

Salvation Outside the Church?

by Sebastian R. Fama

The Catholic Church is the one true Church established by Jesus Christ. Therefore, some conclude, only Catholics can be saved. In a sense that sounds reasonable. However, it does not consider the mercy of God or Church teaching. The stricter view is based on a misreading of a papal bull written by Pope Eugene IV. It reads in part:

The most Holy Roman Church firmly believes, professes and preaches that none of those existing outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans, **but also Jews and heretics and schismatics**, can have a share in life eternal; but that **they will go into the eternal fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels, unless before death they are joined with Her**; and that so important is the unity of this ecclesiastical body that **only those remaining within this unity can profit by the sacraments of the Church unto salvation**, and they alone can receive an eternal recompense for their fasts, their almsgivings, their other works of Christian piety and the duties of a Christian soldier. **No one, let his almsgiving be as great as it may, no one, even if he pours out his blood for the Name of Christ, can be saved, unless he remains within the bosom and the unity of the Catholic Church** (*Cantate Domino*).

Cantate Domino was a document that came out of the Council of Florence. The Council of Florence was called to heal the schism between the Eastern and Western churches. Eugene IV was trying to bring back lost sheep. Twice he speaks of remaining in the Catholic Church. You can only remain in the Catholic Church if you are in her to begin with. When he condemns pagans, Jews, Heretics and Schismatics he is speaking to those who would leave the faith to join one of these groups. In short, he was addressing people who knew better.

But if only the Catholic Church has the complete plan of salvation, how would it be possible for a non-Catholic to get to heaven? Vatican Council II addressed this point: "**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 achieve eternal salvation**" (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* no. 16). Those who are *truly* unaware of what God requires of them are not held responsible; rather they are judged by what they did with the truth they had.

Many Traditionalists claim Vatican II ignored earlier councils and introduced something new. Thus, it is invalid and to be ignored. This of course is false. The Church's teachings before and after the council are the same. Before Vatican II, children were taught from the Baltimore Catechisms. The following is from *Catechism number 3*:

185. Who is punished in hell? Those are punished in hell **who die in mortal sin**; they are deprived of the vision of God and suffer dreadful torments, especially that of fire, for all eternity.

69. What three things are necessary to make a sin mortal? To make a sin mortal these three things are necessary: First, the thought, desire, word, action, or omission must be seriously wrong; second, **the sinner must know that it is seriously wrong**; third, **the sinner must fully consent**.

So only a mortal sin can damn you to hell. And to be guilty of a mortal sin, you must know that you are committing one! **Hence, if you do not know, you are not guilty**. Jesus teaches us the same thing in John 9:40-41: "Some of the Pharisees near Him heard this, and they said to Him, 'Are we also blind?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say 'we see,' your guilt remains.'" In other words, because they knew better, they were guilty of sin. Likewise, if they did not know better, they would not be guilty.

Jesus makes the same point elsewhere. At the Last Supper He said to His apostles: "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But all this they will do to you on my account, because they do not know Him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, **they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin**" (John 15:22).

Prior to Vatican II Pope Pius IX said the following in, "*On Promotion of False Doctrines*:"

We all know that those who suffer from invincible ignorance with regard to our holy religion, **if they carefully keep the precepts of the natural law** which have been written by God in the hearts of all men, if they are prepared to obey God, and if they lead a virtuous and dutiful life, **can, by the power of divine light and grace, attain eternal life. For God, who knows completely the minds and souls, the thoughts and habits of all men, will not permit, in accord with His infinite goodness and mercy, anyone who is not guilty of a voluntary fault to suffer eternal punishment** (no. 7).

He said essentially the same thing in "*On the Church in Austria*:"

It must, of course, be held as a matter of faith that outside the apostolic Roman Church no one can be saved, that the Church is the only ark of salvation, and that whoever does not enter it will perish in the flood. **On the other hand, it must likewise be held as certain that those who are affected by ignorance of the true religion, if it is invincible ignorance, are not subject to any guilt in this matter before the eyes of the Lord** (no. 7).

The invincibly ignorant would not include those who think that all religions are the same. That would be indifference. Jesus said, "**I am the way**" (John 14:6), **not a way**. The person who is invincibly ignorant honestly believes, though erroneously, that he is going the right way.

St. Augustine's position is also consistent with Vatican II. "**When we speak of within and without in relation to the Church, it is the position of the heart that we must consider, not that of the body.... All who are within [the Church] in heart are saved in the unity of the ark** (*On Baptism, Against the Donatists* 5:28 [39] [A.D. 394]).

Clement of Rome wrote, "**Let us go through all generations** and learn that in generation after generation the Master has given a place of repentance for **those willing to turn to him**. Those who repented for their sins, appeased God in praying, and **received salvation, even though they were aliens to God**" (*Letter to the Corinthians*, no. 7 [A.D. 95]).

Paul clearly teaches that we are judged by our intentions. "Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose **the purposes of the heart**. Then every man will receive his commendation from God" (1 Corinthians 4:5).

He expands on this in Romans 2:13-16, "For it is not the hearers of the Law who are righteous before God, but **the doers of the Law who will be justified. When Gentiles who have not the Law do by nature what the Law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the Law. They show that what the Law requires is written on their hearts**, while their conscience also bears witness and **their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them** on that day when, according to my gospel, **God judges the secrets of men** by Christ Jesus."

Their conflicting thoughts would accuse them if they suspected but ignored the fact that God required them to be members of His Church. Not wanting to know the truth is just as bad as knowing it and rejecting it. As Vatican II put it "**Hence, those cannot be saved, who knowing that the Catholic Church was founded through Jesus Christ, by God, as something necessary, still refuse to enter it or remain in it**" (*Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity* no. 7). Their conflicting thoughts would excuse them if they truly sought God but were unaware of this requirement.

Dissenting Catholics would do well to read the letter of the Holy Office concerning Fr. Leonard Feeney, who dissented on this issue back in 1949. It states in part, "**But this dogma [No Salvation outside the Church] is to be understood as the Church itself understands it. For our Savior 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.**"