Since there is being disseminated at this time, not without the loss of many souls and grievous detriment to the unity of the Church, a certain erroneous doctrine concerning justification, the holy, ecumenical and general Council of Trent, lawfully assembled in the Holy Ghost, the most reverend John Maria, Bishop of Praeneste de Monte, and Marcellus, priest of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem, cardinals of the holy Roman Church and legates Apostolic a latere, presiding in the name of our most holy Father and Lord in Christ, Paul III, by the providence of God, Pope, intends, for the praise and glory of Almighty God, for the tranquility of the Church and the salvation of souls, to expound to all the faithful of Christ the true and salutary doctrine of justification, which the Sun of justice, Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of our faith taught, which the Apostles transmitted and which the Catholic Church under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost has always retained; strictly forbidding that anyone henceforth presume to believe, preach or teach otherwise than is defined and declared in the present decree.

CHAPTER I: THE POWERLESSNESS OF NATURE AND OF THE LAW TO JUSTIFY MAN

The holy council declares first, that for a correct and clear understanding of the doctrine of justification, it is necessary that each one recognize and confess that since all men had lost innocence in the prevarication of Adam, having become unclean, and, as the Apostle says, by nature children of wrath, as has been set forth in the decree on original sin, they were so far the servants of sin and under the power of the devil and of death, that not only the Gentiles by the force of nature, but not even the Jews by the very letter of the law of Moses, were able to be liberated or to rise there from, though free will, weakened as it was in its powers and downward bent, was by no means extinguished in them.

CHAPTER II: THE DISPENSATION AND MYSTERY OF THE ADVENT OF CHRIST

Whence it came to pass that the heavenly Father, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, when the blessed fullness of time was come, sent to men Jesus Christ, His own Son, who had both before the law and during the time of the law been announced and promised to many of the holy fathers, that he might redeem the Jews who were under the law, and that the Gentiles who followed not after justice might attain to justice, and that all men might receive the adoption of sons. Him has God proposed as a propitiator through faith in his blood for our sins, and not for our sins only, but also for those of the whole world.

CHAPTER V: THE NECESSITY OF PREPARATION FOR JUSTIFICATION IN ADULTS, AND WHENCE IT PROCEEDS

It is furthermore declared that in adults the beginning of that justification must proceed from the predisposing grace of God through Jesus Christ, that is, from His vocation, whereby, without any merits on their part, they are called; that they who by sin had been cut off from God, may be disposed through His quickening and helping grace to convert themselves to their own justification by freely assenting to and cooperating with that grace; so that, while God touches the heart of man through the illumination of the Holy Ghost, man himself neither does absolutely
nothing while receiving that inspiration, since he can also reject it, nor yet is he able by his own free will and without the grace of God to move himself to justice in His sight. Hence, when it is said in the sacred writings: “Turn ye to me, and I will turn to you, we are reminded of our liberty; and when we reply: Convert us, O Lord, to thee, and we shall be converted, we confess that we need the grace of God.”

CHAPTER VII: IN WHAT THE JUSTIFICATION OF THE SINNER CONSISTS, AND WHAT ARE ITS CAUSES

This disposition or preparation is followed by justification itself, which is not only a remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man through the voluntary reception of the grace and gifts whereby an unjust man becomes just and from being an enemy becomes a friend, that he may be an heir according to hope of life everlasting.

The causes of this justification are: the final cause is the glory of God and of Christ and life everlasting; the efficient cause is the merciful God who washes and sanctifies gratuitously, signing and anointing with the holy Spirit of promise, who is the pledge of our inheritance, the meritorious cause is His most beloved only begotten, our Lord Jesus Christ, who, when we were enemies, for the exceeding charity wherewith he loved us, merited for us justification by His most holy passion on the wood of the cross and made satisfaction for us to God the Father, the instrumental cause is the sacrament of baptism, which is the sacrament of faith, without which no man was ever justified finally, the single formal cause is the justice of God, not that by which He Himself is just, but that by which He makes us just, that, namely, with which we being endowed by Him, are renewed in the spirit of our mind, and not only are we reputed but we are truly called and are just, receiving justice within us, each one according to his own measure, which the Holy Ghost distributes to everyone as He wills, and according to each one's disposition and cooperation.

For though no one can be just except he to whom the merits of the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ are communicated, yet this takes place in that justification of the sinner, when by the merit of the most holy passion, the charity of God is poured forth by the Holy Ghost in the hearts of those who are justified and inheres in them; whence man through Jesus Christ, in whom he is engrafted, receives in that justification, together with the remission of sins, all these infused at the same time, namely, faith, hope and charity. For faith, unless hope and charity be added to it, neither unites man perfectly with Christ nor makes him a living member of His body.

