

**“TUTTE LE RELIGIONI SONO UN CAMMINO PER ARRIVARE A DIO”:  
INCONSISTENT WITH “EXTRA ECCLESIAM NULLA SALUS”?**

## The Controversy

At an interreligious meeting in Singapore on September 13, 2024, Pope Francis addressed a group of young people, saying in part:

*Tutte le religioni sono un cammino per arrivare a Dio. Sono – faccio un paragone – come diverse lingue, diversi idiomi, per arrivare lì. Ma Dio è Dio per tutti. E poiché Dio è Dio per tutti, noi siamo tutti figli di Dio.*<sup>1</sup>

In trying to decipher what the Pope might have truly meant, commentators grappled with the question of translation especially of the first sentence. On the spot translation by the translator at the Pope’s side echoed his words in English, “*All religions are a pathway to arrive at God*”, which is quite a literal translation. Msgr. Christopher Washington of the Secretariat of State’s English Section interpreted *tutte le religioni* to mean *every religion*, thus: “*Every religion is a way to arrive at God.*” Another Vatican translation of the sentence pluralized the predicate noun (*cammino*) in the singular and added a participle to read: “*All religions are seen as paths trying to reach God.*” The official Vatican website, however, put it quite simply, also rendering the singular *un cammino* into plural form as follows: “*All religions are paths to God.*”<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the translation was, confusion and controversy followed the remark. Inasmuch as there was no in-depth explanation, except only by way of an analogy, the remark invited a flurry of reactions and interpretations. A good number of commentators praised the Pope for his emphasis on interreligious dialogue and inclusivity. Some hailed him for highlighting the importance of peaceful cooperation among adherents of various religions. A far greater number, however, on the more conservative side, accused the Pope of having strayed from traditional Catholic doctrine on the mediating role of Christ in achieving unity between God and human beings, minimizing as it seemed to them the uniqueness of that role. Still others saw the remark as relativistic, accusing the Pope of religious indifferentism, of glossing over if not denying the importance of the differences between Christ’s Gospel and other religions.<sup>3</sup> The statement, according to them, suggests that there are more than one path that actually

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<sup>1</sup> See official transcription and translation into various languages of what the Pope said in *Discorso del santo padre, Incontro interreligioso con i giovani*, “Catholic Junior College” (Singapore) Venerdì, 13 settembre 2024 (<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2024/september/documents/20240913-singapore-giovani.html>).

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/september/documents/20240913-singapore-giovani.html>. The full translation of the quoted text above read: “*All religions are paths to God. I will use an analogy, they are like different languages that express the divine. But God is for everyone, and therefore, we are all God’s children.*”

<sup>3</sup> See <https://onepeterfive.com/francis-doubles-down-but-has-he-apostatized/> (BRIAN HARRISON, *Francis Doubles Down – but Has He Apostatized?*)

leads to God and that the Church as means to salvation is downplayed if not rendered as unnecessary altogether.

To ascertain whether these apprehensions hold ground, requires not only theological scrutiny, but also a historical analysis of how Church's long-held doctrine which states that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Church no salvation, henceforth "*nulla salus* doctrine") developed over the centuries up until the present time. Others have already done an excellent work on this subject,<sup>4</sup> but the present historical survey proposes to offer a different perspective.

Before proceeding, the circumstances which contextualized Pope Francis' statement in Singapore must first be recognized:

1. The Pope's audience were young people of various religious faith traditions.<sup>5</sup>
2. The context was an *informal* conversation between the Pope and the youth of Singapore, constituting thus an *interreligious dialogue*.
3. The Pope had a script, but he veered away from it and chose to speak impromptu and spontaneously.
4. The Pope's statement, therefore, was off the cuff, unscripted and unofficial; the transcription of his statement though was posted later on the Vatican website.<sup>6</sup>
5. The Pope did not provide an elaborate theological explanation on what he was saying, except by way of an analogy which compared religions to languages as ways of expressing the divinity.

It is important to bear all this in mind because it provides the circumstances that form the setting for the Pope's encounter with the youth in Singapore, in terms of which said event can be fully understood, assessed and appreciated.

## References in Sacred Scripture

Most discussions on the present subject have as their point of departure John 14, 1-6. Here, the apostle Thomas asks Jesus, "*Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?*" Jesus responds with a clearly exclusive claim: "*I am the way and the truth and the life.*"

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance among many others LOUIS CAPERAN, *A l'écoute du Concile, l'appel des non-chrétiens au salut*, Éditions du centurion, Paris, 1934/1961; FRANCIS SULLIVAN, *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1992/2002. See also R. LOMBARDI, *The Salvation of the Unbeliever* (tr. by D. M. White), Westminster, 1956; and M. EMINYAN, *The Theology of Salvation*, Boston, 1960.

<sup>5</sup> For an official report on what took place, see "Francesco conclude il viaggio a Singapore incontrando i giovani di differenti fedi, Il dialogo si fonda sul rispetto delle differenze," in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Anno CLXIV n. 267, lunedì 25 novembre 2024.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2024/september/documents/20240913-singapore-giovani.html>.

*No one comes to the Father except through me.*" The original Greek text all the more reflects this clarity with the use of the definite article *hē* (ἡ) to specify each of the Christological attributions: "Ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ὁδὸς καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια καὶ ἡ ζωὴ· οὐδεὶς ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸν Πατέρα εἰ μὴ δι' ἐμοῦ."<sup>7</sup> Jesus says this to assert (to his apostles) that he is the *way* to the Father, the ultimate source of *truth*, and the giver of *eternal life*, unmistakably implying that there is no other *way* to reach the Father *except* through him; it is an audacious assertion signifying his divinity and the exclusive access to salvation that he offers.

On close inspection, there is enough reason why Jesus makes such a claim of exclusivity. He has been among his apostles after such a long time (Jn 14, 9). Addressing Philip this time Jesus says: "Have I been with you for *so long a time* and you still do not know me, Philip?"<sup>8</sup> Thus, he already expected his apostles at that point to know who he was. That knowledge should have made them realize that "Whoever has seen (him) has seen the Father" and that "(he) is in the Father...and the Father is in (him)."<sup>9</sup> That being the case, there is no reason why they should look for another way. In other words, anyone who knew Jesus in such a profound way, should realize that there is *no other way, no other truth, no other life.*" Bestowed with the "sight of faith" there was no reason why the apostles should drift away from him.

Two other texts support Jesus' self-identification, namely, Acts 4, 12 and 1 Timothy 2, 5. In Acts 4, 12, Peter said in response to religious leaders who asked him and John to stop talking about Jesus: "*Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.*" Furthermore, in 1 Timothy 2, 5, Paul reminded Timothy that God wants all people to be saved through Christ: "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." In Mark 16, 15-16, Jesus summoned the apostles: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned."

In Romans 2, 14-16, however, St. Paul speaks of the gentiles, those who were not of Jewish descent and the non-Christians in belief. Broadly these were those who did not believe in God. Indeed, there were "the gentiles," St. Paul said, "...who do not have the law..." but "by nature observe the prescriptions of the law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law... They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts also sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them." By implication, without knowing God (Christ), the gentiles had a justifiable excuse for not explicitly recognizing him as "the way" and for not being one with the Christian community (*ecclesia*). Nonetheless, if the gentiles obey the law of God written on their hearts, they are in effect following "the way".

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<sup>7</sup> See *Novum Testamentum Graece*, Nestlé-Aland 26<sup>th</sup> ed., Deutsche Bibelstiftung, Stuttgart, 1979, p. 297-298.

<sup>8</sup> JOHN 14, 9.

<sup>9</sup> JOHN 14, 10-11.

Without considering the textual contexts, an immediate question immediately begs for an answer. If Jesus is the only way, how can St. Paul be so considerate and accepting of the gentiles as to affirm that they are on the way to righteousness just by following the law written on their hearts? Is there not a contradiction here? A careful and deeper comparison, however, between the kind of thinking found in John 14, 1-6 and that found in Romans 2, 14-16 provides the answer. It shows that on one hand for the Christian who wishes to come to the Father, Jesus is the only way and no other. But for the gentile, the way to righteousness is the law written on his heart – which to St. Paul is another way of accepting the Spirit of Christ even if one is not aware of it. In the end, for the gentile, it is still Christ working in him in a different way, not through the eyes of faith but through the light of the law.

A preview of this kind of thinking is found in Luke 9, 49-50 where the apostle John, reacting to an exorcist who did not belong to their company, tells Jesus: “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow in our company.” Jesus’ answer was swift: “Do not prevent him, for whoever is not against you is for you.” This exorcist may have been an “outsider” but Jesus himself was open to him because he was not really against his company. In effect, Jesus is challenging here such narrow minded understanding of belongingness by pointing out that anyone who is performing good deeds (in his name), even if not a known follower, is contributing to the Kingdom of God and should therefore be welcomed.

From all these, Sacred Scriptures speak of two contrasting paths to God. One speaks of the exclusive path of the Christian, the man of faith, towards God. This path is Jesus himself, the lone savior and mediator. He is the way, the truth, and the life. The other speaks of the way a non-believer treads, the way to righteousness guided by the law written on his heart. It is these two contrasting paths – not mutually exclusive but both acceptable in Scriptures – that found their way into the Patristic writings and into the official teachings of the Magisterium of the Church.

### The Nulla Salus Doctrine in Patristic Writings

Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185 – ca. 253), in his Homilies on Joshua (the original Greek texts of which were lost), is credited to have first expressed the idea of restrictive salvation when he said, “...if anyone from that people wants to be saved, let him come in order to be able to attain salvation... Let no one persuade himself, let no one deceive himself. Outside this house, that is, *outside the Church, no one is saved*. If anyone *goes outside*, he is responsible for his own death.”<sup>10</sup> Clearly, Origen was addressing fellow Christians, those who already belonged to the fold, who have

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<sup>10</sup> CYNTHIA WHITE, ed., *Origen Homilies on Joshua* (Homily 3), trans. by BARBARA J. BRUCE, in THOMAS P. HALTON, et al., eds., *The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), p. 50. See also WILLIAM A. JURGENS, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970), p. 214. Cf. *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum*, Vienna: Geroldi, 1866, 3.2, p. 795.

been converted, and who Origen dared *not to go outside*. And that dare turned into a warning, “*extra ecclesiam nemo salvatur*”.

More than Origen, it is St. Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 210 – ca. 258 A.D.), who is oft-cited as reference for the idea of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. In responding to the letter of then Bishop in Mauretania, Jubaianus (ca. 257), concerning the illicit and profane baptisms of heretics, St. Cyprian admonished the lapsed baptized Christians (lapsi): “...the Baptism of public witness and of blood cannot profit a heretic unto salvation, because there is no salvation outside the Church...” (*salus extra Ecclesiam non est*).<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, St. Cyprian echoed the underlying idea of this admonition when, to counter the Novatian schism,<sup>12</sup> he wrote: “No one who forsakes the Church of Christ can receive the rewards of Christ... No one can have God for his Father, who does not have the Church for his mother... No one who splits and divides the Church of Christ can possess the garment of Christ...”<sup>13</sup>

Needless to say, if Origen’s and St. Cyprian’s statements were to be properly understood, they must be viewed within their specific contexts. Namely, both Origen and St. Cyprian were addressing the lapsed baptized Christians, in particular the heretics and schismatics,<sup>14</sup> and not the non-Christians (the unbaptized). Otherwise, their teaching could be vulnerable to misinterpretation.

