

# The Holy Spirit

*In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. ~ Ephesians 1:13-14*

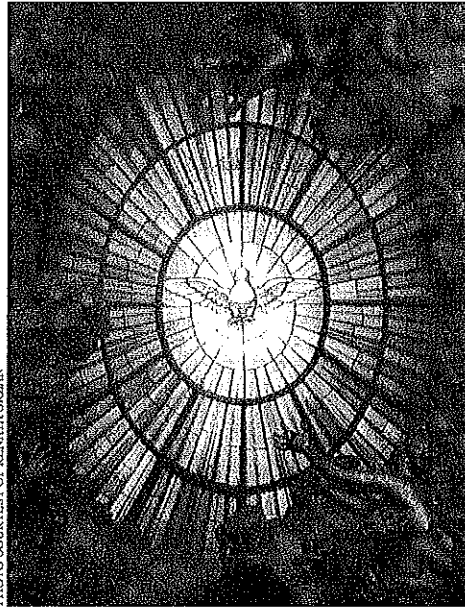
**T**HE HOLY SPIRIT is the third person of the Blessed Trinity. The Father infinitely loves the Son and the Son infinitely loves the Father. The communion of their love is not a power or energy, but a real Person, the Holy Spirit. "God is love" (see 1 Jn 4:8) and the identity of this love defines the person of the Holy Spirit.

## The Lord and Giver of Life

Co-equal with the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is present in all of God's saving works (see Hg 2:5). The Holy Spirit has been present in this world since the first moment of creation. He is the principle of life, and without him nothing would exist or continue to be. When the "earth was without form and void," it was "the Spirit of God [who] was moving over the face of the waters" (Gn 1:2). Adam did not become "a living being" until God "breathed" his Spirit into him (Gn 2:7). Scripture says: "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), which reveals to us that the Holy Spirit is the lord and giver of life. His immanent presence, authorship of life, and signs manifested in Scripture provide the keys to understanding who he is, his role in salvation history, and our relationship with him.

## The Holy Spirit in Salvation History

As the story of salvation unfolds in the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit is present, guiding the faithful such as Joseph (see Gn 41:38), Joshua (see Nm 27:18), David (see 1 Sm 16:13), and Ezekiel (see Ez 11:24), revealing God and his plan, and preparing the People of God for the com-



*Alabaster stone window in the apse of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, dating from the 16th century*

ing of Jesus. Because the Holy Spirit authors all life, it makes sense that he is also the one who sanctifies it. Throughout the Old Testament, he is called upon to make things holy and anoint certain individuals, such as David, for a special purpose.

The New Testament also begins with the action of the Holy Spirit. When the angel came to Mary to invite her to become the Mother of God, he told her that "[t]he Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Lk 1:35), sanctifying her womb and making it divinely fertile. After Jesus' baptism by his cousin St. John the Baptist, he is anointed

by the Holy Spirit (see Mk 1:9-11). It is not until after this anointing that Jesus begins his public ministry. When Jesus opened up the Old Testament to read in the synagogue in Nazareth, he proclaimed, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor: He sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." And he closed the book ... And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:18-21, citing Is 61:1-2). Throughout his public ministry, Jesus promised that all those who believed in him would also receive the Holy Spirit (see Jn 7:37-39).

Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to the Church after he ascended into heaven: "If I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (Jn 16:7).

***"The Holy Spirit is the principle of life and without him nothing would exist or continue to be."***

Just before ascending into heaven, he again promised that the Holy Spirit would come in his fullness

to strengthen the Church (see Acts 1:8). At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fell like fire from heaven upon the gathered apostles and disciples (see Acts 2:1-4). He has remained with the Church ever since and will stay with her until the end of time.

It is the Holy Spirit who gives power to the sacraments; without him, they would be empty rituals. It is the Holy Spirit who safeguards the Church and keeps her from falling into error. The Holy Spirit is the Sanctifier, and he mediates his power through the Church, giving her life and vitality. He is always present, and he will never leave because he has been sent by Jesus to be with the Church until the end of time.

### Signs and Manifestations of the Holy Spirit

*"When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God"* (Rom 8:15). Fostering our relationship with him draws us closer into the communion of God's family as his children. To do that, we need to understand how the Holy Spirit makes himself present to us. What are the signs of his presence and how was he manifested in Scripture? Answers to these questions will help us become more aware of his presence and teach us about our relationship with him.

