

Lectures for Budapest: Lent/Spring 2004

Pentecostal Theological School

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Justification and Sacraments: Individual and Community

Some of the strongest opposition to the GE and any idea of Catholic – Protestant agreement on justification by faith has come from Evangelical free church leaders. This is particularly noticeable in the USA, where the attack is more directed towards the ECT process than to GE, but the objections really concern both.

I refer to an article by an Italian Evangelical, Leonardo de Chirico¹. I think it will be helpful to look at the main criticisms that de Chirico makes of these Evangelical – Catholic joint statements. I do this from the perspective of a Catholic who believes that the Protestant and Evangelical protest has been necessary for the reform and renewal of the Catholic faith. But from my standpoint, while I regard these protests as necessary, I see them as needing the Catholic heritage and corpus to critique and not within themselves as able to form an organic whole.

1. Individual Doctrines versus Complete System

The ECT statements appear “to espouse an isolated, atomistic fragmented way of conducting the conversation which seems to overlook the fact that doctrines are part of a coherent system and that the difference between Evangelical and Catholic views of justification lies in the central core of their respective understandings of the reality of God’s saving work.” (p. 346).

“from an evangelical point of view, it is practically meaningless to uphold together with Catholics the doctrine of justification by faith, on the one hand, and express a sharp disagreement on baptismal regeneration, the Eucharist, sacramental grace, diverse understandings of merit, reward, purgatory, and indulgences, Marian devotion and the assistance of the saints, etc on the other hand. Unlike the Catholic one, the evangelical framework cannot tolerate such diversity and calls for a choice.” (p. 346).

Further on, de Chirico asserts that for an Evangelical justification by faith and ecclesial mediatorship of grace are incompatible (p. 350). For him, ecclesial mediation of grace clearly includes any idea of instrumental causality, other presumably than the Word of God.

In my view Chirico’s criticisms have an element of validity, but for me there are a number of unsatisfactory arguments and probably even more unsatisfactory assumptions.

I think that de Chirico is right to insist that Christian faith is or is meant to be a coherent whole. All doctrines are inter-related. Thus if Catholic leaders agree to a theological statement about justification by faith, but do nothing about practices that are incompatible with it, then there is a serious inconsistency. However, I feel that there is something too static about de Chirico’s understanding. He uses the word “system”, e.g. “the evangelical doctrinal system” (p. 346): he writes: “all these theological issues are quintessentially related to the whole of the Roman Catholic system and, therefore, cannot be treated as if they were marginal, secondary aspects for theological discussion.” (p. 351). It is interesting that de Chirico uses the word “system” of Evangelical doctrine and of the Roman Catholic Church.

I think this is significant. For the doctrinal coherence of the Roman Catholic Church is an element in the coherence of the whole Roman communion. Whereas it seems to me that the

¹ “Christian Unity vis-à-vis Roman Catholicism: A critique of the *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* dialogue”, *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 27/4 (Oct. 2003) pp. 337 – 352.

Evangelical coherence of which de Chirico speaks is found in a certain kind of Evangelical doctrine. One reason this contrast is important is that it relates to the question of the renewal of the Roman Catholic Church. It seems to me that de Chirico's position/model being static or fixed is virtually unchangeable. This is no doubt one reason why some Evangelicals find it hard to believe that the RCC can really change, dismissing the outward changes as merely cosmetic. "Can a leopard change its spots?"

It is because doctrine is one element in an organic whole and not a system on its own that renewal of the whole is possible. The continuity of the RCC is found above all in its liturgy, remember the slogan *lex orandi lex credendi*. This includes the historic creeds and the celebration of key doctrines in liturgical feasts. This is one reason why the Second Vatican Council began with the schema on the liturgy.

I want therefore to assert that de Chirico is right in saying that what Catholics affirm in GE about justification through faith needs to become a living part of Catholic understanding, reaching into all aspects of Church life and teaching. It is probably true that the RCC is not following up the GE with intensive "reception" catechesis. He and other Evangelicals are right when they challenge the Catholic authorities not to tolerate forms of piety and devotion which are incompatible with JTF. He is wrong in the assumption of a static model incapable of real change. This does not understand the relation between worship and doctrine. It goes too fast from the Bible to the doctrine. I would question his assumption that justification by faith is incompatible with ecclesial mediation, which would seem to make Christian faith irredeemably individualistic. That is why, for the Catholic, there is something ironic about de Chirico's criticism of atomistic isolation of doctrines by the Catholics, because the Catholic sees the Catholic Church as standing for organic coherence and the Evangelical as standing for individualism.

2. Justification by Faith and Ecclesial Mediation (Faith and Community)

The argument about justification through faith and ecclesial (sacramental) mediation is closely related to the issue of the relationship between the Christian and the Church. Of course, the doctrine of justification through faith rules out any mechanical view of church mediation, as though the performance of rites can confer God's grace and salvation quite apart from faith. There were times when Catholic practice looked like that. But that was never the official teaching of the Catholic Church. (Major problem of 14th – 16th centuries: the failure of efforts at reform within the Catholic Church.) But the lack of a theology of the Word (faith comes through hearing the Word) and a lack of attention to the Holy Spirit made it impossible for the Catholic Church to produce a biblical theology of Word, Holy Spirit, faith, sacrament and Church.