More rigid than Origen and St. Cyprian, was St. Fulgentius (ca. 462– 527 A.D.), a North African Christian prelate who served as Bishop of Ruspe in what is now Tunisia, during the 5th and 6th century. In his *De fide ad Petrum seu de regula fidei* (ca. 523-526 A.D.), St. Fulgentius also addresses those baptized by *heretics* and *schismatics*, and admonishes them to return to the Church:

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<sup>11</sup> ST. CYPRIAN, *Epistola ad Jubaianum de Haereticis Baptizandis* (Epistola LXXIII. Anno Christi CCLVI), n. 21: “Quod si haeretico nec Baptisma publicae confessionis et sanguinis proficere ad salutem potest, quia *salus extra Ecclesiam non est*...” (Italics added.)

<sup>12</sup> Novatus (c. 200–258) was a Roman priest opposed to the election of Pope Cornelius in 251, who held the strict view that the *lapsi* (those baptized Christians who left the faith and turned to pagan gods when pressured under the Decius persecution in AD 250), cannot be restored to full communion. The Church of Rome declared such a view heretical following the letters of Saint Cyprian of Carthage. See JOHN CHAPMAN, “Novatian and Novatianism,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 11, New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911.

<sup>13</sup> ST. CYPRIAN, *Liber de Unitate Ecclesiae*, nn. 6-7 in Migne PL, Vol. 4, Col. 498 (Cf. E.H. BLAKENEY, trans., with Intro. & Notes, *Cyprian De Unitate Ecclesiae*, New York and Toronto: The Macmillan Co., 1928, pp. 18 & 20): “...nec perveniet ad Christi praemia, qui relinquit Ecclesiam Christi... Habere jam non potest Deum patrem, qui Ecclesiam non habet matrem... Possidere non potest indumentum Christi, qui scindit et dividit ecclesiam Christi.” (For the English translation see ALEXANDER ROBERTS, JAMES DONALDSON, eds. & PHILIP SCHAFF, trans., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 5 (1885), pp. 741-742.

<sup>14</sup> On this point, see B. SESBOÛÉ, *Hors de l’Eglise pas de salut. Histoire d’une formule et problèmes d’interprétation*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2004; ILARIA MORALI, “Le salut de l’autre, dans la théologie et le magistère de 1850 à Vatican II (1964-1965),” in *Islam ve Hıristiyanlık’ta Kurtulus, Istanbul*, 2006, p. 196: ““Un troisième aspect concerne l’interprétation de l’affirmation « hors de l’Eglise il n’y a pas de Salut ». En soi il s’agit d’une expression qui a pris naissance dans un contexte patristique et qui se réfère **aux hérétiques, pas aux païens.**”

*Without the sacrament of Trinitarian baptism no one will receive eternal life, except those baptized in their own blood for the name of Christ (canon 30 §73 pp. 101-102), and those who have received such baptism from heretics or schismatics need not be rebaptised but must return to the Catholic church for baptism to avail them (§43 p. 88). Even if they are generous givers and martyrs for Christ, heretics or schismatics will not be saved without returning to the unity of the Catholic church (§43 p. 88). Maybe they will be tortured a bit less for those good works, but they will not be counted children of God (§44 p88). Only in the Catholic church, where God has promised binding and loosing, is penance fruitful (§39 p. 85).<sup>15</sup>*

Nevertheless, he also spoke about the fate of both pagans and Jews alike:

*Hold most firmly and never doubt in the least that not only all pagans but also all Jews and all heretics and schismatics who end this present life outside the Catholic Church are about to go into the eternal fire that was prepared for the Devil and his angels.<sup>16</sup>*

Such was St. Fulgentius' language because for the most part of his pastoral ministry as bishop, he had to defend orthodoxy and deal with heretics and schismatics, particularly those drawn to Arianism and Pelagianism. No doubt, he had to liken such lapsed Christians to the pagans and warned them about eternal punishment so as to draw them back to the fold of the Church.

In contrast, such exclusivism is toned down in other patristic writings. For instance, *The Shepherd from Hermas* (c. A.D. 140-155),<sup>17</sup> an apocryphal writing in the early Church, recounts a vision that visualizes what might be called a pre-existent Church:

*As I slept, brothers and sisters, a revelation was given to me by a very handsome young man, who said to me, "Who do you think the elderly woman from whom you received the little book was?" I said: "The Sibyl." "You are wrong," he said. "She is not." "Then who is she?" I said. "The church," he replied. I said to him, "Why, then is she elderly?" "Because," he said, "she was created before all things; therefore she is elderly, and for her sake the world was formed."<sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> THOMAS P. HALTON, et al. eds., *The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation*, ROBERT B. ENO, S.S., trans., *Fulgentius Selected Works*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997, pp. 101 ff. See also *Is Faith God's Gift? (Ephesians 2:8-9): Fulgentius* (<https://sites.google.com/site/mattolliffe/articles/is-fath-gods-gift-ephesians-28-9-fulgentius>).

<sup>16</sup> See WILLIAM A. JURGENS, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 3, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1979, p. 298.

<sup>17</sup> *The Shepherd of Hermas* ((c. A.D. 140-155) is a Christian literary work of the late first half of the second century. Though characterized as Apocryphal, it is an important Christian text from the second century that was helpful to the early Church in the formulation of the rules on what is to be recognized as the Canon.

<sup>18</sup> MICHAEL W. HOLMES, ed. & trans., *The Apostolic Fathers, Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd edition, Baker Publishing Group, pp. 10-11. See also WILLIAM A. JURGENS, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. 1, p. 33.

Commenting on this passage, M. Mazza observed, "... It should be obvious from this statement that the Church is being portrayed as a mystery, with much more to it than meets the eye. A door has been opened for a sense of real, though perhaps unacknowledged, membership in this saving body."<sup>19</sup>

St. Justin the Martyr (ca. 100-165 A.D.), a philosopher and Christian apologist, had a much more inclusive approach by proposing a broad understanding of what it means to be a Christian and implicitly what it means to belong to the Church. In his *Ἀπολογία πρῶτα* (*Apologia prima*, ca. 155-157 A.D.), for instance, St. Justin was much more explicit—in words reminiscent of what St. Paul said in Romans 2, 14-16 (*supra*)—in explaining why even perceived atheists like Socrates and Heraclitus and many others that include even barbarians might be considered Christians as well:

*We have been taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have declared above that He is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them; and among the barbarians, Abraham, and Ananias, and Azarias, and Misael, and Elias, and many others whose actions and names we now decline to recount, because we know it would be tedious.*<sup>20</sup>

As far as the Jews were concerned, Justin also indicated that those righteous among them, who lived before Christ would be saved. He later expressed a similar opinion concerning the Gentiles. Those who act pleasing to God, while not "being" Christian are yet in some sense "in" Christ. In his *Dialogue with Trypho* (ca. 155-160 A.D.), who may have been a fictional Jew, Justin pursues the same kind of thinking that is found in the *Apologia*:

*...Each should plainly be saved by his own righteousness, [...] they also who conducted their lives in accordance with the Law of Moses should equally be saved. [...] Since they who did the things that universally, and naturally, and eternally, are good, are pleasing to God, so shall they also be saved by means of this Christ of ours, in the resurrection equally with the righteous who were before them, Noah and Enoch and Jacob, and many others there may be; together with those who recognize this Christ as the Son of God.*<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> MICHAEL J. MAZZA, "Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus: Father Feeney Makes a Comeback," in *Fidelity*, Boston: Fidelity Press, December 1994.

<sup>20</sup> JUSTIN MARTYR, *Apologia prima*, Ch. 46: "Christum primogenitum Dei esse ac rationem illam cujus omne hominum genus particeps erat dedimus, ut supra declaravimus. **Et qui cum ratione vixerunt, Christiani sunt, etiamsi athei existimati sint**; quales apud Graecos fuere Socrates et Heraclitus; apud barbaros autem Abraham, Ananias, Azarias, Misael et Elias, ac multi alii quorum actionibus aut nominibus recensendis, quia longum id esse scimus, nunc supersedemus." ("Ejusdem Justiniani Apologia Prima pro Christianis ad Antoninum Pium," in *S. Justiniani Philosophi et Martyris*, n. 46, col. 398.) See English translation in *Fathers of the Church, Catholic Edition* (<https://www.ecatholic2000.com/fathers/untitled-45.shtml>).

<sup>21</sup> JUSTIN MARTYR, *Dialogue with Trypho*, XLIV.4 – XLV.4, in A. LUKYN WILLIAMS, trans., *Justin Martyr, The Dialogue with Trypho*, London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1930, p. 89.

In his oft-cited work *Adversus Haereses* (ca. 180), St. Irenaeus of Lyon also devoted Book IV, Chapter XXII<sup>22</sup> of this work to show that “Christ did not come for the sake of the men of **one age only**, but **for all** who, living righteously and piously, had believed upon Him; and for those, too, who shall believe.” Though likewise addressing the heretics, particularly the gnostics, St. Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 120-202 A.D.) developed a more all-embracing idea of God’s providence to extend its reach not only to believers but also to those “who shall believe”, not only to those of a particular age and generation but, in fact, to every generation that is drawn to Christ. He wrote:

*For it was not merely for those who believed on Him in the time of Tiberius Cæsar that Christ came, nor did the Father exercise His providence for the men only who are now alive, but **for all men altogether**, who from the beginning, according to their capacity, in their generation have both feared and loved God, and practised justice and piety towards their neighbours, and have earnestly desired to see Christ, and to hear His voice.*<sup>23</sup>

By “all men together”, St. Irenaeus seemed to have included those who are yet to come to the faith and those who are already living righteously and piously as the title of the present chapter of his work suggests.

A more inclusive membership in the Church—that is also what one finds in the funeral oration<sup>24</sup> of St. Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 330-389 A.D.) on the occasion of the death of his father (also named Gregory) in 374 A.D. Referring to him before his conversion to Christianity, St. Gregory eulogized:

*Even before he was of our fold, he was ours. His character made him one of us. For, as many of our own are not with us, whose life alienates them from the common body, so, many of those without are on our side, whose character anticipates their faith, and need only the name of that which indeed they possess. My father was one of these, an alien shoot, but inclined by his life towards us.*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See PHILIP SCHAFF, “Irenæus, Introductory Note to Irenæus, Against Heresies,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenæus*, Vol. 1: Ante-Nicene Fathers, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2019, “Adversus Haereses,” Book IV, Chapter XXII, p. 825.

<sup>23</sup> PHILIP SCHAFF, “Irenæus, Introductory Note to Irenæus, Against Heresies,” *Adversus Haereses*, Book IV, Chapter XXII, p. 826

<sup>24</sup> ST. GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *Oratio XVIII. Funeral Oration on His Father, in the Presence of S. Basil* (Λογος ΙΗ'. Ἐπιτάφιος εἰς τὸν πατέρα, παρόντος Βασιλείου). <https://catholiclibrary.org/library/view?docId=Synchronized-EN/npnf.000364.SaintGregoryNazianzen.OntheDeathofHisFather.html;chunk.id=00000003>

<sup>25</sup> ST. GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *Oratio XVIII*, n. 6: “Ἐκεῖνος καὶ πρὸ τῆς ἡμετέρας αὐλῆς ἦν ἡμέτερος: εἰσεποίει γὰρ αὐτὸν ἡμῖν ὁ τρόπος. Ὡσπερ γὰρ πολλοὶ τῶν ἡμετέρων οὐ μεθ' ἡμῶν εἰσιν, οὓς ὁ βίος ἀλλοτριῶι τοῦ κοινοῦ σώματος: οὕτω πολλοὶ τῶν ἔξωθεν πρὸς ἡμῶν, ὅσοι τῷ τρόπῳ τὴν πίστιν φθάνουσι, καὶ δέονται τοῦ ὀνόματος, τὸ ἔργον ἔχοντες. Τούτων καὶ ὁ ἐμὸς ἦν πατήρ, πτόρθος ἀλλότριος, τῷ βίῳ πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἐπικλίνων.”



