

# CAN AN ‘IMPLICIT FAITH’ IN CHRIST BE SUFFICIENT FOR SALVATION?

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## **Introduction**

In this talk I wish to challenge a theological opinion which is now almost universally held by Catholics, including those who would consider themselves conservative or even traditionalist in outlook. Many approved theologians have long held this opinion. Indeed, it first surfaced in the mid-sixteenth century. Since then it has gradually spread throughout the Catholic world in seminaries and theological faculties, and in recent times seems to have been held by nearly all bishops, possibly even popes in their private capacity. For the position I will criticize is even insinuated – though not clearly affirmed or rigorously implied – in the main document of Vatican Council II and in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. However, as we shall see, it has been rather unexpectedly undermined by the Instruction *Dominus Iesus*, issued in 2000 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith – in a passage that seems to have passed unnoticed by most commentators.

What, then, is this theological opinion which I maintain is false, and even proximate to heresy? Quite simply, it is the proposition that at least some people dwelling on earth in the Christian era *who die as non-Christians* can reach eternal salvation by virtue of a supposed ‘implicit faith’ in Jesus Christ. In other words, I will argue that ever since Pentecost, when the Gospel was first promulgated publicly, an absolutely necessary condition for the salvation of persons with the use of reason is that they die *as Christians*, that is, having arrived at an *explicit, conscious* faith in Jesus Christ as God and Savior.

This issue of course has been very well known to Catholics of Saint Benedict Center and those of like mind for sixty years now. For it is very much part of the conflict that began after World War II in the Archdiocese of Boston as a result of the forthright expressions of Fr. Leonard Feeney and his SBC friends regarding the dogma *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. I do not propose to consider that dogma in its entirety today, only what might be described as the ‘first half’ of it.

Let me explain. In a profession of faith of the year 1442 which is one of the cornerstones of the doctrine I want to defend today, the Ecumenical Council of Florence, in the Bull *Cantate Domino*, made the following declaration. Note that it introduces the doctrinal content with language so solemn as to leave no doubt that this content is being proposed infallibly and irrevocably, as a matter of divine and Catholic faith:

The Most Holy Roman Church, founded by the word of our Lord and Savior, . . . firmly believes, professes and preaches that no persons living outside the Catholic Church – not only pagans but also Jews, heretics and schismatics –

can come to share in eternal life, but will go into the eternal fire . . . unless they are aggregated to her before the end of their life”.<sup>1</sup>

This assertion makes crystal clear who, exactly, is to be understood as being in fact “outside the Catholic Church”. It lists four categories of persons: “pagans, Jews, heretics and schismatics”. I am going to limit myself today to the first two of those four categories: *pagans* (who, in the parlance of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, certainly included the Muslims) and *Jews*. In other words, all non-Christians: all those who do not believe in the Trinity and the Incarnation. (I certainly believe also the ‘second half’ of the dogma, namely, that those who die as “heretics and schismatics” cannot be saved either. However, the question as to who, precisely, was understood by the Florentine Fathers to be counted as a heretic or schismatic involves some complexities which I shall not attempt to discuss today.)

I shall limit myself, in short, to a defense of the belief, solemnly confirmed by Florence, and backed up again in the following century by the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*,<sup>2</sup> that nobody dying as a non-Christian – that is, as a pagan, Jew, Muslim, atheist or agnostic – can reach eternal life. We could summarize this aspect or component of the ancient *extra ecclesiam* dogma by changing one word of it: *extra Christianismum nulla salus*. For whenever we refer to “Christianity”, in contrast to other world religions or philosophies, we always have in mind the *explicit* profession of faith in Jesus Christ. In what follows I shall abbreviate this doctrinal thesis I am defending by the initials *ECNS*. As an appropriate point of reference for the contrary position which I am challenging, I shall refer critically to a book<sup>3</sup> by one of its best known and most authoritative exponents, the well-known Jesuit theologian Fr. Francis A. Sullivan. I will conclude my talk with some reflections drawn from recently recorded psychological and clinical phenomena, not generally known to our ancestors (but suggested, at least, by St. Thomas Aquinas) which significantly mitigate the very pessimistic prospect apparently implied by this doctrine.

## I. Cornerstones of *ECNS*

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<sup>1</sup> DS 1351 = D 714 (my translation).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. I, X, 8, which affirms that those “excluded from the pale of the Church” include “only three classes of persons: first, infidels; next, heretics and schismatics; lastly, the excommunicated”. (“Infidels” here are defined as “those who never belonged to, and never knew the Church”, thereby including Jews as well as Muslims and pagans.) The last category – excommunicated persons – was not mentioned by Florence. This was probably because, unlike the *Catechism* in this passage, the conciliar Fathers refer expressly to the moment of death. To include excommunicated persons in that context might have led to confusion, because (as those Fathers would readily have agreed) such a person – even supposing his excommunication to have been justly merited by some particularly grave sin – can in fact be saved by making an act of perfect contrition, even if he/she then dies before being *canonically* reincorporated into the Church. In a separate passage (I, X, 18) the *Catechism* repeats the age-old typological application of Noah’s Ark to the Church: all who are “outside her . . . are overwhelmed by their own crimes” and go to “eternal death”.

<sup>3</sup> *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2002). Hereafter, this book will be referenced in footnotes simply as ‘S’.

I have already mentioned, while introducing this theme, the Council of Florence's solemn teaching as one of the foundations of my position. Some others are as follows.

### **Ia. Sacred Scripture.**

It needs to be acknowledged that while the overall impression we receive from the canonical gospels, epistles, and the Acts of the Apostles is that an *ECNS* assumption underlies the teaching of these inspired writings, such a position is nowhere spelled out unequivocally. Of course, the necessity of faith in Jesus for salvation is clearly taught in the New Testament: "justification by faith" is, after all, notoriously one of the central themes in St. Paul's letters. But the question that interests us at present - whether or not that faith always needs to be explicit and conscious - is nowhere expressly dealt with.

From whence, then, comes that aforesaid "overall impression" that an *ECNS* position underlies the N.T. teaching? The answer, I suggest, is twofold. First, when we talk about "belief" in something or someone, we nearly always mean explicit, conscious belief unless otherwise stated, or unless the discussion happens to be precisely about the "implicit" vs. "explicit" problem.<sup>4</sup> There seems no reason to think that the New Testament represents an exception to this hermeneutical generalization. Secondly, Scripture insinuates or suggests by what it omits, not only by what it says. And the silence of the N.T. seems rather eloquent on this point. When, for instance, Jesus bluntly asserts, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6), *without* immediately adding (as most modern commentators would do) that this doesn't necessarily mean an explicit belief in himself is always required, the impression is left that it always *is* required.

A stronger biblical text supporting *ECNS* is the Lord's assertion, "This is eternal life: to *know* you, the only true God, and *Jesus Christ* whom you have sent" (Jn 17: 3). Our Lord's verb "know" - the Greek *ginosko*, meaning intimate, personal knowledge - surely means conscious, explicit awareness. (What else do we ever mean when speak of "knowing" something or someone?) So, given the Johannine usage of the term "eternal life",<sup>5</sup> the natural sense of Jesus' words is that to be in the state of grace in this present, earthly life means (that is, necessarily involves) consciously knowing and believing in him. And if we read through Acts of the Apostles and the N.T. letters, the constant impression we naturally receive is that the preaching of the Gospel to those who do not yet "know" Jesus is urgently necessary *in order for them to be saved*. Once the assumption is widely diffused that untold numbers of Jews, pagans and unbelievers out there are *already* in the state of grace by virtue of their "implicit faith", and so are heading straight for heaven, then that sense of urgency in spreading the Gospel is

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<sup>4</sup> In an analogous way, "revelation" or "divine revelation", in Catholic theological discourse, always means "public revelation" unless the discussion is precisely about the distinction between this and so-called "private revelations".

<sup>5</sup> In John's Gospel, "eternal life" does not mean exclusively life *after death* (i.e., being in heaven), but also includes life in Christ in this present mortal existence.

inevitably weakened very seriously. This of course is what we have seen over the last forty years: a large-scale decline of authentic, conversion-oriented, Catholic missionary activity around the world, in spite of major documents from Vatican II (*Ad Gentes*) and John Paul II (*Redemptoris Missio*) attempting to boost and justify such activity.

If Saints Peter and Paul had believed that devout Jews could still be saved by living and worshipping the way they did prior to Pentecost – simply believing in God as a remunerator of good and evil (Heb. 11: 6) and striving to keep his law – could we really imagine these apostles talking to the “men of Israel” the way they do in fact talk? At Pentecost, Peter declares to such devout Jewish pilgrims, when they ask what they are to do, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2: 38). And to the Sanhedrin, “He [Jesus] is the stone rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. *There is no salvation through anyone else*, nor is there any other name under heaven given the human race by which we are to be saved” (Acts 4: 11-12). Admittedly, these affirmations are being made to those who have already heard, or are simultaneously hearing, the proclamation of Jesus as Lord and Savior, so they do not *prove* that those still in invincible ignorance of the Gospel cannot be saved without coming to an explicit faith in him. Nevertheless, the wording of the second of those texts in particular, with its emphasis on “no other name under heaven”, *suggests* quite strongly the requirement of explicit faith; for it seems to insinuate that if you don’t worship Jesus Christ *by name*, that is, consciously, you won’t be saved. In other words, it insinuates that those all over the rest of the earth (“under heaven”) worshipping innumerable deities with other “names” have *not* received justification and sanctifying grace, even though their ignorance of Jesus is still invincible. (We know it was still invincible because in Acts, chapter 4, Peter is speaking in the very early days after Pentecost, before the infant Church has even begun to move out of Jerusalem to begin evangelizing the gentiles and the Jews of the diaspora.)

