

A Catholic Response to Five Sola's of Reformation: Soli Deo Gloria

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The five sola's (Latin word that means *alone* or *only*) are the battle cries of 16th century Reformers against the Catholic Church. Those five may be expressed in one sentence as: We are saved by grace alone [*sola gratia*], through faith alone [*sola fide*], in Christ alone [*solus Christus* or *solo Christo*], as revealed in Scripture alone [*sola scriptura*], to the glory of God alone [*soli Deo gloria*]¹. We now examine soli Deo Gloria or to the glory of God alone.

While the meaning of for the glory of God does not need any explanation, the reason why they add the word "alone" is described below:

By holding forth soli Deo gloria as the lifeblood of the solas, we remind ourselves that the biblical religion recaptured by the Reformation is not ultimately about ourselves, but about God. Our focus so easily becomes self-centered, even when we ask the same important questions that occupied the Reformers: Where can I find God's authoritative revelation? How can I escape the wrath of God? What must I do to be saved? The other four solas provide necessary and life-changing answers to such questions, but soli Deo gloria puts them in proper perspective: the highest purpose of God's plan of salvation in Christ, made known in Scripture, is not our own beatitude, wonderful as that is. The highest purpose is God's own glory. God glorifies himself through the abundant blessings he bestows upon us.

VanDrunen², D.: *God's Glory Alone*, page 15-16 (underlined emphasis added)

Because the Catholic Church rejects the first four sola's, according to VanDrunen glory in Catholicism does not belong to God's alone, but it is shared between God and men.

If the Roman Catholic doctrine of authority and doctrine of salvation are true, all glory thus does not belong to God alone.

the Reformers called the church back to Scripture alone, to faith alone, to grace alone, and to Christ alone, and by so doing they reminded us that all glory belongs to God and not to ourselves.

ibid., page 15, 24 (underlined emphasis added)

While The Catholic Church does not adopt the slogan soli Deo Gloria, neither does she teach that we can have a share in God's glory. Catholic's rejection of the first four sola's, if properly understood and not caricatured, does not lead to that conclusion either.

Sola Scriptura

While the Reformers claimed that Scripture alone is the authority for Christian faith and life, Roman Catholics professed reverence for Scripture but insisted that the church's tradition and the Pope in Rome stood alongside Scripture to interpret it infallibly and to augment its teaching.

ibid., page 14

Here VanDrunen wrote “the church’s tradition”, as if that tradition came only from the church and not from God. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, differentiates between Apostolic Tradition and Church (Ecclesial) tradition. VanDrunen in his statement above mentioned only the latter. The former comes from the Apostles, which they learnt from Christ and from the Holy Spirit (after His Ascension to heaven), who will guide them in truth (John 16:13)³. The existence of this Tradition (Greek noun παραδοσις, paradosis) is found in Scripture (1 Corinthians 11:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:15, 3:6). Before the first book of New Testament was written, the teaching of Christ and of His apostles were circulated orally. Even New Testament, from Catholic point of view, is Tradition in written form. New Testament never claims that it contains all those oral Tradition. Apostolic Tradition is unchangeable while the Church tradition is changeable⁴.

Scripture cannot stand by itself - it needs authority (1) to determine which books and how many of them belong to Scripture and (2) to interpret it. While Protestants reject the authority of the Catholic Church, they still need their authority to do the above two. There is no single verse in Scripture that gives list of inspired books. Neither did God drop that list from heaven, to be discovered by the Church – some sort of Treasure Hunt. Catholics believe that God, through the Holy Spirit, will guide the Church both to determine the canon (list of inspired books) of Scripture and to interpret it. Well, so do the Protestants, even though they never acknowledge it openly. They insist that Scripture has only 66 books because they were told so, and strictly follow their denomination or their leaders’ interpretation of Scripture.

As both Scripture and Apostolic Tradition come from God and the Church is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church does not have a share in the glory, which exclusively belongs to God.

