

BCS and the Doctrine of Sola Fide

by Mike Patrick



For John Martignoni, the doctrine of Sola Fide, or “faith alone” is a sticking point, as it is for most Catholics who follow their official Church teaching on the subject. This is evident in his newsletters, and talks, and in his debates. One can see how emotionally tied Martignoni is to the subject, and rightfully so. The disagreement between Catholics and others (particularly Protestants) on this subject is well known, and has been going on for centuries. Knowing what justifies us before God is supremely important. There are, however, some interesting points and problems associated with John Martignoni’s take on Sola Fide, and I’ll attempt to illustrate just a few.

First, it would be helpful to get an accurate definition of the doctrine of Sola Fide: Sola Fide (otherwise known as the doctrine of justification by faith) states that God’s forgiveness for sin is given freely to anyone through faith alone, and that any work a person may do to achieve that forgiveness is excluded. In other words, Sola Fide asserts that any human effort expended to achieve pardon for our sins is useless. It’s by the saving work of Jesus on the cross, His life, death, and resurrection that we are saved, not by anything we ourselves do. It’s a free gift from God, and is only attainable through our belief and faith in Him. We can’t participate or “cooperate” in our justification in any way other than to simply accept the gift.

Now, here’s where it gets complicated with regard to the BCS view on salvation. Martignoni claims that he does indeed believe that we’re saved by faith alone and not by any works we do, basing most of his argument on James 2:26,

For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. (NAS)

He actually makes two claims in his newsletter # 113 regarding justification by faith. He first states that Catholics do believe that we’re saved by faith alone through baptism. He then claims that no, there are works involved, but it depends on how one defines “work.” He claims that those who hold to the doctrine of Sola Fide actually perform a “work” when they give intellectual assent to Jesus being their Lord, and then have a change of heart toward God because of this decision. In other words, the changing of one’s mind and heart is a work for Martignoni, and would defeat the doctrine of Sola Fide. Essentially, the act of thinking, of making a decision, qualifies as a work for him. This is an astonishing position, and sounds very much like the Pharisees in the days of Jesus, when almost any action qualified as a work and could put one in violation of the Law. If Martignoni is correct, then “thinking” about going to Mass should be sufficient for the Catholic, just as “thinking” about getting baptized would surely fulfill the work requirement (at least to a degree) for baptismal salvation in the Catholic Church, especially if those thoughts were heartfelt. Nonsense. The truth is that Martignoni is struggling here with getting the Catholic view of justification to agree with the Bible.

Let's say that we'll give Martignoni that much; that the thought one has and acts on when coming to Jesus can be qualified as a "work" with regard to a "works" based effort to attain salvation. Martignoni's argument still fails (not surprisingly), because we can see from the Scriptures that the particular "work" of accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is not a work of the believer, but is a work done by God.

"This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent" (John 6:29).

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"For grace are ye saved through the faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:7-9)

John Martignoni has debated several opponents on this subject. Most of them have asserted, or implied that he's claiming that we're justified by faith and works together, but he insists this is not so. He says he doesn't believe that works are needed for a person's salvation. It's confusing, I know. The truth lies somewhere in the middle. The fact is that John Martignoni, as well as other fairly well known Catholic apologists and teachers such as Marcus Grodi, Patrick Madrid, Jimmy Akin, and Tim Staples have to muddy the waters on this one, because each of them does indeed believe the official Catholic Church teaching – that justification is a broad subject, and includes moral renovation along with faith to bring about salvation. They all belong to a new, Ecumenical type of Catholic Church that speaks a sort of "hybrid" Catholic lingo that sounds a little bit like Catholicism, and a little bit like Evangelical Christianity. The truth is that historically, the early Church (Christian, not Roman Catholic) did indeed teach that our salvation came by way of grace through faith alone, and nothing further was needed to secure it, or to keep it. We see that in the Scripture when Paul tells us so in Ephesians. Today however, the Catholic Church teaches that we are not only saved by faith alone, as the doctrine of Sola Fide claims, but by faith together with other self atoning works that contribute to that faith.

