

"Salus extra ecclesiam non est": an evaluation of the view that there is no salvation outside the church,

by Brian McKinlay

The concept of "no salvation outside the church" has ancient origins. In historical circumstances that made church unity imperative, Cyprian of Carthage (c.200-258) declared that *"Nomine salus esse nisi in ecclesia potest."* [There cannot be salvation for any, except in the Church.]¹ Augustine of Hippo (345-430) set down a similar maxim, *"Salus extra ecclesiam non est."* [There is no salvation outside the church.]² Even earlier, Origen wrote, "Outside of this house, that is, outside of the Church, no one is saved; for, if anyone should go out of it, he is guilty of his own death."³

This teaching was affirmed by the church in its Councils⁴ and taught by its scholars, notably Aquinas:

But the unity of the Church exists primarily because of the unity of faith And because without faith it is impossible to please God, for this reason there is no room for salvation outside the Church.⁵

In more recent centuries, the popes have continued to affirm the doctrine, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Thus Pope Pius IX in *Quanto conficiamur* (1863):

... well-known is the Catholic dogma that no one can be saved outside the Catholic Church, and that those who obstinately oppose the authority and definitions of the Church, and who stubbornly remain separated from the unity of the Church and from [...] the Roman Pontiff [...] cannot attain salvation."⁶

As recently as 1981, John Paul II said:

The mystery of salvation is revealed to us and is continued and accomplished in the Church ... we have to be conscious and absorb this fundamental and revealed truth, consecrated by tradition: 'There is no salvation outside the Church.' From her alone there flows surely and fully the life-giving force destined in Christ and in His Spirit, to renew

¹ *Epistle ad Pomponium, de Virginibus*, §4.

² *De Baptismo contra Donatistas*, bk. 4, ch. 17, §24. Similarly Augustine also wrote: "A man cannot have salvation except in the Catholic Church. Outside the Catholic Church he can have everything except salvation. He can have honour, he can have sacraments, he can sing Allelulia, he can answer Amen, he can possess the Gospel, he can preach faith in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: but never except in the Catholic Church will he be able to find salvation" - *Discourse to the people of the church at Caesarea*, cited in Jurgens, *The faith of the early fathers*, Vol. III, p. 130.

³ Origen (c.250), *In Jesu nave*, 3:5. The roots of the axiom go even further 'back to Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and others' - Hans Kϙng, *The Church*. - London: Search Pr., 1981, p.313.

⁴ For example the Fourth Lateran Council, 1215, where Innocent III proclaimed "There is but one universal Church of the faithful, outside which no one at all is saved." The *extra ecclesiam* axiom was formally established in the decrees of the Council of Florence (1438-45).

⁵ *Exposition Primae Decretalis ad Archidiaconum Tudertinum* / edited by Raymond A. Verardo, in *Opusculum theologica*, Vol. I, Turin: Marietta, 1954, p. 425.

⁶ Pius IX, *Quanto conficiamur*. Rome: 1863. Similarly John XXIII: "... it is not possible to be united to Jesus Christ except in the Church and through the Church, His Mystical Body, and, finally, it is not possible to belong to the Church except through the bishops, successors of the Apostles, united to the Supreme Pastor, the successor of Peter", - "Address on the creation of three new dioceses in Taiwan", *L'Osservatore Romano*, 29 June, 1961.

the whole of humanity, and therefore directing every human being to become a part of the Mystical Body of Christ.⁷

However, the Roman Catholic Church no longer describes non-Catholic Christians as "unbelievers". *Unitatis redintegratio* declared that the separated Christian "communities or churches" may possess varying "elements" of the Church and therefore would be attached to the Church in differing degrees so that they have "by no means been deprived of their significance and importance in the mystery of salvation".⁸ The 'coverage' of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* has been extended well beyond the institutional Catholic church, to include other communities and to emphasize charismatic and eschatological aspects of the church as a whole⁹, but Vatican II still held that, "Whosoever ... knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by God through Jesus Christ, would refuse to enter her or to remain in her could not be saved."¹⁰

Until the 20th century, the Catholic Church made little effort to discover the religious character of non-Judaic-Christian religions such as Islam.¹¹ In *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) Paul VI affirmed Islam's importance as a religion rather than as a cultural and political system, speaking of Muslims as "adorers of God according to the conception of monotheism". In *De Ecclesia*, Vatican II declared that "the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the creator. In the first place among these are the Muslims...". In its *Declaration ... on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions*, the Council distinguished Islam from other non-Christian religions, as being related to the religion of the Bible.¹² Catholicism now has an attitude of respect and esteem towards other religions' traditions and their 'salvific' value, without necessarily agreeing that they have the way of salvation.¹³ Nevertheless, the Council allowed some possibility of salvation for those 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 conscience¹⁴

⁷ John Paul II, "Radio Message for Franciscan Vigil in St. Peter's and Assisi, 3 October, 1981", *L'Osservatore Romano*, 12 October, 1981.

⁸ *Unitatis redintegratio*, 3.

⁹ R.P. Greenwood. "'*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*': its treatment in recent Roman Catholic theology", *Theology* 76(638):416-425, Aug., 1973, at p. 423.

¹⁰ *De Ecclesia*, 14.

¹¹ A remarkable exception is a letter of Gregory VII (1073-85) to a Muslim prince, explicitly affirming that Christians and Moslems adore the same God. - see G. Basetti-Sani, *The Koran in the light of Christ*. - Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977, pp. 193-4.

¹² Basetti-Sani, *op.cit.*, pp. 198-201.

¹³ Geffr ■, C. "Christian uniqueness and dialogue" *Focus* 13(2):101-113, 1993.

¹⁴ *De Ecclesia*, 16. Similarly, in its *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity*, Vatican II said, "So 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" - *Ad Gentes* 1,7.

Thus, even a branch of the Christian church that has held the *extra ecclesiam* maxim most strongly is now more equivocal. There is some allowance for salvation of those who are not church adherents (have not been baptised). On the other hand, the Roman Catholic church seems to assert that all salvation is somehow linked to the Church.

Jürgen Moltmann asks whether the church must not, "rethink its position even more radically?" In Moltmann's thinking, there is a distinction between a religion which asserts itself to be absolute and the faith that is the human response to God's self revelation. For him it is better to say, "Outside Christ no salvation".

Christ has come and was sacrificed for the reconciliation of the whole world. No one is excluded. Outside the salvation that Christ brings to all men there is therefore no Church. The visible church is, as Christ's Church, the ministry of reconciliation exercised upon the world. Thus the church is to be seen, not as absolute, but in its relationship to the divine reconciler and to reconciled men and women, of whatever religion.¹⁵

Thus Moltmann cites Hans Küng:

We can ask what is outside the Church, but the question is difficult to answer. But what is outside God and his plan of salvation is no question at all. If we look at God's plan of salvation that there is no extra, only an *intra*, no outside, only an inside, since God's "desires all men to be saved into come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" [Tim.2.5f]¹⁶

Similarly Gerald O'Collins observes in his *Christology* that,

[the] NT sense of Christ's indispensable and necessary role for human salvation could be summarised by a new axiom: *extra Christum nulla salus* (outside Christ no salvation).¹⁷

A glance at any good introduction to systematic theology shows, as Alister McGrath comments in his textbook, that, "'Salvation' is a complex notion."¹⁸

Christianity is ... not in any sense distinctive or unique in attaching importance to the idea of salvation. The distinctiveness of the Christian approach to salvation lies in two distinct areas: in the first place, salvation is understood to be grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; in the second, the specific shape of salvation, within the Christian tradition, is itself formed by Christ. These ideas are complex, and require further exploration before we can proceed.¹⁹

For Christians, the salvation of humankind involves appropriation in some way of the benefits to us of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. For many Christians, salvation has an eschatological dimension - "eternal life" or life in "heaven" or life "with God".

¹⁵ Jürgen Moltmann. *The Church in the power of the Spirit: a contribution to messianic ecclesiology*. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993 (First pub. 1975), pp. 153-4.

¹⁶ *The Church in the power of the Spirit*, n.41, pp. 318-2.

¹⁷ Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: a Biblical, historical, and systematic study of Jesus*. - Oxford: OUP, 1995, p.296.

¹⁸ Alister McGrath. *Christian theology: an introduction*. - 2nd ed. - Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, p. 386.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

Particularly relevant to our topic is whether or not salvation is in some sense universal. Some Christians understand the redemption available in Jesus Christ to apply to the whole of creation. For others salvation requires personal repentance, personal forgiveness of one's sins by God, acknowledgement of the sovereignty of Jesus Christ, and receiving newness of life. If all are "saved" or "redeemed", the question of whether this salvation occurs "outside" the church is less critical than otherwise. But if one believes that not all are saved and that some will perish, the question of *how* salvation occurs - including the role of the church - is imperative.

Following Karl Rahner in particular, the Roman Catholic Church has come to understand and proclaim the church as the "fundamental sacrament of salvation". It is not so of itself, but only in "... relation, distinction and subordination ... to Christ as to the historically primal sacrament in which God's promise of himself as forgiveness and glorification comes to historical appearance and irreversible completion."²⁰ In response, Moltmann argues that the sacraments, and the church as sacrament, can only be understood in a Trinitarian framework of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit, "who creates salvation and brings about the new creation, and who through Christ unites us with the Father and glorifies him."²¹

Catholic writer, Gavin D'Costa, in a study of the 'archeology' of *the extra ecclesiam* maxim, argues that it has been developed in its application over the ages and used positively in application to concrete problems of schism, revolt and betrayal.²² In Christian reflection on the place of non-Christian religions, he argues,

grace could properly be acknowledged as operative outside the visible church, but must be causally related to Christ and his church. Here there are questions for the dogmatic theologian regarding the nature of 'membership' of the church and the appropriate corresponding models of the nature of the church.²³

This brings into focus the question of whether baptism is essential to membership of the church and to salvation. There is much discussion on this in the early fathers and since. (There are even stories of people being raised from the dead to receive baptism and hence salvation.²⁴) In addressing whether all are bound to receive baptism, Aquinas wrote:

Now it is manifest that no one can obtain salvation, but through Christ [...]. But for this end is baptism conferred on a man, that being regenerated thereby, he may be

²⁰ E.J. Angel and Karl Rahner, *Was ist ein Sakrament? Vorstöße zur Verstandigung*. - Freiburg, 1971, p75, quoted by Moltmann, *ibid.*, p. 200.

²¹ Moltmann, *The Church in the power of the Spirit*, p. 206.

²² Gavin D'Costa. "Extra ecclesiam nulla salus' revisited" in *Religious pluralism and unbelief: studies critical and comparative* / edited by Ian Hammet. - London: Routledge, 1990, pp. 130-147. See p. 139.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

²⁴ E.g. the story of the raising of the slave Augustina by St. Peter Claver, see: Angel Valltierra. *Peter Claver: Saint of the Slaves* - London: Burns and Oates, 1960, pp. 221-2.

incorporated in Christ, by becoming His member [...]. Consequently it is manifest that all are bound to be baptised: and that without baptism there is no salvation for men."²⁵

Yet Aquinas allowed that there is provision for those unable to obtain baptism:

... baptism may be wanting to anyone in reality but not in desire: for instance, when a man wishes to be baptised, but by some ill-chance he is forestalled by death before receiving baptism. And such a man can obtain salvation without being actually baptised, on account of his desire for Baptism, which desire is the outcome of faith that works by charity, whereby God, Whose power is not tied to visible sacraments, sanctifies inwardly.²⁶

Controversy on the necessity of baptism (and thus membership of the church) for salvation is an important illustration of the difficulties that arise from an overstated identification of the redemptive work of Christ with the role of the church.

Whether universalist or not, Protestant approaches to teaching on salvation point to the person and work of Jesus Christ, rather than the role of the church. Those who proclaim personal salvation, emphasise appropriation of the saving work of Christ, by the Spirit. Association with the church may occur following or concurrently with salvation, typically through baptism. "And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2.47, NRSV). It could be said that no one hears the Gospel but for some action of the church. In this sense there might be "no salvation but for the church". Yet Romans 1:18-20²⁷ would seem to imply that one could come to a knowledge of God without the Gospel (though it is not clear whether this is a *saving* knowledge).

