

Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus
(Outside the Church, No Salvation)
A Story of Doctrinal Development in the Catholic Church
As It Pertains to Catholic Views of Non-Christians
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The Second Vatican Council initiated a number of reforms in the Catholic Church that were aimed at changing the way the Catholic Church should relate to the modern world. One of those changes involved how the Catholic Church relates to non-Christian religions. Down through the centuries, prior to Vatican II, Catholics usually regarded non-Christians as mission prospects to be converted to Christianity. The theology behind this view of non-Christians included a fairly serious (albeit flawed) view of original sin, of eternal punishment for sin in hell, a clear confession of Christ the incarnate Son of God as the exclusive Savior of sinners, along with the need for personal conversion effected by the saving grace of God which is received through the sacraments of the Catholic Church.

When we look at what the documents of Vatican II teach about non-Christian religions, we notice a significant shift in these theological emphases. Original sin is significantly downplayed. Hell is not mentioned. While Christ is still confessed as the exclusive Savior and Mediator, and the Catholic Church as necessary in some way for salvation, Vatican II presents a much more optimistic, positive view of the non-Christian religions and of man in general. Also, while the council still encouraged mission work, a new emphasis was placed on inter-religious dialogue with non-Christians.

In the first part of this paper, we will briefly trace some of the historical development of how the Catholic Church has viewed the salvation status of non-Christians. In the second part, we will look at some of the key passages in the documents of Vatican II. In the third part, we will look at some of the more recent theological developments. Some Catholic theologians have been advocating a position that goes beyond the Christian inclusivism view of the council toward more pluralistic models. We will note what the Vatican's reactions have been to those views.¹

I. Historical Survey

When Jesus' followers carried out his Great Commission to go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation, they encountered a pluralistic religious world. The Mediterranean-Roman world was a world of many gods and many lords, religions of all kinds. One more religion offering one more god along with all the others probably would not have caused a problem for the adherents of a new religion. But there was a problem for Christians because the Christian gospel was an exclusive religion, as Jesus himself taught.

I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. (Jn 3:5-6)

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him. (Jn 3:16-18,36)

¹ In this paper I am using the terms *exclusivism*, *inclusivism*, and *pluralism* the way they are commonly used in religious literature today. *Exclusivism* teaches that salvation is through Christ, with followers of other religions excluded from salvation. *Inclusivism* teaches that salvation is through Christ, but followers of other religions can be included. *Pluralism* teaches that salvation is through other religions alongside Christianity.

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (Jn 14:6)

Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. (Mk 16:15-16)

He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. (Jn 5:23)

Jesus said to them [the Jews who did not believe in him], "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God." (Jn 8:42,44,47)

The apostles taught this exclusive gospel as well. Peter, speaking to the Sanhedrin, said, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Ac 4:12). Similarly, Paul stated, "God our Savior...wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men" (1 Ti 2:3-6).

And what was the apostles' view of non-Christian religions and their worship? Paul states in 1 Corinthians 10:19-20: "Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons." Gentiles possess a natural knowledge of God's law (Ro 2:12-15), but the law is not a means of salvation (Ro 3:19-20). Salvation is revealed only in the gospel and is received only through faith in Christ (Ro 3:21-24). At the same time, God's plan of salvation is all-inclusive. Jesus is the only Savior (1 Ti 2:5), and he is the Savior of all, who wants all people to be saved (1 Ti 2:4). With a series of rhetorical questions, Paul outlined how the Lord wants his plan of salvation carried out.

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Ro 10:13-15)

The New Testament leaves unresolved for human reason the law-gospel tensions involved in such questions as "Why are some saved and not others?" Jesus' lament over the unbelieving people of Jerusalem states the two-sided answer to that question: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Mt 23:37). And what about all those who have died without ever hearing the gospel? The apostle Paul addresses the question frankly in Romans 2:12: "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law." The New Testament lets stand such law statements regarding God's just condemnation of unbelievers and does not try to reconcile them according to human reason with the gospel, that "God wants all men to be saved" (1 Ti 2:4).

We now turn to the witness of the early church in the centuries after the apostolic age. Before we look at a few specific written testimonies, we should call attention to what was probably the clearest and strongest testimony of the early Christians regarding their conviction that Christ, the incarnate Son of God, was the only Savior of sinners: martyrdom. When faced with the option of offering a pinch of incense to the emperor and saying, "Caesar is *dominus* (lord)" or "Caesar is *soter* (savior)," many Christians instead offered the supreme sacrifice with the words "Jesus is Lord and Savior" on their lips. One could hardly find a clearer confession of the exclusive nature of Christianity.