Also, the very fact that such blunt affirmations as St. Peter’s are certainly not being made by most Catholic leaders today strongly suggests that the post-Vatican II Church has, at least in practice, moved away from the original apostolic approach. For if you believe – as most of our prelates and theologians do today – that sincere and decently-living Jews already have the kind of implicit or unconscious “faith” in Christ that can be salvific for them, you will never speak to a Jewish audience as bluntly as Peter did, or as Paul did in answering the jailer’s question as to what he must do to be saved: “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you and your household will be saved” (Acts 16: 31). No, you will be far more nuanced and ‘ecumenically correct’, saying something like this: “We Christians believe Jesus is the Savior of all men, and if you become convinced of that, then you should, logically, become a Christian. But if you remain sincerely unconvinced that Jesus is the Messiah, then of course your present Jewish convictions will be accepted by God as saving faith *for you*. But we believe it will actually be Jesus who saves you, even if you don’t have any conscious and explicit recognition of him as the Savior.”

Now, there is really nothing that remotely sounds like that in any N.T. account of the apostles’ preaching to their own people. On the contrary, St. Paul sees their state of

being “sincerely unconvinced” regarding Jesus’ divinity as a kind of blindness, a dullness of mind. He says that, “to this present day a veil (over their hearts) remains unlifted when they read the old covenant, because through Christ it is taken away. . . . [W]henever a person turns to the Lord the veil is removed” (2 Cor 3: 14-16). The symbolism of a ‘veil’ would seem to cover both culpable and inculpable unbelief, for a veil can be either self-imposed or imposed by another. But in any case St. Paul holds out no hope for the salvation of his Jewish brethren as long as that ‘veil’ of unbelief in Jesus as the Christ still remains, for whatever reason, over their hearts. For he goes on to affirm that “even though our gospel is veiled, it is veiled *for those who are perishing*” (4: 3). Indeed, so convinced is Paul that his fellow Israelites cannot be saved without conversion to Christianity that he expresses “great sorrow and constant anguish” about their impending fate, and the heartfelt wish “that I myself were accursed and separated from Christ for my brothers according to the flesh” (Rom. (9: 2-3).

If anything, the N.T. shows an even greater clarity regarding the pre-evangelized state of the gentiles – the pagans. It practically spells out that even though their ignorance of Christ is presently invincible, they will *not* be saved unless that ‘darkness’ is overcome! For instance, Saul’s conversion on the road to Damascus is accompanied by a direct revelation from Our Lord himself. Jesus speaks to him of the gentiles “to whom I send you, to open their eyes that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, *so that they may obtain forgiveness of sins* and an inheritance among those who have been consecrated by faith in me” (Acts 26: 17-18). In other words, while they are in that “darkness” (i.e., ignorance of Christ’s gospel), they *do not have* the divine gift and virtue of faith that they need for forgiveness. On the contrary, they are under “the power of Satan”. In Romans 10: 9, Paul affirms as a condition for salvation the kind of faith in the Risen Christ that can be expressed by “confess[ing] with your mouth that Jesus is Lord”. That, obviously, is something that can only be done by a person whose faith in Jesus is conscious and explicit. Indeed, several verses later (vv. 13-17), Paul asks rhetorically, with anguish, how the pagans can be saved if they don’t receive a preacher. Clearly, his anguish – and the question itself – would really make no sense if Paul held that the existing religious convictions of these gentile peoples can already constitute a disguised or implicit faith in Christ that is sufficient for their salvation. The *only* faith in Christ that the Apostle knows anything about is the faith that “comes from what is heard” (v. 17), namely, an *explicit* faith in the preached Gospel message.

It is true that in Romans 2: 6-8 and 13-15 the Apostle speaks of the possibility of gentiles who have lived “without the law” being “justified” by following the natural law “engraved in their hearts”, since, as he says, it is “not the hearers, but the doers of the law, who will be justified” (v. 13). However, St. Paul has in mind here not the contrast between those who have and those who have not yet heard the Gospel of Christ, but rather, the contrast between Jews, who have received the Law of Moses, and gentiles who have not. Moreover, keeping the law has to do with charity (good works flowing from love of God and neighbor) as a requirement for salvation, rather than the prior requirement of faith. It is obvious that Paul cannot be understood to be contradicting here the teaching he emphasises so strongly elsewhere, namely, that justification is not a reward for previously having kept the Law, but always has been, and always will be, an

unmerited gift for which the primordial condition is faith in God's revealed Word. So this passage of Romans by no means proves that those gentiles living after the coming of Christ can be saved if they die in ignorance of him. It would seem to mean nothing more than that gentiles (i.e., non-Jews) living either before or after Christ can die with the virtues of faith and charity, and if so will be saved on Judgment Day, even if they have never been catechized with the written law of the Decalogue.

Those who claim that 'implicit faith' in Christ or 'anonymous Christianity' still continue after Pentecost have, ever since the 16<sup>th</sup> century have invariably appealed to Hebrews 11: 6 as a proof-text for their opinion that, even under the New Law, a person's belief can still constitute the theological virtue of faith even when its explicit, conscious content is limited to the existence of God and his role as Remunerator of good and evil. But they never seem to take into account the literary context of this verse, which is embedded in a whole chapter of Hebrews that speaks exclusively of holy men who lived and died in pre-Christian, and in many cases (vv. 4-22) pre-Mosaic, times. Therefore, especially in view of the rest of the N.T. witness, v. 6 can by no means be taken as serious biblical evidence that this very limited knowledge of God can still be sufficient to constitute the supernatural (theological) virtue of faith, now that Christ has finally come in the flesh. All the inspired author does in 11: 6 is give us a 'lowest common denominator' description of faith: he is revealing the basic, minimum intellectual content (namely, belief in a personal and morally righteous Supreme Being who remunerates human activity) that supernatural faith must include in every age of human history from Creation right through until Judgment Day. But the perennial *necessity* of this basic belief-content throughout salvation history does not logically imply its perennial *sufficiency*.

To sum up the witness of Sacred Scripture on this point, I believe we can say that the idea of someone's being saved even after Pentecost by a merely 'implicit' or 'subconscious' faith in Christ – a 'faith' that actually *knows* nothing of Jesus and/or his identity as God and Savior – is quite foreign to biblical thought. While never directly and expressly ruled out by the New Testament, such an idea is rejected by implication.

### **Ib. Sacred Tradition.**

In the light of the very strong biblical witness we have surveyed very briefly above, it is not at all surprising that for no less than one and a half millennia after Christ, no Catholic theologian ever suggested that anyone in New Testament times, anywhere on earth, could still receive justification and sanctifying grace in this life, much less attain eternal salvation in the next life, by means of a merely 'implicit faith' in Christ. Fr. Sullivan, who is anxious to demonstrate the continuing, perennial reality and salvific value of such a 'faith', has combed the writings of the early Fathers, but draws a complete blank in this respect.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The closest any of the Fathers came to such a position, it seems, was an ambiguous remark of St. Justin Martyr in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Sullivan quotes it, but even he does not try to appeal to it as patristic evidence for the continuing salvific value of 'implicit faith' under the New Law. Rebutting the pagan and Jewish

He does, however, try to make the best of the ‘bad hand’ that has been dealt to him. For instance, in commenting on assertions of St. Cyprian (3<sup>rd</sup> century) such as, “There is no salvation for anyone except in the church”, and, “You cannot have God for your Father if you have not the church for your mother”, Sullivan makes much of the fact that these warnings were directed expressly to those who, having been members of the Church, had left her, or might be tempted to leave. In the case of such departure from the Church they would, in Cyprian’s judgment, be guilty of the mortal sins of heresy, schism or apostasy. Sullivan stresses that “there is no instance of his [Cyprian’s] addressing this warning to the non-Christians who were still the majority of the people in the Roman empire of his day”.<sup>7</sup> He thus insinuates that Cyprian might perhaps have been more hopeful for the salvation of those out-and-out pagans and Jews. However the saint’s words cited above, especially the emphatic “for anyone”, really speak for themselves. It is not taking them “out of context”, as Sullivan claims gratuitously,<sup>8</sup> to conclude that Cyprian simply *took it for granted* that such non-Christians would be damned if they died in that condition, and that he therefore felt no need to write letters or treatises insisting on that fact. It is notorious that, according to St. Cyprian, the baptisms of heretics not only conferred no grace of the Holy Spirit, but were totally invalid. How much more, then, must he have been convinced that out-and-out non-Christians, without baptism *of any sort*, are certainly deprived of grace and Holy Spirit.

As for the Fathers who wrote on this subject from the 4<sup>th</sup> century onward, after the empire itself had become officially Christian, Sullivan has to acknowledge that they explicitly applied the maxim “outside the Church, no salvation” to pagans and Jews as well as apostate Christians.<sup>9</sup> The best he can do for his case is to claim that for the late 4<sup>th</sup>-century Fathers, such pessimism was due mainly or even exclusively to their mistaken assumption that the Gospel had by that time been proclaimed everywhere, so that all remaining non-Christians must surely be *blameworthy* for their unbelief.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in

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objection that, according to Christianity, God mercilessly left all before the coming of Christ with no way of salvation, Justin, like most if not all the other Fathers, indeed maintained that both Jews and gentiles “born before the time of Christ” could be saved if they lived “according to reason” (*logos*). He even goes so far as to say that such persons as Socrates and Heraclitus were “really Christians” (since Christ is, and always has been, the true *Logos*). He goes on to say that just as “those who lived before Christ but did not live according to reason were wicked men and enemies of Christ”, so “those who lived then, *or who live now*, according to reason, are Christians” (quoted in S, 15, emphasis added). These last words could be taken to mean that some “who live now” may still be living “according to reason” without yet knowing Christ; but they are also entirely compatible with Justin’s holding, like all the subsequent Fathers, that after Christ’s coming only those who know and accept his Gospel are given the grace to live “according to reason”, that is, righteously in God’s sight. The very objection Justin is rebutting suggests strongly that the Church in his time, as subsequently, was teaching this latter, more severe, doctrine. Otherwise, it seems hard to imagine how the pagan and Jewish misunderstanding that Justin wants to clear up could have arisen in the first place.

<sup>7</sup> S, 20.

