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# Revisiting the Reformation: Aquinas and Luther on Justification

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**Lukas Steffensmeier**

### **Revisiting the Reformation: Aquinas and Luther on Justification**

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the beginning of Lutheran Reformation. In light of this, it would be appropriate to revisit one of the central theological debates of the reformation: justification. Throughout the centuries there have been many major figures and documents which have provided light on the reality of justification. In this paper, I will be focusing on three of these major figures. The first figure I will analyze is St. Augustine of Hippo, a 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century bishop, who is one of the central authorities on justification for both Catholics and Lutherans. Following Augustine will be Thomas Aquinas, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Dominican friar, who is the major figure for Catholicism and Martin Luther, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Augustinian monk and reformer, who is the major figure for Lutheranism. Both Aquinas and Luther use Augustine as a primary source and cite him heavily, but each draws out different conclusions from their interactions with Augustine. Therefore, I will analyze how both Aquinas and Luther understand justification, in light of Augustine's understanding, in order to determine where they agree and where they disagree on justification. Additionally, I will look at what is beneficial in both Luther and Aquinas from a Catholic perspective.

#### **1. Why Justification?**

To be able to ask the question of "*why*" for something, one must first be able to know *what* that thing is. Therefore, the first question I will address is: "What is justification and why is it important?" In this section I will give a short gloss on the common ground between the Catholic and Lutheran churches to answer the question of "*What*". Simply put, justification is describing how the sinner moves from being a sinner to being saved before God. It is explaining

how humanity moves from sin and death, earned by the Fall and Original Sin, to becoming righteous before God. The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* describes the effects of justification as “the forgiveness of sins, liberation from the dominating power of sin and death and from the curse of the law. It is acceptance into communion with God: already now, but then fully in God’s coming kingdom.”<sup>1</sup> In terms of the operators in justification, it “is the work of the triune God”.<sup>2</sup> It is not a work of humanity. Its primary agent and operator is God, sending the Son into the world in order save sinners who cannot save themselves by their own power. Above all, justification is an effect of grace. Without grace, there is no justification. However, justification does not immediately follow grace. If it did, all would be justified, even without their knowledge. Both Aquinas and Luther agree that faith, on the part of the sinner, is also necessary. Overall, the idea of justification is about the movement from a state of sin and damnation to a state of grace and salvation.

Now we have established that justification is the process of God saving us from our current sinful condition; however, in order to know how a person is saved, one must first know the extent to which that person is damaged. Thus, discussion of how justification works is rooted in anthropology. How damaged one thinks humanity is will directly affect how one understands the process of justification. For Christian theology, this brings up the question of Original Sin and the effects of the Fall on human nature. For Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther, there are some common effects of the Fall. First and foremost, sin is an effect and with sin comes a just damnation of humanity by God. Sin not only damages our relationship with God, but it also damages our relationship with ourselves and others. Therefore, sin disorders human nature,

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<sup>1</sup> Catholic Church, and World Luther Federation. "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification." Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Feb. 2017. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Catholic Church, and World Luther Federation, "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," 15.

weakens the will, and damages rationality. Lastly, human nature develops concupiscence, or the inclination to sin. The major differences in anthropology between Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther are in relation to the extent to which human nature is damaged. These differences will be made more clear in the respective sections on each theologian.

Before looking at the understanding of justification through the lens of Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther, I feel there is one final question that needs to be addressed: why is it necessary to understand the differences in justification at all? There are two immediate answers that come to my mind. The first is that often in discussion between Catholics and Lutherans, the idea of “*sola fide*” vs “faith and works” is often misunderstood. By looking at how Aquinas understands justification from a Catholic perspective and Luther from a Lutheran perspective, we can see whether the ideas of “*sola fide*” and “faith and works” justification actually contradict. Further, if they do contradict, knowing where they specifically contradict allows us to address the real issue. One of the large problems with ecumenical dialogue comes in translation of understandings. Thus, by taking on this project, I will be working to accurately translate the theories of justification so that the actual differences are discussed in the future. My second answer to this question is that how one understands justification directly effects one’s life as a Christian. A basic example of this can be found in prayer. If one believes that one cannot cooperate with God, but rather is constantly moved by God, then one’s prayer for help would likely focus on asking God to “work *through* me” rather than a prayer of “help *me* to do your will”. Essentially, what one believes about oneself will directly affect how one goes about the Christian life. Therefore, understanding how the great figures of the past understand justification will allow ourselves to sharpen our own knowledge of justification and thus shape how we live

our lives as Christians. It is with this in mind that I will start my discussion on Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther.

## **2. Augustine on Justification: Grace**

St. Augustine was named bishop during one of the major controversies of the early church: Pelagianism. Because of this, Augustine's theology of justification is heavily formed by his interaction and defense against the heresy of Pelagianism. This heresy, named after a 4<sup>th</sup> century monk named Pelagius, has two essential claims. The first is that Original Sin did not damage human nature. Humanity's free will is still completely free and intact. The second claim is that the Fall effected Adam and Eve alone. Therefore, no one immediately deserves damnation. Following this line of thought, Pelagianism teaches that it is possible for an individual to not sin and that the individual can save itself by simply being good and not sinning, all without the help of God. The issue with this is that the individual, and the individual alone, is culpable for their sin and salvation. The problem we run into is the fact that everyone sins and if Pelagianism is true, then everyone is worthy of damnation with no hope of redemption. This is where Augustine's theology differs.

Augustine's response to Pelagius defined his understanding of justification. God's grace is absolutely necessary for salvation and claiming that humans can live without sin would mean that Jesus died in vain. In Augustine's theology, "all is grace, from initial conversion to final perseverance."<sup>3</sup> Humans need grace because all have sinned and all share in the consequence of Original Sin. For Augustine, Original Sin has many consequences. The first is that all justly deserve damnation. We have turned away from God and any punishment we receive is just. For

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<sup>3</sup> Duffy, Stephen J. *The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Anthropology*. Vol. 3. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993. 105.

this reason, God's grace is freely given and not deserved by any recipient. It is crucial to remember that no one deserves salvation and it is always a free gift.

