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Paulinus Daeli OSC

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Comparing and Contrasting Luther’s and Aquinas’ Viewpoints Regarding the Essence of Justification
A Step Towards Promoting Ecumenical Harmony

by Paulinus Daeli, OSC

INTRODUCTION
The idea of justification in the Christian faith is a fundamental theological belief that deals with how humans, who are viewed as sinful and distant from God, can be deemed righteous or just in His eyes. The nature of justification in Christian teaching has affected Christian theology today, specifically on how people understand their faith and how to grow it daily. The differing theological interpretations of the
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The doctrine of justification between Lutherans and Catholics have generated considerable discussion, engagement, and contention within the Christian community. For example, looking back at the birth of the Council of Trent in 1545, Alister McGrath says that the hope for reconciliation between Catholics and Lutherans fought for by Cardinal Reginald Pole at the Council was unsuccessful.1 McGrath’s efforts to unite Catholics and Reformers did not successfully gain the church’s support. By condemning the idea of Lutheranism further, the Council of Trent claims Lutheranism as a permanently separated entity from the Catholic Church. In addition, the emergence of John Calvin as the second-generation Protestant reformer, in McGrath’s perspective, is a new movement in Christian history that has influenced many Lutherans to wonder who can be the true church. Undoubtedly, maintaining an optimistic stance toward unity became a challenging task.

However, whether the divergence between Catholics and Lutherans on justification can be considered acceptable is debatable. They are optimistic about the compatibility of the different theology of the Roman Catholic Church and Lutheran Church. Jüngel Eberhard, for instance, says that modern Catholic theology does not deny that Christ alone is the ground for our justification.2 Specifically, for him, the diversity of theological perspectives can help Christians combat condescension toward one another. In addition, Brian Brewer mentions that Catholics and Lutherans reached a consensus on various documents towards the end of the twentieth century, endorsing the most successful modern initiatives in ecumenical dialogue and cooperation while promoting the ideal of biblical Christian harmony.3 These are the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (JDDJ) and the later “Official Common Statement” to strengthen ecclesial support and understanding of the initial declaration. This effort is intriguing because, whereas ecclesiastical communities would excommunicate each other in the past, there is now

an official acknowledgment that their theological beliefs complement each other rather than conflict. In this sense, the Christian Church’s unity is not always about uniformity but diversity.

Using Thomas Aquinas as the Catholic representative and Martin Luther as the Lutheran representative, this essay stresses several topics on which Catholics and Lutherans agree regarding the nature of justification. Although their views on justification have been the subject of much debate and discussion in the history of Christianity, if observed closely, they have the same starting point on the fundamental nature of justification. They both agree that faith in Christ is necessary for justification, God’s grace is truly instrumental in justification, and the concept of justification positively impacts how Christians live. JDDJ also shared the same understanding specifically on this point: “Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.” While Catholics and Lutherans may differ in some specifics, they share an acceptable belief in the centrality of faith in Christ. For example, their differences in the concept of the justified sinner in relation to concupiscence (which Aquinas claims) and the power of Christ over the power of sin (which Luther claims) are challenging to reconcile. However, their difference on the concept of justified sinner is viewed positively by JDDJ by saying that God’s ongoing forgiveness and man’s ongoing repentance and penance are things that sinful man needs throughout his life. In this sense, their difference on many theological issues of justification is highly compatible.

COMPARING LUTHER AND AQUINAS ON THE CONCEPT OF JUSTIFICATION

Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther are two of the most influential Christian theologians who contribute to understanding the doctrine of justification. Both figures uniquely understand how people are justified by faith and strengthened by God’s mercy. Despite having different

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4 The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, par. 15.
5 Loc. cit.
times, their teachings on how Christians live out God’s justification are interconnected. This connection can be seen by comparing their comprehensive understanding of the richness and depth of the concept of justification in Christian theology. The following are some similarities and differences between Aquinas and Luther in their theological perspectives on justification.

SIMILARITIES

The first similarity is that both these theologians concur that justification for humans is only possible via faith in Christ, which is stated through baptism. This idea is one of their primary points of agreement regarding justification. Aquinas and Luther agree that justification for humanity needs faith in Jesus Christ because it changes their beings from imperfection to perfection. Aquinas believes that the sacrament of baptism is typically the means by which one is justified. 7 God’s grace allows for the transformation of the sinful nature of humanity into righteousness, achieved through “spiritual regeneration by Christ.” In the same way, Luther explains that justification is closely related to the term “faith alone.” In this sense, ‘faith alone’ presupposes recognizing God’s judgment of one’s sinfulness, which is communicated through the commandments. 8 For Luther, this can happen through baptism. Luther adds that by faith alone, one is made ‘pious, free, and saved.’ Both figures believe that by having faith in Christ, individuals can receive forgiveness for their sins and achieve eternal life.

