

Why Do We Believe *That*?

Class 17 – TULIP

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Belgic Confession of Faith

Article 21: The Atonement

We believe that Jesus Christ is a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek — made such by an oath — and that he presented himself in our name before his Father, to appease his wrath with full satisfaction by offering himself on the tree of the cross and pouring out his precious blood for the cleansing of our sins, as the prophets had predicted.

For it is written that “the chastisement of our peace” was placed on the Son of God and that “we are healed by his wounds.” He was “led to death as a lamb”; he was “numbered among sinners”⁴⁶ and condemned as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, though Pilate had declared that he was innocent. So he paid back what he had not stolen,⁴⁷ and he suffered — the “just for the unjust,”⁴⁸ in both his body and his soul — in such a way that when he sensed the horrible punishment required by our sins his sweat became like “big drops of blood falling on the ground.”⁴⁹ He cried, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”⁵⁰

And he endured all this for the forgiveness of our sins.

Therefore we rightly say with Paul that we “know nothing but Jesus and him crucified”;⁵¹ we consider all things as “dung for the excellence of the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁵² We find all comforts in his wounds and have no need to seek or invent any other means to reconcile ourselves with God than this one and only sacrifice, once made, which renders believers perfect forever.

This is also why the angel of God called him Jesus — that is, “Savior” — because he would save his people from their sins.⁵³

⁴⁶ Isa. 53:4–12

⁴⁷ Ps. 69:4

⁴⁸ 1 Pet. 3:18

⁴⁹ Luke 22:44

⁵⁰ Matt. 27:46

⁵¹ 1 Cor. 2:2

⁵² Phil. 3:8

⁵³ Matt. 1:21

W. Robert Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation: The Pastoral Theology of the Canons of Dort*

(Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2019)

p.153

The doctrine of perseverance embraced by the Reformed was perhaps their most unique doctrine. The uniqueness lay in their teaching that the believer could know that he would persevere by the grace of God. Robert Bellarmine, the great Jesuit theologian of this period, declared that this was the worst heresy of the Reformed. While the Remonstrance of 1610 had claimed uncertainty about this doctrine, it is clear that by the time of the synod, many Arminians had utterly rejected this teaching. They, like Bellarmine, had concluded that this doctrine would lead to moral laxity. The synod carefully and clearly shows what its teaching on this point truly is, and it shows that the charges brought against it are false.

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The conclusion effectively summarizes both the truth and the piety to which the canons as a whole aspire. Its appeal for fairness and its prayer for those in error show the synod as sincerely trying to be pastoral, removed from the anger and bitterness that sometimes characterized theological debate in the decade before the synod. The Calvinists were of course victorious, and it is easier to be gracious as the winner. Still, this conclusion does capture the spirit of Reformed Christianity at its best.

Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Volume 2*

Trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., (Phillipsburg PA: P&R, 1994)

p. 439

- I. However, we think that the satisfaction of Christ was so perfect and sufficient that he most fully satisfied for all our sins by the one offering of himself, not only for our guilt, but also for both temporal and eternal punishment. Hence- forth there are no more propitiatory offerings or satisfaction to be made for sin, either in this life or after it, although believers are often subjected to the chastisements of God to promote their penitence and sanctification.
- II. Such is the perfection of the atonement that it is adequate to the justice of God revealed in the word and to the demands of the law and answers to the miseries and necessities of those for whom it was made, not through the mere gracious acceptance of God (for thus the legal victims might also have availed to expiate sin, contrary to Heb. 10:4), but through a sufficiency of merit and condignity of work: (1) in respect to parts because it most fully satisfied all the claims of the law upon us: both as to obedience of life and the suffering of death, as to satisfactory virtue by which it has freed us from the guilt of death and the curse by enduring the punishments due to us, and as to meritorious power by which it has reconciled the Father to us, and has acquired for us a right to life; (2) in respect to degree, for Christ has not only done and suffered all that which the law demands but so fully and perfectly as to mode and degree that nothing more in this respect can possibly be desired (on account of the dignity of the person satisfying and the severity of the punishment

exacted) Hence follows the third relation (*schesis*), of the perfection in respect to its effects, which are viewed both in respect to God (in a perfect reconciliation with him, Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:18) and in respect to sin (in its perfect expiation and remission, Eph. 1:7; Heb. 1:3; 9:26); in respect to believers. in their full consummation and redemption (Heb. 9:12; 10:14) both as to deliverance from death and as to the acquisition of a title to life.