The elder Gregory, whom the above oration was about, belonged from the beginning to the monotheistic sect known as *Hypsistarians*.<sup>26</sup> He was converted to the Christian faith after having been influenced by his Christian wife. For St. Gregory, his father, despite his non-Christian provenance, belonged to the fold (the *common body*, the Church) even before his conversion and that was because his character made him so, a character which St. Gregory saw as anticipating his Christian faith.

If St. Gregory was less restrictive and more welcoming in disposition towards his father as a Hypsistarian before his conversion, St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430)<sup>27</sup> was not so in dealing with so many heresies during his time. As Bishop of Hippo Regius in Numidia, Roman North Africa (between 396-430), a Manichaeist and Neo-platonist himself before his conversion to Christianity, St. Augustine had to counter the teachings of Christians who turned to Manichaeism, his religion of origin, Premillennialism, Pelagianism, Arianism, and Donatism.

Addressing in an impromptu sermon on September 18, 418, to the citizens of Caesarea, where the Donatists were gaining adherents, St. Augustine expounded his belief that salvation could be found only in the Catholic Church. In his *Sermo ad Caesariensis ecclesiae plebem*, he minced no words saying:

*No man can find salvation except in the Catholic Church. Outside the Catholic Church one can have everything except salvation. One can have honor, one can have the sacraments, one can sing alleluia, one can answer amen, one can have faith in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and preach it too, but never can one find salvation except in the Catholic Church.*<sup>28</sup>

It is easy to label St. Augustine in this text as restrictive and rigoristic as indeed he is in this instance. But then again this text should not be taken in isolation. Its context explains why St. Augustine had to speak in such language. He was addressing Christians, and Catholics at that, turned heretics and schismatics, who had no reason to be ignorant and whose leaving the Catholic Church for him was not without blame. These are not the people who knew

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<sup>26</sup> The Hypsistarians were worshippers of the Hypsistos (“Υψιστος, the “Most High” God). This was how St. Gregory described the hypsistarians: “For, on the one side, they reject idols and sacrifices, but reverence fire and lights; on the other, they observe the Sabbath and petty regulations as to certain meats, but despise circumcision. These lowly men call themselves Hypsistarii, and the Almighty is, so they say, the only object of their worship.” (Oratio XVIII, n. 5 - *supra*)

<sup>27</sup> See PAUL-AUGUSTIN DEPROOST, “‘Au commencement’: Entre mémoire et désir, la réponse augustinienne à l’énigme du temps,” in *Revue théologique de Louvain* 41/3 (2010), pp. 313-344; MAUREEN A. TILLEY, “Redefining Donatism, Moving Forward,” in *Augustinian Studies* 42/1 (2011), pp. 21-32.

<sup>28</sup> ST. AUGUSTINE, “*Sermo ad Caesariensis ecclesiae plebem*” (Sancti Aurelii Augustini Scripta contra Donatistas, Opera Sectio 7, Pars 3, Liber de unico baptismo Breviculus collationis com Donatistis Contra partem Donati post gesta, Sermo ad Caesariensis ecclesiae plebem Gesta cum emerito Donatistarum episco): “Extra Ecclesiam catholicam totum potest praeter salutem. Potest habere honorem, potest habere Sacramenta, potest cantare Alleluia, potest respondere Amen, potest Evangelium tenere, potest in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus sancti fidem habere et praedicare: sed nusquam nisi in Ecclesia catholica salutem poterit invenire.” ([https://www.augustinus.it/latino/discorso\\_cesarea/index.htm](https://www.augustinus.it/latino/discorso_cesarea/index.htm)).

nothing of Christ and the Church *through no fault of their own*. Led by Donatus Magnus (d. 355), a Berber Christian bishop of Carthage, the Donatists taught that only those who led a blameless life belonged in the Church or could administer the sacraments,<sup>29</sup> an idea that St. Augustine rejected. In any case, it was these Donatists who St. Augustine wanted to compel to come back to the Catholic Church.<sup>30</sup>

Much earlier, however, St. Augustine sounded very differently. In his *De Natura et Gratia contra Pelagium, ad Timasium et Iacobum* (415), he taught that “faith in Christ is not necessary to salvation, if a man without it can lead a righteous life.”<sup>31</sup> He was, of course, referring in this text to those individuals who *through no fault of their own* were unaware of Christ and who may not have heard about the Church so that to have faith in him could never have become possible:

*God is not so unjust as to defraud righteous persons of the reward of righteousness, because there has not been announced to them the mystery of Christ’s divinity and humanity, which was manifested in the flesh. (1 Tim 3, 16) For how could they believe what they had not heard of; or how could they hear without a preacher? (Rom 10, 14) For faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.*<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to his strict judgment against the Donatists, St. Augustine’s tone dramatically shifts when speaking of people whose ignorance about Christ is inculpable because of ignorance they are unable to overcome, *i.e.*, through no fault of their own. In other words, ignorance is not always blameworthy. Accordingly, one can still achieve salvation if one sincerely seeks God and lives a life of righteousness.

This is to suggest that God’s grace can reach those who had not been exposed to the Gospel and the Christian message due to circumstances beyond their knowledge and control. Ultimately then, what shaped St. Augustine’s judgment was anchored on whether the absence of faith was deliberate and willful or blameless as it is innocently incurred. Still, blameless or not, St. Augustine insists that one needs to lead a righteous life to gain access to salvation.

On the whole, an examination of the above patristic writings demonstrated that already from the beginning of Christianity, there were two varying approaches to the issue of Church membership and thus also two ways of looking at the way man gains access to salvation.

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<sup>29</sup> F.L. CROSS, “Donatism,” *The Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> See ST. AUGUSTINE, *Letter to Vincentius*, Letter 93 in Migne, PL, Vol. 33, Cols. 323 - 325, 329 - 330.

<sup>31</sup> ST. AUGUSTINE, *De Natura et Gratia contra Pelagium, ad Timasium et Iacobum*, Ch. II: “Fides in Christum non esset ad salutem necessaria, si homo sine illa posset iuste vivere.”

<sup>32</sup> ST. AUGUSTINE, *De Natura et Gratia*, Ch. II: “Non enim iniustus Deus, qui iustos fraudet mercede iustitiae, si eis non est annuntiatum sacramentum divinitatis et humanitatis Christi, quod manifestatum est in carne. Quomodo enim crederent quod non audierunt? aut quomodo audirent sine praedicante? Fides enim ex auditu, sicut scriptum est, auditus autem per verbum Christi.”

When the focus was on Jesus, and his role in the work of salvation, the approach tended to be more *exclusive* but when the focus was on the understanding of *ecclesia* and membership therein and what it meant to be a Christian, the approach tended to be more *inclusive*.

However different these approaches might be, they are not contradictory, instead they are complementary – they are only different in perspective. There is a way of harmonizing these two approaches. Indeed, Christ is the lone savior and mediator and his redemptive mediation is realized only in the Church. However, from another point of view, one may not be a member of his Church, one may not have been baptized in the Christian faith, one may not formally belong to the Church. But if one lives in righteousness (according to the law), even without being aware of it, then it might be said that access to Christ's saving grace is still possibly open to him.

### **Nulla Salus Doctrine in Papal and Magisterial Statements**

*From the Fourth Lateran Council to Pius XII*

Examining papal and magisterial pronouncements on the issue, the same pattern might be observed. There are statements which tend to be *exclusive*, but there are also pronouncements that tend to be *inclusive*.

The *Fourth Lateran Council* (1215), convoked by Pope Innocent III in April 1213 and which actually took place in November 1215, bears mentioning first. Producing 71 canons or constitutions, the Council addressed a number of issues, among them the treatment of Jews and heretics. In the first constitution itself, which was on the Confession of Faith, the Council declared: “There is indeed *one universal church* of the faithful, *outside of which nobody at all is saved*, in which Jesus Christ is both priest and sacrifice.”<sup>33</sup> Though the Council did not elaborate much on this statement, its prescriptive measures against heretics (Canon 3) and the Jews (Canon 70) account for its restrictive stance.

Pope Boniface VIII (ca. 1230 – 1303), in his Bull *Unam Sanctam* (1302), expressed the same view. According to Pope Boniface, “The true faith compels us to believe that there is one holy Catholic Apostolic Church, and this we firmly believe and plainly confess. And *outside of her there is no salvation* or remission of sins...”<sup>34</sup> At the same time, he stressed that the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, was the supreme head of the Church. Since it was necessary to belong to the Church to attain eternal salvation, “...*submission on the part of every man to the bishop of Rome is altogether necessary for his salvation.*” With these statements, Boniface aimed at justifying the

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<sup>33</sup> FOURTH LATERAN COUNCIL (1215), *Constitutions*, n. 1. See NORMAN P. TANNER, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. 1. Georgetown University Press, 2016 (<https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum12-2.htm#cons>).

<sup>34</sup> See <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/bon08/b8unam.htm>. Cf. JOHANN PETER KIRSCH, “*Unam Sanctam*”, in CHARLES HERBERMANN, ed., *Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 15, New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1913.

superiority of papal authority to that of the king of France, Philip IV (r. 1285-1314) at that time, whose decision to tax the clergy Pope Boniface asked the clergy to defy.

In another papal bull, *Cantate Domino* (1441), issued at the conclusion of the *Council of Florence* (1431-1441), Pope Eugene IV singled out the pagans, the Jews, the heretics and schismatics as excluded from eternal life because they remained outside the Church. If these people were to be saved, they ought to join and return to the Catholic Church. Pope Eugene IV insisted that no amount of good works, like giving alms, and the shedding of blood for Christ would provide one access to salvation unless he *remained* (thus addressed to Christians) in the bosom and unity of the Catholic Church:

*...nullos extra ecclesiam catholicam existentes, non solum paganos, sed nec iudeos aut hereticos atque scismaticos eterne vite fieri posse participes, sed in ignem eternum ituros, qui paratus est dyabolo et angelis eius (Mt 25, 41) ... nisi ante finem vite eidem fuerint aggregati... neminem que quantascunque elemosinas fecerit, et si pro Christi nomine sanguinem effuderit, posse salvari, nisi in catholice ecclesie gremio et unitate permanserit.*<sup>35</sup>

The mention of heretics and schismatics always invited the stern warning of the Church. At the time the Council of Florence was convoked, the schism between East and West wounded the Church, a wound that the Council tried to heal. Pope Eugene IV for his part sought to bring back those who separated from the Church and to achieve that, he had to tell them that salvation was possible only within the confines of the Church. For Pope Eugene IV, this should have made sense especially to those who had already been part of the Church, the heretics and schismatics (former Christians), who for that reason alone should have known better.

