

What Catholics Believe

Grace, Works, & Sacraments

Lifewise Academy Statement of Faith #9

"The salvation of man is wholly a work of God's free grace and is not the work, in whole or in part, of human works or goodness or religious ceremony. God imputes His righteousness to those who put their faith in Christ alone for their salvation, and thereby justify them in His sight."

What do Catholics Believe?

The Catholic Church agrees that salvation is a free gift from the Father through the sacrifice of His son, Jesus Christ. However, this does **not** mean that faith is isolated from participation in the sacraments or good works. The sacraments and good works are necessary to the Christian way of life as they are essential for growing in holiness and deepening our relationship with God.

The Catholic Church believes that salvation is an inheritance freely given to anyone who becomes a child of God through the sacrament of Baptism. This marks the beginning of the Christian life and there is nothing we can do to merit the grace that comes to us through it. Although the Church does not teach that we "earn" salvation, that does not imply that we do not have to work on it. Faith alone is not sufficient to be saved. It is more than a simple belief but involves acceptance to God's truth and obedience to Him and His Church. It must be stressed that faith is not a one-time experience but a life-long process that passes through many stages. A single conversion or acceptance of Christ as your Lord and Savior is never a permanent experience no matter how sincere you may be.

What does Scripture Say?

"Then Jesus approached and said to them, 'All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age'" (Matthew 28: 18-20).

"Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:38).

"So then, my beloved, obedient as you have always been, not only when I am present but all the more now when I am absent, work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12).

"For just as a body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead" (James 2:26).



Justification & Good Works

In reference to good works and justification by faith alone, the Catholic Church teaches, "The grace of the Holy Spirit has the power to justify us, that is, to cleanse us from our sins and to communicate to us the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ and through Baptism'" (CCC 1987, Romans 3:22). This means that our justification is determined by the state of our soul passing from the state of sin (original or mortal) into a state of grace. It is **only** when we are in a state of grace that our good works can be meritorious on our journey to heaven. When we are in a state of sin (original or mortal), our works have no merit. It is only the undeserved grace of God, won for us by Christ's passion, that lifts us out of sin. Good works cannot merit justification by themselves but can dispose us to receive God's grace.

Our faith leads to conversion and truly embracing the Christian lifestyle. This includes the two greatest commandments of loving God and neighbor. When Jesus is asked, "Teacher, what good must I do to inherit eternal life?" He responds, "If you would enter life, keep the commandments" (Mt 19:16-17). Therefore, we see that good works are essential to the Christian way of life but not what merits our justification.

What does the Catechism Say?

"Through the power of the Holy Spirit we take part in Christ's Passion by dying to sin, and in his Resurrection by being born to a new life; we are members of his Body which is the Church, branches grafted onto the vine which is himself" (CCC 1988, John 15:1-4).

"Justification establishes cooperation between God's grace and man's freedom. On man's part it is expressed by the assent of faith to the Word of God, which invites him to conversion." (CCC 1993).



Physical Signs & Spiritual Realities

Our faith is constantly tested by the temptations of Satan and the primary means by which we battle these temptations is to participate in the life of the sacraments.

The sacraments are physical signs communicating spiritual realities instituted by Christ to give grace. Sacraments are not symbolic, but efficacious meaning they do what they signify. For example, in the sacrament of Baptism:

- The water (matter) and the words (form) actually cleanse a person of their original and personal sin(s).
- An indelible spiritual mark is left on the soul signifying we belong to Christ.
- A person receives the Holy Spirit.
- A person is reborn as a child of God and becomes a member of Christ's body, the Church.

What Does the Catechism Say?

"The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions" (CCC 1131).

“If I touch even his garments, I shall be made well”

Similarly to how Catholics understand the sacraments, Jesus often conveyed grace through physical things in Scripture through his many miracles and healings, for example in the Gospel of Mark:

And there was a woman who had had a flow of blood for twelve years, and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard the reports about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. For she said, “If I touch even his garments, I shall be made well.” And immediately the hemorrhage ceased; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone forth from him, immediately turned about in the crowd, and said, “Who touched my garments?”....But the woman, knowing what had been done to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. And he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (Mark 5:25-34).



Through the example of this Scripture passage, we see that the primary elements of the sacramental concept are exemplified:

A physical thing is conveying grace

- *“If I touch even his garments, I shall be made well.”*
- The garment of Christ serves as the physical thing to convey grace to the woman.

Grace flows from God to the recipient

- *“And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone forth from him.”*
- The passage demonstrates that from the touch of his garment, power had gone forth from him to the woman who sought healing.

The recipient’s faith

- *“And he said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.’”*
- After the grace (healing of the woman) had gone from Jesus to the woman, she acknowledged it and her faith was strengthened from the grace given.

Why does this matter for my child?

- Misunderstandings can make children hesitant in encountering God through the sacraments and receiving sacramental grace to strengthen their faith.
- Contrary ideas can confuse children into viewing faith as a one-time experience, not a life-long process.
- The Lifewise statement could be interpreted to imply to children that they are not inherently good in God’s eyes as a result of the fall.
- Misunderstandings might confuse children to think that we do not have to work on our salvation, therefore neglecting the necessity of the sacraments and good works as an essential part of the Christian life (Philippians 2:12).