

"The Mosaic law remains an irrevocable gift from God"

In his 29 September general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechesis on Saint Paul's Letter to the Galatians, speaking about the meaning of justification.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

On our journey to better understand Saint Paul's teaching, today we will encounter a difficult but important topic: justification. What is justification? We, who were sinners, have become just. Who justified us? This process of change is justification. We, before God, are just. It is true, we have our personal sins. But fundamentally, we are just. This is justification. There has been a lot of discussion on this topic, to find the interpretation that best corresponds to the Apostle's thought and, as often happens, these discussions even ended up in contradicting positions. In the *Letter to the Galatians*, just as in the Letter to the Romans, Paul insists on the fact that justification comes through faith in Christ. "But, Father, I am just because I keep all the commandments!" Yes, but justification does not come from that. It comes before that. Someone justified you, someone made you just

before God. “Yes, but I am a sinner!” Yes, you justified, but a sinner. But fundamentally, you are just. Who justified you? Jesus Christ. This is justification.

What is hidden behind the word “justification” that is so decisive for the faith? It is not easy to arrive at an exhaustive definition, but taking Paul’s thought as a whole, it can be simply said that justification is the consequence of “God’s merciful initiative of offering forgiveness” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1990). And this is our God, so very good, merciful, patient, full of mercy, who continually grants pardon, continually. He forgives, and justification is God who forgives everyone first in Christ. God’s mercy grants forgiveness. In fact, God, through Jesus’s death – and we need to underline this: through the death of Jesus – destroyed sin and

definitively granted us his pardon and salvation. Thus justified, sinners are welcomed by God and reconciled with Him. It is as though the original relationship between the Creator and the creature before the disobedience of sin intervened has been restored. The justification wrought by God, therefore, allows us to recuperate the innocence lost through sin. How does justification happen? Responding to this question means discovering another novelty in Saint Paul's teaching: that justification comes through grace. Only through grace: we are justified because of pure grace. "But can't I, can't someone, go to the judge and pay so that he can justify me?" No. You cannot pay for this. Someone paid for all of us: Christ. And from Christ, who died for us, comes that grace that the Father gives to everyone: Justification comes through grace.

The Apostle is always mindful of the experience that changed his life: his meeting with the Risen Jesus on the way to Damascus. Paul had been a proud, religious and zealous man, convinced that justification consisted in the scrupulous observance of the precepts of the law. Now, however, he has been conquered by Christ, and faith in Him has completely transformed him, allowing him to discover a truth that had been hidden: we do not become just through our own effort, no, it is not us, but it is Christ, with his grace, who makes us just. So, Paul was willing to renounce everything that before had made him rich, in order to be fully aware of the mystery of Jesus (cf. *Phil 3:7*), because he had discovered that only God's grace had saved him. We have been justified, we have been saved, through pure grace, not because of our own merits. And this gives us great trust. We are sinners, yes; but we live our lives

with this grace of God that justifies us each time that we ask forgiveness. But not in that moment are we justified: we have been justified, but he comes to forgive us again.

For the Apostle, faith has an all-encompassing value. It touches every moment and every aspect of a believer's life: from baptism to our departure from this world, everything is informed by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus who gives salvation. Justification through faith underlines the priority of the grace that God offers without distinction to those who believe in his Son.

We must not, however, conclude that the Mosaic Law, for Paul, had lost its value; rather, it remains an irrevocable gift from God. It is, the Apostle writes, "holy" (*Rom 7:12*). Even for our spiritual life, observing the commandments is essential. But

even here, we cannot count on our efforts: the grace of God that we receive in Christ is fundamental. That grace that comes from being the justification given us by Christ who already paid for us. From Him, we receive that gratuitous love that allows us, in our turn, to love in concrete ways.

In this context, it is good to recall the teaching of the Apostle James, who wrote: “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.” It seems to be the contrary, but it is not the contrary. “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead” (*Jas 2:24, 26*). Justification, if it does not bear fruit with our works, is only that, buried, dead. It is there, but we must activate it with our works. This is how James’ words complement Paul’s teaching. For both, therefore, the response of faith demands that we be active in our love for God and

in our love of neighbour. Why “active in that love?” Because that love saved all of us, it freely justified us, gratis!

Justification incorporates us into the long history of salvation that demonstrates God’s justice: before our continual falls and inadequacies, he has not given up, but he wanted to make us just and he did so through grace, through the gift of Jesus Christ, of his death and resurrection.

Sometimes I have said how God acts, what God’s style is. And I have used three words: God’s style is nearness, compassion and tenderness. He always draws near to us, is compassionate and tender. And justification is precisely the God’s greatest nearness with us, men and women, God’s greatest compassion for us men and women, the greatest tenderness of the Father. Justification is this gift of Christ, of the death and resurrection of Christ that makes us

free. “But, Father, I am a sinner...I have robbed....” Yes, yes. But fundamentally, you are just. Allow Christ to effect that justification. We are not fundamentally *condemned* no, we are *just*. Allow me to say, we are *saints*. But then, by our actions, we become sinners. But, fundamentally, we are saints: let us allow Christ’s grace to come and this justice, this justification will give us the strength to progress. Thus, the light of faith allows us to recognize how infinite God’s mercy is, his grace that works for our good. But that same light also makes us see the responsibility that has been entrusted to us to collaborate with God in his work of salvation. The power of grace needs to be coupled with our works of mercy which we are called to live to bear witness to how tremendous is God’s love. Let us move ahead with this trust: we have all been justified, we are just in

Christ. We must effect that justice with our works. Thank you.

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