Sola Gratia, Sola Fide and Solus Christus

Salvation by Christ alone, through grace alone, by faith alone means that all glory goes to God alone.

ibid., page 20

Instead of through grace alone, they think Catholics believe we are saved by grace *plus merits* in our cooperation with that grace. They simply confuse what is known as *synergism*⁵ with *semi-pelagianism*⁶. In the latter, grace and our will are two independent and mutually exclusive agents who are working together. God provide grace for us, but it depends on us whether we accept that grace or not. This is not Catholic teaching, and it was condemned as early as 525 AD in the council of Orange. In synergism, on the other hand, our (free) will is produced by grace. There is *Election* in synergism, or God chose whom He wanted to be saved or the Elect. In contrast there is no Election in semi-pelagianism. In synergism God gives the Elect what Catholics define as efficacious grace, which makes our will *freely* cooperate. Our merits in Catholic teaching also come from grace, or they are gift from God⁷, *not* something we deserve like we merit our salary through our job.

In relation to sola fide or (justification) by faith alone, they accuse Catholics of believing in justification by *faith plus works*. By works they understand it to mean our own produced works, as if we have our contribution in our justification. The official Catholic teaching is our justification comes from God's grace⁸. It is grace that enables us to *freely* believe in Christ and to *freely* obey His Commandments during our sanctification. By ourselves we can neither believe in Christ nor obey His Commandments, and therefore can never be justified.

For Catholics justification is a process that includes sanctification. It changes our state, from unrighteous state to righteous one. The Reformers, on the other hand, taught that justification is instantaneous and is by faith alone. Justification is separated from sanctification, but these two must come together in a saved person life. It only changes our status, or we are counted as righteous, but it does not change our state, or we are justified and sinner at the same time.

Because Catholics believe that we are made righteous through justification, they think Catholics believe we are saved by Christ and the Church, as the latter will make grace infused in us through Sacraments. But the Catholic Church does not teach that the Church can produce grace through Sacraments. Being the Body of Christ, the Church is inseparable from the Head, Christ Himself.

Seated at the right hand of the Father [Acts 7:55, Romans 8:34] and pouring out the Holy Spirit on his Body which is the Church, Christ now acts through the sacraments he instituted to communicate his grace.

Catechism of the Catholic Church # 1084

The reason why infusing grace through Sacraments is problematic for Protestants is their belief that we do not need to be righteous to be saved. They say that we can never be able to become righteous. We always fall short and cannot meet God's standard of righteousness. The only solution is accepting righteousness of Christ by faith alone, which will be imputed on us, or we are righteous externally but remain sinners inside. When we die and stand before God for judgment, instead of looking at our sins, God will look at righteousness of Christ and therefore let us enter heaven. Catholics agree that by our own effort we can never become righteous. Our righteousness does come from God through Christ. *Justification is at the same time the acceptance of God's righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ* (ibid. # 1991). Scripture says through Christ we are made righteous (Romans 5:19) and the righteous shall go to eternal life (Matthew 25:46).

To conclude, while the Catholic Church does not (and will not) adopt sola gratia, sola fide and solus Christus, Catholics do not believe we and/or the Church take a portion of glory that exclusively belongs to God.

End Notes

- ¹ <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/five-solas/>
- ² David VanDrunen (born 1971) is Robert B. Strimple Professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics at Westminster Seminary, California (www.wscal.edu).
- ³ *The Tradition here in question comes from the apostles and hands on what they received from Jesus' teaching and example and what they learned from the Holy Spirit.*
Catechism of the Catholic Church # 83
- ⁴ *Tradition is to be distinguished from the various theological, disciplinary, liturgical, or devotional traditions, born in the local churches over time.
In the light of Tradition, these traditions can be retained, modified or even abandoned under the guidance of the Church's magisterium.*
Catechism of the Catholic Church # 83
- ⁵ from Greek syn (together) and ergon (work)
- ⁶ from Pelagius (ca. 350 – ca 425)
- ⁷ *Man's merit, moreover, itself is due to God, for his good actions proceed in Christ, from the predispositions and assistance given by the Holy Spirit.*
Catechism of the Catholic Church # 2008
*The merits of our good works are gifts of the divine goodness.
Our merits are God's gifts."*
Catechism of the Catholic Church # 2009
- ⁸ *Our justification comes from the grace of God*
Catechism of the Catholic Church # 1996