

Cardinal Gasparo Contarini
Epistle on Justification
May 25, 1541

Since in every discussion it is proper first to examine, and clearly to ascertain, what the terms we are using in the discussion signify, especially when their manifold and ambiguous quality can easily cause confusion, and turn the meaning of the whole matter inside out; therefore, we first shall explain what *justification* means, and then what *faith* means, because the entire inquiry in this case depends on the elucidation of these words.

To be justified, it happens, is nothing else than to be made just, and for this reason also to be considered just. Justice, however, is taken in many senses. For there is both a certain *particular* virtue, which directs our works and actions towards everyone else, giving to each what is his. This is called justice, and its object is what is just and fair. So too there is justice as a kind of *universal* virtue. This directs each person's doings toward the common good, which is comprised chiefly in keeping the laws; and so it has also been called *legal* justice. Aristotle discusses both types of justice amply and extensively in the fifth book of his *Ethics*. But we are not speaking here about these two justices when we say that a man is justified. It is something greater and more majestic of which we speak.

Besides these two forms of justice there is also another type, which Plato considers at great length in the ten books he wrote on the just man, which are also commonly called Plato's *Republic*. Aristotle in fact touches this mode of justice only in the fifth book of his *Ethics*, and he labels it justice *metaphorically* so-called. Such justice is set up among the faculties of our soul; and because these are within the same soul, there cannot in their case be justice *properly* so-called, which is a virtue exercised with regard to another person. Still, these faculties of the soul differ amongst themselves, and each owes a certain regard to its other fellow faculties. If this obligation should be overthrown, then each part of the soul is not given its due; and thus if the justices are reciprocal, then there will be justice among them, when each faculty has persisted in the state appointed for it by nature, so that, to wit, the reason commands, and in truth the soul's lower faculties obey reason, and the reason is right. This justice is the parent of all virtues, and is virtue in a fuller way than the two earlier justices. This is the health of the soul, on account of which we are accustomed to call a good man just. This mode of justice is human; it makes a man good, so far as he is a man, so far as he is rational; and for that reason, in our inquiry into justification, about which we are speaking, not only are the two former modes of justice inadequate, but neither is this third enough. We are seeking something larger.

For we are not looking for that justice which only befits men, but rather we are after the justice and

goodness which befits the sons of God, adoption as which we gain through Christ, so that we are called and are the sons of God, and are partakers of the divine nature. Consequently this goodness and this justice of the soul which is proper for the sons of God is called *Christian* justice. By it we are justified in the sight of God, whereas by the previous types we are justified before men. We can readily take an example of this matter from human life and custom. Let us suppose there is a peasant, whose family has always lived in the countryside. He has sons, and he raises them as a peasant in the manners of the countryside, and trains them well and carefully. Certainly if a young man brought up in this way should become a citizen, and be made an intimate of the prince, and a courtier brought into the grace of a royal son, then his former manners by all means are suitable for the politeness and nobility of a country dweller, but are nevertheless far beneath and fall short of the manners required of a citizen, and especially of an intimate of the king. So it is that those earlier human justices, which are appropriate for a man, are far beneath this justice, which is demanded of the sons of God and partakers of the divine nature.

What we have said thus far about justice should be sufficient. Now let us come to the other term which is included in the word *justification*, which is to be *made* just. We should say therefore that *to be made* and *to make*, so far as it pertains to the business at hand, is understood in two ways. For we say that whiteness makes a wall white, and we also say that the plastering of a painter makes a wall white. In nearly the same fashion we say that health makes a man healthy, and likewise that healing makes a man healthy. These two modes of speech differ. For whiteness makes a wall white as a form inhering in the wall, and health makes a man healthy as a form inhering in the body. Wherefore we shall say that this *making* (as I might call it) is *formal*, and we will label it to make *formally*. Plastering to be sure makes a wall white as the action of the painter, and thus does so *efficiently*. Again, we shall say that healing makes a man healthy efficiently.

