

**To Work or Not to Work:
What the Catholic Church Really Teaches About Justification
By Jim Penrice**

Catholic doctrine on the role of “works” in justification is often misunderstood by those who criticize it. It’s also misunderstood by many Catholics who try to defend it. Critics claim the Catholic Church teaches that man can be justified by his own works, contrary to the Scriptural doctrine of justification by faith alone. Many Catholics counter by arguing that man is justified by faith, but needs to prove that his faith is genuine by performing good works.

They’re both wrong. Catholic teaching on justification is none of the above.

There is a central, crucial insight, stated very plainly in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, that seems to go unnoticed by both parties. We’ll get to that insight in a bit, but first let’s lay the Biblical foundations for both sides of the argument.

Both camps like to cite Scripture verses that seem to support their view. Those upholding the “faith apart from works” theory often point to the following. (All Scripture verses cited here are from the New King James translation.)

“Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe.” (Romans 3:20-21)

“Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.” (Romans 3:28)

“For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’ Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.” (Romans 4:3-5)

“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1)

Those proposing an argument for the inclusion of works in justification like to cite these passages:

“But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.” (James 2:20-24)

“He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.” (1 John 2:4)

“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” (James 2:14-17)

On the surface these two sets of quotations seem to contradict each other. But there is a link; the reconciliation can be found in magisterial documents of the Catholic Church, which complement these Biblical teachings about justification and illumine their full meaning.

Before looking to these documents, let’s revisit these two sets of passages. Each set speaks of a different type of “works”—namely, works that have different origins. One type of works can justify a man, the other can’t.

Read very carefully the kind of works St. Paul says are powerless to justify a man:

“Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed.... a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.... For if

Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.”

The “works” spoken of here are man’s own works, what he does completely by himself of his own natural powers or the teaching of the law. (Paul is adamant that he is speaking here about man’s own works. He says Abraham would have “something to boast about, but not before God” because he’s speaking in the context of works performed solely by man’s own natural power.) Paul clearly teaches that man’s own works, done by his own power or by the law, are powerless to justify him.

This is exactly what the Catholic Church teaches. This is stated clearly in Canon 1 from the Decree on Justification from the Council of Trent:

“If anyone says that man can be justified before God by his own works, whether done by his own natural powers or through the teaching of the law, without divine grace through Jesus Christ, let him be anathema.”

The last part of this canon hints at the other type of “works” that can justify a man, the kind spoken of in the second set of Scripture quotes. The “works” they refer to are not works man performs by his own power under the law—they are the works God himself performs through a man who has faith, as God’s proof that the man’s faith is genuine.

James says this when he writes: “Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?” James speaks of faith working through a man, not the man on his own. Faith by definition is the surrender to the God we don’t fully understand, in confidence that His grace works through us to do things we cannot accomplish on our own.

It’s interesting that both Paul and James quote the same Scripture verse to support what on the surface seem to be contrary arguments: “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” (Genesis 15:6) But they’re both making the same point, using this verse in different contexts.

Paul distinguishes between a work God performs through man, and man's own work apart from God, teaching that the former justifies and the latter does not. He also makes the case that faith itself is a work of God, not man.

Consider this carefully: *"For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God."* No man can boast before God of his own works; Paul is saying that faith in itself is a work God accomplishes through a man, not man's own work, and emphasizes it here: *"For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.'"* Faith is an act that is accounted for righteousness, so it must be God's act, not man's. (Jesus taught this in John 6:29 when he said "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.") This is the context for Paul's next remarks: *"Now to him who works [his own works apart from God] the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, [faith, God's work performed through man] his faith is accounted for righteousness."*

James uses the same verse from Genesis to make the same point in a different way: *"Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, [his faith was a work of God performed through him, not by his own ability] and by [God's] works faith was made perfect?"* This is a particularly profound example of God's work in a man, not man's own work. For who else but God would be willing to sacrifice his own son whom he loves? This is God's work by which Abraham is justified, not his own.