The teaching of Vatican Two gives proper attention to the role of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God in eliciting faith, but the context is that of the Church never just of individual believers:

"The Holy Spirit first recalls the meaning of the salvation event to the liturgical assembly by giving life to the Word of God, which is proclaimed so that it may be received and lived" (CCC, para. 1100).

"it is the Holy Spirit who gives the grace of faith, strengthens it and makes it grow in the community. The liturgical assembly is first of all a communion in faith." (CCC, para. 1102). Context is through the "saving word of God".

Under the heading "The Paschal Mystery in the Church's Sacraments" there are the following headings: THE SACRAMENTS OF CHRIST, THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH, THE SACRAMENTS OF FAITH, THE SACRAMENTS OF SALVATION and THE SACRAMENTS OF ETERNAL LIFE. Under Faith, we read:

“The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the Body of Christ and, finally, to give worship to God. Because they are signs they also instruct. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it. That is why they are called ‘sacraments of faith’.” (CCC, para. 1123).

“The Church’s faith precedes the faith of the believer who is invited to adhere to it. When the Church celebrates the sacraments, she confesses the faith received from the apostles – whence the ancient saying: *lex orandi, lex credendi*” (CCC, para. 1124).

“Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify. They are efficacious because in them Christ himself is at work: The Father always hears the prayer of his Son’s Church which, in the epiclesis of each sacrament, expresses her faith in the power of the Spirit.” (CCC, para. 1127).

In a section on “Words and actions” the CCC teaches:

“A sacramental celebration is a meeting of God’s children with their Father, in Christ and the Holy Spirit; this meeting takes the form of a dialogue, through actions and words. Admittedly, the symbolic actions are already a language, but the Word of God and the response of faith have to accompany and give life to them, so that the seed of the Kingdom can bear its fruit in good soil. The liturgical actions signify what the Word of God expresses: both his free initiative and his people’s response of faith.” (CCC, para. 1153).

“When the Holy Spirit awakens faith, he not only gives an understanding of the Word of God, but through the sacraments also makes present the ‘wonders’ of God which it proclaims.” (CCC, para. 1155).

What does all this say about Catholic and Protestant differences? What does it say in response to de Chirico’s criticisms?

Re- de Chirico, it means that Catholic teaching is a lot better than Catholic practice. Catholics need to be much more honest about this than they have been. While preparing this, I found a report of the late Archbishop Gabriel Ganaka of Jos, Nigeria, saying exactly this, and that CCR is a God-given tool to overcome this gap. The Catechism provides a renewed theology, that is much more biblical than the scholastic theology of Trent and the Counter-Reformation. This is not to say that it doesn’t need further renewal. My hope is that Protestants will do two things: (1) recognize the (big) change in Catholic understanding²; (2) encourage the renewal currents in the CC to translate the more biblical understanding into a renewed church life. Here again is one of the very important roles of CCR (and other new ecclesial movements).

In answer to de Chirico’s list of objectionable doctrines including such things as purgatory and indulgences, I think de Chirico is saying these are central (typical and symptomatic) to the Catholic system, whereas I would say the heart of the Catholic understanding is Trinitarian, Christocentric, communitarian and sacramental, so that a doctrine like purgatory has to be interpreted in the light of this framework and not the other way round³. But there needs to be a greater Catholic sensitivity to legitimate Protestant concerns.

² Changes re-Holy Spirit, Christ-centredness, Trinitarian structure, faith and conversion, church as communion more than institution.

³ “All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.” (CCC, para. 1030). So it is in no way part of Catholic doctrine that those purified in the state known as purgatory are saved without Christ, or without faith.

But the biggest issue, as I see it, is the relation between the faith of the individual Christian and the faith of the Church (community). This is closely related to the role of ecclesial and ministerial mediation in the gift of faith and its subsequent outworking in the Church.

It seems to me that the way the justification argument is often presented by Protestants assumes the model of an individual believer standing before God. This was of course the situation to some degree in Luther's crisis experience. Does this not reduce the Church to an aggregate of individual believers but without a real body? Of course, the Reformation argument produced a Protestant focus on faith as subjective act of trust and a Catholic focus on faith as content of what we believe⁴. That easily fits an individual focus for the Protestants and a corporate Church focus for Catholics.

Undoubtedly, Protestant thought is unsympathetic to mediation, except the ministry of the Word. It seems to me that Pentecostal-charismatic ministry has expanded the spheres of ministry (healing, deliverance, praying over people) where the ministers clearly believe they expect something spiritual to happen through their ministrations.