The second similarity is their perspective on human effort alone in relation to justification. Aquinas and Luther share a common perspective concerning justification, as they both maintain that it is unattainable through human effort alone. They both agree that it is only through

6 If Aquinas was a medieval Catholic theologian who was heavily influenced by Aristotelian thought, Luther was a sixteenth-century Protestant Reformer who rejected scholastic understanding and focused on the authority of Scripture.


God’s grace, bestowed as a gift or favor to sinfully flawed human beings, that true justification is achievable. The concept of justification, while ostensibly connected to meritorious works, is stipulated by Aquinas and Luther as unattainable by human exertion alone. Aquinas emphasizes that the extent of deserving works is influenced by the strength of God’s grace, which moves humans toward eternal life in their pure and corrupt nature. Aquinas points out that merit can be a right to spiritual reward from God, and human beings cannot attain merit by their natural powers but only by a ‘supernatural gift’ of God. Luther, like Aquinas, emphasizes humans’ reliance on God’s grace, although they are ‘completely free.’ Luther writes, “He will not, however, become pious and saved through commandments and works, but through God’s word (that is, through His promise and grace) and through faith.” In simpler terms, Luther argues that people cannot achieve righteousness through their actions but only through God’s grace and belief in Christ. Thus, justification is exclusively achievable through the gift of divine grace. Two figures say that humanity cannot attain salvation independently of divine grace, even if they are baptized. Aquinas and Luther perceive that redemption of sinful individuals through justification is not achievable through self-exertion but through divine intervention.

Aquinas and Luther both assert that the concept of justification positively impacts the Christian way of life, serving as a third point of similarity between their respective theological perspectives. The positive impact of God’s justification for humans brings significant changes in human life, such as forgiveness of sins, deliverance from the power of sin and death, and growth in love. Forgiveness of sins obtained by faith in Christ gives Christians a sense of relief and inner peace—they learn that their sins have been forgiven and are no longer a burden. Therefore, they feel that their lives, after justification, are tied to the power of life given by God’s grace. Aquinas believes that the impact of grace is evident in four aspects: the infusion of grace, the movement of the free will toward God in faith,

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9 Aquinas distinguishes between two types of merit: condign merit, which is deserving of reward, and congruous merit, where God rewards based on grace and mercy rather than the inherent worth of the action. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II Q.113. art. 2 and art. 3

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the movement of the free will in recoil from sin, and the remission of guilt.\(^{11}\) This idea assumes that once people have been justified, they are empowered by God’s grace to continue spiritual growth in their daily lives. Similarly, Luther asserts that the believer’s union with Christ requires the Christian to be Christ-like: ‘became a servant.’ Luther states, “Therefore a Christian, like Christ, his head, should be full, replete, and also content with his faith, always increasing the same, which is his life, piety, and salvation, and which gives him everything that Christ and God have.”\(^{12}\) In particular, Luther says that the faithful become true Christians by taking Christ as an example. Thus, Aquinas and Luther agree that the idea of justification, which leads to the forgiveness of sins and spiritual development, significantly impacts the Christian lifestyle. They believe that once God’s grace justifies Christians, they are enabled to imitate Christ, resulting in a life of faith, devotion, and liberation.

DIFFERENCES

First, although they agreed that faith in Christ helps Christians gain eternal life, Aquinas and Luther had different opinions regarding the quality of faith in Christ received through baptism in relation to God’s saving action. Aquinas posits that faith in Christ is a gateway towards acquiring divine grace that enables humans to attain absolution from transgressions and perform righteous actions to achieve a transcendental goal. By emphasizing the movement of faith as a necessity for justification, Aquinas highlights that faith in Christ must presuppose what men believe, and at the same time, they are justified, not that they merit justification by believing.\(^{13}\) Aquinas emphasized the idea that faith is a gift from God to sinful humans and that this gift of faith leads to justification through God’s operative grace, moving human free will towards God, at least initially.\(^{14}\) In this sense, Aquinas sees that ‘the movement of faith’ is closely related to ‘the movement of charity.’ With the help of God’s grace, this movement transforms human beings from