Centuries later, guarding the Church against the dangers of the popular philosophies of the time, Pope Pius IX (1792-1878) issued on 9 November 1846 the encyclical *Qui pluribus* (On Faith and Religion). In this encyclical, Pius IX made reference, for the first time in a magisterial pronouncement, to what is now called *religious indifferentism* (*l'indifferenza della Religione*),<sup>36</sup> according to which *"it makes no difference to which religion one belongs"* because *"men can gain eternal salvation by the practice of any religion"* anyway. This theory, which Pius IX rejected as repugnant even under the light of natural reason removes all distinction between virtue and vice, truth and error, honorable and vile action.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> <https://www.vatican.va/content/eugenius-iv/la/documents/bulla-cantate-domino-4-febr-1442.html> (EUGENIUS IV, *Cantate Domino, Bulla Unionis Coptorum Aethiopumque*, 4 febrarii 1442 (1441 stilo Florent.), Conc. (Oecum. XVII) Florentinum, 26 Febr. 1439 - Aug. 1445, Sessio XI).

<sup>36</sup> PIUS IX, *Qui pluribus* (1846), n. 15.

<sup>37</sup> The original text read (*Qui pluribus*, n. 15): *"Altrettanto diciamo di quel sistema che ripugna allo stesso lume della ragione naturale, che è l'indifferenza della Religione, con il quale costoro, tolta ogni distinzione fra virtù e vizio, fra verità ed errore, fra onestà e turpitudine, insegnano che qualsivoglia religione sia ugualmente buona per conseguire la salute eterna..."* (<https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-ix/it/documents/enciclica-qui-pluribus-9-novembre-1846.html>) See also Pius IX, *The Syllabus Of Errors* (1864), n. 16: *"Man may, in the observance of any religion whatever, find the way of eternal salvation, and arrive at eternal salvation."*

Pius IX, however, is hardly the exclusivist that *Qui pluribus* might picture him to be. In his allocution *Singulari quadem* on 9 December 1854, while insisting that salvation is possible only within the Catholic Church and not outside it, Pius IX nevertheless offered a much more balanced view:

... 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 an 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" (1Jn 3,2), we shall understand perfectly by how close and beautiful a bond divine mercy and justice are united...<sup>38</sup>

This is the first time that a more explicitly *inclusive* way of thinking that resonates with the message of St. Paul in his letter to the Romans<sup>39</sup> (*supra*), found its way into a magisterial statement. What is especially significant about this pronouncement is that it is immediately juxtaposed with the usual exclusive judgment found in most papal statements examined so far. Such juxtaposition indicates that both exclusivity and inclusivity as regards membership in the Church and the attainment of salvation, though seemingly contrary to each other, are actually complementary and not opposed to each other. For the Christian, who has become a member of the Church and who has come to know who Jesus is as savior and redeemer, membership in his Church is an absolute necessity for salvation (exclusivity). But for the non-Christian, who Pius IX described as "*laboring in ignorance of the true religion*", whose ignorance is invincible and who therefore has not known Jesus Christ all his life through no fault of his own, is "*not stained by any guilt in this matter in the eyes of God.*" Such an ignorant non-believer is, in the words of St. Justin Martyr, while not "being" Christian is yet in some sense *in* Christ or what St. Gregory of Nazianzen regards as "belonging to the fold" (inclusivity).

In light of all this, Pius IX's *Qui pluribus* might be considered a turning point in the interpretation of the *nulla salus* doctrine and how this doctrine developed in subsequent magisterial pronouncements.

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<sup>38</sup> DENZINGER SCHÖNMETZER, *Enchiridion Symbolorum in lingua latina, Index Enchiridion Symbolorum*, n. 1647, (Biblioteca di Alessandria, 1957), p. 271: "Tenendum quippe ex fide est, *extra apostolicam Romanam Ecclesiam salvum fieri neminem posse*, hanc *esse unicam salutis arcam*, hanc qui non fuerit ingressus, diluvio periturum; sed tamen pro certo pariter habendum est, *qui verae religionis ignorantia laborent, si ea sit invincibilis, nulla ipsos obstringi huiusce rei culpa ante oculos Domini.* Nunc vero quis tantum sibi arroget, ut huiusmodi ignorantiae designare limites queat iuxta populorum, regionum, ingeniorum aliarumque rerum tam multarum rationem et varietatem? Enimvero cum soluti corporeis hisce vinculis videbimus Deum sicuti est (1 Io 3, 2), intelligemus profecto, quam arcto pulchroque nexu miseratio ac iustitia divina copulentur..." (<https://www.clerus.org/bibliaclerusonline/en/dxl.htm>).

<sup>39</sup> ROMANS 2, 14-16.

Consistent with what he taught in *Qui pluribus*, Pius IX expressed the same balanced view in his 1863 encyclical *Quanto Conficiamur Moerore*. First, Pius IX condemns as opposed to Catholic teaching the belief that “it is possible to arrive at eternal salvation although living in error and alienated from the true faith and Catholic unity.” Referring, however, to the invincibly ignorant non-believer, he wrote:

*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 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.*<sup>40</sup>

Clearly, Pius IX maintained that eternal salvation is unattainable for one who is alienated from the Catholic Church. If, however, through no fault of his own he is ignorant of the true faith he can still achieve salvation because God makes this possible just the same [implicitly through the mediation of Christ and his Church] inasmuch as one does not deserve punishment who has not the guilt of deliberate sin. Invincible ignorance may exclude the non-believer from membership in the Church, but it does not necessarily exclude him from the great goodness and mercy of God.

Even after having said this, Pius IX calls to mind a constant teaching of the Church:

*Also well known is the Catholic teaching that no one can be saved outside 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.”<sup>41</sup> The words of Christ are clear enough: “If he refuses to listen even to the Church, let him be to you a Gentile and a tax collector;” (Mt 15, 17) “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) “He who does not believe will be condemned;” (Mk 16, 16) “He who does not believe is already condemned;” (Jn 3, 18) “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.” (Lk 11, 23) The Apostle Paul says that such persons are*

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<sup>40</sup> Pius IX, *Quanto Conficiamur Moerore* (1863), n. 7 in Denz. 1677: Notum Nobis vobisque est, eos, qui **invincibili** circa sanctissimam **nostram religionem ignorantia** laborant, quique naturalem legem eiusque praecepta in omnium cordibus a Deo insculpta sedulo servant ac Deo oboedire parati, honestam rectamque vitam agunt, posse, divinae lucis et gratiae operante virtute, aeternam consequi vitam, cum Deus, qui omnium mentes, animos, cogitationes habitusque plane intuetur, scrutatur et noscit, pro summa sua bonitate et clementia minime patiat, quempiam aeternis puniri suppliciis, qui voluntariae culpae reatum non habeat.” See also Pius IX, *The Syllabus Of Errors* (1864), n. 17: “Good hope at least is to be entertained of the eternal salvation of all those who are not at all in the true Church of Christ.”

<sup>41</sup> *Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in its letter to Pope Leo.*

*“perverted and self-condemned;” (Tit 3, 11) the Prince of the Apostles calls them “false teachers . . . who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master. . . bringing upon themselves swift destruction.” (2 Pt 2, 1)*<sup>42</sup>

Once again, the harsh words here are directed to those who are supposed to know better, yet who are adamant and intransigent in their opposition to the Church – thus, whose exclusion from the Church is deliberately culpable.

Pope St. Pius X (1835-1914), Pius IX’s successor, curiously had very little to say about the subject. In his encyclical *Iucunda Sane* (1904) on Pope Gregory the Great’s death centenary, he simply reiterated what his predecessor already said: *“Yet at the same time We cannot but remind all, great and small, as Pope St. Gregory did, of the absolute necessity of having recourse to this Church in order to have eternal salvation...”*<sup>43</sup> Pius X was known for vigorously opposing modernism, particularly its interpretations of Catholic doctrine. Concerned about combating the errors of his time, he was then addressing not people who were invincibly ignorant but people who were rather educated and who knew what Christianity was all about. It is not surprising why he adopted St. Gregory’s rigoristic thinking.

Pius XI (1857-1939), in his encyclical on religious unity, *Mortalium Animos*, promulgated in 1928, expressed a more exclusivist view. Such was the case because he rejected the *“false opinion which considers all religion to be more or less good and praiseworthy.”*<sup>44</sup> Explaining this idea with more vigor he continued:

*Not only are those who hold this opinion in error and deceived, but also in distorting the idea of true religion they reject it, and little by little, turn aside to naturalism and atheism, as it is called; from which it clearly follows that one who supports those who hold these theories and attempt to realize them, is altogether abandoning the divinely revealed religion.*<sup>45</sup>

Echoing Lactantius’ (ca. 250-325) lament, Pius XI further stressed:<sup>46</sup>

*The Catholic Church is alone in keeping the true worship. This is the fount of truth, this the house of Faith, this the temple of God: if any man enter not here, or if any man go forth from it, he is a stranger to the hope of life and salvation. Let none delude himself with obstinate wrangling. For life and salvation are here concerned, which will be lost and entirely destroyed, unless their interests are carefully and assiduously kept in mind.*<sup>47</sup>

Pius XI of course knew Lactantius’ background. He was a Christian convert who wrote many treatises not only to demonstrate the errors of pagan religion and philosophy but also to

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<sup>42</sup> PIUS IX, *Quanto Conficiamur Moerore* (1863), n. 8.

<sup>43</sup> PIUS X, *Iucunda Sane* (1904), n. 9.

<sup>44</sup> PIUS XI, *Mortalium Animos*, n. 2.

<sup>45</sup> PIUS XI, *Mortalium Animos*, n. 2.

<sup>46</sup> LACTANTIUS, *Divinarum Institutionum*, Libri IV, 30. 11-12 (addressed to Lactantius’ brother Pentadius).

<sup>47</sup> PIUS XI, *Mortalium Animos* (1928), n. 11.

present the positive doctrines of Christianity. He addressed his writings both to educated pagans and Christians alike. Pius XI, on the other hand, was also concerned with those who separated themselves from the Church, and whom he tried winning back into the fold:

*Let, therefore, the separated children draw nigh to the Apostolic See, set up in the City which Peter and Paul, the Princes of the Apostles, consecrated by their blood; to that See, We repeat, which is "the root and womb whence the Church of God springs."<sup>48</sup>*

Pope Pius XII (1876-1958), like Pius IX, paid particular attention to those who did not belong to the Church. In his encyclical *Mystici Corporis* (1949), Pius XII recognized them as having a certain relationship with the Church but such an imperfect state does not allow them to fully enjoy the blessings bestowed only to members of the Catholic Church:

*[...] from the very beginning of Our Pontificate, We have committed to the protection and guidance of heaven those who do not belong to the visible Body of the Catholic Church, solemnly declaring that after the example of the Good Shepherd We desire nothing more ardently than that they may have life and have it more abundantly. [...] 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.<sup>49</sup> 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 Body of Jesus Christ [...] We wait for them with open and outstretched arms to come not to a stranger's house, but to their own, their father's home.<sup>50</sup>*

What is peculiar to this pronouncement is its formulation, which makes explicit Pius XII's view that although non-believers, by their unconscious desire and longing, may be considered as having a certain relationship with the Church (*that is, based on an inclusive understanding of the Church*), they may still be in a state in which they cannot be sure of their salvation, thus the need for them to enter into Catholic unity and be part of the one, organic Body of Jesus Christ, the Church (*that is, based on an exclusive understanding of salvation*).

