Can only Christians be saved?

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> *God our Saviour . . . desires all men to be saved and to 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.*
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> (I Timothy 2:4-6)

Here side by side we have two basic Christian truths which somehow have to be held together in creative tension: God wants every single human being to be saved, but the one and only way to that salvation is Jesus Christ. Almost inevitably there have been times when one of these truths has been overstressed in a way which threatened to undermine the other.

From the beginning of the Christian Church, it has been taught that Jesus is the only Saviour. St Peter made this clear to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem: '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 4:12). Because of the intimate bond between Christ and his Body, the Church, it has been stressed that the community of the Church is itself necessary for salvation. This idea was crystallised in the ancient formula 'outside the Church, no salvation' (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*). Some have interpreted this as condemning to damnation all those who are not visible members of the Church, although the teaching authority of the Church has never gone that far.

Today however there is a tendency to highlight instead God's desire for the salvation of all (the Book of Jonah, Wisdom 8:1, Acts 10:34-35). Over the past five hundred years, the discovery of new lands has challenged the Christian to think more carefully about the possibility of salvation for the non-Christian. Among the teeming millions in Asia today, only between one and two per cent are Christians, and throughout the world there are vast numbers of people who are clearly seekers after the good and the true, but who have no belief in Jesus Christ. Some writers stress God's will for the salvation of all humanity in a way which undermines the uniqueness of Christ as the only Saviour. In order to give value to other paths to salvation, Jesus's uniqueness as God-made-man is often rejected, and he is understood simply as a great man, one of a number of great prophets and teachers who were especially open to God's revelation of himself.

The challenge to the Christian today is to hold onto both truths in a way which is faithful to the Christian Tradition but which allows for a genuine development in our understanding of those truths. The Christian cannot compromise on the absolute uniqueness of Christ as the

only Mediator: he is the only Saviour because he alone among all human beings is a man who is personally God. On the other hand, the Christian must take very seriously God's desire for the salvation of all, the vast majority of whom do not believe that Jesus is Lord and Saviour.

The question which forms the title of this pamphlet can only be answered if we are reasonably clear what we mean by being 'saved' and by 'Christians'.

'Salvation'

Very often salvation is understood simply as our reaching heaven by living good and loving lives free from serious sin. In our efforts to achieve this, we need occasional helps from God. Having opened the gates of heaven for all, Jesus teaches us the way to get there and gives us an inspiring example of how to live our lives in doing so. If this is all there is to salvation, it is not difficult to see why Jesus's importance to us here and now can be undervalued. There are many other great and impressive teachers and examples of goodness and holiness. If all we need to be saved is guidance, inspiration and occasional help as we climb the mountain to God, then there are many 'prophets' we can turn to, and God can work mysteriously anywhere in anyone.

But for the Christian, salvation is primarily about God coming down the mountain in person to be with us as one of us. God crosses the man-made gulf between himself and humanity, placing himself in our midst as a fellow human being so that we can become at-one with him and be drawn back into the inner life of God. There are many prophets and teachers, but there is only one human being who is God-with-us. There is only one hu-

man point of contact with God, and it is only by being united with him, with Jesus of Nazareth, that we can be taken into the heart of God, into 'heaven'. That is why Jesus is the only Saviour, the only Mediator. Not even the greatest of other religious leaders, no matter how inspiring their teachings and their lives, can substitute for Jesus Christ. Only someone who is both God and man can be our Saviour! The Christian believes therefore that anyone who is saved, who is taken up into the eternal dwelling-place of God, is saved by Christ, whether that person recognises him or not. There is salvation in no-one else.

'Christians'

For most people a 'Christian' is clearly someone who knowingly accepts Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. This faith is perfected by being incorporated into Christ, into his Body the Church, by baptism. Because of the central truth that Christ is the only Saviour and that a person can only be saved 'in Christ', some theologians now define Christianity in much wider terms, to include all men and women of good will, but this is surely a distortion of the word. Disregarding infants, a Christian is someone who has an explicit faith in Christ, who believes that he is God the Son made flesh who died for all (Romans 5:18) and rose from the dead. Given that Jesus is the only Saviour, the central question for this pamphlet is whether or not one has to have an explicit faith in him in order to be at-one with him and therefore saved by him. And given that faith in Jesus has from the very beginning always been a communal faith, involving discipleship within the community of the Church of Christ, we have to ask also whether some kind of

membership of the Church is necessary for salvation.

Outside the Church no salvation

It is clear in the New Testament that there is no such thing as an isolated, purely private faith in Jesus. There is no Church-less Christianity. To be a Christian is to be a member of Christ's Body, the visible Church.

