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“Justification”: Stumbling Block for Anglican-Roman Catholic Unity?

ROBERT B. SLOCUM

A detailed criticism of ARCIC II's *Salvation* by Bishop C. Fitzsimons Allison, "The Pastoral and Political Implications of Trent on Justification: a Response to the ARCIC Agreed Statement *Salvation and the Church*," appeared in this journal in June 1988. Allison marshals a host of arguments against the agreed statement, drawing on his broad knowledge of history, theology, psychology, and pastoral practice. While he makes a couple of favorable comments about the agreed statement, Allison objects to *Salvation* because of its "disappointingly ambiguous" handling of the doctrine of justification as a contested issue between Anglicans and Roman Catholics.

Allison's protest centers on the document's interpretation of the theological phrase *simul justus et peccator* ("at once justified and a sinner") for the condition of the justified person. Allison likewise objects to the Roman Catholic understanding of justification as defined by the Council of Trent, and to more recent Roman Catholic statements on justification that seem to follow Trent. He argues that Tridentine teaching cannot comprehend the possibility of a person who is simultaneously justified and beset by unconscious sin. He also notes that the faithful may have trouble comprehending their "collective or corporate guilt" if this guilt is seen through Trent as incompatible with a state of grace and justification. Allison does see one glimmer of hope for Anglican-Roman Catholic agreement on justification: the "unique and unprecedented reconstruction of the Roman Catholic interpretation of Trent" by the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng.

Treatment of Simul Justus et Peccator in the Agreed Statement

I disagree with Allison's assertion that *Salvation* is "ambiguous" on the doctrine of justification with reference to the condition of the faithful as *simul justus et peccator*.

As a preliminary, I must note that the title of the agreed statement is

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Salvation—not “justification.” *Salvation* reflects ARCIC II’s agreement concerning the “essential aspects of the doctrine of salvation.”¹ The agreed statement notes that “justification” is not the exclusive or dominating aspect of the doctrine of salvation for either Anglicans or Roman Catholics.

In order to describe salvation in all its fullness, the New Testament employs a wide variety of language. Some terms are of more fundamental importance than others: but there is no controlling term or concept; they complement one another. The concept of salvation has the all-embracing meaning of the deliverance of human beings from evil and their establishment in the fullness of life which is God’s will for them. . . . The idea of reconciliation and forgiveness stresses the restoration of broken relationships. . . . The language of expiation or propitiation . . . denotes the putting away of sin and the re-establishment of right relationship with God. . . . To speak of redemption or liberation is to talk of rescue from bondage so as to become God’s own possession, and of freedom bought for a price. . . . The notion of adoption refers to our new identity as children of God. . . . Terms like regeneration, rebirth and new creation speak of God’s work of re-creation and the beginning of new life. . . . The theme of sanctification underlines the fact that God has made us his own and calls us to holiness of life. . . . The concept of justification relates to the removal of condemnation and to a new standing in the eyes of God. . . . Salvation in all these aspects comes to each believer as he or she is incorporated into the believing community.²

The Commission recognizes that justification is one aspect among many in the phenomenon of human salvation. The agreed statement does not dwell on one aspect of salvation to the exclusion of others. Allison may have been disappointed that justification was not featured more prominently in *Salvation*. It is appropriate to note that the doctrine of justification was not as crucial for the English Reformation as for the continental reformers.

Salvation is not a treatise on the doctrine of justification, but justification has been appropriately and unambiguously considered in the agreed statement—especially in recognizing the faithful as *simul justus et peccator*. Paragraph 21 of *Salvation* states:

¹*Salvation and the Church: An Agreed Statement by the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission ARCIC II* (Cincinnati: Forward Movement, 1987), p. 26.

²*Ibid.*, p. 16.