Secondly, Augustine believes our free will has been damaged and now "we lack the ability to use our freedom for what it was intended."<sup>4</sup> True freedom, as understood by Augustine, is willing and doing what is proper. For example, a guitar is most free when being used as a musical instrument rather than as a cup holder. Similarly, humanity is most free when it is following God's will. We no longer do as we ought and, because of this, we no longer have freedom. Therefore, Augustine sees that the fulfillment of freedom for an individual is to develop to the point where it is impossible to say no to God's will. Not in the sense that we no longer have free will but in the sense that our will naturally and instinctively is tuned to and does God's will. However, the state of post-fall humanity's free will is one that "without grace [it] is capable of nothing but sin."<sup>5</sup>

Third, humanity is inclined to sin which is called concupiscence. Sin in humanity continues to produce sin and it is impossible for humanity to save itself. Sins for Augustine are as small as "imperfections [and] trivialities"<sup>6</sup>. Anything that isn't perfectly directed towards God is a sin. They are anything that turns us away from God, however minor. Concupiscence, however, is not sin itself but only a product of sin.<sup>7</sup> It is the human inclination to always sin more. For this reason, sin can only produce more sin. Lastly, we have been damaged in that our being made in the image and likeness of God has been damaged. While before the Fall we did

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<sup>4</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 105

<sup>5</sup> Eno, Robert B. "Some patristic views on the relationship of faith and works in justification." In *Justification by faith*. Minneapolis, Minn: Augsburg, 1985. 111.

<sup>6</sup> McCue, James F. "Simul iustus et peccator in Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther: toward putting the debate in context." *Journal Of The American Academy Of Religion* 48, no. 1 (March 1980): 84.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, Saint. "Contra Duas Epistolas Pelagianorum," Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Accessed March 10, 2017. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf105.html>. 716.

not need God's grace for all things (though still for many), it is now necessary for God's grace in all things. For these reasons, God must be the savior for humanity to be saved. We are unable to save ourselves because sin only causes more sin. For Augustine, grace begins to reverse this process.

The first step in Augustine's justification is, as stated above, grace. Thus, the first mover in the process of justification is God. The response to this grace is faith and baptism. Augustine makes it clear that "no one is justified unless [one] believes in [Christ] and is cleansed by his baptism."<sup>8</sup> According to Augustine, the entire process of justification is rooted in the Incarnation. God sends the Incarnate Word in the person of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and restoration of humankind. Humanity was first made in the image of God and therefore, "salvation for Augustine is renewal in the human person of the image of God."<sup>9</sup> This is why Augustine says that "the Word became what we are that we might become what we are not. To make humans gods, God became human."<sup>10</sup> The end goal of Augustine's theory of salvation is for humanity to be become like God which requires a change in human nature. For this change to occur, humanity must respond to God's grace. Thus, the first movement by the sinner is to accept God's grace through faith. However, the ability to accept God's grace originates from God's grace itself because Augustine writes, "even for us to turn to God requires God's help."<sup>11</sup> What Augustine is implying here is that for the sinner to say 'yes', they merely must not say 'no'. The process of justification, for Augustine, is completely a work of God. Although grace is everything for Augustine, grace does not take away the individual's free will and ability to

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<sup>8</sup> Augustine, Saint. "On Nature and Grace". In *The Fathers of the Church: Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, translated by John A. Mourant, and William J. Collinge. Baltimore, US: Catholic University of America Press, 2010. 59.

<sup>9</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 83.

<sup>10</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 83. Quoting Augustine: "Sermons 117,10 and 15; 199, 5; 121, 5."

<sup>11</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 104. Quoting Augustine: "*Merits and Forgiveness of Sins* 2,5."

choose. The individual still can reject God's grace. By not rejecting God's grace, we allow God to work in us. Since, prior to justification, human nature is so damaged that we always go against God's will in its action, human nature cannot be an active participant in its justification. Only after justification can human nature be active.

After this acceptance of grace, by faith and baptism, can the justified start to live as they ought. Not only *can* the justified live as they ought but *must* do so as well. Grace does not stop with the justification of the sinner. For Augustine, "grace accomplishes a real change in the human being: rebirth, justification, adoption, divinization, participation in the divine life."<sup>12</sup> As sin can only drag us further into sin, so too does grace move us the other direction, towards God. After we are justified, we are now able to do good works and by doing so grow closer to God. It is important to remember that in all things, grace comes first. Even our good works are results of God's grace. There is nothing in the process of justification that does not start with God's grace. As I mentioned above, grace effects change in the person but this change requires action from the individual. The process of deification requires the cooperation of the individual since "it is through loving God that believers are deified."<sup>13</sup> If the justified does not do good works and love God, they will not be deified. In this process of deification sin is still present. Once justified, grace is still necessary since "there lingers in all the just the inability to persevere in goodness."<sup>14</sup> It is always possible for the justified to slip back into sin. Without God's grace, the justified will assuredly do so. Therefore, Augustine believes the justified to be "*both* sinner and righteous; that is, 'partly' sinner and 'partly' righteous."<sup>15</sup> This is similar to the phrase proposed by Luther that I will address later in this paper: *simul iustus et peccator*. The major difference in this

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<sup>12</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 79.

<sup>13</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 82.

<sup>14</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 96.

<sup>15</sup> Hall, Thor. "Analysis of simul iustus et peccator." *Theology Today* 20, no. 2 (July 1963): 174.



phrasing, however, is that Augustine believes humanity can move away from sin and towards holiness. Thus, for Augustine, both sin and righteousness exist in the sinner and the process of deification slowly pushes out sin and replaces it with righteousness. Here we see justification as a process guided by grace.

Overall, Augustine's view of justification is defined by God's grace. Without God's grace at each and every step there is no justification. Faith and works are both results of God's grace. This is not to say humans have no free will, but instead it is to say one's free will cannot save oneself. Salvation comes as a free gift from God that no one, not even the saints in heaven, deserve.

