



Salvation 'Within' The Church

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That ancient and difficult doctrine, "There is no salvation outside the Church," is still very much alive in this ecumenical age. Of this the Second Vatican Council has assured us. In its *Constitution on the Church*, proclaimed at the last session, the Council has declared:

. . . Basing itself upon Sacred Scripture and Tradition, [this Sacred Council] teaches that the Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is necessary for salvation. Christ, present to us in His Body, which is the Church, is the one Mediator and the unique way of salvation. In explicit terms He Himself affirmed the necessity of faith and baptism (cf. Mk. 16, 16; Jn. 3, 5) and thereby affirmed also the necessity of the Church, for through

baptism as through a door men enter the Church. Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter it or to remain in it, could not be saved (no. 14).¹

As a result of the Council's statement, we should once again be able to understand this article of faith in a positive, constructive light. In the recent past, our approach to the dogma has been largely negative: while admitting the doctrine in principle, we have spent most of our efforts emphasizing that it does not condemn non-Catholics who are invincibly ignorant of the true religion. It is certainly important to make this point, but we should remember that it is only a negative point; it does not amount to an explanation of what, positively, the doctrine means. The dogma of the necessity of the Church for salvation is a basic truth, rich in theological significance. We should be sure that we understand the significance it has before we begin applying distinctions to satisfy our concern for the salvation of non-Catholics.

It is noteworthy that the *magisterium*, in unfolding the dogma of the Church's necessity for salvation during the past centuries, was at first concerned entirely with positive declarations and elaborations of the basic doctrine. The distinctions bearing upon the salvation of non-Catholics were made explicit only later as new needs arose. Since the procedure adopted by the present Council is largely a summary of this long doctrinal development, we ought to be familiar with the process of development in order to understand well the approach taken by Vatican II.

Development of the Dogma

Our survey begins with an earlier Ecumenical Council. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215), in a solemn dogmatic definition, declares:

There is one universal Church of the faithful. Outside this Church no one at all is saved (D 430).²

¹ In all quotations from decrees of the Second Vatican Council the NCWC translations are used.

² Denzinger citations refer in all cases to the numbering system of the earlier editions, prior to the new 1963 compilation.

This decree is almost identical with an article of the profession of faith which Innocent III had required of the Waldenses returning to the Catholic Church in 1208:

We believe in our hearts and we profess aloud that there is one Church, not the Church of the heretics, but the Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church; and we believe that outside this Church, no one will be saved (D 423).

In both of these documents we find a clear, direct assertion that there is no salvation outside the one true Church of God. The decree for the Waldenses brings out more explicitly that this Church is none other than the Roman Catholic Church. What is striking in the Lateran declaration is the insistence that the Church's necessity for salvation admits of no exceptions whatever: outside the Church "no one at all [*omnino nullus*] is saved."

Almost a century later (1302), these pronouncements were reaffirmed and slightly amplified by Boniface VIII in his Bull *Unam Sanctam*. "Outside this Church," Boniface declares, "there is no salvation and no remission of sins." The Pope goes on to speak of the Church as the Mystical Body and Spouse of Christ, giving this as the reason why all men must be united with her to be saved. He shows how the Church, under the figure of Noah's ark, is described in Scripture as the one true kingdom of God apart from which no one can escape the flood. Then, in the final sentence of the Bull, the Pope solemnly defines that the Church through which men are to be saved is none other than the visible Roman Catholic Church, and that salvation necessarily involves submission to the Roman Pontiff:

. . . Finally, We declare, state, and define that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff (D 469).

Another century and a half takes us to the Council of Florence, the council which brought about, if only too briefly, the reunion of the Eastern and Western Churches. In a decree for the

reconciliation of the Jacobites, issued in 1442, the council emphatically reasserts "that none of those who are outside the Catholic Church . . . can become partakers of eternal life; but that they are going into the everlasting fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels, unless they become joined with it before they die." The sacraments and good works, the council continues, "are profitable for salvation only to those who remain within it [the Church]"; no matter how good a man's works may be, "even though he shed his blood for the name of Christ," he cannot be saved "unless he remains within the embrace and unity of the Catholic Church" (D 714).

Only in the last century—after the intervention of Protestantism, rationalism, and liberalism in the four hundred years since Florence—did the *magisterium* begin to discuss the salvation of non-Catholics who are in good faith. Pius IX, in the allocution *Singulari quadam* (1854), pointed out clearly that the necessity of the Church for salvation does not involve the condemnation of those who, through no fault of their own, do not recognize the Catholic Church's divine institution:

Certainly we must hold it as a matter of faith that no one can be saved outside the Apostolic Roman Church, that this Church is the only Ark of salvation, and that anyone who does not enter it will perish in the deluge. Nevertheless, we must also hold it as certain that those who labor in ignorance of the true religion, if their ignorance be invincible, will never on account of this be charged with any guilt in the eyes of the Lord (D 1647).