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THIRTEENTH QUESTION: THE MATTER OF THE SATISFACTION

Is the satisfaction of Christ to be restricted to the sufferings and punishments which he endured for us? Or is it to be extended also to the active obedience by which he perfectly fulfilled the law in his whole life? The former we deny and the latter we affirm.

- I. Concerning the matter and parts of the satisfaction, the opinions of theologians vary. Some restrict it to the sufferings or punishments which Christ endured for us. This opinion appears to have been first maintained by Cargius, a Lutheran minister, and after him by Piscator, a Reformed professor at Herborne and his followers. Some of these place the whole righteousness in the death of Christ; others comprehend in it all the sufferings he endured through the whole course of his life and call this his "passive righteousness." However the active righteousness (which they place in the obedience yielded by him to the precepts of the law), they suppose to have been necessary as a condition in the person of the Mediator to the performance of his office; but not forming a part of his satisfaction or his merits which are imputed to us.
- II. But the common opinion and the one received in our churches is that the satisfaction of Christ, which is imputed to us for righteousness before God, embraces not only the sufferings which he endured either in his life or at his death, but also the obedience of his whole life, or the just and holy actions by which he perfectly fulfilled the demands of the law in our place. Thus from these two parts, the full and perfect price of our redemption proceeds.
- III. The subject of controversy is not: (1) whether Christ perfectly fulfilled both the general law binding him to serve God and the special law commanding him to submit to death; and whether the obedience of his whole life was necessary to him for the execution of the work of salvation and useful to us and rendered for our good. For our opponents grant not only that Christ perfectly fulfilled both laws, but also that the obedience of his life was necessary both for him (as a condition required in the Mediator for the performance of the prescribed functions) and in many respects profitable for us. But we inquire whether it was also rendered in our place and whether it forms a part of the satisfaction which he made to God for This they deny and we affirm.
- IV. ...the question is whether with the obedience which he exhibited in his death (by enduring the punishment due to us) ought also to be joined the obedience of his whole life by which he fulfilled all righteousness and was perfectly conformed to the law. This we maintain and they deny.

Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*

(Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1937, repr. 2002)

p.166

Origen presents several different views without combining them into a synthetic whole. Christ saves by deifying human nature through the incarnation; by giving the supreme example of self-sacrifice, thus inspiring others to a similar sacrifice; by laying down his life as a sacrifice for the expiation of sin; and by redeeming men from the power of Satan. In connection with the idea of man's redemption from the power of the devil Origen introduces a new idea, namely that Satan was deceived in the transaction./ Christ offered Himself as a ransom to Satan, and Satan accepted the ransom without realizing that he would not be able to retain his hold on Christ because of the latter's divine power and holiness. Satan swallowed the bait of Christ's humanity, and was caught on the hook of His divinity. Thus the souls of all men -even of those in hades - were set free from the power of Satan.

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...God foreordained from eternity the passion of Christ as the means for the salvation of the predestinated. This passion has a peculiar value and a special efficacy only because it was foreordained as the means of salvation, and because God was willing to accept it as effectual. Duns denies the infinite value of the merits of Christ, because they were merits of the human nature, which is after all finite. By an act of His will, however, God determined to accept them as sufficient. A merit that is not at all commensurate with the debt owed is willingly accepted by God.