### **3. Aquinas on Justification: Operation/Cooperation**

St. Thomas Aquinas followed in the intellectual footsteps of Augustine and many great thinkers before him. Throughout his life, he wrestled with the idea of justification; however, it was not in a way that Augustine or Luther later would. There was no major heresy or issue that was challenging Church teaching. Instead, Aquinas's engagement with the idea of justification was in a relatively peaceful time for the Catholic Church.

To begin, Aquinas understands justification as "a certain movement whereby the human mind is moved by God from the state of sin to the state of justice."<sup>16</sup> Here justice refers to a "certain rectitude of order"<sup>17</sup>. Thus, justification is a movement from disorder to an appropriate order before God. Further, justification, like Augustine, is heavily dependent on God's grace. I will address this further but it is important to understand this idea of movement. Since the sinner

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<sup>16</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I-II, Q113, A5, co.

<sup>17</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I-II, Q113, A5, co.

is moved from the sin to justice we must address where the sinner is moving from in the first place. So, for Aquinas, how damaged is human nature?

Aquinas emphasizes that humans beings have both rationality and free will. This means that we can not only think and understand things, but we can also make decisions freely. In his discussion on justification, Aquinas begins by making two distinctions for human nature in his discussion on grace and justification. There are two ways we can think about human nature:<sup>18</sup> the first is the state of perfect human nature<sup>19</sup> and the second is the state of fallen human nature. In the state of perfect human nature, humanity still needs God's grace, but not to the extent that fallen human nature does. For perfect human nature, God's grace is needed to maintain its state and to elevate the nature in order to do supernatural<sup>20</sup> actions. According to Aquinas, perfect human nature "by [its] natural powers alone, can love God more than [itself] and above all things".<sup>21</sup> However, we still need God's grace in order to will and do "supernatural good"<sup>22</sup>. This supernatural good is something that is beyond our natural abilities and thus requires God's assistance.

After the fall, human nature is damaged and there are three consequence to sin: (1) stain, the result of the deformity of sin; (2) corruption of natural good, humanity's will no longer being subject to God's will; and (3) debt of punishment, humanity justly deserving damnation.<sup>23</sup> Along with Augustine, Aquinas also believes concupiscence is a not a sin but is a result of original sin.<sup>24</sup> Following original sin, the sinner is now completely orientated away from God. However,

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<sup>18</sup> When Aquinas uses "nature", he uses it in the sense that Duffy defines it as "determining how a being acts". Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 156.

<sup>19</sup> Also known as "intact human nature"

<sup>20</sup> Supernatural refers to something that is above one's nature, not the colloquial understanding of ghosts and spirits.

<sup>21</sup> Aquinas, *Summa I-II*, Q109, A3, s.c.

<sup>22</sup> Aquinas, *Summa I-II*, Q109, A2, co.

<sup>23</sup> Aquinas, *Summa I-II*, Q109, A7, co.

<sup>24</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 134.

not everything is completely damaged. Human nature's will is still intact, though damaged, and humanity can actually still do a limited version of good, like building shelter or growing food. This good, however, is what Aquinas would consider a "non-meritorious" good.<sup>25</sup> Even non-meritorious goods require a base of divine grace. Overall, Aquinas likens fallen human nature to a sick man. The sick man still maintains a weakened version of action to an otherwise healthy man.<sup>26</sup> This said, the sinner is still unable to save itself and reach its purpose: God.

Aquinas makes it clear, the *telos* for humanity is union with God. Though it is the purpose of all of humanity to be in union with God, this is something that is beyond human nature. Because of this, "[humanity] by [itself] can no wise rise from sin without the help of grace" because "to rise from sin means that [humanity] has restored to [itself] what [it] lost by sinning."<sup>27</sup> Even if the sinner were to stop sinning completely that would not mean the sinner has been justified; rather, it would only mean that the sinner stops committing sin. Refraining from sinning does not equal healing damage from previous sins. Therefore, there is still the issue of repairing the broken order that comes with previous sins. Because of this, humanity needs God's grace.

Just as it was in Augustine, grace is a freely given gift by God to humanity. Likewise, it is "primarily an interior reality".<sup>28</sup> That said, grace is not simply a response to sin. As I mentioned above, grace was necessary even in the state of perfect human nature. Therefore, Aquinas understands grace as "*beyond nature*, as perfecting nature, and [as] helping it to be itself."<sup>29</sup> To say that grace is purely a response to sin would be limiting God and God's gifts to

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<sup>25</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 137.

<sup>26</sup> Aquinas, *Summa I-II*, Q109, A2, co.

<sup>27</sup> Aquinas, *Summa I-II*, Q109, A7, co.

<sup>28</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 131.

<sup>29</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 155.

humanity. This gift, however, is not a quantitative or physical gift. Rather, it is more of a modification or internal change in one's disposition. Thus, grace not only heals nature but it also elevates it so that it can go beyond what it was first able to do. To make this clear, Aquinas makes two different notional distinctions in grace.

The first distinction in grace is between "operative" and "cooperative" grace. These graces refer to the operators or movers in an action. Operative grace is grace where God is the sole mover and the human being is passively moved. Cooperative grace is grace where God moves in a way that allows the individual to move with God. God's action, in cooperative grace, "elicits our active, free response."<sup>30</sup> In cooperative grace, the individual responds to God's action and moves with it. Stephen Duffy explains it best when he writes, "operative grace renders one acceptable to God, while cooperative grace renders one's deeds acceptable to God; effectively, operative grace makes the will desire good; cooperative grace actualizes the good will in good works."<sup>31</sup> Right away, we see a similarity between Augustine and Aquinas. Both believe the individual is able to cooperate with God in one's life after one's justification.