It wasn't until the sixteenth century at the Council of Trent that the Catholic Church was led away from the orthodox teaching on the subject of justification by faith alone due largely to its knee jerk reaction to the Reformation. Today's Catholic Church, along with its modern foot soldiers, is subtly communicating the Trent definition of the doctrine, but wraps it in a different package; one that apparently minimizes the strict works based teachings of the post Trent Catholic Church to make the traditional works based Catholic theology sound more palatable. It's the same story with a different presentation. If Martignoni truly believes as he claims, that we are really saved by God's grace alone, then I challenge him to tell us if he agrees that we can throw away all of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church (all of which require a work to be effective) and still have, and maintain, our salvation.

What Martignoni doesn't tell us in his newsletters *Apologetics for the Masses #107*, or *Apologetics for the Masses #113*, is that he's skewing the order of, and combining the content of the doctrines of justification and *sanctification* to make them better fit his Catholic world view. He downplays the idea that all we need to do to secure our salvation was done by Jesus on the cross. He states:

"Sola Fide believers say that there is nothing we can do to impact our salvation. Jesus did all that needed to be done for us through His death on the cross."

Martignoni's wording is subtle. He's correct in noting that Jesus did all that need be done for us on the cross with regard to our salvation – Jesus made that claim Himself (John. 19:30). But that doesn't mean that we have no part in our salvation *after* justification has taken place. His wording "*nothing we can do to impact our salvation*" with regard to Sola Fide can be taken differently, depending on how you read his words. Sola Fide states that there's nothing we can do

to secure our own salvation through our works, but it doesn't mean there's nothing we can do to impact our salvation *after* the original saving event – post justification. Martignoni wants us to believe that those who follow the doctrine of Sola Fide are somehow saying that our subsequent behavior is not relevant to one's standing with God. This is not what Sola Fide communicates, nor is it true that those who follow the idea of salvation by faith alone are suggesting such a thing. Where Martignoni trips up is his failure to note the distinction between the doctrine of justification, and the doctrine of sanctification (the process of making us holy.) He wants to press the two together and then deny faith alone theology in order to make his point. But if we apply a correct understanding to these two very distinct doctrines, we can begin to see where he's gone off track, and how he's trying to lead us down the same misguided path that he's on. The doctrines of Justification and Sanctification must be taken together in order for them to make sense separately, but they are still separate events that have different and distinct meanings. Martignoni creates a point without a distinction. He doesn't see that he's actually *supporting* the doctrine of Sola Fide by stating that he too believes in salvation by faith alone, and that his problem comes in when he tries to unnaturally bolt together two doctrines as if they were the one and the same thing.

Justification (salvation) is the process we go through to become saved initially. It's an imputation of righteousness allocated to our account by God that justifies us independently of our actions. It's a judicial act of God, which He performs from an authoritative position that we do not hold. It's an instantaneous event, not an ongoing action (Romans 8:1, Hebrews 7:27) initiated by the work Jesus did on the cross – not by any works we do (Romans 5:16; 6:23; Gal 3:29; Eph 1:5-6; Rev 22:17.) This is why salvation is called a "gift" from God, because we have no part in it, nor do we have any standing to participate in it other than to receive it. The recipient of this gift receives it freely as a gift (Eph 2:8-9); free from any conditions or restrictions, and as such it is not, nor can it be earned.

Sanctification on the other hand does indeed involve the cooperation of the believer. However, while being important in the spiritual life and development of the believer to foster growth in Christ, and to make that person holy, sanctification does not enter in until *after* justification by faith alone has taken place; after we have been justified (saved) by God's grace, and our salvation has been secured. It's in this way that we play a role in our salvation, but it's a developmental role, not an establishing role. The Christian can relinquish his or her salvation – essentially give it up, but it will not be stripped away against the will of the believer, because he or she has somehow fallen below some threshold of grace, or is living in some state of mortal sin. If that were the case, the work of Christ would have no meaning, and would be insufficient, because it's Christ who paid the price for sin, and sin no longer has a hold on the believer. The standard for salvation (justification) is measured against Christ and His work, not ours. Maybe John Martignoni will be comfortable telling Jesus Christ to His face that His death and resurrection fell short and were not quite enough to save us. I'll leave that one to John.