When we look at the written testimonies of early Christian writers and what they said about the salvation of non-Christians, already in the second and third centuries we notice what we might call two strains of thought or teaching. An example of the one strain is found in the writings of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, who apparently coined the famous phrase, *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, "Outside the church there

is no salvation."² We should point out that whenever Cyprian applied this axiom and similar ones, "You cannot have God for your Father if you have not the church as your mother,"³ the context is a warning spoken against those who already were Christians but were in danger of falling into the grave sins of heresy and schism, breaking fellowship with the bishop. Perhaps the closest Cyprian comes to speaking about non-Christians is the following evangelical appeal:

We implore you to make reparation to God while you still can, while you still have a little time left. We show you the way to salvation. Believe, and you shall live. For a time you have persecuted us; come and rejoice with us forever. It is here below that life is either lost or held onto; don't let your sins or your age make you put off gaining salvation. While still in this world, repentance is never too late. Even at death's door you can beg pardon for your sins, appealing to the one true God in faith. For God's goodness grants acquittal unto salvation to the believer so as to pass from death to immortality. It is Christ who grants this grace.⁴

Cyprian seems to hold to Christian exclusivism, that salvation comes to all only through faith in Christ.

Alongside this teaching in the early church, we find another teaching in such writers as Justin Martyr. When Justin was faced with the question, "What hope of salvation was there for those who died before Christ came" (pagans who never had heard the gospel), here was Justin's answer:

If some should accuse us as if we held that people born before the time of Christ were not accountable to God for their actions, we shall anticipate and answer such a difficulty. We have been taught that Christ is the first-begotten of God, and we have declared him to be the *Logos* of which all mankind partakes. Those, therefore, who lived according to reason (*logos*) were really Christians, even though they were thought to be atheists, such as, among the Greeks, Socrates, Heraclitus and others like them....So also, those who lived before Christ but did not live according to reason were wicked men, and enemies of Christ, and murderers of those who did live according to reason. Whereas those who lived then, or who live now, according to reason are Christians. Such as these can be confident and unafraid.⁵

Justin's rationalistic approach seems to anticipate Karl Rahner's "anonymous Christians" theory to describe the salvation of non-Christians. In a certain way, salvation is still "in Christ" but no longer through faith in Christ—inclusivism, as opposed to exclusivism.

When we look at some of the statements of Christian writers after the time of Constantine, when Christians assumed that non-Christians living at the time had sufficient opportunity to have heard the gospel, they viewed unbelief as deliberate and therefore culpable. The statement from Bishop Ambrose is representative:

If someone does not believe in Christ he defrauds himself of this universal benefit, just as if someone were to shut out the rays of the sun by closing his window. For the mercy of the Lord has been spread by the church to all nations; the faith has been spread to all peoples.⁶

Next we turn to Augustine, who offered some of the clearest testimonies of the early Christian writers regarding the exclusive nature of the gospel.

Now this grace of Christ, without which neither infants nor adults can be saved, is not given in return for merits, but is a free gift; for this reason it is called "grace." Wherefore, all those who are not set free by that grace, whether because they could not hear [the message of the Gospel], or because they refused to obey it, or, being unable to hear it because of their infancy, they did not receive the baptismal bath by which they could have been saved—all these, I say, are justly damned, because they are not without sin—either the original sin that they contracted, or the sins that they added by their own wicked deeds.... The entire mass, therefore, incurs the

² *Epistle 73:21, Fathers of the Church 51:282. Quoted in Francis A. Sullivan, Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York/Mahmah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), p. 21.

³ *The Unity of the Catholic Church 6; Ancient Christian Writers 25:48. Quoted in Sullivan, p. 22.*

⁴ Quoted in Sullivan, p. 23.

⁵ *First Apology 46, Fathers of the Church 6:83-84. Quoted in Sullivan, p. 15.*

⁶ *In Psalm 118 Sermon 8:57. Quoted in Sullivan, p. 25.*

penalty, and if the deserved punishment of condemnation were meted out to all, it would without doubt be justly meted out.... anyone who judged rightly could not possibly blame the justice of God in wholly condemning all mankind.⁷

If, as truth itself tells us, no one is delivered from the condemnation that we incurred through Adam except through faith in Jesus Christ, and yet, those people will not be able to deliver themselves from that condemnation who will be able to say that they have not heard the Gospel of Christ, since faith comes through hearing.... Therefore neither those who have never heard the Gospel nor those who by reason of their infancy were unable to believe... are separated from that mass which will certainly be damned.⁸

We notice the clear understanding Augustine had of the biblical doctrine of the guilt of original sin and how it played into his view of non-Christians.

