

“Chosen In Him”

The Catholic Teaching on Predestination

By David E. Utsler

ISSUE: How does the Catholic Church understand predestination?

RESPONSE: Predestination is a term used to identify God’s plan of salvation, in which according to His own decree, He “accomplishes all things according to his will” (Eph. 1:11). God gives us the gift of salvation through grace and faith. In turn, we must use our free will to persevere in good works “prepared beforehand” by God Himself (Eph. 2:8-10; cf. Phil. 2:12, 13).

DISCUSSION: There are two opposite and equally erroneous positions about predestination that have always been rejected in authentic Catholic teaching. The first is that of the Pelagians.¹ Pelagius taught that a person, by the exercise his free will, could obtain salvation unaided by grace. The obvious error here is that God has nothing to do with salvation.

Calvinists and Jansenists teach the second error.² They teach that Christ died only for the elect; those predestined to salvation. The rest He predestined to eternal damnation by His own decree. Furthermore, they taught that if God predestined someone to eternal life, it is impossible that he should fall away. Likewise, one chosen for damnation has no choice in the matter, but will surely perish in hell. In short, the individual has nothing to do with his own salvation.

There are various schools of thought among Catholic theologians and philosophers through the ages. Most notably we should mention St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. There are also theories by Molina, St. Robert Bellarmine and the Franciscan Duns Scotus. It is outside the scope of this FAITH FACT to look at these in great detail. However, to understand how the Catholic Church views predestination, we must first understand some fundamental concepts. First, the Catholic Church unequivocally teaches that the source of all things is God. This includes grace, the act of faith and even our good works (Eph. 2:8-10; Jas. 1:17, 18). God alone initiates salvation. He always turns toward man first and seeks him, as when God walked in the Garden (Gen. 3:8). Man does not seek God or turn to him without God first calling man to Himself (Jn. 6:37, 44; 1 Jn. 4:10,19). Second, God’s initiative does not exclude man’s free response, but demands it (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [Catechism], nos. 154, 155, 2002; Phil. 2:12, 13). In other words, God wills that man be free to choose His grace or reject it. Third, salvation is extended to each and every human person, not limited to just some, and one can fall away from grace (Heb. 2:1-4; 6:4; 2 Pet. 1:10; 3:9; 1 Jn. 5:16, 17). Furthermore, it is imperative that once one is touched by grace, he perseveres in charity lest he forfeit the free gift of salvation (*Lumen Gentium* [LG], no. 14). Within the confines of these principles, Catholics have sought to understand the mystery of predestination. Though opinions and formulations have varied among Catholic theologians, with these principles left intact, there is room for legitimate speculation.

The only proper framework to understand predestination must be rooted in the notion of a communion of persons in love. Why? The nature of God as Trinity is this very kind of communion and God created man to share in that “blessed life” (cf. Catechism, no. 1). This communion of love demands freedom of will. For love is not something thrust upon a person, but offered as a gift. This communion of love in the Trinity is also the basis for evangelization in the Church (cf. Catechism, no. 850). As this is the very essence of the relationship between God and man, everything in one way or another must refer back to it and be measured by it. As this was God’s purpose in creating man, it is also intimately tied to our redemption and our ultimate destiny. God is love (1 Jn. 4:8).

Salvation is the gift of God alone: Grace

God alone is uncreated. All that is, including man, owes its existence to God. He created man freely and out of “sheer goodness” (Catechism, no. 1). Man has nothing that he did not receive from God. Anyone who

would charge the Catholic Church of teaching salvation by works alone or that salvation originates in any way in man, does so in contradiction to the whole history of authentic Catholic teaching.³ No one can come to Christ, except that the Father draw him (Jn. 6:37, 44). We love Him, because He first loved us (1 Jn. 4:10, 19). The fount and source of these things is the grace that comes from God alone.

Grace is God's favor. It means "gift." In other words, it is not something received in return for anything, but is free and unmerited. It is a participation in the life of God, which comes to us by the Holy Spirit (Catechism, nos. 1997, 1999). God is the "high and lofty One who inhabits eternity" (Is. 57:15). He must reveal Himself to us if we are to participate in His divine life unto eternal salvation. It is not possible to know Him, except He reveals Himself (Catechism, no. 1998). Thus, this initiative which is freely made by God alone in revealing Himself is a gift we call grace. Because it is a gift, it can be rejected.