The growth of believers to maturity, and indeed the common life of the Church, are impaired by repeated lapses into sin. Even good works, done in God and under the grace of the Spirit, can be flawed by human weakness and self-centredness, and therefore it is by daily repentance and faith that we reappropriate our freedom from sin. This insight has sometimes been expressed by the paradox that we are at once just and sinners.³

This statement seems very clear to me. It acknowledges that the life of the believer is “impaired by repeated lapses into sin” and that it is by “daily repentance and faith that we reappropriate our freedom from sin.” The statement expressly acknowledges “the paradox that we are at once just and sinners.” Allison questions the comment in the footnote for Paragraph 21 that “*Simul iustus et peccator* is a Lutheran not a characteristically Anglican expression.” Incredibly, however, he fails to acknowledge that the expression (apparently so important to him) is *used* in Paragraph 21 of *Salvation* to express the paradox of the believer’s condition.

The agreed statement is sensitive and unambiguous concerning the paradox of *simul justus et peccator* in the corporate life of the Church. Paragraph 29 notes that “the credibility of the Church’s witness is undermined by the sins of its members, the shortcomings of its human institutions, and not least by the scandal of division. The Church is in constant need of repentance and renewal so that it can be more clearly seen for what it is: the one, holy body of Christ.”⁴ The *simul justus et peccator* paradox of the Church is also recognized in Paragraph 30.

The Church which in this world is always in need of renewal and purification, is already here and now a foretaste of God’s Kingdom in a world still awaiting its consummation. . . . Yet, until the Kingdom is realised in its fullness, the Church is marked by human limitation and imperfection. It is the beginning and not yet the end, the first fruits and not yet the final harvest.⁵

The agreed statement grasps the Church’s paradox of “already and not yet”: corporately forgiven and yet needing forgiveness, redeemed and yet needing redemption, called and yet constantly needing to be recalled to true identity, sharing a foretaste of God’s Kingdom and yet not knowing its

³Ibid., p. 21.

⁴Ibid., pp. 24-25.

⁵Ibid., p. 25.

fulfillment, justified and yet sinners. *Salvation* grasps the paradox of *simul justus et peccator* without ambiguity.

*Modern Roman Catholic Social Teaching
and the Acknowledgement of Simul Justus et Peccator*

I also disagree with Allison's contention that the Roman Catholic understanding of justification "seems to preclude not only any recognition of unconscious sin but also any teaching of corporate or collective guilt." Allison ignores the Roman Catholic Church's example of leadership in social teaching for Christian and human responsibility. He also ignores many recent statements by Roman Catholic leaders and theologians acknowledging corporate guilt in the faithful and in the Church as a whole.

For example, Pope John XXIII avows an unambiguous understanding of corporate responsibility for the process of disarmament in the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*: "The world will never be the dwelling-place of peace, till peace has found a home in the heart of each and every man, till every man preserves in himself the order ordained by God to be preserved."⁶

Karl Rahner, a well-known Roman Catholic theologian, acknowledges the sinfulness and corporate responsibility of Church and individual regarding world poverty in a chapter of his *Theological Investigations*, "The Unreadiness of the Church's Members to Accept Poverty." Speaking of the Church and poverty, Rahner observes that

the prospects are that the Church will not succeed in leading the struggle against poverty by means of her own 'poverty', even though in itself she has a duty to do this. . . . If we take Church history into consideration, and take serious cognizance of the teaching that the Church is a Church of *sinner*s, then we cannot say that it is impossible from the outset for the Church to be capable of failing in major historical situations. . . .⁷

With respect to the individual and world poverty, Rahner adds that

it is also very difficult to say how the individual could seriously rise above the economic and social forces which are impregnated by sin—forces which can rarely actually be said simply to be

⁶Pope John XXIII, "*Pacem in Terris*," in *The Papal Encyclicals 1958-1961*, ed. Claudia Carlen Ihm (Wilmington NC: McGrath, 1981), p. 126.

