

Outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation

If you have not already read my essay on [Jesus Christ Founded the Catholic Church](#), you should do so first for context.

The Catholic Church has always taught *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*, which means: “Outside the Church, there is no salvation.”

Traditionally, many have taken this to mean that unless you are a signed and certified member of the Catholic Church, you cannot be saved. Actually, that’s a common misunderstanding. The Catholic Church, realising that this teaching is commonly misunderstood, sought to reformulate it in a positive way, so as to better capture its meaning.

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 either to enter it or to remain in it (Catechism of the Catholic Church 846).

The gist of this teaching is that salvation comes from Jesus Christ alone, who has chosen to save souls using the ministry and sacraments of his Kingdom on earth (the Catholic Church). The primary sacrament, through which people enter the Catholic Church, is Trinitarian baptism. So when a person is baptised, according to the Trinitarian formula (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), that person has

just taken his/her first step into the Catholic Church, whether he/she realised it or not. Every Trinitarian baptism is a valid baptism, as far as the Catholic Church is concerned. This is why the Catholic Church will not re-baptise Protestants when they join the Catholic Church if they have already received a Trinitarian baptism in some other tradition. When my wife and I entered the Catholic Church in the Spring of 2000, we were not re-baptised as Catholics. That's because the Catholic Church accepted our Protestant baptisms as valid baptisms because they were Trinitarian. My baptism was Lutheran. My wife's baptism was Methodist. But as far as the Catholic Church was concerned, because they were both administered as Trinitarian (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), they were essentially valid Catholic baptisms, even though they were performed outside the Catholic Church. As properly baptised converts, my wife and I needed to only make a confession of sin and profession of faith to enter the Catholic Church (after a little education). Upon doing so, we were immediately given the sacraments of confirmation and Eucharist, as if we had been raised Catholics all our lives and only received these sacraments later than usual.

For this reason, the Catechism instructs Catholics to refer to Trinitarian-baptised Protestants as "brethren" and "Christians" (Catechism 818). Now, this doesn't mean they are Catholics. Nor does it mean that we need not try to persuade them to join the Catholic Church. On the contrary! Their communion with the Catholic Church is impaired by schism and heresy. They are like "baptised Catholics" who live outside of the Catholic Church, lacking the ministry and sacraments of the Catholic Church. Imagine, if you will, baptising your infant child in the Catholic Church, and then letting her grow up without ever teaching her the faith properly, or giving her the sacraments of confession, confirmation or first communion! That is exactly the state of

deprivation that all Protestants currently live in, and it's been going on for 500 years! Living outside of the Catholic Church, they are deprived of the ministry and sacraments that is their birthright by virtue of their valid baptism. They have a birthright to sound Catholic teaching — which they are denied. They have a birthright to the sacraments — which they are denied. They have a birthright to full communion with the pope and bishops of the Catholic Church worldwide — which they are denied. This denial comes from the schism and heresy of Protestantism, which unnecessarily keeps them away from the truth and the sacraments.

So Jesus Christ provides the normal means of salvation to humanity through his Kingdom (The Catholic Church), and that normal means of salvation is shared with non-Catholics in the following way...

Trinitarian Baptism which comes directly from Catholic teaching on the Trinitarian nature of God.

Scripture, which is to say knowledge of the truth through the Bible, has come to us through the diligent work of the Catholic Church defining it through controversy and preserving it throughout the centuries.

It's a misunderstanding on the part of some Catholics that "no salvation outside the Church" means that one cannot be saved unless they're official members of the Catholic Church. This is because the Catholic Church extends far beyond the parish and diocesan jurisdiction. It extends into the lives of those who have been baptised according to the Trinitarian formula (this includes Protestants), whether they realise it or not. So even if they don't acknowledge the Catholic Church or ignorance causes them to believe the Catholic Church is less than Christian, they are still very much initiated into the Catholic Church by virtue of their Trinitarian baptism. They are like "baptised Catholics" who live in perpetual state of schism and heresy which deprives them of the benefits they're baptism entitles them to. Only confession and a profession of faith can bring them

back into their natural home — which has always been the Catholic Church.

So could a person who lives his whole life outside the Church this way still be saved? Or maybe the question is really this. Can Protestants be saved? The answer is “yes it is possible,” but one should never presume this to be the case. Just as being a Catholic, inside the Church, doesn’t guarantee one salvation, so it is much more the case with Christians living outside the Catholic Church. A Catholic’s relationship with God is punctuated by the sacraments, which give life to the recipient and helps him come into conformity with God’s will. To be saved, Catholics must seek to be conformed to the image of Christ as much as possible, and the sacraments help to assist Catholics in this process. Protestants are denied those sacraments because of their schism and heresy, so this makes things more difficult for them. Can they still be saved? Yes, but it’s harder. They must find a way to do so without the sacraments and without sound doctrine. In other words, their separation from the Catholic Church makes salvation unnecessarily more difficult for them. So we could say that one doesn’t necessarily NEED to be Catholic to be saved, but it helps! Actually, it helps a lot! It helps so much that it would be crazy for a Protestant not to join the Catholic Church at the earliest opportunity.