#### Signs

**Water:** This symbol signifies the work of the Holy Spirit in Baptism; as water cleanses the body, the Holy Spirit cleanses the soul from all sin. His presence remains in us as the source of our divine life. *"But whoever*

*"It is the Holy Spirit who gives power to the sacraments; without him, they would be empty rituals."*

*er drinks of the water that I [Jesus] shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal*

*life"* (Jn 4:14).

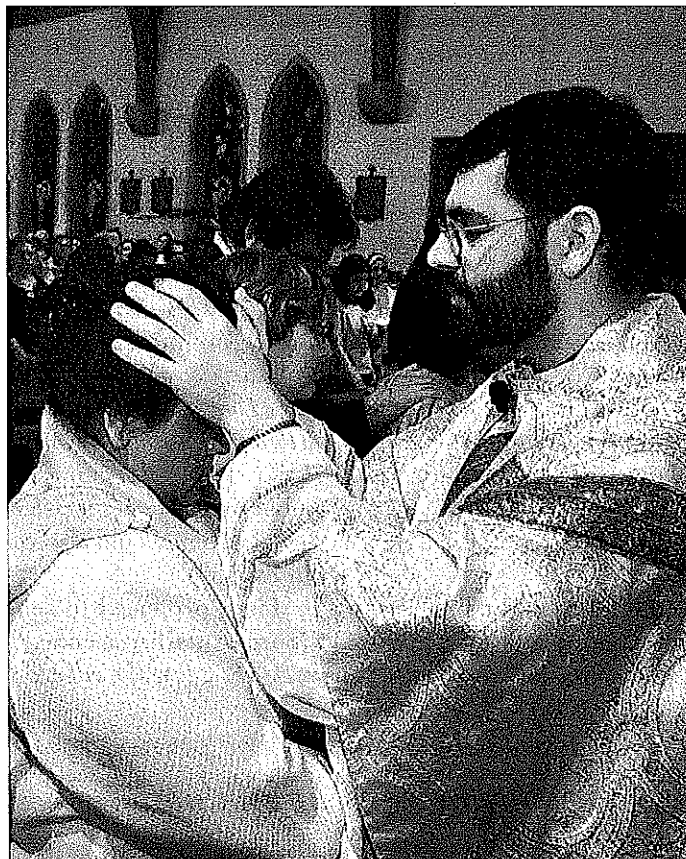
**Oil:** In the Old Testament, oil was used to anoint the priests, the prophets, and the kings of Israel. Jesus, the Messiah, was "the Anointed One." In Baptism and Confirmation, oil is used to signify our union with Christ. Christians share in the priesthood of Christ, and in his prophetic and royal mission. *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light"* (1 Pt 2:9).

#### Manifestations

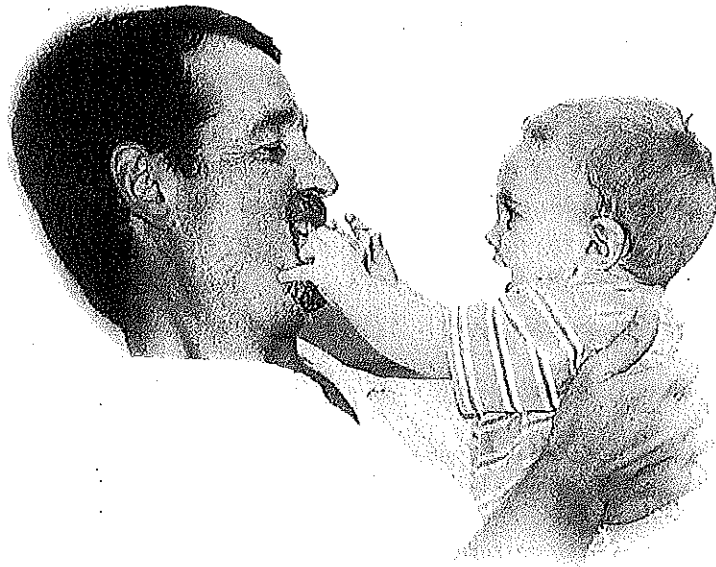
**Fire:** God led his people Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night (see Ex 13:21). When Israel was tempted to idolatry, the prophet Elijah challenged the priests of Baal to a showdown: the God who answered by fire would be acknowledged as the true God. When the idol-god Baal failed,

Elijah commanded the sacrifice to be soaked three times with four jars full of water. Elijah prayed to God and fire came from Heaven and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stone altar, and even the water that had run onto the ground (see 1 Kgs 18:16-40). This is the same "fire from Heaven" that descended on the apostles on the Day of Pentecost. Fire consumes everything it touches. Similarly, anything yielded to the Holy Spirit is caught up into God's life (see CCC 1127).