⁷Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations 14: Ecclesiology, Questions in the Church, the Church in the World*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), p. 274.

sinful in themselves and of their very nature, even though they belong intrinsically to the 'acquisitive' constitution of the world, impel us to sin, are born of sin, and are there to put us to the test (*ad agonem*) in a struggle in which all of us are only too prone to succumb, falling into personal sin or making our own personal contribution to the 'sins of the world' in other ways. For man is precisely a sinner both in his private and in his public life, both within and without the Church.⁸

Rahner's understanding of the Church and the faithful as *simul justus et peccator* is unambiguous with respect to corporate responsibility for world poverty. Rahner's understanding of the "mixed nature" of the Church seems to agree with *Lumen Gentium* 8 of the Second Vatican Council, which "speaks of the Church as 'holy and at the same time always in need of purification' (*sancta simul et semper purificanda*)."⁹

Daniel Rush Finn, a Roman Catholic economist, ethicist, and theologian, contributed an essay to the Notre Dame symposium that was "convened specifically for the U.S. Bishops' Committee charged with writing a pastoral letter on the economy."¹⁰ Finn lists six "Background Assumptions in the Catholic Tradition Concerning Economic Life"; the sixth assumption concerns the requirement of prophetic confrontation and critique.

Because all human effort and all human institutions will be tinged by sin, prophetic confrontation of sin is crucial. The Hebrew prophets condemned the leaders of Israel for deceiving themselves into thinking that they were fulfilling God's law without providing justice to the widow, the orphan, the sojourner and the poor. Christians striving to live out an economic ethic must not only attend their own personal life styles but must also challenge economic structures, confront the powerful and run counter to popular opinion when justice requires it.¹¹

Finn clearly recognizes the reality of sin in "all human effort and all human institutions," along with the Christian responsibility to resist sin by seeking justice and righteousness in the world.

⁸Ibid., p. 278.

⁹*Salvation*, p. 21, n4.

¹⁰Rembert G. Weakland, "Foreword," in *Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, ed. John W. Houck and Oliver F. Williams (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1984), p. ix.

¹¹Daniel Rush Finn, "Ethical Dimensions of the Debate on Economic Planning," in *Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, pp. 419-20.

The theme of Roman Catholic social responsibility is also clear in John W. Houck's essay presented to the Notre Dame symposium for the Bishops' Committee on the economy. Houck is a professor of management and codirector of the Center for Ethics and Religious Values in Business at Notre Dame. He concludes that poverty in America is a "largely hidden problem" because the "poor and disadvantaged are, as a group, isolated from economic life and political participation" and "Americans tend to ignore poverty because we share with all societies the capacity for not seeing what we do not wish to see." Houck likens this situation to the Gospel parable of "The Rich Man and Lazarus" (Luke 16:19-31), in which living in luxury while poverty is near is an obstacle to salvation." Significantly—both for Houck's position and for evaluation of Allison's complaints—Houck recognizes corporate Christian social responsibility in the context of unconscious sin. With respect to the parable of "The Rich Man and Lazarus," Houck notes, "Sin is portrayed in the parable not as the commission of deliberate harm but as the omission of compassion and action to remedy the situation of the poor."¹²

The modern Roman Catholic understanding of sin (in the believer, in the Church, in the world) does not seem to preclude recognition of unconscious sin or corporate guilt.

*Modern Roman Catholic Theology
and the Acknowledgement of Simul Justus et Peccator*

Allison does see a glimmer of hope for Anglican-Roman Catholic understanding of justification through "Hans Küng's unique and unprecedented reconstruction of the Roman Catholic interpretation of Trent." I agree with Allison's understanding of Küng's theology, and I agree that Küng's work on justification makes a significant contribution to ecumenical progress in this area. I disagree, however, with Allison's description of Küng's approach to justification as "unique and unprecedented" in modern Roman Catholic theology.

Allison himself notes Küng's use of Karl Rahner's ecclesiology and language: "The Church is a sinful Church—that is a truth of faith, not a primitive fact of experience."¹³ This reference to Küng's quotation of Rahner (another Roman Catholic theologian) is surprising in light of Allison's description of Küng's approach as "unique and unprecedented."

