

Without the Church There Is No Salvation

By Philip C.L. Gray

ISSUE: What does the Catholic Church mean by the phrase, “Outside the Church there is no salvation” (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*)?

RESPONSE: All salvation comes through Jesus Christ, the one Savior of the world (cf. Acts 4:12). His Holy Spirit dispenses those graces through His body, the Church. “He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Lk. 10:16).

Quoting from various documents of Vatican II and Pope Paul VI, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 776) explains:

As sacrament, the Church is Christ’s instrument. She is taken up by Him also as the instrument for the salvation of all, the universal sacrament of salvation, by which Christ is at once manifesting and actualizing the mystery of God’s love for men. The Church is the visible plan of God’s love for humanity, because God desires that the whole human race may become one People of God, form one Body of Christ, and be built up into one temple of the Holy Spirit. (see also nos. 846-848)

DISCUSSION: There are two principal errors when it comes to the Church’s teaching on *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Some reject this teaching as both incorrect and arrogant. Others interpret this statement to condemn all those who are not visibly united to the Roman Catholic Church. To come to the proper understanding of this teaching, we must examine it within the context of divine Revelation and Church history. This examination will reveal that the phrase was not formulated to express who would go to heaven and who would go to hell, for only God will judge that. Rather, the phrase expresses an understanding of the Church in relation to her role in the salvation of the world.

Translation or Interpretation?

Many people translate the Latin phrase *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* as “Outside the Church there is no salvation.” This translation does not seem entirely faithful to the Latin meaning, and contributes to the misunderstanding of the phrase.

The Latin word “*extra*” is both an adverb and preposition. Depending on its use in a sentence, the word has different meanings. When used to describe spatial relations between objects, the word is translated as “beyond” or “outside of”(e.g., beyond the creek is a tree; or, James is outside of the room). When used to describe abstract relations between concepts or intangible things, the word is commonly translated “without” (e.g., Without a method, it is difficult to teach). Within the phrase in question, *extra* is a preposition describing the abstract relationship of the Church to salvation. Considering the Latin nuances of the word, a proper translation would be, “*Without* the Church there is no salvation.” This translation more accurately reflects the doctrinal meaning of the phrase.

Scriptural Foundations

In the Gospel of Mark, after the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to the Eleven and gave them the commission, “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mk. 16:15-16).

In order to accept or reject the Gospel, each person must have it preached to him. If acceptance or rejection of the truth were based on private revelations given to each man, woman, and child, there would be no need for

Christ to commission the Apostles to preach the Gospel. Jesus desired to reveal Himself through His body, the Church. While this passage condemns those who reject the truth, it does not condemn those who have not had the truth offered to them as Christ intends.

The New Testament clearly teaches that salvation is a gift offered by God in various ways to all men. Adam, Abel, and Enoch lived between the first sin and the covenant of Noah. They were bound by original sin. All are considered to be in heaven. Enoch did not even die, but was taken to God before death (Heb. 11:4-5). These men were neither baptized nor circumcised, but nonetheless saved.

When the gentile centurion came to Jesus in Capernaum and asked for the healing of his servant, Our Lord agreed to go to his home, but the centurion said, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed" (Mt. 8:8). Jesus replied:

Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from East and West and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth (Mt. 8:10-13).

Jesus makes a clear distinction between those who are sons of the kingdom (that is, those who have knowledge of and accepted of the faith) and those who are not. He includes in the kingdom of heaven many of those who are not. Jesus graces us with His incarnation, and His presence is known through His Body, the Church. The Church carries on the work of Christ here on earth. Those to whom the Church has not preached the Good News will be judged by God in a manner known to God and tempered with His mercy. As St. Paul explains:

When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my Gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus (Rom. 2:14-16).

Sacred Tradition

Many people who claim that God restricts salvation to baptized Catholics cite the Fathers of the Church to prove their assertions. While space does not allow an exhaustive analysis of the Fathers, there are several necessary points to keep in mind. First, the Fathers must be understood in the context of their writings, not in the context of the one quoting them. The majority of the Fathers who wrote on this topic were concerned about those who had once believed or had heard the truth, but now rejected it. Many of them believed the entire world had heard the Gospel. Their words were not directed at those who, by no fault of their own, did not know the Gospel of Christ.

The Fathers do affirm the inherent danger in deliberately rejecting the Church. For example, St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote at the turn of the second century, "Be not deceived, my brethren; if anyone follows a maker of schism, he does not inherit the kingdom of God" (Letter to the Philadelphians 3:3). In the third century, St. Cyprian of Carthage wrote, "whoever is separated from the Church and is joined to an adulteress [a schismatic church] is separated from the promises of the Church, nor will he that forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ. He is an alien, a worldling, and an enemy" (The Unity of the Catholic Church 6, 1). In the fourth century, St. Jerome wrote, "Heretics bring sentence upon themselves since they by their own choice withdraw from the Church, a withdrawal which, since they are aware of it, constitutes damnation" (Commentary on Titus 3:10-11).

On the other hand, many of the Fathers did write about those who were invincibly ignorant of the Gospel. Of these, the Fathers accepted that salvation was open to them, even if in a mysterious way. The Fathers recognized that the natural law of justice and virtue is written on the hearts of all men. Those who respect this law respect the

Lawgiver, though they do not know Him. As St. Justin Martyr wrote in the second century:

We have been taught that Christ is the first-begotten of God, and we have declared Him to be the Logos of which all mankind partakes (Jn. 1:9). Those, therefore, who lived according to reason [logos] were really Christians, even though they were thought to be atheists, such as, among the Greeks, Socrates, Heraclitus, and others like them . . . those who lived before Christ but did not live according to reason were wicked men, and enemies of Christ, and murderers of those who did live according to reason, whereas those who lived then or who live now according to reason are Christians. Such as these can be confident and unafraid (First Apology 46).