Loyal followers of Augustine, such as the North African bishop Fulgentius (468-533), reiterated Augustine's teaching. Fulgentius clearly affirmed:

Most firmly hold and by no means doubt, that not only all pagans, but also all Jews, and all heretics and schismatics who die outside the Catholic Church, will go to the eternal fire that was prepared for the devil and his angels.⁹

This statement of Fulgentius is especially significant because it was later incorporated into a decree of the Council of Florence in 1442.

During the Middle Ages, many Catholic theologians followed Augustine more or less. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, affirms the necessity of baptism and faith for salvation. At the same time, Thomas worked out the theory of "baptism of desire" as a quasi means of grace for those who were not able to receive baptism. As to the eternal fate of Jews and Moslems, Thomas seems to assume that they were aware of the claims of Christianity and had rejected them. Therefore the rule, *Extra ecclesiam, nulla salus*, applied to them. What about someone who had never heard the gospel, such as a feral child? Thomas theorized according to the semi-Pelagian doctrine, *Deus non denegat gratiam facientibus quod in se est*, that if such a person lived a good enough life according to the natural knowledge of the law, God would give grace.

Two key magisterial level statements from the Middle Ages on the status of non-Christians are the bull *Unam Sanctam* of Pope Boniface VIII in 1302 and the previously mentioned Council of Florence. Pope Boniface affirmed unqualified, absolute jurisdiction over the temporal and spiritual orders of the entire world when he issued the infamous words:

Moreover, we declare, state and define that for every human creature it is a matter of necessity for salvation to be subject to the Roman Pontiff.¹⁰

Another Medieval magisterial teaching on the state of non-Christians, a decree of the Council of Florence, reads as follows:

[The holy Roman Church] ...firmly believes, professes and preaches that no one outside the Catholic Church, neither pagans nor Jews nor heretics nor schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; but they will go to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, unless before the end of their life they are joined to it. For union with the body of the church is of so great importance that the sacraments of the church are of use toward salvation only for those remaining in it, and fasts, almsgiving, other works of piety and the exercises of a militant Christian life bear eternal rewards for them alone. And no one can be saved, no matter how much he has given in alms, even if he sheds his blood for the name of Christ, unless he remains in the bosom and unity of the Catholic Church.¹¹

Just fifty years after the Council of Florence issued the above decree, Columbus discovered the

⁷ *De natura et gratia* 4-5. Quoted in Sullivan, p. 38.

⁸ *De correptione et gratia* 7:11-12. Quoted in Sullivan, p. 38.

⁹ *De fide, ad Petrum* 38 (79). Quoted in Sullivan, p. 43.

¹⁰ Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* 875 [DS]. Quoted in Sullivan, p. 65.

¹¹ DS 1351. Quoted in Sullivan, p. 66.

New World. With the discovery of the New World, some Catholic theologians in the 16th and 17th centuries, including Robert Bellarmine, Albert Pighi, Francisco Suarez, and others visited anew the question of salvation for non-Christians. They further developed the theory of salvation by desire, along with the semi-Pelagian axiom that God doesn't deny grace to those who do what is in them. The primary difference between them and Thomas seems to be that the exceptions to "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*" were no longer the very rare or even hypothetical feral child but whole continents of Indians and aborigines. At the same time, no Catholic questioned the necessity of doing mission work to convert the heathen so that they might have the fullness of grace and salvation as baptized members of the Catholic Church.

So during the Middle Ages and the early modern period, we see the two strains of teaching that started in the early church continue in Roman Catholicism: "Outside the (Roman Catholic) Church there is no salvation" and "There can be exceptions." Also, as has become obvious, the exclusivist view has come to include the visible Roman Catholic Church as part of the exclusive formula.

In the 20th century, almost on the threshold of Vatican II, a doctrinal discipline case in the Catholic Church occurred in which Rome officially sided with the "exceptions" strain rather than with an absolutist interpretation of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. The case involved a popular Catholic radio preacher priest from Boston, Leonard Feeney. Feeney took the position that "there is no salvation outside the Roman Catholic Church" in an absolute way, that no one is saved who does not live and die as a Roman Catholic, and anyone who tried to water it down in any way he labeled a heretic. Feeney got himself into trouble when he publicly accused the archbishop of Boston, Cardinal Richard Cushing, of *heresy*. In response to Feeney's charge, Cushing asked the Holy Office in Rome for a clarification of the doctrine. The Holy Office responded with an official letter in 1949. We quote here some pertinent parts of the letter:

The infallible dictum which teaches us that outside the Church there is no salvation, is among the truths that the church has always taught and will always teach. But this dogma is to be understood as the Church itself understands it. For the Saviour did not leave it to private judgment to explain what is contained in the deposit of faith, but to the doctrinal authority of the Church....