¹²John W. Houck, "The Poor and the Disadvantaged," in *Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, pp. 139-40.

¹³See Hans Küng (*Justification*, trans. Thomas Collins, et al. [New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1964], p. 247) citing an untranslated work by Karl Rahner (*Kirche der Sünder* [Freiburg, 1948].)

Küng's approach is not unprecedented if Küng adopts (and quotes) a similar approach by Rahner.

Rahner elsewhere directly acknowledges that "One of the basic religious experiences is undoubtedly the experience that we are sinners but that we may also at the same time console ourselves about being justified before God in Christ. . . . *all* Christians have to confess that man is a sinner and is justified by God's grace alone."¹⁴ Rahner's statement is found in a book granted the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* by the Roman Catholic Church.

Rahner explains the historic Roman Catholic rejection of the reformation formula of *simul justus et peccator* by maintaining that in justification "something happens and takes place here which is now but was not before," creating "something new which cannot exist 'simultaneously' with the old state."¹⁵ Rahner embraces the paradox of justified and sinner. He does not minimize the reality of justification as an event of change in the believer's life, but he does not deny the believer's continuing dependence on God and inclination for sin. As Rahner explains,

Of ourselves we are always sinners. Of ourselves we would always turn away from God if God's grace did not anticipate us. In view of the completely uncontrollable grace of God, of tempted justice, uncontrollable justice, we are always sinners. In this sense, it is possible to find an always true and decisively important Catholic sense in the formula 'Just and sinner at the same time'.¹⁶

Rahner describes the *simul justus et peccator* paradox as a dynamic, hinging on man's free will and the freely bestowed grace of God.

The doctrine of permanent, habitual justice through infused sanctifying grace must not be understood as if this justice were a purely static possession or static quality in man. Rather, this justice is always tempted and threatened by the flesh, the world and the devil. It is always dependent again on the free decision of man. In spite of its character of a state it is suspended, as it were, on the point of the free grace of God and on the point of man's freedom. The grace of justification must always be accepted and exercised anew again, since basically it is always given anew again by God.¹⁷

¹⁴Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations 6: Concerning Vatican Council II*, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), pp. 218-19.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 221.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

Rahner emphasizes the believer's reliance on God (not inherent personal capacity or status) for justification.

The Christian must have understood that of himself he is nothing but nothingness and that left to himself he is nothing but sin. Wherever he discovers something good in himself, he must acknowledge it as a causeless free grace of God. Hence even the Catholic Christian should not spread out his justice before God. He should rather from day to day accept his justice, which in fact divinises him, as an unmerited gift of God's incalculable favour. If he wants to express this by saying that he is always and of himself a poor sinner and always someone justified by God's grace as long as he does not close himself to this grace of God by disbelief and lack of love, then he is quite at liberty to do so.¹⁸

Richard McBrien, chair of the Department of Theology at Notre Dame, also seems to grasp the paradox of *simul justus et peccator*:

The condition of sin and anxiety . . . leaves us in a state of despair. We sense ourselves as being at once bound and free. We are bound insofar as we are involved in the flux of time; we are free insofar as we stand outside of time. We are aware of this capacity to stand apart because we know ourselves as object, we can judge ourselves as sinners, and we can survey the past and the future. We also know that nothing actually operating in history can ever sufficiently deliver us from despair, despite our optimistic illusions to the contrary. Only a divine, forgiving, timeless love beyond history, such as has been revealed in Jesus Christ, gives meaning to human life.¹⁹

Avery Dulles, S.J., notes the unequivocal teaching of Trent concerning "the transition from unrighteousness to righteousness that occurs in justification." As a result of Trent's denial "that grace consists merely in God's favor or in the nonimputation of sin," Dulles explains, "Catholics remain to this day somewhat nervous about the formula, *simul iustus et peccator*, which might suggest that we are justified only in hope or in a purely nominalistic way that leaves us internally untouched." Dulles goes on,

¹⁸Ibid., p. 230.

