

Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus

"Outside of the Church there is no salvation"



The following is a letter I received from one of my readers. In response to the letter is my brief but hopefully satisfactory explanation. I will attempt to clarify the position of the Roman Catholic Church as it has been presented through the ages. I have wrestled with trying to explain this profound, albeit, controversial subject for a long time. So please be patient. I cannot answer every question or objection in the space available in this newsletter. I would suggest reading this article from beginning to end in one sitting and more than once in order to get the full impact.

"Dear Mr. Gonzales,

I salute your efforts on the Newsletter (The Hammer). You may be familiar with John Harden, S.J., who speaks of the tremendous need for RE-EVANGELIZATION in this country. Received copy of your publication at Assumption of Mary (Catholic Church)....

The content of your Issue #4 surely says it as it is. However, page 7 at mid-page has a comment which seems to say that there is no salvation outside the Church. If this is what you mean, it is in conflict with Church teaching as expressed many years ago in the Fr. Feeney incident and as given in our current Catechism of the Catholic Church.... pages 216, 222, and 223. To avoid loss of credibility I believe it would be well to clarify this in your next issue.

Wishing you many blessings in your work,

I am Sincerely, CBW."

Dear Mr. W. Thank you for your letter and especially for taking such an interest in your faith. To know the One True God and to love Him with every fiber of our being is the most important gift we have been given as Roman Catholics. Continue to nourish and foster your faith. I will use the rest of this newsletter to address your question and comment. It is one of the most controversial and profound issues of our religion and should be clarified. As I have stated above it is impossible to answer all the objections and questions that this issue provokes. In fact, the more we learn the more questions we will have but let me try in this limited space to at least express the traditional and constant teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on this matter.

Sacred Scripture

"If God were your Father, you would surely love me. For from God I came forth and have come; for neither have I come of myself, but He sent me. Why do you not understand me? Because you cannot listen to my word. Your father is the devil and you desire to do his will. He was a murderer from the beginning. He cannot abide in the truth for the truth is not in him. When he

tells a lie he speaks from his very nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Therefore, because I speak the truth you do not believe me.... If I speak the truth why do you not believe me? He who is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear is that you are not of God." (John 8:42-47)

Jesus spoke these damning words to the Jews of his day who would not believe Him. He said in this same chapter that to refuse to believe Him was mortally sinful, and that they would die in their sins if they persisted in error. If you take these same words and apply them to the voice of the Church, which is the continuing incarnation of Jesus in the world, you will see that they apply to all those who resist the truth. **The Church has been given the fullness of truth and the fullness of Grace, for it came from God and speaks the same Word of God for all generations.**

The Jews were a good people when Jesus, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, became a man to reveal the fullness of truth to them. God had forged their spirits and culture in the crucible of slavery, glory, persecution and exile. By the time Jesus came, they had finally renounced, once and for all, the pagan gods in the cultures that surrounded them; they lived by the law and their identity as God's chosen people had been solidified. They had finally become the people that God had wanted them to be, truly prepared for His coming. So the question is: **If being good simply means living out the natural law, loving God and neighbor and being true to your own conscience (and according to the Modernists this is enough to gain eternal life), then why did Jesus come in the first place?** He came first to the children of Israel, whom He had formed to be a people uniquely His own, and they rejected Him. So...

- If we can be saved without Him, why was His coming necessary?
- And if ignorance of the truth is sufficient to prevent us from being damned, why would God have established a Church to bring the Truth to all humanity?
- Was the redemption of Jesus just simply an action that made it possible for all men to be saved without necessarily accepting the truth that Jesus came to reveal?

The Church is the extension of Jesus in time and space. She carries on, by His commission and command, His mission to teach, govern and sanctify all men in every place and at all times. **"As the Father has sent me so now I send you!"** (John 20:21) **WHY? If knowing the truth is unnecessary and ignorance a ticket into eternal life, why would Christ burden us with this mission?**

He said to the Apostles, "Who's sins you forgive they are forgiven them. Who's sins you hold bound they are held bound" (John 20:23) But what difference does it make, if all you need to do to be forgiven is to admit you've sinned before God alone, privately in your own room, making this sacrament of Confession unnecessary? **If the pagans have just as much chance of eternal life as those do in the Church, then why did Jesus establish the necessity of baptism for salvation?** ("Unless a man be born again of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven.") From whence does the imperative come for the missionary activity of the Church, if there is no need for the Church? Didn't Jesus say?

