect the actual transformation of
the soul of man, or infuse it with divine life. Justification, then, leaves man in his sin, while declaring him free of all the consequences thereof.

Our third term, sanctification, is closely related to justification. For Catholics, justification and sanctification are inseparable, since each includes the definition of the other. To be justified in God’s sight is to be declared, as well as made holy, and sanctification is this process of receiving, and being transformed by sanctifying grace, i.e. the life of God in our souls. For Protestants, there is a real separation between justification and sanctification. Justification, as we have said, is God’s juridical declaration. Sanctification, from this perspective, is the reason for God’s judgment, and is simply “a cloaking of sin and an extrinsic imputation of the merits of Christ” (Attwater). Although, from both perspectives, our sanctification relies upon Christ, note the key difference between the Catholic and the Protestant understanding. For Catholics, the saving work of Christ effects a real transformation in the heart of man by making him sharer in divine life, while the Protestant position sees only a covering of our sin, without any real intrinsic change taking place.

In concluding our initial thoughts on this topic, let us keep in mind the conceptual problem that divides Catholics and Protestants on the issue of salvation. For Catholics, salvation consists in God actually making us sharers in his own blessed life (cf. CCC, 1). On the other hand, for Protestants, God saves mankind by divine fiat, declaring man to be justified in his sight, while ignoring the actual state of his soul.
Salvation – A Reflection by Deacon Sabatino – Part 2

As I wrote previously, the fundamental point that divides Catholics and Protestants is the question of salvation. Although issues about Mary, the Papacy, or the Eucharist may, in fact, be the most popular topics of debate, the issue of salvation and the related issues of justification and sanctification are the foundation for all that divides western Christendom. If this is resolved, all other issues will fall away. Again, for Catholics, salvation consists in God actually making us sharers in his own blessed life (cf. CCC, 1). On the other hand, for Protestants, God saves mankind by divine fiat, declaring man to be justified in his sight, while ignoring the actual state of his soul.

The fundamental reality that is at stake here is the nature grace; what is it, and how does it affect man’s life? In order to gain a proper perspective of the issue, we must once again define our terms. From a Catholic perspective, grace is the supernatural gift of God’s own life “inhering in the soul, by which we are made friends of God, adopted sons, coheirs with Christ, ‘partakers of the divine nature’” (Attwater, Catholic Dictionary). In other words, by granting man the gift of his own life in Jesus Christ, God has refashioned man in his own image and likeness. When we speak of “friendship with God,” or “adopted sonship,” this is simply the meaning of our terms; by becoming a sharer in God’s own life, men, in the state of grace, can be said to be like God in that they now share God’s own life.

From the Protestant perspective, especially Protestants of the Calvinist school, grace is not something that “inheres in the soul,” but rather is something wholly exterior to man. As one theologian once put it, for Protestants, ‘grace is the smiley face upon God.’ In other words, grace is God’s gift of forgiveness by which man is considered cleansed of all guilt, while remaining steeped in the sin of our first parents. Grace, then, from this perspective, is God’s judgment of innocence upon his guilty people. Thus, by God’s gift of grace, man is declared “justified,” apart from man’s persistent state of sin.

The complete division between the two above-stated positions is clear, and the effects of such divergent theologies of grace are far reaching. Consider for a moment the effects of each position upon the Christian life. From a Catholic perspective, baptism, the beginning of the Christian life, is the moment when God first shares his supernatural life with man, justifying him by means of the Sacrament. Here, man is considered justified in the eyes of God because he is remade in God’s own image; refashioned according to the plan of God in the beginning. From a Protestant perspective, Baptism is no more than a public declaration of man’s freely chosen adherence to God, and does not make him share in God’s own life. Thus, Baptism becomes an external proof of God’s declaration of justification in the Christian life, and a witness to the Christian community of the person’s dedication to Christ. The Eucharist can be considered from the same vantage point. Among the Protestant communities, the Eucharist is not a real participation in
Christ’s flesh and blood, but rather a way in which individual Christian’s are invited into a symbolic communion with God, by way of obeying Jesus’ command to “do this in memory of me.” From a Catholic perspective, the Eucharist is a real participation in Christ’s resurrected flesh and blood, granting to the communicant an actual relationship with the most Holy Trinity.