p.185-186

Socinus never tires of saying that the forgiveness of sins is an act of pure mercy, simply on the basis of repentance and obedience. The only conditions are sorrow for sin and an earnest desire to obey the law. He realized, however, that he had to give some explanation of the unique significance of Jesus, whose saving work was really excluded by his system. He says that Christ saves sinners by revealing to them the way of faith and obedience as the way to eternal life; by giving them an example of true obedience both in His life and in His death and by inspiring them to a similar life; by giving a concrete representation of obedience as the way of life in an obedience unto death followed by the resurrection; and by bestowing eternal life, by virtue of the power received at the resurrection, on all those that attach themselves to Him in faith. God gave Him this power as a reward for His obedience. This theory establishes no direct connection between the death of Christ and the salvation of sinners. The death of Christ did not atone for our sin, neither did it move God to pardon sin. The forgiveness of sins depends exclusively on the mercy of God. But because Christ received the power to bestow eternal life on believers immediately after His death, Socinus considers it possible to maintain that this death expiated our sins. The Socinian doctrine is really nothing but a concoction of several heresies condemned by the early Church; a revival of ancient Pelagianism with its belief in the inherent goodness and

spiritual ability of man; of the old Adoptionist doctrine, making Christ as to His human nature a Son of God by adoption; of the Moral Influence theory of the atonement with its emphasis on the exemplary life of Christ; and of the Scotist doctrine of an arbitrary will in God. It found little favour even among those who opposed the penal substitutionary doctrine of the atonement. And this is no wonder in view of the fact that it is thoroughly rationalistic, a mere abstract play of human logic that fails altogether to do justice to the facts revealed in the Word of God and experienced in the lives of the redeemed.

p. 188-189

It is quite characteristic of the Arminian view that it represents the death of Christ as a sacrificial offering, but at the same time maintains that this sacrifice should not be regarded as the payment of a debt, nor as a complete satisfaction of justice. ...In both the Old Testament and the New God sees fit to connect the manifestation of His pardoning grace with the antecedent death of a sacrifice. The sufferings and death of Christ are regarded as penal and judicial, and therefore as of the nature of punishment. This does not mean, however, that He endured what man deserved to endure, but only that by a divine appointment His sacrificial death took the place of a penalty, and as such had the effect of reconciling God to man and procuring the forgiveness of sins. This means that the death of Christ is not regarded as a substituted penalty which is a strict equivalent (the view of the Reformers), but as a substitution for a penalty which may be of inferior worth. It is spoken satisfaction of benevolence, On this point the Arminians are quite in agreement with Grotius.

They have several objections to the officially adopted doctrine of the atonement, the most important of which may be stated as follows: (a) Christ did not endure the full penalty of sin, since He did not suffer eternal death, either in time or in degree There was no endless suffering in His case, neither was there absolute despair. (b) If Christ completely atoned for sin, there is nothing left for divine grace to accomplish. If justice is satisfied, the remission of sin can no longer be a matter of divine compassion. And (c) if Christ rendered full satisfaction, God has no right to demand faith and obedience, nor to punish the sinner, if he fails to obey, for it is unjust to exact double punishment for one and the same sin.

Moreover, they regard the atonement of Christ as general or universal, which means that he 'made an atonement for the sins of mankind in general, and of every individual in particular' God sent Christ into the world, and Christ offered Himself willingly for the purpose of saving every individual of the human race. But while the atonement is universal in the divine intention, it is not universally effective, since many are lost. This partial failure is ascribed to the obstinacy of the sinner in refusing the effective application of the atonement depends ultimately on the offered atonement and defeating the divine intention. The sinner's will, which can and does in many cases defeat the very purpose of God.

p. 198

According to [the mystical theory] Christ assumed human nature as it was in Adam after the fall, that is, human nature with its inborn corruption and pre-disposition to moral evil. But through the power of the Holy Spirit, or of His divine nature, He was able to keep this corrupt human nature from manifesting itself in any actual or personal sin, gradually purified it through His sufferings, completely extirpating the original depravity by death, and thus reunited it to God. This purifying of human nature in the person of Jesus Christ constitutes His atonement. Consequently, men are saved, not by any objective propitiation, but by becoming partakers of Christ's new humanity by faith.

Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith*

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011)

p.503-504

Like a monarch slighted by a subject, God must have a suitable tribute to outweigh the affront to his honor. However, God's majesty is infinite and therefore a sin against it demands an infinite penalty. Yet how can a finite creature offer an infinite compensation? Only human beings owe it, but only God can pay it. Therefore, the Savior must be both God and human. As with the others, there is important truth in this formulation. Criticism of this theory as owing more to the feudal system of medieval chivalry than to Scripture easily overlooks its similarities with the ancient Near Eastern background of the biblical world (especially its understanding of covenant). Anselm's formulation properly directs our attention to the objective character of the atonement: *God's* problem with sin. The problem is that God has been offended, not simply that lives and human relationships have been broken.

