

## Step by Step

### Can Non-Christians Be Saved?

By Kenneth J. Howell

**OBJECTOR ONE:** Doesn't the Catholic Church teach that there can be no salvation outside the Church? Does that mean that no people of other religions can be in heaven with God? What gives the Catholic Church the right to think it can judge whether non-Christians will be saved?

**CATHOLIC:** The Catholic dogma is indeed that outside the Church there is no salvation, but your interpretation of what this dogma means is flawed. The Church does not presume to know who will be in heaven with God. It makes no judgments in this matter whatsoever. The ancient phrase *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (literally, "outside the Church no salvation") has been a widely accepted principle since the earliest days of Christianity. Since the Church has no authority to deny long-established principles, it cannot simply throw out time-honored truths to suit the current fads of thinking.

**OBJECTOR ONE:** But if the Church makes no judgments of any person, that is inconsistent with the principle that outside the Church there is no salvation. That principle says quite clearly that anyone who is not Catholic will not be saved.

**CATHOLIC:** No, the principle says that the Church is the necessary instrument for people to find salvation. The Second Vatican Council affirmed that the Catholic Church is the "sole Church of Christ" that Christ established on the earth (*Lumen Gentium* 8). In the teaching and sacramental ministry of the Church, Jesus Christ is made known to the world for the salvation of the human race. No one would have access to Christ's salvation if the Church were not in the world. In that sense the Church is necessary. But Christ's salvation is not limited to the boundaries of formal membership in the Church. In other words, we know from Christ's teaching in the Bible that the Church is necessary, but the Church holds out hope for those outside the Church that they too may be saved.

**OBJECTOR TWO:** I have to disagree with both of you. I believe Scripture makes it abundantly clear that there is no other name under heaven than Christ himself by which one can be saved. Acts 4:12 makes that clear. The Catholic Church's dogma is confused. It places too much emphasis on the Church and not enough on Christ himself. But then the Second Vatican Council, if what you say is true, claims that the Church, rather than Christ, is necessary and at the same time says that people who don't accept Christ can still be saved.

**CATHOLIC:** Acts 4:12 says that salvation is found in no one other than Christ, "for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." This verse and many others make it abundantly clear that Christ is the only Savior of the world. That is precisely why the Church says that its existence in the world is necessary for salvation: because we would not know of Christ had it not been for the Church. In Acts 4:12, Peter is pointing to

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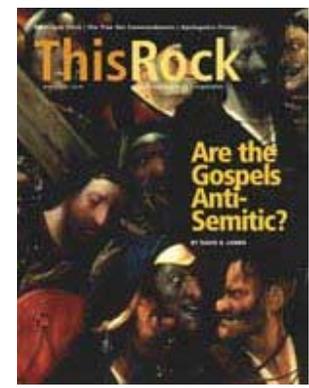
#### CATHOLIC QUOTES

"Deo Gratias!"

-- [Oliver Plunket](#), Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of all Ireland, Saint; after being sentenced to death, he joyfully declared "Thanks be to God" in front of all; on July 11, 1681, Plunket was the last martyr at Tyburn, victim of the notorious Lord Shaftesbury and his chief perjured witness, Titus Oates, both of whom were subsequently thrown in jail.

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Christ as the Savior, but he does so as an authoritative witness to Christ, as his chosen apostle. The people to whom Peter was preaching would not know of Christ except through his witness as the leader of the Church. So we can say that the proclamation of Christ by the Church is necessary for salvation. Outside of Christ there is no salvation and, by implication, outside the Church there is no salvation.

**OBJECTOR ONE:** Wait a minute. If you agree with this Fundamentalist that belief in Christ is necessary for salvation, then you are judging non-Christians. You're saying they cannot be saved.

**OBJECTOR TWO:** But if you say that non-Christians can be saved, then you're denying the necessity of Christ coming into the world to save sinners. Your position is clear: People outside of Christ can be saved. But this is also clearly wrong. The Catholic position is really confused because it says that Christ and the Church are necessary for salvation while also saying that people outside of Christ and the Church can be saved.

