

to-face with this minister of Christ and tell him everything that bogged me down. He encouraged me to be patient with myself and prescribed some Scripture reading. The culmination of the experience was to hear those sweet words of absolution again.

Do I feel that confession to a priest is a necessary part of receiving God's forgiveness? For serious, or "mortal," sins yes. I believe it is the manner in which the Lord Jesus wishes to touch us with His forgiveness. I realize, however, that a large number of Christians do not believe this way, even considering it a serious error of the Catholic Church. The Lord continues to reconcile these believers to Himself when they fall, not allowing confusion or lack of knowledge about the sacrament to come between He and they. I also, however, believe that God desires them to know about this gift and begin reaping the benefits He has packed into it. In this chapter I want to explain the biblical and historical basis of Reconciliation *within* the Scriptural teaching on the Gift of Salvation.

#### *A Complete Salvation*

As we saw previously, the New Testament is adamant that salvation does not come through the Law of Moses. Baptism is our birth as sons and daughters "in the Son." We start out as infants, but our Father has no intention of letting us remain infants for eternity (Ephesians 4:13; Hebrews 6:1). He looks forward, eagerly, to our growth and development. In the end we will be like Jesus – loving and pouring ourselves out to Him in the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:29). Faith propels us forward, moving us to not just listen to God's word but to put it into practice (James 1:22-25). Catholics call this "sanctification" or the "ongoing process of justification" – recognizing birth and the subsequent process of growth as stages in one and the same Life.

Regardless of the terminology, the Apostle Paul has some important things to tell us about this process. First and foremost we have to get it through our heads that the actions we perform (you can call them deeds or works and they can be anything from time spent in prayer, to sharing our goods with less fortunate brothers and sisters, to caring for the sick or dying) are never ours alone – they are *primarily* the actions of Christ Jesus Himself. As Paul tells us in *Philippians*, "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,” or as the New American Bible translates it, “who begets in you *any measure of desire or achievement*” (2:12-23).

Jesus acting in us and through us is what we call the life of Grace.<sup>68</sup> All of His actions during His time on earth were expressions of Love for His Father, and as such they were performed in the Holy Spirit. When He acts in us the same is true; He is Loving the Father, in the Holy Spirit, *through us* (Galatians 2:20-21). We have already talked about how Jesus deepens our participation in His Life through the Sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist. Talk about the greatest honor in the universe, we have been inserted into the Life of the God Who is Love!

In Jesus, by His Grace, we live in a way that pleases our Father.<sup>69</sup> And the Father, looking at us with eyes full of mercy and Love, regards these

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<sup>68</sup>For direction to several verses in the next two footnotes I owe thanks to Robert Sun-genis’s *How Can I Get to Heaven? The Bible’s Teaching on Salvation Made Easy to Understand*, (Santa Barbara, California: Queenship Publishing Company, 1998).

*Philippians 4:13*, “I can do all things in him who *strengthens* me”

*2 Peter 1:3-4*, “His divine *power* has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness. . .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*.”

*1 Corinthians 15:10*, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I *worked harder than any of them*, though it was not I, *but the grace of God* which is with me.”

*Romans 12:6*, “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.”

*Ephesians 4:7*, “But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”

See *Ephesians 1:10-11* in next footnote as well.

<sup>69</sup>*Hebrews 13:20-21*, “Now may the God of peace. . .equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever.”

*Philippians 1:9-11*, “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God”

*2 Corinthians 5:9-10*, “So whether we are at home [in the body] or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body.”

actions (or works, or deeds) as truly *ours*. But how can an action be simultaneously Jesus' and ours? Let me offer an analogy.

Suppose you and your sister were standing at the top of a flight of steps when she lost her balance and began to fall. You reached out and grabbed her, pulling her back upright. In her gratefulness she planted a big kiss on your hand, saying, "I love this hand. Thanks for grabbing me." Now that good deed took place because of the instrumentality of your hand; it extended toward her and grabbed onto her. The only way it could do that good deed though, was because it participated in your life and was under your direction. That action belonged totally to you – and totally to your hand, simultaneously.