How clear it is that this issue lies at the heart of all Protestant / Catholic dialogue. Does God save man by returning to man all that God had planned for him in the beginning, or does he save man by deciding to ignore man’s state of fallen nature and recognize instead the work of Jesus Christ? For Catholics the answer is fundamental: God saves man by granting him a share in his own blessed life, through participation in the life of the God-man, Jesus Christ. In Baptism, we are resurrected with Christ and in Confirmation we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the Eucharist, we are fed with life of God himself and in Holy Confession we speak intimately with our Lord and Savior. For Catholics, salvation is not a courtroom declaration of a judge but rather the loving gift of God’s own life.
Salvation – A Reflection by Deacon Sabatino – Part 3

In my last two posts, we considered the issue of salvation, as it is understood from both the Catholic and Protestant positions. From the Catholic perspective, salvation consists in being made a sharer in God’s own life, and by this gift or grace, man is justified, or made right, in the eyes of God. From the Protestant perspective, God’s grace is not something that justifies man interiorly, rather it is God’s declaration of justification. In other words, God declares man to be justified, apart from any real interior justification of the soul. Today, we will consider the reason for the Protestant position. At the end of this week, we will consider the foundation for the Catholic answer.

The reason for the difference between the Protestant position and that which the Catholic Church has traditionally given is rooted in the confused spirituality of Martin Luther. Luther, a Catholic monk, struggled with the problem of scrupulosity; a problem which led him to a distorted view of salvation. As a good monk, Martin Luther examined his conscience continually, always seeking to root out any sins which may have been lurking in the darkest parts of his soul. By his own account, Luther tells us, “I was a pious monk, and so strictly followed the Rule of my Order, that I dare say if ever any man could have been saved by monkery, I was that monk. I was a monk in earnest.... If it had continued much longer, I should have carried my mortifications even to death, by means of watchings, prayers, readings, and other labours.”1 For Luther, dedication to prayer and penance became an obsession, and drew him to sacramental Confession and extraordinary penances more and more frequently. According to some accounts, Luther sought out sacramental confession daily, and on one occasion Martin Luther is said to have spent six hours confessing his sins. Exhausted with Luther’s extreme scrupulosity, his confessor finally exclaimed: “God is not angry with you. You are angry with God.”2

At the root of Martin Luther’s problem, which led him to his revolutionary view of salvation, was a confused understanding of sin. Feeling within himself a struggle between virtue and vice, Luther began to see his disordered appetites as formal sins. In other words, when Martin Luther examined his conscience, he identified not only his disordered actions as sinful, but even the urges which were the foundation for his actions. Seeing within himself a disordered appetite, that which the Church calls concupiscence, Luther declared that in every action, he sinned, since in every action some struggle for virtue was to be found.

A helpful way to understand Luther’s confusion is to consider the case of a former smoker. Even many years after a former smoker has quit the habit, it is common for him to have urges which incline him toward smoking. No one in their right mind would consider these urges themselves to be equivalent to smoking, any more than one who has them can be called a smoker. Similarly, tradition has always considered disordered desire, or concupiscence, one of the effects of original sin, to be the “tinder” for sin, but not sin itself. Martin Luther, however, who saw concupiscence
as sin, declared that in every action, man sins. “When I was a monk,” Luther wrote, “I used immediately to believe that it was all over with my salvation every time I experienced the concupiscence of the flesh.... I used to try various remedies; I used to go to confession every day, but that didn’t help me at all. For this concupiscence of the flesh was always returning, so that I could never find peace, but was everlastingly tormented with the thought, ‘You have committed such and such a sin; …and all your good works are just useless.”3

Believing that he sinned in every act, Luther concluded that God had not justified man interiorly, but rather declared him free from divine wrath, regardless of the true state of his soul. Seeing all of his actions as tainted by sin, and yet believing that God had saved him, Luther concluded that a man’s works could not be a determining factor in his salvation. Thus, Luther declared, “Be a sinner and sin on bravely, but have stronger faith and rejoice in Christ, who is the victor over sin, death, and the world. Do not for a moment imagine that this life is the abiding place of justice: sin must be committed. To you it ought to be sufficient that you acknowledge the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world, the sin cannot tear you away from him, even though you commit adultery a hundred times a day and commit as many murders.”4 Please continue reading later this week.