Nevertheless, the Anselmian interpretation has certain exegetical and doctrinal weaknesses. Contrary to the widespread insistence of critics of vicarious satisfaction more generally, this particular formulation has never been accepted without reservation by Protestants, much less made the sole interpretation of Christ's death. Berkhof explains, "The theory of Anselm is sometimes identified with that of the Reformers, which is also known as the satisfaction theory, but the two are not identical." While Anselm grounds the atonement in the need to satisfy God's offended *dignity*, Reformation theology recognized that it was God's *justice* that was at stake. There is no room in Anselm's theory for Christ meriting life for us by his active obedience or for his suffering the penalty for our sin, only for the offer of a tribute that more than compensated for human offense — "and this is really the Roman Catholic doctrine of penance applied to the work of Christ." Furthermore, Reformed theology has faulted the theory for reducing the atonement to a commercial transaction between God and Jesus Christ without any treatment of its communication to sinners.

p.504-505

Like the moral influence theory, this view presupposes a strong version of *voluntarism*: that is, the priority of God's will over God's nature. Therefore, the principal rationale for Christ's work is not that it is the only way in which God can be true to both his love and his justice, but that it provides the general ground on which God can offer terms of salvation to sinners. Thus, Christ's death need not be regarded as a real payment of a debt, but merely as the basis upon which God's just rule is exhibited.

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ATONEMENT THEORIES	
Theory	Description
Recapitulation	Associated especially with Irenaeus and Eastern theology, this view underscores Christ's life as well as death as undoing humanity's collective transgression, replacing Adam's headship over the human race with his own. This view also emphasizes immortality as the supreme gift of Christ's saving work.
Ransom	Also known as the "classic" theory (because of its association with Origen and other early Alexandrian theologians), this view held that Christ's death was a ransom paid to Satan for the ownership of humanity.
<i>Christus Victor</i>	A key aspect of atonement theology especially in the East (as well as in Lutheran and Reformed teaching), this theory emphasizes Christ's victory over the powers of death and hell at the cross.
Satisfaction	Associated especially with the eleventh-century theologian Anselm, this view understands Christ's atonement primarily as an appeasement of God's offended <i>dignity</i> . Reformation theologies focus on the satisfaction of divine <i>justice</i> .
Moral Influence	This view interprets the atonement as a demonstration of God's love rather than as a satisfaction either of God's dignity or his justice. The effect of the atonement is to provide a moving example of God's love that will induce sinners to repentance. This view is associated with Abelard (1079 – 1142), has been held by Socinians and some Arminians, and has been the central idea in Protestant liberalism.
Moral Government	According to this view, Christ's atonement exhibits God's just government of the world and thereby establishes repentance as the basis on which human beings approach God. It was formulated in Arminian theology, especially by Hugo Grotius (1583 – 1645).

p. 509-510

More recently, the argument has been pressed by liberation, feminist, and Anabaptist theologies that representing Christ's death as a vicarious sacrifice valorizes domestic violence and social scapegoating. All of these objections share at least three assumptions that have been challenged above, namely, (1) a denial of God's wrath and the necessity of his justice being fully satisfied by Christ's death, (2) a rejection of the principle of substitution in this relationship between God and sinners, and (3) an emphasis on the exemplary character of Christ's death as inciting human love and obedience rather than on its expiatory character as providing the sole basis for our acceptance before God.

However, according to Scripture, that which makes sin *sinful* is the fact that it is first of all an offense against God (Ps 51:3 – 5). For a variety of reasons, the notion of justice has been replaced in our culture by a therapeutic vocabulary. This is not altogether wrong from a Christian perspective: there is much in the gospel about the healing that Christ's work brings in its wake. Restored relationships, renewal, and empowerment have their important place in a Christian doctrine of sanctification. However, in a therapeutic worldview, the whole purpose of religion is to improve our sense of well-being rather than to address the situation of sinners before the judgment of a holy God. As we have seen from Jeremiah 30, confirmed by many other passages in Old and New Testaments, the condition in which Israel finds itself is precisely that of the world in Adam: hopeless and helpless, beyond cure, unable to recover from either the guilt and condemnation or the corruption of sin. Whatever truth there may be in Christ's cross securing restored relationships, renewal and moral empowerment can be justified only on the deeper basis of Christ's fulfilling the law in his life, bearing the curse in his death, and rising victoriously from the dead.