The second distinction is between habitual and helping grace. These graces refer to the effects of grace in the individual. Habitual grace refers to grace that heals and elevates human nature while helping refers to grace that preserves nature and motivates the individual to act the good. Each grace relates to a part of the human person: a rational being with free will. To do any action, one must have both the ability to do that action and the motivation to do so. There are many times when human nature, on its own, is either unable (because of natural ability) to do the good, or unwilling and unmotivated to do so. Thus, habitual grace elevates human nature's capacity to do good while helping grace gives human nature the motivation to do good. Over

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<sup>30</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 160.

<sup>31</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 161.

time, habitual grace builds habits from within and this elevates one's nature. The healing part of habitual grace enables the ability "to will and do the *total* good non-natural or proportionate to human nature" while the elevating aspect enables meritorious actions for the individual.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, helping grace allows nature to maintain its goodness. Another way to think of helping grace is that it moves potency into action. Human nature often has the potential to do good, but it needs motivation to be moved into action. Thus, whenever God moves out potential into action, it is helping grace. Additionally, each of these graces can be either operative or cooperative. Thus, there are four categories of grace. Stephen Duffy's explanation here is helpful:

(a)[helping] operative, grace inclining the will to desire the end, the good and operating without need of response, (b) [helping] cooperative, grace assisting the renewed will to realize its good intuitions in a choice of means and external actions, all requiring the will's cooperation, (c) habitual operative, grace as the formal principle of justification, plucking out the heart of stone and substituting a heart of flesh, and (d) habitual cooperative, grace as the principle of meritorious deeds.<sup>33</sup>

From here, we are able to adequately address Aquinas's understanding of the process of justification.

The movement of justification has four distinct parts that are separated logically, though they are understood to be simultaneous in time. The four parts are 1) the infusion of grace, 2) the movement of the free will towards God by faith, 3) the movement of the free will away from sin (or towards sin in detestation), and 4) the remission of sin.<sup>34</sup> Like Augustine, the entire process of justification is operative grace. Additionally, the operative grace is both helping and habitual. To begin, God's grace is infused in the sinner which prepares the sinner for justification. This infusion of grace is operative habitual grace that gives the individual the capacity to have faith,

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<sup>32</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 137.

<sup>33</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 162.

<sup>34</sup> Aquinas, *Summa I-II*, Q113, A6, co.

which is not initially within human nature's ability. Following this infusion of grace is a movement towards God by faith. This movement, for Aquinas, is helping grace that motivates the free will to turn towards God. However, the "free will can only be turned to God when God turns it."<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the second movement is still operative grace. God moves the free will in such a way that the free will is passive, yet the free will moves naturally as it would. For example, when one is pedaling a bike, the bike is freely moving as it naturally would, but the bike is passive in its movement. The individual riding the bike is the sole motivator in its natural motion. In the same way, God moves the free will from the potential of faith to actual. When one turns towards God, one naturally turns away from sin, thus explaining the third part. Logically this is the order, though they are the same movement. Lastly, once these three parts have been accomplished the sinner receives a remission of sin. With the remission of sin, the sinner is now justified.

Like Augustine, Aquinas understands there to be a further movement after justification called sanctification. Once justified, the individual continues its movement towards total union with God. The individual is now oriented towards God but he or she still retains concupiscence. Because of this, the individual needs to continue to move towards God so that he or she spontaneously turns to God at all times. Following the justification by faith, the individual "gradually embodies this inner renovation in the fruition of external action" which is also known as sanctification.<sup>36</sup> Grace also develops charity(love) in the individual, which changes the choices made by the individual. These choices, effected by love, "gradually shape one's basic orientation and adapt it to the authentic self"<sup>37</sup> which is in relationship to God. Overall, love,

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<sup>35</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I-II, Q109, A6, ad. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 140.

<sup>37</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 154.

which is a result of justification and grace, slowly habituates the individual towards God. However, steadily fixing one's disposition towards God is not the only effect of habitual grace and justification. The merit of our works also change.

After being justified by faith and growing in charity through grace, the justified's good actions can be considered meritorious. Even in the state of sin, the unjustified "by reason of their freedom can do either good or evil".<sup>38</sup> However, these good acts are considered non-meritorious. It is only by grace that one can perform a meritorious good act. As mentioned above, habitual cooperative grace is the base of all meritorious acts. A distinction does have to be made here. All merits are only meritorious in proportion to God and are therefore not meritorious in an absolute sense. A merit, which is a "right to a reward from God" can be so "only on the condition that God so directs."<sup>39</sup> The merits that earn salvation are still products of grace. Aquinas writes, "[humanity], by [its] natural endowments, cannot produce meritorious works proportionate to everlasting life; and for this a higher force is needed, viz. the force of grace."<sup>40</sup> Though we can merit, we are limited in what we can merit. Much of Aquinas's question on merit<sup>41</sup> addresses the things humans cannot merit. According to Aquinas, there are only two things humans can merit: increases in charity and eternal life, which comes from charity. Charity brings us closer to God while eternal life is a result from union with God. Therefore, eternal life is an effect of our charity. All of this is dependent, however, on God's grace. Grace is always necessary for actions to be considered meritorious. Thus, any increase in charity is based in God's grace first. Overall, this serves as a reminder that the justified individual is always dependent on grace.

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<sup>38</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 133.

<sup>39</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 133.

<sup>40</sup> Aquinas, *Summa I-II*, Q109, A5, co.

<sup>41</sup> Aquinas, *Summa I-II*, Q114.

The next question then is, once an individual is justified, do they remain justified forever or can they fall out of being justified? Aquinas answers “yes, one can fall out of justification”. Committing a mortal sin is how one falls out of justification and can only be received back through the sacrament of reconciliation. For this reason, the justified needs to be preserved in its justification. This preservation is God’s helping grace since it motivates us to remain orientated towards God, rather than turning back to sin. Aquinas think that without God’s grace one can, for a time, avoid mortal sin but sooner or later, without grace, one will sin. For this reason, “even when possessed of grace, [humanity] needs perseverance to be given by God”.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, even after justification, the justified is still completely dependent on God’s grace.

