

Imputed or Infused?

The Catholic doctrine of sanctifying grace, and why a verdict alone would not have been enough

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I. The Question

Beneath the disagreement between Protestants and Catholics about salvation lies a single question, and most of the other disputes follow from how it is answered. When God saves a man, does He declare him righteous while leaving him otherwise as He found him? Or does He make him righteous, changing what the man actually is?

The first answer is **imputed** righteousness: forensic, external, alien. Christ's righteousness is credited to the sinner's account, the books balance, and the sinner himself remains what he was. Luther's formula is *simul iustus et peccator*, at once righteous and a sinner. Alister McGrath, whose *Iustitia Dei* is the standard history of the doctrine, reduces the Reformation position to three claims: that justification is a forensic declaration rather than a process of being made righteous; that justification and sanctification are systematically distinguished; and that the righteousness involved is Christ's own, external to the believer and imputed to him.

The second answer is **infused** righteousness. Grace is poured into the heart (Rom. 5:5) and effects something there. What follows is sanctification, the lifelong process of

becoming holy through growth in virtue, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit and in imitation of Christ. The Council of Trent defined this at Session VI in 1547; its canon 11 condemns the position that men are justified by the imputation of Christ's righteousness alone, apart from the grace and charity poured forth in their hearts. The Catechism restates it at 1989: justification is not only the remission of sins but the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.

The argument that follows is for the second account, drawn chiefly from Scripture. It begins, though, with what the Reformers had right, since that is more substantial than polemics on either side usually allow.

II. What the Reformers Had Right

- No human work earns salvation. The initiative belongs to God from first to last, and any account in which a man places God in his debt is not the Catholic account. Trent said so before its critics did.
- Assurance is not a luxury. A believer who lies awake wondering whether he has done enough has misunderstood the gospel somewhere, and the late medieval penitential system against which Luther reacted really did produce such men. The problem he named was a real one.
- Justification is God's work and not a reward for progress. Nobody sanctifies himself first and is accepted afterwards.

Classic Reformation theology treats justification rather than sanctification as the essence of salvation, and takes considerable care never to let justification depend upon sanctification (McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*). Justification is understood as all or nothing; sanctification admits of degrees. The line was drawn there for a reason, namely to prevent anyone from supposing he could ascend to heaven on the strength of his own improvement, which is a danger worth guarding against. The question at issue is whether Scripture draws the line in the same place.

III. What Heaven Requires

The place to begin is the end, since whatever heaven requires governs everything that leads to it.

“But nothing unclean shall enter it, nor any one who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.”

Revelation 21:27

“You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Matthew 5:48

“Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”

Hebrews 12:14

Read as descriptions of a legal status, these passages become difficult. Revelation states that nothing unclean enters, not that the unclean are admitted under a different heading. Christ does not instruct the disciples to be reckoned perfect. Hebrews does not say that without an imputed holiness no one will see the Lord; it says without holiness, and then directs the reader to strive for it, which is a strange instruction to give concerning somebody else’s righteousness.

If what heaven requires is real holiness, then the grace that fits a man for heaven must be grace that actually makes him holy. The remainder of this essay is an attempt to show that Scripture describes exactly that.

IV. Sanctification in Three Tenses

Scripture speaks of the Christian’s sanctification in the past tense, the present tense and the future tense. All three are true at once, and a purely forensic account has no obvious place for the second.

The believer was sanctified.

“And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”

1 Corinthians 6:11

The believer is being sanctified.

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

2 Corinthians 3:18

The believer will be sanctified.

“Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

1 John 3:2

“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

The middle text carries the most weight. Paul describes a change proceeding from one degree of glory to another, and degrees are precisely what a verdict does not admit: a defendant is acquitted or he is not, and there is no condition of being acquitted by some fraction. Something in the believer differs at the end of the process from what it was at the beginning. Paul also identifies whose work this is, and it is not the believer's; the change comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Salvation itself is conjugated the same way. The believer *has been* saved—“For by grace you have been saved through faith” (Eph. 2:8); *is being* saved—“to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18); and *will be* saved—“he who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt. 24:13). A doctrine in which salvation is a completed transaction at the moment of faith must read two of those three tenses as loose talk. The Catholic account needs no adjustment: salvation is a life—begun in grace, sustained in grace, completed in glory.

