

## SALVATION OUTSIDE THE CHURCH?

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FROM THE very first moment the Catholic Church began her apostolic mission until the present time, her doctrinal intransigence has always been a source of grief to those who do not accept her claims. One doctrine especially stands out as the target at which most of the attacks directed against her are first aimed. This most tender spot in the non-Catholic consciousness of the Church is her oft-reiterated claim to be the only church in which men can be saved.

The psychological effect of such an assertion upon non-Catholics is quite understandable. For in that one phrase, "*No salvation outside the Church*," they see the substance of the Catholic Church's attitude toward non-Catholic communions. This is her evaluation of their worth as soul-saving institutions. That state of mind, however, is as nothing in comparison with what usually results when, as often happens, our separated brethren proceed from this declaration to a complete misunderstanding of Rome's teaching regarding the salvation of individual non-Catholics. They reason that since those not in communion with Rome depend upon their own societies to aid them in attaining heavenly beatitude, the utter worthlessness of these institutions in the estimation of the Church likewise argues to the fact that anyone dependent upon them is also, in her eyes, foredoomed to the fires of hell. As a result of such reasoning, the ire of an outraged world has more than once been enkindled against the monster, Rome. It matters little whether the attackers believe in hell or not. The very idea of such a galling attitude of superiority and exclusiveness furnishes spirit enough, although doctrinal conviction is lacking.

That these recurrent storms of denunciation mean little to the Church is evidenced by the fact that she continues to proclaim her exclusiveness as the sole means instituted by Christ for the salvation of men. She does, however, often explain the meaning of her doctrine in this matter for the benefit of those who have the good will to hear her. Recently she made it quite clear that she does not consider adherence to a non-Catholic sect

an automatic cause for damnation. Consequently, for a time at least, she will be spared attack from this quarter until the memory of the pronouncement has grown dim.

Yet such a declaration of the possibility of salvation for non-Catholics, if not properly understood, may easily give rise to another error into which many people, even Catholics, fall. Due to the complexity of the question and the apparent contradiction involved, they arrive at this conclusion: after declaring for centuries that outside of her communion no one can attain heaven, the Catholic Church now states that every non-Catholic who is in good faith and who follows the dictates of his conscience, will be saved. But this latter declaration seems to contradict the first. Therefore the Catholic Church must be discarding the old line of thought and turning to a more liberal doctrine.

Many a non-Catholic probably sighs with relief as he sees—or thinks he sees—the Church of Rome finally climb on the bandwagon and jettison that “relic of medieval intolerance,” which has risen so often in the past to vex his protesting forbears. Many a Catholic, struggling to solve the apparent contradiction in doctrine, probably falls into the same error, or, if well instructed in the truth that Christ’s Church cannot contradict herself, at least hopes that no one will call upon him for an explanation.

The error is understandable, at least on the part of non-Catholics, but it is obviously dangerous because of the religious indifferentism which may arise from it. Superficially, these doctrines do seem to contradict each other. Therefore, a further explanation is necessary to show that in reality they are not opposed, that the Church has not sacrificed either one, but that their apparent discordance can be reconciled. However, first we should see what foundation each has had in the history of the Church.

Concerning the first; the formula, “*No salvation outside the Church,*” was first used by St. Cyprian in the third century,<sup>1</sup> and later adopted by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). From the very beginning, however, the Church has asserted her claim to be the only source of salvation for men. Christ Himself, as Head of the Church, provided the basis for it not only by instituting the Church, but also when he told the disciples to regard any man who would not hear the Church as a heathen and a publican,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ep. 73, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Matt. 18:17.

and again when He declared, "He who heareth you, heareth Me; he who despiseth you, despiseth Me." (Luke 10, 16) He placed as a necessary condition for salvation not only faith in Himself, but also incorporation into the visible society He instituted. Thus, the Catholic Church, realizing with St. Peter that salvation comes through Christ alone,<sup>3</sup> and that it is the merits of His crucifixion applied to each soul that makes it worthy of heaven, also knows that these merits flow into men's souls through her ministry alone. She is conscious of the fact that the principal fonts of the graces of the Redemption, the Mass and the Sacraments, have been given into her custody. Consequently, men can grasp Christ and attain incorporation into His Mystical Body only through her.

