

Cardinal Reginald Pole  
Memorandum on Justification  
October of 1546

Never can it truly be said that man is justified before God by works, as much by those performed apart from grace, which merely are sins, as by those done in grace, even though these, as far as they indeed proceed from grace, are both called good and are; for nonetheless they are wrought in us and by us, who from our own selves are always bad, and they can never be so good, that we may be justified before God through them. 'For if thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities', and so forth, says the Prophet. 'And enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified'. When he says 'no man', he undoubtedly has exempted no one, nor does he speak only about those who are first being converted to God through faith. Truly the Prophet, who is making these prayers on his own occasion, would not himself then for the first time be uttering them to God, as though he were being converted to him through faith when previously he had not known him. Rather, he was being turned back through penitence and faith to him from whom, in view of some chastisement loosed upon him by God, he believed himself to have turned away by a certain transgression, one known perhaps to nobody besides himself, or else not even to himself but to God alone. 'Cleanse me from my secret faults, O Lord', etc. Abraham indeed, who was the 'father' and type of 'all who believe', when he received testimony from God himself of the righteousness of faith, was not then being converted to him for the first time. Long before he had both known him by believing and followed him by obeying. And yet the Apostle says concerning him, 'What then shall we say that he found?', etc. This should not be understood only as regarding the first conversion to God, as though after that either we had no sins, or else they were forgiven and covered through another way than by the mercy of God in Christ, whom we apprehend by faith. For concerning the faithful it is written: 'If we say that we have no sin', etc.

But through what justice does he do this? Assuredly it is through that justice which in the gospel he has promised and holds out to believers through the remission of sins. It is not, however, through that justice which he has promised in the law through the fulfillment of the commandments, and which he gives as due for works. It is, I say, through that justice in which alone the Prophet prays that he might be heard and delivered, saying, 'In thy truth hear me, and in thy righteousness'. Again, in another place: 'Deliver me in thy justice, and rescue me'. 'For if thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities', etc. For John the Apostle writes, 'If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us'. This word indeed, as long as it remains in us, never fails to convict us of sin; and thus it urges and impels us to flee to the mercy of God, which is to Christ, and to embrace him through faith, since he

'who knew no sin, was made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him' and through him.

For the same Apostle declares to all the faithful: 'Of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption; that, as it is written', etc.

And though in fact it is certain alike from the testimony of the scriptures and from experience that these things are so, still they are not spoken in the proper sense that they may render us less guarded and more readily inclined to commit sin. For we who are dead to sin, how shall we live in it? 'For we are not debtors to the flesh', etc. 'For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God'. And it is in this that they indeed do not sin who are led by the Spirit of God: namely, the fact that because they are the sons of God, they do not sin. 'For whosoever is born of God sinneth not'; and the same man said this, who a little earlier had written, 'If we say that we have no sin', etc. 'For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit', so that whatever things we will according to the latter's influence, the same we do not do. For 'to will is present with me; but how to perform that thing I find not. For the good that I will I do not: but the evil which I will not, that I do'. So speaks that man upon whom God had poured out his Spirit, not sparingly but liberally and in abundance. As one may see, through the Spirit he delighted 'in the law of God after the inward man', and yet the same man was himself finding 'another law in his members, warring against the law of his mind', and in this way drawing him as a captive to the law of sin, so that he was compelled to exclaim, 'O wretched man that I am!' However, the word of God remained in him, by which he not only was convicted and cast down on account of his own personal sin and misery, but also was defended and raised up after being reminded of the mercy of God through Christ, lest he should rush 'headlong into the pit' of despair. For this reason, being carried forth by faith and hope he immediately adds: 'I thank God', and so forth. And again, repeating in summary what he had said earlier, he concludes: 'So then with the mind I myself', etc. 'But there is now no condemnation', etc.

For although these men both have and perceive sin in their flesh, in which no good thing dwells, still they do not consent as servants to it. Nor do they walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit, while in this, the fact that they sin, they do not please themselves, but very greatly displease and grieve themselves. And they call upon God the Father, daily and always praying, 'Forgive us our debts' through Jesus Christ thy Son and our Lord, whose word and Spirit within and without constantly admonishes us that we sin not. 'For, my little children', says John the Apostle, addressing you and all the faithful by this name, 'I write these things to you, that ye sin not; but if any man sin', let him not

despair, nor let him trust that he will obtain pardon from God through any other way than this one alone, which the Apostle Paul points out to us when he says: 'Having confidence in the entering in to the holy places by the blood of Jesus, as a new and living way, which he hath dedicated for us through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; and having an high priest over the house of God: Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering; for he is faithful that hath promised'.