Overall, Aquinas’s understanding of justification is heavily based in Augustine and the necessity of God’s constant grace. Both Augustine and Aquinas understand God’s grace to be both the primary cause in the process and that which sustains once the individual is justified. Aquinas goes further than Augustine in his understanding of grace and its effects in the world, while Augustine still sees grace as primarily medicinal for the believer. Additionally, Augustine’s view of human nature is one of a much more damaged humanity than Aquinas’s, since Augustine believes the sinner can do nothing but sin. Aquinas, on the other hand, believes the sinner can still do good, however it is considered non-meritorious. While their anthropology may differ, both see the necessity of human cooperation with God both during and after the process of justification which eventually leads to sanctification/deification. Therefore, the most amount of variance between the two comes in their understanding of anthropology.

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<sup>42</sup> Aquinas, *Summa* I-II, Q109, A10, s.c.



#### 4. Luther on Justification: Faith

By the time Luther entered the scene in the 16th century, the popular piety of Europe had developed quite a bit since Aquinas's time. There was a heavy emphasis on meritorious works for salvation which caused a great amount of anxiety for believers. What Luther saw in his day was "rampant Pelagianism or 'works-righteousness'"<sup>43</sup>. The vast majority of this medieval piety was so focused on doing good works in order to earn salvation that it seemed to forget the constant need for God's grace. At its worst, the believer was believed to be the sole operator in good works. Furthermore, the Catholic Church seemed to have evolved into a "system of 'buying' salvation".<sup>44</sup> Preachers such as Tetzel would preach that one could save one's soul by giving enough money to the Church. These indulgences were a major source of income for the Catholic Church. Part of Luther's theology is developed in response to this corruption. Because of this, Luther's "emphasis on justification 'apart from works of the law' was a challenge not simply to trends in theology and religious practice but also to powerful special interest groups".<sup>45</sup> By attacking indulgences, Luther was attacking the financial backing of the Church. Naturally, there was backlash. However, this was not the only focus of Luther. At the heart of Luther and his emphasis on *sola fide* was a deeply human response to scrupulosity, or the obsession over whether one has done right. His teaching of "justification by faith was, rather, to console anxious consciences terrified by their inability to do enough to earn or merit salvation".<sup>46</sup> As stated above, we all know that we are sinners and no matter how hard we try not to, we still sin.

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<sup>43</sup> Anderson, Hugh G., T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess. "Justification by Faith (Common Statement)." *In Justification by Faith*, 15-74. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publ. House, 1985. 22.

<sup>44</sup> Anderson, "Justification," 23.

<sup>45</sup> Anderson, "Justification," 23.

<sup>46</sup> Anderson, "Justification," 23.

If we cannot stop sinning, how would we ever be able to make amends with God? It is in this context that Luther develops his understanding on justification.

Luther's anthropology develops from his twofold understanding of the nature of humans. Within each human is a spiritual and bodily nature. The spiritual nature (soul) is called "spiritual, inner, or new man" while the bodily nature (flesh) is called "carnal, outward, or old man."<sup>47</sup> In a Christian, the inner human nature is ruled by faith while the outer is ruled by sin. Overall, humanity is a slave to sin and it is the "old man" who is enslaved. For Luther, human nature is so damaged by Original Sin that it cannot have any part in its own justification. Luther writes in his *Large Catechism*, "the human heart is by nature so desperately wicked that it always flees from God...we are sinners and have merited nothing but wrath."<sup>48</sup> Like Augustine, the human will can only will evil after the Fall, and sin itself merits a just damnation for the sinner. Further, human nature is not forced to sin; rather, it sins voluntarily because of its damaged free will.<sup>49</sup> Once again, humanity is in need of God for its salvation.

Though Luther understands God's grace to be the first movement of justification, he mainly emphasizes faith in the process of justification. Luther makes a distinction between the idea of grace and gift. Grace is "favor, mercy, the gratuitous good will of God towards us. The gift is the Holy Spirit."<sup>50</sup> Further, the effects of grace in the human are quite different than Aquinas's understanding. For Luther, grace does not change or elevate a human's nature. Instead, it "effects a wholly new creation in which the natural person dies."<sup>51</sup> Grace kills the old

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<sup>47</sup> Luther, Martin. "The Freedom of a Christian." In *Three Treatises*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986. 278.

<sup>48</sup> Luther, Martin. *The Large Catechism*. Translated by Robert H. Fischer. Philadelphia, PN: Fortress Press, 1959. 65.

<sup>49</sup> Althaus, Paul. *The Theology of Martin Luther*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966. 156.

<sup>50</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 190.

<sup>51</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 181.

in order to bring about the new. This idea of death and resurrection of human nature parallels Christ's death and resurrection. Through this death, "one meets the end of one's sinful ways, the spirit, the life-giving word is given".<sup>52</sup> Thus, grace gives the gift of the Word and the Holy Spirit to the believer. This death and resurrection is an effect of justification and the life of faith. Overall, grace is still the first movement in justification, but it is not the primary emphasis of Luther's understanding of justification.

Before anything else, Luther's understanding of justification is that we are justified by *faith* and by faith alone. Luther makes it clear that "only one thing is necessary for Christian life, righteousness and freedom"<sup>53</sup>: the Word of God, which is faith. Therefore, "a Christian has all that [one] needs in faith".<sup>54</sup> Right away we see Luther's defense against the emphasis on meritorious works of medieval piety. For justification, works do nothing while faith is everything. It is important to note that faith is not an action of the individual nor is it "mere assent".<sup>55</sup> Rather, faith is "the work and gift of God".<sup>56</sup> God freely and gratuitously gives the individual faith, which is that individual's justification. Thus, the gift of faith is the cause of justification. There is no human operation in this act. While this explains what faith is theoretically, it does not help us understand what faith is in our experience. For the individual, faith is belief and trust in the Gospel promises and the person of Jesus Christ. Essentially, faith means that one trusts in Christ's righteousness more than trusting in one's own. Overall, God gives us the gift of faith, which enables us to believe in Christ's righteousness for our salvation

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<sup>52</sup> Forde, Gerhard O. *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2012. 15.