This doctrine is emphasized throughout the Acts and Epistles. St. Peter compares the Church to the Ark of Noe, outside of which all were lost.<sup>4</sup> St. Paul constantly speaks of the salvation that has come to the gentiles through Christ and His Church.<sup>5</sup> The same thought is expressed by the Fathers. St. Irenaeus declares, ". . . In the Church, St. Paul tells us, God has set apostles, prophets, teachers, and all other means through which the spirit works, of which all those are not partakers, who do not join themselves to the Church, but defraud themselves of life."<sup>6</sup> St. Cyprian is even more forceful: "No one can have God for his Father who has not the Church for his mother";<sup>7</sup> "No man can be saved except in the Church."<sup>8</sup> Christian tradition has never wearied of insisting upon it. In 1208 Pope Innocent III obliged converted Waldenses to a profession of faith containing this phrase: "We believe in our hearts, and we confess with our lips one and only one Church, not that of the heretics, but the Roman, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, outside of which no one can be saved."<sup>9</sup> Examples could be multiplied indefinitely, all of them emphasizing the fact of the Church's consciousness of her Divine foundation and absolute necessity in the economy of salvation. Perhaps the most forceful document on this point

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Acts 4:12.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. I Pet. 3:20-21.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Rom. 1:5-8; 4: 12-25; 1 Cor. 1:24; 12:13. Gal. 1:1-6; Eph. 1:2-8; 1 Thess. 2, etc.

<sup>6</sup> *Treatise against Heresies*, bk. 3, ch. 24, I.

<sup>7</sup> Ep. 74:7.

<sup>8</sup> Ep. 4:4.

<sup>9</sup> *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, Denzinger-Bannwart 423

in modern times is the allocution, *Singulari Nos* of Dec. 9, 1854. In it Pius IX refers to the idea that those outside the Church can hope for "eternal life, as a "pernicious error," and exhorts the bishops to vigilance, lest, ". . . this impious and baleful opinion" find a permanent place in the thought of many Catholics. Finally the Pontiff declares, "It must be held as an article of faith that outside the Apostolic Roman Church no one can be saved, for she is the one and only ark of salvation, which unless one gain entrance into it, he must perish in the deluge."<sup>10</sup>

Thus the Church is most definite in her reply to the question of the possibility of the adoption of a more "tolerant" attitude toward other communions which have been established in antagonism to her, the Mystical Body of Christ. They will always appear to her for what they are: institutions which have not arisen from Christ, but which have purely human and often anti-Christian sources.

The apparently opposite line of doctrine also has a firm basis in Scripture and Catholic teaching. For example, St. Paul taught that God desires all men to be saved.<sup>11</sup> It is the consequent refusal of a free but perverse will to accept Divine grace that causes damnation. In 1610 Pope Alexander VIII condemned the proposition of Arnould, the Jansenist, which stated that Jews, heretics, and all other non-Catholics receive absolutely no grace from Jesus Christ. In 1713 Clement XI in his bull *Unigenitus* denounced the same error of Quesnel. The Church has always taught that no one is lost except through his own fault, that invincible ignorance never causes damnation.<sup>12</sup>

The same Pope Pius IX who uttered the forceful declaration quoted above, also said: "We all know that those who are invincibly ignorant of our religion and who nevertheless lead an honest and upright life, can, under the influence of Divine light and grace, attain to eternal life; for God, Who knows and sees the mind, the heart, the thoughts and the dispositions of every man, cannot in his infinite bounty and clemency, permit anyone to

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 1646-1647.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Rom. 1:16: II Cor. 5:15: I Tim. 2:4.