<sup>8</sup> S, 22.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. S, 27.

his concluding chapter Sullivan seems rather disingenuous, insofar as his summary of this point leaves readers with the impression – more by what he omits than by what he affirms – that the aforesaid false assumption pretty much continued to dominate Catholic thought right up until the middle ages.<sup>11</sup>

Such an impression would not correspond to historical truth. And while Sullivan’s account of late 4<sup>th</sup>-century Christian attitudes may well be true enough, this needs to be kept within its proper historical perspective. After all, half a century is a pretty small time-slot within the period under discussion – only 5% of the first millennium. For practically all the rest of those ten centuries, the evangelization of hitherto unreached pagans in different parts of Europe, North Africa, and the Eastern lands was progressing only very gradually. And nearly all contemporary church leaders would certainly have been aware of that fact. In other words, the continuing existence of multitudes of folks *invincibly* ignorant of the Gospel was perfectly well-known to the vast majority of first-millennium Fathers, bishops and popes. And yet there is no record of any of them holding out hopes for the salvation of any of those folks if they died in their ignorance.

Corroborating the thesis they did *not* hold out any such hopes is the fact that in the opinion of many of these Fathers and Doctors, especially in the first five or six centuries, even catechumens would be eternally lost if they had the misfortune to die before receiving the saving waters of baptism! Even those usually cited as the pioneers of so-called ‘baptism of desire’, St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, evidently vacillated on this issue.<sup>12</sup> The souls of deceased catechumens were never prayed for in the ancient liturgy,<sup>13</sup> and, simply because such persons lacked true membership in the Church, it took many centuries for a consensus to build up that a desire for baptism could sometimes save a catechumen if he died suddenly before being able to receive the sacrament. Now, given that the possibility of salvation for even these *explicit* believers in Christ was considered at best uncertain by many or most first-millennium prelates, this bespeaks a strong underlying conviction that all those dying in a *far worse* spiritual condition than catechumens – that is, those *without* any explicit faith in Christ, and *without* any explicit

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. S, 24-27.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. S, paragraph spanning pp. 200-201.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, St. Augustine said at one period, “However much progress the catechumen should make, he still carries the load of his iniquity: is it not removed from him unless he comes to baptism”. And St. Ambrose asserted, “Even a catechumen believes in the cross of the Lord Jesus, . . . but unless he be baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, he cannot receive the gift of the remission of sins nor be a recipient of the gift of spiritual grace”. Also, ““Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God’. No one excepted: not the infant, not the one prevented by some necessity”. St. John Chrysostom *never* accepted ‘baptism of desire’, and went as far as to preach that “the catechumen is a stranger to the faithful, . . . [so that] if it should come to pass (which God forbid!) that through the sudden arrival of death we depart hence uninitiated, though we have ten thousand virtues, our portion will be none other than hell”. St. Gregory Nazianzen was of the same mind, teaching that even in the case of catechumens who die unbaptized from “some perfectly involuntary circumstance”, this lack of the sacrament “prevents them from receiving the gift [of grace and salvation] even if they desire it”.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1907 , vol. 2, 265.



desire for baptism – would certainly be damned, regardless of whether their unbelief was culpable or inculpable. It does not seem to have occurred to Sullivan that if the Fathers of the Church did not often put this conviction in writing, it was very probably because they considered it so elementary and undisputed as to go without saying!

However, this faith-conviction *was* sometimes expressed in writing, and not always just by individual Fathers writing in a private capacity. In fact, the solemn profession of faith of Pope Pelagius I, promulgated for the universal Church in the year 557, affirms the doctrine that on judgment day, God will hand over “to the punishment of eternal and inextinguishable fire” all of the wicked, who (he says) consist of “[those] who *either did not know the way of the Lord*, or, having known it, abandoned it, ensnared by transgressions of various kinds”.<sup>14</sup> In other words, it is proposed as *de fide* by Pope Pelagius that a pagan’s or Jew’s ignorance of the Christian Gospel at death does not in any way diminish the certainty that he will be damned. Fr. Sullivan’s omission of this key magisterial text is certainly a serious flaw in his scholarship. However, he does at least let his readers know that St. Augustine taught explicitly that all unevangelized pagans – those living and dying in invincible ignorance of Christ – would certainly be damned. Augustine maintained, however, that their damnation would not be a punishment for their unbelief itself – for in their case it would obviously be inculpable – but for other unrepented mortal sins, or original sin. (A millennium later theologians would develop such moral reasoning into explanations clarifying the distinction between ‘necessity of precept’ and ‘necessity of means’.)

Sullivan also cannot deny that the medieval theologians, led by St. Thomas Aquinas, were all unanimously insistent that an *explicit* faith in Christ has been universally necessary for salvation ever since the New Law of grace was revealed in the first century A.D.<sup>15</sup> For instance, speaking of the three eras in salvation history (before the Law [Sinai], from Sinai to Christ, and after Christ), Aquinas says: “In the third epoch, however, after the coming of Christ, all men are required to believe explicitly (*omnes tenentur ad explicite credendum*) [in the Redeemer], since by then the mystery of redemption was completed bodily and visibly and was preached. And if someone did not have an instructor, God would reveal it to him, unless he was left [ignorant] through his own fault (*et si aliquis instructorem non haberet, Deus ei revelaret, nisi ex sua culpa remaneret*)”.<sup>16</sup> The whole of my talk today could be summed by saying that I simply wish

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<sup>14</sup> “. . . *qui viam Domini aut non agnoverunt aut cognitam diversis capti praevaricationibus reliquerunt*” (DS 443, my translation and emphasis).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. S, 47-58.

<sup>16</sup> III Sent., d. 25, a. 2, q. 2, corp (n. 105). For a detailed study of Aquinas’ thought on this issue, cf. Anthony P. Tyrrell, *The Necessity of Explicit Faith for Salvation According to Saint Thomas* (Rome: Pontifical University of St. Thomas, 1996). This ‘Angelicum’ thesis, which gained a *magna cum laude* Licentiate degree in Theology (S.T.L.), was supervised by the distinguished Thomist theologian Fr. Benoit Duroux, O.P., a long-standing consultor for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Tyrrell’s conclusion, on the basis of studying all of Aquinas’ texts on the subject and many commentaries, is that the Angelic Doctor holds that God has indeed established different requirements for salvation for pagans living before and after Christ respectively. His summary:

to defend this teaching of St. Thomas as the true and authentically Catholic one: anyone living after Pentecost who during his earthly life never has a chance to receive spoken or written ‘instruction’ from human messengers of the Gospel, but who perseveres in seeking goodness and truth according to conscience and natural law, will certainly receive from God himself – perhaps just before the very moment of death, and very possibly in a way that is quite undetectable to bystanders at the deathbed – an explicit revelation of at least the basic Christian truths. This will enable such a person to make true acts of Christian faith, hope and charity – constituting an at least implicit desire for baptism – which will be sufficient for his/her salvation. The corollary is that if anyone dies without even this elementary Christian faith, he will be damned; but this will be, as St. Thomas says, due to his own fault. That is, his being left in ignorance of Christ right till the very end of his life will be due to the fact that he did *not* persevere to the end in striving for truth and goodness.

This completes our survey of the witness of Sacred Tradition, which, as we noted already in our introductory remarks, was solemnly confirmed by the Ecumenical Council of Florence in 1442.

## II. The 16<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: Theological Revolution Leading to Magisterial Ambiguity

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It seems that for Saint Thomas, the infidel of the age of the New Testament has a greater obligation than the gentile living in the time of the Old Testament. The question might well be raised: why isn’t the case of the gentiles of the old law the same as that of the new law unbeliever? In other words, isn’t implicit faith in Christ enough for the unevangelized of today as it was enough for the pagans of the Old Testament? The answer in the negative stems from the fact that a more perfect faith in the Incarnation is required by virtue of the more perfect revelation of the new law (p. 70).

Tyrrell has a footnote here indicating that this is the way Aquinas is understood by R. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., arguably the greatest Thomist theologian of the last century (cf. *The Theological Virtues: Faith* [St. Louis: Herder, 1965] p. 224). Garrigou disagrees mildly with Thomas, opining that what he says is right as a general rule, but that God may still accept implicit faith in exceptional cases. R. Lombardi (1956), M. Labourdette, R. Bernard (1950), and S. Harent (1927) all recognize that Thomas holds this strict view, even though all four disagree with him and take the more liberal view that implicit faith is still (after the coming of Christ) supernatural and salvifically sufficient for sincere pagans. J.F. Quigley, in an ‘Angelicum’ doctoral dissertation of 1984 on almost the same subject, also concludes that Thomas holds the strict view; but Tyrrell does not say whether Quigley personally agrees with it or not. The French Thomist T. Pegues (1915) recognizes that Thomas takes the strict view, and agrees with him without reservation. The only commentator Tyrrell could find who thinks Thomas might have accepted an ‘implicit faith’ as still sufficient to save unevangelized pagans living after Christ is T. O’Brien (1964), who argues, rather implausibly, that when Thomas says that “all men” (*omnes*) need an explicit faith in at least the Trinity and the Incarnation, he just means “all” *who have been baptized in the Catholic Church*. Apart from authorities quoted by Tyrrell, the great Spanish Thomist Antonio Royo Marín, O.P., whose theological manuals have been widely used in many Spanish-language seminaries round the world for the last half-century, recognizes both St. Thomas and St. Alphonsus as having taught the universal need for explicit faith in the Trinity and Incarnation, and comments that although “it is not proven with absolute certainty that explicit faith is necessary for salvation by necessity of means, this is the most probable opinion” (*Teologia Moral*, vol. I, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, [Madrid: BAC, 1996], p. 285, my translation).