Over the past couple weeks, we have considered the topic of our salvation, as it is understood from both the Catholic and Protestant perspectives. Once again, from the Catholic perspective, salvation consists in being made a sharer in God’s own life, and by this gift or grace, man is justified, or made right, in the eyes of God. From the Protestant perspective, God’s grace is not something that justifies man interiorly, rather it is God’s declaration of justification, apart from any real interior justification of the soul.

As we considered, the source of the Protestant position lies in the frustrated heart of Martin Luther, who did not make a proper distinction between actual sin and certain disordered tendencies which incline us to sin, commonly called concupiscence. Having confused the act of committing a sin with the condition of concupiscence, Luther concluded that since he felt his disordered appetite at war within him in every action, he must be committing sins in all his deeds, even the virtuous ones. Thus, Luther taught that man’s acts, either virtuous or vicious, could in no way be a determinative factor in his salvation. As we noted at the beginning of the series, this error is the foundation for all that divides western Christendom. Please note, if man is left in his sin, then the entirety of the sacramental system—by which Catholics believe that God pours his own divine life into the soul of man, sanctifying, justifying and saving him from his sin—is an outrage! What is the truth?

In the beginning of the Gospel of Saint John, the Evangelist tells us that God sent his only-begotten Son, so that men might be given the power “to become children of God” (Jn 1:12). This gift of divine adoption raises man up, through the Sacrament of Baptism, so that we might “be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom 6:5). As Saint Paul explains, “let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies . . . but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life” (Rom 6:12-13). “Let us then,” Saint Paul continues, “cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light” (Rom 13:12). Here we find the heart of the Catholic teaching on salvation. It is simply this: that God loved his people so much, that he would not leave them under the dominion of the devil. Therefore, he sent his only Son, who is himself the Good News, that mankind, in the person of Jesus Christ might come into the presence of God, “holy and blameless and irreproachable” (Col 1:22). As the Scriptures tell us, “nothing unclean shall enter [into the house of the Lord]” (Rev 21:27).

By Baptism, the Sacred Scriptures tell us, and the Catholic Church believes, we “put on a new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24). Thus, God reconciles his creation by making men once again “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4). From this participation in the life of God, man is justified, not by an external juridical
declaration, but by an interior restoration. God’s life becomes man’s life once again, in order that
man might live the life of God. By grace, mankind, reconciled to the Father through Jesus Christ,
now lives the life of “the Son,” carrying the cross and being crucified in the flesh, so that “as
Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of
life.” (Rom 6:4). With the grace of God flowing through us, now all is made possible, because
our life has become the life of God himself (Cf. Acts 3:12, 4:30). Let us be clear, the Catholic
Church does not teach that man is saved by his works, but rather, that man is saved by being
united to the life and work of the Son of God. The key to understand the Catholic position on
salvation is that our union with the work of Christ is an interior union which restores the whole
of the human person, even his work. When a Catholic performs works of charity, he believes that
God is at work in him, justifying him by making him a sharer in God’s work. The justified man
is the man who is fully alive in God, through Jesus Christ. Thus we read in the epistle to the
Galatians, “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also
reap . . . let us not grow weary of well-doing, for in due season we shall reap” (Gal 6:7,9). Far
from being left in our sin, and declared justified apart from our true state, God has made us
“partakers of the divine nature,” that in every action of our lives, God is present, reconciling the
world to himself. This is the Good News of Jesus Christ.

As we continue our journey of Lent, making our way to the great Paschal feast, let us keep our
salvation in mind. Let us always remember the great gift that God has prepared for us in Jesus
Christ, and remember that our salvation depends upon our union with Him. Let us prepare our
hearts, therefore, that when the day of salvation appears, the doors of our hearts are found open
to Him.