

Can You Know You Are Saved?

Assurance, Perseverance, and the Anatomy of Catholic Hope

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Contents

I. “Are You Saved?”

II. The Protestant Case, Fairly Stated

III. Three Doctrines, Not One

IV. Scripture’s Two Voices

V. Mortal Sin Is John’s Vocabulary

VI. What Trent Actually Condemned

VII. Who Really Lies Awake at Night

VIII. Catholic Hope: Between Two Ditches

Endnotes

For Further Reading

I. “Are You Saved?”

“Are you saved?” The question assumes its own answer key: that a Christian can know—now, finally, and for certain—and that Catholics, with their mortal sins and confessionals, live in a fog the gospel was meant to lift. Against evangelical certainty the Catholic seems to offer only “I hope so,” which sounds, to the Protestant ear, like a religion that has misplaced its own good news. This essay argues the reverse: that the certainty being offered comes in three mutually refuting versions; that Scripture speaks two languages any honest doctrine must keep together; that the Council of Trent condemned a counterfeit rather than confidence; and that Catholic hope is not the absence of assurance but its adult form.

II. The Protestant Case, Fairly Stated

The Reformed conviction is stated by the Westminster Confession: those whom God has effectually called “can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.” The proof-texts are among the most beloved in Scripture: “My sheep hear my voice... and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27–28); “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion” (Phil. 1:6); nothing in creation “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39).¹

Nor is assurance presumption, on this view; it is the stated purpose of Scripture: “I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). Know—not hope, estimate, or anxiously infer. Against this stands the Catholic system as the tract describes it: salvation forfeitable by a single mortal sin, restored through a priest, lost and regained indefinitely—a treadmill on which no one can say “it is finished.” And Trent, the objection concludes, made the uncertainty official, anathematizing the claim that a man can know with infallible certainty that he will persevere to the end.²

III. Three Doctrines, Not One

Begin with a fact the tract rack conceals: “Protestant assurance” is not one doctrine but three, and they refute one another. The Calvinist teaches that the elect persevere—but that some who believe, obey, and die confident were never elect at all, so present assurance guarantees nothing about the person having it. The Baptist teaches that anyone who ever truly believed is safe forever, whatever follows—a position Calvinism itself rejects, since perseverance, not a past decision, marks the elect. And the Wesleyan—heir of the man who evangelized half the English-speaking world—teaches against both that a real Christian can really make shipwreck of his faith. Whatever Scripture promises, it cannot promise all three. The disagreement is not Rome against the Reformation; it is the Reformation against itself, on the very point where certainty was advertised.³

IV. Scripture’s Two Voices

The Bible speaks confidence, and the Catholic sings every one of those verses: no one shall snatch the sheep from His hand; He who began will complete; nothing can separate us from the love of God. But the same apostles speak a second language that any honest doctrine must keep. “Let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). “I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27). “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace” (Gal. 5:4)—not a hypothetical, but Paul’s

description of people he knew. “Provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off” (Rom. 11:22). “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). And Hebrews warns the baptized, at length, against falling away (Heb. 6:4–6; 10:26–27).⁴

A theology in which falling is impossible must recast every warning as theater—addressed, with divine solemnity, to people who cannot do the thing they are warned against. The Catholic reading lets both voices mean what they say. The promises describe God: His grip does not slip, His gifts are not revoked, no third party can snatch. The warnings describe us: the one being no one can snatch a sheep from the Shepherd’s hand does not include the sheep itself, which remains free to wander. Confidence in God and watchfulness over self are not rivals; they are the two hands of the same faith.

V. Mortal Sin Is John’s Vocabulary

The “machinery” of mortal and venial sin was not built in Rome. It is on the page, in the same letter the objection quotes for assurance, five verses later—and in a Protestant translation: “If any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin which is mortal; I do not say that one is to pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal” (1 John 5:16–17, RSV). John teaches, in so many words, that some sins are deadly to the life of grace and some are not. The Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sin is an exegesis of that sentence; and the confessional is what a Church does about it—not a treadmill but a door, through which the Father of the parable is always visible, running.⁵

VI. What Trent Actually Condemned

Now read the anathema. Trent’s canon 16 condemns whoever says “that he will for certain, with an absolute and infallible certainty, have that great gift of perseverance even to the end, unless he shall have learned this by a special revelation.” The target is precise: the claim to possess, about one’s own future free choices, the kind of certainty God alone has. Trent did not condemn confidence; the same decree teaches that all should place “a most firm hope in the help of God,” and its chapters breathe trust in grace from first to last. What it refused to let anyone claim is a private infallibility about himself.⁶