With these points set forth regarding justification, let us now turn to *faith*. Faith also is spoken of in various ways. For sometimes that which is believed is called faith, according to what is maintained in the Athanasian Creed: 'This is the Catholic faith, which except a man believe', etc. Sometimes the habit by which we believe that which has been delivered from God is called faith. Now and again the act itself by which we believe is customarily termed faith. Although this act is elicited by the intellect, it is nonetheless commanded by the will, and thus the Apostle says, 'For the obedience of faith'. For indeed we believe because we wish to obey God. Faith also is called trust, because we have confidence in the promise someone has made to us. In this sense we talk about keeping faith and breaking faith. Cicero

wrote in the first book of *De Officiis* that this faith was spoken of to the effect that by it that which was pledged gets performed; and he set down such faith as part of justice. Thus marital faith is classified among the three goods of matrimony, according to which each of the spouses in turn pledges mutual faithfulness, and again believes and trusts the promise of the other.

But let us associate this faith with the divine promise, which is faith in God inasmuch as he keeps his promises. So it is in the psalm: God 'is faithful in all his words'. So it is with Paul: 'Has their iniquity made the faith of God without effect?' This faith truly is in us so far as we trust in the divine promise. Faith in this sense as trust is joined with its meaning as hope. Hope properly looks toward the future, while trust in fact also regards the present and past; but in any case, such trust is close to hope. And so it happens that the one is oftentimes used for the other. John of Damascus writes in his fourth book that faith is taken in two senses: the one he says is assent, while the other he says is hope for those things which have been promised to us. To this latter sense he refers the definition of faith which the Apostle gives in the Epistle to the Hebrews, when he says, 'faith is the substance of things to be hoped for', etc. In many passages from the Apostle Paul we have this estimation of faith as confidence. For now one suffices from the Epistle to the Romans, when he speaks concerning Abraham, on whose example the Apostle very greatly relies. He says, 'he was not weak in distrust, but grew strong in faith'. Behold how over against distrust he has set faith, that is, confidence.

We have discussed these things because if a man has not understood them well, he will not grasp rightly the whole matter we are handling. Let us add that to be justified or to be made just, being also taken *efficiently* (as we said above), can moreover be understood in two ways: namely, *properly*, as when it is brought about that a man from being unjust is made just; and also *less properly*, when someone becomes more just, and from a lesser justice advances to a greater justice. In this fashion we also say that something is made hot in two ways.

Now it is time that we come to the explanation of justification, and first of that justification by which an ungodly adult from being unjust is made just. If the efficient cause of this justification is sought, no one doubts but that it is by the Holy Spirit. For God alone forgives sins; God gives grace; God justifies the ungodly. The way, however, in which the Holy Spirit effects this is the motion and also the inspiration whereby he illuminates the man's understanding and moves his will. For in fact this is the way in which a man does something, as far as he is a man, to wit, as far as he does it freely and of his own accord. However the Holy Spirit stirs the man's will by converting it to God, and in this fashion the heart is prepared by God, and the man prepares himself, inasmuch as this conversion is

voluntary and in no way is forced. But nobody is able to be converted to God voluntarily, unless he should be turned away from impiety and from sin, just as happens in every motion; for someone draws back in whatever from the one contrary, that he may arrive at the other. Therefore man's will first draws back from sin, and abandons impiety through the renunciation of impiety and sin, and then raises itself to God, to whom it is being turned back. As St Thomas says, and as can be gathered from very plain reasoning, this first movement of the soul is the movement of faith, and we call this motion or act *faith*. Now this motion begins from the will, which, obedient to God and to faith, brings it about that the intellect assents without hesitation to what has been delivered by God. The intellect thus trusts in the divine promises, and draws from them a firm confidence, which reaches to the will, so that in a kind of circle as it were this faith begins from the will and finishes with the will.