Taken literally, the ancient formula 'outside the Church no salvation' would mean that anyone not a visible member of the Church would be certain of damnation. This rigid interpretation has never been officially taught by the Church, and has been explicitly rejected several times in the last hundred years. But the Church still insists that all salvation comes *in some way* through the Church to those outside its visible limits, even if they have not heard the Gospel and do not believe in Christ. It is important to stress here that the Church's doctrine on this point is still developing. Various theologians have suggested ideas as to how the Church is involved in the salvation of those who are not visible members, but the Church's official teaching is left undefined as further reflection continues. Words such as 'in some way' are often found in the Church's documents.

The insistence of the early Christians on membership of the Church as necessary for salvation must be seen in context. The central truth being defended was that Christ was the only Saviour. We are united with Christ in his Church, and that Church is entered through baptism. The Gospel states that we cannot enter God's kingdom without baptism (John 3:5), and the Church was often compared with Noah's ark: those not on board would unfortunately be drowned (cf. I Peter 3:18-22).

The formula goes back to Origen and St Cyprian in

the third century, mainly to warn those already inside the Church against schism or to reject reliance on the Jewish Law for salvation rather than Christ himself. The positive teaching was that we encounter the saving presence of Christ in the communion of his Church. It was often expressed as a negative statement about those 'outside the Church', but this was not within the context of a general principle about the salvation of those who did not believe in Christ.

An implicit faith

From very early in the history of the Church, various theologians allowed for substitutes for entry into the Church other through the sacrament of baptism. Christ's work as Saviour reached back in time to those who lived before his coming, and martyrdom sufficed for the person put to death before receiving baptism. Gradually the idea of 'baptism of desire' was developed, not only as an explicit desire for baptism but also as an implicit faith in Christ given by God to those beyond the reach of the Church's proclamation of the Gospel.

During the Middle Ages, although people knew of distant lands where the Gospel had not yet been preached, little theological thought was given to the problem. In the known world, it was assumed that the Gospel had been preached sufficiently everywhere, and that therefore any unbelievers were to blame for their unbelief. The Church's negative attitude towards non-Christians was strengthened by threats from the economic power of the Jewish communities in Europe and from the military advances of the Muslims. In general, the doctrine of the necessity of the Church for salvation was accepted and

defended, although theologians such as St Thomas Aquinas allowed for the possibility of an implicit faith in Christ manifested in a good and God-fearing life.

From the late fifteenth century onwards, the great geographical discoveries demanded deeper reflection on the whole question of unbelief, especially since moral goodness was encountered among the 'pagans' in the new lands. St Robert Bellarmine and others developed the distinction between membership of the Church 'in reality' and 'in desire', and various theologians gave thought to ways in which people outside the visible Church could be united to Christ and thus saved. Some suggested that unbelievers belonged to the invisible soul rather than the visible body of the Church, and the concept of 'baptism of desire' was developed to include any pagan in invincible ignorance of Christ who genuinely sought to do God's will by following his conscience.

In the Catholic Church (which then of course counted Protestants among those 'outside the Church'), the Jansenist crisis forced theologians to think more seriously about the status of those 'outside the Church' and about God's will for the salvation of all. The Jansenist statement that 'no grace is granted outside the Church' was condemned as an error by Pope Clement IX in 1713, but it was left unresolved whether this grace comes through the Church or joins a person invisibly to the Church.

Invincible ignorance

In the nineteenth century the Church felt it necessary to speak out against the prevailing 'indifferentism' which implied that there was a choice of equally valid paths to salvation, but this was accompanied by a growing of-

ficial rejection of any rigid interpretation of 'outside the Church no salvation'.

In his allocution *Singulari Quadam* in 1854, Pope Pius IX reaffirmed the traditional belief that salvation could only be found in the Church as the one ark, but also taught that invincible ignorance excuses a person from embracing Christianity. If a person does not know Christ through no fault of his own, he will not be condemned. Only those *culpably* outside the Church are denied salvation, and as the Pope asked, 'Who could presume for himself the ability to set the boundaries of such ignorance?' In his later encyclical *Quanto conficiamur moerore* in 1863, Pius once again stressed membership of the Church, but added:

> It is known to us and to you that those who are in invincible ignorance of our most holy religion, but who carefully observe the natural law and its precepts which God has written in the hearts of all men, who are ready to obey God and to lead an honest and upright life, can through the power of the divine light and grace attain eternal life.

This teaching was reaffirmed by the Holy Office in 1949 against Fr Feeney in Boston who was preaching a rigid interpretation of 'outside the Church no salvation', and was later excommunicated. Even when there is no explicit belief in Christ or the Church, faith, charity and a well-founded hope of salvation can exist. To gain eternal salvation, God accepts an implicit desire for the Church from someone who is invincibly ignorant, called implicit because 'it is contained in the good disposition of soul by which a man wants his will to be conformed to God's will'.