And what I remind you of is that, as members of Jesus' Body, we are His hands...and feet, mouth, etc., etc. The action *originates* in Jesus but is *actualized* in us, "For we are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). The idea to perform the work is Jesus', the Love and Power to carry it out is the Holy Spirit pouring through us, but the action doesn't take place without our "yes," our cooperation. And God the Father is pleased by that cooperation – like any father looking at the work his child "helped" him accomplish (even though it required the father to exert more energy than had he just done it himself).

Not only does God the Father regard these works as ours and smile with pleasure, He goes even further and "rewards" us with progressively

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*Romans 12:1*, "...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

*Philippians 4:18*, "I have received. . .the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God."

*1 Timothy 2:1,3*, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men. . .this is good and it is acceptable to God our Savior"

*Colossians 3:20*, "Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord."

*1 John 3:21-22*, "Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him."

more of His Grace – until finally He places the crown of life on our heads.<sup>70</sup>

We “merit” this increase of Grace but not in the legal sense of God owing us a payment for our work. We merit in the same way a child who eats everything on his plate merits a second helping – the merit is founded on the Father’s Love for His children.<sup>71</sup> Such a progression can be seen in St. Paul’s journey. He could write to the Philippians, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. . .I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil.3:12,14); and then years later write to Timothy, “I am already on the point of being sacrificed. . .I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award me on that Day” (2 Tim.4:6-8). Paul had fully entered into Jesus’ offering to the Father. The refusal of our first parents to enter into the flow of Life going on within the

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<sup>70</sup> 2 Peter 1:3,5-8,10-11, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness. . .make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if *these things* are yours *and abound*, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. . .Therefore, my brethren, be the more zealous to *confirm your call and election*, for *if you do this, you will never fall*; so there will be richly provided for you *an entrance into the eternal kingdom* of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

We see the Mystery of our cooperation with God’s Grace in Jesus’ “parable of the talents” also: A man went on a journey and entrusted differing sums of money to three of his servants. The first servant, receiving five talents (about five thousand dollars), invests them and makes five more. The second servant did likewise with the two talents he was given. The third servant, however, buried the one talent he had been entrusted with for fear of losing it. When the man returned to settle accounts he was enraged with servant #3, “You wicked and slothful servant! . . .You ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. [I’ll take the talent from you] and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to every one who has will more be given; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (Matthew 25:26-29).

<sup>71</sup> Hahn, Scott, *Hail Holy Queen: The Mother of God in the Word of God* (San Francisco: Doubleday, 2001), pp.133-134.

Trinity, and the effects of that sin, are being undone even as you read this. It happened for Paul and it can for us too. If we enter fully into Jesus' offering to the Father by both our obedience to God's will and our perseverance through suffering, then we will also share in His resurrection (Philippians 2:8-9; 3:10).

We are meant to be branches living by the life of the Vine, parts of the Body of which Jesus is the Head. If our lives are not showing forth His Life, and progressively more so over the years, then there is a problem. "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. . . I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away" (John 15:4,1-2).

This is what the *Epistle of James* means when it says, "You see that a man is justified by *works* and *not by faith alone*...For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:24,26; emphasis added). James was not teaching that we can earn *initial* justification (the gifts of faith and baptism); no, we have been made God's children purely by His favor. What I am convinced he *was* teaching, and the Catholic Church continues to bear witness to, is the reality that justification is not only our unmerited incorporation into Jesus' Sonship; justification *is also* the process of His lifestyle becoming ours. It is a process that has to be continued. Jesus didn't pour Himself out to the Father just interiorly, or spiritually, one time at the beginning of His Life. He gave Himself in His flesh and blood, His words, thoughts and actions continually; and as parts of His Body, motivated and empowered by His Grace, we are called to do the same!<sup>72</sup>

Recognizing ourselves as members of Christ's Body guards us from another danger as well – focusing on salvation as if it happens to souls in isolation. The truth is just the opposite: in being fused to Jesus we are simultaneously fused to one another. We even become channels of Grace to

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<sup>72</sup> *Galatians 5:4-6* "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law [of Moses]; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the *hope of righteousness*. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but *faith working through love*."