<sup>53</sup> Luther, "Freedom," 279.

<sup>54</sup> Luther, "Freedom," 284.

<sup>55</sup> Anderson, "Justification," 53.

<sup>56</sup> Althaus, *Theology*, 230.

rather than our own. This is necessary because by our own merit and power we will do nothing but turn away from God. God alone can save.

In order to describe this effect of justification and faith, Luther uses the phrase “*simul iustus et peccator*”, meaning “simultaneously justified and sinner”. Augustine and Aquinas understand righteousness and sin as two ends of a scale. Whenever one moves closer to God/righteousness, one moves the same distance away from sin. This clearly is not the case for Luther. According to Luther, the believer is both fully righteous and fully sinner at the same time. This means the individual is righteous “through the judgement of God who accept [the individual] as righteous for Christ’s sake” while at the same time, that individual “is a sinner in [him/herself], that is, as [the individual] now exists as a human being.”<sup>57</sup> Grace does not elevate or heal human nature. Instead, grace gives human nature Christ’s righteousness by faith, through which the individual receives all the effects of faith. Christian salvation is not done ontologically, saving our human nature as it is; rather, Christian salvation comes relationally, saving us because of our relation to Christ.<sup>58</sup>

To express this more clearly, Luther uses the metaphor of the bride and the bridegroom. The Christian who believes in Jesus is the bride, while Jesus is the bridegroom. Through faith alone the soul is united “with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom”<sup>59</sup> and by this union, all that is Christ’s becomes the sinner’s and all that is the sinner’s becomes Christ’s. Thus, Christ claims our sin and swallows it up, making it nothing “for it is impossible that sin

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<sup>57</sup> Althaus, *Theology*, 242.

<sup>58</sup> Steinmetz, David C. "Aquinas for Protestants: what Luther got wrong." *The Christian Century*, 122, no. 17, (2005): 23.

<sup>59</sup> Luther, “Freedom,” 286.

should exist in Christ”.<sup>60</sup> At the same time, all that is Christ’s becomes the believer’s. Therefore, faith can be understood as “participation in Christ, in whom there is no sin, death, or curse”.<sup>61</sup> The believer is now free from these things. However, Christ’s righteousness does not fully belong to the individual. Rather, Christ’s righteousness is the individual’s only insofar as that individual is united to Christ in faith. At any point, if the individual loses union with Christ, they lose all of Christ’s gifts as well. Therefore, Christ’s righteousness, which brings about justification by faith, is external to the justified. At the same time, Christ’s righteousness is “something external [that] becomes something internal”.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, justification comes from “the external or alien justice of Christ, a justice never our own, but always Christ’s”.<sup>63</sup> Essentially, when God judges us, God will judge Christ’s righteousness that is obtained by faith instead of the sinner’s sin. In a way, God views us through the lens of Christ’s righteousness, rather than seeing us as we are.

Christ’s righteousness is not the only effect of faith for the Christian. The first effect of faith in Christ is “forgiveness of sins and the imputation of righteousness”<sup>64</sup> followed by becoming a new creation “being born again from God”.<sup>65</sup> This new creation comes from a death to sin, each and every time we sin. This new creation is no longer a slave to sin but is free. Elsewhere, faith is the cause of works. A common misunderstanding of Luther’s theology of *sola fide* is that it is anti-works. Luther is anti-works only so far as they are a means to

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<sup>60</sup> Luther, Martin. "Two Kinds of Righteousness." In *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, translated by William R. Russell. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012. 156.

<sup>61</sup> Mannermaa, Tuomo. *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*. Edited by Kirsi Irmeli Stjerna. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.16

<sup>62</sup> Lutheran World Federation, and The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. "From Conflict to Communion." 2013., 108.

<sup>63</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 187.

<sup>64</sup> Althaus, *Theology*, 235.

<sup>65</sup> Althaus, *Theology*, 235.

justification. Luther even writes that “our faith in Christ does not free us from works but from false opinion concerning works”.<sup>66</sup> Works are not a cause of justification, instead, they are an effect. Luther says that the Christian does works out of “spontaneous love in obedience to God”<sup>67</sup> instead of out of an attempt to justify him or herself before God. Good works are done by a good person; they do not make a person good. Luther emphasizes, “works...cannot glorify God, although they can, if faith is present, be done to the glory of God”.<sup>68</sup> The importance of good works is the faith that is present in them. Thus, for Luther, works can never be meritorious. Since in faith the believer has received all of Christ’s merit, there is nothing more one can merit. Justification would seem to be lacking if one had to merit further. Unlike Augustine and Aquinas, there is little, if any, movement after justification.

Overall, Luther does not focus heavily on the “how” of justification; instead, he focuses on the fact *that* one is justified and what the effects of justification are. Luther, unlike Aquinas, was not working out a systematic treatise on justification. Instead, he was closer to Augustine because he was responding to the threats of medieval piety and “works-righteousness”. Likewise, both Luther and Augustine’s anthropologies in a pre-justified state are extremely similar. Both claim that the sinner will always choose, of its own free will, sin because of the brokenness of human nature. However, Luther departs from Augustine in his understanding of a post-justification individual. Augustine believes that the justified are deified through love while Luther rejects such a process. According to Luther, the individual has already gained salvation through its relationship with Christ through faith, there is no change in human nature. Further, there is no need to change human nature. That said, Luther and Augustine are extremely similar

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<sup>66</sup> Luther, “Freedom,” 311.

<sup>67</sup> Luther, “Freedom,” 295.

<sup>68</sup> Luther, “Freedom,” 288.

in everything up to and including the act of justification. Their main differences are found in the movement (or lack-thereof) after justification.