"All power in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore, I am sending you forth to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teach them to observe all that I have commanded you." (WHY?)

"He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned." (Matt.28:18-20) (Mk 16:15)

"He who hears you hears me; and he who rejects you rejects Me; and he who rejects Me rejects He who sent Me." (Luke 10:16)

Now how can anyone be condemned for not believing in what is unnecessary to believe? Either we believe that Jesus meant EXACTLY what He said or we REFUSE to believe Him and everything is just a beautiful fairy tale that has no real significance. Jesus demanded three things of us in order to be saved; first we must believe in everything He came to reveal; second, that we believe in Him and consequently in His Church through which we would come to know Him and finally that we live out this truth and this relationship in love. He did not come to simply give us a philosophy of life like Buddha, Confucius or Mohammed. Our Faith rests primarily on Him. He is the source of our salvation and He established the Catholic Church through which He could be with us in time and space. The Church is Christ and Christ is the Church. They are one and the same! (Acts 9:5)

The Fathers of the Church

If we are to understand exactly what the Church has always taught in this matter it is important to go back to the Fathers of the Church. They were closest to the Apostles and whatever we have has come to us through them. The following quotations will give us a clear view of exactly how the Fathers of the Church approached this question. It is also very important to realize that our ancestors were not "politically correct" nor did they feel the need to be "tactful" or diplomatic when it came to presenting the Faith. In fact, I find their candor quite refreshing compared to our own fear of hurting feelings even to the point of allowing people to remain in error and ignorance to the peril of their souls.

St. Ignatius of Antioch (AD 107)

"They (the heretics) abstain from the Eucharist because they do not believe the Eucharist to be the flesh of Our Savior Jesus Christ Who suffered for our sins. Unbelievers in the blood of Christ shall be condemned. Let no man deceive himself, unless he believes that Jesus Christ has lived in the flesh and confesses His cross and passion and blood He shed for the salvation of the world, he shall not obtain eternal life. Therefore, they who deny this gift of God (The Eucharist) die in their denial."

"He who corrupts the Faith of God for which Christ suffered shall go into unquenchable fire."

"An invisible Church is the same thing as no Church at all."

St. Irenaeus of Lyons (AD 202)

"Heretics damn themselves and are worse than heathens."

"Being ignorant of Him Who from the Virgin is Emmanuel, they are deprived of eternal life; and not receiving the incorruptible Word, they remain in mortal flesh and are debtors to death, not obtaining the antidote of life."

St. Cyprian (AD 258)

"He who does not have the Church for his mother cannot have God for his Father. If anyone was saved outside the ark of Noah then those who are outside the Catholic Church can be saved."

"Christ has declared the unity of the Church. Whoever parts and divides the Church cannot possess Christ. The House of God is one, and no one can have salvation except in the Church."

"There is no salvation outside the Church and it is they who in His Church have labored in doing good works whom the Lord says shall be received into the Kingdom of Heaven on the Day of Judgment."

"He is no Christian who is not in the Church of Christ."

"No martyr can he be who is not in the Church. If he be outside the Church when put to death, he cannot come to the rewards prepared for the Church. Though they be cast into fire and burnt in flames, though they be exposed to wild beast and lay down their lives, this will not win them the crown of glory, but will be the penalty for their unfaithfulness;..."

St. Augustine (AD 430)

"The contemporaries of Noah would not believe his warnings as he was building the Ark, and thus they became frightful examples for all posterity. Christ our God is now building His Church as the Ark of Salvation, and is calling upon all men to enter it."

"He who does not have Christ for a Head cannot be saved; and he who does not belong to the Body of Christ, that is to the Church of Christ, does not have Christ for his head. The Catholic Church alone is the Body of Christ; the Holy Ghost gives life to no one who is outside His Body."

"No one can find salvation except in the Catholic Church. Outside the Church you can find everything except salvation. You can have dignities, you can have sacraments, you can sing "Alleluia," answer "Amen," have the Gospels, have faith in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, and preach it, too; but never can you find salvation except in the Catholic Church."

"Because we fight for the unity of the Church, let us not concede to heretics what we know to be false, but let us rather teach that they cannot attain salvation unless they come into that same unity."

