

The Necessity of the Catholic Church

By Greg Witherow

It is rare today to hear one speak of the necessity of the Church for one's salvation. The old proclamations, "Outside of the Church there is no salvation¹", sound like relics from a medieval past, something to be discarded in our ecumenical age. Yet it is clear that the Magisterium and the Church Fathers have made such claims for 2,000 years. And today it is again reaffirmed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. But on the other hand the Church has always allowed for non-Catholic Christians to have the hope of salvation too. And today we often hear of the hope of salvation of non-Christians, let alone non-Catholics. Is the necessity of the Church, so often proclaimed in the past, devoid of meaning in our era? Has the Church changed her dogmas in the post-Vatican II era? In light of such questions, we will survey the historical and constant teaching of the Church.

The Church Is Necessary For Salvation

To begin with, the teaching that there is no salvation outside of the Church is a "de fide" (what must be believed) dogma². The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 stated, "The universal Church of the faithful is one outside of which none is saved". This was the teaching also of the Union Council of Florence (1438-1445), Pope Innocent III, Clement VI, Benedict XIV, Pope Boniface VIII in the papal bull Unam Sanctum, Pius IX, Leo XIII and Pius XII in the Encyclical Mystici Corporis³. But does the Magisterium address exceptions to **formal** membership to the Church?

This question is answered by reviewing the excommunication of Father Leonard Feeney in 1953, a recent yet pre-Vatican II⁴ case that illustrates the Church's teaching. Father Feeney was excommunicated because he rejected the teaching of baptism of desire, either explicit or implicit. As baptism is the gate into the Catholic Church, he held all the unbaptized are undoubtedly lost. This was in direct conflict with the teaching of the Church. It has always been held that salvation is **possible** for the unbaptized, assuming the person has either an explicit or implicit desire for Christ and his Church. Such people are mystically (not formally) attached to the Church, **if indeed they are in a state of grace**⁵. The Feeney case illustrates two things. First, there are exceptions to formal membership and secondly, such exceptions are not a post Vatican II invention.

¹ Pope Boniface VIII proclaimed this in the papal bull Unam Sanctum in 1302.

² The Fundamentals of the Catholic Faith, page 312.

³ Taken from The Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma (by Dr. Ludwig Ott) on page 312.

⁴ I will use as many pre-Vatican II examples as possible as some are suspicious of the post-Vatican II era.

⁵ The story of Cornelius in Acts 10 depicts a non-Christian who was a true follower of God. In the story we see Cornelius is neither a Christian (he hadn't heard the Gospel yet) nor a Jew (he was considered by Peter to be a Gentile). Yet he was in a state of grace before he received the Gospel or was baptized. We know this because his prayers were heard and his alms were accepted as pleasing to God, as Hebrews 11:6 states, "without faith it is impossible to please God". This means Cornelius must have had faith, which can **only** be obtained by the work of the Holy Spirit on someone's soul. Cornelius had the Holy Spirit in the same manner pre-Pentecost believers had Him. With baptism he received a post-Pentecost portion of the Holy Spirit. Characteristics Cornelius had marking him as a man of God included prayer, fasting, almsgiving, the fear of the Lord, righteousness **AND** upon hearing the Gospel, he did not reject it – i.e. it was **not** because he was "a good person". Baptism brought him into a full, formal communion with the Church.

Invincible Ignorance

Pope Pius IX shepherded the Church from 1846-1878. During his Pontificate he defined the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and Papal Infallibility at Vatican I (1870). He also railed against the Modernists in his Syllabus of Errors (1864). No one has ever accused Pope Pius IX of compromising the Catholic faith. On December 9, 1854 he published a document called Singulari Quadem. In it he reaffirms the necessity of formal membership of the Church while making allowances for **invincible** ignorance.

“For it must be held by faith that outside the Apostolic Roman Church, **no one can be saved**; that this is the only ark of salvation; that he who shall not have entered therein will perish in the flood; but, on the other hand, it is necessary to hold for certain that they who labor in ignorance of the true religion, **if this ignorance is invincible, are not stained by any guilt in this matter in the eyes of God**. Now, in truth, who would arrogate so much to himself as to mark the limits of such ignorance, because of the nature and variety of peoples, regions, innate dispositions, and of so many other things? For, in truth, when released from these corporeal chains “we shall see God as He is” [I John 3:2], we shall understand perfectly by how close and beautiful a bond divine mercy and justice are united⁶.”

Defining Invincible Ignorance

What exactly is invincible ignorance and how does it differ from vincible ignorance⁷? The Catholic encyclopedia defines invincible ignorance as follows:

“Ignorance is said to be invincible when a person is unable to rid himself of it [ignorance] notwithstanding the **employment of moral diligence**, that is, such as under the circumstances is, morally speaking, **possible and obligatory**.”

In contrast vincible ignorance is defined as follows:

“Ignorance is termed vincible if it can be dispelled by the use of "moral diligence".... We may say, however, that the diligence requisite must be commensurate with the importance of the affair in hand, and with the capacity of the agent, in a word such as a really sensible and prudent person would use under the circumstances.”

To summarize, a vincibly ignorant person remains under God’s judgment while an invincibly ignorant person **may** be saved⁸. This certainly may apply to **Christians** outside of the Catholic Church. These Christians embrace Christ and baptism while unwittingly (in most cases) rejecting his Church. Only God can judge whether all Protestants and Orthodox are invincibly ignorant. But ignorance of the true religion is more descriptive of non-Christians, those ignorant of Christ, his Church and baptism.

