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The Catholic Trouble with Justification: Comments on Scott Hahn's *Romans*

October 31st, 2019, marks the twentieth anniversary of the historic Catholic-Lutheran *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, now adhered to also by the World Methodist Council and the World Communion of Reformed Churches. Consequently, on the eve of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, Pope Francis (2016) said: "Nowadays, Lutherans and Catholics, and all Protestants, are in agreement on the doctrine of justification: on this very important point he [Luther] was not mistaken." Furthermore, the Joint Declaration (JD) states that the doctrine of justification is "an indispensable criterion which constantly serves to orient all the teaching and practice of our churches to Christ" (JD 18).

The problem with these wonderful statements is that they are little more than wishful thinking. First, there are in fact enormous intra-Protestant and even intra-Lutheran differences in understanding the doctrine of justification, not to mention the differences between an average believing Lutheran and an average believing Catholic, if we may use such terms. Second, and this is my main concern here: the doctrine of justification is really no criterion at all in Catholicism. I have been an active Catholic in a Lutheran-majority country for the past seventeen years, that is, for most of the lifespan of the JD, in addition to which I have observed Catholic life on four continents and in various contexts (religious orders, ecclesial movements, etc.), and in my experience, justification is almost never mentioned in Catholic preaching or catechesis. It only receives a couple of pages of (rather confused) treatment in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) – the same amount of attention is given to the doctrine of indulgences! – and it is certainly not used to orient other Catholic teachings in any direction whatsoever. Rather, other teachings (ecclesiology, sacraments, moral theology) are used to minimise the impact of the doctrine of justification.

Based on my observations, there are four main contexts in which the doctrine of justification is talked or written about in the Catholic world. They are 1) apologetic materials, usually by ex-Protestant converts, 2) Catholic Pauline scholarship, such as commentaries on Romans, 3) books dealing with the Council of Trent, and 4) ecumenical theology, such as the literature surrounding the Joint Declaration. This is of course better than nothing, but I cannot help noticing that Catholics really only talk about justification when it comes their way via Paul or Protestantism. On its own terms, Catholicism cannot seem to find a positive role for the doctrine of justification by faith, and below I hope to discuss why. I will illustrate my point with reference to a recent book that belongs to the first two categories mentioned above, namely the famous Catholic convert Scott W. Hahn's *Romans*, published in 2017 by Baker Academic.

Standard Catholic Soteriology – And the Trouble with It

In order to understand why Catholicism leaves so little room for “justification by faith”, we need to be clear on standard Catholic soteriology. The topic is obviously vast, and I can only briefly outline what I think are the central elements and problems. As it turns out, they are not quite the ones the ecumenical discussion usually concentrates on.

The most solemn and comprehensive official Catholic treatment of the doctrine of justification is found in the Council of Trent’s *Decretum de iustificatione*. In chapter 7, this conciliar decree from 1547 lists the five “causes of justification”, *none of which is faith*. Faith is connected, though, to the *instrumental cause of justification*, or to be more exact, the justification *of the impious*, the so-called first or initial justification. The instrumental cause is said to be *baptism*, which the decree calls the “sacrament of faith”. This can be interpreted as saying that faith leads to baptism or that faith is presupposed and expressed in baptism; or that faith is given in baptism, or as Vatican II says when talking about Protestants, that a man is *justified by faith in baptism* (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 3). In any case, justification takes place in and through the sacrament of baptism. This is the first point.

The second point is that *after* baptismal justification, the Christian is said to be confronted with Christ’s words “if Thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments”. Knowingly and wilfully breaking one of the ten commandments in a serious way, i.e. committing a grave or mortal sin, leads to the loss of the grace of justification, or, as Catholics more commonly say, “sanctifying grace” (CCC 1856-1861). Crucially, chapter 15 of the Decree on Justification teaches *that the grace of justification is lost by every mortal sin, though faith is not*, appealing to Paul’s words to the believers in Corinth and Galatia, according to which fornicators, adulterers, drunkards etc. will not inherit eternal life. Furthermore, chapter 14 teaches that those that have fallen from grace *may be restored to it through the sacrament of penance*, or confession (or at least the desire thereof, provided that the confession is made when the opportunity arises). In other words, after serious post-baptismal sins, the instrumental cause of (re-)justification is the sacrament of penance/confession (or at least the desire thereof).

