

## **Learning from the ‘Annoying Other’. The Roman Catholic Critics of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification***

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### *Introduction*

Receptivity and ‘receptive ecumenism’ have to do with the relationship with the other. But who is the other? Roman Catholics do not *necessarily* have to go and meet people from other denominations in order to encounter ‘the other’. There are enough annoying people within the Roman Catholic church to have profound experiences of otherness within its visual boundaries. For ecumenically oriented Roman Catholics one of these annoying others is the group of ecumenical sceptics who merely defend the Roman Catholic tradition against ecumenical compromises and who seem to assume that we cannot learn anything from other Christians. In this paper I will address the question how we can learn from the sceptics, from those who do not want to learn anything. I will turn to the case of Roman Catholic critics of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*

### *The critics of the Joint Declaration*

In the Tridentine *Decree on Justification*, it is asserted that the only formal cause of justification is God’s righteousness *by which we are made righteous* (DH 1529). That means that what happens in justification is a real cleansing of the human person, a destruction of sin and the infusion of the supernatural virtues of faith, hope and love (DH 1530). It is an event (justification) that in an important respect takes place in the here and now at the level of

created reality. This is expressed in the Tridentine interpretation of justifying grace as 'inhering grace' (DH 1530, 1547, 1561).

It is this idea of grace as really becoming part of the believer's ontological reality that is the core of the argument of some Roman Catholic theologians against the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. I am thinking of the German Cardinal Leo Scheffczyk and the American theologian Christopher J. Malloy. They quite accurately, point to the fact that none of the traditional expressions of this idea ('created grace', 'inhering grace', 'habitual grace', and so on) has found its way into the final text of the *Joint Declaration*. At first sight this fact is quite unsurprising. For the ecumenical dialogue simply has to transcend the letter of some traditional doctrinal formulations in order to overcome mutual condemnations of the past, especially when these formulations lead to controversial 'yes or no' questions such as 'does justification involve inhering grace?'

Therefore it may appear more fruitful to avoid this question and to rephrase the problem in terms of questions that can be answered in a more differentiated way. This is precisely what is attempted in the *Joint Declaration*: the seven subsections in which the consensus is unfolded can all be seen as substantively related to the issue of 'inherent grace', without however addressing the question explicitly. This does not necessarily imply that the drafters of the document maliciously circumvented an irritating problem by secretly diverting the attention to more comfortable questions. The breaking down of church-dividing yes-or-no questions into other, less aggravating issues is a conscious and in itself legitimate hermeneutical strategy. It is based on the conviction that certain dividing yes-or-no questions are in reality distorting the matter at stake, because they rest on polemical exaggerations and the generalization of a particular theological (scholastic) discourse. Turning to other questions than that of 'inhering grace' is simply considered here to lead to a more appropriate statement of the problem of justification.

The Roman Catholic sceptics of the *Joint Declaration*, however, adopt another strategy based on another conviction. Their stance towards the question of ‘inhering grace’ or ‘inhering righteousness’ can be called apologetic, rather than hermeneutical. They do not attempt to *interpret* the question into other terms, but rather to defend its traditional Roman Catholic – i.e. Tridentine – answer. This approach is based on the conviction that the yes-or-no question of ‘inhering grace’ is still a very relevant question, which keeps lurking behind each of the different topics on which the *Joint Declaration* claims to have established a consensus. Consequently, as long as this question remains unanswered, the consensus can be called into question again. So the only way forward would be either to arrive at a common answer to the question or *at least* to make the Catholic answer plausible as a legitimate interpretation of justification.

Now here lies the crux of the matter. For these Roman Catholic critics of the *Joint Declaration* would not be satisfied with ‘inhering righteousness’ being presented as *one possible* interpretation of justification. For them, communion with Lutherans would require the latter to accept and adopt the idea of grace inhering in the very being of the creature. But since Lutherans have generally rejected this idea, the Roman Catholic critics are demanding from the dialogue partner nothing less than doctrinal capitulation, something the dialogue has carefully attempted to avoid. That is why the proposal of Scheffczyk and Malloy may come across as anti-ecumenical.