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\(^{11}\) Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II. Q.113, art.6.
\(^{13}\) Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II Q.114, art. 5.
\(^{14}\) Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II. Q.113, art. 4.
sinful disorder to God’s righteousness.\textsuperscript{15} Meanwhile, Luther argues that faith in Christ is God’s gift to humans, which is the only way to be saved.\textsuperscript{16} According to him, sinful man cannot do anything to save himself but can only hope in God’s grace received through faith in Christ. By translating faith as the only way to justification, Luther emphasizes that good works cannot accomplish the righteousness of humanity and the fulfillment of all commandments. In other words, faith in Christ, without meritorious works, presupposes that God gives salvation to humans. These theologians, Aquinas and Luther, postulate that justification cannot be dissociated from acknowledging faith in Christ. Arguably, Aquinas and Luther agree that faith in Christ is essential to salvation, but they differ in their views of its function. Aquinas sees faith as a pathway to divine grace that leads to absolution and righteous actions, while Luther maintains that faith alone, without good works, is the only means of salvation. Despite their differences, both theologians agree that faith in Christ is inseparable from justification.

Second, Aquinas and Luther have different opinions regarding divine grace and justification. Although they used Augustine to understand the doctrine of justification, they had different emphases. Aquinas maintains that God’s grace refers to God’s divine intervention, which empowers human beings and infuses theological virtues into a new relationship with God.\textsuperscript{17} The grace of God is not confined solely to the absolution of transgressions. Still, it extends to individuals’ capacity to engage in virtuous conduct and attain an elevated state of existence hereafter. In this case, Aquinas perceives grace as a means of healing and elevating, enabling humans to cooperate with God effectively.\textsuperscript{18} God unconditionally bestows grace, without any antecedent merit on the part

\textsuperscript{15} To this, Aquinas argued that in a pure natural state, humans have the ability to steer clear of sin without grace, but in a corrupted state, this is not the case. Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, II-II. Q. 109, art. 8.


\textsuperscript{18} Thomas Aquinas writes “Grace is therefore twofold. There is grace through which a man is himself united to God, which is called “sanctifying grace”. There is other grace whereby one man cooperates with another in leading him to God. This later gift is called “free grace,” since it is beyond the capacity of nature to give, and beyond the merit of him to whom it is given”. Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologica}, II-II. Q.111, art. 1.
of humans. Therefore, for Aquinas, humans who are justified by God’s grace in Christ require free cooperation and inner transformation of the human being. In other words, justification, for Aquinas, is a process that transforms the sinful individual into a righteous one - one of the principal outcomes of the infusion of grace is the absolution of sins.

Meanwhile, Luther argues that humans could only be saved through God’s grace received through faith. To this, Luther states, “Thus it is clear that faith alone, by sheer grace and through Christ and His word, make a person sufficiently pious and saved.” According to Luther, God takes away the sinner’s guilt and accepts the sinners back into divine communion through faith in Christ, which is proclaimed in the Gospel. The Christian journey, then, can be understood as a spiritual pilgrimage beginning with the moment of God’s initial imputation of righteousness and culminating in the ultimate realization of righteousness through divine intervention. In this context, Luther differs from Aquinas in regard to God’s intervention. In contrast to Aquinas, who posits God’s inherent intervention in the faithful, Luther states that God’s divine intervention remains external to the believer. Luther sees Christ as the essence of the Christian faith, not good works. Love and good works are necessary results of justification, even though they are not required for justification. Here, Luther emphasizes that the tendency to love and do good deeds is always present in believers through Christ, who is present in faith.

The third difference is the effect of justification. Although these two theologians say that justification by God can enable Christians to grow in love, they have different emphases. Aquinas teaches that justification is a process that involves humanity’s free cooperation with God’s grace. God heals and elevates fallen human beings to a supernatural state through His grace. In this process, humans are justified by God’s grace that transforms the human mind and provides a habit of love (habitum caritatis) in human free will that allows humans to love God and others. Meanwhile, Luther teaches that justification is an event that involves the