Anyone can voluntarily give up his or her salvation, because we're always free moral agents, and God allows us the right to practice that free will. If we reject God, we lose our salvation willingly, but it's not a matter of losing our salvation by not performing a work, and incurring God's wrath as Martignoni and the Catholic Church claim. If we lose our salvation, it's really a matter of our giving it up, which may include a perpetual turning away from God through continued sinning without repentance – a form of rejection. It's giving up the gift we once accepted, but now give back. God will honor our choices, and He will not force us to continue in a relationship with Him that we don't want.

Martignoni clouds the issue further in his Apologetics for the Masses newsletter #113. He attempts to lead the reader down the path of a works based salvation (while still claiming that's not what he's doing) by failing to make the distinction between a gift, and a debt. He draws an illustrative point in which he compares those who are redeemed, and those who are saved, as if there is a distinction. He suggests that everyone has been redeemed, but because those who are

saved accepted the Lord's free gift of salvation, their decision to accept that gift somehow qualifies as a "work" spoken of in the Bible. However, this is a dishonest comparison. While it's true that Jesus died for everyone, and He redeemed us all, not everyone has accepted the free gift He offers by way of His redemptive sacrifice. It's the Christian (the one who has been saved) that has been bought with a price - not the unrepentant sinner. Martignoni's suggestion that Jesus died for all, so all are therefore redeemed is incorrect. The correct view is that Jesus died for all so that they may be redeemed, not all are redeemed because Jesus died for them. Those who do in fact accept the gift of salvation are redeemed, and become so by merely accepting Christ, and becoming a child of God just as Paul told us in Acts 16:

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved..."

This can hardly be qualified as a "work", any more than holding one's hands out to receive a Christmas gift on Christmas day qualifies as a work. The gift is freely available to all, but not all choose to accept it. While it's true one must accept God to receive the gift, that acceptance is not a work, because if it was, then God's gift could in no way be a real gift – but a wage. The very act of performing a work to receive God's gift of salvation turns God into a debtor, because we are due something based on an action we performed to gain it. Much like a child holding out his hand for his allowance, we would be laying claim to the salvation of God based on our perceived goodness created by a personal act. The Bible tells us that God is a debtor to no man (Malachi), and as such His gift can't be earned. God doesn't "owe" us our salvation because of anything we do no matter how great that work might be, because all of our "works" are tainted by sin. Sin stands in the way of our works. Even if Martignoni was right, and works are necessary to gain or maintain our salvation, those works would be sinful works, and unacceptable to God. Only Christ's perfect work, which removes that sin, opens the door.

We then see Martignoni attempt to string out a logical argument for his case and he fails miserably. Here's how he lays it out in his newsletter #113, and I add comments in red to show where he veers off course.

From Apologetics for the Masses #113:

- 1) (Martignoni) Was the work of our salvation "finished with Jesus' death on the cross? Yes or no? (Answer: Yes, He declared it so just before He died on the cross when He said "It is finished. John. 19.")
- 2) (Martignoni) Did Jesus' death on the cross pay the price for all men's' sins? Yes or No? (Answer: Yes.)
- 3) (Martignoni) If "yes," then that means that all men are redeemed, (Incorrect. Just as one can purchase a lottery ticket, that ticket isn't redeemed until presented for the prize. Purchasing isn't the same as redeeming.) but not all men are saved. Which means you have some who are redeemed and saved, and some who are redeemed and unsaved. Is the difference between these two groups – the redeemed and saved and the redeemed and unsaved – something that Jesus did, or something that the saved did? (Answer: Here Martignoni is trying to communicate (and not very well, since the following week his newsletter had to explain his position again because of mass confusion from his students) that even though Jesus redeemed us, not all of us have taken advantage of what He has done. The problem is that Martignoni then wants to claim that accepting the redeeming work of Christ is a "work." This is silly. We don't earn the gift of salvation by accepting it. We don't "work" for our inheritance. An inheritance is always a gift by definition. If we take Martignoni's explanation at face value, then you and I have "earned" the love of our family when they come to the realization that they love us. Our children have "earned" our love, because we give intellectual acknowledgment of our relationship with them in our minds. And in Martignoni's mind, Jesus believes we have earned, or "merited" our salvation because we're so good. Because Martignoni believes that