If therapeutic categories dominate, however, every article of the Christian faith is tested by whether it will help us to feel better about ourselves, have a more fulfilling life, and contribute to human flourishing. When humans rather than God are at the center, the cross can be understood as a moving example of loving self-sacrifice, an illustration of how much God loves us, and a demonstration that God has reestablished his sovereignty over the kingdoms of darkness. But the one thing that it *cannot* be is the means by which "we have been justified by his blood [and] . . . saved by him from the wrath of God" (Ro 5:9).

Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology*

(Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006)

p.224

The only significant difference between it and the penal substitution theory (often said to be the orthodox doctrine of the atonement, especially by conservative Reformed theologians) is that the governmental theory does not say that in their place Christ bore the actual punishment of sinners; it says that he bore suffering as an alternative to punishment in their place. In other words, according to those Arminians who do hold to the governmental theory, God inflicted pain on Christ for the sins of the world in order to uphold his justice and holiness. Christ's suffering was equivalent to any sinner's deserved punishment so that God could forgive while at the same time being wholly just and holy. But Christ did not take the actual punishment deserved by every person. To say that the governmental theory denies substitution is simply false. It differs from the traditional Reformed theory of the atonement only at that one point.

J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism*
(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923, repr. 2009)

p.100-101

Modern liberal preachers do indeed sometimes speak of the "atonement." But they speak of it just as seldom as they possibly can, and one can see plainly that their hearts are elsewhere than at the foot of the Cross. Indeed, at this point, as at many others, one has the feeling that traditional language is being strained to become the expression of totally alien ideas. And when the traditional phraseology has been stripped away, the essence of the modern conception of the death of Christ, though that conception appears in many forms, is fairly plain. The essence of it is that the death of Christ had an effect not upon God but only upon man. Sometimes the effect upon man is conceived of in a very simple way, Christ's death being regarded merely as an example of self-sacrifice for us to emulate. The uniqueness of this particular example, then, can be found only in the fact that Christian sentiment, gathering around it, has made it a convenient symbol for all self-sacrifice; it puts in concrete form what would otherwise have to be expressed in colder general terms. Sometimes, again, the effect of Christ's death upon us is conceived of in subtler ways; the death of Christ, it is said, shows how much God hates sin-- since sin brought even the Holy One to the dreadful Cross--and we too, therefore, ought to hate sin, as God hates it, and repent. Sometimes, still again, the death of Christ is thought of as displaying the love of God; it exhibits God's own Son as given up for us all. These modern "theories of the atonement" are not all to be placed upon the same plane; the last of them, in particular, may be joined with a high view of Jesus' Person. But they err in that they ignore the dreadful reality of guilt, and make a mere persuasion of the human will all that is needed for salvation. They do indeed all contain an element of truth: it is true that the death of Christ is an example of self-sacrifice which may inspire self-sacrifice in others; it is true that the death of Christ shows how much God hates sin; it is true that the death of Christ displays the love of God. All of these truths are found plainly in the New Testament. But they are swallowed up in a far greater truth—that Christ died instead of us to present us faultless before the throne of God. Without that central truth, all the rest is devoid of real meaning: an example of self-sacrifice is useless to those who are under both the guilt and thrallldom of sin; the knowledge of God's hatred of sin can in itself bring only despair; an exhibition of the love of God is a mere display unless there was some underlying reason for the sacrifice. If the Cross is to be restored to its rightful place in Christian life, we shall have to penetrate far beneath the modern theories to Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.