<sup>12</sup> Invincible ignorance is that state of mind wherein a person, through no fault of his own, lacks certain knowledge, which if possessed, would cause him to embrace a good (in this case the Catholic Church), or deter him from acting contrary to that truth. It presupposes good will. Cf. *Summa Theologica* I-II, Q. 6, a. 8.

suffer eternal punishment who is not guilty through his own fault."<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, there is no doubt about this matter either. Non-Catholics who lead just lives according to the knowledge they possess, can receive the saving grace of Christ's Redemption, even though they are unaware of the necessity of visible membership in the Catholic Church. On more than one occasion, Rome has been quick to denounce any opinion to the contrary. However, from what has been said, it is obvious that this ignorance, in order to excuse, must not be the result of obstinate refusal to see the truth, but must stem from causes beyond the control of the individual. In other words, good will is the necessary fundament for the reception of God's mercy.

Thus in every age of the Church, men have been confronted with two tenets of faith, one apparently in opposition to the other. There have been those who, unmindful of the infallibility of the teaching Church or erroneously considering one or the other doctrine as merely private theological opinion, have sought to solve the problem by discarding the doctrine which least suited them. But this is no solution; it is heresy. On the other hand, orthodox theologians, reasoning from the declarations of the Church, from her nature and divine mission, and from their knowledge of God's mercy, have explained the two doctrines and have shown their consonance. If perhaps, all the intricacies of the question are still not solved to everyone's complete satisfaction, it must be remembered that we are dealing here with mysteries, including God's infinite mercy. He Himself has said that He does not desire the eternal death of man, but rather his eternal happiness, but He has also instituted a visible Church as the necessary means for obtaining this mercy. It remains for us, then, to discover how these theologians show that the Catholic Church's absolute necessity for salvation does not conflict with the boundless mercy God has toward all men.

First of all, it is of primary importance to realize that the declaration, "*No salvation outside the Church*," is not directed against any individual non-Catholics precisely as they are individual persons. It is not the office of the Church to condemn anyone to hell, for she cannot know the ultimate dispositions of souls which determine their fate in the next life. Rather, it is aimed at non-Catholic communions insofar as they are non-Catholic. It is a

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<sup>13</sup> Denz. 1677.

concise formulation of the truth that there is but one Holy, Apostolic, Catholic Church, which possesses and dispenses the grace of the Redemption in all its fullness, and that every separated church, or any cult which has not Christ for its head, stands outside His grace. Insofar as it is separate from Christ and His Mystical Body, the Church, it is essentially unfruitful in supernatural good. It cannot be a mediator between God and man and, because it is separate, its adherents cannot obtain salvation through it.

How then are non-Catholics able to receive God's grace, if they are separated from visible communion with the only means of grace, the Catholic Church? The answer is simple and startling. They receive grace and salvation insofar as they are Catholics! This is another "contradiction" which needs explaining.

When the heretical and schismatic communions broke away from the true Church, they retained a part (more or less, depending on the sect), of the original Catholic doctrine and means of grace. Primary among these means is the sacrament of Baptism, and in the schismatic churches, all the sacraments. Thus dissidents obtain grace, not because of the character of their own separated churches, but rather in spite of it. It is that which is Catholic in them and not their own which saves. Consequently, our separated brethren owe any faint glimmering of truth they may possess to the Catholic Church, for the power of Christ always works through the unity of His Mystical Body, the Church. Therefore, because the non-Catholic does receive this grace through the Church, he must be a member of that Church in some way.

