



a Kendall Hunt Company

Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A, Catechist - RCLB Lectionary



Catechist Background and Preparation

To prepare for this session read all the readings.

Deuteronomy 11:18, 26-28, 32

Psalms 31:2-3, 3-4, 17, 25

Romans 3:21-25, 28

Matthew 7:21-27

Spend a few minutes reflecting on what these readings mean for you today. Is there a particular reading that appeals to you? Is there a word or image that engages you?

Read the Word in Liturgy and Catholic Doctrine sections. These give you background on what you will be doing this session. Read over the session outline and make it your own. Check to see what materials you will need.

The Word in Liturgy

Ostensibly a farewell speech of Moses before the Israelites enter Canaan, the Book of Deuteronomy contains traditional material spanning many centuries. Most scholars believed that the final version reflects the concerns of a seventh-century editor, but it is not known whether the literal observance of this command to wear phylacteries (or prayer boxes, in which texts of the Torah were placed) was in force at that time or came about only later. In the theological version of the deuteronomistic school, the blessing and curse set before Israel had to do with their decision to observe the Law or not. Disobedience to the prescriptions of the Covenant brought down divine retribution; observance of the Law resulted in divine blessings. Many of the historical books of the Bible are written with this presupposition in mind and attempt to understand Jewish history from this perspective. Despite the danger of mere external compliance that this view can foster, authentic deuteronomistic theology clearly seeks to instill a deeply internalized love, not fear, as the motive for observance of the Law. The opening verse of the first reading is a partial quote from the Shema, one of the most important prayers of the Jewish people from ancient times up to the present day, enjoining them to love God and keep the commandments. In view of today's reading from Romans, it is also worth mentioning that Deuteronomy regards observance of the Law both as possible and as fruitful.

Psalms 31 gives voice to the prayer of one undergoing trial and distress. The verses selected to today express the supplicant's unshakable faith in God, a "rock of safety." Mention of God's action ("refuge...rescue...deliver...safety...fortress") may have dictated the choice of this psalm as a fitting preparation for the reading from Romans.

With today's reading from Romans we begin a fifteen-week semi-continuous series of readings from that letter that will continue until the twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time.

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The theme of Romans, first announced in 1:16-17, is here restated, namely that “the justice of God which works through faith in Jesus Christ.” The heart of Paul’s teaching is his insistence that we are all sinners, incapable of overcoming our sinfulness, and that only God can save us by the free gift of grace. . That offer of grace has been revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ, and it is our faith in Christ, not our observance of the Law, that opens us to the justice of God. The focus of today’s catechesis on the doctrine of justification draws heavily on a proper understanding of Paul’s nuanced theology found in Romans 3:21-4:25. Centuries of polemic since the Reformation once made it seem impossible for Catholics and Protestants to agree on this central issue, but a return to the scriptural basis of the Church’s understanding now has shown the considerable common ground that is actually shared by both traditions. Rather than continue to insist on the mutually exclusive “faith versus works” approach, today’s readings (including the gospel) help us to understand that, in the concrete, it is always “faith and works” that characterize the experience of the believer.

The section of Matthew that we read today forms the conclusion of the great Sermon on the Mount. Jesus points to the importance of being a doer of his word, not just a hearer, much in the same way that the first reading from Deuteronomy demanded a choice between blessing and curse. Jesus urges his disciples to enter the reign of God by internalizing their faith in him and by expressing that faith in action. It is the deeper motivations of the heart (“hears my words”) that must form the basis for right action (“and puts them into practice”). In developing a correct understanding of the Catholic position on justification, both the emphasis of this text and of Paul’s teaching in Romans must be kept in balance.

Catholic Doctrine

Justification

As we explore the Catholic viewpoint on being justified before God, it is worth noting that this doctrine article and next week’s go together. Today’s topic of justification is followed next week by our understanding of how justification is achieved. Justification is the theological term used by Catholics to describe our stance before God, having been saved by Jesus Christ and gifted with the Holy Spirit, such that we believers are freed from sin and given a new birth by divine grace. The key here is the utterly free and generous act of God—the bestowal of grace—so that believers are justified, that is, put into right relationship with the divine. For believers this is celebrated in the Sacrament of Baptism.

The Protestant reformers emphasized the universality of sin, the absolute gratuity of justification, and insisted human freedom was destroyed by original sin. The Council of Trent (1546-1553) rejected this view. Instead, the Catholic Church proclaimed it is possible for humans to exercise their free will and cooperate with God’s grace and thus be renewed inwardly. Indeed, it is possible to grow in holiness as we practice the virtues of hope and love. Unfortunately, the way in which the Catholic Church and the Reformation theologians initially spoke about justification only furthered the split of Christianity. Today, however, as a result of



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continuing discussions between the Roman Catholic church and the Lutheran Church, there is much closer agreement on the basic themes of justification which is grounded in both the Old and New Testament scriptures: justification is the action of God's grace through the salvation achieved by Jesus Christ and individuals appropriate that justification by their faith-in-action.

Thus, the central lynchpin of the doctrine of justification is Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection. Through the Holy Spirit we are joined to Christ's suffering and death when we die to sin and, in the same way, we are joined to Christ's resurrection when we are born again to eternal life in baptism (CCC 1988). Given this line of theological reflection, conversion is characterized as the first work of the grace given by the holy Spirit—in keeping with the gospel message of repentance initially proclaimed by Jesus (CCC1989). In this vein, Jesus continues to preach as he does in today's gospel passage, for the believer cannot embrace the message of salvation without also putting that saving Word into practice.