St. Jerome (AD 420)

"As I follow no one but Christ, do I therefore unite myself with Your Holiness, that is, with the Chair of Peter. Whoever eats the Lamb outside this House is profane; whoever is not in this Ark of Noah will perish in the Flood; whoever does not gather with thee scatters; that is: he who is not Christ's is Antichrist's."

St. Fulgentius (AD 553)

"Hold most firmly, and do not doubt at all: not only pagans, but also all Jews and all the heretics and schismatics who terminate this present life outside the Catholic Church will go into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels."

"No one can by any means be saved outside the Church; all pagans and heretics are infallibly damned."

Now I think the position of the Fathers of the Church is crystal clear. The consensus of the Fathers is unanimous. I have used only a few here to give you an example of what they all have confirmed. They who were closest to Christ and the Apostles in time and culture all say the same thing. **THE BEATIFIC VISION OF ETERNAL LIFE IS NOT A RIGHT!** It is a gift rewarded to those who, with faith, obey the will of God, loving Him above all things and loving His creation for His sake. The only vehicle of salvation, which Christ directly established, is the Catholic Church. Christ never revealed any other means of attainment of the beatific vision except through His Church.

The Magisterium of the Church

It must be emphasized that the Church has continually reaffirmed the positions of Christ and the Fathers of the Church. It has passed down to every generation the same truth and has never and can never deny any dogma of the Faith. This would be against its very nature and the guarantee of Christ to preserve the Church from error. Whatever, therefore, the Church teaches in any particular age must always rest upon and agree with the position it has continually clarified for the faithful in the past. Any interpretation, which denies an article of the faith whether implicitly or explicitly, must be rejected as false. Whatever statements the Church has made since the Second Vatican Council including the Council documents themselves must be read and interpreted through the light of Holy Tradition and all dogmatic statements previously confirmed by the Magisterium of the Church. The following quotations are from the official statements of the Church, her saints and Popes.

Official Ex Cathedra Dogmatic Statements

II Council of Constantinople (AD 553)

"If anyone does not condemn those who hold opinions similar to heretics and who have remained in their godlessness up till death: let such a one be anathema."

The First Lateran Council (AD 1123)

"If anyone does not profess, in accordance with the holy Fathers, properly and truthfully all that has been handed down and taught publicly to the Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church of God, both by same holy Fathers and by the approved universal Councils, to the last detail in word and intention: let him be anathema"

The Fourth Lateran Council (AD 1215)

"There is but one universal Church of the faithful, outside of which **no one at all** can be saved."

Pope Eugene IV, Cantate Domino, (AD 1441.)

"The Holy Roman Church firmly believes, professes and teaches that none of those who are not within the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but Jews, heretics and schismatics, can ever be partakers of eternal life, but are to go into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Mt. 25:41), unless before the close of their lives they shall have entered into that Church; also the unity of the ecclesiastical body is such that the Church's sacraments avail only those abiding in that Church, and fasts, alms giving and other works of piety which play their part in the Christian combat are in her alone productive of eternal rewards; moreover, that no one, no matter what alms he may give, not even if he were to shed his blood for Christ's sake, can be saved unless he abide in the bosom and unity of the Catholic Church."

Council of Florence (AD1445)

"No one can be saved outside the bosom and unity of the Catholic Church."

Council of Trent (AD 1563)

"Without our Catholic Faith it is impossible to please God"

I Vatican Council (AD 1870)

"Since without faith it is impossible to please God and to attain to fellowship of His children, therefore without faith no one has ever achieved justification. If anyone says a man without the faith can be just before God merely by observing the Commandments: Let him be anathema!"

II Vatican Council (AD 1965)

"Basing itself on Holy Scripture and Tradition, this sacred Council teaches that the Church now sojourning on earth as an exile is necessary for salvation. In explicit terms, Christ affirmed the necessity of Baptism and thereby also affirmed the necessity of the Church, for through baptism as through a door men enter the Church. Christ present to us in His body, which is the Church, is the sole Mediator and the exclusive way of salvation." (Lumen Gentium)

Pope John XXIII (AD 1963)

"It is impossible to be joined to God except through Jesus Christ; it is impossible to be united to Christ except in the Church which is His Mystical Body."