The Savior did not make it merely a necessity of precept for all nations to enter the Church. He also established the Church as a means of salvation without which no one can enter the kingdom of heavenly glory.

As regards the helps to salvation which are ordered to the last end only by divine decree, not by intrinsic necessity, God, in His infinite mercy, willed that their effects which are necessary to salvation can, in certain circumstances, be obtained when the helps are used only in desire or longing. We see this clearly stated in the Council of Trent about the sacrament of regeneration and about the sacrament of penance. The same, in due proportion, would be said of the Church in so far as it is in general help to salvation. To gain eternal salvation it is not always required that a person be incorporated in reality as a member of the Church, but it is required that he belong to it at least in desire and longing. It is not always necessary that this desire be explicit, as it is with catechumens. When a man is invincibly ignorant, God also accepts an implicit desire, so called because it is contained in the good dispositions of soul by which a man wants his will to be conformed to God's will....

It must not be imagined that any desire whatsoever of entering the church is sufficient for a man to be saved. It is necessary that the desire by which a man is related to the Church be informed with perfect charity. And an implicit desire cannot have its effect unless a man has supernatural faith.¹²

The letter from the Holy Office certainly didn't advocate any kind of universalism, the hope that in the end hell will be empty and all mankind will be saved, but it did clearly disavow the absolutist view of Feeney. At the same time, it clung to a certain "exceptions" interpretation of *extra ecclesiam*. It seems that by the 20th century "outside the Church" had come to be interpreted by Rome as "without the (Catholic) Church" there is no salvation.

¹² DS 3866-3872. Quoted in Sullivan, pp. 136-138. An English translation of the entire letter appears in *The Companion to the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), pp. 360-362.

The "clarification" from the Holy Office did not satisfy Father Feeney. He was convinced that the language of the popes and councils down through the centuries was unequivocal, including, besides those already mentioned, Popes Innocent III (1208), Pius IV (1564), Pius IX (1854), and the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). Technically, Father Feeney was never condemned for heresy. What got him excommunicated was the fact that he accused the Holy Office of heresy and then refused to go to Rome to discuss the matter.

Just a little over a decade after the Feeney case, the Catholic Church would issue magisterial teaching on the subject that would contain a more optimistic view than it had ever held before regarding the possibility of salvation of non-Christians. We are, of course, talking about the Second Vatican Council.

II. Vatican II

Catholics and others frequently refer to Vatican II as a "watershed" in their church's appreciation for other religions, not just non-Christians but non-Christian *religions*.¹³

Three documents of Vatican II address the possibility of salvation for non-Christians. The foundational document of Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, section 16, speaks of Jews, Muslims, and even atheists.

Finally, those who have not yet received the gospel are related in various ways to the People of God. In the first place there is the people to whom the covenants and the promises were given and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh (cf. Rom. 9:4-5). On account of their fathers, this people remains most dear to God, for God does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the calls He issues (cf. Rom. 11:28-29).

But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place among these there are the Moslems, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind. Nor is God Himself 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 every other gift (cf. Acts 17:25-28), and who as Savior wills that all men be saved (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4).

Those also can attain to everlasting 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. Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace. Whatever goodness or truth is found among them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the gospel. She regards such qualities as given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life.¹⁴

While previous magisterial teaching had said that non-Christians could be saved by baptism of desire or some other kind of unconscious desire, Vatican II says merely that they are "related in various ways" to the Church. No mention is made of the necessity of Christian conversion or explicit faith in Christ. The Catholic Church is still regarded as the true visible church of Christ on earth and association with it is necessary only in a certain mysterious (ambiguous?) way.

The Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christians, seeks to establish a common religious ground with all non-Christians in the natural knowledge of God and the inborn knowledge of the law. Besides pointing to the natural knowledge of God and the law, the declaration finds a number of positive things to say specifically about Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism. It teaches the unscriptural, Christ-denying doctrine that modern-day Jews and Muslims worship the

¹³ Cf. David Wright, "The Watershed of Vatican II," *One God, One Lord: Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism*. Edited by Andrew D. Clarke and Bruce W. Winter (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), pp. 208f.

