

The path that leads to Heaven: Law or Grace?

By Laurence Gonzaga

"Because by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified before him... For all have sinned and do need the glory of God. Being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, Whom God hath proposed to be a propitiation, through faith in his blood, to the shewing of his justice, for the remission of former sins, Through the forbearance of God, for the shewing of his justice in this time: that he himself may be just and the justifier of him who is of the faith of Jesus Christ... For we account a man to be justified by faith, without the works of the law. (Rom 3:20-28, DRB)

Anyone who has engaged in apologetical discussions with those of other Christian faiths would know this passage quite well. They often interpret these "works of the law" as good works in general. And so, they base their doctrine of *sola fide* (faith alone) on an erroneous understanding of this passage. Works are indeed necessary for salvation (Matthew 5:16, 16:27; John 3:21; James 2:14-24; etc.). But one would have to ask, then what are these "works of the law" and why can't one be justified, that is saved, by these works?

A few years ago a controversial document came out of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). It was called "Reflections on Covenant and Mission". In this document it states in the preface: "A deepening Catholic appreciation of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people, together with a recognition of a divinely-given mission to Jews to witness to God's faithful love, lead to the conclusion that campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church." This is a pretty strong position to take. One has to wonder, if this were true, why Christ would have had to come at all if there was already a perfectly good way to heaven in the Old Covenant? All one had to do was to become Jewish. But the question then follows: did the Law have the power to save to begin with?

If you are one of the very few Catholics these days who had the benefit of a solid, orthodox (right-belief), formation, you would recall that when sin entered the world, the gates of Heaven were closed until the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross opened them. So, where were the souls of the righteous of the Old Covenant? According to Catholic theology, they were

in a place called *limbus patrum* (Limbo of the Fathers). If this stuff is starting to sound familiar to you, then you will then reason, if the Law had the power to save, then these righteous of old would have been able to get to heaven even before the Sacrifice of Christ. So which is it then? Did Vatican II change these teachings? Some would like to think so. With some of the things I have heard from these so-called "experts", one would have to wonder if they ever read a single document from that Council at all. So, let us try to explore some pertinent texts to try to understand what the difference is between the Old and New Covenants, and if the Old Covenant is still around. One would have to think, considering what I said above, if the Old Covenant were still around, and it never had the power to save to begin with, even before the New Covenant... then how could we even hope that it has the power to save now?

The New Testament makes it quite clear, what the Old Covenant, otherwise known as the Law, was for; it was to make man aware of sin: "For by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). If one attempts to be justified according to the Old Law, he could not transgress even one law, for a transgression of one precept, is a transgression of the entire Law: "And whosoever shall keep the whole law, but offend in one point, is become guilty of all" (James 2:10). In the New Covenant, we are now in the system of grace, and not law: "For sin shall not have dominion over you: for you are not under the law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid!" (Rom 6:14-15).

But what about the Ten Commandments? Don't we still follow them? If so, then doesn't that mean the Law is still in effect? No. We follow the Ten Commandments, not because it is a matter of the law (Mosaic covenant), but because it is simply an expression of the eternal laws of God. As the *Catechism of the Council of Trent* states: "...all the Commandments contained in the two tables are observed by Christians, not indeed because their observance is commanded by Moses, but because they are in conformity with nature which dictates obedience to them" (TAN, 1982, p. 396). Of course! That is why the absolute law of worship on the Sabbath, according to the Law of Moses, can be changed by the authority of the New Testament Church, to be Sunday, the Day of the Lord. That is why "graven images" are now permissible in the context of worship and devotion.

In the wake of the controversial *Reflections* document of the USCCB, a press-release was written, which stated, "Reflections on Covenant and Mission, does not represent a formal position taken by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) or the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (BCEIA)." It's a good thing because the

formal acceptance of this position, in "dual covenant" theology, is heresy. There is only one path of salvation open to both Jew and Gentile today, and that is, the **only** eternal covenant, the covenant made in Jesus' Blood: "Neither is there salvation in any other. For there is no other name under heaven given to men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). This is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, not the Mosaic.

The fact of the matter is: the Mosaic Covenant, the Covenant given to the Jewish people on Mt. Sinai, has been *abrogated* or *replaced*. This doctrine is called "supersessionism". This fact can be demonstrated from Scripture: We have been released from the Law, "But now we are loosed from the law of death wherein we were detained; so that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter" (Romans 7:6). Scripture is quite clear; the old covenant (Mosaic) was not faultless. It was meant to be a preparation for the new, and it was therefore temporary: "For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second... In speaking



of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away" (Hebrews 8:7, 13). And as Pope Pius XII wrote in his encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*: "And first of all, by the death of our Redeemer, the New Tes-

tament took the place of the Old Law which had been **abolished**; then the Law of Christ together with its mysteries, enactments, institutions, and sacred rites was ratified for the whole world in the blood of Jesus Christ. For, while our Divine Savior was preaching in a restricted area - He was not sent but to the sheep that were lost of the House of Israel - the Law and the Gospel were together in force; but on the gibbet of His death Jesus made void the Law with its decrees fastened the handwriting of the Old Testament to the Cross, establishing the New Testament in His blood shed for the whole human race." To such an extent, then," says St. Leo the Great, speaking of the Cross of our Lord, "was there effected a transfer from the Law to the Gospel, from the Synagogue to the Church, from the many sacrifices to one Victim, that, as Our Lord expired, that mystical veil which shut off the innermost part of the temple and its sacred secret was rent violently from top to bottom."

For more on this read, *Not By Faith Alone* by Robert Sungenis (1996, Imprimatur)