

CATHOLIC

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Do Catholics Believe in Salvation by Works?



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Many non-Catholic Christians have been told that Catholics believe in salvation by works. Certainly to the outside it might look that way! When non-Catholics hear about the duties and obligations of Catholics it might seem that we are earning our salvation by good works.

Five hundred years ago that impression was strong and many Catholics practiced their faith as if it depended on their good works. Reacting against this culture, Martin Luther discerned that one was saved, not by works, but by simple faith in God's saving work through the death of Christ the Lord. Martin Luther himself had been caught up in a legalistic and oppressive form of religion that depended on long prayers, strict discipline and self denial. Agonizing over the destiny of his own soul, he was enlightened and liberated by studying the epistles of Paul. He came to see that salvation was by faith through the power of God's grace.

However, in his zeal, many believe Luther went to an extreme--even adding the word "alone" to his German translation of Romans 8:23 - "For we maintain that a person is justified by faith (alone) apart from the works of the law." Scholars debate whether the insertion of that one word was permissible, but it is certainly true that it became the cornerstone of the belief that salvation was by faith alone and not of works.

This verse from Romans was complemented by other teachings by Paul. So, for example in writing to the Ephesians he says, "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves; it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast." (Eph. 2:9)

This was understood to be a necessary correction to the Catholic doctrine of salvation by works. However, the Catholic Church has never formally taught the doctrine of salvation by good works. An earlier form of this belief was called Pelagianism. A monk called Pelagius taught that man did not need God's grace and that humans could understand God and win salvation in their own power. The Catholic Church repudiated Pelagianism formally at the Councils of Carthage in the year 414 AD and again at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD.

While the Catholic Church has always rejected salvation by works, it has also not accepted the doctrine of salvation by faith alone. It is more accurate to say that Catholics believe in salvation by grace alone, and that through grace we co-operate with God in faith to produce good works. We affirm Ephesians 2:9 on the need for grace and faith, but we go on to quote the next verse, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, so God has prepared for us to walk in...."

We balance the need for grace-empowered saving faith with the words of the epistle of James, "As you can see, a man is justified by his deeds and not by faith alone." (James 2:24) Catholics believe

that God's grace empowers faith, and that faith is evidenced and worked out through a life of good works. We're reminded of Paul's teaching to the Philippians, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence,

work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Php. 2:12)

In fact, the question of faith and works is a complex theological question, and not one which we should dispense with in easy slogans and sure fire proof texts. Catholic and Protestant theologians have debated the subtle points of how God's grace is active in our lives for five hundred years. Protestants have tended to see salvation as a once and done transaction. Catholics have

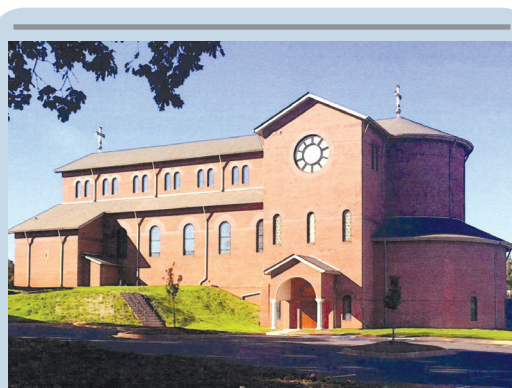
seen it as the grace filled work of a lifetime. Many are seeing that the his-

toric disagreements are more a matter of perspective than true division. We are looking at the same fact from different viewpoints. Therefore the question of justification and its process is one where Catholics and Protestants are in closer and closer agreement.

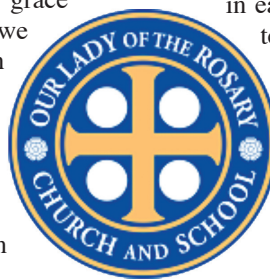
In 1999 Lutheran and Catholic theologians issued a document which was the result of years of dialogue and discussion. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was a milestone document showing that Catholics and Protestants can agree on much more than the controversialists from both sides like to think. Both groups have agreed that salvation is by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and that good works are ways through which we co operate with God's grace.

While that might be all well and good for theologians, it is still true that many people believe you get into heaven by doing good works. In fact, when we are honest we must admit that many non-Catholics believe this too. If you were to go out into the street and ask people at random what they need to do to go to heaven, the vast majority would say something like, "I suppose I have to be a good person." This is the response most people would make.

As John Calvin said, "You cannot get into heaven by good works, but you cannot get into heaven without good works." So the best thing believing Christians can do today is put aside the false idea that salvation is by human good works and call for all to rely on God's grace and have a faith in Jesus Christ that is active, dynamic and life changing. If all Christians of every church and denomination lived by faith in Jesus Christ, then the theological arguments would disappear into the radiance of their lives as shadows are banished by the light.



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