The interesting thing is that the *Joint Declaration* itself also did not present ‘inhering righteousness’ as one legitimate interpretation of justification. The notion of ‘created grace’, which basically refers to the same reality, was mentioned in the first draft of 1995. It did not reappear, however in the second draft and in the final version. This is remarkable, considering the method of ‘differentiated consensus’ used in the *Joint Declaration*. This method would have allowed ‘inhering righteousness’ to appear in a Roman Catholic paragraph of the *Joint*

*Declaration* without forcing the Lutheran dialogue partner to embrace it as a binding articulation of faith. The only thing what the Roman Catholic participants had to do was to explain the idea as a plausible and possible formulation of justification. The fact that created grace was barred from the second and third version of the document creates the impression that the Roman Catholics in the commission either failed to present this idea with sufficient plausibility or did not find it important enough to uphold it.

It would seem then that there are two possibilities in this discussion: either to go along with the conclusion that a central article of Catholic faith has been lost in the ecumenical dialogue or to defend the *joint Declaration* against these ‘conservative’ and anti-ecumenical attacks. But would it not be possible to give a more differentiated judgement about this issue? Let me try.

#### *A differentiated assessment*

Why is there a certain plausibility in the argument of Malloy and Scheffczyk? Scheffczyk argues that only when justifying grace is seen as ‘inhering’ in the human person, the relationship between God and man can be rightly viewed as a real relationship in which both are involved as partners, the human being of course as the subordinate partner, but still as a partner. Only when grace enters into the very being of the creature, the human can encounter a gracious God from face to face, without being destroyed as a person (267, 273). One could wonder, however, whether we really need this metaphysical interpretation of grace (as ‘a quality of the soul’) in order to safeguard the personal nature of the God-man relationship. What is the ‘soul’ anyway? And what is ‘being’? Still, let me try to continue my defence of Malloy and Scheffczyk for a short while.

In 2008 the first part was published of a *Katholische Dogmatik aus ökumenischer Erfahrung* ('catholic dogmatics proceeding from ecumenical experience'), written by Hermann Otto Pesch, a Catholic scholar whose theological and ecumenical work greatly influenced the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue. In the chapter on justification Pesch summarizes the consensus reached between the different Christian denominations on justification in seven points. The first point is precisely that 'contemporary Catholic theology does not believe that one can only talk appropriately about grace and justification in the terminology of medieval theology'. In other words, expressions like 'inhering grace' and 'grace as quality of the soul' are not the only language in which we can talk about justification. In practice, however, Pesch is going further than that, for he is virtually abandoning all 'scholastic' language in this chapter in favour of a more existential idiom. He writes about grace as 'God's gentle power' (*Gottes sanfte Macht*). God does not violently crush the human being, but rather fills His beloved partner with a new delight in God's will (63). As such, this more existential way of speaking is not problematic. After all, Scheffczyk also reaches for the existential language of partnership in order to make the theological idea of inhering grace plausible.

A problem emerges, however, when Pesch describes the ecumenical consensus on the meaning of human cooperation in grace. There he writes that this cooperation is 'not a partner-like collaboration with God on one's own justification, but literally only consent (*Zustimmung*), and so response and non-resistance' (124). Pesch sounds more Lutheran here than the Catholic paragraph on cooperation in the *Joint Declaration*. In this paragraph cooperation is excluded only when it is interpreted as an 'action arising from innate human abilities'. Pesch seems to reject the idea of cooperation altogether. This is significant, because it seems to question his own existential idea of grace as 'God's gentle power'. In the event of justification, at the culmination point of God's salvific work, suddenly the human being cannot act as God's partner any more. His or her active faculties are silenced, except for the

ability of saying a humble 'yes' to the work that God is accomplishing in him or her. The Roman Catholic critics of the *Joint Declaration* would question the 'gentleness' of such an act of God, which annuls all human action.

My point is that the example of Pesch seems to give the analysis of Scheffczyk and Malloy a certain plausibility. Maybe the so-called 'scholastic' or 'medieval' terminology is indeed a necessary protection of the idea that is central to the Roman Catholic understanding of justification, namely the full personal involvement of the human being in salvation, an involvement that entails more than the *Zustimmung* of a deeply moved spectator. Pesch's abandonment of the traditional terminology seems to lead to an abandonment of the concern behind this terminology (the God-man partnership).