The very first Catholic theologians Fr. Sullivan can find who supported ‘implicit faith’ in Christ as still having a supernatural, salvific character after Pentecost lived a full fifteen hundred years after Christ. They wrote in the mid-16th century, beginning with the Belgian theologian Albert Pigge (or Pighi) in 1542,<sup>17</sup> who was soon followed by the Spanish Salamanca Dominican priests Melchior Cano and Domingo Soto.<sup>18</sup> In 1547 Cano stretched the existing tradition to its limit by proposing that implicit faith could still, in the Christian era, suffice for *justification* – forgiveness of sins and the infusion of sanctifying grace in the present life – among unevangelized pagans like the American Indians. However, Cano still just managed to keep within the limits set by the Council of Florence; for he insisted that, even after a pagan’s justification by implicit faith in Christ, this faith would still have to be ‘upgraded’ to the explicit level before death. If this did not happen, he would at some stage lose the sanctifying grace he had received, and so would be eternally lost.<sup>19</sup> (St. Robert Bellarmine was to adopt essentially the same position as Cano half a century later.<sup>20</sup>) A few years after Cano’s treatise, however, his colleague Fr. Domingo Soto followed Fr. Pigge in crossing the line into real doctrinal novelty. Pigge and Soto did not make Cano’s distinction between the faith-requirements for justification and eternal salvation respectively, and maintained that such a post-Pentecost pagan’s ‘implicit faith’ in Christ can be enough to get him all the way to heaven, provided that by the moment of death he at least believes consciously in God on the terms laid down in Hebrews 11: 6 and also possesses charity as a result of perfect contrition for his sins.

Before long, however, theologians still more ‘progressive’ were claiming that this position itself was still a half-way house – or maybe that Pigge and Soto had only succeeded in making it to first base. Indeed, the rest of Fr. Sullivan’s book could be roughly summarized as an account of how, in the succeeding centuries, other scholars – notably his own fellow-Jesuits – picked up this ball (to switch metaphors yet again!) and started running with it, extending step by step the concept of ‘invincible ignorance’ so as to make it cover ever more categories of non-Christians, as they reduced step by step the minimum *explicit* belief-content held to be necessary for the existence of the theological virtue of faith.<sup>21</sup> We read how that reduction finally descends to the point of absolute zero in the notorious ‘anonymous Christians’ theory of Fr. Karl Rahner, S.J. Rahner requires absolutely no particular explicit belief-content at all, since he claims that not only pantheists, polytheists and agnostics, but even outright atheists, can have ‘implicit faith’

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. S, 78-81.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. S, 73-76.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. S, 74-75.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. S, 90-91. In spite of Sullivan’s professed uncertainty on this point, it seems clear to me from the context that the “greater light of faith” which St. Robert said the good pagan would still need to acquire after justification in order to reach eternal salvation could only be the “light” of an explicit knowledge of Christ. Given the theological state of the question at that time, there is really nothing else it *could* mean.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. S, 82-140.

in Jesus Christ. According to Rahner, the sincere atheist fulfils the Gospel's faith requirement for salvation provided only that he "accepts a moral demand from his conscience as *absolutely* valid for him and embraces it as such in a free act of affirmation".<sup>22</sup> Never mind *what* one's conscience tells one to do, it seems. Are we to suppose that the Aztec priest ripping out human hearts on the altar of the serpent God, the Hindu insisting on burning alive his friend's widow, and the suicide bomber screaming praises to Allah as he rams a jet plane into a skyscraper – that all these ever-so-sincere chaps are really just expressing the divine gift of Christian faith – each in his own . . . highly creative way? That "straight and narrow" path which our Lord says leads to salvation – adding that "few there be that find it" – now seems to have been wondrously transmuted into a broad and smooth highway that just about everyone will find.

Fr. Sullivan freely acknowledges that, even three centuries before his own Society of Jesus had plumbed these rock-bottom depths of content-free 'implicit faith', it had already reached a radical level of theological novelty in the person of Fr. Juan De Lugo, S.J., who back in 1646 was already anticipating Rahner's 'anonymous Christians' theory. He proposed openly that at least a monotheist such as a Jew or a Muslim, assuming he is sincere and therefore endowed with 'implicit faith', "should not be called a non-Christian, because, . . . in the sight of God he will be reckoned with the Christians".<sup>23</sup>

Fr. Sullivan twice describes De Lugo's innovation as "revolutionary",<sup>24</sup> justifying his use of such a strong word with the following comment: "After all, the Council of Florence had declared it to be a matter of faith to hold that all pagans, Jews, heretics and schismatics who died outside the Catholic Church would inevitably be damned to hell".<sup>25</sup> Indeed it had declared precisely that! And I submit that the stark contrast between that Council's solemn declaration on the one hand, and on the other, the "revolutionary" and now rampant contrary opinion that has become increasingly diffused throughout the Church for close to half a millennium, constitutes a serious challenge to the consistency, and, therefore, the credibility, of the Catholic religion. For, as we shall see shortly, the magisterium itself has gone through a phase of uncertainty or vacillation over the last 150 years.

This revolutionary theology of Juan de Lugo that has now become very much mainstream invites us to ask this paradoxical riddle: "When is a Jew not a Jew? *Answer*: "When he sincerely disbelieves Christianity and devoutly believes the Torah and Talmud". Now, that would certainly be astounding news to our Jewish brethren themselves. For the type of person they regard – very reasonably – as the archetypal Jew, the model Jew, is declared by Fr. De Lugo and his followers *not to be a Jew at all!* That leads to another conundrum: *Question*: "If a Jew who sincerely disbelieves Christianity

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<sup>22</sup> K. Rahner, "Atheism and Implicit Christianity", *Theological Investigations*, vol. 9, 153, cited in S, 179.

<sup>23</sup> S, 96.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. S, 97, 98.

<sup>25</sup> S, 97.

and devoutly believes the Torah and Talmud is *not* really a Jew, then what is he?” And our modern sages assure us: “He is really a Christian”. Wouldn’t this strike Jews as still more condescending and insulting? Such an answer naturally prompts one more riddle: *Question*: “Well, if sincere and devout Jews are all really Christians deep-down, then who are the *real* Jews?” The only logical answer would of course have to be: “The real Jews are those who are *not* sincere and devout. That is, insincere and religiously apathetic Jews”. In other words, the only real Jew is a *bad* Jew, according to the liberal logic of today’s Jesuit-led school of thought! Let me emphasize once more: That conclusion, which I agree will justly offend every Jew, is nevertheless clearly implied, not by the conservative Christian position I am defending today, but by the liberal Christian position that I am attacking!

One well-known theologian – a defender of ‘implicit faith’ – to whom I showed the previous draft of this paper commented that I am over-simplifying De Lugo’s position here. According to him, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Spaniard does not intend to affirm baldly and unreservedly the ‘Christian’ status of the sincere and devout Jew; rather, he is taking the more nuanced position that such a person is *explicitly* a Jew but *implicitly* a Christian. In reply, I would note, first, that De Lugo’s own words – asserting that such a person “should not be called a non-Christian” – seem to me pretty categorical and un-nuanced. Secondly, even if we suppose that De Lugo’s position *is* in fact this more nuanced one, his contention that such a person can be saved is then exposed more obviously than ever as being irreconcilable with the teaching of Florence. How so? Well, as all will agree, when the Council Fathers spoke of “Jews”, they had in mind the religious, not merely racial or ethnic, sense of the word. And the *meaning* they attached to that word was indisputably the same meaning that all others, Jews and gentiles alike, always have attached to it in this religious context – namely, those persons who *profess* Judaism. That is, the word “Jews” *means*, precisely and essentially, ‘those who are *explicitly* Jewish in their religion’.<sup>26</sup> And the Council affirms categorically that no one who dies as such can be saved, since he will be dying outside the Catholic Church. In short, the Council of Florence, in opposition to Fr. De Lugo’s putatively ‘nuanced’ position, indisputably means to say that *dying as an ‘explicit Jew’ is in itself a certain and sufficient condition for eternal damnation*. It follows logically that any ‘implicit’ disposition whatsoever that also happens to be harbored in the soul of such a Jew at the moment of death will do nothing whatever to alter that dreadful destiny. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same will hold for

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<sup>26</sup> The dictionary definitions of “Jew” (in the religious, not ethnic, sense) invariably express in one way or another the explicit, consciously followed, character of the beliefs in question. Cf., for instance, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (OUP, 1964): “one who professes Judaism”; *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary* (New York, 1996): “a person whose religion is Judaism”; *Funk & Wagnall’s Standard College Dictionary* (New York, 1977): “Any person professing Judaism”. The Spanish *judío* (which means firstly the adjective “Jewish” and secondarily the noun “Jew”) is defined by the authoritative *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* of the Royal Spanish Academy (Madrid, 1992) as “*perteneciente o relativo a los que profesan la ley de Moisés*” (“pertaining to or relative to those who profess the law of Moses”). In *Vocabulario della Lingua Italiana* (Turin, 1959), *giudeo* is defined as “*chi vive secondo l’antica legge di Moisé*” (“one who lives according to the old law of Moses”), while in G. M. Gatti’s *Dizionario Scolastico della Lingua Italiana* (Turin, 1960), the entry for *giudeo* says simply “*ebreo*” (“Hebrew”), which in turn is defined as “*chi segue la religione ebraica*” (“one who follows the Jewish religion”). È. Littré’s *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française* (Paris, 1889) defines *juif* as “*Celui, celle qui professe la religion judaïque*”.

all those the Council Fathers qualify as “pagans”, a word they clearly understand to cover all the unbaptized who *explicitly* hold any religious (or irreligious) beliefs whatsoever other than Christianity or Judaism.

