

Outside the Church There Is No Salvation

April 26, 2015

Fourth Sunday of Easter
Readings: Acts 4.8-12;
1 John 3.1-2;
John 10.11-18**By Rev. Joseph Koterski, S.J.**

The final line in the remarks by St. Peter in today's first reading raises some important doctrinal issues. Asked by the Temple authorities about the power by which he had healed a cripple, Peter answers in a simple but striking way: "Be it known to you all . . . that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well. This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4.10-12).

On this occasion the bold claims made by the apostles earned them a stern warning. There are similarly strong assertions elsewhere in the Scriptures. In the commission that Jesus gives his disciples just before the Ascension, for instance, he says: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16.16). And when Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, apparently hoping to be a believer in secret, Jesus informs him of the need to be baptized: "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless one is born anew [from above], he cannot see the kingdom of God... Amen, amen, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3.3, 5).

The directive here cannot be interpreted as simply insisting on baptism for an individual like Nicodemus who apparently wanted to be privately committed to Jesus without having to disclose his commitment publicly. Jesus's answer is not about whether one's commitment must become publicly known. Rather, he makes a universal statement about the need for baptism.

The Doctrinal Issues

Reflection on what has been revealed by Christ in this regard has led the Church to formulate a number of doctrines that may strike modern ears as excessive, if not simply unacceptable: the uniqueness of Jesus in saving us, the necessity of baptism, and the indispensability of the Church for salvation. Insisting that Jesus is the sole mediator between God and humanity (CCC 2674, Denzinger 1526, 3370) may rankle minds that have grown accustomed to a live-and-let-live toleration of difference. Maintaining that baptism is necessary for salvation (Denzinger 219, 4670) and that outside the Church there is no salvation (CCC 846, Denzinger 802, 4136) seems to many best ignored as some outdated relic of a triumphalist Church. What has been doctrinally defined, however, cannot be so easily confined to the scrap heap of history or conveniently forgotten as it awaits some sort of mending in the theological repair shop.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* shows that these doctrines are fundamentally connected. When asking, for instance, how we are to understand the affirmation "outside the Church there is no salvation," the *Catechism* defends the position as one that was often repeated by the Fathers. Augustine uses it, as does Ambrose. Much depends, of course, on how the phrase is to be understood, and so the *Catechism* explains it this way: "it means that all salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is his Body" (CCC 846).

The text then reinforces the interconnection by citing the Second Vatican Council's *Lumen Gentium*:

Basing itself on Scripture and Tradition, the Council teaches that the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, 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 to enter it or to remain in it. (LG 14)

The *Catechism* is able to make these strong assertions without demurrals or embarrassment because of the clear evidence for them in the Scriptures as well as in Tradition. The final line in this text from *Lumen Gentium* makes an important qualification, however, by stating that exclusion from salvation applies specifically to those who know that through Christ God established the Church as indispensable and yet who still refuse to enter or remain in it.

To clarify that this affirmation is not aimed at any who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his Church, the *Catechism* cites another crucial passage from *Lumen Gentium*:

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. (LG 16; cf. DS 3866-3872)

Avoiding Presumptions

What we have here is a warning against two misleading presumptions that might arise in any of us all too easily: the presumption that no one could ever be saved without baptism, and the presumption that everyone (or virtually everyone) is saved, regardless of their baptismal status. The former position fails to take account of the fact that only God really knows a person's conscience, while the latter treats baptism as if it were needed only to make one a member of the Church and does not constitute a means that Christ himself established as something required for salvation.

The epistemological humility recommended here by the warnings against presumption should prevent us from erring in a number of ways. First, it should prevent us from forgetting the real efficacy of the sacraments that Christ the Head entrusted to the Church, his Body, for sanctifying us with the graces that he won by the redemptive sacrifice of his life. It should also help us by insisting on the same distinction the Church regularly urges us to make when dealing with moral matters: invincible ignorance removes the responsibility that would be present if a person had or should have had sufficient knowledge.