Moreover the promise of God, whom it firmly believes, and on that account derives confidence, is (as St Thomas writes in the First Part of the Second) that God forgives sins and justifies the ungodly 'through the mystery of Christ'. For he himself is become the author of salvation to all who believe on him. And so this motion of faith, after the renunciation of sin, raises the mind to God, and turns the soul back to him. With the soul converted, God pours out his Spirit and heals, sanctifies, justifies, and adopts it, bringing it into sonship through the Spirit of his own Son, through whom being shed abroad in our hearts we cry out, 'Abba, Father'. Further, with the Spirit of Christ he grants us Christ himself, and freely, by his mercy, makes all of his righteousness ours, and imputes it to us who have put on Christ. In the meantime, while indeed the soul is being thus prepared by the Lord, and is also preparing its own self, (seeing that this preparation does not occur in a moment of time, except by some miracle, as happened with Paul the Apostle,) if there should be occasion, he who is being converted does good works and refrains from evil. Nevertheless, as Paul says, and as St Augustine writes in countless passages, and Thomas distinctly also in the First Part of the Second, justification and sanctification is not given for our works; but rather it is owed to faith, not because we merit justification through faith and the fact that we believe, but because we receive it through faith. For so says the Apostle in his Epistle to Galatians: 'receiving the promise of the Spirit through faith'. Likewise in the Epistle to the Romans: 'by whom we have access through faith into this grace'. Again, in the Epistle to the Hebrews: 'he that cometh to God must believe', because by so believing we come to this access.

St Thomas in the Third Part calls this accepting of which the Apostle speaks *application*. He says that the passion of Christ is like a shared medicine, which each applies to himself by faith, and by the sacraments of faith. The Protestants call this *apprehending*, not in the sense which you suppose in your

letter given to me, namely that which pertains to intellectual cognition, but in the sense noted above, namely that according to which we talk of apprehending the thing at which we arrive, and which after our movement we reach.

We attain moreover to a *twofold justice*. The one is inherent in ourselves, by which it we begin to be just, and are made partakers of the divine nature, and have charity poured forth in our hearts. The other in truth is not inherent, but is given to us with Christ, the justice (I say) of Christ, and all his merit. Each is given to us at the same time, and we arrive at both through faith. Which of them in fact is by nature prior, is a question which more concerns the debates of the schools than the business of faith which we are handling. We will therefore postpone it to another time, just as we also are deferring another controversy which could be presented to us, viz., which is first by nature, forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God, or infusion of grace. If at some point we happen upon a more opportune place I will say what I think on both topics. For now let us pass by both. Because, moreover, God has given us Christ and all things with him, the Apostle's statement is clear in the Epistle to the Romans, 'He that spared not his own son, has he not given us all things with him?' So too, 'unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given'. When in the Mass we offer Christ to God, do we not say in the canon, 'To thee we offer from thy presents and gifts a pure sacrifice, a holy sacrifice, a sacrifice without blemish'? Our blessed father Augustine says as much in many passages, but one now comes to mind. I know not whether it is in the soliloquies or the meditations. 'Whatsoever I am lacking', declares that good father, 'I take to myself from the heart and bowels of my Lord'.

Having discussed these things hitherto, which I believe no one can contest, let us now explore the proposition before us. We are justified by faith, but not *formally*, to wit, as if the faith inherent in us should make us just, much as whiteness makes a wall white, or health makes a man healthy. For in this way the love and grace of God inhering in us, and the justice of Christ that is given and imputed to us, has made us just. Nor do we understand *faith* as a habit, as we said above, but rather as an act. Yet the proposition is true, if it should be interpreted *efficiently*, just as it is plastering that has made a wall white, and it is healing that makes a man healthy. In this way, or in a manner not unlike it, faith makes a man just and justifies, since it is through faith that we arrive at each justice. And because every movement is incomplete unless it should reach its end, so also the motion of faith is imperfect if it should not arrive at the love which we obtain. Therefore the faith which justifies, is a faith formed by love, or efficacious through love; and unless it arrives at this, it is ineffectual for justification. This is just as though we should say that this cure effects health which arrives at health, and it is effective

through health, and thus can also be called healing.

What we have already said can appear to be sufficient with respect to our justification, and to me what was said seems so clear, that nothing is left in which anyone could be uncertain. But we have stated that we attain to a *twofold justice* through faith: the justice (I say) inherent in us, and the love, and grace by which we are made partakers of the divine nature; as well as the justice of Christ which to us is given and imputed, because we are grafted into Christ and have put on Christ. It remains therefore for us to look into the question, on which of the two we ought to rely, and to suppose that we are justified by it before God, that is, reckoned holy and just. This justice, I say, which is of the sort that befits the sons of God, and satisfies before the eyes of God--is it by the justice and charity inherent in us, or rather by the justice of Christ given and imputed to us?