¹⁹Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism: Study Edition* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1981), p. 123.

however, to list the grounds for a “qualified” Roman Catholic approval of *simul justus et peccator*.

a) Any goodness that is ours is a gift from God, so that all we have truly from ourselves is prevarication and sin. . . .

b) The justification given to us in this life remains from start to finish a gift of grace. It is a participation in the righteousness of Christ, whom Paul calls our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30).

c) Concupiscence remains in the baptized. Although according to Trent, concupiscence is not sin in the true and proper sense of the word, concupiscence is in the concrete tinged with sin inasmuch as it arises from sin and is conducive to sin. . . .

d) Even after justification we retain sinful attitudes, habits, and other after-effects of our past sins, called by Augustine “*reliquiae peccatorum*.”

e) We live in a sinful world in which the atmosphere is contaminated by the cumulative effects of sin.

f) Like Christ himself, who was “made sin” for our sakes (2 Cor. 5:21), we are mysteriously in solidarity with a sinful race.

g) We are constantly subject to temptations, into which we would fall were it not for the grace of God that enables us to resist.

h) Without an altogether special privilege of grace, even the just fall frequently into venial sins, which cannot easily be distinguished from those which are mortal.

i) Even the church is in some sense sinful, since it does penance and in its public liturgy prays for forgiveness.

j) Even the saints—or rather, they especially—pray like the publican in the Gospel, “God be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13).

k) Our definitive redemption is something to which we look forward as an eschatological gift.²⁰

Dulles’s list of “grounds” for Roman Catholic acceptance of *simul justus et peccator* makes points of special significance. He parallels Küng’s use of the Church’s liturgical prayers for forgiveness as evidence of the Church’s “mixed situation of sin and grace.” Once again we see that Küng’s approach in this regard is not “unique” in Roman Catholic theology. We should also note Dulles’s repeated affirmation of the mixed state of the justified: of

²⁰Avery Dulles, “Justification in Contemporary Catholic Theology,” in *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, ed. H. George Anderson, et al. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), pp 269-70.

ourselves we have nothing more than “prevarication and sin”; we retain sinful attitudes and inclinations; and we join with the publican of Luke 18 and the saints in praying, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” Dulles also recognizes what Allison calls “the *status viatoris* (the not yet sanctified condition of all Christians).” Dulles explains that “definitive redemption” is not a present possession of the justified but “something to which we look forward as an eschatological gift.”

Finally, Dulles seems to push *beyond* Küng in acknowledging the radical corporate identification of Christians with sin: “Like Christ himself, who was ‘made sin’ for our sakes (2 Cor. 5:21), we are mysteriously in solidarity with a sinful race.” This identification of the justified with sin (following Christ’s example) relates closely to the sense of corporate responsibility for sin that Allison finds lacking in Roman Catholic theology of justification. The paradox of corporate responsibility of the justified for sin is developed more fully by yet another Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar.

It is the man justified by grace and living by faith, and only he, who comprehends what scripture means by “the world.” The *world* is not individual, personal sin that can be neatly demarcated. It is the whole realm over which sin (*hamartia*) holds sway. . . . The paradox deepens as we gain deeper insight in our experience of “the world.” The distinction between *my* sin and *your* sin disappears, and we confront the mystery of man’s solidarity in sin. Every personal sin is also community sin, and it is produced, to some extent, by the sins of the community. This does not diminish personal guilt. On the contrary, it complicates personal sin and heightens our responsibility as sinners. . . .²¹

Balthasar demonstrates a clear appreciation of the believer’s “solidarity” with sin in the world—including the corporate responsibility of the justified person for sin. And Balthasar parallels Dulles in the radical identification of Jesus Himself as the definitive *simul justus et peccator* in whom we are able to experience the paradox of being justified and sinners.