Pope Paul VI (AD 1978)

"We must always remember the unity of the mystical Body outside of which there is no salvation, for there is no entering into salvation outside the Church. Only within the Church is an encounter with our Father possible... The Church AND THE CHURCH ALONE possesses the secret of true relationship to God, as established by Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Church IS that very relationship, which is both a certain and exclusive means of attaining salvation.... THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IS THE Extension OF JESUS CHRIST IN TIME AND SPACE.... Outside this Body, the Holy Spirit does not give life to anyone."

Pope John Paul I (AD 1978)

"The ship of the Church is guided by Christ and by His Vicar... It alone carries the disciples and receives Christ. Yes, it is tossed on the sea but, outside it, one would perish immediately. Salvation is only in the Church; outside it, one perishes."

Pope John Paul II (AD 1978-Present)

"Dear young people and members of the faithful... We have to be conscious of and absorb this fundamental and revealed truth, contained in the phrase consecrated by Tradition: There is no salvation outside the Church. From her alone there flows surely and fully the life-giving force destined, in Christ and His Spirit, to renew the whole of humanity, and therefore directing every human being to become a part of the Mystical Body of Christ."

I think the point is clear. The constant position of the Church has been and always will be that no one outside the Church is saved. But what about all those supposedly "good" people who have never "hurt" anyone and who do not deserve to be damned? What about the "virtuous pagan" who truly lives out the natural law and has never heard the Gospel and does not know the Church is necessary for eternal life? Will men be damned to hell for what they do not know?

"God... wishes all men be saved and come to the knowledge of Truth." (1 Timothy 2:4)

We must realize that it is God's desire to see that men are saved. Therefore, He will do whatever He can, within His own established Order, to save us. This is why He became man. He literally took upon Himself the just punishment we deserved to save us from eternal separation from Himself. This must be understood. God established the Church to continue to apply the merits of His redemption to all those men of good will who would accept Him, obey Him and embrace the fullness of the truth He came to reveal. We are all born into original sin. That means that we are all born without the ability to see God. We are born without God's life within us and are spiritually dead. Nothing we can do on a human level can ever bring us to spiritual life. This spiritual life and the ability to see God face to face is given to us by the sacrament of baptism. We cannot demand spiritual sight either for ourselves or anyone else. This is not something we deserve or to which we are entitled. It is given only to those who are given the grace to receive. We can make ourselves more receptive to God's grace by living out the eternal law written within our own hearts and by our "good will" but this still would not entitle us to the rewards of eternal life.

The fact that we are Roman Catholics is a grave responsibility. It means that through the mercy of God we have obtained a grace that we neither deserved nor earned but that God has, in His infinite and unfathomable wisdom, willed to give to us sinners, that we might have the most precious gift that He could ever give, eternal life.

When asked how many would be saved Jesus answered with the terrifying words; "Enter by the narrow gate, for wide is the way and easy the path that leads to destruction but narrow is the way and difficult the path that leads to eternal life and few there are who find it." (Matt.7:13-14) In other words, not only is salvation reserved to those within the Mystical Body of Christ, but also few of us will attain it even with all the assistance of the sacraments and helps of the Faith.

Is There Hope?

This imperative of Christ reiterated over and over again by the Church has spurred the Missionary zeal over the centuries. Countless men and women have given their lives for pagans, Jews, Muslims, heretics and schismatics to win their souls back from error and death to life in Christ. They have suffered indescribable tortures by the very people to whom they went to save and the blood of the martyrs has been the foundation of the faith. I remember reading about the tortures that the Red Communists in China put the Catholics through especially the priests and nuns. The thousands of martyred missions who died to bring the gospel to the unbelievers and the ignorant testify to the necessity of Christ and consequently the Church for salvation.

We can, however, give a small hope for the possible salvation of those who appear to be outside the possibility of hope by making a very important distinction. Let me explain. In the normal, ordinary course of events God does not directly intervene to change the laws of nature. For instance, if through ignorance a man should drink a deadly poison the normal result would be his death. Yet there has been instances within the lives of the Saints where the enemies of the Church attempted to poison a saint and the saint had no ill effects from that poison due to the

direct intervention of God. We call these direct interventions and the suspension of the natural law a miracle. Only He who is supreme Sovereign over His creation can suspend the very laws He has established for the normal ordinary functioning of His universe. Examples of this are found throughout the Sacred Scriptures. Normally when a person dies they remain dead. Yet Jesus raised the dead to life. If a person has a severe head injury he will remain mentally and or physically handicapped for the rest of his life unless and only unless God directly intervenes in an extraordinary manner. We call these interventions "miracles" because they are outside the normal order of things.