The same can be said of the Jew, Mohammedan, or pagan who has never had the Gospel preached to him. For it is the Church's teaching that, in addition to the ordinary means of salvation, the boundless mercy of God supplies extraordinary ways. By these, at some time or another, He gives every man who lives in invincible ignorance of the Church's necessity for salvation, at least one opportunity to be saved. The workings of God in these souls are of course mysterious, and He has revealed nothing of them. This much we know: these extraordinary means raise the soul to the supernatural plane, are the channels of whatever graces the divine bounty bestows, and furnish the soul, sooner or later, with a knowledge of the truths necessary for salvation.<sup>14</sup> Whether or

<sup>14</sup> These truths are: belief in the existence of God, Divine Providence, the Trinity, and the Incarnation. cfr. *Summa Theologica* II-II, Q. 2, a. 7, 8.

not these means are often accepted is something known only to God. If they are received and justifying grace flows into the soul, then that person, too, is incorporated in some manner into the Body of Christ.

It is obvious, however, that these non-Catholics do not enjoy membership in the Church to the same extent as those in visible communion with Rome, who possesses the entire Faith of Christ. Therefore, it is necessary to determine in what sense they are Catholics. To do this we must turn to the traditional teaching of theologians regarding the body and soul of the Church.

The Church as the Mystical Body of Christ is, in an analogical sense, similar to the body of a man. As a living organism, it is composed of a plurality of living members with Christ as its Head,<sup>15</sup> all quickened and governed by a single living principle. This principle or soul is the Holy Spirit. Thus, St. Thomas says: "As in a man there is one soul and one body, yet a diversity of members, so the Catholic Church is one body and has different members. The soul which quickens this body is the Holy Ghost."<sup>16</sup> Membership in this body is effected by the sacrament of Baptism, presupposing, of course, faith in Christ. St. Paul confirms this in his first Epistle to the Corinthians: "For in one Spirit we are all baptized in one body. . ." (1 Cor. 12, 13) Likewise, Pope Eugene IV and the Council of Florence declared: "We are made members of Christ and the Body of His Church by Baptism."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, every person sacramentally baptized belongs to the body of the Church in virtue of this sacrament.

In regard to the soul of the Church anyone who is in the state of sanctifying grace has the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, dwelling in his soul. Thus, since he is animated supernaturally by this Spirit Who is the Soul of the Church, he can rightly be said to belong to the soul of the Church.

Applying this distinction first of all to the members of the Catholic communion who profess the Faith of Christ and are in the state of grace, we find that these belong both to the body and soul of the Church. Theirs is the perfect union with Christ, receiving as they do, the full benefit of the fruits of the Redemption and the totality of divine revelation in its original purity. Then there are those Catholics who, though they still belong to

<sup>15</sup> 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 1:22; 5:23; Coll. 1:18; 2:10.

<sup>16</sup> *Exposition of the Creed*, Art. 9.

<sup>17</sup> *Decretum pro Armenis*, Denz. 696.

the visible Catholic communion, have nevertheless lost sanctifying grace by mortal sin. These have forfeited membership in the Church's soul since they are no longer vivified by the Holy Ghost. Even their membership in the visible body of the Church is imperfect, for they are dead members.<sup>18</sup> Lastly, there are those non-Catholics, invincibly ignorant of the necessity of communion with the Catholic Church, and yet sanctified through that Church. These are members of her soul in varying degrees, depending upon the truth and grace they have received. For, all these things being equal, it is obvious that members of the schismatic communions have a greater deposit of truth, and access to the means of grace than Mohammedans or pagans.

Yet over and above this, the justified non-Catholic must also have some attachment to the body of the Church. The distinction of membership in the soul is meaningless if this membership is considered as something apart, with no relation at all to the body. For it is the nature of a soul, when it is acting as the vivifying principle of a body, to be essentially conjoined to that body. Moreover, the whole tenor of the tradition regarding salvation through the Church seems to regard membership in the body as absolutely necessary.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, in speaking of non-Catholics as members of the Church's soul, we cannot rest simply in the idea that they are a sort of invisible Church, having no relation at all to the visible body of Christ. Their very membership in the soul implies some sort of membership in the body.