Sadly, however, most Protestants don’t do this, and therein lies the tragedy. Sometimes this is due to a hardness of heart and an unwillingness to hear the truth. But most of the time, however, it is simply the result of ignorance and brainwashing.

I’m speaking from personal experience here. When I was an Evangelical Protestant, I didn’t know much about the Catholic Church, and I operated on general assumptions (most of them false) as to what Catholics believed and practised. This was compounded by living in a Catholic-majority part of the country, wherein I can’t remember a single Catholic who was able to correct me on these

misunderstandings. Furthermore, I was fed a steady diet of anti-Catholic propaganda from Evangelical pastors who were former Catholics themselves, and left the Church for various reasons. It's hard to take the claims of the Catholic Church seriously when you've been told by a former Catholic, over and over again, that the pope is the Antichrist and he's trying to deceive you. The truth is, the odds were stacked against me ever learning the truth, and I have to admit that were it not for my unusual appetite for acquiring and processing new information, I probably would have never become Catholic.

You see, I began studying for the ministry as an Evangelical, and it was that study that led me to some curious discoveries. After studying the Jewish roots of the Christian faith, and reading the writings of the early Church Fathers, I came to the conclusion that the early Christians were much more Catholic than I was comfortable with. I found myself on a trajectory leading to the Catholic Church, which I took a brief detour into Anglicanism in the hopes of avoiding it. However, that Anglican detour only redirected my trajectory toward Rome and intensified it. The whole thing was quite an ordeal for me, as everything I was learning contradicted all the emotional comforts I had previously known. I nearly had a nervous breakdown from the whole thing. Having gone through this intense experience myself, I am highly sympathetic toward the majority of Evangelical Protestants who are victims not only of ignorance but also anti-Catholic brainwashing. It's not that they've seriously considered the claims of the Catholic Church and rejected them. They haven't. In most cases, they've never even heard the claims of the Catholic Church, and in those few cases where they have, anti-Catholic propaganda has convinced them that they may go to hell if they even entertain the notion of those claims being true. In the end, it's fear (not obstinance) that keeps most Protestants out of the Catholic Church. Sometimes that fear is illogical, again based on

feelings created by anti-Catholic brainwashing, meeting the very definition of the word “phobia.” I have personally witnessed two Evangelical Fundamentalists actually have nervous breakdowns when confronted with the undeniable truth of the Catholic Church. One was committed to a psychiatric hospital for a while and has since walked away from all organised religion. The other committed suicide. I bring up these two rare cases to illustrate the gravity of the problem, not to discuss them in any detail. The whole thing is still very upsetting to me as I knew these people personally.

Ignorance can be corrected fairly easily. Brainwashing is a little more complicated. On the flip side, I’ve personally known dozens of Evangelicals who eventually joined the Catholic Church as a result of learning the truth and facing their fears. I’ve known dozens more Evangelicals who have not joined the Church, but have gained a new appreciation for Catholics as “fellow Christian brethren.” As Catholics, we need to learn our faith and learn it well so we can share it with others. At the same time, however, when we encounter illogical and/or irrational resistance to the truth we’re sharing, leading to very heated or emotional discussions that seem to no longer make sense, the best thing to do is politely end the conversation and move on. This person has been brainwashed and will likely need more help than we can give.

This leads me to the topic of “invincible ignorance.” The Catholic Church describes it this way...

This affirmation is not aimed at those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his Church: 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. “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.” (Catechism 847-848)

Ignorance of Christ and his Gospel, bad example given by others, enslavement to one’s passions, assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience, rejection of the Church’s authority and her teaching, lack of conversion and of charity: these can be at the source of errors of judgment in moral conduct. If – on the contrary – the ignorance is invincible, or the moral subject is not responsible for his erroneous judgment, the evil committed by the person cannot be imputed to him. It remains no less an evil, a privation, a disorder. One must therefore work to correct the errors of moral conscience. A good and pure conscience is enlightened by true faith, for charity proceeds at the same time “from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith.” The more a correct conscience prevails, the more do persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and try to be guided by objective standards of moral conduct. (Catechism 1792-1794)

The gist of this teaching is that the guilt of having rejected the Catholic Church is not always the fault of the one doing the rejecting. Sometimes it is the result of brainwashing by somebody

else, which keeps a person in a state of invincible ignorance through emotional bondage. Such persons require more than education. They require prayer, intercession and even sacrifice.

We can never assume a person is in a state of invincible ignorance when they reject the truth, but at the same time, we cannot discount it either. We can only conclude that it may be a possibility in each individual case and hope that's all it is. This in no way means we should stop teaching, educating and proclaiming the truth of the Catholic Church. If anything it means the damage of the devil is strong, and we should, therefore, intensify our proclamation of the truth on a wider scale.

So how are we to deal with the teaching *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*, which means: "Outside the Church, there is no salvation?" We are to take it seriously. But we must understand this doesn't mean a person's name needs to be in the sacramental records of a Catholic parish to be saved. The saying has a much broader meaning than that. Virtually all Protestants have a baptismal connection to the Catholic Church, whether they choose to admit it or not, and the Bible they revere comes to them from the Catholic Church as well. The Catholic Church is playing a huge role in their lives, and their very salvation is dependent on that role. They would do well to pay more attention to what the Catholic Church says, and to consider joining her as soon as possible.