The ordinary, normal means of salvation is the Church. God created it this way. He established the spiritual laws of His creation and they are just as fixed as the physical laws of gravity and thermal dynamics. Now how many times has He opened the Red Sea or raised the dead to life? I can confidently say not too many. His miracles are rare. God prefers to work within the laws He has established and therefore we can never depend on miracles to save us. We can hope that God will be merciful but we can never expect Him to change the normal course of history. He has not revealed that He will perform a miracle for any particular circumstance and therefore we must rely upon the natural means He has given us.

Thus it is with the Church. He can suspend the spiritual laws He has established for the salvation of humanity. Nevertheless, He has never revealed that He would do so and to expect it is to imply that God must do what we think is best by performing a miracle of grace to save a soul outside the Ark. God did not do so for the people of Noah's time. Nevertheless He could have if He so chose.

Because God wills that all men be saved and come to knowledge of truth He will use every opportunity to save the souls of men of good will. He may even perform a miracle of grace and save them outside the Church militant but they would still be saved through the Church because they would have to be given the truth through the Church suffering.

So can a person be saved who dies outside the visible Catholic Church? The answer is absolutely not, in the ordinary course of things. Can God perform a miracle of grace and suspend the spiritual laws of nature He has fixed and established? Absolutely! He is Supreme Sovereign over all His creation. Does He perform miracles of this kind? That is a much harder question to answer. I believe that He does and there is some evidence to support this in the Scriptures. Nevertheless, if He does so He does so rarely and we cannot expect or demand that He do anything outside the ordinary means He has already given His very Life to establish. We have always heard about the proverbial "virtuous pagan" or the good "Christian" that seemingly dies in faith. But we do not know if God in His mercy has seen fit to perform a miracle in any particular circumstance. He has never revealed that He has even in any authentic private revelation. On the contrary, He always reiterates the need for the Catholic Faith.

In so far as the new "Catechism of the Catholic Church" indicates that others may be saved who are outside the Catholic Church it does so with the idea, based in the Sacred Scriptures, Holy Tradition and the constant teaching of the Church, that these are miracles of grace outside the

ordinary means of salvation, and that these souls would nonetheless be united to and saved through the Church if not on earth then in purgatory. To interpret what is said in the catechism or any other document in any other way is to commit heresy. And if the authors of the Catechism actually meant to say anything opposed to the constant teaching of the Church then the catechism, in so far as it means this, is in error and that error must be rejected. Remember the whole catechism is not dogmatic. There are portions of it that are theological considerations and explanations that may not necessarily be accurate.

I hope this brief explanation helps you to understand the position that the Church has always taken regarding salvation. It is our duty; then, to see the overwhelming need to evangelize in some way by word and example those who God brings into our life. If our ancestors were willing to lay down their lives for the sake of the gospel and converting those who were in the darkness of sin and error how can we do otherwise. There are souls to be saved and it is the height of Charity to do all that we can to save them.

In regards to Father Feeny: This is a rather complicated issue and I would recommend the book "The Boston Heresy Case". However, it should be noted that despite the fact that Fr. Feeny never recanted his "hard nosed" position on this issue of "Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus", he was, nonetheless, re-communicated by Pope Paul VI. **The problem with Father Feeny's position was that he would not give any quarter in regards to the possibility that God can be God and use extraordinary means to save someone not visibly united to the Church.**

It must also be noted that the Church has never definitively defined "Eternal Life" as being exclusively the "beatific vision". It is, therefore, possible to speculate that those few who are saved by an extraordinary miracle of God's grace to live in eternal happiness with Him in heaven may, nonetheless, be deprived of the beatific vision. In other words, they may enjoy perfect natural and even supernatural happiness for all eternity after the resurrection. They will be able to see and be with Jesus and Mary and all the Angels and Saints but they could never see God in the face, as He is in Himself, as the Blessed Trinity. This will be such for unbaptized infants and virtuous pagans as it was for the Angels before the fall. **The privilege of the beatific vision is reserved exclusively for those who have been faithful to God through the Church and who die in the state of sanctifying grace.**

I could write a book on this subject but hopefully this brief article will stimulate thought and discussion. May God have mercy on us all.

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