Protestant theologians who have a universalist understanding of salvation (and indeed some Catholics as we have seen), similarly stress the centrality of Christ and place little emphasis on role of the church in the work of redemption. In *The coming of God*²⁸, Moltmann criticizes 'ecclesiastical millenarianism' in which a hierarchically organized centralistic church claims spiritual rule over the world. It is a church outside which there is no salvation. A monarchical structure of command is justified monotheistically, Moltmann asserts, and according to a subordinationist principle. It is the Pope who ensures the unity of the Church and whose dogma determines who is to be saved, not the Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of the Trinity, however, talks about the community of the triune God, reflected in a community of free and equal people, not a monarchy. Both

²⁵ *Summa Theologica*, III, Q. 68, a. 1.

²⁶ *Summa Theologica*, III, Q. 68, a. 1.

²⁷ "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse ..." (Romans 1:1-20, NRSV)

²⁸ Jürgen Moltmann. *The coming of God: Christian eschatology*. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996 (First pub. 1995), pp. 182-4.

Catholic and Orthodox make use of a *totus Christus* ecclesiology in which Christ the head and the Church his body form a complete unity and hierarchy of command. Moltmann argues that the church is not yet the spouse, but only the bride who awaits the marriage with hope. The Catholic ecclesiology relies on an 'over realized' eschatology, a "triumphalist, illusory and presumptuous"²⁹ ecclesiology that claims to the church authority that is not yet. It is not for the church, therefore, to assert that without it no one is saved.

These trenchant criticisms focus on the question at the heart of the debate on the *extra ecclesiam* maxim - the role and status of the church. The Catholic and Orthodox churches have a high view of the oneness of identity between Christ and his church. Thus, John Paul II has written:

There are people who mistakenly suppose that Christ can be separated from the Church, that one can devote one's entire life to Christ without reference to the Church. In so doing, they forget the truth proclaimed by St Paul [in Ephesians 5:29-30³⁰]. As I stated in my recent apostolic letter on St. Augustine: "since he is the only mediator and redeemer of mankind, Christ is the head of the church; Christ and the church are one sole mystic person, the total Christ".³¹ [...] So, loving Christ means loving the church. [...] The more we come to know and love the church, the nearer we shall be to Christ. [...] In point of fact, St. Paul often identifies the church with Christ himself, by calling her the body of Christ [*cf.* Romans 12:12ff.].³²

Such a view so closely identifies Christ with the church that there is the possibility of the role of the church being substituted for that of Christ. Yet, there are instructive examples in the gospels where Jesus himself declares that salvation has occurred - before the resurrection and before the institution of the church.³³

Most Protestants would see the church as an assemblage of believers still in the process of being brought into unity with Christ, a unity that will not be fully realised until the eschaton. As Moltmann goes on to say (in the passage following that quoted above),

Only in the millennium will the martyrs rule with Christ and judge the nations. Before the millennium, the church is the brotherly and sisterly, charismatic, non-violent fellowship of those who wait for the coming of the Lord and in the power of the spirit, who is the giver of life, enter into Christ's struggle and their cross in his discipleship.³⁴

Thus, in his *Resurrection and discipleship*, Thorwald Lorenzen concludes that,

²⁹ *The coming of God.*, p. 184.

³⁰ "For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body."

³¹ *Augustinum Hipponensem* II, 3.

³² Pope John Paul II, *Agenda for the third millennium* / translated by Alan Neame. - London: Harper Collins, 1996, pp. 29-30.

³³ Luke 19:9; 23:43.

³⁴ *The Coming of God.*, p. 184.

The resurrection of the crucified Christ reminds us that salvation must not be reduced to any part of God's creation, be it humanity will be it the church. Salvation is God's act in Jesus Christ and therefore it encompasses all of reality.³⁵

Only in Christ, will be found the ultimate redemption of humankind, indeed of the whole creation. Some believe that all will be redeemed, others do not. Some believe that salvation is open to all people of faith, whether this is conscious faith in Christ or not. Others disagree. But it does not seem that the church is in a position to be the ultimate mediator of salvation. This is a role reserved to God in Christ alone.

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