**Wind/Breath:** This sign reminds us of the mystery of the Holy Spirit. We cannot ex-



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARLOS MONZON



*“By sending us the Son  
and the Holy Spirit,  
the Father gave us the  
‘best portion’ of all that  
he has to give us.”*

perience his presence with our senses, or control his movement by our own will. *“The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit”* (Jn 3:8). The breath of God imparts life to all it touches: Adam and Eve received human life from the breath of God (see Gn 2:7); Jesus breathed on his apostles and they received the Holy Spirit (see Jn 20:22-23). The Holy Spirit inspired (“breathed into”) the Holy Scriptures.

**The Dove:** The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove at his Baptism (see Jn 1:32). This was a sign given to St. John the Baptist that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. The symbol reminded the Jews of the Great Flood, when a dove sent out by Noah returned with an olive branch as evidence that the waters had receded and the earth was again habitable (see Gn 8:10-11). The dove is one of the most common symbols of the Holy Spirit in Christian art and literature. It speaks to us of the purity and gentleness of the Holy Spirit.

#### **The Holy Spirit: Our Guarantee and Hope**

In our Baptism, Jesus *“has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee”* (2 Cor 1:22). The Holy Spirit is our guarantee and the reason for why we hope. Jesus promised to send him to the Church after he ascended into Heaven. *“[I]f I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you”* (Jn 16:7). At Pentecost, Jesus fulfilled his promise and the disciples received the Holy Spirit who has stayed with the Church ever since and will stay with her until the

end of time. The Spirit is our hope because he comes to guide us into all truth, convince the world of Jesus, and prove the world wrong about sin (see Jn 16:8-13). Everything that Jesus has, the Father has given to the Holy Spirit for the sake of his Church. He holds all the aces to life’s most difficult situations and cannot be defeated. His presence in our lives is the guarantee and assurance of all that has been revealed and promised to us in Christ.

As a guarantee the Holy Spirit is like a pledge, a first installment of all those gifts that the Father will pour out upon us when we reach Heaven. And not just any gift but the “first fruits” of our inheritance. When Israel was commanded to offer in sacrifice to God the “first fruits” of their crops and livestock, they were giving him the best portion of all that they had. By sending us the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Father gave us the “best portion” of all that he has to give us.

Life in the Holy Spirit fulfills our vocation here on earth. Through the power of the Spirit, *“we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading”* (1 Pt 1:3-4). The Spirit enables us to share in the Kingdom of Heaven here and now. *“[L]ove, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control”* (Gal 5:22-23) are all fruits of the Spirit and blessed attitudes (or beatitudes) of the saints in Heaven which we share in because of the Holy Spirit. He is the Father’s greatest gift to us.

(CCC 243-245, 484-486, 683-741, 1107, 1699, 2657)

# Once Saved, Always Saved?

*For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. ~ 2 Peter 2:20-21*

**I**S IT POSSIBLE TO KNOW with absolute certainty that we are saved?

God's desire is that we know him with ease, firm certainty, and without error. For this purpose he has revealed himself in history and Sacred Scripture (see CCC 50-53). John 20:31 says, "*These [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.*" God has revealed everything that is necessary for us to know to obtain salvation. From this, we know that it is his desire that we have confident hope in his offer of salvation, which is his free gift to us.

However, God's grace is never in opposition to human freedom. God desires us to freely choose him; therefore, his offer of salvation is always extended to us as a gift that we are free to accept or reject. Even the great apostle Paul knew the importance of persevering in faith. He wrote, "*I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified*" (1 Cor 9:26-27).

Some Christians interpret certain passages of Scripture to mean that, once salvation is accepted by faith, it is "eternally secure," even if the believer later falls into habitual, serious sin. They may phrase this belief as "once saved, always saved." This poses a difficulty since Sacred Scripture is clear that some choices disqualify us from participation in God's life. "*Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God*" (Gal 5:19-21). St. Paul also writes: "*The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we shall also live with him; if we endure,*

*we shall also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us*" (2 Tm 2:11-12). Many Christians who believe "once saved, always saved" explain this problem by concluding that a believer who later falls into serious sin did not experience a genuine conversion, or that his or her faith was not sincere, even though at the time it seemed sincere. However, this poses the further problem that the only way to determine if our faith is sincere is if we never fall into serious sin. Since none of us knows for sure what we may do in the future, this would make it impossible for anyone to ever know the way of salvation.