In my estimation, these issues of the instrumental cause of justification, as well as the conditions of losing and regaining justification, are really the central problems, exegetically, dogmatically, ecumenically and spiritually (since Catholics face them on a daily basis), and yet they are almost always overlooked in the literature, which most often focuses on general and theoretical issues like “faith and works”, “justification and sanctification”, “infusion or imputation”, “forensic or effective”, “cooperation and free will”. This also applies to Hahn’s *Romans* to the extent that the dynamic of mortal sin and confession, so central to everyday Catholic soteriology, goes completely unmentioned. In a sense, this is understandable (and convenient), given the epistle’s silence on these matters, but if the idea is to present Paul’s teaching in harmony with Catholic doctrine, pretending the tension doesn’t exist is a grave omission.

But to finish off the description of Trent’s teaching on justification and to say something about the role of good works, I will mention two things. First, works do not merit the justification

of the impious, but they contribute to the *increase* of justification, or righteousness (chapter 10), understood as infused grace and virtue. Second, they are rewarded by God at the last judgment and thus are said to “merit” eternal life (chapter 16), but only thanks to the merit and grace of Christ and only in the case that the person in question “depart in grace”. In other words, getting to heaven ultimately depends on whether one has died in God’s grace, not on anything like the number of good works performed.

In sum, the truly decisive element in standard Catholic soteriology is the dynamic of mortal sin and confession. What really determines one’s standing before God and one’s eternal destiny is whether one lives and dies in “the state of (sanctifying) grace” – the term that Catholics normally use instead of “justification” or “righteousness”. Being in the state of grace depends on whether one has committed a mortal sin and on whether one has gone to confession (or at least desired it) after committing one. Simply being a believer makes no difference: you can believe in Jesus all you want, but if you have one unconfessed/unrepented mortal sin on your conscience at death, you’re going to hell.

At this point, I hope it is clear why Catholics almost never talk or teach about “justification by faith”, unless pressed by Paul or Protestantism. The main reason is that in Catholic doctrine, *faith is generally not recognized as an instrumental cause of justification*, as it is in the Lutheran tradition, taking its cue from Paul’s teaching in Romans 3-4. The central soteriological term for Catholics is not justification but “the state of grace”, or “sanctifying grace”, and there is no doctrine about “entering/being in/ staying in/ re-entering the state of grace by faith”, for faith can exist in the soul even without sanctifying grace. Entering the state of grace happens by baptism and confession, not by faith.

Now, to understand the exegetical challenge Paul’s letter to the Romans poses to Roman Catholics, imagine it said, over and over again, that *a man enters the state of grace by faith, or that man is reckoned to be in the state of grace by faith*. I always remember how the first time I read Romans 3-4 I asked myself in anguish: How are the Lutherans not right? The text did not fit my Catholic soteriology at all. Paul says that God justifies the one that believes in Jesus (3:26), that man is justified *diá pisteos* (3:22, 25) or *pístei* (3:28), through faith, by faith, by means of faith, by the instrumentality of faith, apart from the works of the law, or as in Romans 4, righteousness is credited or reckoned to the one who believes, apart from works. This seemed to me quite far removed from a system based on keeping the ten commandments in order to stay in the state of grace and going to confession in order to re-enter it when necessary.

Of course, ever since Trent, Catholics have developed all kinds of ways to explain Paul’s teaching, and I soon learned many of them. In Hahn’s *Romans*, I counted at least four different strategies, some of which do not seem entirely compatible with each other. In what follows, I will examine these strategies to illustrate how difficult it is for Catholic theology to appropriate Paul’s teaching on “justification by faith”, and how attempts to get around it serve to further trivialise and minimise the role of this supposedly central doctrine for Catholics.