**CATHOLIC:** It is not as confused as you imagine. Let's make some important distinctions: The Church is necessary, as I have said, because no one will be saved apart from Christ. If the Church were suddenly taken out of the world, the knowledge of Christ would be lost. So I agree with our Fundamentalist friend here on the necessity of Christ and the Church for salvation, but he insists also that faith in Christ must be conscious and explicit for a person to be saved. Am I accurate in stating your position?

**OBJECTOR TWO:** Yes. The Bible says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). I don't know so much about belonging to the Church. If you mean the Roman Catholic Church, then the Church is definitely not necessary for salvation. If you mean the Church generically—that is, the body of Christ—then I might agree. But my point is that the Catholic Church can't logically claim that Christ is necessary for salvation and also that non-Christians have the possibility of salvation.

**CATHOLIC:** We *can* claim both because we know from Scripture that Christ and the Church are necessary, but we also *don't know* how many people without a conscious and explicit knowledge of Christ may still be united to him in a way known only to God.

**OBJECTOR ONE:** Let me see if I understand you. Christ and the Church are necessary but the Church also allows that there may be those outside the Church who are united to Christ without knowing that they are united to him. That position is not as harsh and condemning as I first thought but I still think that it comes down to the same thing. You insist on salvation only through Christ.

**CATHOLIC:** Guilty as charged. The Catholic Church insists on salvation only through Christ because it is the unchanging witness of Scripture and Christian Tradition. We cannot surrender the centrality of Christ or the Church without abandoning our faith and heritage. But you are also right when you say that there may be people who are united to Christ while not being aware of it. We don't say that we know there are such people. We say that because we *don't know* if those outside the Church are cut off from Christ.

**OBJECTOR TWO:** I agree on insisting on salvation only through Christ, but then you surrender that very belief when you allow the possibility that non-Christians may be united to Christ without faith.

**CATHOLIC:** We would be surrendering our belief in the necessity of Christ only if we agreed with you that the knowledge of Christ must be explicit and conscious. Since you believe that the only kind of knowledge of Christ that one can have is conscious, I see why you would say that we are surrendering our insistence on Christ and the Church.

**OBJECTOR TWO:** But where do you get the idea that people can be united with Christ without an explicit faith in him? Certainly not from the Bible.

**CATHOLIC:** The Bible speaks of a merciful God who wants all to come to repentance and to a knowledge of the truth (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). God has established the Church as the means by which all people can come to him. But the question naturally arises about those who never hear of Christ's salvation through the ministry of the Church. Are they thereby excluded from salvation even though their ignorance is no fault of their own?

**OBJECTOR TWO:** All people are guilty before God and can make no special claim. Doesn't the Bible say that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23)?

**CATHOLIC:** Yes, all human beings are born with original sin (except Mary, but that's for another discussion), but

Paul also said that "God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all" (Rom. 11:32). God's ultimate purpose is not condemnation but salvation. This salvation normally comes through the ministry of the Church as people embrace Christ and the Church he founded. The question before us is this: What about those who are hindered from the normal means of hearing the gospel through the Church's ministry? If an explicit and conscious knowledge were absolutely necessary, then children who die before they can understand the gospel would be lost. This also applies to people who are mentally disabled and don't have the capacity to understand the gospel through ordinary use of language. Or again, what about those in world history who never had the chance to hear the gospel?

**OBJECTOR TWO:** I can't say. I don't know what God will do for such people. All we know is what is revealed in the Bible, namely, that faith in Christ is absolutely necessary.

**CATHOLIC:** We *don't know* what God will do for those outside the Church, so it's best not to presume to judge. We can only hope and pray that God will have mercy on them. That's why I said that the Catholic Church's position on this matter is not contradictory. On the one hand, we know that the usual and expected means of salvation is being united with Christ (cf. Rom. 6:1–5), but we also know from the Bible that "the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Ps. 103:8). We hope that those who, through no fault of their own, never know the gospel in a conscious way may be united to Christ in a way known only to God. We believe that God is sovereign and loving. He will judge people according to their knowledge. If they live in a way that accords with their best knowledge of God, we trust that he will be merciful to them.

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