The Catholic Church teaches that these "works" do play a part in justification ; the works of God performed through a man who believes, not the works of man of his own natural power or under the law. It plainly teaches that the source of all good works is God, not man himself. It is the works of God accomplished through man, together with man's acceptance of the faith that also comes from God alone, that justifies man. Thus justification through faith and works is ultimately God's work and accomplishment, not man's, though man must cooperate through his free will to allow justification through faith and God's works to take place.

This is the true Catholic doctrine, as clearly taught in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

“Justification has been merited for us by the passion of Christ who offered himself on the cross as a living victim, holy and pleasing to God, and whose blood has become the instrument of atonement for the sins of all men.” (CCC 1992)

“Justification is the most excellent work of God’s love made manifest in Christ Jesus and granted by the Holy Spirit.” (CCC 1994)

“Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.” (CCC 1996)

Now here’s the central, crucial insight often overlooked by both Catholics and critics of Catholic doctrine, stated plainly and clearly in The Catechism, in which the Church gives the ultimate credit for all good works to God, not to man:

“The merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful. Man’s merit, moreover, itself is due to God, for his good actions proceed in Christ, from the predispositions and assistance given by the Holy Spirit.” (CCC 2008)

So even though we read “Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life,” (CCC 2010), it is in the context of what precedes it in 2008 (quoted above) and what follows it, quoted here—the crucial insight mentioned at the beginning of this article:

“The charity of Christ is the source in us of all our merits before God.” (CCC 2011)

In other words, when speaking of “works,” Catholic doctrine clearly and ultimately gives the credit for all good “works,” and all our “merits,” to God, not man, for God is the ultimate source of all good works. Man is justified through the love and mercy of God so that he may become an instrument of God’s good works .

This is clearly Biblical. Man is made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27), the God of good works (Genesis 1, 2). God intends to accomplish good

through us as his instruments; none of us can boast of our own accomplishments. (John 3:30, Acts 9:15, Galatians 2:20, 1 Corinthians 1:29, 3:9).

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:8-10)

So justification by faith alone, without the accompanying good works of God performed through man as God’s instrument, would be incomplete.

“Though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:2)

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.” (Galatians)

With this context established, we can now better understand the Canons from the Decree on Justification issued by the Council of Trent. Among them (emphasis added):

Canon 3

If anyone says that without the predisposing inspiration of the Holy Ghost and without his help, man can believe, hope, love or be repentant as he ought, so that the grace of justification may be bestowed upon him, let him be anathema.

Canon 10

If anyone says that men are justified without the justice of Christ, whereby He merited for us, or by that justice are formally just, let him be anathema.

Canon 12

If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else than [man’s own] confidence in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ’s sake, or that it is this [man’s] confidence alone that justifies us, let him be anathema. [Note that “confidence” does not justify us—“faith” does. There is clearly a difference, otherwise “confidence” would not have been used. Confidence is man’s work, faith is God’s work accomplished through man.]

The final two canons we'll consider lead us to our final point on this topic:

Canon 19

If anyone says that nothing besides faith is commanded in the Gospel, that other things are indifferent, neither commanded nor forbidden, but free; or that the ten commandments in no way pertain to Christians, let him be anathema.

Canon 20

If anyone says that a man who is justified and however perfect is not bound to observe the commandments of God and the Church, but only to believe, as if the Gospel were a bare and absolute promise of eternal life without the condition of observing the commandments, let him be anathema.

Once again, faith alone, without the accompanying works of Jesus performed through us, is not enough. It is the works of God performed through us, not our own works, that justify us along with faith.

Consider these words of Jesus:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.” (John 14:12-14)

It is in this context that Jesus then immediately says the following:

“If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever— the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.” (John 14:15-18)

“You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.” (John 15:14)

Earlier in this chapter Jesus makes it clear that even when we obey him and the commandments, it is truly his works through us, not our own:

“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

This is what the Catholic Church really teaches about justification.