

What is meant by the statement, “There is no salvation outside the Catholic Church”?

Clarification of this statement was addressed in the Declaration issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith called “**Dominus Iesus**” in August of 2000. The following text quotes exclusively from that document.

With regard to the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions, the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She (the Catholic Church) has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and teachings, which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nonetheless often reflect a ray of truth which enlightens all men.

The Church’s constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism (all religions are the same). As a remedy for this relativistic mentality it is necessary to reassert the definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ. He is the way the truth and the life and in Christ the whole fullness of divinity dwells in bodily form. Therefore, the theory of the limited, incomplete, or imperfect character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, which would be complementary to that found in other religions, is contrary to the Church’s faith.

A distinction must be made between *theological faith* and *belief* in other religions. *Faith* is the acceptance in grace of revealed truth, which makes it possible to penetrate the mystery in a way that allows us to understand it coherently. *Belief*, then in other religions is religious experience still in search of the absolute truth and still lacking assent to God who reveals himself. This is one of the reasons why differences between Christianity and other religions tend to be reduced at times to the point of disappearance.

The salvific action of Jesus Christ, with and through the Holy Spirit, extends beyond the visible boundaries of the Church to all humanity. The salvific action of Jesus Christ holds true not only for Christians but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.

Hence, the connection is clear between the salvific mystery of the Incarnate Word and that of the Spirit, who actualizes the salvific efficacy of the Son made

man in the lives of all man, and those who live after his coming in history. The Spirit is therefore not an alternative to Christ nor does he fill a sort of a void. No one, therefore, can enter into communion with God except through Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit.

The Lord Jesus, the only Saviour, did not only establish a simple community of disciples, but constituted the Church as a salvific mystery: he himself is in the Church and the Church is in him. Therefore, the fullness of Christ’s salvific mystery belongs also to the Church, inseparably united to her Lord. Indeed, Jesus Christ continues his presence and his work of salvation in the Church and by means of the Church, which is his body. And thus, just as the head and the members of a living body, though not identical, are inseparable, so too Christ and the Church can neither be confused nor separated, and constitute a single “whole Christ”. Just as there is one Christ, so there exists a single body of Christ, a single Bride of Christ: a single Catholic and apostolic Church.

This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him. The Church of Christ, despite the divisions which exist among Christians, continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church. Outside of her structure, many elements can be found of sanctification and truth, but it needs to be stated that those Churches and ecclesial communities which are not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church, derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church.

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. The Church is the universal sacrament of salvation; she has, in God’s plan, an indispensable relationship with the salvation of every human being.

If it is true that followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation. However, all the children of the Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results, not from their own merits, but from the grace of Christ. If they fail to respond in thought, word, and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be more severely judged.

Michael Dosen