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imputation of Christ’s justice to sinners who believe in Christ.\textsuperscript{22} When faith catalyzes the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, the transgressions committed by the believer are duly veiled. During the event mentioned above, Luther stresses that humans who are justified by God’s grace do not mean they are made perfect or cease to sin. In this sense, Luther agreed with Aquinas that the idea of original sin, which Augustine created, requires us to rely on God. Luther posits that while faith serves to justify an individual internally, the earthly existence necessitates the performance of works that align with one’s internal being and faith. Even it seems Luther understands Christ to be alive and active in sinners. If a sinner is justified, works must be produced because this is what Christ does. In response to this matter, Luther pens his thoughts whereby he asserts that “just as God helped us gratuitously through Christ, so we should do nothing else than help our neighbor through our body and its works.”\textsuperscript{23} Accordingly, it is incumbent upon individuals who have attained justification to cultivate and enhance love as a manifestation of their faith and acknowledge the divine’s benevolence. Thus, Aquinas believes that justification is a process that involves working with God’s grace to achieve healing and a supernatural state. On the other hand, Luther sees justification as a single event in which the righteousness of Christ is imputed to believers by faith. While both believe in original sin and dependence on God, Luther emphasizes the importance of performing good works as a manifestation of inner faith.

THE IMPACT OF COMPARISON
The different emphases shown by Aquinas and Luther to have a positive impact on people, especially in terms of justifying the Christian lifestyle, do not necessarily propagate a dichotomous relationship between Catholics and Lutherans.\textsuperscript{24} While Aquinas and Luther expressed different views on how God’s grace encompasses Christians as they

\textsuperscript{22} Lowell C. Green in “The theology of Martin Luther: five contemporary Canadian interpretation” edited by Egil Grislis (Winnepeg: Lutheran Council in Canada, 1985), 96.

\textsuperscript{23} Martin Luther, \textit{On the Freedom of a Christian}, point 27.

\textsuperscript{24} Richard J. Sklba. “Lutheran and Catholic reconciliation on justification: a chronology of the holy see’s contributions, 1961-1999, to a new relationship between lutherans and catholics and to steps leading to the joint declaration on the doctrine of justification.” Theological Studies 71, no. 3 (09, 2010), 735.
strive for perfection, it is important to interpret their differences within the framework of harmony with God and each other, guided by truth and grace. We should show love not only to people who are similar to us but also to those who are unique and distinct from us. This is how we can mirror the perfect love of our heavenly father: “Therefore, strive to be flawless, just as your heavenly Father is flawless” (Matthew 5:48). As Walter Kasper has pointed out, the difference between Aquinas and Luther’s justification is Christianity’s treasures that touch every aspect of the Christian faith.²⁵ Aquinas and Luther’s understanding of justification wants to show us that faith in Christ calls people who are justified to become witnesses of the Gospel and serve the world with love. The endowment of justification empowers individuals to produce “good fruit” and “works of love.”²⁶ Justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ makes the fruits of the Holy Spirit in the lives of justified people, such as love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Hence, it is noteworthy to highlight that among followers of Christianity, the focus is not on the contestation of correctness or fallacy but instead on a shared pursuit of attaining perfection through the manifestation of the works of love.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Catholic and Lutheran definition of justification was redefined in JDDJ.²⁷ It says that God’s mercy is the source and norm

²⁵ Kasper says “All the more reason why the recent basic consensus on justification achieved by Lutherans and Catholics is one of the most important ecumenical achievements of the last decades, with consequences touching every aspect of the Christian faith” Walter Kasper. Harvesting the Fruits: Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue (London: Continuum, 2009), 33.
²⁶ JDDJ states: “We confess together that good works - a Christian life lived in faith, hope and love - follow justification and are its fruits. When the justified live in Christ and act in the grace they receive, they bring forth, in biblical terms, good fruit. Since Christians struggle against sin their entire lives, this consequence of justification is also for them an obligation they must fulfill. Thus, both Jesus and the apostolic Scriptures admonish Christians to bring forth the works of love”. JDDJ point 37, “1997 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification”
²⁷ The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) was acknowledged by the Catholic Church, Lutheran World Federation, and World Methodist Council. It was the result of a long process of dialogue that began in 1972 and was supported by various documents, including Justification by Faith (1983) and The Condemnations of the Reformation Era (1994). Walter Kasper. Harvesting the Fruits: 33.
of the doctrine of justification because God shows His mercy to sinful humankind by sending His Son to die and rise for them. The concept of justification extends an invitation to all individuals identifying as Christians to witness the salvific actions of the divine being in Jesus Christ, as documented in the New Testament. This statement emphasizes that justification obtained through God’s favor is a gift that cannot be stopped or revoked because God remains faithful to His promises and never abandons those who believe in Him. Thus, JDDJ comprehends divine salvation in connection with the transgressions of humankind: “it tells us that as sinners our new life is solely due to the forgiving and renewing mercy that God imparts as a gift and we receive in faith, and never can merit in any way.” God’s mercy is then the basis and goal of the Christian life. Through His grace, God calls people who are justified to live in fellowship with Him and serve others with love.