So too John the Apostle, after he had said, 'But if any man sin', at once joined this to it, 'We have an advocate', etc. And lest a carnal man should think that through these things license for sin is in any way given him after the reception of grace, he immediately adds and declares who they are, who have Christ the righteous as an advocate with the Father, and 'for' whose 'sins' he was made 'the propitiation'. It is in truth not those who, since they do not keep his commandments, display by this fact that they are little acquainted with him. For though with the mouth they profess that 'they know God and Christ, yet in their works they deny him'. 'But we', he says, 'by this we know that we have known him, if we keep his commandments'. 'For unto this were ye called', says the Apostle Peter, when he exhorts us to patience and to the bearing of evils by the example of Christ: 'because', he writes, 'Christ also suffered for us', etc. But will this be able to be said about no one else except the one man himself? By no means here: 'For we are all sinners and always need the glory of God'; so that plainly through faith are we justified before him, 'in whose sight shall no man living be justified'. For, 'if thou shouldest mark iniquities', etc. We endure, however, as many as believe in him truly and from the heart, not having trusted in our righteousness, but in his word, in which he has promised to the penitent and to those who believe on him that he will freely forgive them their sins through his mercy in the name of Christ.

Wherefore, resting on him by this faith always our soul has hoped, does hope, and ever will hope unto the end: 'For my soul hath hoped in the Lord', he says, 'From the morning watch even until night let Israel hope in the Lord'. But why? 'Because with the Lord there is mercy', it is said, 'and with him is plentiful redemption', 'who bore our sins in his body upon the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live to righteousness: by whose stripes we were healed'. Surely it was from this infirmity that he died for the ungodly, and not from that which that just and pious king was hitherto perceiving in his own flesh. And because of this he cried out: 'Heal me, Lord, for I am weak'. 'For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly', etc. 'And not only it, but ourselves also', says the Apostle, 'who have the firstfruits of the Spirit', etc. 'Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities', etc. By his help, even

if we fall seven times in a day, still we never fall not to rise again. 'For though the just man fall, he shall not be bruised', etc. Moreover, how this happens is related by the Prophet as he speaks in his own case about the fall and the infirmity explained earlier: 'Because I kept silence', he says, 'my bones waxed old, while I cried out all the day long'. The cause of his crying indeed was this: 'For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me; my moisture was turned into the drought of summer'. But how at last, and on what account did you rise again from your fall and recover from your infirmity? He says, 'My sin I made known unto thee', etc.

Behold, therefore, that even the saints themselves sin; and while they are judged by God for sins, they are chastened by him, so that they should not be condemned 'with this world'. For these men, when reminded of their weakness and their sins, flee to the mercy of God, and they seek and obtain pardon from him because of him 'who loved us and gave his own self for us'. For 'there is no other name under heaven given to men, whereby we must be saved'. Nor is there any other sacrifice and propitiation for sins, whether committed before baptism and grace or after baptism and grace, besides that 'one', which himself once 'offering for sins for all time, he sitteth on the right hand of God, from henceforth waiting until his enemies should be made his footstool: for by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified'. 'Let us go therefore with confidence to the throne of his grace', we who understand ourselves to be just and holy in him and through him by true faith, even though we the same men in our own selves are unjust and sinners; let us do this giving thanks to him for that justice which by his unspeakable gift we have as well in him as in our own selves; while for our sins, which by our fault only are never lacking in us, let us be asking pardon from him without ceasing, and always having the saying equally in our heart and in our mouth: 'Enter not into judgment', etc. 'If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities', etc. 'In thy truth hear me', etc.

Notes:

1. For the background of this document, as well as commentary on it, see chapter 11 of Dermot Fenlon's *Heresy and Obedience in Tridentine Italy*. Compare Thomas F. Mayer's *Reginald Pole: Prince and Prophet*, pp. 156-7.
2. It is curious that Pole's opening sentence should resemble a line from St Augustine, who once wrote: *numquam vere dici ab homine potest, quod ante conspectum Dei sit iustus, cui comparatus quilibet iniquus est*. It is further curious, in light of this piece's title, that the line in question should come from Augustine's *Annotationes in Iob*, 35. The print edition in volume 12 of *Concilium Tridentinum* notes many of Pole's scriptural citations but does not mention the patristic parallel. It would be interesting to learn whether the document as originally written gave indication of the allusion.

N.B. *This translation is an initial draft and should be compared against the original Latin.* JMA.