In the third century, St. Clement of Alexandria wrote: “Before the coming of the Lord, philosophy was necessary for justification to the Greeks; now it is useful for piety . . . for it brought the Greeks to Christ as the Law did the Hebrews” (Miscellanies 1:5). Origen wrote, “[T]here was never a time when God did not want men to be just; He was always concerned about that. Indeed, He always provided beings endowed with reason with occasions for practicing virtue and doing what is right. In every generation the Wisdom of God descended into those souls which He found holy and made them to be prophets and friends of God” (Against Celsus 4:7). In the fifth century, St. Augustine wrote: “When we speak of within and without in relation to the Church, it is the position of the heart that we must consider, not that of the body . . . All who are within the heart are saved in the unity of the ark” (Baptism 5:28:39).

Magisterial Pronouncements

Throughout the history of the Church, the Magisterium has accepted and synthesized these teachings. Recognizing that God will judge our hearts according to the gifts we have received, *invincible ignorance*—that is, ignorance which cannot be overcome by ordinary means—tempers divine justice. Those who have knowledge of the truth are expected to accept it. Those who have not been given this gift will be judged according to the law written on their hearts. Two noteworthy examples of this position are found in Pope Boniface VIII’s bull *Unam Sanctam* and Pope Pius IX’s encyclical *Quanto Conficiamur Moerore*.

Boniface VIII wrote concerning the nature of the Church and the supremacy of the Pope. He did not write concerning the damnation of those who have never heard the Gospel. After expressing the truth that there is only one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism and one Church, he explained that supreme authority of the Pope is both temporal and spiritual. He then ended by declaring: “We declare, say, define, and pronounce, that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff.” This is not a statement demanding that everyone know the supremacy of the Pope to be saved, but rather is a truthful claim that the Pope authority from God as the legitimate successor of St. Peter, to whom Our Lord entrusted the keys of the kingdom.

Pius IX clearly expressed the full teaching a century ago. His writing distinguishes between those who are invincibly ignorant and those who have willfully separated themselves from the Catholic Church:

There are, of course, those who are struggling with invincible ignorance about our most holy religion. Sincerely observing the natural law and its precepts inscribed by God on all hearts and ready to obey God, they live honest lives and are able to attain eternal life by the efficacious virtue of divine light and grace. Because God knows, searches, and clearly understands the minds, hearts, thoughts, and nature of all, His supreme kindness and clemency do not permit anyone at all who is not guilty of deliberate sin to suffer eternal punishments. Also well-known is the Catholic teaching that no one can be saved [without] the Catholic Church. Eternal salvation cannot be obtained by those who oppose the authority and statements of the same Church and are stubbornly separated from the unity of the Church and also from the successor of Peter, the Roman Pontiff, to whom the custody of the vineyard has been committed by the Savior.

Sacrament of Salvation

In an expression of the authentic Magisterium, the college of bishops further explained this doctrine in the context of Christocentric sacramental theology at Vatican II. Echoing the words of St. Paul, the Council described the Church as the Spouse and Body of Christ (*Lumen Gentium*, nos. 6-7). Jesus is one with His Spouse, the Church (cf. Eph. 5:32). The two form the one Body of Christ visible on earth. Christ is the Head, and He ministers through His body as the sacrament of salvation (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 9). To whom does He minister? Both His body and those apart from the body, that he might draw all men to Himself (*ibid.*, no. 13). In this way, the Church dispenses to all men the graces of salvation won by Christ. Those who knowingly reject these graces are lost. Those who accept them are saved. Those who do not have the opportunity to accept the grace can be saved because of the presence of the Church in the world (cf. 1 Cor. 7:12-16). If they are saved, they are saved through the Church without their knowledge of that grace.

Vatican II declares:

[Many] of the most significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope, and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as visible elements. All of these, which come from Christ and lead back to Him, belong by right to the one Church of Christ. . . . It follows that these separated Churches and communities as such, though we believe they suffer from the defects already mentioned, have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church (*Decree on Ecumenism*, no. 3).

Come Aboard!

This teaching of Christ and His Church is not meant to allow indifferentism or exclusivism. Baptism and unity with the Catholic Church provide the only assurance of salvation, but not the only means. “*God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but He Himself is not bound by His sacraments*” (Catechism, no. 1257, original emphasis).

The will of God is for “all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). To fulfill His will, Jesus commissioned the Apostles to preach the Gospel and baptize those who would embrace it (Mk. 16:16). He gave us the Sacrament of Baptism and unity with the Church as the ordinary means of salvation. By Baptism we are made sharers in the life of Christ. When we participate in the fullness of life within the Church, we remain obedient children of God with the Church as our Mother. To provide assurance for the salvation of all men, we must fulfill the command of Christ to evangelize the world and bring all into His Body, the Church.

Because God is not bound by the sacraments, He makes the grace of salvation available to all in ways unknown to us. This is the basis for the Church’s teaching on “Baptism of desire” (cf. Catechism, nos. 1258-60, 1281). This occurs, for example, when one seeks Baptism but dies first, or when one dies without explicit knowledge of Christ, but would have embraced the truth had it been presented. Only God can judge their souls.

The Church is the ark through which men are saved. Noah and his family were the only men saved on the ark, but even animals who had no understanding of the matter were saved with them. As the ark saved all on it, even those who had no knowledge, so does the Church, as the universal sacrament of salvation, dispense the graces won by Christ and applies them to all men of every place and condition. In a way mysterious to us, this salvation is offered to all, and God, who judges the hearts of all, will determine their destiny.

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