¹⁴ All quotations of documents of Vatican II are from *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, General Editor (New York: Herder and Herder, Association Press, 1966).

same God as Christians. The fact is, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Jews all explicitly reject the Triune God revealed in the Bible and confessed by Christians in the three ecumenical creeds.

Finally, the council document *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, section 22, offers some language about the relationship between Christ and the whole human race that later John Paul II would further develop in his first papal encyclical.

The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him who was to come, namely, Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. It is not surprising, then that in Him all the aforementioned truths find their root and attain their crown.

He who is the "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), is Himself the perfect man. To the sons of Adam He restores the divine likeness which had been disfigured from the first sin onward. Since human nature as He assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect too. *For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man.* (emphasis added)

We will return to the italicized words in the third section of this paper when we look at how John Paul II further developed the teaching presented here in *Gaudium et Spes*.

By way of summary, when looking at what Vatican II said about non-Christian religions, we might first of all ask, what has happened to the dogmatic formula, "Outside the church there is no salvation"? The formula is not cited in so many words anywhere in the council documents. The closest approximation is found in *Lumen Gentium* 14: "This sacred Synod...basing itself upon sacred Scripture and Tradition, ...teaches that the Church is necessary for salvation." And the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* 3, states:

It is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the all embracing means of salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained. It was to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, that we believe our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant.

Clearly, "outside the church, no salvation" has developed into "without the [Roman Catholic] Church, no salvation."

Vatican II seems to have deliberately left the answers to some questions vague or unanswered regarding exactly how non-Christians have to be related to the Catholic Church in order to be saved. Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and even atheists are offered the hope of salvation because in some mysterious ways they are all "related to the [Catholic] Church." Christ and the Catholic Church are said to have a unique role in the salvation of all who will be saved. But what about the role of non-Christian religions? Again there is vagueness. Some positive role for non-Christian religions is neither clearly affirmed, nor does it seem to be altogether denied. The only ones who are explicitly shut out and can "not be saved" are those who "knowing that the Catholic Church was necessary by God through Jesus Christ, would refuse to enter her or to remain in her" (*Lumen Gentium* 14). Does this mean that atheists and all non-Christians have a better chance at getting to heaven than confessional Lutherans who are aware of the Catholic Church's claims and reject them? It would appear so. Trent's solemn curse words, "anathema sit," are not explicitly repeated in Vatican II upon those who believe in justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, but the message is still the same. What clearer affirmation of salvation by (faith and) good works could be devised than by teaching the possibility of salvation for all non-Christians and even atheists if only they do enough good works according to their natural knowledge of the law?

Vatican II's vagueness regarding the nature of the relationship of non-Christians to the Catholic Church has resulted in various interpretations of the documents and the development of further theories since the time of the council. We will now look at a few of those post-Vatican II developments.

III. Post-Vatican II Developments

As part of its implementations of the reforms of Vatican II, the Catholic Church began inter-religious

dialogues with leaders and spokesmen of all the major world religions: Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. In these dialogues Catholics have often emphasized the common elements between Catholicism and other religions, while down-playing the historic differences between the religions. Christians, Jews, and Muslims are said to all worship the same God. They are all said to promote peace, justice, and doing good.

Pope John Paul II reached out to other religions with many grand public gestures, including being the first pope to visit the chief synagogue in Rome, being the first pope to visit a mosque and praying there, inviting leaders of various world religions to Assisi in 1986 to pray side by side (not technically "praying together") for world peace. While many Catholics applauded the Assisi gesture and many high-level Catholic prelates attended the meeting, other high-ranking members of the hierarchy raised their eyebrows. One prominent member of the Curia was most conspicuous by his absence—Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. Alarmed at how such highly publicized gestures might be misconstrued as promoting religious relativism, Ratzinger is reported to have said of Assisi, "This cannot be the model."¹⁵

In his magisterial teaching, John Paul II continued the teaching of Vatican II, that many elements of religious truth are found in the non-Christian religions but that the fullness of the truth is found in Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church.