The same Pontiff, in the encyclical *Quanto conficiamur moerore* (1863), expanded on how it is possible for a non-Catholic in good faith to be saved:

And here . . . We should mention again and censure a very grave error in which some Catholics are unhappily involved, who believe that men living in error, and separated from the true faith and from Catholic unity, can attain eternal life. Indeed, this is certainly quite contrary to Catholic teaching. It is known to Us and to you that they who labor in invincible ignorance of our most holy religion and who, zealously keeping the natural law and its precepts engraved in the hearts of all by God and being ready to obey God, live an honest and upright life, can, by the operating power of divine light and grace, attain eternal

life, since God who clearly beholds, searches, and knows the minds, souls, thoughts, and habits of all men, because of His great goodness and mercy, will by no means suffer anyone to be punished with eternal torment who has not the guilt of deliberate sin. But the Catholic dogma that no one can be saved outside the Catholic Church is well known . . . (D 1677-1678).

These statements clearly show that in the matter of salvation, invincible ignorance is a negative factor and not a positive one. Ignorance, even (in a way, especially) the invincible kind, is a privation, an evil; it can never be a sacrament bringing salvation. It is perfectly true to say that invincible ignorance does not cause anyone to be lost; but we must not then back into the idea that invincible ignorance enables one to be saved outside the Church. In fact, as the context shows in both cases, the main burden of Pius IX's statements is to reprobate the erroneous notion that anyone can be excused from the necessity of being saved within the Catholic Church.

Pius IX did not attempt to settle the question of just how a non-Catholic in good faith is constituted 'within' the Church. Almost a hundred years later (1943), Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis* pointed out that "those who do not belong to the visible structure of the Catholic Church . . . may be directed towards the Redeemer's Mystical Body by a sort of unconscious desire and intention," while leaving the precise nature of their connection with the Church still unspecified (D 2290). In 1949 the Holy Office, in connection with the Feeney case, distinguished between attachment to the Church in reality (*re*) and by desire (*voto*); and it held that one who belongs by desire, even if only implicitly, is sufficiently within the Church to be capable of salvation.³

The *re-voto* distinction was the most precise refinement to be introduced by the *magisterium* before the present Council, and it was certainly a significant advance toward a positive explanation of how a sincere non-Catholic can be 'within' the Church.

³ The Holy Office letter, known as *Suprema haec sacra*, was addressed to the then Archbishop Cushing of Boston and dated August 8, 1949. The full text, in Latin and in English, was published in the *American Ecclesiastical Review*, CXXVII (October, 1952), 307-315.

Yet, further questions remained open, among which one was especially delicate: Did the *re-voto* distinction mean that only those whom we recognize as Roman Catholics have 'real' membership in the Church, with all non-Catholics limited to union by 'desire'? Some theologians, stressing the nature of the Church as a visible society, replied in the affirmative, objecting even to the use of the term 'member' to refer to a non-Catholic's connection with the Church. Other theologians argued, on the contrary, that anyone who has validly received the Sacrament of Baptism must be considered a 'member' of the Church in a 'real' sense, even if—as in the case of a sincere Orthodox or Protestant—he is unaware of the full doctrinal and juridical implications of the Christian faith to which his baptism commits him. Adherents of this second view appealed to the theological outlook and terminology of St. Thomas Aquinas, as well as to canon 87 which states baptism as the essential constituent of membership in the Church. These theologians also pointed out that the *re-voto* distinction had been taken over from the Council of Trent, where it was used precisely in reference to the necessity of the Sacrament of Baptism; the same council had declared that through baptism one becomes a "member" of Christ's Body (D 796, 895).

The Contribution of Vatican II

The present Vatican Council II has lent considerable weight to the broader, Thomistic opinion which takes a more positive view of the way in which separated Christians belong to the Church. It has done this in the context of summarizing all the previous doctrinal development contained in the Church's magisterial pronouncements. In light of what we have seen of the history of this development, we may now analyze the statement of Vatican II under the following headings:

1. The Church has been established by Christ as the necessary means of salvation for all men.

This basic dogma is reaffirmed in the statement quoted in our opening paragraph. Here the doctrine is certainly enunciated

in positive fashion, and is shown to be based on the intimate relation between the Church and her Spouse, Christ, in Whom we are regenerated by baptism. At the same time, by indicating the necessity of the Church from the necessity of baptism, the Council lays the foundation for the positive approach it will take toward baptized Christians separated in good faith from the See of Peter.

II. The Church which is necessary for salvation is the Roman Catholic Church.

Immediately after its opening statement on the matter, the conciliar decree goes on to point out that membership in the Church, in the full sense, belongs only to Roman Catholics:

They are fully incorporated in the society of the Church who, possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept her entire system and all the means of salvation given to her, and are united with her as part of her visible bodily structure and through her with Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the Bishops. The bonds which bind men to the Church in a visible way are profession of faith, the sacraments, and ecclesiastical government and communion. He is not saved, however, who though part of the body of the Church, does not persevere in charity . . . (no. 14).