Vatican II

The fathers of Vatican II took up and developed this traditional teaching. They reaffirmed Christ as the one Mediator, 'the source of salvation for the whole world' (*Lumen Gentium*, CTS Do 349, 17) and 'the unique way for salvation' (*Lumen Gentium* 14). They also reaffirmed that the Church, in which Christ is made present to us, is necessary for salvation. The Church is the 'universal sacrament of salvation' (*Gaudium et Spes*, CTS Do 363, 45), the all-embracing means of salvation through which Christ communicates truth and grace to all (*Lumen Gentium* 8).

This grace is present and active outside the visible boundaries of the Church, working in an unseen way in the hearts of men and women of good will (*Gaudium et Spes 22*). This is true not only of individual non-Christians, but also of the various religious traditions to which they belong, although in varying degrees. Without giving way to indifferentism, Vatican II demanded that we look more positively at the great world faiths, seeing them to some extent as having a place in God's universal desire for salvation, and yet remembering always that there is no saving power which is not related to Christ: as he said himself, 'Apart from me, you can do nothing' (John 15:5).

Among these faiths, the Jews are highlighted as remaining most dear to God because of his irrevocable call, and the Muslims are seen too as included in God's plan for salvation. Nor is God far from those who 'in shadows and images seek the unknown God' (*Lumen Gentium* 16). Pope John Paul II later said of the followers of these world faiths that their firm belief 'is also an

effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body' (*Redemptor Hominis,* CTS Do 506, 6).

Article 16 of *Lumen Gentium* also includes the most important statement of the modern Church about the salvation of non-Christians, including agnostics and atheists:

> 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.
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> (*The Documents of Vatican II*, edited by W. Abbott, G. Chapman; cf *Ad Gentes* 7)

The Church, then, clearly gives a negative answer to the question posed by this pamphlet: No, it is *not* only Christians who can be saved. An explicit faith in Christ is indeed asked of everyone, but if a person does not have such a faith through no personal fault, then salvation is still possible, although it is Christ alone who can save him. This 'invincible ignorance' of Christ can happen not only in isolated regions where the Church is not present, but also in the heart of nominally Christian

communities where the light of the Gospel can often be obscured precisely by Christians themselves.

Those who do not explicitly believe in Christ can indeed be saved, but only by Christ, and it is still the teaching of Vatican II that the Church is somehow involved in that salvation. Nor does the possibility of salvation outside its visible boundaries excuse the Church from its work of proclaiming the Gospel or from asserting the uniqueness of Christ. As Pope Paul VI wrote:

> The religion of Jesus . . . objectively places man in relation with the plan of God, with his living presence and with his action; she (the Church) thus causes an encounter with the mystery of the divine paternity that bends over towards humanity. In other words, our religion effectively establishes with God an authentic and living relationship which the other religions do not succeed in doing, even though they have, as it were, their arms stretched out towards heaven.
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> (*Evangelii Nuntiandi,* CTS S 312, 53)

Salvation is not primarily about us reaching God by our good lives, or by our prayerful reaching up to God; it is about God himself reaching out to us in our godlessness and plunging himself into our human existence by the unique incarnation of his Son. Only by being at-one with Christ in an explicit or implicit faith can we be taken up into the life of God, 'through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit'. There is no other way to God, and the atheist who sincerely seeks to do good will be saved only by God's Spirit working unseen within him and binding him to the Christ he does not recognise.

The New Testament makes it clear that no-one can be saved without faith in God (Mark 16:16, Hebrews 11:6), and this must be a faith received as a gift from God himself and involving a response to God's unveiling and giving of himself. It involves a movement of our will to the God who has already moved towards us. This faith is possible for everyone, although the life of faith will be handicapped if it is not brought to perfection within the community of the Church. A person with such an implicit faith in God, and indeed in Christ himself, can perhaps be better understood if we reflect on the hidden presence of Christ in the whole of creation.

Christ among us

The doctrines of Creation, the Incarnation and the Resurrection remind us that no human being is totally cut off from Christ. Everyone has some living contact with him, whether recognised or not.

Firstly, it was through Christ that all things and every person came into being and now remains in being: 'All things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together' (Colossians 1:16-17; cf. John 1:1-4, Hebrews 1:3, I Corinthians 8:6). The cosmic Christ is present and active everywhere as the very ground of everything that exists.

Secondly, through his incarnation, the Son of God has plunged himself deep into the body of humanity and established himself at the heart of the network of human relationships which forms the human family. The human race is not a collection of separate individuals, but is like a human body, bound together by a mysterious bond of solidarity. By becoming a human being, 'the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every man' (*Gaudium et Spes* 22). There is no human

being who is not in some way united with Christ, the new head of the human race, and the brother and neighbour of each of us.

