JUSTIFICATION AND MERIT: THE INTERPRETATION AND
EVALUATION OF THE CONCEPT OF MERIT IN MODERN CATHOLIC
THEOLOGY IN RELATION TO LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF
JUSTIFICATION

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The teaching of justification of the sinner solely by faith is the "heart"
of the Reformation. Martin Luther viewed it as the "main teaching" of
Christianity and demonstrated this assertion by the concepts of the sole
agency of God and of the consecutive character of good works. Since he
could concede neither the cooperation of man nor the "final character of
works" (meaning works achieved with an ultimate end in view), his struggle
was mainly against the Church's traditional doctrine of merit.

Catholic theology, however, refused to follow the Reformer in this
radical break with tradition. When about a decade after the outbreak
of the Reformation it had become clear that the teaching of justification
formed the main point of the dispute, Catholic theology set the doctrine
of merit like a dam against Luther's *sola fide.* The Reformer's adver-
saries viewed the idea of merit as the best proof that justification cannot
result from faith alone. Thus, the problem area of justification and
merit has functioned since the days of the Reformation as an insur-
mountable hindrance in the conversations of polemical theology.

With modern Catholic research on Luther since about 1940 the en-
trenched fronts got into motion again. A more objective *historical* view
of the life and work of the Reformer produced a deeper understanding
of his theological concerns. The following ecumenical opening in
theological studies (about the time of Vatican II) led to a distinct rap-
prochement between the Catholic interpretation of the doctrine of
justification and that of Luther. Some scholars (J. Lortz, O. H. Pesch)
have even claimed a consensus with the Reformer.

The purpose of the present dissertation is to investigate the
justification for this claim. The doctrine of merit, which forms the
polemical side issue and which in the current-day dialogue has been un-
justly pushed to the margin, is used in this investigation as a kind of
"scratch test" for the validity of this assertion (W. Dantine). Since
modern Catholic theology is anxious to reconsider and to reformulate
the meaning and statement of the doctrine of merit, the question arises
whether these new interpretations and formulations are adequate to
make the alleged consensus with Luther credible.

Chap. 1 deals with controversial aspects in Luther's teaching on justification, which developed out of his new understanding of Paul and which ultimately led to the battle with the ecclesiastical doctrine of merit.

In order to understand Luther's position in relation to the idea of merit, chap. 2 offers a historical survey of the development of the Christian doctrine of merit. Following this, Luther's teaching on justification is discussed in the light of those features that led to his rejection of the Catholic dogma of merit.

Chap. 3 focuses on the modern Catholic reaction to Luther's rejection of the doctrine of merit, on the new interpretations of his teaching on justification, and on the possibilities of relativizing, reinterpreting, and completing the dogmatic statements of the Council of Trent.

Chap. 4 investigates the question of how the doctrine of merit is interpreted in present Catholic exegesis and dogmatics, including the position of Vatican II.

The dissertation closes with the statement that a trend of rapprochement toward Luther is unmistakable in the Catholic understanding of justification. This, however, does not yet justify speaking of a successful consensus. The Catholic doctrine of merit, with its final concept of salvation (instead of Luther's consecutive one), its principle of cooperation, and its view of inherent grace, points — in contrast to the Reformer — to a different understanding of the gospel.