So, if De Lugo’s theory – claiming that devout and sincere Jews and Muslims are really, though ‘implicitly’, Christians – is now starting to sound to you like indefensible double-talk, then I agree entirely. Oddly enough, that is the way Rahner’s ‘anonymous Christians’ theory sounded to none other than the Rev. Hans Küng. For this theological luminary “summarily dismissed” Rahner’s theory as a “theological fabrication” which gives mere face-saving lip-service to the dogma *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. It is, says Küng sarcastically, “an elegant gesture which sweeps the whole of good-willed humanity into the back door of the holy Roman church”.<sup>27</sup> In other words, it almost turns the old dogma into a new one that could be formulated as “*Extra Ecclesiam nullus est*” (“Outside the Church . . . nobody is!”). It is not, of course, that Küng differs from Rahner on the substantive issue of whether all those countless members of “good-willed humanity” will be saved, regardless of which religion (if any) they profess at the time of death. He, like Rahner, has no doubt that they will all breeze straight through the Pearly Gates. It is simply that Professor Küng tends to be more up-front and straightforward in propounding his errors and heresies than those in the more subtle Jesuit tradition. So his point is simply that Rahner’s position, while purporting merely to “reinterpret” the ancient *extra Ecclesiam* dogma, is in fact quite incompatible with it; so it would be better and more honest, in Küng’s opinion, for us all to follow him in openly rejecting the Florentine dogma itself as simply false – as a monumental, thousand-year error on the part of Holy Mother Church. (This is a man, remember, who is notorious for dissenting from the fundamental dogma of the Church’s infallibility, and who for nearly 30 years now has been officially categorized by Rome, for this and other reasons, as being “no longer a Catholic theologian”.)

Indeed, centuries before Rahner was born, his Jesuit predecessor De Lugo was, as we have seen, also engaged in playing the “reinterpretation” game: keeping the existing words of a Catholic dogma while changing their hitherto accepted meaning. This radical procedure perhaps had some excuse at the time, because even though such a hermeneutical ploy is self-evidently a potentially lethal threat to any and every Catholic dogma, the Church’s magisterium had not yet explicitly condemned it. However, in 1870, the sword of Damocles fell in no uncertain terms. Faced with modernistic theological currents that spoke of an “evolution” in the church’s dogmas whereby their meaning could be altered in the light of new human knowledge, Vatican Council I solemnly defined:

If anyone shall say that, in accordance with the progress of science, it can happen that dogmas proposed by the Church must be given a meaning different from that which the Church has understood and still understands, let him be anathema.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in S, 176.

<sup>28</sup> DS, 3043 (my translation).

I have never seen any attempt by the champions of ‘implicit faith’ to address seriously the objection that their theory runs up against this Vatican I anathema. Fr. Sullivan’s book nowhere even mentions it – not even in a footnote. But are not these ‘progressive’ theologians doing precisely what it anathematizes? Does the Council of Florence proclaim dogmatically that all dying as Jews and pagans are outside the Church and so will be damned? Well, yes it does. So we shall ‘solve’ that problem by the simple expedient of re-defining ‘good’ and ‘sincere’ Jews and pagans as really being *non*-Jews and *non*-pagans! That is, a new and different meaning is to be given to the words “Jews” and “pagans” in the Bull *Cantate Domino*. Instead of signifying *all* those who profess the Jewish and pagan religions respectively, those two words are (according to the revisionists) to be taken henceforth as signifying *only* those who profess these religions *insincerely or without conviction*. Only those who die with this deep-down attitude of indifference to, or even willful rejection of, religious truth are (we are now assured) the “Jews” and “pagans” whom Florence consigns to the “eternal fire”; for their sincere and truth-loving co-religionists, being good Christians deep down (and so at least implicitly subject to the Roman Pontiff) are *not* really ‘outside the Church’ after all!

I submit that this is all simply nonsense.

Fr. Sullivan’s reading of the Florentine decree is criticized in detail in an appendix to this essay, but now we need to complete our survey of the historical development of the tradition. Sullivan also fails to mention in his book another important magisterial decision supporting *ECNS*, dating from about half a century after De Lugo’s revolutionary theory. The Holy Office under Pope Clement XI in 1703 answered two questions from the Bishop of Quebec. The first is whether a missionary can baptize a perilously ill (*moribundus*) Indian who so far knows nothing of Christian truth, but who promises to take instruction in the faith in the event that he should recover from his illness. The second question also has to do with such an emergency situation, but prescind from whether or not any such promise to take instruction is given. This time it is simply postulated that the dangerously ill Indian’s explicit knowledge is limited more or less to that described in Hebrews 11: 6. That is, he knows only “of God and some of his attributes, especially his justice in rewarding and punishing”. In other words, any belief such an Indian might have had in Jesus Christ would so far be only implicit at best. The response of the Holy Office is negative to both questions: “A missionary should not baptize one who does not believe *explicitly* in the Lord Jesus Christ, but is bound to instruct him about all those matters which are necessary, by a necessity of means, according to the capacity of the one to be baptized”.<sup>29</sup> And the bare minimum among

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<sup>29</sup> D 1349b = DS 2381 (emphasis added). Catholic theology distinguishes between two kinds of necessity: “necessity of means” and “necessity of precept”. The latter means the *moral* ‘necessity’, that is, moral *obligation*, to obey a lawful command (precept) issued by God or a human authority. This obligation to obey begins only after the person has heard and understood the precept in question, so that invincible ignorance of its existence (or of its lawfulness) completely excuses a person who fails to obey it. But the kind of necessity specified here by the Holy Office in relation to explicit Christian belief – a “necessity of means” – is the kind of necessity which is *not* cancelled out or rendered inapplicable by invincible ignorance. For it refers to a *means* which you simply need to have at your disposal in order to attain a certain *end*, just as you need access to a ship or a plane if you want to get to England from America. So what the Holy Office was saying is that even if your total ignorance of Christ is invincible – like that of the pagan Indians the Bishop of Quebec was writing in about – you cannot be baptized, even in danger of

these essential doctrinal matters are said to be the Trinity and the Incarnation.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the magisterium was here upholding the teaching of St. Thomas and the *ECNS* consensus of the first fifteen Christian centuries. For, underlying this Holy Office decision, is the premise that an adult who does not *explicitly* believe in Jesus Christ lacks the theological virtue of faith – the first and most basic prerequisite for justification – and so cannot be baptized, even in grave danger of death.

Although Fr. Sullivan fails to mention this 1703 Vatican decision (which has never been rescinded) anywhere in his own historical survey, he does go on to acknowledge that it was mainly the Jesuits, in the two centuries or so after De Lugo, who promoted the contrary idea that non-Christians can be saved by a merely implicit faith in Christ; and he admits that, especially in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when the Jesuits were temporarily suppressed, approved Catholic theologians followed the strict *ECNS* position of the Fathers and St. Thomas Aquinas.<sup>31</sup> After the restoration of the Jesuits in 1814, however, the more liberal view made a strong comeback, especially through the prestige of the Roman theologian Giovanni Perrone, S.J.,<sup>32</sup> whose views very probably influenced Blessed Pope Pius IX.<sup>33</sup>

Two interventions of this pontiff are now generally held to give the stamp of positive magisterial approval to the anti-Thomistic position, thereby paving the way for its further supposed confirmation at Vatican Council II. I would maintain, however, that Blessed Pius IX's statements do not in fact rule out the ancient *ECNS* teaching. In the 1854 allocution *Singulari Quadam*, the Pope said:

Certainly we must hold it as of faith that no one can be saved outside of the apostolic Roman Church, that this is the only ark of salvation, that the one who does not enter this is going to perish in the deluge. But nevertheless we must likewise hold it as certain that those who labor in ignorance of the true religion, if that ignorance be invincible, will never be charged with any guilt on this account before the eyes of the Lord.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, this statement is perfectly compatible with the *ECNS* position. For Augustine, Aquinas, and the mainstream pre-Jesuit tradition had never suggested that anyone invincibly ignorant of the true religion would be charged with guilt “on this account”, that is, *on account of* their ignorance itself. But this did not mean they could be saved if they remained in such ignorance of the Gospel right up until death. As we have already noted, patristic and medieval tradition held that such persons would be damned because of *other* unrepented sins; for all those who *did* repent of grave sins weighing on

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death, precisely because you are presumed *not* to have the theological virtue of faith which is an absolutely necessary prerequisite for justification and admission to Church membership.

<sup>30</sup> D 1349a = DS 2380.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. S, 103-106

<sup>32</sup> Cf. S, 108-112.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. S, 116.

<sup>34</sup> This is the translation cited in S, 113.



their own conscience, and who persevered in seeking after truth and righteousness, would never in fact be left in ignorance of the Gospel right until death. Indeed, the *ECNS* position seems more readily reconcilable with that of Pius IX than the ‘implicit faith’ theory. For in that same allocution the Pope not only insists that “no one can be saved outside of the apostolic Roman Church”, but describes as an “impious and deadly” error – one which he tells the bishops to “drive out of the minds of men” – the opinion “that the way of salvation can be found in any religion”. But if there really existed people who died as good-willed and truth-seeking Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc., and if such persons then reached eternal salvation, then would not every reasonable person then have to admit the *truth* of the opinion that “the way of salvation can be found in any religion”?

Nine years later, in the encyclical *Quanto Conficiamur Moerere* addressed to the Italian bishops, Pius IX made some similar observations, as follows:

Here we must again mention and reprove a most serious error in which some Catholics have unhappily fallen, thinking that men living in errors and altogether apart from the true faith and Catholic unity can attain to eternal life. [Nevertheless] it is known to us and to you that those who labor in invincible ignorance concerning our most holy religion and who, assiduously observing the natural law and its precepts which God has inscribed in the hearts of all, and being ready to obey God, live an honest and upright life, can, through the working of the divine light and grace, attain eternal life; since God . . . [will] never allow anyone who has not the guilt of wilful sin to be punished by eternal sufferings. But it is also a perfectly well known Catholic dogma that no one can be saved outside the Catholic Church, . . . <sup>35</sup>

The Pope then goes on to stress that those who knowingly and obstinately reject her authority and separate themselves from her unity cannot be saved. He does not, however, say that such formal heretics, schismatics and apostates are the only persons to whom the dogma “outside the Church, no salvation” applies.