acceptance of Jesus' gift of salvation is in itself a "work", it stands to reason that we can lose our salvation by ceasing to perform that work. It can be taken away from us based on performance. This is why Martignoni runs into such a problem when it comes to Sola Fide. He's accepted another Sola Fide that allows for a works based faith hybrid.)

Martignoni states in his newsletter:

"1 Tim 2:4 tells us that God wants all men to be saved. So, the difference between the saved and the unsaved cannot be something Jesus did – He did the same thing for all men so that all men could be saved."

Again, Martignoni is trying to assert that there is some work we must do, but when we stop and think about it, this is a silly, and extremely simplistic statement. God does want all to be saved, and Jesus did die for all, but it doesn't then follow that because God wants all to be saved, and He has made a way for them to be saved, that they will choose to be saved. Our free will still comes into play. Contrary to what Martignoni claims, the difference between the saved and the unsaved exists because of what Jesus did. Up until Jesus' work, there was no way to be saved. Again we see Martignoni implying that by coming to Christ, we have to "do" something, and what we "do" when we come to Christ is a work. But we've already seen that the Bible tells us that particular work Martignoni says we need to do, is done for us by God (John 6:29.)

It wasn't until the Council of Trent (1545-1563) that the notion of justification as a process based on human effort derived through divine grace surfaced as official doctrine of the Catholic Church. The article in Session VI, Canon 7 of the Council of Trent led Catholics away from the orthodox teaching on justification. This "New Law" that Trent claimed was instituted by Jesus is the position Martignoni holds today, even though he, along with other modern day Catholic apologists have sprinkled it with a little Protestant sugar to make it more palatable for today's Catholics, and those they're trying to convert. The fact is that the Catholic Church does not teach that we are saved by God's grace alone. It teaches that salvation is not a free gift, but an ongoing "earning" by way of continual ritualistic appeasement of God. The Catholic Church teaches that salvation is a cooperative effort of Christ and the person, and this is why we hear so often that Catholics must "cooperate" with the grace of Christ by performing continual works such as attending Mass. For the Catholic, Christ's righteousness alone is not enough for us. There must be more that we ourselves contribute, because Jesus' work on the cross is not a finished work for Catholics, but an incomplete effort. The Trent view (and therefore Martignoni's view) sets us back. It puts us in the position we were in before Jesus died on the cross, and then forces us to fight our way back again to a state of grace before God by way of the sacraments. Catholics can never be assured of their salvation.

Continuing to make his point that Catholics believe in salvation by faith alone, John Martignoni claims that this is demonstrated in the belief and practice of infant baptism in the Catholic Church. Martignoni tells us:

"The infant can do absolutely nothing that would affect his or her salvation – whether an act of faith or any works. Yet, through Baptism, this infant is saved...saved by the grace of God alone."

The conveyance of God's grace unto salvation by way of baptism is a whole other can of worms we won't get into here, but Martignoni's statement does beg at least one question: Is God not capable in determining what is best for the child until that child comes of age to form a relationship with Him? It's because the Catholic Church believes that a work needs to be done before grace can be communicated (that work being baptism) that babies are baptized in the

Roman Catholic Church. In the case of infant baptism, others perform the required work for the child, and it comes in the form of infant baptism. Never the less, a work is performed – even if it's by proxy. In addition, another work is eventually required called confirmation, that essentially places the baby in the same works based position of earning Christ's favor at a later date, and sets that baby on the road to a continual works based effort to retain that salvation.