Here then, Pius XII differentiates those who are actually incorporated into the Church as members, from those who are united to the Church only by desire and though different in this way, Pius XII recognized that together they make up the Mystical Body of Christ here on earth: "*Acutally, only those are to be included as members of the Church who have been baptized and profess the true faith, and who have not been so unfortunate as to separate themselves from the unity of the Body, or been excluded by legitimate authority for grave faults committed.*"<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Pius XI, *Mortalium Animos* (1928), n. 12.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Pius IX, *Iam Vos Omnes*, 13 Sept. 1868: Act. Conc. Vat., C.L.VII, 10 (Pius XII's own reference).

<sup>50</sup> Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis* (1943), n. 13.

<sup>51</sup> Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, n. 22.



*From Suprema haec sacra to Dominus Iesus*

It turned out that Pius XII's message in *Mystici Corporis* would become a point of reference for another document, this time coming from the Holy Office<sup>52</sup> in 1949, the Protocol *Suprema haec sacra*.<sup>53</sup> The importance of this document seemed not to have been fully appreciated coming perhaps as it did, not *directly* from the Pope himself but rather only from the Holy Office. Its contribution, however, to the discussions on the proper understanding of the *nulla salus* doctrine is undeniably significant. The document is actually a reaction to what is now known in history as the "Boston Heresy" whose main proponent, the ex-Jesuit *Fr. Leonard J. Feeney*, held the rigoristic view that outside the Church there is no salvation (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*), that is, in an *absolute sense*.

For Feeney, this has serious consequences. Pushed to the extreme, it means that all who did not formally enter the Church would go to hell. The unbaptized babies go to hell. All adults who did not formally enter the Church - get their names on a parish register - would also go to hell, even if they never had a chance to hear there was a Church.<sup>54</sup> Because of this belief, Feeney even went to the extent of accusing Pius IX of the heresy of *Pelagianism* for having held that God, in regard to infants, would not "suffer anyone to be punished with eternal torment who has not the guilt of deliberate sin" (*supra*).<sup>55</sup>

In response to such extreme rigorism, the Holy Office issued on 8 August 1949 the Protocol *Suprema haec sacra* that was addressed to Boston's Archbishop, *Richard James Cardinal Cushing*, under whose jurisdiction Feeney's St. Benedict Center was operating. The Holy Office reaffirmed the Church's constant infallible teaching that "there is no salvation outside the Church." It cautioned, however, that this dogma ought to be understood "in that sense which the Church herself understands it," thus, ruling out the legitimacy of any private interpretation of Church doctrine.

With that said, the Holy Office set forth how precisely this particular dogma is to be interpreted as the Church taught it. Its starting point is the command of Christ that we be incorporated to the Church, his mystical body, by baptism and that we remain united to him

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<sup>52</sup> The *Holy Office* was founded in 1542 by Pope Paul III, whose function was to defend Catholic teaching on faith and morals, particularly by judging heresy and other offenses related to heresy. In 1908, it was named the *Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office*. In 1965, it became the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* (CDF), and most recently in 2022, it has come to be called the *Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith*. See CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *To Promote and Safeguard The Faith: From the Holy Office to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, 2015.

<sup>53</sup> HOLY OFFICE, *Suprema haec sacra*, Ex Aedibus S. Officii, die 8.a augusti 1949, Protoc. Num. 122/49. For the Latin and English texts, see "Analecta," in *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, Vol. CXXII No. 4 (October, 1952), pp. 307-315.

<sup>54</sup> WILLIAM MOST, *Tragic Errors of Leonard Feeney* (See <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/tragic-errors-of-leonard-feeney-12314>); GEORGE B. PEPPER, *The Boston Heresy Case in View of the Secularization of Religion*, Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988.

<sup>55</sup> See WILLIAM MOST, *Tragic Errors of Leonard Feeney*.

and his vicar through whom he governs the Church. From this premise, the Holy Office asserts:

*Therefore, no one will be saved who, knowing the Church to have been divinely established by Christ, nevertheless refuses to submit to the Church or withholds obedience from the Roman Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ on earth. Not only did the Savior command that all nations should enter the Church, but He also decreed the Church to be a means of salvation without which no one can enter the kingdom of eternal glory.*

Careful reading of this text indicates the circumstance when and why salvation is not possible outside the Church, that is, if one were to *adventently refuse* to be part of the Church and to submit to its visible head, the Roman Pontiff, despite *knowing* that the Church has been divinely established by Christ precisely as the means of salvation. There is an element of culpability because despite the knowledge obtained about the divine origin of the Church there is a deliberate refusal to accept it and be a part thereof. The Holy Office, however, acknowledges that there are times when “*the effects necessary for one to be saved*” by the infinite mercy of God, may also be “*obtained in certain circumstances when those helps are used only in desire and longing.*” Such is the basis for the Holy Office to conclude:

*Therefore, that one may obtain eternal salvation, it is not always required that he be incorporated into the Church actually as a member, but it is necessary that at least he be united to her by desire and longing. However, this desire need not always be explicit, as it is in catechumens; but when a person is involved in invincible ignorance God accepts also an implicit desire, so called because it is included in that good disposition of soul whereby a person wishes his will to be conformed to the will of God.*

For the Holy Office, this is not something new. It claims that this was what Pius XII precisely taught in *Mystici Corporis*,<sup>56</sup> where the Pope “*distinguishes between those who are actually incorporated into the Church as members, and those who are united to the Church only by desire.*” With this distinction, the Holy Office did not only counter the errors of the Feeneyites, it also laid a firmer ground on which the idea of *ecclesial inclusivity* in magisterial teaching is to be based.

On account of this, the Church historian, Francis Sullivan, saw in *Suprema haec sacra* a significant step in the growth and shift in magisterial teaching, from a more restrictive and exclusive to a broader and more inclusive idea of membership in the Church.<sup>57</sup> Geertjan Zuijdwegt did not quite see it this way, arguing that the theological framework of (now St.) Robert Bellarmine<sup>58</sup> still underlies the Holy Office’s pronouncement as it does *Mystici Corporis*.

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<sup>56</sup> PIUS XII, *Mystici Corporis*, 1943 (AAS, Vol. 35, an. 1943, p. 193 ff.) as cited by *Suprema haec sacra*.

<sup>57</sup> FRANCIS SULLIVAN, *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).

<sup>58</sup> For Robert Bellarmine (1542 - 1621), the Mystical Body of Christ is also the established Church of Christ. Thus membership in the Church is defined as a) being part of a body of people united by the profession of the same Christian faith, b) participation in the sacraments, and c) submission to the authority of lawful

He saw instead this shift as having been initiated and partly accomplished in the discussions/debates that preceded the promulgation of *Lumen Gentium*.<sup>59</sup> Be that as it may, still there is no denying that the Holy Office in *Suprema haec sacra* has in fact opened wider the door of the Church to *non-Christian* adherents. This is not to deny, however, that the real breakthrough in the Church's understanding of the *nulla salus* doctrine can be found in *Lumen Gentium* (1964).

Promulgated by St. Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964, *Lumen Gentium* (LG), particularly in n. 14, confirms past teaching but at the same time presents new insight which, that notwithstanding, is still in continuity with the past. At the outset, the document makes clear that it wishes to address first the *Catholic faithful*,<sup>60</sup> that means to say, people who have been baptized Catholics, who are therefore Christians, who are presupposedly knowledgeable in the Catholic faith, and who therefore have no excuse in not knowing who Christ is, and what it means to be part of his Church.

To these Catholics, LG reiterates what should be a reminder about what to them should be by now a familiar teaching:

*Basing itself upon Sacred Scripture and Tradition, it 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<sup>61</sup> and thereby affirmed also the necessity of the Church, for through baptism as through a door men enter the Church.<sup>62</sup>*

Apart from insisting that the Church is necessary for salvation, such reminder also reiterates the recognition that Christ is the **sole Mediator** and **Savior** (one and unique).<sup>63</sup> Along with

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pastors, particularly the Pope; essentially, one becomes a member by professing the true faith, receiving the sacraments, and remaining in communion with the Church hierarchy. See ROBERT BELLARMINE, "De ecclesia militante," Cap. II, Lib. III, in *Quarta controversia generalis, De conciliis, et ecclesia militante, Quator Libris comprehensae, a R.P. Roberto Bellarmino Politiano, Societatis Iesu* (Sartorius, 1587), p. 184: "... illam unam & veram esse cœtum hominum **eiusdem Christianæ fidei professione, & eorundem Sacramentorum communione colligatum, sub regimine legitimorum pastorum**, ac præcipuè unius Christi in terris Vicarii Romani Pontificis." Also quoted in GEERTJAN ZUIJDWEGT, "Salvation and the Church, Feeney, Fenton and the Making of *Lumen Gentium*," in *Louvain Studies* 37 (2013), pp. 147-178, p. 156, n. 46.

<sup>59</sup> GEERTJAN ZUIJDWEGT, "Salvation and the Church, Feeney, Fenton and the Making of *Lumen Gentium*," in *Louvain Studies* 37 (2013), pp. 147-178.

<sup>60</sup> LUMEN GENTIUM, n. 14: "Ad **fideles** ergo **catholicos** imprimis Sancta Synodus animum vertit."

<sup>61</sup> Cf. MARK 16, 16; JOHN 3, 5.

<sup>62</sup> LUMEN GENTIUM, n. 14: "Docet autem, Sacra Scriptura et Traditione innixa, Ecclesiam hanc peregrinantem necessariam esse ad salutem. Unus enim Christus est Mediator ac via salutis, qui in Corpore suo, quod est Ecclesia, praesens nobis fit; Ipse autem necessitatem fidei et baptismi expressis verbis inculcando (cf. Mc 16,16; Io 3,5), necessitatem Ecclesiae, in quam homines per baptismum tamquam per ianuam intrant, simul confirmavit."

<sup>63</sup> See also LUMEN GENTIUM, n. 8: "**Unicus Mediator** Christus Ecclesiam suam sanctam, fidei, spei et caritatis communitatem his in terris ut compaginem visibilem constituit et indesinenter sustentat(9), qua veritatem et gratiam ad omnes diffundit."

such reminder LG issues a warning, reminiscent of patristic and magisterial statements in the past when addressing heretics and schismatics: *“Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved.”*<sup>64</sup>

For Catholics then, to say the least, to whom the reminder and warning are directly addressed, the Church as it exists visibly on earth is necessary for salvation, in the same way that Christ himself affirmed the necessity of faith and baptism. LG, however, refines who they are that comprise the body of the Church:

*They are fully incorporated (plene incorporantur) 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 (iunguntur) 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.*<sup>65</sup>

Here, LG speaks of *full incorporation* in the society of the Church which consists in *a)* the [invisible] possession of the Spirit of Christ, *b)* the [visible] bonds of the profession of faith (*vinculis nempe professionis fidei*), *c)* the sacraments (*sacramentorum*) and *d)* ecclesiastical government and communion (*ecclesiastici regiminis ac communionis*). One cannot speak of full incorporation in the Church if any of these components is wanting.

Moreover, LG warns that it is not enough to be part of the body of the Church and remain in the bosom of the Church only in a “bodily” manner. One must also persevere in charity and be a part of the Church “in his heart”. Otherwise, one loses access to salvation.<sup>66</sup>

All this may still sound restrictive but just as immediately, LG softens such tone when it says that *“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.”*<sup>67</sup> Obviously, LG is referring here to other Christians (other than Catholics), who, though not completely in union with the Holy

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<sup>64</sup> LUMEN GENTIUM, n. 14: “Quare illi homines salvari non possent, qui Ecclesiam Catholicam a Deo per Iesum Christum ut necessariam esse conditam non ignorantes, tamen vel in eam intrare, vel in eadem perseverare noluerint.”