Truly I think it is said both piously and christianly that we ought to rely, to rely (I say) as on a thing that is stable and certainly able to support us, upon the justice of Christ which is given to us, and not upon the sanctity and grace inherent in us. For verily this justice of ours is but begun and imperfect, and as such cannot defend us, seeing that in many things we offend, and that we sin continually, and for this reason need the prayer by which we daily ask to have our debts forgiven us. Therefore in the sight of God we cannot on account of this righteousness of ours be considered just and good, such as it befits the sons of God to be good and holy. But the righteousness of Christ which is given to us is true and perfect righteousness, which is altogether pleasing in the eyes of God, and in which there is nothing that offends God, indeed that does not please him in the highest degree. On this therefore alone, as sure and stable, ought we to rely, and on account of it alone to believe ourselves justified before God, that is, considered and pronounced just. This is that precious treasure of Christians, which whoever discovers it sells all that he owns to buy it. This is the pearl of great price, which he who finds it leaves everything, so that he might have it. The Apostle Paul says, 'I have counted everything else but loss that I might gain Christ, not having my own righteousness, but that which is through the faith of Christ'. Indeed, to those who rely on their own holiness it is said in the Apocalypse: 'Because thou art lukewarm I will begin to vomit thee out of my mouth. For thou sayest: I am rich, I have need of nothing; and seest not thine own nakedness', and so forth, as elsewhere. Again we read in the Apocalypse: 'I will give thee a new stone, and in the stone is a name written, which no man knoweth but he that receiveth it'. This name is the name of Christ, and truly no one knows it except he who receives it.

From this it comes that in experience we see holy men, who the more they advance in holiness, the

less they please themselves. Because of this they understand better that they need Christ, and the righteousness of Christ which is given to them; and so they give themselves up and rest on Christ alone. Such does not happen for this reason, that being made holier they see less than before. Nor is it because they have become lower and baser in spirit. On the contrary, the more they advance in holiness, the stronger they are in spirit, and the more penetrating is their sight. Wherefore, being made more penetrating in vision, they behold more keenly the thinness of that sanctity and righteousness which inheres in them, and they perceive many stains with it, which more greatly offend their now keener eyes. Thus in very truth they recognize that they ought not to rely upon the holiness, charity, and grace which inhere in them, but ought rather to fly to Christ, and to the grace of Christ given to them, on which they lean and repose.

Let us return to the example we put forward above about the peasant who, having come into the grace of being a son of the king, is made a citizen and courtier of the king, and who has already begun to absorb royal manners. To be sure, even though he has begun to be trained in royal manners, vestiges of the countryside remain in him, and so this man still is not pleasing to the king, and there are many things in him which offend the king. Nevertheless, he holds him as a courtier and an intimate on account of the grace and merits of being his son, which he gave to the peasant.

St Thomas, when he speaks about the sacrament of baptism, says that it washes away all sins and all guilt and debt of punishment whatsoever. He gives this as an explanation, that each person is baptized into the death of Christ, and is buried with him, as the Apostle says. Therefore the baptized man is so situated as if he himself, assuming the person of Christ, had died, and had suffered and been buried together with Christ, and with Christ had risen again to new life. Behold how with great clarity this man, equally most learned and most holy, says that the death of Christ, his passion and merit are given to us and imputed to us in baptism, which is the sacrament of faith. This is not because they inhere in us who now live, but because they are given and imputed to us.

I believe this topic about justification in the presence of God has already been sufficiently elucidated, viz. on which justice we ought to rely: whether to rely, I say, on the justice inherent in us, or on the justice of Christ given and imputed to us. But, you will say that the authorities which I have set out in my letter appear to oppose this or that statement.

