



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St. Peter's Square

Wednesday, 19 November 2008

Saint Paul (13):

The Doctrine of Justification: from Works to Faith.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On the journey we are making under St Paul's guidance, let us now reflect on a topic at the centre of the controversies of the century of the Reformation: the question of justification. How does man become just in God's eyes? When Paul met the Risen One on the road to Damascus he was an accomplished man; irreproachable according to the justice deriving from the Law (cf. [Phil 3: 6](#)), Paul surpassed many of his contemporaries in the observance of the Mosaic Law and zealously upheld the traditions of his fathers (cf. [Gal 1: 14](#)). The illumination of Damascus radically changed his life; he began to consider all merits acquired in an impeccable religious career as "refuse", in comparison with the sublimity of knowing Jesus Christ (cf. [Phil 3: 8](#)). The Letter to the Philippians offers us a moving testimony of Paul's transition from a justice founded on the Law and acquired by his observance of the required actions, to a justice based on faith in Christ. He had understood that what until then had seemed to him to be a gain, before God was, in fact, a loss; and thus he had decided to stake his whole existence on Jesus Christ (cf. [Phil 3: 7](#)). The treasure hidden in the field and the precious pearl for whose purchase all was to be invested were no longer in function of the Law, but Jesus Christ, his Lord.

The relationship between Paul and the Risen One became so deep as to induce him to maintain that Christ was no longer solely his life but also his very living, to the point that to be able to reach

him death became a gain (cf. [Phil 1: 21](#)). This is not to say he despised life, but that he realized that for him at this point there was no other purpose in life and thus he had no other desire than to reach Christ as in an athletics competition to remain with him for ever. The Risen Christ had become the beginning and the end of his existence, the cause and the goal of his race. It was only his concern for the development in faith of those he had evangelized and his anxiety for all of the Churches he founded (cf. [2 Cor 11: 28](#)) that induced him to slow down in his race towards his one Lord, to wait for his disciples so they might run with him towards the goal. Although from a perspective of moral integrity he had nothing to reproach himself in his former observance of the Law, once Christ had reached him he preferred not to make judgments on himself (cf. [1 Cor 4: 3-4](#)). Instead he limited himself to resolving to press on, to make his own the One who had made him his own (cf. [Phil 3: 12](#)).

It is precisely because of this personal experience of relationship with Jesus Christ that Paul henceforth places at the centre of his Gospel an irreducible opposition between the two alternative paths to justice: one built on the works of the Law, the other founded on the grace of faith in Christ. The alternative between justice by means of works of the Law and that by faith in Christ thus became one of the dominant themes that run through his Letters: "We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet who know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law; because by works of the law no one will be justified" ([Gal 2: 15-16](#)). And to the Christians of Rome he reasserts that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" ([Rm 3: 23-24](#)). And he adds "we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law" ([ibid., v. 28](#)). At this point Luther translated: "justified by faith alone". I shall return to this point at the end of the Catechesis. First, we must explain what is this "Law" from which we are freed and what are those "works of the Law" that do not justify. The opinion that was to recur systematically in history already existed in the community at Corinth. This opinion consisted in thinking that it was a question of moral law and that the Christian freedom thus consisted in the liberation from ethics. Thus in Corinth the term "*πάντα μοι ἔξεστιν*" (I can do what I like) was widespread. It is obvious that this interpretation is wrong: Christian freedom is not libertinism; the liberation of which St Paul spoke is not liberation from good works.

So what does the Law from which we are liberated and which does not save mean? For St Paul, as for all his contemporaries, the word "Law" meant the Torah in its totality, that is, the five books of Moses. The Torah, in the Pharisaic interpretation, that which Paul had studied and made his own, was a complex set of conduct codes that ranged from the ethical nucleus to observances of rites and worship and that essentially determined the identity of the just person. In particular, these included circumcision, observances concerning pure food and ritual purity in general, the rules regarding the observance of the Sabbath, etc. codes of conduct that also appear frequently in the debates between Jesus and his contemporaries. All of these observances that express a social, cultural and religious identity had become uniquely important in the time of Hellenistic culture,

starting from the third century B.C. This culture which had become the universal culture of that time and was a seemingly rational culture; a polytheistic culture, seemingly tolerant constituted a strong pressure for cultural uniformity and thus threatened the identity of Israel, which was politically constrained to enter into this common identity of the Hellenistic culture. This resulted in the loss of its own identity, hence also the loss of the precious heritage of the faith of the Fathers, of the faith in the one God and in the promises of God.

Against this cultural pressure, which not only threatened the Israelite identity but also the faith in the one God and in his promises, it was necessary to create a wall of distinction, a shield of defence to protect the precious heritage of the faith; this wall consisted precisely in the Judaic observances and prescriptions. Paul, who had learned these observances in their role of defending God's gift, of the inheritance of faith in one God alone, saw this identity threatened by the freedom of the Christians this is why he persecuted them. At the moment of his encounter with the Risen One he understood that with Christ's Resurrection the situation had changed radically. With Christ, the God of Israel, the one true God, became the God of all peoples. The wall as he says in his Letter to the Ephesians between Israel and the Gentiles, was no longer necessary: it is Christ who protects us from polytheism and all of its deviations; it is Christ who unites us *with* and *in* the one God; it is Christ who guarantees our true identity within the diversity of cultures. The wall is no longer necessary; our common identity within the diversity of cultures is Christ, and it is he who makes us just. Being just simply means being with Christ and in Christ. And this suffices. Further observances are no longer necessary. For this reason Luther's phrase: "*faith alone*" is true, if it is not opposed to faith in charity, in love. Faith is looking at Christ, entrusting oneself to Christ, being united to Christ, conformed to Christ, to his life. And the form, the life of Christ, is love; hence to believe is to conform to Christ and to enter into his love. So it is that in the Letter to the Galatians in which he primarily developed his teaching on justification St Paul speaks of faith that works through love (cf. [Gal 5: 14](#)).

Paul knows that in the twofold love of God and neighbour the whole of the Law is present and carried out. Thus in communion with Christ, in a faith that creates charity, the entire Law is fulfilled. We become just by entering into communion with Christ who is Love. We shall see the same thing in the Gospel next Sunday, the Solemnity of Christ the King. It is the Gospel of the judge whose sole criterion is love. What he asks is only this: Did you visit me when I was sick? When I was in prison? Did you give me food to eat when I was hungry, did you clothe me when I was naked? And thus justice is decided in charity. Thus, at the end of this Gospel we can almost say: love alone, charity alone. But there is no contradiction between this Gospel and St Paul. It is the same vision, according to which communion with Christ, faith in Christ, creates charity. And charity is the fulfilment of communion with Christ. Thus, we are just by being united with him and in no other way.

At the end, we can only pray the Lord that he help us to believe; really believe. Believing thus becomes life, unity with Christ, the transformation of our life. And thus, transformed by his love, by

the love of God and neighbour, we can truly be just in God's eyes.

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am pleased to greet the participants in the international Catholic Scouting Conference meeting in Rome. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Finland, South Africa and the United States, I cordially invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Next Sunday, the last of Ordinary Time, we shall be celebrating the Solemnity of Christ, King of the Universe. Dear *young people*, place Jesus at the centre of your life and you will receive light and courage from him. May Christ, who made of the Cross a royal throne, teach you, dear *sick people*, to understand the redemptive value of suffering lived in union with him. I wish that you, dear *newlyweds*, may recognize the Lord's presence in your family journey.

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