And the Reformed tradition, pressed, concedes Trent’s point in its own idiom. Westminster admits that true believers may have their assurance “shaken, diminished, and intermitted.” More tellingly, since Calvinism grants that some who feel entirely saved were never elect, the felt certainty it offers is precisely the certainty Trent denied—*infallible-feeling*, but *fallible*. No Calvinist can know he is not the man of Matthew 7:22,

confident to the end and wrong. The difference between the systems is not that one offers certainty and the other refuses it; it is that Rome says openly what Geneva's own premises imply.⁷

VII. Who Really Lies Awake at Night

The pastoral charge—that Rome manufactures anxiety—deserves an answer from the historical record, and the record points the other way. It was the Puritan and Reformed world, not the Catholic, that produced a literature of agonized self-examination: the practical syllogism, the hunt through one's works and feelings for signs of election, the deathbed terror of the possibly reprobate. Calvin himself wrestles in the *Institutes* with the anxieties of those who seek certainty of their election outside Christ, and warns that such inquiry is a labyrinth—a page this site examines in its essay on faith alone. The Catholic penitent, by contrast, has something no introspection supplies: a sacrament. He does not audit his feelings for evidence of election; he confesses, hears “I absolve you,” and walks out. Which system leaves souls guessing is an empirical question, and the archives answer it.⁸

VIII. Catholic Hope: Between Two Ditches

What the Church offers is hope—the theological virtue, not the shrug. On one side lies despair, which disbelieves God's mercy; on the other presumption, which believes in mercy without conversion; the Catechism names both as sins against hope. Between them walks the Christian of the New Testament: certain of God, watchful of himself, confident that nothing outside him can separate him from the love of God—and mindful that Paul wrote those words in the same life in which he pommeled his body lest he be disqualified.⁹

Ask a Catholic “are you saved?” and the precise answer is the Apostle's grammar: I have been saved (Eph. 2:8), I am being saved (1 Cor. 1:18), and I hope to be saved (Rom. 5:9–10)—a hope “sure and steadfast” (Heb. 6:19) because it is anchored in Christ, not in my estimate of myself. That is not a religion that misplaced its good news. It is the good news with the watchfulness the apostles packed with it: the Father seen down the road, the ring and the robe ready, and the elder brother's presumption and the prodigal's despair both answered by the same running figure.

Endnotes

1. Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), XVII.1; John 10:27–28; Philippians 1:6; Romans 8:38–39. Scripture quotations in this essay are from the Revised Standard Version.

2. 1 John 5:13; Council of Trent, Session VI (1547), canon 16.

3. Westminster Confession XVII; Baptist Faith and Message 2000, Article V; Wesley's sermons "On Sin in Believers" and "A Call to Backsliders" for the Wesleyan position.
4. 1 Corinthians 10:12; 9:27; Galatians 5:4; Romans 11:22; Philippians 2:12; Hebrews 6:4–6; 10:26–27; cf. 2 Peter 2:20–21.
5. 1 John 5:16–17, RSV; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§1854–1864.
6. Council of Trent, Session VI, canons 15–16, with chapter 13.
7. Westminster Confession XVIII.4; Matthew 7:21–23.
8. Calvin, *Institutes* III.21.1 (the labyrinth of inquiring into election) and III.20.21, on the anxieties of those who seek certainty of their election; treated on this site in the essay accompanying "Is Sola Fide True?"
9. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§2090–2092; Ephesians 2:8; 1 Corinthians 1:18; Romans 5:9–10; Hebrews 6:19; Luke 15:11–32.

For Further Reading

Council of Trent, Session VI—the Decree on Justification itself: read what was condemned, and what was commanded. Free online at <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/sixth-session.htm>.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, "The Virtue of Hope"—hope between its two counterfeits, despair and presumption. Free online at https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_three/section_one/chapter_one/article_7/i_the_virtue_of_hope.html.

Is Sola Fide True?—the justification doctrine underneath the assurance question. Free online at https://richwhiting.com/weft/sola_fide/sola_fide.php.

How Should Sin Be Handled?—confession as Christ instituted it. Free online at <https://richwhiting.com/warp/sin/sin.php>.

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"And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." — Philippians 1:6

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic teaching on assurance, perseverance, and hope*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.