<sup>65</sup> LUMEN GENTIUM, n. 14: “Illi plene Ecclesiae societati incorporantur, qui Spiritum Christi habentes, integram eius ordinationem omniaque media salutis in ea instituta accipiunt, et in eiusdem compage visibili cum Christo, eam per Summum Pontificem atque Episcopos regente, iunguntur, vinculis nempe professionis fidei, sacramentorum et ecclesiastici regiminis ac communionis.”

<sup>66</sup> Lumen Gentium, n. 14: “Non salvatur tamen, licet Ecclesiae incorporetur, qui in caritate non perseverans, in Ecclesiae sinu "corpore" quidem, sed non "corde" remanet. Memores autem sint omnes Ecclesiae filii condicionem suam eximiam non propriis meritis, sed peculiari gratiae Christi esse adscribendam; cui si cogitatione, verbo et opere non respondent, nedum salventur, severius iudicabuntur.”

<sup>67</sup> LG, n. 15: “Cum illis qui, baptizati, christiano nomine decorantur, integram autem fidem non profitentur vel unitatem communionis sub Successore Petri non servant, Ecclesia semetipsam novit plures ob rationes coniunctam.”

See are nevertheless linked (*coniunctam*) with the Church. LG details why they are somehow linked with the Church, that is because: *a*) they honor Sacred Scripture, *b*) they believe in God the Father Almighty and in Christ, the Son of God and Saviour, *c*) they are consecrated by baptism, *d*) accept other sacraments, *e*) they cultivate devotion toward the Virgin Mother of God, *f*) they are joined (*coniunguntur*) with the Catholics in the Holy Spirit, and *g*) some of them have been strengthened to the extent of the shedding of their blood.<sup>68</sup>

The basis of that inclusiveness is the fact that “Christ, having been lifted up from the earth, has drawn *all* to Himself (cf. Jn 12,32). Rising from the dead (cf. Rom. 6, 9). He sent His life-giving Spirit upon His disciples and through Him has established His Body which is the Church as the *universal sacrament of salvation*.”<sup>69</sup> So that:

*Until the Lord shall come in His majesty, and all the angels with Him (cf. Mt. 25,31) and death being destroyed, all things are subject to Him (cf. 1 Cor. 15,26-27) some of His disciples are exiles on earth, some having died are purified, and others are in glory beholding “clearly God Himself triune and one, as He is”;<sup>70</sup> but all in various ways and degrees are in communion in the same charity of God and neighbor and all sing the same hymn of glory to our God. For all who are in Christ, having His Spirit, form one Church and cleave together in Him (cf. Eph. 4,16).<sup>71</sup>*

The same spirit of openness is extended by LG even to non-Christians: “those who have not yet received the Gospel are *related (ordinantur)* in various ways to the people of God.”<sup>72</sup> Referring to the *Jews* “from whom Christ was born according to the flesh,” LG says that “this people remains most dear to God.” According to LG, the “plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator,” [...] “amongst [whom] are the *Muslims*, who,

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<sup>68</sup> LG, n. 15: “Sunt enim multi, qui sacram Scripturam ut normam credendi et vivendi in honore habent sincerumque zelum religiosum ostendunt, amanter credunt in Deum Patrem omnipotentem et in Christum, Filium Dei Salvatorem(29), baptismo signantur, quo Christo coniunguntur, imo et alia sacramenta in propriis Ecclesiis vel communitatibus ecclesiasticis agnoscunt et recipiunt. Plures inter illos et episcopatu gaudent, Sacram Eucharistiam celebrant necnon pietatem erga Deiparam Virginem fovent(30). Accedit orationum aliorumque beneficiorum spiritualium communitio; imo vera quaedam in Spiritu Sancto coniunctio, quippe qui donis et gratiis etiam in illis sua virtute sanctificante operatur, et quosdam illorum usque ad sanguinis effusionem roboravit.”

<sup>69</sup> LG, n. 48: “Spiritum suum vivificantem in discipulos immisit et per eum Corpus suum quod est Ecclesia ut *universale salutis sacramentum* constituit.”

<sup>70</sup> LG cites the following as sources (supplementary note): “Cfr. S. Cyprianus, Epist. 64, 4: PL 3, 1017. CSEL (Hartcl), III B p. 720. S. Hilarius Pict., In Mt 23, 6: PL 9, 1047. S. Augustinus, passim. S. Cyrillus Alex., Glaph in Gen. 2, 10: PG 69, 110 A.”

<sup>71</sup> LG, n. 49: “Donec ergo Dominus venerit in maiestate sua et omnes Angeli cum eo (cf. Mt 25,31) et, destructa morte, Illi subiecta fuerint omnia (cf. 1Cor 15,26-27), alii e discipulis Eius in terris peregrinantur, alii hac vita functi purificantur, alii vero glorificantur intuentes “clare ipsum Deum trinum et unum, sicuti est”; omnes tamen, gradu quidem modoque diverso, in eadem Dei et proximi caritate communicamus et eundem hymnum gloriae Deo nostro canimus. Universi enim qui Christi sunt, Spiritum Eius habentes, *in unam Ecclesiam coalescunt* et invicem cohaerent in Ipso (cf. Eph 4,16).”

<sup>72</sup> LG, n. 16: “Ii tandem qui Evangelium nondum acceperunt, ad Populum Dei diversis rationibus *ordinantur*.”

professing to hold the faith of Abraham [...] adore the one and merciful God.” LG also acknowledges that “God [is not] far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things, and as Saviour wills that all men be saved.” Echoing past teaching, LG declares that “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.”<sup>73</sup>

Even more broadly, LG states that “Divine Providence does not deny the helps *necessary for salvation* to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God [but] with His grace strive to live a good life.” “Whatever good or truth is found amongst them,” according to LG, “is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel.”<sup>74</sup>

As one can see, gone are the *rigorism of thought* and the *strictly restrictive language* found in past magisterial pronouncements in dealing with non-Catholic Christians and even non-Christians. There is no reference to heretics and schismatics. There is even no mention of *pagans* nor of *non-believers*. Those who do not share the Catholic faith are described in more positive terms. In fact, it is only in addressing Catholics that LG retains some of the *exclusivist* understanding of salvation (*supra*).

This change in tone and language is further corroborated in two other conciliar documents, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (UR) and *Nostra Aetate* (NA). UR was issued by St. Pope Paul VI on the same date of the promulgation of LG on November 21, 1964. Also dubbed as “Decree on Ecumenism”, this document, referring to other Christians who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church as a result of the rifts within the one and only Church of God over the centuries, affirms that “*men who believe in Christ and have been truly baptized are in communion with the Catholic Church even though this communion is imperfect.*”<sup>75</sup> The same document goes on to say that “... *in spite of [the obstacles to full ecclesiastical communion] it remains true that all who have been justified by faith in Baptism are members of Christ's body,*<sup>76</sup> *and have a right to be called Christian, and so are correctly accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church.*”<sup>77</sup> For UR, it is the sacrament of baptism that “*establishes a sacramental bond of unity which links all who have been reborn by it.*”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> LG, n. 16.

<sup>74</sup> LG, n. 16.

<sup>75</sup> UR, n. 3: “Hi enim qui in Christum credunt et baptismum rite receperunt, *in quadam cum Ecclesia catholica communione*, etsi non perfecta, constituuntur.”

<sup>76</sup> Sources cited in UR, n. 3: “Cf. CONC. FLORENTINUM, Sess. VIII (1439), Decretum Exultate Deo: Mansi 31, 1055 A.”

<sup>77</sup> Sources cited in UR, n. 3: “Cf. S. AUGUSTINUS, In Ps. 32, Enarr. 11, 29: PL 36, 299.”

<sup>78</sup> UR, n. 22: “Baptismus igitur *vinculum unitatis sacramentale* constituit vicens inter omnes qui per illum regenerati sunt.”

Consistent with LG's approach (n. 16 *supra*), Vatican II's Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate* (NA), proclaimed by St. Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965, adopts and develops a positive attitude towards people who do not share the Christian faith. NA, for instance, recognizes that other religions also have their own concept of the divinity, "a certain perception of that *hidden power* which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history" which some have come to recognize "as a *Supreme Being*" or "even as a *Father*."<sup>79</sup> In keeping with such positive appreciation, NA avers that:

*The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.*<sup>80</sup>

Reference to this "ray of Truth" seems to be an allusion to Christ, for just as immediately NA cites John 14,6, where Christ identifies himself as "the way, the truth, and the life" who, NA asserts, the Church "ever must proclaim"<sup>81</sup>. This would seem to be an acknowledgement that *somehow*, in whatever way, Christ (the Truth) is at work in other religions.

Thus, considering what LG teaches about what it means to be a Catholic and what constitutes full incorporation into the Church, seen together with what UR and NA teach about the status of other Christians and non-Christians alike, which is but an echoe of LG teaching on the same subject, there is reason to assert that:

*the one Church of Christ, which in the Creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic [...] this Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity.*<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> NA, n. 2: "Iam ab antiquo usque ad tempus hodiernum apud diversas gentes invenitur quaedam perceptio illius *arcanae virtutis*, quae cursui rerum et eventibus vitae humanae praesens est, immo aliquando agnitio *Summi Numinis* vel etiam *Patris*."

<sup>80</sup> NA, n. 2: "Ecclesia catholica nihil eorum, quae in his religionibus *vera* et *sancta* sunt, reicit. Sincera cum observantia considerat illos modos agendi et vivendi, illa praecepta et doctrinas, quae, quamvis ab iis quae ipsa tenet et proponit in multis discrepent, haud raro referunt tamen *radium* illius *Veritatis*, quae illuminat omnes homines."

<sup>81</sup> NA, n. 2: "Annuntiat vero et annuntiare tenetur indesinenter Christum, qui est "via et *veritas* et vita" (Io 14,6)..."

<sup>82</sup> LG, n. 8: "Haec est unica Christi Ecclesia, quam in Symbolo unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam profiteamur [...] Haec Ecclesia, in hoc mundo ut societas constituta et ordinata, *subsistit* in Ecclesia catholica, a successore Petri et Episcopis in eius communione gubernata, licet extra eius compaginem *elementa plura sanctificationis et veritatis inveniantur*, quae ut dona Ecclesiae Christi propria, ad unitatem catholicam impellunt."

It must be noted that LG does not say “the Church of Christ *is (est)* the Catholic Church.” Rather it says that “the Church of Christ *subsists (subsistit)* in the Catholic Church.” Indeed, seen in the light of this finer distinction, LG has every reason to acknowledge that elements of grace and truth can also exist outside of the Church’s visible structure. Which is the same as saying that the fullness of the Church (thus the fullness of salvation) may be found within the Catholic Church, but access to salvation for those outside of it is also a real possibility.