Comparing Thomas Aquinas’s and Martin Luther’s views regarding the decree of justification reveals certain similarities. Both argue that the concept of justification is important in understanding Christian theology because it shows that salvation can only be achieved through faith in Christ and God’s grace, which can forgive sins to humans so that they can be considered righteous before God. Even though they have different views on several matters, they agree that faith in Christ is central when discussing the concept of God’s salvation in justification. Then, using Augustine as the primary source, both Aquinas and Luther agree that justification for original sin could only be achieved through God’s grace and not through human effort alone. Thus, Aquinas and Luther also hold divergent views on the nature of justification. For Luther, justification is a singular and inimitable act of divine grace that entirely absolves and eradicates the individual’s transgressions. In contrast, for Aquinas, justification is an ongoing process of incremental moral development, necessitating the continual intercession of divine grace and active human partnership. Finally, faith in Christ and God’s infinite grace change human life. That is, justification without forgiveness.

of sins is an impossibility for both of them. Aquinas and Luther agree that by being justified by faith in Christ, human life experiences changes that make them grow spiritually. In Aquinas’ conception, the accomplishment of justification involves the harmonious collaboration between human agency and divine grace, which gives them infusion in the order of nature.\textsuperscript{29} This synergistic process is predicated on conformity to both natural and divine law. In contrast, Luther states that to receive forgiveness of sins and achieve salvation, faith in Jesus Christ is essential, and good works are unnecessary. To grow spiritually, Christians must recognize that Christ’s sacrifice is sufficient to atone for their sins and bring them back to God. In the Christian life, good works are necessary, as a fruit of justification, to express our love and gratitude to God and service to others.

The aforementioned similarities and disparities possess an immense propensity to meaningfully augment the comprehension of the concept of justification through a comprehensive analysis. Aquinas and Luther think justification is important, and they disagree on the particulars of how it works. However, what they agree on is that every Christian should show Christ’s love through their actions. The notion of justification encompasses not solely the realm of personal experience but also constitutes a sociological phenomenon,\textsuperscript{30} such as balance, peace, and mutual understanding. The insight gleaned from this observation possesses a distinctive quality in facilitating an ecumenical harmony—one that does not attribute superiority or inferiority to the perspectives that diverge. The comprehension of the theory of justification elucidated by Aquinas and Luther is manifested in the possession of an attitude of humility among individuals. This attitude serves as a robust defense mechanism for maintaining a true Christian life, which is aligned with Jesus’ teachings in John 17:21: “so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you.” In this sense, all Christians are the universality of the children of God who gather into the unity of faith. Consequently, the explication of the divergences and correspondences

\textsuperscript{29} Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, II-II, Q.113, art.8.
\textsuperscript{30} William J. Hill. “Justification in Catholic Theology Today.” Thomist : A Speculative Quarterly Review 30, no. 3 (Jul 01, 1966), 226.
in the concepts of justification, as espoused by Aquinas and Luther, elucidates the fact that unity does not exclusively comprise uniformity but also encompasses diversity. Both do not have to accept this perspective, but tolerance can be realized by understanding it. This paper is not intended to equalize or equate Aquinas’ and Luther’s views on justification.

Using Thomas Aquinas as the Catholic representative and Martin Luther as the Lutheran representative, this essay stresses several topics on which Catholics and Lutherans agree regarding the nature of justification. Although their views on justification have been the subject of much debate and discussion in the history of Christianity, if observed closely, they have the same starting point on the fundamental nature of justification. They both agree that faith in Christ is necessary for justification, God’s grace is truly instrumental in justification, and the concept of justification positively impacts how Christians live. It means, that while they may differ on some of the specifics, they have an acceptable shared belief in the centrality of faith in Christ. In other words, their difference on many theological issues of justification is highly compatible. Mutual acceptance of significant differences is an ecumenical endeavor that can embrace both Lutherans and Roman Catholics. In this case, Christians are invited to open themselves critically to the possibility of Christian unity by accepting the differences: arguing over the contradictions between two figures may not be essential, but refusing to acknowledge the distinctions leads to Christians missing out on the depth of the Aquinas’s and Luther’s richness.

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