

IS THERE SALVATION OUTSIDE THE CHURCH?

Few points of Catholic doctrine have been so misunderstood or have excited more prejudice in the Protestant mind than the proposition of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215)—“Outside the Church there is no salvation.”

Many, even among Catholics, in attempting to explain it have frequently drifted into one or other of the two opposite extreme views, both equally distant from the truth. Some have so minimized its meaning as to leave the impression that, since God's mercy is infinite, it is needless to harass men in good faith with the duty of entering the true Church; while others have defended the statement in all the harsh rigor of its literal sense, and thereby made the doctrine of the Church appear narrow and unjust, with the result that well-meaning inquirers after truth were prevented from turning toward Catholicism as a probable answer to their aspirations. Because of these erroneous interpretations of Catholic teaching, the Church has been alternately charged with laxity and rigorism. In a letter of Leibnitz to Pelisson,* we find statements regarding the laxity of the Catholic doctrine: “There are none so lax as the Catholics, in admitting not only heretics but infidels to salvation, so much so that Protestant theologians have deservedly censured them.” And in his third letter to Simon Loeffler, he refers to the extreme liberality of the Catholic teaching, according to which, he says, it is possible for infidels and heretics to be saved. And then he adds: “I have often wondered why this argument is not more frequently and vigorously urged against them by our theologians.”

On the other hand, many sneer at the rabid intolerance of the Church which would pitiously consign to eternal damnation all those who knowingly or unknowingly believe otherwise than herself.

That the true Catholic teaching avoids carefully these two extremes is laid down quite clearly by Pius IX in his encyclical of August 10, 1863: “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 divine grace, attain to eternal life; for God, who knows and sees

* Actu Eruditorum, tom. XI, an. 1672.

the mind, the heart, the thoughts, and the dispositions of every man, cannot in His infinite bounty and clemency permit any one to suffer eternal punishment who is not guilty through his own fault." The Church, therefore, cannot rightly be accused of opening wide the door of salvation to all outside her pale nor of closing it mercilessly against those who are not members of her visible communion. These misconceptions arise from a gross ignorance; from an inability, or, rather, an unwillingness, to understand what the Catholic Church really teaches, and from the substitution of a repulsive rigorism or laxity for the plain and reasonable faith of Catholics. As we shall see, the axiom "Outside the Church, no salvation," has a quite different meaning from that too often wrongly attributed to it.

When God came down to earth over nineteen centuries ago, the chief purpose He had in view was the redemption of the whole human race from the heavy yoke of original sin and its attendant consequences, to make us again heirs to a better home later on, closed against us by the revolt of our first parents. And this errand of mercy He fulfilled not only for some, but for all, without exception. The words, "He loved me and gave Himself for me," are true in the mouth not merely of the princes of the Church of God, but of every single member of the human family. For all God has died, for all He has a father's love. His vigilant eye is ever upon us. He extends His mercy and assistance to us all from the first to the last moment of our earthly probation. We are not the objects of His care in a mere worldly sense, to promote the fleeting happiness of this life. No, God's goodness, and the purpose of His becoming Man, went far beyond our temporal happiness. It was an eternal, not a temporal, felicity He won for us all. "I have loved thee with an everlasting love" (Je. xxxi, 3). If in this life Christ gives us a taste of happiness, it is but to encourage us to continue on in our strivings for the end for which He has created us. The fondest caresses of the Divine Lover bestowed upon His faithful children during the days of their toil, labor and suffering on earth, are to be considered as nothing when compared with the rapture of the soul merged hereafter in the ocean of Divine Love, and bathed in the fires of Divine Charity, become verily like to its God, as the iron dipped in the furnace partakes of the glowing intensity of the fire around it.

God, then, sincerely desires the salvation of all men without exception, He wishes us all to possess one day the ineffable joys of eternal life. For this He sent His only begotten Son into the world to ransom us from the captivity of sin and eternal death, to point out to us clearly the way—the only way that leads to our true home later on—and to leave us the means by which we might be able to reach it—His Church.

Let us now take our axiom, "Outside the Church, no salvation," and reduce the Catholic teaching on this point to the form of a proposition and devote some time to its analysis and proof. "For those who at death are found, culpably (i. e., through their own fault), outside the pale of the true Church, salvation is not attainable."

In this proposition it is question of the true Church instituted by Christ upon this earth; it matters little for the present where that true Church is to be found. All those, therefore, who belong to a Church which they regard as identified with the Church of Christ have nothing to dread or reprehend in this doctrine. But, as Liebermann well observes: "When we see men bitterly opposed to this doctrine, a suspicion naturally arises that they are far from feeling that confidence in their own Church which they pretend, and that they have invented a system of universal tolerance only for the purpose of seeking shelter from the arguments of Catholics, or from the remorse of their own conscience."