Given the teachings of LG, UR, and NA, Vatican II’s final document *Ad Gentes* (AG), promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965, gives a fitting mandate to the Church founded on what is by now a consistent insistence on the uniqueness of Christ’s saving act of mediation:

*(The) missionary activity (of the Church) derives its reason from the will of God, “who wishes all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, Himself a man, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim. 2, 45), “neither is there salvation in any other” (Acts 4, 12). Therefore, all must be converted to Him, made known by the Church’s preaching, and all must be incorporated into Him by baptism and into the Church which is His body. [...] Therefore those men cannot be saved, who though aware that God, through Jesus Christ founded the Church as something necessary, still do not wish to enter into it, or to persevere in it.”<sup>83</sup>*

Yet despite this, AG also echoes a message of *salvific inclusivity* that is encompassed by Christ’s unique saving action:

*Therefore though God in ways known to Himself can lead those inculpably ignorant of the Gospel to find that faith without which it is impossible to please Him (Heb. 11, 6), yet a necessity lies upon the Church (1 Cor. 9, 16), and at the same time a sacred duty, to preach the Gospel. And hence missionary activity today as always retains its power and necessity.<sup>84</sup>*

Following AG’s line of reasoning, the fulfillment of the Church’s missionary mandate becomes a *necessity*, even a *sacred duty*, if everyone were to come to the knowledge of Christ, the only Savior. Indeed, it is a necessity even if in reality those who are inculpably ignorant of the Gospel may have a way of coming into the faith and thereby in this way be saved as well.

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<sup>83</sup> AD GENTES, n. 7: “Ratio huius missionalis activitatis ex voluntate Dei sumitur, qui «omnes homines vult salvos fieri et ad agnitionem veritatis venire. Unus enim Deus, unus et mediator Dei et hominum, homo Christus Iesus, qui dedit redemptionem semetipsum pro omnibus» (I Tim. 2,4-6), «et non est in alio aliquo salus» (Act. 4,12). Oportet igitur ut ad Eum, per praedicationem Ecclesiae agnitus, omnes convertantur, et Ipsi et Ecclesiae, quae Corpus Eius est, per Baptismum incorporentur. «[...] Quare illi homines salvari non possent, qui Ecclesiam Catholicam a Deo per Iesum Christum ut necessariam esse conditam non ignorantes, tamen vel in eam intrare, vel in eadem perseverare noluerint».” (*Insertions added.*) Cf. LG, n. 14.

<sup>84</sup> AD GENTES, n. 7: “Etsi ergo Deus viis sibi notis homines Evangelium sine eorum culpa ignorantes ad fidem adducere possit, sine qua impossibile est Ipsi placere, Ecclesiae tamen necessitas incumbit, simulque ius sacrum, evangelizandi...”



This is exactly what St. Pope John Paul II teaches in *Redemptoris Missio* (RM), an encyclical on the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate. Given on December 7, 1990, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Ad Gentes*, John Paul II speaks of the *universality of salvation*. To say that salvation is universal, according to him, means that salvation is granted not only to those who explicitly believe in Christ and have entered the Church, but thus also – by implication – to those outside the Church. “Since salvation is offered to all,” RM insists, “... it must be made concretely available to all.” RM sadly recognizes though that “...many people [today as it was in the past] do not have an opportunity to come to know or accept the Gospel revelation or to enter the Church,” thus, “salvation in Christ [for such people] is accessible by virtue of a grace which [...] does not make them formally a part of the Church.”<sup>85</sup>

Noticeably, all four Vatican II documents, i.e., *Lumen Gentium*, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, *Nostra Aetate*, and *Ad Gentes*, including *Redemptoris Missio*, albeit dealing with the present subject, never used the expression *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. The next time the expression appears in a magisterial document is in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), promulgated by St. John Paul II, on October 11, 1992, the thirtieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council.

Citing St. Cyprian as source,<sup>86</sup> CCC recalls the *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* doctrine. To properly understand this affirmation, however, the CCC proposes to re-formulate it in a *positive way*.<sup>87</sup> Doing so would show, according to CCC, that “...all salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is his Body.” In somewhat exclusivist and restrictive tone, the CCC explains:

*Basing itself on Scripture and Tradition, the Council teaches that 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, 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*

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<sup>85</sup> RM, n. 10: “Salutis universalitas non significat illam iis solis oblatam esse, qui expresse in Christum credunt et Ecclesiam ingressi sunt. Si omnibus destinatur, salutis facultas vere est omnibus suppeditanda. Sed liquet hodie, sicut praeterito tempore, multos homines facultatem non habere cognoscendi vel accipiendi Evangelii revelationem, in Ecclesiam ingrediendi. [...] His Christi salus patens est per gratiam quae, quamquam arcanam habet necessitudinem cum Ecclesia, in hanc tamen formali ratione eos non introducit.”

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Ep. 73.21:PL 3,1169; De unit.:PL 4,509-536 as cited by the CCC.

<sup>87</sup> That the *nulla salus* doctrine be reformulated in a positive way « *Le salut par l'Église* » has long been an idea proposed by the French theologian Henri de Lubac (1896-1991): “...the formula ‘outside the Church, no salvation’ (hors de l’église pas de salut) has still an ugly sound, there is no reason why it should not be put in a positive form and read, appealing to all men of good will, not ‘outside the Church you are damned’, but ‘it is by the Church and by the Church alone that you will be saved’.” See Henri De Lubac, *Catholicism, Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988, p. 236 – a translation of the original *Catholicisme: les aspects du dogme*, Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1947.

*that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or to remain in it.*<sup>88</sup>

This is really nothing but a direct quotation of the exclusive language of *Lumen Gentium* (*supra*). Yet, tempering such exclusive language and shifting to a more inclusive language, the CCC—like *Lumen Gentium*—cautions that “(t)his affirmation is not aimed at those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his Church...” For these people, the CCC argues, may not “know the Gospel of Christ or his Church,” but they “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.” They too, the CCC concludes, “may achieve eternal salvation,”<sup>89</sup> and as CCC points out elsewhere, they too “are related to the People of God in various ways.”<sup>90</sup>

How this might happen, the CCC believes that “...in ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel, to that faith without which it is impossible to please him.” Be that as it may, “the Church still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize all men.”<sup>91</sup>

As a matter of fact, this positive and inclusive attitude of the CCC towards people of other faith traditions is anchored on the fact that:

*The Catholic Church recognizes in other religions that search, among shadows and images, for the God who is unknown yet near, since He gives life and breath and all things and wants all men to be saved. Thus, the Church considers all goodness and truth found in these religions as ‘a preparation for the Gospel and given by Him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life.’*<sup>92</sup>

The positive reformulation of the *nulla salus* doctrine allowed the CCC to embrace a broader understanding of the Church that includes people of good will, the non-Christians in particular. If such is CCC’s openness to non-Christians, so much more is its receptiveness towards other (non-Catholic) Christians. Citing LG (n. 15) and UR (n. 3), it affirms:

*The Church knows that she is joined in many ways to the baptized who are honored by the name of Christian, but do not profess the Catholic faith in its entirety or have not preserved unity or communion under the successor of Peter. Those “who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in a certain, although imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church.” With the Orthodox Churches, this communion is so profound “that it lacks little to attain the fullness that would permit a common celebration of the Lord’s Eucharist.”*<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> CCC, n. 846. Here, CCC cites as source LG 14, with reference to Mk 16, 16 and Jn 3, 5.

<sup>89</sup> CCC, n. 847, citing LG 16, with reference to DS 3866-3872.

<sup>90</sup> CCC, n. 839.

<sup>91</sup> CCC, n. 848, citing *Ad Gentes*, n. 7 (*supra*), with reference to Heb 11, 6 and 1 Cor 9, 16.

<sup>92</sup> CCC, n. 843. Cf. LG, n. 16; NA, n. 2 and *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 53.

<sup>93</sup> CCC, n. 838.

On the whole, the tone of CCC's teaching on salvation, the uniqueness of Christ's mediation, and membership in the Church is a **balance** between exclusiveness and inclusiveness. It is this balance that tempers the tension between the assertion that salvation is achieved only within the confines of the Church and the insight that access to salvation is also possible to those outside the Church.

As to be expected, the same stance characterizes the teaching of the declaration *Dominus Iesus* (DI), issued on August 6, 2000, by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, under its Prefect then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict VI). Such balance is expressed by the document's subtitle itself, "*On the **Unicity** and Salvific **Universality** of Jesus Christ and the Church,*" that is, paradoxically unique yet universal!

[...] *it must be firmly believed that "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".*<sup>94</sup>

This truth "must not be set against the **universal** salvific will of God" (cf. 1 Tim 2, 4). Thus, cognizant of the tension, DI further insists that "...it is necessary to keep these two truths together, namely, the real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind and the necessity of the Church for this salvation."<sup>95</sup>

Explaining further, DI recalls LG's assertion that the Church is the *universal sacrament of salvation*<sup>96</sup> in the sense that "united always in a mysterious way to the Saviour Jesus Christ, her Head, and subordinated to him," the Church has, "in God's plan, an indispensable relationship with the salvation of every human being."<sup>97</sup> DI appends to this RM's affirmation that there are those who may not be formal and visible members of the Church, but salvation in Christ is accessible to them "by virtue of a grace which [...] enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation." "This grace comes from Christ" just the same for "it is the result of his sacrifice," at the same time that "it is communicated by the Holy Spirit."<sup>98</sup>

By now, it is clear how Church teaching, as manifest especially in Vatican and post-Vatican II documents, struggled to reconcile and harmonize the conviction that the Church is necessary for salvation and that Christ alone mediates that salvation through the Church, with the same conviction that salvation is open and possible even to those who are *extra*

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<sup>94</sup> DI, n. 20. Cf. LG, n. 14; AG, n. 7; and UR, n. 3.

<sup>95</sup> DI, n. 20. Cf. RM, n. 9; CCC, nn. 846-847.

<sup>96</sup> LG, n. 48.

<sup>97</sup> DI cites here ST. CYPRIAN, *De catholicae ecclesiae unitate*, 6: Council of Chalcedon *Symbolum Chalcedonense* (CCSL) 3, 253-254; ST. IRENAEUS, *Adversus haereses*, III, 24, 1: *Symbolum Constantinopolitanum* 211, 472-474.

<sup>98</sup> DI, n. 20; RM, n. 10.

*ecclesiam*—through no fault of their own. Thus, no matter how divergent these two sides of Church doctrine might be, they do not exclude each other. In other words, the acceptance of one does not mean the exclusion or rejection of the other.

### **Pope Francis’ “Tutte le religioni” Statement**

If the above historical analysis were to serve as background, what may be said of the Pope’s address to a group of youth in Singapore? *First*, the same may be said of Pope Francis’ *tutte le religioni* statement what then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Joseph Ratzinger,<sup>99</sup> said about St. Cyprian’s *nulla salus* doctrine, *i.e.*, that it was formulated in a quite concrete situation (*i.e.*, addressing the heretics at Mauretania and the so-called Novatian heresy), and that given that context, the revered saint—even in his official capacity as Bishop of Carthage—cannot be said to have intended laying down *a theory on the eternal fate of the baptized and non-baptized*. Similarly, Pope Francis could not have intended to develop a theory, let alone a doctrine, of salvation in an unscripted, unofficial statement. Be that as it may, Pope Francis’ address to the Singaporean youth may be likened to the less exclusive position of St. Paul in Romans 2, 14-16 and the same teaching as expounded in some magisterial pronouncements in the past, given that his audience were non-Christians.

Second, there is nothing in Pope Francis’ statement that should necessarily be seen as affirming all religions as “*equally valid*”. “*All...are*” in his statement does not necessarily signify “*equal validity*”. When analogically compared to different languages, it is not only the *similarity* among religions as expressions of the divinity that is recognized or presupposed, but their obvious *differences* as well, that is, in their being an adequate or inadequate expression of the divine reality.