Two texts resist any narrowing of “works” to Mosaic ceremony, and they deserve to be faced: “not because of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8–9) names no ceremony, and Titus 3:5 excludes even “deeds done by us in righteousness.” The honest answer is to grant them whole. The Catholic Church teaches exactly what they say: that the grace of justification cannot be merited by anything that precedes it, faith included—Trent says so in those terms—and that a man contributes nothing to his rescue that he was not first given. “What have you that you did not receive?” (1 Cor. 4:7). Even the merits of the saints are, as Augustine put it, God crowning His own gifts. What these verses exclude is boasting, and Rome excludes it too. The dispute was never whether salvation is by grace through faith; it is whether the faith that saves can remain alone—and that question these verses do not address.

Pastorally, the argument that converts people is assurance: that Catholic teaching turns confidence into anxiety, since a man who must wait to see whether he has been made good can never know where he stands. But Scripture gives the believer both notes at once. It commands confidence—“that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13)—and it warns the confident: “let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). Paul holds the two together in his own person, disciplining his body “lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27), and saying of himself, “I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted” (1 Cor. 4:4). What the Church denies is not confidence but presumption; what she offers is hope “as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (Heb. 6:19), resting on God's fidelity

rather than on self-examination. And the anxiety charge cuts both ways: a tradition that tells a man his works prove nothing, and then sends him to his works to test whether his faith is genuine, has rebuilt the same anxiety one story down.

V. Partakers of the Divine Nature

The boldest statement on the subject in the New Testament belongs to Peter, and its vocabulary is not that of a courtroom.

“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature.”

2 Peter 1:3–4

A defendant who receives a favorable verdict does not thereby come to share the judge’s nature. The tradition names what Peter describes *theosis*, or deification, and means by it not that the creature becomes God but that God communicates a share in His own life (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 460). The passage also speaks of escaping the corruption that is in the world, which is the language of a man being healed rather than a man being released.

VI. Grace and Effort

“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Philippians 2:12–13

These two verses are commonly quoted against one another, Catholics taking the first and Protestants the second, though Paul wrote them as a single sentence joined by “for.” The believer works out his salvation *because* God is at work in him. Grace and effort are not two parties dividing a task between them; the effort is what the grace produces.

This is what the Catholic tradition means by cooperation, and the word repays care, since it is generally heard as though the creature contributed something of his own. He does not. God supplies both the willing and the working. What God declines to do is bypass the person He is saving. Augustine put the balance in a sentence the Catholic tradition has never stopped quoting: “God who created thee without thee will not justify thee without thee.” Luther erred on one side of that sentence, making the good act come from God

alone; Pelagius erred on the other, making it come from man alone. Justification, as Charles Journet draws the doctrine from Augustine and Thomas, is a free assent moved by God, who “moves natures without doing them violence” (Journet, *The Meaning of Grace*, quoted from the copy in the site’s reference library).

VII. Why a Verdict Alone Would Not Have Been Enough

Athanasius put the blunt form of the question in the fourth century (On the Incarnation, 7). Could God not simply have overlooked what humanity had become and pronounced it forgiven? His answer was that God could have done so and that it would have settled nothing, since men would have returned to sinning immediately. Repentance by itself leaves a man as corruptible as it found him. What was required was not merely the cancelling of a debt but the repair of the nature that had incurred it.

This is the deepest reason the Catholic account asks for more than imputation. A pardon that leaves the disease untreated is a limited sort of mercy, and Scripture consistently describes something more thorough: a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), a heart of flesh given in place of a heart of stone (Ezek. 36:26), a divine life poured into the believer. On this reading, when God calls a man righteous the man is thereby made righteous, by a grace that is entirely God’s gift and entirely effective.