But the Church community is not just an organisation that upholds certain doctrines as conditions for membership. It is also called to be a believing trusting community. The child in a Christian family sees faith in action in family prayer, in the way that disputes are handled, etc. In Catholic understanding, evangelisation is done by the Church (by those who bear witness to the Church's faith) - evangelists are not just "lone rangers" – in order to bring forth new life. In the Catholic understanding, the Church (community) play the role of mother in the regeneration of new life in the Spirit. So, in Paul VI's letter on Evangelization, he says in turn:

- "The Church is born of the evangelising activity of Jesus and the Twelve." (EN, 15).
- "Having been born consequently out of being sent, the Church in her turn is sent by Jesus." (EN, 15).
- "Having been sent and evangelised, the Church herself sends out evangelisers." (EN, 15).
- "the person who has been evangelised goes on to evangelise others." (EN, 24).
- "evangelization is for no one an individual and isolated act; it is one that is deeply ecclesial." (EN, 60).
- "Evangelization will never be possible without the action of the Holy Spirit. ... the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of evangelization: it is he who impels each individual to proclaim the Gospel, and it is he who in the depths of consciences causes the words of salvation to be accepted and understood." (EN, 75).

This individual versus community question needs much more reflection from both sides, so that we can get beyond a thorough-going individualism on the Protestant side (a Protestant theology that corresponds to the Protestant facts) and too ideological or romantic a view on the Catholic side (a Catholic theology that does not correspond to the Catholic facts).

A Protestant theologian from a Pentecostal background who has thought more deeply on these issues is Miroslav Volf, as in his book *After Our Likeness*⁵. "Because human beings appropriate salvific grace in faith, the understanding of salvation (and thus also of the church) is shaped in an essential fashion by the way faith is mediated. Hence an individualistic

⁴ "Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed. As personal adherence to God and assent to his truth, Christian faith differs from our faith in any human person. It is right and just to entrust oneself wholly to God and to believe absolutely what he says." (CCC, para. 150).

⁵ Wm B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1998. See especially pp. 160 – 171.

understanding of the mediation of faith is at once also an individualistic view of salvation ...” (p. 160). Volf objects to the Catholic statement that faith is a gift of God received from the Church. But for him the Church is not only the *filia* of faith, but also the *mater* of faith (p. 162). “Appropriately understood, the motherhood of the church is a statement that the transmission of faith occurs through interpersonal ecclesial interaction.” (pp. 162 – 3). For Volf “one does not receive faith (*fiducia*) from the church ... but rather through the church” (p. 166). “Understood in this way, the mother church does not stand over against individual Christians; rather, Christians are the mother church.” (p. 166). What we see here is Volf clearly rejecting all individualistic theologies, but re-thinking the communal in personal terms, seeking to avoid all institutionalisation of the Church.

As Protestant fears of magic and superstition in sacramental practice are reduced, then we see a new openness to understand the biblical character of effective signs: of signs and prophetic actions that produce effects in the spiritual realm. Examples in Scripture: Elijah stretching himself out upon the body of the son of the widow at Zarephath (1 Kings 17: 21); Elijah and later Elisha striking the waters of the Jordan with a cloak (2 Kings 2: 8, 14); Elisha throwing salt into the spring with poor water (2 Kings 2: 19 – 22); Elisha stretching himself upon the body of the dead son of the Shanammite woman (2 Kings 4: 32 – 35); Elisha telling king Jehoash of Israel to shoot arrows to the east and to strike the ground: doing it only three times means that the Arameans will only be defeated three times (2 Kings 13: 15 – 19); Jeremiah smashing the clay jar in the valley of Ben Hinnom (Jer. 19)..

“They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.” (Mark 6: 13).

Simon Tan in AJPS

I have recently read an interesting article in AJPS by a Pentecostal questioning the general Pentecostal rejection of infant baptism. In some ways it is a curious article as Tan tends to agree with the Baptist scholars in their rejection of arguments from the NT in favour of infant baptism, but he ends up critiquing infant dedication as rooted in “an independent individualism” that is “a uniquely American and modern western phenomenon” (p. 230).

Return to the Jewish Root

Once again, I am convinced that the only way to break through these Reformation controversies is by together returning to the Jewish root. Here we find a strong corporate sense, that is linked in the NT with an emphasis on the personal response of faith. “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor. 12: 13). This verse holds together the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit and the relationship to the body. Initiation is into a body. The body in NT terms is something visible, tangible: it is not a “spiritual concept” with no earthly expression.

I think we must here go back to the whole process described in the New Testament as to how the Church was born within Israel. How does the faith of Israel, the life of Israel and the hope of Israel, become the faith, the life and the hope of the Church, born in Israel and into which Gentile believers are grafted? There is both a continuity and a discontinuity. Through the centuries we have ignored the continuity by a replacement view of the Church in relation to Israel. But the corporate body character of the Church is grounded in the flesh of Israel.

Ignoring the Israel root causes a Catholic account of the establishment of the Church to be too institutional-legal, and a Protestant account of the Church to be too aethereal and ultimately invisible.

We cannot avoid the issues of Mary and the Twelve here. For they as disciples are at the core of the corporate “remnant”. The group gathered in the Upper Room waiting for the promise of the Father (see Acts 1: 12 - 14) is not just a gathering of like-minded individuals. The twelve have been constituted into a foundational group by Jesus himself. In the vision of “the

holy city, the new Jerusalem” in Acts 21 the city has gates with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel and a wall with foundations bearing the names of the “twelve apostles of the Lamb”.