The first is from David in the seventeenth psalm: 'Judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness, and according to mine innocence, according to the cleanness of my hands; for I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not done wickedly against my God; because all his judgments were

in my sight, and his justices I have not put away from me.' Behold how plainly these men, who look at a few things, say that David leans on his own justice and his own innocence. Certainly if David had understood these words as they understand them, so that on this account he had thought himself justified before God, not only would these things he says have been spoken with arrogance and pride, and for that reason deserve more blame than the prayer of the Pharisee in the Gospel, who says far less about himself; but they would simply be lies. For as a matter of fact, this man who (to ignore daily sins) had been an adulterer, and who had slain a friendly man very near to himself in order to seize his wife, how could he truly declare that he had not done wickedly against his God, that he had kept all his judgments in his sight, and the other things which he says there? Therefore, lest we should force such arrogance and such lies upon the very mild and gentle king, let us draw nearer and correctly ascertain his meaning.

As is understood from the psalm's title, David composed and also sang the seventeenth psalm after his enemies had been subdued, the chief of whom were Saul and Absalom. David always treated these men humanely, and never plotted anything against them. Much to the contrary, he protected them when they were delivered into his power, and the demise of each he faced with great grief in his spirit. Thus everything said in the psalm should be directed to these enemies of his, that is, to how he was deserving of good, and to all his works toward them. It should not, however, be directed to his own justice inherent in himself before God, and in the sight of his eyes. This statement is straightforward, and no one can cling to it. But indeed, notice what David says when he speaks with his own self and addresses his words to his soul: 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all he hath done for thee; who forgiveth all thine iniquities, who healeth all thy diseases; who crowneth thee with mercy and compassion; who satisfieth thy desire with good things. For as a father hath compassion on his children, so hath the Lord compassion on them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our iniquities from us', etc. Compare these things, I beseech you, with those which you bring forward from the seventeenth psalm, and you will see how much they differ. Very evident then is the sense in which they have agreed.

Another passage which is cited, namely, 'This shall be our justice, if we observe all these precepts', does nothing against our judgment. For it is true that our justice, I say our *human*, which is our *legal* justice, about which we have spoken above, is to keep the precepts of the law. This is true even though, as we stated earlier, we are after a loftier kind of justice, which is proper for the sons of God. Still, as Paul the Apostle declares, since no one keeps all the precepts of the law, as far as regards the justice of

the law, we all are under a curse, according to that saying, 'Cursed is he that continueth not in all the words of this law'. For no one keeps all the precepts of the law, especially the precept about love, as reaching to the inner movement of the heart; and thus we all need Christ, through whom we obtain grace and charity. By these we begin in a certain lower sense to keep the law; and in addition all his righteousness is ascribed to us, as many of us as have put on Christ.

A further passage you adduce was this, 'It will be reckoned for righteousness before the Lord to return the poor man his deposit'. No one doubts but that it pertains to justice in the form of that *particular* virtue we discussed above to return a deposit not only to a poor man but to anyone. But because the pauper stands in greater need, the damage will be larger if it is not returned, and the injustice will be greater. And consequently the Holy Spirit exhorts us to this kind of justice. Nevertheless, we are not on account of it justified before God, according to the reasoning and the rule we applied above. For if to return his deposit to the poor man were adequate for this justification, then many Jews and a good many Moslems would be justified before God. For it happens that many of them are so instructed that they never hold back a deposit entrusted to them. In this manner should the saying also be spoken about Phinehas.

It seems to me that these passages which have been brought forward are so clear that they could make for no uncertainty about this opinion on which Catholics and Protestants have agreed. It also appears that the passages are not understood correctly enough by those who rely on them. What we have said to this point does, I believe, amply address that justification by which it is brought about that an adult from being ungodly is made just. But there is also another type of justification, by which a man from being just becomes more just, much as he is said to be made hot who from being less hot becomes hotter. It is according to this mode that it is said in the Apocalypse, 'He that is just, let him be justified still'. Therefore, in order that the entire plan of justification may be understood, let us add a few things about this kind of justification.