Yet God's desire is that we have a sure and steadfast hope, based on his revealed truth. "*For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope*" (Rom 15:4). "*We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf*" (Heb 6:19-20).

We must always be on guard that our selfish free choices do not separate us from God's gift of mercy and grace, but we can have absolute confidence in God's intention to lavish his love and mercy upon us. Jeremiah, a prophet of the Old Testament, wrote, "*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness*" (Lam 3:22-23).

God has graciously given us the means of salvation, which include a way to receive forgiveness even for serious sins. By continually saying "Yes" to the gift of God's grace, we can have firm confidence that, through his mercy, we will indeed receive the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls (see 1 Pt 1:9).

(CCC 600, 1817-1821, 2016)



*Christ in Glory, 13th century illuminated manuscript, from an English Psalter*

# Justification

*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus. ~ Romans 3:21-26*

**T**HE PURPOSE OF HUMAN EXISTENCE, the reason why we are created, is to share in the very life of God by becoming members of his divine family. This membership in the fami-

ly of God makes us heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven. When Adam and Eve fell at the dawn of creation, however, humanity's relationship with God was shattered to its very foundations. Because of original sin, we found ourselves separated from God and totally disinherited. Yet God did not abandon us. He gave us the hope of salvation by promising a redeemer who would justify us before God and restore us to the full measure of divine friendship (see Gn 3:15).

The Church teaches that it is the grace of the Holy Spirit, given initially in Baptism, which has the power to justify human-

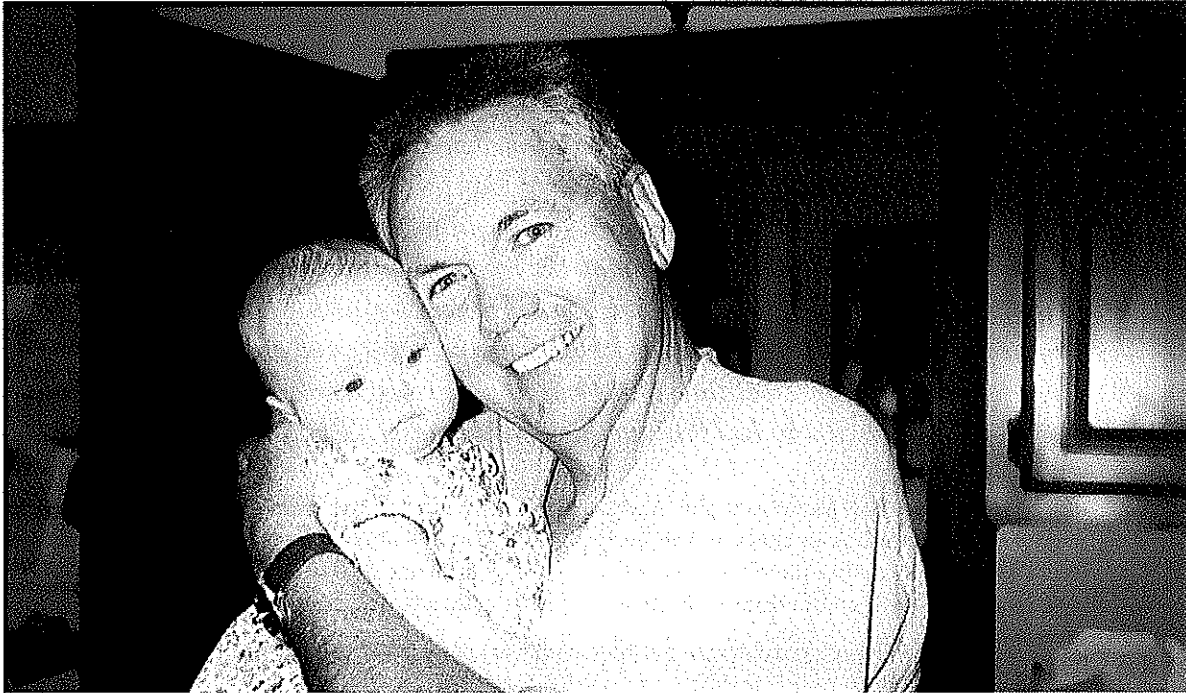
ity. This grace flows from the power of the Redemption that was accomplished once and for all by the saving sacrifice of Jesus Christ on Calvary. Justification, then, flows from and is merited for us by the

