

DEPRAVED OR DEPRIVED?: COUNCIL OF TRENT AND JUSTIFICATION

As mentioned last week, the Council of Trent spanned eighteen years and three pontificates. In reality, the work of the council lasted about four and a half years, making it much closer to Vatican II (1962-65). Two lengthy suspensions delayed the final decrees. A key **point of departure** between Catholics and the reformers (e.g., John Calvin and Martin Luther) was anthropology—i.e., the teaching about the nature of man. Today, we hear very little about **original sin**. It is not on people's radar, and yet it is one of the most fundamental teachings of our faith. In Swiss reformer John Calvin's primary work—*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*—he concludes from Scripture (esp. Genesis 6 and the story of Noah): “The will is so utterly vitiated and corrupted in every part as to produce nothing but evil.” Of course, Genesis 6:8 reads, “But Noah found favor with the Lord.” This is the classic “depraved vs. deprived” discussion of human nature after the Fall in the Garden of Eden.

Catholics agree with our Protestant brothers and sisters that God's grace is necessary to be pleasing to God. Thus, we cannot effect that relationship on our own. “Thanks, but I'm ‘all good’ with God...got it all covered.” Actually, no you don't! None of us does. We absolutely need God's grace, both for the movement of faith and to be just in His sight. But this does not **imply** that we are depraved, that is, **utterly helpless**. Calvin believed that even those justified by Christ “cannot perform one work which, if judged on its own merits, is not deserving of condemnation.” (*Institutes*, Bk. III, ch. 9, para.9) The key distinction here is the role that we humans play in this relationship. Calvin rejected the Catholic teaching that God **permits** evil, responding that there is no evil that is not “impelled” by God's positive command. Lost yet? It is confusing. For Calvin, we are depraved before God—absent his grace, we can do no good whatsoever.

Our justification **begins** at Baptism, though it does not stop there. When we speak of original sin, we refer to the lack of being pleasing (righteous) before God due to the sin of our first parents, which as members of the human family, we inherit. So far, so good. But for the reformers, they meant something else **in addition** to the above. They saw original sin as also including the **sinful inclinations** we carry throughout life. We agree in part— we **do have** these inclinations and have a fancy word for it—concupiscence. Thus, we see these inclinations as the **effects** of original sin, not original sin itself. What's the difference? Well, since the term original sin itself is never used in the bible, these are heady debates and sometimes we mean something different from the use of the same term by others.

My “elevator speech” for justification— it is a **process** of moving from the state in which, born as children of the first Adam and transformed by grace, we become the adopted children of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. Begun in baptism, justification continues throughout our lives. From being unrighteous before God, we become **pleasing** in His sight. Here, to “justify” is **not** explaining our actions— “let me justify my decision to buy a new car, despite the high price tag.” Rather, it means to be *righteous* before God. The **difference** between Catholics and Protestants concerns the way we are made righteous after baptism. Protestant theology holds that God has **imputed** the gift of righteousness, regarding a person *as if* he had lived Christ's life of righteousness. Catholics teach rather that God's righteousness changes us, providing interior renewal. We are thoroughly washed clean, not merely declared pleasing.

Regarding **justification**, the summary statements of Trent are clear and helpful. Thirty-three propositions—called canons— summarize Catholic teaching in a **negative** fashion, by clarifying

what is outside of Catholic tradition. For example, Canon I of Session VI reads: “If anyone says that man may be justified before God by **his own works**, whether done through the teaching of human nature, or that of the law, without the grace of God through Jesus Christ; let him be anathema.” Or another example: “If anyone says that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema.” The bottom line for Catholics is that God’s grace **truly changes** and cleanses us. It does not merely “cover over” a sinful nature. Our **souls** are made as **clean and shiny** as the St. Joseph Chapel floors! (See inset).

The Calvinists often quoted Romans 5:1 in defense of their viewpoint: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” If isolated, this verse could appear to bolster the case that justification is a one-time event, not a process. However, look at Galatians 5:5: “For through the Spirit, by faith, we await the hope of righteousness.” This connotes something in the **future**. Proof texting is a risky proposition when seemingly contradictory passages may be cited. In fact, Pope Benedict XVI’s 2007 encyclical *Spe Salvi* opens with a line from Romans 8:24: “*SPE SALVI facti sumus*”—in hope we were saved, says Saint Paul to the Romans, and likewise to us. According to the Christian faith, “redemption”—salvation—is not simply a given.” (To be continued).

- “You go girl!” **Elizabeth Gust**, a dispatcher at the Minnesota Department of Transportation’s Regional Traffic Management Center in Roseville, has an eagle eye. She followed **carjackers** utilizing **17** different traffic **cameras**, keeping police informed every step of the way. This led to the arrest of two young suspects, finally putting an end to their carjacking spree. They await trial on 31 counts! Enough!
- The medallion for the **St. Paul Winter Carnival** was found at Silverwood Park, literally across the street from Anoka County! Depending upon the route, the park is between 15 and 16 miles from St. Paul City Hall. They’ve not only run out of parks within our city limits—they are now as close to leaving Ramsey County as possible!
- Though never part of the video-game generation, I can imagine how addictive they can be. So too with word games. Ever played **Wordle**? Simple.Fun.Addicting! (One game daily, six guesses to identify a new five-letter-word.) A correct answer—say perhaps on the **second** guess?—your day’s an instant success! No wonder the New York Times bought the rights to the six-month old sensation!
- I offer **profound thanks** to our staff who worked diligently to prepare for Bishop Williams’ ordination. Volunteers stepped up to clean pews and arrange the sanctuary flowers. The new bishop and several priests commented on the Church’s beauty at the evening dinner reception. In a last-minute switch, the Apostolic Nuncio vested in my office! Boy, am I glad that I cleaned it the day before!
- When **Tom Brady’s** NFL career began (2000), Falcons star TE Kyle Pitts wasn’t even **alive**! Consumer prices (averaged): Stamps \$0.33; new homes, \$134,000; 1 lb. bacon \$2.97; barrel of oil, \$30. Hands down, Brady was the best NFL QB of all time!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector