

Outside the Church there is no Salvation

by Jim Seghers

The statement, "Outside the Church there is no salvation," seems to affirm that formal or card-carrying membership in the Catholic Church is necessary for salvation. This would imply that non-Catholic Christians, so say nothing of non-Christians, have no possibility of salvation unless they officially join the Catholic Church.

Translation

This **incorrect** understanding is based on several errors. The first is related to the unfortunate translation of the Latin word *extra* in the expression *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, which is better translated "**Without** the Church there is no salvation," instead of "**Outside** the Church there is no salvation."

Extra is translated as "outside" or "beyond" when it is used to describe a spatial relationship, e.g. Shannon is *outside* working at her desk. When *extra* is used as a preposition to describe an abstract relationship it is translated as "without", for example, without a microphone it is difficult to be heard. Thus the proper understanding of the translation, clarifies many of the difficulties with the statement. Regardless of this little Latin lesson, it is important to understand that the translation, "Outside the Church there is no salvation," is deeply imbedded in Catholic literature."¹

The Nature of the Church

A deeper difficulty many have with this statement stems from an inadequate understanding of the nature of the Church. If the Catholic Church were merely a religious organization not substantially different from other Christian churches, then the statement, "Outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation," would appear unreasonable and arrogant. However, the reality of the Catholic Church is radically different from any other structure or organization.

The [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) properly speaks of the Church as an "inexhaustible mystery."² The *Catechism* develops this idea in paragraphs 770-810. The Church is a visible society with a hierarchical structure.³ Jesus gave his followers the command to convert the world baptizing in his name.⁴ The ordinary means of by which God's life is transmitted, nurtured and restored are the sacraments.

¹ It is so translated in the paragraph heading in the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) (CCC) above paragraph 846.

² [CCC #753](#); See also: Eph 1:22; Col 1:18; and [Lumen Gentium](#) 9.

³ [CCC](#) #'s [771](#), [779](#); Mt 16:18-19.

⁴ Mt 28:18-20.

However, vital to the nature of the Church is its spiritual dimension in the Person of Jesus Christ.⁵ Jesus is the Head of the Church, which is his Body. Because of this unique relationship with Christ, the members of the Church form the People of God because they are one with him.

Clearly in this context the whole Christ, that is, the man-God and his Mystical Body are the essential means through which all man can be saved.⁶ Thus the [Catechism](#) speaks of the Church as the "universal Sacrament of Salvation."⁷ Citing the Second Vatican Council, the [Catechism](#) adds: "She [the Church] is taken up by him also as the instrument for the salvation of all," "the universal sacrament of salvation," by which Christ is "at once manifesting and actualizing the mystery of God's love for men."⁸

Application

"Basing itself on Scripture and Tradition, the Council [Vatican II] teaches that the Church, ... 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 that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or to remain in it.**"⁹

"This affirmation is not aimed at those who, through **no fault of their own**, do not know Christ and his Church."¹⁰ Ignorance is not itself a sufficient excuse. Each person has an obligation to discover and follow God's directives. However, many men of good will cannot overcome their ignorance even when using diligence. Consider the [Catechism's](#) instruction on this important point: "Although 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**, the Church still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize all men."¹¹

In this context the Church has always upheld the necessity of baptism.¹² "God has bound salvation to the Sacrament of Baptism, but He Himself is not bound by His sacraments."¹³ In addition the Church has also recognized the efficaciousness of martyrdom, baptism of blood, and baptism of desire. Furthermore, the distinction is also made between explicit and implicit baptism of desire. Explicit baptism of desire occurs when one intentionally and consciously desires to be baptized but is prevented from doing so. Implicit baptism of desire is achieved when someone does not know of the obligation to be baptized, but by surrendering to the

⁵ Col 1:18; 2:19; Jn 15:1-1; [CCC #'s 779, 790, 791, 792, 793, 794, 795, 805, 807.](#)

⁶ [CCC #'s 781, 782, 783, 784, 785, 786, 806, 807.](#)

⁷ [CCC #'s 774, 775, 776.](#)

⁸ [CCC #776.](#)

⁹ [CCC #846](#) citing: [Lumen Gentium](#) 14; Mk 16:16; Jn 3:5.

¹⁰ [CCC #847](#); ref. [Lumen Gentium](#) 16.

¹¹ [CCC #848](#); ref. Ad gentes 7; Heb 11:6; 1 Cor 9:16.

¹² [CCC #1257.](#)

¹³ [CCC #1258.](#)

grace to please God by leading a moral life, he implicitly desires to do anything required to please God including the reception of baptism.

Conclusion

It must be emphasized that the statement, "Outside the Church there is no salvation," does not mean that Protestants or non-Christians cannot be saved. Fr. Leonard J. Feeney, S.J, taught that error. Archbishop Cushing on April 18, 1949 suspended him, so he could not use his priestly faculties. Subsequently, the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office condemned Feeney's doctrine and that of "the Cambridge group" on August 8, 1949. Archbishop Cushing again suspended Feeney and placed the St. Benedict Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts under interdict. In October 1949 Feeney was dismissed from the Jesuits. On February 13, 1953 the Holy See excommunicated him.

His followers are called Feeneyites. They are a small group still adhering to the same error. Fr. Feeney reconciled with the Church before his death.

Finally, it must be remembered that the Church's decrees are directed toward its members, not those outside the Church. Catholics are to be guided by the deposit of faith entrusted to the Church by Christ. Catholics do not have the moral freedom to pick and choose what they must believe or how they must behave.

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