Passion of Christ, and it is accomplished in us at the moment of our Baptism where we die with Christ and are raised up with him. St. Paul expresses this truth very clearly: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:3-4). Thus, at Baptism, we are not simply passive receivers of divine grace, but in a very real and mysterious way, actually participate in Christ's Passion by dying to sin, and in

*"Justification is the restoration of sinners to friendship with God so that he may adopt them into his divine life."*



*The Pharisee and the Publican, by Gustave Doré, 1833-1885*



his Resurrection, by being born to a new life.

Basically, justification is the restoration of sinners to friendship with God so that he may adopt them into his divine life. Therefore, justification is a cleansing of the soul from sin and the communication of *"the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ"* (see verses at beginning of handout). This means that when a person is justified, he or she is newly created and is fully released from the bondage of sin and death that separate the soul from God's inner life. This renewal and freedom establishes in the person a right relationship with God in which *sin is not merely overlooked, but is truly and entirely blotted out* (see Acts 3:19). Hence, the power of Christ's redemption conquers sin and death totally by wiping it out completely.

Justification also entails a transformation of the whole human person, accomplished by the grace of the Holy Spirit received in Baptism. This sanctification of the Spirit renews us and makes us true sons and daughters of God and heirs to the Kingdom of Heaven (see Rom 8:15-17).

We cannot speak of justification without some mention of freedom. Freedom and justification go hand in hand. Justification enables men and women to cooper-

ate freely with God's grace. This is expressed by believing in God's Word that calls the sinner to conversion. To be justified, a sinner must undergo a free conversion of heart which turns him or her away from sin and toward God, thus fulfilling Jesus' command to *"repent, and believe in the gospel"* (Mk 1:15). A free conversion means that God respects our free will; thus his invitation of forgiveness and grace can be rejected. No one is ever justified against his or her will.

Finally, justification can be lost (see also handout on *Once Saved, Always Saved?*). Just as God does not justify us against our will, he does not prevent us from turning against him after Baptism. St. Paul warns: *"And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard"* (Col 1:21-23). He admonishes us to *"work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling"* (Phil 2:12). We

can be confident of God's unending love and care for us, but we must still seek to do his will so as to remain on the *"hard way"* and enter through the *"narrow gate"* to eternal life (see Mt 7:13-14). (CCC 1987-1995)

*"Justification also entails a transformation of the whole human person, accomplished by the grace of the Holy Spirit received in Baptism."*

# Good Works

*The Lord recompense you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel. ~ Ruth 2:12*

**T**HE ROLE OF GOOD WORKS in our salvation has been a contentious issue for several hundred years within Christianity. At the time of Martin Luther and John Calvin in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Protestants believed that the Catholic Church taught what has been labeled “works righteousness,” that is, the concept that a person could earn his or her way into Heaven by good works. This continues to be one of the most common charges against the Catholic Church by Protestant Christians, who espouse instead a concept of salvation often called *sola fide* (Latin for “faith alone”). What is the truth of the matter?

## Justification is Not the Result of Our Own Efforts

There are numerous passages in the New Testament, especially in St. Paul’s letters, that suggest that works are not salvific. One of the shorter passages reads: *“But if it [God’s choice of his people] is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace”* (Rom 11:6). A slightly longer one reads: *“Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness. So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin’”* (Rom 4:4-8, quoting Ps 32:1-2). These passages suggest that God’s favor and forgiveness of our sins — our justification — has nothing to do with our own efforts, but it is the result of God’s



grace. And this is a correct understanding of these passages. For if God did not initiate the process of conversion, then none of us would choose to love him.