One place where John Paul II seems to have "developed" magisterial teaching beyond Vatican II is the way he used the sentence from *Gaudium et Spes* 22, that "by his incarnation the Son of God united himself in some sense with every human being." In his first encyclical, *Redemptoris Hominis*, "The Redeemer of Man," issued in March, 1979, John Paul provided a lengthy meditation on that phrase, including:

We are dealing with "each" man, for each one is included in the mystery of the Redemption and with each one Christ has united himself for ever through this mystery.... This is man in all the fullness of the mystery in which he has become a sharer in Jesus Christ, the mystery in which each one of the four thousand million human beings living on our planet has become a sharer from the moment he is conceived beneath the heart of his mother.... Every man without any exception whatever—has been redeemed by Christ, and because with man—with each man without any exception whatever—Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it.¹⁶

Here the pope has isolated a statement of *Gaudium et Spes* that speaks of Christ's self-identification with all humanity in his incarnation and has "developed" it into a rather unqualified soteriological universalism that allows salvation without faith.

At other times in his magisterium, John Paul seems to follow more closely the wording of other documents of Vatican II. In a catechetical lecture that he delivered at one of his regular Wednesday general audiences, the pope unfolded his teaching on the subject in some detail. Here is a portion of the lecture:

It is important to stress that the way of salvation taken by those who do not know the Gospel is not a way apart from Christ and the Church. The universal salvific will is linked to the one mediation of Christ. The First Letter to Timothy states it: "God our Saviour...wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth. And the truth is this: God is one. One also is the mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (2:3-6). Peter proclaims it when he says that "there is no salvation in anyone else" and calls Jesus the "cornerstone" (Acts 4:11-12), emphasizing Christ's necessary role as the basis of the Church.

This affirmation of the Saviour's "uniqueness" derives from the Lord's own words. He stated that he came "to give his life in ransom for the many" (Mk 10:45), that is, for humanity, as St Paul explains when he writes: "One died for all" (2 Cor 5:14; cf. Rom 5:18). Christ won universal salvation with the gift of his own life; no other mediator has been established by God as Saviour. The unique value of the sacrifice of the Cross must

¹⁵ John L. Allen, "Doubts about Dialogue," *National Catholic Reporter*, August 27, 1999.

http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/1999c/082799/082799a.htm

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Redeemer of Man*, Encyclical *Redemptoris Hominis* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1976), n. 13,14, pp. 41,42,44.

always be acknowledged in the destiny of every man.

Since Christ brings about salvation through his Mystical Body, which is the Church, the way of salvation is connected essentially with the church. The axiom *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*—"outside the Church there is no salvation"—stated by St Cyprian (Epist. 73,21; PL 1123AB), belongs to the Christian tradition and was included in the Fourth Lateran Council (DS 802), in the Bull *Unam sanctam* of Boniface VIII (DS 870) and in the Council of Florence (*Decretum pro Jacobitis*, DS 1351).

The axiom means that for those who are not ignorant of the fact that the Church has been established as necessary by God through Jesus Christ, there is an obligation to enter the Church and remain in her in order to attain salvation (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 14). For those however, who have not received the Gospel proclamation, as I wrote in the Encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, salvation is accessible in mysterious ways, inasmuch as divine grace is granted to them by virtue of Christ's redeeming sacrifice, without external membership in the Church, but nonetheless always in relation to her (cf. n. 10). It is a "mysterious relationship": mysterious for those who receive the grace, because they do not know the Church and sometimes even outwardly reject her; it is also mysterious in itself, because it is linked to the saving mystery of grace, which includes an essential reference to the Church founded by the Saviour.

In order to take effect, saving grace requires acceptance, co-operation, a yes to the divine gift: and this acceptance is, at least implicitly, oriented to Christ and the Church. Thus it can also be said that *sine Ecclesia nulla salus*—"without the Church there is no salvation": belonging to the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, however implicitly and indeed mysteriously, is an essential condition for salvation.¹⁷

We now turn to the developments of other Catholic theologians after Vatican II. The most well-known theologian who developed Catholic thinking on this subject during the council and in the years following was Karl Rahner. A German Jesuit theological professor, Rahner is often called the most influential Catholic theologian of the 20th century. Rahner coined and popularized the theory in which non-Christians are referred to as "anonymous Christians."¹⁸

Rahner's theory of "anonymous Christianity" is couched within the framework of his existentialist philosophy (Neo-Kantian Transcendental Thomism), in which every human being is said to have an awareness and experience of the transcendent reality, however vague and undefined as that may be. This existential experience of every person, Rahner says, is "grace, the free self-communication of God to his creature."¹⁹ Rahner, however, denies that this means that every person who has ever lived is or was an anonymous Christian. He states:

It is true that it would be wrong to go so far as to declare every man, whether he accepts the grace or not, an 'anonymous Christian.' Anyone who in his basic decision were really to deny and to reject his being ordered to God, who were to place himself decisively in opposition to his own concrete being, should not be designated a 'theist', even an anonymous 'theist'; only someone who gives—even if it be ever so confusedly—the glory to *God* should be thus designated.... But if in this way he believes in deed and in truth in the holy mystery of God, if he does not suppress this truth but leaves it free play, then the grace of this truth by which he allows himself to be led is always already the grace of the Father in his Son. And anyone who has let himself be taken hold of by this grace can be called with every right an 'anonymous Christian'. This name implicitly signifies that this fundamental actuation of a man, like all actuations, cannot and does not want to stop in its anonymous state but strives towards an explicit expression, towards its full name.²⁰

¹⁷ John Paul II, General Audience, May 31, 1995. *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, June 7, 1995, p 11.

¹⁸ Rahner developed his theory of "anonymous Christians" in a number of essays, which have been published in his *Theological Investigations*, 23 vols., (Baltimore and New York: Helicon, 1961-69; Seabury/Crossroad, 1977-) "Anonymous Christians," VI:390-398; "Atheism and Implicit Christianity," IX:145-164; "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church," XII:161-178; "Observations on the Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian,'" XIV:280-294; "Anonymous and Explicit Faith," XVI:52-59; "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation," XVI:199-224; "Religious Feeling Inside and Outside the Church," XVII:228-242.

¹⁹ Karl Rahner, "Anonymous Christians," *Theological Investigations*, VI:390.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 394-395 (emphasis original).

While *at least parts of* Rahner's theory *still* remain popular in *some* Catholic circles, it has not been left uncriticized. The somewhat more conservative Catholic theologian, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, has criticized it for leading to relativism. However, Von Balthasar himself has suggested that God's desire that all people be saved (1 Ti 2:4) gives us the hope that God somehow will leave hell empty.²¹ More liberal Catholic theologians, such as Hans Küng, have criticized Rahner for not going far enough. According to Rahner's theory, non-Christians are still anonymous Christians, still making Christ and the Catholic Church somehow still necessary for salvation.²² Not surprisingly, Rahner's theory has not proved popular at all among Catholics actively involved in dialogue with non-Christians because referring to Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, etc., as anonymous Christians is highly offensive to them.

One of the more recent Catholic scholars of international reputation to develop a theory of salvation for non-Christians was the Belgian theologian Jacques Dupuis (1923-2004). Dupuis, a Jesuit, spent 36 years teaching theology in India. In 1984 he was called from India to teach theology at the prestigious Gregorian University in Rome. Dupuis' views clearly eclipsed the Vatican II teaching about salvation still coming in some mysterious way from Christ through the Catholic Church. Dupuis' theory seems to come much closer to pluralism: non-Christian religions are means of salvation alongside Christianity, and not just *de facto* but *de iure*, according to God's plan. Even Dupuis, however, still held that Christ has a role as "universal savior" but not as "absolute savior." What this means for Dupuis is that God's "Eternal Word" existed before Christ and in certain ways is still apart from the incarnate Christ in other religions and cultures. Practically, though, Dupuis seems to hold that a Hindu is saved as a Hindu by his Hinduism. All religions are means of salvation. The purpose of Christian missionary efforts and inter-religious dialogue should be to "build up the reign of God." That seems to mean that Catholic missionary efforts should consist of helping Hindus be good Hindus, helping Buddhists be good Buddhists, etc. Dupuis published his theory in the book *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*.²³

Dupuis' book came to the attention of Cardinal Ratzinger of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and resulted in a disciplinary investigation against Dupuis. Several notable Catholic theologians and even a few members of the Roman Curia came to Dupuis' defense, including Bishop Michael Fitzgerald, then secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, who went on record as expressing his "debt of gratitude to Fr. Dupuis and his pioneering work."²⁴

Ratzinger and the CDF, however, were not dissuaded and in 2001 issued an official "Notification" against the book. The notification was softer than an out-and-out condemnation for heresy. Instead, it cited from Dupuis' book a number of "ambiguous statements and insufficient explanations" from which could be derived "erroneous and harmful opinions."²⁵

Fr. Dupuis is not the only Catholic theologian who has been advocating religious pluralism, nor the only one being disciplined by the CDF for that reason.²⁶ In fact, in two major essays written in the 1990s, Cardinal Ratzinger identified religious pluralism as the most serious doctrinal challenge facing the Catholic Church today. At the heart of pluralism, according to Ratzinger, is relativism, which leads to indifferentism, evidenced by a radical decline in traditional missionary work and efforts by Roman Catholics around the world.²⁷

²¹ "Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

²² Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976), p. 89-100.