⁶ Denzinger; The Sources of Catholic Dogma, 1647.

⁷ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07648a.htm>

⁸ A person invincibly ignorant of the faith can still go to hell as a result of committing mortal sins known by natural law including murder, rape or other such crimes. No sane person is invincibly ignorant of these.

The Church and Implicit Desire

By Catholic definition, a person who is not baptized is not a Christian. However the Church has always recognized that an explicit desire for baptism is sufficient for salvation. A person who dies en route to the rite has his reward. But a non-Christian can also have an implicit desire for a baptism he knows nothing about. He too can be “baptized” into Christ and his Church.

As proof, we see the Council of Trent reaffirming the ancient teaching of baptism by desire. In her Decree on Justification, chapter 4 she states, “and this translation [an individual being put into a state of grace] after the promulgation of the Gospel cannot be effected except through the laver of regeneration, **or a desire for it**...”⁹

This statement of Trent included an understanding that the desire could be implicit. We see this demonstrated in a quote by St. Alphonsus Liguori (1691-1787) in his book Moral Theology - (Bk. 6) where he states, “But baptism of desire is perfect conversion to God by contrition or love of God above all things accompanied by an **explicit or implicit** desire for true Baptism of water.”

The pre-Vatican II thinking on this topic is further illustrated in the book The Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma (published in 1955) where it states, “The necessity of means is, however, not an absolute necessity, but a hypothetical one. In special circumstances, namely, in the case of invincible ignorance or of incapability, actual membership of the Church can be replaced by the desire for the same. **This need not be expressly (explicit) present**, but can also be included in the moral readiness faithfully to fulfill the will of God (votum implicitum). In this manner also those who are in fact outside of the Catholic Church can achieve salvation¹⁰.” And later, “Baptism of desire is the **explicit or implicit** desire for sacramental baptism (votum baptismi) associated with perfect contrition (contrition based on charity)¹¹.”

And this pre-Vatican II teaching carries into the post-Vatican II era. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) speaks on this topic in a number of sections. Here is one.

“Since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partakers, in a way known to God, of the Paschal mystery.” Every man who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved. It may be supposed that such persons **would have desired Baptism explicitly if they had known its necessity**.¹²”

⁹ Denzinger, 796.

¹⁰ Page 312.

¹¹ Page 356.

¹² CCC 1260. CCC 847 also states, “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**.” Like Cornelius, these souls are created anew in Christ before hearing the Gospel.

Mysterious Relationship with the Church

But those who are not formally members of the Church are still attached to her. The Encyclical Letter, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, was written by Pope Pius XII in 1943. He insists non-Catholics believers are related to the Church while being deprived of graces.

“In this Encyclical Letter in which we have proclaimed the praises of the “great and glorious Body of Christ,” and from a heart overflowing with love we ask each and every one of them to correspond to the interior movements of grace, and to seek to withdraw from that state in which **they cannot be sure of their salvation**. For even though by an **unconscious desire** and longing **they have a certain relationship with the Mystical Body of the Redeemer**, **they still remain deprived** of those many heavenly gifts and helps which can only be enjoyed in the Catholic Church. Therefore may they enter into Catholic unity and, joined with us in the one, organic God of Jesus Christ, may they together with us run on to the one Head in the Society of glorious love.¹³”

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger echoes this spiritual attachment to the Church and its dangers (deprivations) and uncertainties in his Declaration entitled *Dominus Iesus*. He writes,

“With respect to the *way* in which the salvific grace of God — which **is always given by means of Christ** in the Spirit and **has a mysterious relationship to the Church** — comes to individual non-Christians, the Second Vatican Council limited itself to the statement that God bestows it “in ways known to himself.”¹⁴ And “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 salvation¹⁵.”

Conclusion

All believers are united to the Catholic Church either formally or spiritually¹⁶. Formal attachment is no guarantee of final salvation¹⁷. And the spiritual attachment of invincibly ignorant non-Christians is a gravely deficient condition. Yes, the Church’s post Vatican II emphasis has changed, but her dogma has not. Only God knows who is invincibly ignorant. We must not presume. But **we sin and are in heresy** if our message is “Take Christ, the Church is optional” or worse “Be good, don’t worry about Christ”. Even the invincibly ignorant need food (the Eucharist) and water (baptism)¹⁸. **We truly lack charity** if we let souls approach death in a **gravely deficient** state as if their salvation was certain in Christ.

¹³ *Mystici Corporis Christi*, p. 103. Faith filled formal membership gives one greater certainty of salvation.

¹⁴ *Dominus Iesus*, paragraph 21. In a mysterious sense all believers are Catholic.

¹⁵ *Dominus Iesus*, paragraph 22. Here Ratzinger is addressing non-Christians, not Protestants or Orthodox.

¹⁶ The Protestant teaching of the visible and invisible Church differs. The Catholic Church holds **it is the true visible Church** and believers are **required** (allowing for invincible ignorance) to be formal members of her. Protestants hold that **all denominations** are part of the visible Church and membership is **optional**.

¹⁷ *Dominus Iesus*, paragraph 22.

¹⁸ Terri Schiavo was deprived of food and water and the Church regarded it as a sinful act. It is likewise a sin if we do not have the **same fervency** for providing food (the Eucharist) and water (baptism) by formally converting all people into the Church. Terri died a physical death. A spiritual death is much worse.