The doctrine of Sola Fide, on the other hand depends on the goodness and grace of God – a loving God, and that He will do what is right for that child up until the time that child can make an informed decision as to his or her relationship with the Lord. It trusts God to convey grace to the child based on His character as it is revealed in the Bible, because we can do no work to help convey that grace ourselves. The Catholic position essentially removes spiritual responsibility for the child from God's loving grace, and again places God in a “debtors” position, requiring Him to honor an action the baby had nothing to do with, because an act was performed by others that compels God to save the baby. Babies have no way of knowing the meaning of their baptism, and thus it has no real meaning with regard to salvation, because the baby hasn't agreed to the gift. It's as if they baby were given an automobile. While being a great gift, the baby can do nothing to accept it, since the baby is in no position to take advantage of it. Only later will the baby be able to understand and accept the gift. Until then, the automobile is useless to the baby. Jesus demonstrated this by holding off His own baptism until He was an adult. There was no infant baptism of Jesus, and there was no confirmation later. There was just one baptism, with Jesus knowing full well what was taking place, and giving an outward sign of who He was.

Martignoni goes on to confuse the subject further by mixing in an Evangelical Christian view with his Catholic view. He states in his newsletter # 113:

“...we also believe that God's free gift of His grace calls for a response from us – a twofold response of faith and works, as opposed to the Sola Fide belief that God's grace calls for a response of faith alone.”

What does this mean? What “twofold” response is he talking about? It's the “second fold” of the twofold response that is in error. The first fold, “faith”, is a response to a gift. The second fold “works” is a response in an effort to earn or retain that gift through sanctification. Again, this makes God a debtor to us. Martignoni is apparently comfortable with the idea that God “owes” us our salvation. By combining both faith and works in a “twofold” system, he ties the two together so that, contrary to what he states, one can't be saved by faith alone (as he claims the Catholic Church teaches) since the works requirement is bolted on to his hybrid twofold system – thereby turning it into something that denies saving grace by faith alone. It's not a twofold system, but rather two, distinct events with two distinct functions for the believer. It's only one response, leading to one relationship. It's like asking a woman to marry. How many responses does she need to give? Is it a “twofold” response? No - just one – leading to one relationship.

John Martignoni struggles hard to marry his Catholic belief on faith by justification with what the Bible teaches on the subject. By doing so, he must offer invalid comparisons, astonishing assertions, and unrealistic suggestions as he makes his way through a maze of Scriptural land mines that wait for him around every corner. As we have seen, he fails in his attempt to discredit the doctrine of Sola Scriptura. This is because the Catholic view on justification and its intrinsic view of salvation is Biblically skewed, and is against what the Bible teaches on the matter. We read in the Bible where God specifically stated that he did not want us to, in any way, believe we have any part in the gift of salvation. This is because God understands our sin nature, and that we would take away the glory of God and His free gift, if we were to have any part in saving ourselves.

In the Scriptures we read:

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

God understands our nature, and He sent His only Son Jesus Christ to save us from ourselves. If we were in any way capable of that, there would be no need for Jesus to have died for our sins. If we play any part in our salvation, even if that part is to "cooperate" with God's grace any further than simply believing in Him and following Him, then there stands the possibility that the works we offer will become a debt that God owes. In addition, there would also exist the possibility of pride within the Church (which I believe does exist today), contaminating those who might think they have performed their works "better" than their neighbor, and who might look down on those who might be weaker. This is why it's the work of Jesus alone that saves us – by faith alone. Everyone can come to the same faith conclusions using the same faith vehicle. There is no work to be done by us that might increase our standing before God with regard to our salvation. Our works influence our relationship with God after we are saved, but the only influence on our initial salvation is our one time decision to follow Christ, and our Lord's gift.