### **5. Similarities and Differences between Aquinas and Luther:**

After working through all three theologians, there are three main similarities found within each of their understandings of justification. The first is that God is always the first movement of justification. Humanity never starts the process. Without God's grace, there is no justification. For all three, humans are justly condemned to damnation because of their sin. This means that justification is a freely given gift by God. Even with Aquinas's discussion on merit, Aquinas still understands that justification cannot be merited in anyway. This leads me into my second main similarity: justification is solely an operation of God. This is initially clear for both Luther and Augustine, since for Luther the entire act must be God's grace due to human nature's damaged condition, while for Augustine we, at most, do not say "no" during the process. Aquinas emphasizes that we can only cooperate with God's grace after justification. Therefore, everything leading up to the process of justification and justification itself is God's operative work. Finally, all three agree that faith and baptism are the proper and necessary responses to God's grace for one to become justified. The first response of faith is, again, an operative act of God who moves the individual to respond in faith. Augustine understands it as operative since the only act a human can perform in justification would be rejecting it. By remaining passive and allowing God's grace to work through us, we say "yes", in a passive way. Aquinas understands this movement of faith as God moving the free will to move naturally as it would, but the entire cause of the movement is God's grace. We cannot cooperate in this act. Similar to Augustine, by not saying "no", we say "yes". However, this lack of saying "no" does not make

us cooperative. Lastly, Luther does not get into the specifics of how faith responds to God's grace in justification. He simply repeats that faith itself is a work of God, not of the individual. Therefore, all three agree on God's freely given grace, primacy, and sole operation in the process of justification. From here, I will move onto my discussion on where Aquinas and Luther disagree: primarily in anthropology, cooperation, sanctification, and the nature of works.

Many of the differences between Aquinas and Luther originate from their differing anthropologies. Luther's view of fallen human nature is one that depicts the human as full of pride that constantly and freely chooses to go against God's will. It is now in human nature to always sin. Humanity is a slave to sin. Aquinas, on the other hand, views human nature as damaged, but still able to do some non-meritorious good some of the time. Sin has turned us away from God, but we are not so totally damaged that it is impossible for us to do good. However, this difference substantially effects their anthropology after justification, rather than anthropology before justification. Stephen Duffy writes that "there is no substantial disagreement between Thomas and Luther concerning the human person's moral impotence."<sup>69</sup> For both, without God's grace we are unable to do any substantial good. Even though Aquinas thinks we cannot do some good before justification, it is unmeritorious. Despite this, the differences between Aquinas's optimism and Luther pessimism about anthropology define their different understandings of cooperation.

Since Luther's understanding of justification is relational, human nature is not changed as an effect of becoming justified. Therefore, after justification, the individual is still completely disposed to freely going against God's will. Even when justified, human nature naturally goes against God. Because of this, it follows that Luther does not believe that humans can cooperate

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<sup>69</sup> Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 146.



with God. Any human operation will always go against God. Thus, any good performed by a human is done solely by God's grace and the human is passive. Meanwhile, Aquinas's starting place of humanity as able to do some good before being justified makes cooperation a real possibility. Along with Aquinas's understanding of justification as healing and elevating human nature, it follows naturally that humanity can cooperate with God. These differences in cooperation continue to inform their understanding on sanctification and the nature of work.

The modern debate of *sola fide* versus "faith and works" justification is, at its heart, a discussion of sanctification and the nature of work. As shown above, it is directly informed by one's understanding of anthropology and whether or not one can cooperate with God's grace. To shed some light on this discussion, I will address what Aquinas and Luther would say on this matter.

To begin, it would appear that Aquinas and Luther would both agree on *sola fide*, in terms of the process of justification. They both would affirm that it is necessary to respond to God's grace by faith alone in order to be justified. Since justification is solely an operation of God's freely given grace, works cannot be part of the process. Further, faith is the proper response for all three. For both Aquinas and Luther, works cannot merit justification for either and good works come after faith. So, the uncontroversial section of this debate is justification by faith alone. However, Aquinas and Luther would disagree on "faith and works". Aquinas would affirm that we are justified by faith, but sanctified by works. This is because humanity *can* cooperate with God's grace. Anytime one cooperates with God's grace, it is out of charity and therefore, it merits a reward. These rewards are only meritorious insofar as God allows them to be there. They are relatively meritorious, since their meritorious character in itself is a gift from God. As I wrote above, Aquinas says that works can merit two things: increases in charity and

eternal life. The main effect of faith is charity, which brings one closer to God. Eternal life comes from union with God. Therefore, there is a process after justification. As one grows closer to God, one moves further away from sin. Faith must be animated by love, otherwise the Christian will recede back towards sin. One can always fall from their justified state and need to be forgiven again by God, for Aquinas. Without cooperative works of charity, human nature will not be sanctified. Thus, we find in James 2:26, “faith without works is dead”. Therefore, for Aquinas, works are necessary and meritorious, and they are part of the process of sanctification for the individual.

Luther, on the other hand, rejects this line of thinking. The effects of justification and sanctification for Aquinas are ontological; they change human nature. This is not the case for Luther. The effects of justification are relational. Because our relationship to God has changed from the imputed righteousness of Christ, there is no need to be sanctified by works. Even further, there is no need to be sanctified by works since everything the individual could want has already been obtained through justification by faith.<sup>70</sup> Further, it is impossible for human nature to cooperate with God’s grace since our nature is not changed by justification. There is no transformation because of works. For Luther, works come from faith. They merit nothing and effect no real change in human nature. At the very most, works can only show an individual whether or not their faith is real.<sup>71</sup> All other good works are done because of the faith already present in the individual. Therefore, works are an effect of faith that cause no change in one’s nature.

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<sup>70</sup> Luther does have an idea of sanctification but it is vague and little can be said about it. At most, sanctification comes after death. What that entails and how it is accomplished is hardly addressed.

<sup>71</sup> Althaus, *Theology*, 249.

