

## Is There Salvation Outside the Church?

By Fr. Alfred McBride, O. Praem.



Some years ago, a popular Jesuit writer named Father Leonard Feeney charmed readers with his humorous essays and books, such as "Fish on Friday." A lighthearted apologist and defender of the Church, his insistence on doctrine delivered with a sense of humor prompted the comment that he was "as Catholic as St. Thomas Aquinas and as American as Mark Twain."

In 1943, Father Feeney became the popular chaplain for the students at St. Benedict's Center, which served Catholics from Harvard and Radcliffe.

And then something happened, He began to preach that the axiom of Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303) — "Outside the Church, no salvation" — meant that formal membership in the Catholic Church was necessary for salvation. The Vatican's Holy Office rejected his restrictive view by distinguishing between those who really belong to the Church (*in re*) and those who belong by desire (*in voto*). The desire would be explicit in those who were catechumens and implicit in those people of goodwill who would join the Church if they knew it to be the one, true Church of Christ.

Father Feeney refused an order from his Jesuit superiors to leave St. Benedict's Center. The following year he was dismissed from the Society of Jesus. In the meantime, he established a religious community for men and women for his followers at Still River, Mass. In 1972, through the efforts of Bishop Bernard Flanagan of Worcester, Father Feeney and some of his followers were reconciled to the Church. He died in 1978.

The Fathers of the Church often taught that "outside the Church there is no salvation" (e.g., St. Augustine, *Sermon 96*, 7, 9). Stated positively, this means that all salvation comes from Christ, the Head, through the Church, which is His Body.

Basing itself on Scripture and Tradition, the Second Vatican Council teaches that the Church is necessary for salvation. Christ is the mediator and way of salvation. He is present to us in His body, which is the Church. He explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and baptism. By doing so, He affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church, which people enter through baptism. Because of that, there are people who could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or remain in it (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 846).

Vatican II teaches that the Church is the "Sacrament of Salvation." (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, no. 1; *Catechism*, no. 780). Christ intended that the Church be a sacrament of the inner union of all people with God. This means that the Church is an effective sign of salvation for all who will be saved. Not just a signpost — like "exit 34" on a freeway — but an actual instrument of salvation. Jesus accomplishes His saving work in and *through* the Church.

But what about the billions of people who do not know Christ or the Church?

"Those, who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do His will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience — those too may attain eternal salvation" (*Catechism*, no. 847). Sincere non-Christians can be moved by grace to seek God and know and do His will. When they do so according to the dictates of their conscience they can be saved, for by God's will they are associated with the paschal mystery of Christ.

What about those outside the Church who belong to other Christian faiths or world religions? I do not have enough space here to give an adequate answer to this question. I strongly recommend studying the Catechism's coverage of this matter in nos. 836-845. The opening statement is instructive: "All men are called to this catholic unity of the People of God. . . . And to it, in different ways, belong or are ordered: the Catholic faithful, others who believe in Christ, and finally all mankind, called by grace to salvation" (no. 836).

Members of other Christian churches who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are in a certain, though imperfect, union with the Catholic Church. With the Orthodox churches, this union is so close that it lacks little to attain the fullness that would permit a common celebration of the Eucharist.

The Church maintains a special relationship with the Jewish people. As the People of God in the New Covenant, the Church has a deep link with the Jewish people, who were the first to hear God's Word. "Unlike other non-Christian religions, the Jewish faith is already a response to God's revelation in the Old Covenant."

Regarding the Messiah, Jews and Catholics have similar goals about the future. Catholics await the return of the Messiah, who died and rose from the dead and is recognized as Lord and Son of God. Jews await the coming of a messiah whose features remain hidden until the end of time. Their expectation, therefore, is accompanied by the mystery of their not knowing or misunderstanding Jesus Christ when He comes again.

The Catechism proceeds to discuss the Church's positive relationships with the Muslims and other non-Christian religions that developed quite independently of Judaism and Christianity. "The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions" which "often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men" (*Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, no. 2). The commitment of the Church to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue with other believers is a major effort to fulfill the Father's will that all people be gathered together into His Son's Church.

"The Church is the place where humanity must rediscover its unity and salvation," St. Augustine wrote (*Sermon 96, 7*). "The Church is the world reconciled. She is the bark which in the full sail of the Lord's cross, by the breath of the Holy Spirit, navigates safely in this world."

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