This 1863 document, admittedly, seems to lean rather more toward Perroni’s “implicit faith” thesis than the 1853 allocution did. Nevertheless, it does not teach that thesis unequivocally. For nothing the Pope says implies that anyone who is *still* invincibly ignorant of Christ *at the moment of death* can be saved. By specifying those who are “zealously keeping the natural law and its precepts”, who are “ready to obey God”, and who “live an honest and upright life”, Pius IX shows that he is talking primarily about the habitual conduct of people during the normal, active period of their lives, prior to their last agony. And he is saying that such persons “can, by *the operating power of divine light* and grace, attain eternal life” (emphasis added). These words are worth reflecting on. The Pope is saying that to be saved, they will need more than just “grace”; they will also need (and will in fact be offered) “divine light”. That of course means illumination of the *mind*. And the New Testament uses the analogy of “light” to mean precisely the *knowledge of* (i.e., explicit belief in) the Gospel, in contrast to the “darkness” of those still in Judaism or paganism (cf. Eph 5: 8, I Thess 5: 4-5; Col. 1: 12-13; I Peter 2: 9; 2 Cor. 4: 3-4; 2 Tim. 1: 10). The last two passages are particularly

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<sup>35</sup> DS 2866 = D 1677 (cited in S, 113-114).

expressive: “And even though our gospel is veiled, it is veiled for those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, so that they may not see *the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ*, who is the image of God.” And: “. . . but now is made manifest *by the illumination of our Savior Jesus Christ*, who hath destroyed death, and hath *brought to light* life and incorruption by the Gospel” (emphasis added). In short, the reference for the need for “light”, as well as “grace” to assist persons invincibly ignorant of the Gospel at least insinuates an *ECNS* position, although without unequivocally asserting it.

Some ‘implicit faith’ advocates object that if the Pope had wanted to teach the need for explicit faith in Christ, he would not have needed to include anything about good-willed non-Christians who are invincibly ignorant of the true religion. For (according to these objectors) it would seem practically redundant and trivial for him to issue a teaching that amounts to saying, “There is no salvation outside the Church; but those in invincible ignorance of the Church will, if they keep striving for truth and goodness, eventually overcome that ignorance and so will be joined to the Church before death”. But I do not concede that this papal gloss on the ancient dogma is in fact redundant or trivial. On the contrary, it serves to obviate a false and superficial interpretation of the dogma which has in fact needlessly scandalized many over the centuries, namely, the interpretation of those who think *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* implies an unjust, arbitrary and merciless God who eternally punishes multitudes of people merely for failing to obey a commandment of which they were invincibly ignorant. Pius IX’s two carefully worded interventions clearly rule out that distorted reading of the dogma.

Moreover, if, as Fr. Sullivan maintains, the Pope had been intending to teach positively the more liberal, ‘implicit faith’ view of Perroni, according to which “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus* refers only to those who are *culpably* outside the church”,<sup>36</sup> then we would have the Supreme Pontiff hitting ridiculously at a mere man of straw – solemnly excoriating an error that no Catholic was in fact holding or propagating. And it seems incredible that a Pope should have made such a misinformed blunder in his magisterial documents. There was certainly no Catholic theologian, and probably no Catholic writer or publicist at all, who was then promoting the idea that salvation awaits even those who die *culpably* outside the Church, i.e., those who know, or strongly suspect, that God wills their entry or re-entry into the Catholic Church but who consciously and finally refuse to obey their own conscience in this matter. Indeed, even in the far more liberal post-Vatican II period, I have never heard of any Catholic author propagating such a preposterous opinion. But Blessed Pius IX, in insisting that there is no salvation outside the Church, clearly understands himself to be combating an error that is real and dangerously widespread, not a mere phantom. In his 1854 allocution he describes as a “deadly” and “depraved” error – and one that “has entered the minds of very many Catholics” – the opinion that “they can well hope for the eternal salvation of all those who have in no way lived in the true Church of Christ.” That is, “those who have never given themselves to the Catholic faith”.<sup>37</sup> Then, in the 1863 encyclical, he expresses the

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<sup>36</sup> S, 114.

same concern, speaking of “a most serious error in which some Catholics have unhappily fallen, thinking that men living in errors and altogether apart from the true faith and Catholic unity can attain to eternal life.”<sup>38</sup> Clearly, the Pope wants to denounce as a “most serious” error *not only* the practically non-existent opinion that those who die culpably outside the Church can be saved, but also the much more popular and seemingly reasonable opinion that we can at least hope for the salvation of those who die *inculpably* separated from the true Church. (Pope Pius seems to have had in mind here the classical Augustinian/Thomistic view that such persons will always in fact be guilty of *other* unrepented sins, and that it will be these, rather than their ‘extra-ecclesial’ status as such, that will earn them eternal punishment.)

How, then, can we summarize Blessed Pius IX’s teaching in these two documents? I would conclude that he was not intending to decide one way or the other the long-standing controversy between the Jesuit and Thomist schools as to whether or not an explicit faith in Christ at the moment of death was necessary in order to be joined minimally to the Church, and so be eligible for salvation. Such a conclusion is supported by the fact that the Catholic theological community did not interpret these two papal interventions as constituting such a decision; for approved theological works in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries have continued to see the ‘implicit/explicit’ dispute as remaining just as open as it had been since Pigge, Cano and Soto began it in the 16th century.<sup>39</sup> Rather than attempt to adjudicate that dispute, the Pope was content simply to reaffirm and juxtapose two firm doctrinal principles – both well established by Tradition but in apparent tension with one another – without indicating how, precisely, they were to be reconciled. These two principles were, first, that there is no salvation outside the Church, and secondly, that invincible ignorance is never culpable and punishable in the sight of God, who will unfailingly provide the light and graces necessary for salvation to all those who persevere in seeking truth and goodness according to their conscience.

Nothing substantially different from Pius IX’s teaching on the eternal destiny of non-Christians issued from the magisterium for well over a century. I have found that it is a common mistake among both followers and opponents of Fr. Feeney to suppose that the 1949 Holy Office *Letter* to the Archbishop of Boston comes down clearly on the liberal side of the dispute left open by Pius IX’s somewhat ambivalent statements. That is, they reason that this *Letter*, since it says an “implicit desire for the Church” can be sufficient for salvation,<sup>40</sup> teaches definitely and positively that at least some who die as Jews, pagans and Muslims can be saved by virtue of a presumed ‘implicit faith’ in Christ. But

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<sup>37</sup> cited in S, 113.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Cf., for instance the article “Infidèles (salut de)” in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (vol. VII, cols. 1726-1930), which recognizes the Thomistic ‘explicit faith’ view as quite legitimate, while coming down on the side of the sufficiency of implicit faith. Cf. also the references in note 15 above to the approved 20<sup>th</sup>-century theologians Pegues and Royo Marín, who (like the present writer) have held out for the strict, ‘explicit faith’ view which they find taught by St. Thomas.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. DS 3870.

this is a non sequitur. In reality, the *Letter*, while it is certainly *open* to this ‘implicit faith’ thesis, also remains open to the contrary ‘explicit faith’ thesis. For the expression “implicit desire for the Church” clearly does not mean the same thing as “implicit faith in Christ”.<sup>41</sup> Whether or not the latter – assuming it to be a species of the genus *supernatural* (‘theological’) faith, which is always necessary, along with charity, for salvation – is still infused by God into any human souls after Pentecost, is a question still left unadjudicated by the 1949 *Letter*. This becomes clear when we note that it also warns that “an implicit desire [for the Church] cannot have its effect unless a man has supernatural faith”.<sup>42</sup> But the *Letter* says nothing one way or the other about whether non-Christians *can in fact* possess supernatural faith.<sup>43</sup> The whole question that concerns us now is precisely whether or not the merely implicit or unconscious longing for Christ which is arguably present in the souls of good-willed Jews, Muslims and other non-Christians *can in fact, after the coming of Christ, constitute* supernatural faith – the first and most fundamental of the theological virtues. Nearly all Catholics today say “Yes”; but I, along with all the Fathers, St. Thomas, and the Council of Florence, am saying “No”.

Vatican Council II also really does little more than restate the open-ended position of Pius IX and the Holy Office *Letter*. For while the Council’s main text on this subject is certainly *capable* of being interpreted as meaning that some persons dying without any conscious knowledge of Christ as God and Savior can be saved, it neither spells out nor strictly implies that thesis. For *Lumen Gentium*, article 16, begins by referring globally to all the various groups of non-Christians as “those who have not *yet* received the gospel”. The word “yet” here leaves the whole of article 16 open to the possible reading that while such people, living in ignorance of Christ, can in some way prepare themselves for justification and salvation by cooperating with the actual graces God offers them (for it says they are “included in God’s plan of salvation”), they will not reach sanctifying grace (justification) until they *do in fact* “receive the gospel”. And in the other key conciliar passage, article 7 of the Decree on Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes*, we find a similar ambiguity, although this time the text tends to favor the conservative *ECNS* position. The

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<sup>41</sup> If the two expressions meant the same thing, then, logically, no Protestant, Orthodox, or other separated Christian whose faith in Christ (the Trinity and Incarnation) is *explicit*, could ever have a salvifically sufficient *implicit* desire for the Catholic Church. But the truth that such non-Catholic Christians, at least, *can indeed* have such a salvifically sufficient desire is the whole point of the *Letter*, which is directed precisely against Fr. Leonard Feeney’s severe denial – or seeming denial – of this truth. Cf. note 43 below.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. DS 3872.

<sup>43</sup> The only point on which the 1949 *Letter* goes substantially further than Blessed Pius IX is its clear implication that *at least* non-Catholic *Christians* can definitely be saved with a merely “implicit desire for the Church”. For if at the moment of death they remain invincibly ignorant of the truth of the distinctively Roman Catholic dogmas – above all, the need for personal submission to the Roman Pontiff – then, according to the logic of the *Letter*, they will not be true (formal) heretics. And in that case their belief in Jesus Christ (the Trinity and the Incarnation) can in fact constitute that supernatural faith which the *Letter* says must also be there along with the *votum implicitum Ecclesiae*. While their lack of any *explicit* will to be subject to the Roman Pontiff leaves them still, at the point of death, numbered among that class people who are universally termed ‘non-Catholics’, the *Letter* implies that such persons will not be altogether ‘outside the Church’, and so can be saved (if they also have supernatural charity).