Four Strategies to Explain (Away) Romans 3-4

To begin on the positive side, Hahn rightly understands and explains Paul's teaching on justification by faith on two vital points. First, he admits that Romans 3:28 teaches that faith is "the means of justification", that "which reaches out to God and accepts the gift of righteousness that is offered in Jesus" (Hahn 2017, 49). In other words, faith is an *instrument* by which man receives justification. Second, on the nature of justifying faith, Hahn observes how Abraham's example shows that justifying faith is "trustful belief in the Lord and the Lord's promise, not dutiful observance of a covenant requirement" (Hahn 2017, 58). Now, this is precisely what the Lutheran tradition has discovered and treasured in Paul: justification is a gift, and it is received by means of faith, which is not understood simply as assent to truths but as trust in the promise. Ecumenically speaking, we might add that trust includes also the concepts of hope and love. But the important point is that if and when faith is recognised as an instrument of justification, then justification by faith is *always* a relevant doctrine for the believer, as long as he believes. It is a constant source of consolation to the Christian struggling with sin and doubt. *Iustitia Dei* is always there to be received in faith.

The problem with Hahn's commentary is that instead of building a positive case on these exegetical observations (which he could have done with the help of the Joint Declaration and some of the teachings of Popes Benedict XVI and Francis), he resorts to polemical strategies that in fact undermine them. As a result, the doctrine of justification by faith is emptied of its meaning and consigned back to irrelevance. Let me now comment on these four strategies.

1. The first strategy is to make a distinction between "initial" or "first" justification and "final" justification (Hahn 2017, 30), so that the former is by faith apart from works (3:28), whereas the latter is by good works and faithful obedience to the divine law (2:13); in short, salvation by faith and works. There are several problems with this common solution; I will mention three. First, Hahn himself recognises in his exegesis of Romans 4 that Abraham's justification by faith in Gen. 15:6 does not refer to his initial justification but to a later point in his journey of faith (Hahn 2017, 58, n. 4). This favours the view that justification by faith apart from works applies to the entire Christian life, not merely its beginning. Second, in official Catholic teaching final justification isn't really based on "whether we have lived a life of faithful obedience" (Hahn 2017, 55), but rather on whether we have died in the state of grace. Here, Hahn makes too much of the role of works in final justification. In standard Catholic teaching, a bad Catholic who repents and goes to confession at the last minute is saved despite his lifelong disobedience, whereas a good Catholic who has committed one mortal sin will not be saved, no matter how many good works he has performed. So even final justification depends ultimately on grace, and the real issue to be discussed is whether the state of grace – i.e. the state of being justified – can be accessed by faith in Christ. The third problem is that according to the Council

of Trent, even initial justification does not really happen by faith in an instrumental sense but by baptism.

2. This leads us to Hahn's second problematic strategy. On the one hand, he tries to affirm, with Paul, that faith is an instrumental cause of justification, but on the other, because of Trent, he ends up reducing its relevance to the liturgical event of baptism, the "sacrament of faith". Hahn does speak of faith and baptism as the "twin instruments of salvation" (Hahn 2017, 97), but all this seems to come down to for Hahn is that both faith and baptism are necessary for initial justification, that faith becomes salvific only in baptism (Hahn 2017, 50, 97). Additional frustration is caused by the fact that Hahn uses this strategy to argue against Luther's *sola fide*, which was in no way directed against baptism. Moreover, Hahn refers here to James 2:24's denial of *sola fide*, but this is unfair in the context of initial justification, for there it does not apply; even Trent places the verse in the context of progressive justification, or what some Lutherans would call second justification. The question is whether Catholic theology could affirm that both baptism and faith are instrumental causes of justification. Catholics often pride themselves on their both-and-approach in contrast to Protestantism's either-or-approach, but here it seems to be the opposite. Lutherans are not ordinarily happy with faith apart from baptism, either, but usually they are willing to admit that faith and baptism both contain and confer the same gift of justification, namely union with Christ. By contrast, Catholics tend to reduce Paul's "justification by faith" to "justification by baptism". But in Romans, there seems to be an effective justification by faith already in chapters 3-5, long before baptism is introduced in chapter 6.
3. The third Catholic strategy to explain "justification by faith", employed both by Hahn and by Trent, is to say that faith is the "foundation and root of all justification" (this is how Trent explains "justified by faith" in Romans 3), that it is the "essential condition", "the structural foundation" or an "indispensable element in all matters pertaining to salvation" (Hahn 2017, 24-25, 48); in other words, an important prerequisite, a vital and necessary condition. But this is very different from an instrumental cause. A mere necessary condition, however essential and foundational, does not really accomplish anything. To illustrate, *existence* is also an essential condition for justification, absolutely necessary and foundational, but it does not follow that we are "justified by existence"! Conversely, imagine Paul had written that "a man is justified by existence" and that "God justifies him who exists". What would that mean? Would it not mean that an existing man is a justified man, and not that existence is simply a necessary condition, to which this or that needed to be added?
4. The fourth strategy is to refer to "faith working in love" and "the obedience of faith" and to say that Paul "has a very broad concept of saving faith" (Hahn 2017, 49), so that faith now by definition includes works and obedience as well. Hahn refers here to the teachings of Vatican I and Vatican II about faith, saying that it is "nothing less" than the "total response" of the human person to God,