We should note here that while pointing out clearly the visible character of the Church of Christ, the Council emphasizes that membership also involves invisible elements which are, ultimately, the most important ones. Once again a basis is provided for attributing some sort of membership to those who have the essential invisible elements—primarily, supernatural charity—even if they may lack a perfect realization of the visible elements.

III. Non-Catholics can be saved, although only within the Catholic Church.

The Council now distinguishes carefully among the respective positions of various groups of non-Catholics:

A. Catechumens

Those under instruction in preparation for entering the Catholic Church are, obviously, already united with the Church by their "explicit intention" (no. 14).

B. Separated Christians

The Council speaks of separated Christians as joined with the Church through baptism, in terms which strongly imply real membership:

The Church recognizes that in many ways she is linked with those who, being baptized, are honored with the name of Christian, though they do not profess the faith in its entirety or do not preserve unity of communion with the successor of Peter. . . . They are consecrated by baptism, in which they are united with Christ. . . .

Likewise we can say that in some real way they are joined with us in the Holy Spirit, for to them, too, He gives His gifts and graces whereby He is operative among them with His sanctifying power. Some indeed He has strengthened to the extent of the shedding of their blood. . . . (no. 15).

While thus pointing out that sincere non-Catholic Christians are really united with the Church as members by their baptism, the Council adds the reminder that they nevertheless lack that perfect unity with the Church which Christ wills; and it expresses the prayerful hope that all Christians may "be peacefully united, in the manner determined by Christ, as one flock under one shepherd." Elsewhere, in its *Constitution on Ecumenism*, the Council has pointed out even more forcefully the real, and yet imperfect, membership which separated Christians have in the Catholic Church:

. . . the Catholic Church looks upon them as brothers, with respect and affection. For men who believe in Christ and have been truly baptized are in real communion with the Catholic Church even though this communion is imperfect. . . .

Nevertheless, our separated brothers, whether considered as individuals or as communities and churches, are not blessed with that unity which Jesus Christ wished to bestow on all those who through Him were born again into one body, and with Him quickened to newness of life—that unity which the Holy Scriptures and the ancient Tradition of the Church proclaim. For it is only through Christ's Catholic Church, which is "the all-embracing means of salvation," that they can benefit fully from the means of salvation. We believe that Our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, in order to establish the one body of Christ on earth to which all should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the People of God. . . . (no. 3).

C. Non-Christians

The Constitution on the Church proceeds to point out that in speaking of the non-baptized, distinctions are also necessary: "those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the People of God" (no. 16). The relationship varies according to the greater or smaller content of the true faith which a non-Christian may profess. A unique place is held by the Jews, "to whom the testament and the promises were given and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh (Cf. Rom. 9:4-5)." The Moslems, for their part, "acknowledge the Creator" and, "professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God. . . ." Still others "in shadows and images seek the unknown God. . . ." All of these, related as they are to the Church "in various ways," can be saved if they live according to their conscience through the help of grace:

Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel. She knows that it is given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life (no. 16).

The Council's decree then adds that there are men who "have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator," or who, "living and dying without God, are left finally in a state of hopelessness." The plight of these men spurs the Church to a vivid consciousness of its mission to "preach the Gospel to every creature" so that all may be saved.

Conclusion

In closing this section of its decree, the Council sets forth the Church's obligation to spread the Gospel the world over, "in order that the entire world may become the People of God, the Body of the Lord and the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and that in Christ,

the Head of all, all honor and glory may be rendered to the creator and Father of the Universe" (no. 17).

This statement amounts to a reassertion that the Catholic Church is the necessary means of salvation for all men, and so it comes as a fitting summary to all the preceding discussion. In the earlier paragraphs the decree had first affirmed the necessity of the Church for salvation, and then provided for the salvation of sincere non-Catholics by stressing their relationship to the Church in the most positive way possible. Now, with this concluding declaration, we are effectively reminded that considerations bearing upon the salvation of non-Catholics are an elaboration, and not a mitigation, of the basic dogma which states the need for all to be saved 'within' the Church.

There is, then, no thought of watering down *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* in view of our current renewed efforts for Christian unity. In fact, the Council seems to suggest, it is precisely this doctrine which should inspire our concern for unity within the true Church of Christ. The ecumenical atmosphere now spreading through the Catholic Church bears witness that the dogma of the Church's necessity for salvation is as important now as it was fifteen centuries ago, when St. Augustine spoke the words:

Outside the Catholic Church, one can have anything except salvation. One can have honor. One can have the sacraments. One can sing the 'Alleluia' or give the response 'Amen'. One can hold to the Gospel; he can have and preach the faith in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. But one can never find salvation except in the Catholic Church (*Sermon to the Church of Caesarea*).