There are many effects and purposes of grace. We even have different terms to express the varying functions of grace (sanctifying, habitual, etc.). Grace enables us to respond to God's call that we may become His adopted sons (Catechism, no. 1996). Grace sustains us and helps us grow in holiness towards Christian perfection. The Holy Spirit gives all the graces that we receive. He employs several means, such as the Sacraments, direct intervention, Mary, prayer, etc., through which He communicates grace to us.

Faith

The proper disposition to receive grace is faith, which is itself "a work of grace" (Catechism, no. 2001). The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum [DV]*) reminds us: "Before this faith can be exercised, man must have the grace of God to move and assist him; he must have the interior helps of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God."⁴

It is equally true that we need grace to sustain us in faith. Faith is not a once for all event. Rather, "The just shall live by faith" (Hab. 2:4). It must be preserved, nourished and be made to grow, as Holy Scripture reminds us often (cf. 1 Cor. 16:13; 2 Cor. 10:15; Col. 1:23 2 Thess. 1:3).

Work...for God is working in you

Good works are a fruit of God's grace. Jesus emphasizes this with the imagery of the vine. "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5).

What is clear is that grace must be antecedent to any act on our part, whether of the act of believing or any good work. The question that this often raises is that of the nature of our response to grace. Is it free? And if it is, how does grace work with freedom of will?

St. Paul reminds us that we are to work out our own salvation "with fear and trembling, for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13). God provides grace and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, works within us in order that we might persevere on the way to salvation. Salvation is not just a one-time event, but a continual process of growth. The freedom of our will is necessary for this growth. Exactly how our will cooperates with this grace is a mystery.

This mystery of how grace works with human nature is reflected in the Catechism. "Believing is possible only by grace and the interior helps of the Holy Spirit. But it is not less true that believing is an authentically human act" (Catechism, no. 154).

Working from the premise that God created us to share in a loving communion with Him, the necessity of free will becomes apparent. Some narrowly understand the cooperation of the will with God as "helping God out" as if He is somehow limited. Some find it objectionable that man has any free part to play in His eternal destiny. If that eternal destiny is a communion of love, how else could it be but truly free (cf. Catechism, nos. 2001, 2002)? Further, there is no logic in the notion that an absence of free will necessarily follows God's sovereignty, or that from free will it necessarily follows that God needs our help. God wills our free will in love. That is His design.

For whom did Christ die?

God created man for heaven, not hell. Hell is the ultimate isolation and a free choice by an individual. As stated above, man was created for love, to love God, to love others and to be loved. This “civilization of love” or “communion of persons” is central to man’s being. Each and every person was created both to be his own end (“willed for his own sake”) and to make a gift of that self to others. The Decree on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), especially paragraphs 12 and 24, is particularly helpful reading to see this “dyadic” structure of the human person.

As is clear in Matthew 25:41-46, there will be those who find themselves in Hell. Some would explain this by asserting that Christ did not die for everyone, but only the “elect.” Scripture, to the contrary, confirms that God does wish for all to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). Christ did die for the sins of the whole world, but it is necessary, enabled by grace, that one respond to the free gift and persevere until the end. We can have confidence that Christ can see us through to the end. He is called the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). St. Paul encourages us that “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

In his second epistle, St. Peter reminds us that God has granted us all things that “pertain to life and godliness” (1:3) and that through His promises we may escape corruption to become “partakers of the divine nature” (1:4). Because of this, he exhorts us:

For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never fall; so there will be richly provided for you and entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:5-11).

Let us freely accept the gift of God’s grace and rejoice in Jesus Christ who upholds “the universe by his word of power” (Heb. 1:3). And with St. Paul, let us say:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:3-6).

¹ Named for the Irish Monk Pelagius (355-425), who incorrectly took St. Augustine’s teaching on grace to imperil the use of free will. Any good encyclopedia would provide reference to Pelagius and Pelagianism. Also highly recommended is Augustine’s many writings against Pelagianism.

² Named for Cornelius Jansenius (1585-1638), a theologian at Louvain and then Bishop of Ypres who taught a system of grace and predestination similar to Calvin. In 1653, Pope Innocent X condemned his teaching as heretical. Subsequent popes repeated and affirmed the condemnation.

³ Council of Orange, A.D. 529; Council of Trent, Sessions V, VI (especially the 33 Canons on justification).

⁴ *DV*, no. 5; Cf. Catechism, no. 153.

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