This problem is a complex one, but many theologians advance this solution. The non-Catholic striving to act according to the lights of his conscience and to any meager glimmerings of truth he may possess, explicitly desires to do everything necessary for salvation. His will, then, is in conformity with the Divine Will. He may possess a few crumbs of truth, or he may be as yet entirely ignorant of God as we know Him. But his will is so ordered, that did he know all that God wills, he would immediately desire that the Divine Will be done in all things. Hence, he would explicitly desire the means which God has ordained for supernatural life: membership in the visible body of the Catholic Church. Thus, by explicitly wishing to conform to the truth as

<sup>18</sup> *Summa Theologica*, III, Q. 8, Art. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Very explicit testimony to this necessity is contained in the bull *Unam Sanctam* of Boniface VIII (1302): "We declare, assert, define, and pronounce that submission to the Roman Pontiff is absolutely necessary for every human being who wishes to be saved."—Denz. 469



he knows it, he implicitly desires membership in the body of the Church. Now since this union with the body is effected through Baptism, he implicitly desires this sacrament, and therefore, is said to have Baptism of desire. And God, Who knows the dispositions of the hearts of men, in His mercy, makes this implicit desire equivalent to actual membership in the communion of the faithful.

It may be noted also that the validly baptised non-Catholic has a relation to the body of the Church in virtue of the character of the sacrament he has received. For, as has been pointed out, membership in the Body of Christ is brought about by Baptism. Now the character of this sacrament is an indelible thing. Since it cannot be erased by any repudiation, explicit or implicit, a baptized person, by reason of the sacramental character, is a member of the body of the Church, regardless of what dissident sect he may profess. The fact of his adhering to the non-Catholic sect does constitute an obstacle to complete, visible communion, and hence the membership is imperfect. Yet, he is, "by right and exigence of the character,"<sup>20</sup> still radically attached to the Catholic Church.<sup>21</sup> As a result, despite his separateness, he is still by right (*jure et debito*) a subject of the Church, and she can legislate in his regard.

Thus, the consonance of these two teachings of the Church on salvation is evident to some degree. Anyone who is saved or who is here and now worthy of salvation, regardless of the visible organization to which he belongs, which by its deviation from Christ's Body separates him from perfect communion with the Savior, is saved through his membership, imperfect though it is, in the Catholic Church. He is saved by that which he does not know. However, the conclusion must not be drawn from this that salvation is therefore comparatively easy for one ignorant of the Church. It is true that he may be ignorant of many of the divine precepts and consequently their infraction may not be sinful for him, but it is also true that he has a conscience and that the natural law is, so to speak, written in his heart. He usually possesses none of the life-giving sacraments, without which it is impossible to continue in the state of grace for any length of time. Our grasp upon grace and our chances of regain-

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<sup>20</sup> Billot, S.J., *De Ecclesia Christi*, Vol. I, p. 277.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Who Belongs to The Mystical Body*, Victor White, O.P., *Orate Fratres*, Nov. 2, 1941, p. 554.

ing it when lost, are infinitely better than his. Is it any wonder that St. Paul never ceased to marvel at the predilection of God for us, who possess the spiritual wealth of the true faith?

It is this realization of what we Catholics have and what the others have not that has engendered in the Church this consciousness of herself as the only Ark of Salvation. It has also given her an unquenchable desire to bring the light of the truth she possesses to those countless souls, the poorest of the poor, who without knowing it, sit in the shadow of death. She cannot rest in the knowledge that some few, by the mercy of God, are enabled in an extraordinary way, to partake of the bountiful graces which she alone possesses. There are always the others, who, with their fallen nature and ignorance, are anchored in the mire of vice without the desire or the means to free themselves. That is why her quest for souls has known no ending . . . why, despite the clamors of her enemies, she continues to proclaim herself as the one true Church of Christ; in order that the children of death may see her, believe, and entering in, be saved as their Savior intended they should be saved, through the unity of His Mystical Body on earth, the Catholic Church.

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