Council insists here that evangelizing activity always remains a sacred right and duty of the Church, even though it is also true that “God, in ways known to Himself, can lead men who are inculpably ignorant of the Gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please Him (Heb. 11: 6)”.<sup>44</sup> Now, since we would scarcely talk of “leading” a man to something he already possesses, or to a place or stage he has already arrived at, the most natural sense of the Council’s words would seem to be that those “men who are inculpably ignorant of the Gospel” (i.e., who do not believe *explicitly* in even Christian basics such as the Trinity and Incarnation) do *not* yet possess the theological virtue of faith. However, if one understands the words “inculpably ignorant of the Gospel” as referring to a condition that lasts right up till death, then the saving “faith” to which such persons are “led” would presumably be to a simple monotheistic belief in God as remunerator of good and evil. In short, the ambiguity remains unresolved by the Council.

### III. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century: the Ambiguity Clarified

In view of the prevailing preference of church leaders for this second and more liberal view, the CDF Declaration *Dominus Iesus* of the year 2000 comes as quite a surprise. For it reaffirms the Thomistic *ECNS* view that the defective “belief” (Latin *credulitas*) found in non-Christian religions is *not* the supernatural (theological) virtue of faith. Article 7 reads as follows:

The proper response to God’s revelation is “*the obedience of faith (Rom 16: 26; cf. Rom. 1: 5; 2 Cor 10: 5-6)*. . . . The obedience of faith implies acceptance of the truth of Christ’s revelation, guaranteed by God, who is Truth itself. . . . Faith, therefore, as “*a gift of God*” and as “*a supernatural virtue infused by him*” (CCC #153), involves a dual adherence: to God who reveals and to the truth which he reveals, out of the trust which one has in him who speaks. Thus, “we must believe in no one but God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (CCC #178).

For that reason, the distinction between *theological faith* and *belief* in the other religions must be *firmly held*. If 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”, then belief, in the other religions, is that sum of experience and thought that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration, which man in his search for truth has conceived and acted upon in his relationship to God and the Absolute.

This distinction is not always borne in mind in current theological reflection. Thus, theological faith (the acceptance of the truth revealed by the One and Triune God) is often identified with belief in other religions, which 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 the differences between Christianity and other religions tend to be reduced at times to the point of disappearance (#7, emphasis in original).

Thus, the defective acts of believing occurring in the minds of those who follow “the other religions” (which in context means all those that do not believe in the Trinity and “Christ’s revelation”) do *not* constitute theological faith. Therefore, as the 1949 Holy Office *Letter* affirmed, such persons do *not* have the kind of “implicit desire for the

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<sup>44</sup> The Latin text reads: “*Etsi . . . Deus viis sibi notis homines Evangelium sine eorum culpa ignorantes ad fidem adducere possit, sine qua impossibile est Ipsi placere (Hebr. 11, 6)*. . . .”

Church” that is sufficient for salvation. And this distinction “must be firmly held” – declares our present Pope, “ratified and confirmed” by his then-reigning predecessor John Paul II “with sure knowledge and by his apostolic authority” (cf. end of Declaration). The following syllogism, however shocking it may seem to those Catholics who think it perfectly orthodox to hold that some who die as non-Christians can reach eternal life, makes clear how this new magisterial decision implies the contrary doctrine, unanimously taught in the Church for 1500 years and solemnly enshrined at the Council of Florence:

**1. Those who die without the supernatural (theological) virtue of faith are excluded from eternal salvation.** This is *de fide* from Scripture (e.g., Hebrews 11: 6, “Without faith it is impossible to please God”) and the universal ordinary magisterium (cf. for instance, the Council of Trent’s teaching that this faith is “the beginning of human salvation” and “the foundation and root of all justification”<sup>45</sup>).

**2. Those who believe in religions other than Christ’s revelation – “the truth revealed by the One and Triune God” – lack the supernatural (theological) virtue of faith.** This is taught in *Dominus Iesus* #7 as a point of doctrine to be “firmly held” by Catholics. Assuming that “to be firmly held” means the same as “to be held definitively”, this is being proposed as infallible teaching of the second category specified in the 1989 Profession of Faith: truth inseparably connected with the revealed deposit of faith, but not necessarily an integral part of it.<sup>46</sup>

**3. Therefore those who die believing in religions other than Christ’s revelation are excluded from eternal salvation.** This is also clearly implied in another recent ecclesial text of great dogmatic importance: the most solemn of all our liturgical prayers for non-Christians. In the post-Vatican II Missal of Paul VI we find that the seventh intercession in the “universal prayer” of Good Friday is “for those who do not believe in Christ”. The invitation to this prayer, announced by the deacon, reads: “*Oremus et pro iis qui in Christum non credunt, ut, luce Spiritus Sancti illustrati, viam salutis et ipsi valeant introire.*”<sup>47</sup> That means, literally, “Let us pray also for those who do not believe in Christ, so that, illumined by the light of the Holy Spirit, they too may be able to enter the way of salvation.” Think about that! The Church is clearly implying here that non-Christians have *not yet even entered* “the way of salvation”. That can only mean that they are not yet in the state of sanctifying grace, the essential prerequisite for salvation. To reach that state, the prayer teaches, they will have to come to believe in Christ “by the light of the Holy Spirit”. Moreover, the fact that this text is talking about all who lack *explicit* belief in Christ becomes apparent two lines later, in the intercession itself, which identifies those being prayed for as “those who do not *profess* Christ” (*qui*

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<sup>45</sup> DS 1532 = D 801.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. John Paul II’s *Motu Proprio Ad Tuendam Fidem* of 18 May 1998, with the accompanying “Doctrinal Note” of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

<sup>47</sup> *Missale Romanum*, 3<sup>rd</sup> editio typica (Vatican Press: 2002), 320.

*Christum non confitentur*).<sup>48</sup> Obviously, those who do not *profess* (or *confess*) Jesus Christ are the same people as those who do not believe explicitly and consciously in him.

Let us return to the CDF Declaration *Dominus Iesus*. If it should be objected that this document also subsequently teaches that grace is not granted only to Christian believers, the response would be that, assuming *DI* to be internally consistent, we must understand the relevant articles (20-21) as referring not to the *state of* grace – that is, *sanctifying* grace or the grace of justification – but rather, to *actual* grace. And there is nothing at all new in this teaching, for as early as 1690, the Holy Office under Pope Alexander VIII had condemned the rigorist Jansenist proposition that “Pagans, Jews, heretics and others of this kind do not receive in any way any influence from Jesus Christ”.<sup>49</sup> A similar proposition, “Outside the Church, no grace is granted”, was condemned by Pope Clement XI in 1713;<sup>50</sup> and finally, in 1870, Vatican Council I clarified what these condemnations were getting at when it declared, in regard to those “who have not yet believed”, that “the most benign God . . . arouses” such people “by his grace and aids them so that they can ‘come to a knowledge of the truth’ [I Tim. 2: 4]”.<sup>51</sup> In other words, the consistent teaching of the Church over the centuries is that the spiritual journey of good-willed pagans, Jews and unbelievers – indeed, that good will itself by which they seek to find truth and live according to conscience – is possible only by virtue of the assistance of divine grace. If they persevere in cooperating with those actual graces, they will most surely receive the gift of faith in Christ and justification at some moment before death, and hence be able to attain eternal salvation. How many of them – and for that matter, how many ‘cradle Catholics’ – *do in fact* persevere in this cooperation with divine grace right until death is of course a mystery known only to God.

## Conclusion

We have seen that both *Dominus Iesus* and the new Good Friday prayer for non-Christians have recently reaffirmed the orthodox Catholic doctrine that under the terms of the New Covenant only Christians – as distinct from those with non-Christian religious beliefs or no belief at all – can possess the theological virtue of faith, without which no one can be saved. But it is worth while asking how it came about that approved theology, and finally the magisterium itself, during the last centuries of the second millennium, passed through a phase of vacillation and uncertainty regarding a truth that no Catholic had doubted for the first fifteen hundred years of Christian history.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> DS 2305 = D 1295.

<sup>50</sup> DS 2429 = D 1379.

<sup>51</sup> DS 3014 = D 1794.

The most probable answer is the increasing diffusion of the viewpoint voiced by Fr. Sullivan, speaking of the impact on 16<sup>th</sup>-century Catholic theology of the discovery of the ‘New World’ with all its millions of unevangelized inhabitants:

By the year 1580, when [the Jesuit theologian] Suarez began teaching in Rome, it was obvious that vast multitudes of people in the newly discovered regions of the world had lived and died in complete ignorance of the Christian faith. The missionaries found no evidence that any of these people had ever been enlightened about the Christian religion, as the medieval theologians thought they would be if they were doing “what lay in their power to do”. On the other hand, God would certainly have provided such people with the means that were necessary for their salvation.<sup>52</sup>

So Suarez, along with his fellow Jesuits and an ever-increasing number of other Catholics from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, drew a logical conclusion from those premises, and from the additional premise that at least *some* of all those millions of unevangelized pagans over so many centuries must have been people of good will, persevering in trying to live according to their own conscience. Their conclusion was that an *explicit* faith in Christ cannot in fact be absolutely necessary, always and everywhere, for salvation.

The trouble was, as Juan De Lugo realized half a century after Suarez, this conclusion runs up against the solemn teaching of Florence, which declared that all who die as Jews and pagans – persons who, by definition, lack an explicit faith in Jesus Christ – are eternally damned. De Lugo’s “solution”, as we saw, was the desperate measure of “redefining” sincere and good-willed Jews and pagans as not really being Jews and pagans at all! But this kind of irrational “redefinition” of the words used in Catholic dogmas was itself anathematized in principle two centuries later, at Vatican I. By that time, however, few if any theologians thought to join up all these dots so as to see the deep and dangerous doctrinal incoherence involved here. The Jesuits’ ‘compassionate’ theory of ‘implicit faith’ had become widely entrenched as offering what seemed to be the only ‘way of salvation’ for all those countless millions of unevangelized American Indians, Africans, South Sea Islanders and so on. So much so that even the late 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>- century popes and bishops felt constrained to allow that theory full currency in Catholic seminaries and universities, alongside the stricter, but increasingly unpopular, Thomistic *ECNS* thesis which insisted on the need for explicit faith in at least the Trinity and Incarnation as a condition of salvation.

