

The Church is necessary for salvation

We've been looking at Catholic dogmas about the Church herself, so today we reflect on the teaching that the Church is necessary for salvation. The Holy See's Declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000) named this as a doctrine that 'must be *firmly believed*' (20) – indicating by that expression a first-level teaching of divine faith.

Vatican II proclaimed, 'The Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation. The one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church. He himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and Baptism (cf. *Mk* 16:16; *Jn* 3:5), and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through Baptism as through a door. Hence they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or to remain in it.' (*Lumen gentium* 14)

This reality has been taught across the centuries. St Paul warned, 'The gospel will save you only if you keep believing exactly what I preached to you – believing anything else will not lead to anything.' (*1 Cor* 15:2) The ancient *Athanasian Creed* opens with the words, 'Whoever wishes to be saved, needs above all to hold the Catholic Faith. Unless each one preserves this whole and inviolate, he will without a doubt perish in eternity.' (DS 75)

In 1215 the 4th Lateran Council professed in its *Creed*: 'There is one universal Church of the faithful outside which no one at all is saved.' (DS 802) And Boniface VIII proclaimed, 'We declare, state and define that for every human creature it is a matter of necessity for salvation to be subject to the Roman Pontiff.' (*Unam sanctam* (1302) DS 875, reaffirmed at Lateran V)

What then of the multitudes never having the chance of becoming Catholic, perhaps not even knowing the Church exists? God does not punish people for things that are not their fault. And willing all people to be saved (*1 Tim* 2:4), in hidden ways he offers every person the possibility of somehow receiving the grace of salvation, flowing from Christ the One Saviour through his Body the Church. (Cf. Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* 22; *Catechism* 846, 1260)

Long before Vatican II, Pius IX had already affirmed, 'We must hold it as of faith that no one can be saved outside of the apostolic Roman Church... On the other hand, it must be held as certain that those who live in ignorance of the true religion, if such ignorance be invincible, are not subject to any guilt in this matter before the eyes of the Lord. But then, who would dare to set limits to this ignorance, taking into consideration the natural differences of people, lands, native talents, and so many other factors?' (*Singulari quadam* (1854))

Someone not knowing the true religion, yet having the infused supernatural virtues of faith, hope and charity, loves God above all things and so desires his will to be done. But that desire includes – not explicitly if the person is unaware, yet by implication – that God's *specific will* be fulfilled, that all belong to his One Church. Such people then, while not formally members of the Church, are nonetheless *in relationship to her* by this 'desire' implicit within their love of God. (Cf. Pius XII, *Mystici corporis* (1943) 103, DS 3821; Holy Office, *Letter to the Archbishop of Boston* (1949) DS 3866-72; F. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?* 131-40)

In the early Church, St Ambrose and St Augustine held that those desiring Baptism but dying before receiving it were sufficiently linked to the sacrament just in virtue of their desire. So the Council of Trent, teaching the necessity of Baptism (1547), added the words, ‘or the desire for it’ (DS 1524). And as St Thomas Aquinas had taught long before, this desire could be merely implicit rather than explicit. (*Summa Theologiae* IIIa, 69, 4, ad 2)

We do still need *faith*, without which ‘it is impossible to please God’ (*Heb* 11:6; cf. Vatican II, *Ad gentes* 7). Having the actual virtues of faith, hope and charity remains absolutely necessary for salvation. But how explicit the *content* of one’s faith must be, depends on one’s degree of awareness.

So Vatican II taught that, ‘those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation.’ (*Lumen gentium* 16)

Still, we cannot be complacent: many do not live up to this. Vatican II went on to say, ‘More often...men, deceived by the Evil One, have become vain in their reasonings and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator.’ (*ibid.*; cf. R. Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?* 7-23) And the Council warned of the situation of those who take ‘little trouble to find out what is true and good’. ‘Without doubt those who wilfully try to drive God from their heart and to avoid all questions about religion, not following the biddings of their conscience, are not free from blame.’ (*Gaudium et spes* 16; 19) As St John Paul II stated, ‘Although each individual has a right to be respected in his own journey in search of the truth, there exists a prior moral obligation, and a grave one at that, to seek the truth and to adhere to it once it is known.’ (*Veritatis splendor* 34)

And even regarding those who do generally try to follow truth as they understand it, we reflect that Jesus did not endow his Church with all the means of salvation to no purpose. He tells us, ‘The gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it’, and ‘the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it’ (*Mt* 7:13-14) – so we all need to access all the divine helps we can.

The Declaration *Dominus Iesus* cautions: ‘If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation.’ (22) They are in a state ‘in which they cannot be sure of their salvation’, ‘deprived of those many heavenly gifts and helps which can only be enjoyed in the Catholic Church’. (Pius XII, *Mystici corporis* 103, DS 3821)

So for ourselves, with no excuse of ignorance, to avoid hell we must persevere to the end in the Catholic Church. And we do everything possible to share this priceless gift, entrusted to us by no merit of our own. The way to heaven, not guaranteed for anyone, is surely easier, safer and more joyful in full possession of Christ’s gifts. So we tirelessly fulfil his ‘Great Commission’ (*Mk* 16:15-16): ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.’