



GOD'S SALVATION: LAW AND GRACE

4. Merit and Holiness

Texts from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

MERIT

"You are glorified in the assembly of your Holy Ones, for in crowning their merits you are crowning your own gifts". (Roman Missal, Preface of the Saints)

What is merit?

The term "merit" refers in general to the *recompense owed* by a community or a society for the action of one of its members, experienced either as beneficial or harmful, deserving reward or punishment. Merit is relative to the virtue of justice, in conformity with the principle of equality which governs it. (2006)

With regard to God, there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man. Between God and us there is an immeasurable inequality, for we have received everything from him, our Creator. (2007)

All merit comes from God

The merit of man before God in the Christian life arises from the fact that *God has freely chosen to associate man with the work of his grace*. The fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man's free acting through his collaboration, so that the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful. Man's merit, moreover, itself is due to God, for his good actions proceed in Christ, from the predispositions and assistance given by the Holy Spirit. (2008)

God's gratuitous justice

Filial adoption, in making us partakers by grace in the divine nature, can bestow *true merit* on us as a result of God's gratuitous justice. This is our right by grace, the full right of love, making us "co-heirs" with Christ and worthy of obtaining "the promised inheritance of eternal life" (Council of Trent). The merits of our good works are gifts of the divine goodness. "Grace has gone before us; now we are given what is due... Our merits are God's gifts." (St. Augustine) (2009)

No one can merit the initial grace

Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, *no one can merit the initial grace* of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, *we can then merit* for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life. Even temporal goods like health and friendship can be merited in accordance with God's wisdom. These graces and goods are the object of Christian prayer. Prayer attends to the grace we need for meritorious actions. (2010)

The source of all our merits

The charity of Christ is the source in us of all our merits before God. Grace, by uniting us to Christ in active love, ensures the supernatural quality of our acts and consequently their merit before God and before men. The saints have always had a lively awareness that their merits were pure grace.

"After earth's exile, I hope to go and enjoy you in the fatherland, but I do not want to lay up merits for heaven. I want to work for your love alone... In the evening of this life, I shall appear before you with empty hands, for I do not ask you, Lord, to count my works. All our justice is blemished in your eyes. I wish, then, to be clothed in your own justice and to receive from your love the eternal possession of yourself." (St. Thérèse of Lisieux) (2011)

CHRISTIAN HOLINESS

"We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him... For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified." (Rom 8:28-30) (2012)

The fullness of Christian life and the perfection of charity

“All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity.” (Vatican II) All are called to holiness: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mt 5:48)

“In order to reach this perfection the faithful should use the strength dealt out to them by Christ's gift, so that... doing the will of the Father in everything, they may wholeheartedly devote themselves to the glory of God and to the service of their neighbour. Thus the holiness of the People of God will grow in fruitful abundance, as is clearly shown in the history of the Church through the lives of so many saints.” (Vatican II) (2013)

Intimate union with Christ

Spiritual progress tends toward ever more intimate union with Christ. This union is called “mystical” because it participates in the mystery of Christ through the sacraments - “the holy mysteries” - and, in him, in the mystery of the Holy Trinity. God calls us all to this intimate union with him, even if the special graces or extraordinary signs of this mystical life are granted only to some for the sake of manifesting the gratuitous gift given to all. (2014)

The way of the Cross

The way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle. Spiritual progress entails the ascesis and mortification that gradually lead to living in the peace and joy of the Beatitudes:

“He who climbs never stops going from beginning to beginning, through beginnings that have no end. He never stops desiring what he already knows.” (St. Gregory of Nyssa) (2015)

Seeking the ‘holy city’ which is to come

The children of our holy mother the Church rightly hope for *the grace of final perseverance and the recompense* of God their Father for the good works accomplished with his grace in communion with Jesus. Keeping the same rule of life, believers share the “blessed hope” of those whom the divine mercy gathers into the “holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” (Rev 21:2) (2016)

IN BRIEF

- **We can have merit in God's sight only because of God's free plan to associate man with the work of his grace. Merit is to be ascribed in the first place to the grace of God, and secondly to man's collaboration. Man's merit is due to God. (2025)**
- **The grace of the Holy Spirit can confer true merit on us, by virtue of our adoptive filiation, and in accordance with God's gratuitous justice. Charity is the principal source of merit in us before God. (2026)**
- **No one can merit the initial grace which is at the origin of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit, we can merit for ourselves and for others all the graces needed to attain eternal life, as well as necessary temporal goods. (2027)**
- **“All Christians... are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity”. “Christian perfection has but one limit, that of having none”. (St. Gregory of Nyssa) (2028)**
- **“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mt 16:24) (2029)**