## We Cannot “Earn” God’s Favor

However, there is something very subtle, and very momentous, going on here. St. Paul condemns the attitude of the servant or wage-earner, who expects wages not as a gift but as a right. This attitude is incompatible with our relationship with God. First and foremost, we must have faith in God, and trust him with our lives. Good works are not a way to “earn” God’s favor. “With regard to God, there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man. Between

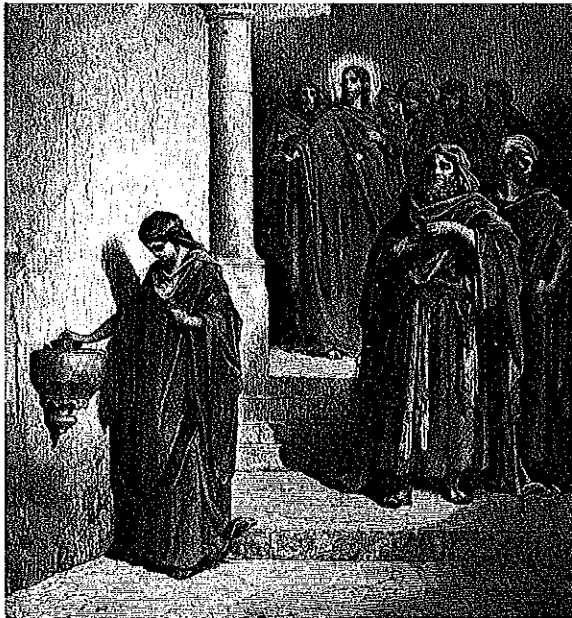
God and us there is an immeasurable inequality, for we have received everything from him, our Creator” (CCC 2007). St. Paul was especially trying to undo the attitude of his fellow Jews (and of certain Jews who had become Christians), who had built up a theology of complete adherence to the hundreds of tenets of the Jewish moral and ceremonial law as a path to righteousness — a works-based system for salvation. St. Paul rightly points out that this is impossible, since no one can perfectly adhere to the law: *“For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction;*

***“Obedience to Jesus’ commands — good works — is essential to our salvation.”***

*since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are*

justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was

to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law" (Rom 3:20-28). The grace bestowed through our redemption by Jesus is the means by which we are justified — that is, brought into God's favor. This justification begins at our Baptism, when we begin



*The Widow's Mite, by Gustave Doré, 1833-1883*

walking "in newness of life" (see Rom 6:3-4; see also Col 2:12).

Yet St. Paul is *not* arguing against good works, and he is *not* arguing against someone who claims that simply obeying Jesus' command to love one another is enough for salvation (that we can "work our way to Heaven"). He is, rather, arguing against the attitude of the servant or the wage-earner, who believes that a full day's pay for a full day's work is rightfully due not only from his or her master or employer, but also from God himself. It is always possible for the master to find fault with the servant — no person is the "perfect servant" — and St. Paul tells us that this attitude condemns us to

***"Once we understand that God does not treat us as his servants, but as his beloved children, everything becomes clear."***

falling short of our salvation, since we cannot be sinless, either. We can't "work our way" to Heaven; no human works can replace the necessity of God's initial gift of grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

#### **Yet Good Works Are an Essential Part of the Christian Life**

If good works cannot "earn" us Heaven, how do they fit into the Christian life? Is faith alone enough? Is a one-time acceptance of Jesus as our Lord and Savior the conclusion of the matter?

This is where the rest of St. Paul's theology must be taken into account. Our good works do indeed count, "[f]or he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, ... but glory and honor and peace for every one who does good" (Rom 2:6-10). Even though our good works do not save us, we are required to do them as part of our Christian life: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God — not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:8-10). They are the witness, the manifestation, of the truth of our faith. They are so necessary that it isn't an issue of "faith alone," because faith that fails to express itself in good works is not truly faith at all, as St. James explains in his letter: "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But some one will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe — and shudder... 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" (Jas 2:14-19, 24, 26). "[W]hen it is deprived of hope and love, faith does not fully unite the believer to Christ and does not make him a living member of his Body" (CCC 1815).



Jesus explains the relationship between faith and works using a practical metaphor: "A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits" (Mt 7:18-20). His extended description of the Last Judgment in the Gospel of Matthew tells us how he views good works: we are to care for others as though we were caring for Jesus himself — that is, we are to care for others as we care for members of our own family (see Mt 25:31-46). Thus obedience to Jesus' commands — good works — is essential to our salvation. Any good thing done by a believer, however, is not on his or her own initiative but through the power of God's grace.

### We are Rewarded as God's Children, Not as His Servants

St. Paul even goes so far as to use the word "reward": "Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — each man's work will become manifest; for the Day [of judgment] will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward" (1 Cor 3:12-14). Is St. Paul inconsistent? What is he speaking of, if not a reward to a servant or a wage-earner?

Once we understand that God does not treat us as his servants, but as his beloved children, everything becomes clear. We all know that, as five-year-olds, we cannot "earn" our place in the family. We are there because our parents brought us into the family in love, and could no more think of sending us away than they could think of cutting off parts of themselves. In this sense, children have a *right* to be part of the family. And this right doesn't depend on doing all the chores perfectly, or on doing them at all. The right is a consequence of birth into the family.