including assenting to the truth God reveals and consenting to live as God requires. This strategy opens the door to all sorts of elements to be smuggled into Paul's concept of faith, which Hahn elsewhere understands simply as "trustful belief in God's promise". In other words, I may believe and trust in God and Jesus and the Gospel of his death and resurrection all I want, but if I disbelieve even one of the "revealed truths of faith" defined centuries later (such as Vatican I's dogma of papal infallibility, which all other Christians deny), or perhaps even dissent on a particular moral teaching (who knows where the line goes), I don't really have saving faith. This strategy paves the way for an exegetical, ecumenical, and spiritual suicide, and I say this as someone who really was on the edge once precisely due to this sort of reasoning. Thankfully, I decided to believe Paul's simple gospel (see e.g. 1. Cor. 15:1-5) was still valid, even for desperate, struggling Catholics.

Conclusion

Twenty years ago, Catholics and Lutherans together solemnly confessed that "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work. . . we are accepted by God" and that "through Christ alone are we justified, when we receive this salvation in faith" (JD 15-16). In a catechesis on the Apostle Paul, Pope Benedict XVI (2009, 82) famously said the following: "Being just [or righteous] simply means being with Christ and in Christ. And this suffices. Further observances are no longer necessary. For this reason Luther's phrase: '*faith alone*' is true, if faith is not opposed to charity, to love." I and most of my Lutheran friends are happy to agree. The problem is that unlike Lutherans, Catholics are still officially burdened with all sorts of obligatory observances, such as attending Mass on Sundays and "days of obligation", *under pain of mortal sin* (CCC 2181), no matter how much they otherwise believe and love Christ. To me and many of my Lutheran friends, this makes a mockery of Paul and the Joint Declaration.

Of course, the JD only claims consensus on "basic truths of the doctrine of justification", while allowing for "differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis", as explicated in JD 18-39. But is it only a difference of language if the believing Lutheran holds that there is nothing he could do that would affect his salvation, while the Catholic believes he can lose it by missing one Sunday Mass or consenting to a single impure thought? Is it only a difference of emphasis if the Lutheran can at any moment believe that in Christ his sins are fully forgiven, whereas the Catholic needs to go to a priest after every serious sin? No, there are still major substantial differences, both within the Churches and between them, on issues concerning the instrument of justification, mortal sin, and confession.

What then? I would be the last person to advocate going back to the old condemnations. Rather: "Our consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification must come to influence the life and teachings of our churches. Here it must prove itself. In this respect, there are still questions of varying importance which need further clarification." (JD 43)

My analysis is that there are two different lines of thought operative in the Catholic Church at the same time, deriving from different sources. There is a Pauline, ecumenical, Catholic-Lutheran line of thought, discovered or rediscovered thanks to modern biblical studies and ecumenism. On the other hand, there is the classical Catechism-based model, with a rather (neo)scholastic view of faith, sin, grace, and obedience to rules, which is still quite commonly taught to Catholics on the grass-root level. This paradigm still dominates public discussion in the Church, whereas justification by faith is almost never invoked in intra-Catholic debates. Take the current issue of communion for the civilly married. Are they in the state of grave sin and therefore to be excluded from the sacraments, or might they be justified because of “reduced subjective culpability”? No one has even considered the possibility that they might be justified (“in the state of grace”) because of faith in Christ.

I would like to conclude with these words of Joseph Ratzinger (2009, 59-60): “What is grace?. . . Our religious mentality has reified this concept much too much; it regards grace as a supernatural something we carry about in our soul. . . Grace in the proper and deepest sense of the word is not some thing that comes from God; it is God himself. . . To be in a state of grace means: to be a believer.”

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