That there is but one true Church of Christ upon this earth needs no proof. That the countless so-called Christian sects which today dispute the claim to that glorious prerogative cannot all have an equal right to it is self-evident; for, surely, this bedlam of discordant and contradictory doctrines cannot come from Him who was Truth itself and who taught but one doctrine to the world. That this one true Church can be known is also certain, for Christ could not have instituted this medium for the salvation of mankind without giving to it the credentials which would stamp it as such before the world.

We Catholics claim to be that one true Church of Christ. Only we can trace our ancestry back to Christ and the Apostles, while all other sects are the creations of mortal men, founded not through pure love of truth, but for the realization of some sordid or selfish ambition. We alone from a small plant in the beginning have grown into a mighty tree and spread our

branches throughout the whole world. We alone have the means of producing sanctity in our members, and these fruits of sanctity are our glory down through the centuries from our very birth. We alone have unity of faith and government, wherever our Church is to be found, even to the remotest confines of the world. In a word, we alone have the marks of the true Church—we alone are One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic, such as Christ wished His Church to be, and consequently we have a perfect right to claim that our Church is necessary for salvation, that whoever, through his own fault, remains outside this Church until death cannot be saved.

In order to grasp the true import of this claim we must now distinguish two kinds of necessity. Necessity in a relative term, and indicates a relation between the means to be employed and the end to be attained. In order to attain a particular end some things are required, because they so positively conduce towards that end that they are indispensably necessary as a means to its attainment. Thus, the air we breathe is a necessary and indispensable means for the preservation of corporal life. Sanctifying grace, in the supernatural order, is equally necessary for the preservation of the spiritual life of the soul.

But other things are required, not as necessary and indispensable means, but only by virtue of precept, which makes the attainment of the end dependent upon the fulfillment of the precept. Thus, abstinence from the forbidden fruit was necessary for the continued felicity of our first parents in the garden of paradise, not because that abstinence of itself positively conducted to this end, but because the Almighty by His command made the one dependent on the other.

It will be seen at once that a very practical difference exists between things required as an indispensable means to an end and those required by virtue of a precept only. In regard to the former, it is absolutely impossible to obtain the end without making use of the means; but in regard to the latter, as invincible ignorance excuses from the violation of the precept, so it renders possible the attainment of the end without the fulfillment of what is commanded. Thus, reverting to the illustrations already given, if the body be deprived of air, no matter how invincible or culpable the ignorance may be from which this deprivation occurs, life cannot be maintained. But if our first parents mistook the particular tree of whose fruits they were forbidden to

eat, they would not have forfeited their felicity, because the violation of the divine command would not have been voluntary or culpable.

Air, therefore, is required as an indispensable means for the life of the body, but abstinence from what is forbidden, or compliance with what is commanded, only by virtue of a precept. If this precept be not voluntarily and culpably violated, the end may still be attained, provided that all else is done which is indispensably necessary for its attainment.

Undoubtedly the next question to answer is; in which sense communion with the true Church is required, whether as a necessary and indispensable means, or only by virtue of a divine precept, which commands all men to seek salvation in the Church of Christ. If it is as a necessary means, no amount of ignorance, no matter how inculpable, would save those who live and die without its pale; but if only by virtue of precept, then salvation would still be possible for those who are ignorant of the precept, who misunderstand its meaning, or who honestly believe that they are fulfilling it by remaining in the Church of which they are members, provided always that they omit none of those things that are required as indispensable means of salvation.

The teaching of the Catholic Church is this: In order to gain eternal life it is required, not as a necessary and indispensable means, but by virtue of a divine precept, to live, or at least to die, in communion with the true Church. We maintain that God has imposed on all men a precept, binding under pain of mortal sin, to enter the true Church and continue till death as members of it; that those who voluntarily and culpably violate this grave precept are not walking in the way of salvation, and that if they persevere till death in its violation, salvation for them is not attainable.

That such a precept exists must be admitted by all who hold that Christ established a visible Church on earth; that he commanded His Apostles and their successors to teach His doctrines to all nations, and by baptism to initiate men into the visible communion of His Church—and that He threatened the severest punishment on those who refused to receive the religion so preached, or to enter the Church so constituted. "Go ye therefore into the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be condemned" (Mark xvi, 15-16).

Similar striking quotations may be found in St. Matthew's Gospel, also in the Epistles of St. Paul.

Supposing, then, the existence of the precept, the truth of our proposition is proved—those who culpably, or through their own fault, remain until death outside the true Church cannot be saved. Through their own fault they reject the true means of salvation, and through their own fault they are condemned. Such persons are guilty of grave disobedience to God's command and grave insult to His authority. They refuse God's revelation, which has been presented to them with sufficient clearness to demand their assent, or at least to manifest the obligation of making further inquiry. If they reject such evidence, or fail to make further inquiries to satisfy themselves that they belong to the one true Church, then they have themselves to blame, and of a truth God will not save them in spite of themselves. They frustrate the object which our divine Saviour had in view in the establishment of His Church, the work given by Christ to the Apostles and their successors. The Apostles organized the Church in every place where the Gospel was preached. They provided for the succession of the ministry. They acted in all things according to their belief that profession of the Christian faith means membership in the visible Church of Christ. The same belief is emphatically put forth in the concurrent testimony of the early Fathers. So far we have seen that God wishes the salvation of all men. For this end He founded His Church and laid upon all the grave obligation of joining it, so that whoever wilfully neglects to do so cannot be saved.