Every animal or plant which nature brings forth into the light and produces is allotted in its generation a certain appearance or nature. Nonetheless it does not stay put at that step in which it was allotted its nature and animal appearance, but it has a certain course to follow until it arrives at the perfected condition for its nature. So it is with man, so too with birds, so with animals both from land and water. They do not rest in that size and weak condition of the body in which they were born, but either they are carried along without interruption to the perfection which the nature of each has appointed, or of necessity they perish. It is the same case with him who through faith has obtained

charity and the Spirit of Christ, and has been made a new creature in Christ Jesus. If he wills to rest at that stage in which he was born spiritually, and not to advance further, then no one doubts but that in a brief space of time he may fall back into a worse state, and lose the spirit which he received, and let go of both justices. For no one can take to himself the righteousness of Christ who does not have the Spirit of Christ and does not live in Christ. It is necessary therefore that we all march on and stretch for what is before us, for 'if a man chances to relax his arms, the current drags him headlong down the rushing stream'.

This progress happens through good works both internal and external, which when they are done with love and by the Spirit of God, also increase love. For in fact, just as the origin for the generation of each thing is from the outside, since nothing produces its own self, so too the origin of growth is extrinsic, for surely every animal is strengthened by its spirit. Thus, the charity inherent in us, the Spirit of Christ, and the grace which by this is always fostered, and which flows out from the fullness of his grace, (I say) from Christ's: these cannot be idle, but the person exercises himself either in internal meditations and prayers, or else with external works of piety. From this working are charity and grace increased, which also increase faith. For we believe and trust him more whom we love more, and in this way we are more and more justified. Accordingly, as we noted above, the Holy Spirit says in the Apocalypse: 'He that is just, let him be justified still'.

This justification can be said to happen by works, and can be called *justification of works*. The earlier justification, however, by which a man is made a new creature in Christ, is not owed to our works, but to the Holy Spirit, who moves our heart by taking it away from a life of sin, and by raising it in faith to God through Christ, till it becomes a partaker of charity and grace, as we have explained at length above. Still, this justification is shown forth by the works which follow it, and this faith is perfected, or formed and efficacious through love, as James writes in his Epistle. For if good works should not follow, then that faith was imperfect and vain. And so we walk in these good works, as St Paul says, and in this way our calling is made sure, as Peter says. For we are further justified by them, and we reach out to perfection; and if we neglect these things we slip backward. For in the way of the Lord, not to go forward is to go backward, and at last to fall headlong.

So it is that those who say we are justified by works speak the truth, and those who say we are justified not by works but through faith also speak the truth. But in order that both sayings may be understood correctly, it is necessary properly to explain and to elucidate the whole matter, since in fact it is quite entangled and overgrown. In this letter we have made an effort, doing as much as we were

able, in order to clear up these matters and make them easy to see. Whether indeed we have achieved this will be up to the judgment of the most venerable and illustrious Cardinal of Mantua your patron, my high regard for whom you know, as well as that of yourself. Fare thee well in the Lord.

Regensburg, May the 25th of 1541.

Notes:

1. Contarini attributes the following saying to St Augustine, but is unsure from what work it comes: *Quicquid mihi deest, usurpo mihi ex visceribus Domini mei*. It appears to be taken from the *Manuale* (lib. i, c. 21), a composition of doubtful authorship sometimes printed, as Contarini implies, alongside the soliloquies and meditations also attributed to Augustine. Cf. the 'Admonitio' in PL 40:950. See also St Bernard on the Song of Songs, *S.* 61, 4, where a statement with the same phrasing is found in a passage which would no doubt have held Contarini's attention.
2. Pole, when writing to Contarini about this treatise on justification, echoes the latter's words about the precious pearl, congratulating him that to his friend's past services to the Church God has now added this, *ut istam veritatis sententiam, quam quasi margaritam pretiosam partim absconditam, partim apertam ecclesia semper tenuit, ipse in multorum manus et quasi possessionem dares*. For more on Pole's letter, including his criticism of the treatise, see Fenlon, *Heresy and Obedience*, p. 60, and Mayer, *Reginald Pole*, p. 109.
3. Regarding Revelation 22:11, it should be observed that where Weber/Gryson and the Nova Vulgata read *et iustus iustitiam faciat adhuc*, the Clementine Vulgate and other texts instead read *et qui justus est, justificetur adhuc*.