²³ English translation published by Orbis Press, Maryknoll, New York, 1997.

²⁴ John L. Allen, "Rome Sends Mixed Signals on Jesuit Contributions," *National Catholic Reporter*, April 27, 2001.

<http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2001b/042701/042701f.htm>.

²⁵ The text of the Notification may be found on the Vatican website:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20010124_dupuis_en.html

²⁶ For a brief survey of various other contemporary Catholic theologians' theories of salvation for non-Christians and official Vatican statements, see Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism: New Edition* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), pp 379-390.

²⁷ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures," Address given to the presidents of the Asian bishops' conferences, Hong Kong, March 2-5, 1993, <<http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/RATZHONG.HTM>> and "Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith

For those reasons and others, Cardinal Ratzinger as prefect for the CDF issued in the year 2000, with the pope's express approval, a document called *Dominus Iesus*, "Jesus Is Lord." The document affirms the more recent magisterial teaching that Christ is the only Savior and that the Catholic Church is somehow still necessary for salvation. While non-Catholic (Protestant) churches may have elements of the true faith and religion, they are not true churches. The Church of Christ subsists in its fullness only in the Catholic Church. Reaching back to the magisterium of Pope Pius XII, *Dominus Iesus* declares non-Christian religions to be "in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation" (DI 22). While it seems that the Vatican has been trying to apply the brakes to the trend toward full-blown religious pluralism, Lutherans can take no comfort in a document that teaches stock Roman doctrine, that denies salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and that affirms salvation in its fullness is possible only in or with the Roman Church, headed by the pope as the vicar of Christ and the bishops in communion with the pope.²⁸

Now that Cardinal Ratzinger has become Pope Benedict XVI, we might reasonably expect to see this more "conservative" trend continue. Indications so far would seem so. The new pope continues to hold "courtesy meetings" with religious leaders of Judaism and Islam, as did his predecessor, but some of the optimism of John Paul II is clearly more restrained with Benedict XVI. Instead of offering more apologies to Jews for the Holocaust and to the Muslims for the Crusades, the new pope is making it clear that it is now time for Muslims and others to acknowledge the inherent rights of every human person, especially the right of religious freedom. After all the gestures of friendship and respect that John Paul II offered to Jews, Muslims, and other non-Christians, the Vatican now seems to be including in its statements to other religions the message: "It's time for you to start reciprocating." Trying to convince especially Muslims to agree to such reciprocity of religious freedom will probably be one of the Vatican's top priorities for years to come.

In this regard, it is interesting to note how one of the first changes that Benedict made in the Roman Curia seems to reflect this more conservative stance toward inter-religious relations. By Benedict's order, what was the curial department known as the Council for Interreligious Dialogue has been discontinued as a separate curial department and merged with another department, the Council for Culture. And the former president of the Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Bishop Gerald Fitzgerald, who had come to the public defense of Jacques Dupuis, and who was once considered by many Vatican watchers to be a rising star in Rome and on his way to becoming a cardinal and archbishop, has been transferred out of the Curia by Benedict and assigned to be the Vatican's ambassador to Cairo, Egypt. While the Cairo post is important enough in today's world, Vatican insiders consider the move a clear "Vatican career ender" for Fitzgerald.²⁹

At the same time as we observe what appears to be a little conservative Roman correcting of overly optimistic views of non-Christian religions since Vatican II, it is also safe to assume that progressive Catholic theologians will continue to work on and promote theories of religious pluralism. They are fully aware of how some theological theories that were once considered suspect or even heretical by Rome fifty or a hundred or one hundred fifty years ago are today's conservative Roman orthodoxy. That, after all, is the story of many doctrinal developments in the Roman Catholic Church.

Today," an address given to the presidents of the Doctrinal Commissions of the Bishops' Conferences of Latin America, Guadalajara, Mexico, May 1996, <<http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/RATZRELA.HTM>>

²⁸ For a more in depth analysis of *Dominus Iesus*, see John F. Brug, "The Only Saving Church," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 98:2 (Spring, 2001), pp. 131-134. [This article is available on the online essay file at www.wls.wels.net – WLS Library Staff]

²⁹ Cf. Sandro Magister, "The New Curia of Benedict XVI Looks toward Asia," *Chiesa*, May 26, 2006. English edition posted online at <http://www.chinese.espressonline.it/print/Dettaglio.jsp?id=60561&eng=y>