

Meriting Grace

Does the Catholic Church officially teach that the faithful can merit the graces needed to attain eternal life?

I wonder what your answer might be. Perhaps you resent the very suggestion that the Catholic Church teaches that we can merit grace or eternal life by our good works. You may also feel that evangelical pastors are being dishonest when they assert such things about Catholicism.

I asked the question in my blog during last December and I was not altogether surprised with the response. Of the 883 respondents, 801 (90%) answered NO -- they do not believe that the Catholic Church teaches that we can merit the graces needed to attain eternal life. Also many Catholics who corresponded with me over the years have expressed the same conviction.

Yet they are wrong. The Catholic Church does in fact teach that we can merit the graces needed to attain eternal life. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 2027, states:

"No one can merit the initial grace which is at the origin of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit, we can merit for ourselves and for others all the graces needed to attain eternal life, as well as necessary temporal goods."

It could not be any clearer than that: "we can merit ... all the graces needed to attain eternal life." That does not mean that the Church teaches that we can merit the initial grace of justification. Even after conversion, the Church insists that we can only do good works by the power of the Spirit. Nonetheless it is also true that, according to the Catechism, we can merit further graces needed to attain eternal life.

I used to feel frustrated whenever Catholics denied this teaching of their church, and I tried to persuade them otherwise from the official writings, especially the Council of Trent. (The 6th Session gives a detailed explanation of the doctrine of Justification).

I am not bothered anymore; actually I am glad that many Catholics are unaware of some of these doctrines, and even reject them. I don't know the underlying reasons for this. Perhaps Catholic teachers and apologists are not presenting church doctrine clearly and faithfully as they should, or perhaps, it is due to the influence of evangelical Christianity. Whatever the reasons, I thank God that many Catholics believe that they cannot merit grace or eternal life.

What is absolutely sure is that the Bible teaches that eternal life is a gift. "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

We have earned and merited God's wrath by our disobedience and sin. If God had to give us what we deserve, death and hell would have been our payment. "The wages of sin is death!"

But thanks to God, he deals graciously with his chosen people. He gives us freely what we have not worked for; he gives us the gift of infinite value purchased by the precious blood of Christ. "The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We cannot merit grace because we cannot pay for a gift; we can only receive grace and eternal life with empty hands and an eternally grateful heart. That is my prayer for all the readers of this letter and your loved ones. May God richly bless you in Christ throughout 2008.