But eventually our status as children in a natural family is affected by our behavior. Parents expect their children to do what they tell them to do, to help around the house, to do their homework, to treat their parents with respect and their siblings with kindness, and to grow in virtue and character. This is all "part of the deal" in being a member of a family. None of it will earn, or lose, the child his or her place in the family. It is the parents' love that invests a child's good behavior with value. Yet it is certainly possible for a child, especially as they approach adulthood, to behave so badly that they cut themselves off from the family. It is equally possible that, by fulfilling the responsibilities and expectations of childhood, the ties of love between parents and children are continually strengthened. These children can rightly view themselves as the heirs of their parents.

As Christians, we are born into God's family by Baptism through the redemptive merit of Jesus' sacrifice of himself (see Gal 4:4-5). Once baptized, "we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ" (Rom 8:16-17). We do nothing to "earn" our new life in God; it is purely God's grace that brings us into his family. Yet our Heavenly Father expects us to obey his commandments to love and worship him and to love our fellow human beings. We thereby grow in the Christian life. We can't earn our place in God's family — nothing we do is of sufficient value to do that — but we can certainly cut ourselves off from communion with God by our sins. And if we follow God's commandments, especially those of loving each other as God has loved us (see Jn 13:34; Jn 15:12), we can expect that we will have our home with God forever in Heaven, as co-heirs with Jesus. "Filial adoption, in making us partakers by grace in the divine nature, can bestow *true merit* on us as a result of God's gratuitous justice. This is our right by grace, the full right of love, making us 'co-heirs' with Christ and worthy of obtaining 'the promised inheritance of eternal



Woman and child of Jericho, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

life.<sup>1</sup> The merits of our good works are gifts of the divine goodness<sup>2</sup> (CCC 2009; italics in original).

As children of our flesh-and-blood parents, no faith is required to know them. We can see them, speak to them, be hugged by them. This is not true of God, whom we can see only through the eyes of faith. That is why faith is the first hurdle and, because God and not we initiate the relationship with him, even our faith is not our own doing, but the gift of our Heavenly Father.

### Our Merit Comes Through Christ's Salvific Action

By Jesus' redemptive suffering and death on the cross, all our good actions take on the merit he earned for us. "*The charity of Christ is the source in us of all our merits* before God. Grace, by uniting us to Christ in active love, ensures the supernatural quality of our acts and consequently their merit before God and before men" (CCC 2011; italics in original). For this reason, we can see that our own merit is itself due to God, "for [our] good actions proceed in Christ, from the predispositions and assistance given by the Holy Spirit" (CCC 2008).

### We are Rewarded on the Basis of Our Good Works, Not Our Faith Alone

But our part is crucial. God's grace bestows on us the free gift of grace; it is nothing of our doing. However, God doesn't force himself on us, but, through the grace of faith, frees us enough from our sinful nature that we might truly be able to choose for, and not against, him. Through our free will — itself a gift of God — we cooperate with his initiative. "The merit of man before God in the Christian life arises from the fact that *God has freely chosen to associate man with the work of his grace*. The fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man's free acting through his collaboration, so that the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the

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faithful" (CCC 2008; italics in original).

In this manner, Heaven is truly a reward — not from God our master or God our employer, but from God our loving Father who rewards his children for their response to his love. "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; italics in original). By Christ's saving action, we can receive the grace we need to live a life of Christian virtue, especially charity, and we can "rightly hope for *the grace of final perseverance and the recompense* of God [our] Father for the good works accomplished with his grace in communion with Jesus"<sup>3</sup> (CCC 2016; italics in original). St. Paul encourages us in these words: "*Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain*" (1 Cor 15:58).

In the book of Revelation, Jesus tells us: "*I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve*" (Rv 2:23). "Deserve" not as a servant or as an employee deserves, but as a beloved child who, even in failure, seeks in repentance ever more to please his heavenly Father, who wants nothing more than that his child live with him forever in the loving embrace of Heaven. (CCC 1815, 2007-2011, 2016)

<sup>1</sup> Council of Trent (1547) from Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* 1546 (1966)

<sup>2</sup> Council of Trent (1547) from Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* 1548 (1966)

<sup>3</sup> Council of Trent (1547) from Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* 1576 (1966)