Phillip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom, Vol. 2*
(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1931, repr. 2007)

The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent

p.157

[from Chapter VIII] Thus, man has not wherein to glory, but all our glorying is in Christ: in whom we live; in whom we merit; in whom we satisfy; *bringing forth fruits worthy of penance*¹, which from him have their efficacy; by him are offered to the Father; and through him are accepted by the Father. Therefore the priests of the Lord ought, as far as the Spirit and prudence shall suggest, to enjoin salutary and suitable satisfactions, according to the quality of the crimes and the ability of the penitent; lest, if haply they connive at sins, and deal too indulgently with penitents, by enjoining certain very light works for very grievous crimes, they be made partakers of other men's sins. But let them have in view, that the satisfaction, which they impose, be not only for the preservation of a new life and a medicine of infirmity, but also for the avenging and punishing of past sins.

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[from Chapter IX] The Synod teaches furthermore, that so great is the liberality of the divine munificence, that we are able through Jesus Christ to make satisfaction to God the Father, not only by punishments voluntarily undertaken of ourselves for the punishment of sin, or by those imposed at the discretion of the priest according to the measure of our delinquency, but also, which is a very great proof of love, by the temporal scourges inflicted of God, and borne patiently by us.

p. 164-165

[Canon IV] If any one denieth, that, for the entire and perfect remission of sins, there are required three acts in the penitent, which are as it were the matter of the sacrament of Penance, to wit, contrition, confession, and satisfaction, which are called the three parts of penance; or saith that there are two parts only of penance, to wit, the terrors with which the conscience is smitten upon being convinced of sin, and the faith, generated by the gospel, or by the absolution, whereby one believes that his sins are forgiven him through Christ: let him be anathema.

p. 168-169

[Canon XII] If any one saith, that God always remits the whole punishment together with the guilt, and that the satisfaction of penitents is no other than the faith whereby they apprehend that Christ has satisfied for them: let him be anathema.

¹¹ The Council cites Matt 3:18 here, which famously the Vulgate translated the Greek word for “repentance” as “do penance.”

[Canon XIII] If any one saith, that satisfaction for sins, as to their temporal punishment, is nowise made to God, through the merits of Jesus Christ, by the punishments inflicted by him, and patiently borne, or by those enjoined by the priest, nor even by those voluntarily undertaken, as by fastings, prayers, alms-deeds, or by other works also of piety; and that, therefore, the best penance is merely a new life: let him be anathema.

[Canon XIV] If any one saith, that the satisfactions, by which penitents redeem their sins through Jesus Christ, are not a worship of God, but traditions of men, which obscure the doctrine of grace, and the true worship of God, and the benefit itself of the death of Christ: let him be anathema.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition

(Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2019)

p. 371

1474 The Christian who seeks to purify himself of his sin and to become holy with the help of God's grace is not alone. "The life of each of God's children is joined in Christ and through Christ in a wonderful way to the life of all the other Christian brethren in the supernatural unity of the Mystical Body of Christ, as in a single mystical person."

1475 In the communion of saints, "a perennial link of charity exists between the faithful who have already reached their heavenly home, those who are expiating their sins in purgatory and those who are still pilgrims on earth. Between them there is, too, an abundant exchange of all good things." In this wonderful exchange, the holiness of one profits others, well beyond the harm that the sin of one could cause others. Thus recourse to the communion of saints lets the contrite sinner be more promptly and efficaciously purified of the punishments for sin.

1476 We also call these spiritual goods of the communion of saints the Church's treasury, which is "not the sum total of the material goods which have accumulated during the course of the centuries. On the contrary the 'treasury of the Church' is the infinite value, which can never be exhausted, which Christ's merits have before God. They were offered so that the whole of mankind could be set free from sin and attain communion with the Father. In Christ, the Redeemer himself, the satisfactions and merits of his Redemption exist and find their efficacy."

1477 "This treasury includes as well the prayers and good works of the Blessed Virgin Mary. They are truly immense, unfathomable, and even pristine in their value before God. In the treasury, too, are the prayers and good works of all the saints, all those who have followed in the footsteps of Christ the Lord and by his grace have made their lives holy and carried out the mission the Father entrusted to them. In this way they attained their own salvation and at the same time cooperated in saving their brothers in the unity of the Mystical Body."⁸⁹