

15th Sunday Ordinary Time Year B
July 10-11, 2021

Assurance of salvation?

Readings: Amos 7: 12-15; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:7-13

Though most priests are used to receiving theological questions, some still catch us off guard. “Have you been saved?” What the question really means is: “Don’t you wish you had the *assurance* of salvation?” In today’s readings, Saint Paul shares that we have “redemption by his blood,” and that we have heard the word of truth, “the gospel of your salvation.”

Redemption and salvation are key concepts. Most Catholics treat these words as synonyms, but they are not. Redemption is the process of restoring us from the bondage of sin to freedom by means of the merits of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross.

The Council of Trent taught that salvation from sin begins with God’s grace touching our hearts, calling us to repentance. When we receive this grace, our sins are not merely covered over; we are made pleasing to God. Our souls become sanctified, renewed and transformed by grace.

Some Christians believe that salvation takes place when we accept Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior, providing us with absolute assurance from that moment forward. No sinful deed can ever affect the believer’s salvation. The sinner did nothing to merit God’s grace and likewise he can do nothing to “de-merit” grace. Adam and Eve might disagree!!

Catholics distinguish, saying that only on judgment day is our salvation brought to fruition. Our salvation can be lost by mortal sin. St. Paul says in his letter to the Romans: “See, then, the kindness and severity of God: severity toward those who fell, but God’s kindness to you, provided you remain in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off.”¹ This does not imply that we live in perpetual fear of the eternal loss of our soul. No, there is a helpful middle ground between extremes.

¹ See Romans 11:22

My first encounter with the word redemption occurred when I used to save up cereal box tops from, so that I might turn them in for a prize. I would patiently collect them until I earned enough to “redeem” them for the awaited prize, after waiting the required four to six weeks for delivery.

Some things never change. Even today, I have no logical explanation for why I have yet to redeem my 172,161 Speedway points, other than the greedy goal of trying to attain the highest prize level available– now 202,000 points! The points even survived when the card was stolen out of my car...the thief did not have the code and the points were safe! Just as I near the highest award level, a new one is added. And so I wait! I just don’t want to “cash it in.”

Theologically, redemption is a kind of ransom. A redeemer is one who pays a price to regain something that has been lost or given up. The problem is that we cannot accomplish that which is needed for our own salvation. We cannot save ourselves. Jesus is our Redeemer!

The Council of Trent emphasizes the unique character of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross as “the source of eternal salvation” teaching that “his most holy Passion on the wood of the cross merited justification for us.”² Our salvation is “the prize,” the result of his actions. His death effected our redemption. He paid the price through obedience.

Vatican II’s *Lumen gentium* (par 3) also helps us here: “By His obedience He brought about redemption.” Without obedience, the death of Christ would have been a tragedy, but not *redemption*. It was his *obedience* that gave his death its value and made our new life in Christ possible.

Our sins put the scales of justice out of balance. The price of our sins was immense, and has disturbed the good order of things in the world. But Jesus gave up far more than we had taken, in His passion and death.

² Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph #616, 617, cf. Council of Trent: DS 1529.

We cannot earn salvation, but we certainly can lose it. Faith is an entirely gift that God makes to us. We can lose this priceless gift, as St. Paul indicated to St. Timothy: ‘Wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith’ (1 Tim 1: 18-19)³.

So, we come back full circle to the question: “Have you been saved?” We **have been redeemed** from our sins through the blood Jesus Christ shed on the cross. We **are being saved** by cooperating in faith with the grace God offers us to do his will. We **will be saved** and happy forever in God’s presence in heaven if we persevere in the life of grace and die in the loving arms of Jesus.

I have been redeemed, and like the apostle Paul, I am working out my salvation in fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12), with hopeful confidence in the promises of Christ (Rom. 5:2, 2 Tim. 2:11-13) but not a false assurance. And I do this just as the Church has consistently taught for centuries.⁴

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph #162

⁴ Cf. Catholic Answers Tract entitled “Assurance of Salvation?” accessed on its website. See <https://www.catholic.com/tract/assurance-of-salvation>