There is nothing in this doctrine to shock the sensibilities of our Protestant friends, since they themselves hold that salvation is impossible outside the true Church, as is explicitly declared in the formularies of faith drawn up at the very beginning of Protestantism. Here, for instance, is what we read in the Helvetic (Swiss) Confessions of 1565: "There is no salvation outside of the Church, as there was no salvation outside of the Ark; if man desires life, he must not separate himself from the true Church of Jesus Christ." The Saxon Confession, that of Belgium, that of Scotland, are no less explicit: "Outside of the Church" says the Calvinist Catechism of the seventeenth century, "there is nothing but damnation; all those who separate themselves from the communion of the Faithful, to form a sect apart, cannot hope for salvation as long as they remain sep-

arated." Moreover, Calvin himself affirms, in his *Institutions*, "that outside of the Church man cannot hope for the pardon of sins nor for salvation."

It is to be sincerely hoped that what has been said will have a twofold result. First, to make better known the true stand of the Catholic Church on the doctrine of salvation; and, secondly, to show that the Catholic Church cannot justly be accused of being either too rigorous or too lax on this point, for in truth it holds the golden mean. It strongly upholds the divine precept to enter the visible Church, and declares that those who culpably violate that precept are not in the way of salvation. At the same time it is also aware that many are separated inculpably from this visible union of the Church, and for these, if they do all that lies in their power, God will provide according to His Providence. Pius IX, in an Allocution delivered in 1854, having laid down the general proposition regarding the necessity of belonging to the true Church, adds these important words: "But we are, nevertheless, to hold as certain that those who are ignorant of the true religion, if that ignorance be invincible, are not held accountable in the sight of God. But who can presume to fix the limits of that ignorance, considering the difference and variety of peoples, of places, of dispositions, and many other circumstances? Hereafter, when freed from our earthly bonds, we shall see God as He is, and no doubt we shall understand how closely and how harmoniously His attributes of mercy and of justice are united. But while we dwell on earth, weighed down by this mortal body which obscures the perception of the mind, we must hold, according to Catholic doctrine, that there is but one God, one faith, one baptism; to go beyond this our inquiry is criminal. We should, however, as charity demands, pour forth fervent prayers that all nations may be converted to Christ, we should labor, each one according to his opportunities, to promote the salvation of all men, for the hand of the Lord is not shortened, nor will the gifts of God's grace be refused to those who sincerely desire to be vivified by this heavenly light."

When it is said that a person inculpably separated from the Church may be saved, is it meant that such a person is saved outside the Church? By no means, for does not the axiom say that no one is saved outside the Church? How, then, is this person a member of the Church, and therefore in the way of salvation? We must distinguish between the body and soul of the Church.

Just as a human being is composed of a twofold element, one internal, the other external, namely, the soul and the body, so likewise the Church, which is the mystical Body of Christ. To the body of the Church pertains the external profession of faith, the administration of the sacraments, and the visible regime; by the soul is understood faith, hope and charity, the internal gifts of the Holy Ghost, and, finally, every supernatural virtue and grace by which the Church lives. When, therefore, it is said that a person is inculpably separated from the Church, it is meant that this person is not united to the visible body of the Church by external communion with her, and by the outward profession of her faith, but, nevertheless, united to the soul of the Church by a true spiritual communion of faith and charity, and therefore if this person is saved he is saved in the Church.

Some one may ask "If I can be saved outside the Catholic Church what is the use of my joining it?" Well, first of all, because Jesus Christ, the divine Organizer has commanded all to join His society, as is easily seen from Scripture. Because the Catholic Church alone preaches the entire Gospel, and in her inner and outer life is the ordinary way of salvation God gave to man. Non-Catholics, even if inculpably outside the Church, are deprived of much of God's revelation and many of His helps for salvation especially Penance, the Eucharist, the Sacrifice of the Mass. The Catholic Church is also the ordinary channel through which Christ communicates his graces to the souls of men. Those, therefore, to whom her claims and privileges are sufficiently proposed, are bound, as they value their salvation, to seek for truth and grace in her communion.

Bibliography

Most Rev. T. J. Carr. "Is there salvation outside the Church?" Australian Catholic Truth Society.

Very Rev. J. V. DeGroot, O. P., S. T. M. *Summa Apologetica*. Ratisbon, 1906.

Very Rev. Hugh Pope, O. P. "Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus." *American Ecclesiastical Review*, Vol. XXVII, 1902.

Rev. R. F. Clarke, S. J. "Is it the Will of God that all Men Should be Saved?" *American Catholic Quarterly Review*, Vol. IX, 1884.

Rev. W. Devivier, S. J. *Christian Apologetics*. Vol. II, San Jose, Cal., 1903.

—Bro. Raymond Grace, O. P.