Christ on the cross is the *simul justus et peccator*, the sinless one who was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21) and turned into a curse (Gal. 3:13), so that we might be redeemed from sin and God’s

²¹Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Drury (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), pp. 280-81.

curse. . . . On the cross, we see what sin is, and at Easter we find out what grace can do; only God himself could show us this. . . . We cannot find the true meaning of *simul justus et peccator* in ourselves; we must look to Christ for it. . . . We are the sinners, while he is the just one. In being made sin for us, he does not cease to be the just one; while we, in being justified, do cease to be sinners in a very real sense. In taking the form of sin, Christ experiences the full reality of the contradiction between God and sin and overcomes it. Only he does it, so he is the definitive form of the *simul justus et peccator*.²²

Balthasar acknowledges the mixed condition of the believer as *simul justus et peccator*, and he shows us the only true meaning or source of hope in the paradox: in Jesus Christ, the definitive *simul justus et peccator*.

Furthermore, there is a clear lesson for those who review the writings of Pope John XXIII, Rahner, Finn, Houck, McBrien, Dulles, and Balthasar: Küng is not the *only* Roman Catholic theologian who “can accept the reality of unconscious sin or corporate guilt necessary for authentic pastoral care and responsible social engagement.” In that regard, Küng’s work is not altogether “unique and unprecedented.”

Allison’s Objections and the Modern Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Salvation

Roman Catholic theologians do insist on the reality of justification as an *event* of salvation history in the life of the believer. They maintain that *something happens* in justification that leaves the believer really changed internally, and not just with an external imputed righteousness in which sins are overlooked or treated “as if” they were not present. This position simply recognizes the depth and mystery of the paradox “*simul justus et peccator*,” acknowledging a *real* justification as well as a *real* identity as sinner in this life.

This Roman Catholic understanding of the paradox should not be unusual or troublesome to Anglicans, since Anglican theology has tended to understand salvation in terms of an ongoing process of justification and sanctification—instead of insisting on the “utter depravity” of the faithful, notwithstanding justification. The agreed statement on *Salvation* reflects this understanding, noting that “justification is indissolubly linked with [God’s] sanctifying recreation of us in grace,” which “is being worked out in the course of our pilgrimage, despite the imperfections and ambiguities of

²²Ibid., p. 283.

our lives.”²³ The agreed statement clearly means these “imperfections” in our lives to be understood in terms of sin: “The growth of believers to maturity, and indeed the common life of the Church, are impaired by repeated lapses into sin.” These sins in the very process of sanctification call for “daily repentance and faith that we reappropriate our freedom from sin.” To say the least, being a sinner in the process of sanctification is a paradoxical condition—acknowledged in *Salvation* to have been “expressed by the paradox that we are at once just and sinners.”²⁴ The agreed statement is unambiguous on this point.

Perhaps the greatest flaw in Allison’s approach is his insistence that Roman Catholic theology be understood by a rigid application of Trent. This approach is manifest in the title of his article: “The Pastoral and Political Implications of Trent on Justification.” Allison insists on viewing Roman Catholicism through the window of Trent. I have no doubt that sixteenth-century Roman Catholics would have trouble reaching agreement with twentieth-century Anglicans on justification. But that is not the issue. Roman Catholic theology (like Anglican theology) has continued to develop and evolve since the sixteenth century, as noted by the common statement on “Justification by Faith” in the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue.

Without making any radical break with earlier Catholic tradition and the doctrine of Trent, recent Catholic theologians have sought to distance themselves from the thought forms of late Scholasticism as being too individualistic, intellectualistic, abstract, and legalistic. Catholic theology has been seeking to renew itself through a return to biblical categories together with a more personalistic and historical emphasis.²⁵

Anglicans should be no more insistent than Roman Catholics for a rigid application of Trent in our dialogue on salvation. Certainly there are still causes that divide Anglicans and Roman Catholics—such as our differences concerning authority in the Church, and even simple prejudice. But the subject of justification should not be a cause of division for twentieth-century Anglicans and Roman Catholics.

²³*Salvation and the Church*, p. 17.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁵“Justification by Faith (Common Statement),” in *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, p. 43.

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