Importantly, the *Catechism's* interpretation of the formula "outside the Church there is no salvation" stresses not only that God is not bound by the rules that he established for the Church, but also that the task Christ imposed on the Church ever remains, to preach the gospel to everyone and thereby fulfill Jesus' command to baptize all nations (Mt 28.19):

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. (CCC 848)

Not Intolerance

What may be the greatest source of difficulty in grasping and accepting this part of the Church's teachings is a propensity to apply our democratic assumptions about equality, liberty, and the peaceful toleration of differences to questions for which these assumptions are not relevant. Democratic assumptions about equality of all before the law are not relevant to the question of the truth or falsity of divine revelation about salvation as disclosed to us by Jesus.

Dogmatic assertions about the necessity of baptism and the indispensable role played by the Church are statements about what each and every person needs for salvation, not statements attempting to curtail anyone's civil liberties. Assessments about the truth of some religious claims and the falsity of others are not invitations to intolerance; rather, they provide the reason for taking discussion about religion seriously, for there is nothing more important for our eternal destiny than knowing which religious claims are true and which are not.

For better understanding here, it may be helpful to bear in mind the difference between *redemption*, *sanctification*, and *salvation*. Someone may, of course, want to use these terms in a nonstandard way, but for Christianity *redemption* refers primarily to what Christ did for all humanity on the cross. On Calvary he suffered and died for everyone – those who lived before his lifetime, during it, and afterward. But not everyone accepts the grace he won for us by his redemptive act. What is needed is our free acceptance of the gift of his grace, so that our sins can be forgiven and our wounds healed. This is the process of *sanctification*, and it requires our voluntary cooperation. *Salvation* refers, finally, to reaching heaven and there enjoying the secure and endless union with God that is beatitude.

The Church's teaching on this question of salvation arises from a desire to be conformed entirely to what Christ has revealed, even while making the necessary distinctions between the obligations that Christ gave to the Church and God's power to know hearts in a way that entirely surpasses any human power. The *Catechism* is helpful in clarifying the necessity of baptism, the indispensable role that the Church plays in salvation, and the infinite power of God to be completely just and merciful in dealing with each and every person.

About the Author

Rev. Joseph Koterski, S.J. teaches philosophy at Fordham University. Among his recent publications is An Introduction to Medieval Philosophy: Some Basic Concepts (2009). He has produced lecture courses on Aristotle's Ethics, on Natural Law and Human Nature, and most recently on Biblical Wisdom Literature for The Teaching Company, and courses on Spiritual Theology and on John Paul II's Veritatis splendor for the International Catholic University

FOR FURTHER READING

Rev. Robert Barron, "How Many Are Saved?" available at: <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column.php?n=2383>
Response by Ralph Martin, available at: <http://www.renewalministries.net/wordpress>

Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitonum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, edited by Peter Hünermann, 43rd edition, and edited by Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash for the English Edition: *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2012).

Dominus Jesus ("On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church), available at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con

Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012).

Rev. Alfred McBride, O. Praem., "Is There Salvation outside the Church?" available at: <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=674>.

"No Salvation outside the Church," *The Father William Most Collection*, available at: <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/most/getwork.cfm?worknum=71>.

IN SHORT . . .

- ***The uniqueness of Jesus in saving us, the necessity of baptism, and the indispensability of the Church for salvation are doctrines that may strike modern ears as excessive or unacceptable.***
- ***But dogmatic assertions about the necessity of baptism and the indispensable role of the Church are about what every person needs for salvation, not about curtailing anyone's civil liberties.***
- ***Exclusion from salvation applies specifically to those who know that through Christ God established the Church as indispensable and who still refuse to enter or remain in it.***
- ***Two misleading presumptions might arise: that no one could ever be saved without baptism, and that everyone is saved, regardless of baptismal status.***
- ***The Catechism stresses not only that God is not bound by the rules he established for the Church, but also that the task of preaching the gospel to everyone ever remains.***