Thirdly, after passing through death on the cross as a ransom for the whole of humanity, objectively achieving the redemption of all, Christ's resurrection radically transformed his human existence in a way which took it beyond the normal limitations of time and space. Christ is now present to all peoples of all times and places, invisibly active as saving Lord among them. The saving fruitfulness of his once-for-all death on the cross is now universally available by the power of Easter to whoever places no obstacle and who opens his or her life to the presence of the risen Christ, known or unknown. That secret presence of Christ still needs to be illumined by the light of the Gospel, so that the response to God's grace can be healed, ennobled and brought to perfection (*Ad Gentes* 9 & 11).

Christ in others

Because the human race is in essence a single community, with Christ himself in solidarity with every human being through his incarnation and resurrection, there is a sense in which every person can be a sacrament of Christ and his salvation for his neighbour. We meet Christ through each other, and we unknowingly respond to him by our loving service of others, especially those in need. This is one message of Matthew 25:31-46. On Judgement Day, Christ divides the sheep from the goats, and welcomes the sheep because they have responded to his hidden presence: 'Truly, I say to you, as you did this to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' A right relationship with our fellow human beings

is a vital aspect of a right relationship with Christ, and thus of an implicit faith in him. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, people may not recognise him for who he is, but if they journey with him unseen in those in need, he will be for them 'the Way, the Truth and the Life' (John 14:6).

The Church and its Prayer

The risen Christ is present at the heart of the human race, but his presence is embodied in the community of the Church. The Church is the effective sign and instrument for uniting the world to God in Christ; its mission is directed to all peoples until the end of history, and it is a community endowed by Christ with the means of salvation for all. As has been said before, it has not been made clear how the Church is involved in the salvation of those who do not explicitly believe in Christ, but it is important to remember that the Church too is an integral part of the human community, the body of humanity, perhaps the heart of the human race. There is a sense therefore in which everyone is united to the Church to some degree, and it is through this community that Christ reaches out to the rest of humanity.

Any relationship with Christ, even an unrecognised one, is orientated towards membership of the visible community of Christ's disciples, and ultimately towards the heavenly gathering of the communion of saints. Christ's saving work always involves gathering people together around himself, and therefore all faith in Christ implies being at-one not only with Christ but also with one another.

Here and now the Church is effective in the worldwide

process of salvation through its prayer and worship. People are indeed saved outside the visible boundaries of the Church, but not without the spiritual assistance of the community to which everyone is bound in some way. In its prayer of intercession, the Church comes to God united to all humanity, entering the presence of God with the whole world in its mind and heart. We should always remember the power of the Eucharist which is offered each time for the salvation of all:

> Lord, may this sacrifice which has made our peace with you advance the peace and salvation of all the world.
>
> (Eucharistic Prayer 3)

> We offer you his body and blood,
> the acceptable sacrifice
> which brings salvation to the whole world.
>
> (Eucharistic Prayer 4)

As well as 'all your people', we ask God to remember 'all those who seek you with a sincere heart', and to remember 'all the dead whose faith is known to you alone'. Christ is after all the Lamb of God 'who takes away the sins of the world'.

Fellow pilgrims on the road to God

Many non-Christians are on the road to salvation in Christ, either as individuals seeking goodness and truth, or as members of great religious traditions. Christ journeys with them unrecognised, and the Church will always hope that they come to an explicit recognition of him in the Christian community. In the end, they will recognise him at the heavenly banquet.

The Christian meanwhile makes no apologies for his absolute claims about the significance of Christ. No matter how positive an evaluation one makes of the position of any non-Christian, it is by Christ alone that anyone can be saved, and the hidden presence of Christ in the spiritual journeys of others will always have an inner dynamism towards an explicit acceptance of him as Lord within the Church.

The Christian seeks to journey with the non-Christian as a fellow searcher for God, a fellow pilgrim, respecting his conscience and recognising all that is good and true in his religious outlook. He seeks to be by his life a living sign of the risen Christ to others, to be 'the living Gospel for all to hear'. He walks with others in the name of Christ, hoping that the non-Christian's heart will burn within him as he encounters the Good News powerfully alive and active. Pope Pius XII summed up much when he wrote:

> It is true that Christ has only one Bride, the Church; yet the love of the divine Bridegroom is so universal that in his Bride he embraces without exception every member of the human race. For our Saviour's purpose in shedding his blood was that on the cross he might reconcile with God all men, held asunder by nationality and race, and bid them come together into one Body. A true love of the Church therefore requires not only that in the Body itself we should be members one of another and mutually careful one for another . . . but also that in other human beings not yet united with us in the Body of the Church we should see brethren of Christ according to the flesh, called with us to the same eternal salvation.
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> (*Mystici Corporis* 95)