To take a concrete example, as far as theology is concerned, the Bicol language is an imprecise, if not an imperfect language. It just does not have the richness and precision of Latin, German, English, or even Tagalog. This is demonstrated, for instance, in its inability to express with theological exactitude the concept and reality of the Trinity. The concept is simply alien to it. It may have to borrow some vocabulary from other languages, but the result is still something wholly imperfect. Thus, an *aeta* in the mountains of Bicol who has not known about Jesus, nor has heard the good news, may have his own idea of the divinity, but he will have a hard time accepting, let alone understanding such basic deposit of the Christian truth. His indigenous religion may be able to express the divine and make it similar to Christianity in that regard, but such similarity does not make it equal to how Christianity expresses more fully such fundamental truth of the Christian faith.

If, therefore, Pope Francis may be faulted, it is not because he taught an error and with it supplanted official magisterial teaching. Rather, it is because he highlighted only the similarity among religions and said nothing about their differences.

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<sup>99</sup> See “Ratzinger Speaks,” in *Catholic World Report* (January 1994), p. 23.

Finally, if a single casual statement of Pope Francis does not ground the totality of doctrine, such a statement must be seen in conjunction with his other more official pronouncements, according to which he affirms Christ as the lone mediator, and the Church as the locus and means of salvation and redemption. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, for instance, the 2013 apostolic exhortation by Pope Francis “On the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world”, he proclaimed:

*The salvation which God has wrought, and the Church joyfully proclaims, is for everyone. God has found a way to unite himself to every human being in every age. He has chosen to call them together as a people and not as isolated individuals. No one is saved by himself or herself, individually, or by his or her own efforts. God attracts us by taking into account the complex interweaving of personal relationships entailed in the life of a human community. This people which God has chosen and called is the Church. Jesus did not tell the apostles to form an exclusive and elite group. He said: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). Saint Paul tells us in the people of God, in the Church, “there is neither Jew or Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). To those who feel far from God and the Church, to all those who are fearful or indifferent, I would like to say this: the Lord, with great respect and love, is also calling you to be a part of his people!*<sup>100</sup>

Clearly, after having proclaimed that salvation is for everyone, Pope Francis locates salvation in the Church, not outside it. Furthermore, in his message to young people for the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2024 of the post-synodal exhortation *Christus Vivit* (2019), Pope Francis referred to St. John Paul II to affirm Jesus’ role as lone mediator of salvation and redemption:

*In 1984, at the end of that Jubilee Year, Saint John Paul II consigned the WYD Cross to young people and gave them the mission of carrying it to the entire world as a sign and reminder that in Jesus alone, crucified and risen, do we find salvation and redemption. As you know very well, that was a plain wooden cross, not a crucifix, precisely in order to remind us that it celebrates the victory of the Resurrection, the triumph of life over death.*<sup>101</sup>

In his most recent encyclical *Dilexit Nos* (2024), the Pope reiterates in unequivocal terms:

*Christ alone saves us by his offering on the cross; he alone redeems us, for “there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim 2:5-6). The reparation that we offer is a freely accepted participation in his redeeming love and his one sacrifice. We thus complete in our flesh “what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church” (Col 1:24); and Christ himself prolongs through us the effects of his complete and loving self-oblation.*<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 113.

<sup>101</sup> Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to Young People for the Fifth Anniversary of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “*Christus Vivit*”, March 25, 2024.

<sup>102</sup> POPE FRANCIS, *Dilexit nos*, *On the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ*, October 24, 2024, n. 201.

To give too much weight then to Pope Francis' impromptu *tutte le religioni* statement and in effect regard it as though cancelling out what he teaches in his more official statements would simply be myopic and too much of a reductionism. It is to fail to look at the broader picture of Pope Francis' message in its entirety and to situate his individual pronouncements within such perspective. If one examines the thought of Pope Francis in his official pronouncements, a constant theme emerges, that of inclusivity. It is in this context that his message to the youth of Singapore must be appreciated. He was speaking of man's search for God<sup>103</sup> and not necessarily *specifically* about salvation. In this aspect, all religions have a way of awakening the human consciousness and indeed in this way all are the same. Christians do not have the monopoly of the sense of the divinity. Other people of various faith traditions also enjoy such grace, though in an imperfect way. Everyone is searching for God, everyone wants to reach him. That is all what Pope Francis wanted to say. It is not about who is the Savior and who is going to be saved. It is not about which is the true Church and which is not. Rather, it is about looking for a common ground as the starting point of dialogue, and about the basis of mutual respect as a prerequisite to peace. It is about recognizing what binds people of varying faith traditions together so harmony in the concrete could be established.

Against this background Pope Francis' *tutte le religioni* statement is not inconsistent with the official magisterium's *nulla salus* doctrine. On the contrary, it is consistent with the interpretation of the *nulla salus* doctrine based on a broader understanding of *ecclesia* (church), one that is aligned with the idea of *ecclesia* in Romans 2, 14-16, in some patristic writings and in most of the Church's pronouncements on interreligious dialogue.

The confusion, however, generated by the Pope's statement was understandable especially because it was taken by most commentators *in isolation*. But the misunderstanding should have also been easily avoidable, that is, had the lessons of history been heeded. Given the story of how it developed in time, the *nulla salus* doctrine served as a warning, if not an admonition to baptized Christians who had turned heretics or apostates (the so-called *lapsi*), or even to Christians who were on the verge of losing their faith. Having known who Christ truly was and the Church he founded, there was no justifiable reason why they should relinquish their faith and leave the Church. Thus, they had to be warned, "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*."

For obvious reasons, such warning served no purpose and therefore had no effect on non-Christians, the unbaptized, who had no opportunity of knowing Christ in the first place and of hearing his word in scriptures – through no fault of their own. Are these people then to be condemned outright? It was in consideration of these people that St. Paul expressed a more accommodating disposition: when people without knowledge of the scripture instinctively follow the teaching of scripture, it validates that God has written his law on their human hearts. It is for these people that the Magisterium likewise developed a doctrine

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<sup>103</sup> Cf. CCC, n. 843.

based on a broad understanding of the Church. They also belong to the Church but in an imperfect way.

It is when these two approaches are decontextualized, that is, stripped of their historical *Sitz-im-Leben*, and pushed to the extreme that the contradiction between them occurs. To make absolute the *nulla salus* doctrine would mean *extreme exclusivism* which denies that the mercy of God is also offered to people who may not have known Christ and who may not have belonged to the Church, again through no fault of their own. To relativize it, on the other hand, would mean *religious indifferentism* that no longer recognizes the Church as the sole locus of the fullness of salvation and thereby renders it as only one among many of those means where salvation might be accessible.

## Conclusion

1. The Pope's statement may have caused confusion but it was obviously not made as an exercise in *infallible* teaching. In other words, it is *non-infallible*. It was first and foremost an unscripted remark, made off the cuff – *obiter dictum*. It must therefore be regarded as such and nothing more than that. Therefore, one needs to situate it in its proper context and accord it the weight proportionate to its original intent. To give it incommensurate attention would mean giving it undeserved significance and granting it the authority it does not have. There is even no need to discuss this point because a *casual unscripted remark* is for obvious reasons never an *ex cathedra* pronouncement. Its importance cannot even match that of statements found in an *Apostolic Brief*, one of the least authoritative of papal pronouncements, it being a simple document that deals with matters of minor importance.
2. The context is a spontaneous and non-formal dialogue, specifically an exercise in inter-faith dialogue. A dialogue calls for mutual openness and respect. It requires the willingness to listen to the opinions of other interlocutors. In this context, one first looks for a common ground, rather than immediately pinpoint the error of opposite views. "You are wrong. I am right!" – are hardly the first words in a dialogue. Much less may one belittle or ridicule the beliefs of those in disagreement. Otherwise, genuine dialogue cannot proceed as it is immediately blocked. Perhaps the Pope was stating an *opinion* with this kind of disposition. Yes, his was mere opinion *vis-à-vis* the opinions of his conversation partners, putting him on an equal footing with them as it should be in a dialogue.
3. The Pope said, "*Tutte le religioni sono un cammino per arrivare a Dio,*" or as a Vatican English translation would put it, "*All religions are paths to God.*" A more literal translation might be that of Msgr. Christopher Washington of the Secretariat of State's English Section, who rendered it as "*Every religion is a way to arrive at God.*" Another translation offered by the Vatican's Secretariat of State: "*All religions are seen as paths trying to reach God.*" Translated in whichever way, the Pope's statement may indeed

be unclear. The varying reactions to it worldwide are proof enough of this lack of clarity. Not all understood and interpreted the statement in the same way. Some defended it, some contradicted and even rejected it. Understandably so, insofar as the remark lacks theological clarity and precision. May not, however, the Pope be excused for such a shortcoming considering that his audience were adolescents without strict theological training, and may not have known or heard about Jesus Christ through no fault of their own? The Pope was not speaking to expert theologians after all and he had very little time to elaborate on what he could have truly intended to convey. His fault here? Not heresy, but – by any chance – extemporaneity without much thought about the consequences!

4. The important question, however, is whether the statement promotes religious indifferentism. Is it against the traditional teaching of the Church? Is it heretical? Not so. First, the Pope did not explicitly say that all religions are “equal” paths to God. “All” does not necessarily imply “equality”. Without this specific qualifier, “paths” in the statement can be taken to mean “attempts” to reach God, and an attempt, we all know, is not always guaranteed to succeed. Indeed, there are straight paths as there are crooked and winding paths. There are paths that are wide open and easy to navigate, as there are those that are narrow, blocked, and even impassable. To say then that the Pope suggested that any religion will do and that it does not matter what religion one may profess because every religion leads to the one true God would be to stretch too much what he might have wanted to say. Much more so, to think that the Pope meant to divest Jesus Christ of his role as the sole agent of redemption would be to infuse into his statement a meaning that it does not necessarily have.

There is not enough of what the Pope said that would establish its inconsistency with the official teaching of the Magisterium of the Church. There is no adequate reason either to suppose that it was his intention in the first place to supplant official teaching. Inconsistency, let alone the charge of heresy or apostasy, needs to be demonstrated not simply by implication. Rather, it must be shown that there is an *explicit* denial and rejection in his statement of the necessity of salvation through Christ, of belonging to the one true Church founded by Christ, and of him being the sole Mediator between God and man.

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*An afterthought:*

1. Christian faith is essentially paradoxical, that is, seemingly contradictory yet true. It affirms one reality and yet admits what may appear contrary to it at the same time. For instance, Christian faith professes that God is *one* (the reality of *unicity* and *uniqueness*), yet it also declares that God is *triune* (the reality of *plurality*). Think of Mary – she is a virgin and yet a mother too! In the incarnation, Jesus Christ himself is a paradox as he is both God and man. In the objective world, something cannot be both human and divine, yet that is exactly who Jesus is. As if to reflect this paradoxical identity, most of Jesus’ teachings involve a paradox, *e.g.*, there is



wealth (blessedness) in poverty, there is greatness in being small, etc. The paschal mystery itself is characterized by paradox: there is life in death, it is in dying that one gains eternal life.

2. When Catholic and Magisterial teaching enunciates the object of Christian faith through dogma and doctrine, it cannot but use the language of paradox, seemingly contradictory yet true. Membership in the Church is exclusive in one sense, yet also inclusive in another sense – the Church's *nulla salus doctrina* makes sense if seen in this light.

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✠ J. ROJAS  
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8 December 2024