For which reason it is most truly said that faith without works is dead and of no profit, and in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availed anything nor uncircumcision, but faith that works by charity. This faith, conformably to Apostolic tradition, catechumens ask of the Church before the sacrament of baptism, when they ask for the faith that gives eternal life, which without hope and charity faith cannot give. Whence also they hear immediately the word of Christ: If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. Wherefore, when receiving true and Christian justice, they are commanded, immediately on being born again, to preserve it pure and spotless, as the first robe given them through Christ Jesus in place of that which Adam by his disobedience lost for himself and for us, so that they may bear it before the tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ and may have life eternal.

CHAPTER VIII: HOW THE GRATUITOUS JUSTIFICATION OF THE SINNER BY FAITH IS TO BE UNDERSTOOD
But when the Apostle says that man is justified by faith and freely, these words are to be understood in that sense in which the uninterrupted unanimity of the Catholic Church has held and expressed them, namely, that we are therefore said to be justified by faith, because faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and root of all justification, without which it is impossible to please God and to come to the fellowship of His sons; and we are therefore said to be justified gratuitously, because none of those things that precede justification, whether faith or works, merit the grace of justification.

For, if by grace, it is not now by works, otherwise, as the Apostle says, grace is no more grace.

CHAPTER X: THE INCREASE OF THE JUSTIFICATION RECEIVED

Having, therefore, been thus justified and made the friends and domestics of God, advancing from virtue to virtue, they are renewed, as the Apostle says, day by day, that is, mortifying the members of their flesh, and presenting them as instruments of justice unto sanctification, they, through the observance of the commandments of God and of the Church, faith cooperating with good works, increase in that justice received through the grace of Christ and are further justified, as it is written: He that is just, let him be justified still; and, Be not afraid to be justified even to death; and again, Do you see that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only?

This increase of justice holy Church asks for when she prays: "Give unto us, O Lord, an increase of faith, hope and charity."

CHAPTER XVI: THE FRUITS OF JUSTIFICATION, THAT IS, THE MERIT OF GOOD WORKS, AND THE NATURE OF THAT MERIT

Therefore, to men justified in this manner, whether they have preserved uninterruptedly the grace received or recovered it when lost, are to be pointed out the words of the Apostle: Abound in every good work, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

For God is not unjust, that he should forget your work, and the love that you have shown in his name; and, do not lose your confidence, which hath a great reward.

Hence, to those who work well unto the end and trust in God, eternal life is to be offered, both as a grace mercifully promised to the sons of God through Christ Jesus, and as a reward promised by God himself, to be faithfully given to their good works and merits.

For this is the crown of justice which after his fight and course the Apostle declared was laid up for him, to be rendered to him by the just judge, and not only to him, but also to all that love his coming.

For since Christ Jesus Himself, as the head into the members and the vine into the branches, continually infuses strength into those justified, which strength always precedes, accompanies and follows their good works, and without which they could not in any manner be pleasing and meritorious before God, we must believe that nothing further is wanting to those justified to prevent them from being considered to have, by those very works which have been done in God, fully satisfied the divine law according to the state of this life and to have truly merited eternal life, to be obtained in its [due] time, provided they depart [this life] in grace, since Christ our
Savior says:

If anyone shall drink of the water that I will give him, he shall not thirst forever; but it shall become in him a fountain of water springing up into life everlasting.

Thus, neither is our own justice established as our own from ourselves, nor is the justice of God ignored or repudiated, for that justice which is called ours, because we are justified by its inherence in us, that same is [the justice] of God, because it is infused into us by God through the merit of Christ.

Nor must this be omitted, that although in the sacred writings so much is attributed to good works, that even he that shall give a drink of cold water to one of his least ones, Christ promises, shall not lose his reward; and the Apostle testifies that, That which is at present momentary and light of our tribulation, works for us above measure exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; nevertheless, far be it that a Christian should either trust or glory in himself and not in the Lord, whose bounty toward all men is so great that He wishes the things that are His gifts to be their merits.

And since in many things we all offend, each one ought to have before his eyes not only the mercy and goodness but also the severity and judgment [of God]; neither ought anyone to judge himself, even though he be not conscious to himself of anything; because the whole life of man is to be examined and judged not by the judgment of man but of God, who will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts, and then shall ever man have praise from God, who, as it is written, will render to every man according to his works.

After this Catholic doctrine on justification, which whosoever does not faithfully and firmly accept cannot be justified, it seemed good to the holy council to add to these canons, that all may know not only what they must hold and follow, but also what to avoid and shun.

Reading Guide Questions for Excerpts from the Decrees of the Council of Trent

1. Did original sin extinguish human free will (chapter 1)? Can Jews or gentiles rise above original sin either by obedience to the law of Moses or by their own strength?

2. Does God justify humans because of some human merit, whether faith or works? Do humans do anything on their own in relation to God’s grace? What?

3. How should humans respond to God’s gift of justification? Is eternal life a grace or a reward for good works?

4. The Council describes five causes pertaining to justification (chapter 7). What are they? What do these five causes tell us about the nature of justification?

5. The Council argues that, in justification, humans are infused not only with the gift of faith, but also hope and charity. Explain.