Does this mean that Pesch is wrong altogether? By no means! Especially his distinction between the Lutheran 'existential' and the thomistic 'sapiential' theological language remains crucial in the whole discussion. The whole problem is that in a certain respect Pesch is not completely living up to his own distinction. For in the end he is completely surrendering to an existential theology and thus sacrificing what remains valuable in the Roman Catholic sapiential approach.

But precisely this distinction (between 'existential' and a 'sapiential' language) also reveals the blind spot of Scheffczyk and Malloy. Scheffczyk repeatedly expresses his dislike for the paradoxical language of Lutheran theology (e.g. *simul iustus et peccator*) and his preference for the clarity of Catholic dogma. Similarly, Malloy is trying to prove that the Lutheran idea of imputed righteousness has no room in the structure of Roman Catholic doctrine. Ideas like *simul iustus et peccator* and imputed righteousness appear to them as exaggerated or one-sided accounts of something that is described in a more balanced way and with finer distinctions in *Denzinger*. They are implicitly thinking of Lutheran theology as a kind of metaphysics of sin and grace. What Malloy and Scheffczyk do not really consider is the

possibility that this theology may reflect an outrageous *experience* of ambiguity in human and ecclesial reality. It is in the light of this experience that the sapiential and metaphysical approach of Tridentine dogma, with its emphasis on the *real* holiness of the Christian, appears as unbearably idealistic. In other words, what Scheffczyk and Malloy are blind for the possibility that the encounter with Lutheran teaching reveals an intrinsic incompleteness of the whole Tridentine doctrine, no matter how balanced and precise this doctrine may be on a 'sapiential' level.

### *Conclusion*

What can we conclude from all this? It is clear that, in a certain respect, 'ecumenical sceptics' and 'ecumenical enthusiasts' are confirming each other's prejudices and fears. Pesch's silent abandonment of the idea of cooperation seems to confirm the fear of Malloy and Scheffczyk that learning from the other leads to a devaluation of Roman Catholic doctrinal substance. The approach of Malloy and Scheffczyk, in its turn, confirms the fear that an apologetic approach precludes the possibility of ecumenical learning.

How can we overcome this vicious circle of what become in the end mutually amplifying fears? I believe, three insight are important here

(1) First, Malloy and Scheffczyk have succeeded, in my opinion, in demonstrating the plausibility and importance of the idea of 'inhering grace', something the *Joint Declaration* failed to do. This shows that ecumenists should highly esteem the apologetic approach, an approach which in the case of Scheffczyk and Malloy *de facto* leads to a failure to learn from the other. But I do not see any reason why apologetics as such should *necessarily* guide us in that anti-ecumenical direction.

(2) Secondly, the encounter with the Lutheran tradition confronts Roman Catholics more clearly with the intrinsic incompleteness of their own teaching tradition. This incompleteness is also evident within the Roman Catholic Church in the form of an uneasiness with the traditional (e.g. Tridentine) formulations of dogma, an uneasiness felt both at grassroots level and in academic theology.

(3) These two conclusions taken together lead us to a third more paradoxical conclusion. For on the one hand we need the traditional formulae in order to safeguard the very content of our faith. But on the other hand we seem to be, in a certain respect, irreversibly alienated from these formulae, precisely because of our present-day existential experience. We *have* to defend our own tradition, but at the same time we know that it is not completely defensible. To put it a bit tongue-in-cheek and with great exaggeration: “the Tridentine teaching on justification is the worst interpretation of justification. The only problem is that we haven’t got a better one.” The ‘paradox of this conclusion consists in the fact that Roman Catholics cannot learn *nothing* from Lutherans. Lutherans *have* already confronted Roman Catholic dogmatics with its intrinsic incompleteness. The point is that Roman Catholics at the same time cannot learn *everything* from Lutherans, in the sense that a confrontation with the ‘otherness’ of Lutheran theology will not simply rescue Roman Catholics from the uneasiness they feel about their own normative traditions. Receiving the Lutheran doctrine of justification involves for Roman Catholics the process of painfully re-receiving and re-considering their own tradition.

One of the annoying thing about others is that they confront us with what is annoying about ourselves.