This line of thought is also reflected in Luther's understanding of how one can be considered no longer justified. For Aquinas, there are multiple mortal sins that break the bond between God and the individual that remove justification. For Luther, there is one: not having faith in Christ. Having faith in something other than Christ is the ultimate sin and the ultimate pride. This, once more, reflects their anthropology and idea of justification. For Aquinas, we are justified by having our very nature healed and elevated; therefore, anything that damages our nature hurts our relationship with God and can affect our justified state. On the other hand, Luther's theory of justification is exterior to our extremely damaged human nature and this justification is done relationally. Therefore, the only thing that can break that relationship is removing what the relationship is founded on: faith.

Overall, both Aquinas and Luther can agree on *sola fide* insofar as it pertains to the process of justification. The real disagreement is over whether there can be further movement after justification. Aquinas says "yes", in works performed by charity, while Luther says "no", justification is sufficient. Lastly, these differences are rooted in their different understanding of anthropology, which inform how they understand justification.

## **6. Benefits of Aquinas and Luther from a Catholic Perspective:**

Instead of focusing only on the differences between Luther and Aquinas in justification, I want to end with looking at what is beneficial from both for Catholics in the life of faith. In honor of the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, I want to focus on ecumenism and finding what can bring us together, rather than adding to the list of what separates us. There is a lot that Aquinas and Luther agree on, despite how different their understandings of justification are. George Lindbeck, when discussing whether Catholic and

Lutheran understandings of justification are compatible, writes, “the only proof of compatibility of diverse doctrines is the establishment of communion between the churches that adhere to them.”<sup>72</sup> Unity between the churches leads to a unity of doctrine. To begin this unity, it is necessary to find what is good in each, rather than the problems of each. Therefore, this last section will focus on how I see both Luther and Aquinas as helpful for Catholics.

Where Luther shines, especially for Catholics, is his defense against the overemphasis of meritorious works. If Luther is being taken as corrective, he is immensely helpful for Catholics. To start, Luther reminds us that God’s grace is primary and that the entire process of justification is solely God’s operation. After reading through and working on this paper it is clear that this is the case, whereas beforehand, I would have thought otherwise. I believe this is true with many Catholics as well. Catholicism, when preaching “faith and works” can fall into the habit of overemphasizing the meritorious nature of good works to the point that we forget about the constant presence of God’s grace first. Works are meritorious only when we have been justified by faith first. When reading Luther seriously and not dismissing him initially, he is an excellent reminder that God’s grace is first. As a Catholic, Luther reminds me that eternal life and salvation are a freely given gift by God and I can only “earn” it insofar as God allows me to. At the end of the day, it is all God’s gift. Therefore, Luther is extremely helpful for reminding Catholics of the freely given gift of grace that God constantly gives us, through no merit of our own.

Aquinas, on the other hand, helps Catholics understand how we as humans can be in relation to God. Aquinas’s discussion on operative and cooperative graces is extremely helpful in this respect. It not only addresses a real tension in the Christian life, but it also allows for a

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<sup>72</sup> Lindbeck, George. "A Question of Compatibility: A Lutheran Reflects on Trent." In *Justification by Faith*, by H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess. Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1985. 231.

helpful distinction. First, the distinction of God's grace as solely operative prior to justification echoes Luther's lesson of God's freely given gift of grace. However, the discussion of the ability of human nature to cooperate with God prior to justification speaks to the healing and elevating power of grace. This reflects Aquinas's anthropology. Secondly, the division of graces speak to the tension of feeling the effects of God's grace in our lives. There are many times where, as Catholics, we recognize that we cannot do God's will alone and we then pray and ask for God's grace to enable us. For Aquinas, this act of asking for grace is a cooperative grace itself. On the other hand, sometimes God simply gives us grace freely without us having any part in it. God's grace is mysterious and it can never be fully understood, but Aquinas's distinctions help us to dive further into the mystery.

On top of his discussion of grace, Aquinas's anthropology and understanding of sanctification can also give hope to believers. Any Catholic who is serious about their faith deeply knows their sin and understands that we are sinners. There are days where we feel as if we can only sin. This is where Aquinas's understanding of sanctification can give hope. His message of justification as transformational tells us that we can, in fact, become better than we currently are. God's grace is greater than our broken nature. Not only can we become better, but we can do so by our working *with* God. This freely given gift of justification is given in such a way that our nature is healed and elevated so that we can cooperate with God. God's salvation is one that fixes all the damages of sin and elevates us further. There are dangers of having such a high view of human nature<sup>73</sup>, but I think if done correctly, they can give great hope to believers. Of course, we must always keep in mind Luther's lesson that God's grace is always first.

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<sup>73</sup> Pelagianism is one of these dangers.

Additionally, we at most cooperate and are never the sole operator. Still, this emphasis on healing and elevating of nature is one that I think is most beneficial for Catholics.

Overall, Aquinas and Luther can work together for Catholics by focusing on what I have mentioned above. Luther reminds us to always keep God first in the life of faith while Aquinas gives us hope for improvement. I recognize this may not be as beneficial for Lutherans; however, in terms of the history of ecumenism between Catholics and Lutherans, this is a step. By understanding the benefits of both Aquinas and Luther, we can hopefully move closer towards reunification.

## **7. Conclusion**

To conclude, Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther come together in agreement in their understanding of God's operation in the process of justification, while they differ in terms of anthropology and deification/sanctification. Luther falls more in line with Augustine's anthropology while he diverges from Augustine's idea of deification. Aquinas, however, reflects Augustine's deification while having a much higher view of anthropology than Augustine. These differences do not make them fully incompatible. Despite their differences, Luther and Aquinas can both be beneficial for Catholics. Luther, who has often been demonized by Catholics, can serve as a needed corrective against overemphasis of the necessity of good works. Additionally, understanding Luther and Aquinas's teachings accurately can help lead to ecumenism. By knowing and understanding what both Luther and Aquinas are actually saying about justification, we can have a real conversation about their ideas. Instead of having arguments about differences that only appear in mistranslations, real discussion can be had on the actual differences at hand. Therefore, by analyzing how Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther

understand justification, not only can we take the next step in ecumenism, but we can also apply them to our daily lives as believers.

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