The three imputation texts read well on those terms—arguably better. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says we “might become the righteousness of God,” and become is the transformation word, not the bookkeeping one; the verse promises more than a changed ledger. Philippians 3:9 contrasts a righteousness “of my own” with one “from God”—a contrast of source, which the Catholic affirms entire: infused righteousness is no more the believer’s own achievement than imputed righteousness is, being God’s gift from first to last. And the tax collector of Luke 18:14 went home justified that hour because justification, on the Catholic account too, is instantaneous at its reception: Trent teaches that the sinner is justified in a moment, freely, at the font or in true contrition. What takes a lifetime is growth in the righteousness given, not the giving of it.

The objection that this leaves the believer without assurance misplaces where assurance was ever meant to rest. It does not rest on the believer’s measurable progress.

“Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”

Hebrews 7:25

VIII. Where the Two Accounts Have Moved Closer

Honesty requires reporting agreement as fully as disagreement. In 1999 the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, which found a consensus on basic truths sufficient that the mutual condemnations of the sixteenth century no longer apply to the teaching of either party as the Declaration sets it out. Both affirm that sinners are justified by grace alone, through faith, apart from any merit of their own.

The Declaration does not dissolve the difference treated here, and it does not claim to. Differences of language and emphasis remain, and the question of whether justifying grace transforms the one who receives it is among them. What the document does establish is that arguing as though nothing had happened since 1547 is arguing with a position neither side now holds in the form it once did.

IX. The Implication: Purgatory

The doctrine of infused righteousness carries a consequence that is worth following to its end, because it is where the two accounts visibly separate.

If nothing unclean enters heaven, and if holiness is something really worked in a person rather than merely credited to him, then the ordinary Christian death presents a difficulty. Few die perfect. They die forgiven, genuinely and completely forgiven, and still carrying attachments to sin: the grudge never quite surrendered, the appetite never quite mastered, the small vanity long since stopped being noticed. The good work has begun and is plainly unfinished.

Three answers are available. The first is that such a person enters the presence of God exactly as he is, which sits badly against Revelation 21:27. The second is that he was never saved at all, which would empty heaven of most of those who have ever loved God. The third is that God completes what He began.

Paul states that He does: He *will bring it to completion* (Phil. 1:6). Purgatory is the name for that completion when it must occur after death. It is not a second chance, not a punishment, and not a place where anything is earned. It is the final stage of the sanctification that began at baptism, undergone by those already saved and already certain of heaven (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1030-1031).

The imputed account has no room for purgatory and requires none, which is consistent of it. Where righteousness is credited to a man who remains as he was, nothing is left outstanding to complete. The two doctrines stand or fall together, and a dispute about purgatory usually turns out on inspection to be a dispute about what grace does.

X. In Short

Scripture states that heaven admits nothing unclean and that without holiness no one will see the Lord. It says that believers were sanctified, that they are being changed from one degree of glory to another, and that they shall be like Him. It instructs them to work out their salvation because God is at work in them, and tells them they become partakers of the divine nature. None of this reads naturally as a verdict pronounced over a man who remains exactly what he was.

The Catholic claim is not that God's declaration is too weak to save. It is that God's word accomplishes what it says. He does not call a man righteous and leave him unrighteous; He makes him what He calls him. That work begins in this life, continues through it, and is brought to completion before the believer sees His face, since he is promised that he shall see Him as He is, and to do so he must be like Him.

For Further Reading

Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church (1999)—the full text.

Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification, by R. C. Sproul—the Protestant case, argued by its ablest defender.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1987–2029 on grace and justification. Free online at <https://usccb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2>.

Council of Trent, Session 6, the Decree on Justification (1547), with its chapters and canons. Free online at https://www.newadvent.org/library/docs_trento6.htm.

The Meaning of Grace, by Charles Journet—quoted in the Catholic View panel; readable at the Internet Archive. Free online at <https://archive.org/details/meaningofgrace0000jour>.

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*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 doctrine of infused righteousness*, 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.