But were all the premises that led to the Jesuits’ temporarily triumphant conclusion necessarily correct? I think not. Fr. Sullivan, as we just saw, considers it “obvious” that all those “vast multitudes of people in the newly discovered regions of the world had lived *and died* in complete ignorance of the Christian faith” (emphasis added). I would suggest that that certain recent clinical observations, along with innumerable personal testimonies, concerning so-called “Near Death Experiences” (NDEs) have radically undermined our grounds for thinking it “obvious” that *all* members of those unevangelized tribes have in fact *died* “in complete ignorance of the Christian faith”. There is now a large amount of data, in the form of a great many firm personal

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<sup>52</sup> S, 92



testimonies of NDEs. They come from all sorts of people from different countries, cultures and beliefs, telling of extraordinary spiritual experiences (including, often, what they believe to have been real “encounters with a divine person”, often identified as Jesus, or on the other hand, with menacing, evil spirits) which they are firmly convinced occurred during moments when they appeared clinically to be dead, prior to recovering their normal consciousness. In some of these cases there is clinical evidence that zero brain activity was being registered on hospital instruments at the time these experiences occurred, as well as cases where independent corroboration has been possible of the reality of things and events which these patients report having witnessed elsewhere while their eyes were closed and their bodies motionless in a state of apparent total unconsciousness or even death on a hospital bed or trolley.<sup>53</sup>

Now, I am not in any way suggesting that any specific theological conclusions could wisely be drawn about salvation or damnation, based solely on the *specific reported content* of such mysterious subjective experiences. It seems to me that a theologian, as such, would be rash – at least in the present limited state of our knowledge of such phenomena – if he tried passing judgment on whether a person’s reported experience of, for instance, meeting our Lord, the Blessed Mother, or demons from hell, in an NDE, was objectively real or not. Nevertheless, it is impressive that whereas common experience seems to indicate that people can usually eventually identify hallucinations, dreams and fantasies as having been just that, when they return to normal consciousness after some kind of psychological crisis, those who have been through NDEs nearly always continue to insist permanently on the *reality* of what happened to them in those moments, denying vehemently that the experience was a mere psychologically or physically provoked fantasy or hallucination. Indeed, their lives are often changed permanently as a result of their NDEs.

In any case, what these experiences do show very clearly is that a person hovering between life and death can no longer be assumed to be unconscious – without any mental experience whatever – just because he/she *appears* totally unconscious, or even lifeless, to bystanders. There is now just too much evidence that in fact, such a person may at that moment be undergoing some kind of intensely vivid and possibly life-changing conscious experience. In view of this fact, and especially in view of the omnipotence of God, I think we must conclude that in the case of good-willed non-Christians who have lived their life invincibly ignorant of the truth of the Gospel, it is entirely plausible to hold that the Holy Spirit enlightens such people in their last agony, enabling them to make an explicit act of faith in Jesus Christ, formed also by supernatural hope and charity, that will link them to the one true Church in a way that is sufficient for their salvation, even if they do not, prior to death, get as far as learning the secondary Catholic dogmas that follow on from the Trinity and the Incarnation.

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. innumerable personal testimonies accessible on the Internet by looking under “Near Death Experiences”, as well as the pioneering book on this topic (Raymond Moody, *Life After Life*) and many others of a similar nature. A recent (2004) 90-minute DVD, *The Evidence for Heaven*, contains valuable material (including up-to-date medical/clinical data and ‘evidence for Hell’ as well as Heaven), although the evangelical Protestant doctrinal ‘spin’ given by the commentators to the testimonies adduced in the film mars it slightly for a Catholic viewer. It can be obtained at [www.grizzlyadams.tv](http://www.grizzlyadams.tv) or 1-800- 811-0548

Does this thesis of a last-minute enlightenment for good-willed non-Christians have any basis in Catholic tradition? Up to a certain point, yes. We recall that St. Thomas Aquinas postulated for pagans unreached by missionaries a special revelation of the Gospel by either an angel or by God himself. And Vatican II, in *Ad Gentes* 7, affirms similarly, and more authoritatively, that when missionaries are unavailable, God “in ways known to himself” can lead those who are inculpably ignorant of the Gospel to that faith which is necessary for salvation. It is true that these and other magisterial statements along the same lines do not, as far as I know, specify the very last moments of a person’s life as those in which this act of faith would be elicited by divine illumination. However there appear to be solid independent theological reasons as to why this would in fact normally be the most appropriate moment for God’s direct intervention.

First, given that final perseverance in good will till the very end of life is for everyone, ‘cradle Catholics’ included, a special, unmerited grace which nobody can presume to have been granted beforehand,<sup>54</sup> it would seem almost inconsistent, or at least confusing, for God habitually to grant miraculous conversions to Christianity earlier on in the life of unevangelized pagans, when such a privileged intervention might well later be nullified by the recipient’s subsequent lapse into mortal sin and even damnation. It would cheapen the very dignity and status of miraculous conversions if God were habitually to bring them about under circumstances in which many could eventually turn out to be superfluous – their effect being subsequently reversed and nullified by the abuse of human free will.

Secondly, a fundamental aspect of the revealed economy of salvation under the New Law of Christ is our Lord’s sovereign decision to make the *natural* methods of communication – that is, speaking and writing on the part of human beings – the *ordinary* means of spreading the saving Gospel.<sup>55</sup> Given that decision, it would seem perfectly reasonable, and in accord with what we know of God’s parsimony in using extraordinary means, that he would normally intervene directly and miraculously to facilitate a conversion only in those cases where the ordinary means prove to be unavailable or ineffective; that is, in the cases of those non-Christians who have persevered in good will and truth-seeking until just before death, but who are still at that time invincibly ignorant of Gospel truth. Indeed, if extraordinary, seemingly spontaneous, conversions to Christ had constantly been seen all over the world, right from the first century A.D., occurring quite independently of any human missionary efforts, and during the active, workaday life of the good-willed Jewish and pagan beneficiaries of these special graces, then it would be hard to imagine a scenario better calculated to stifle and extinguish all missionary zeal. Why should anyone bother risking terrible hardships, possibly even torture and death, to spread the knowledge of Christ among the nations, if God himself were quite obviously doing the job much more efficiently, and without any human assistance? Such a divine strategy would, for all practical purposes, be a negation of

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. for instance, the Council of Trent’s teaching in DS 1566, 1572 (= D 826, 832).

<sup>55</sup> Cf. the great missionary command to the Apostles at the end of Matthew’s Gospel (28: 18-20).

Christ's own solemn command to the Apostles to go out to the ends of the earth, teaching and baptizing all nations.

I will summarize the content of my talk today by concluding with another syllogism which I believe expresses both the severity of the Gospel's demands and the compassion of Christ, who "wants all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth":

**Major:** *After the promulgation of the New Law at Pentecost, explicit faith in Jesus Christ is universally necessary for salvation, by a necessity of means.* This is strongly indicated in Scripture, spelt out in constant patristic and medieval Tradition, and taught infallibly by the Council of Florence's solemn profession of faith, which excludes from eternal life all who die as pagans and Jews, i.e., as non-Christians. The same doctrine is also implied by the CDF Instruction *Dominus Iesus* and the solemn Good Friday prayer for non-Christians in the Missal of Paul VI.

**Minor:** *God wills the salvation of all men, and so will not deny the means necessary for salvation for those who persevere in good will, living by the light of conscience and natural law.* This is an at least authentic, and probably infallible, teaching of the ordinary magisterium, enunciated by – among others, Pope Pius IX and Vatican Council II in *Lumen Gentium*.

**Conclusion:** *Therefore, if anyone perseveres in good will until just before death, but is still invincibly ignorant of Christian truth, God will certainly make possible for that person an act of explicit faith in Christ in those last moments of his/her life.*

## APPENDIX

### How Does Francis Sullivan Understand the Council of Florence?

It is worthwhile adding some observations on how Fr. Francis Sullivan, S.J., attempts to negotiate the evident objection to his own liberal position constituted by the teaching of the Council of Florence? Does he accept this teaching as true or not? Once again, the relevant section of the Bull *Cantate Domino* of 4 February 1442 affirms solemnly:

The Most Holy Roman Church, founded by the word of our Lord and Savior, . . . firmly believes, professes and preaches that no persons living outside the Catholic Church – not only pagans but also Jews, heretics and schismatics – can come to share in eternal life, but will go into the eternal fire . . . unless they are aggregated to her before the end of their life”.

Fr. Sullivan comments as follows on this statement:

[W]e have good reason to understand this decree in the light of what was then the common belief that all pagans, Jews, heretics and schismatics were guilty of the sin of infidelity, *on the grounds that they had culpably refused either to accept the true faith or to remain faithful to it*. We have seen how St. Thomas distinguished three kinds of sinful unbelief: that of pagans, that of Jews, and that of Christian heretics and schismatics. The bishops were merely drawing the logical conclusion from St. Thomas’ teaching about these sins of infidelity. Their decree cannot be understood except in the light of their judgment concerning the grave culpability of all those who they declared would be condemned to hell.<sup>56</sup>

Certainly, going by the classical Augustinian and Thomistic terminology which the Fathers of Florence would all have accepted, the words “heretics and schismatics” would have been understood to mean, by definition, persons *guilty* of the mortal sins of heresy and schism respectively. Indeed, right up till today the Church’s *Catechism* and Canon Law today still treat these sins as particularly grave ones, earning automatic excommunication.<sup>57</sup> So there is no discrepancy on this point between the teaching of Florence and that of Vatican II. In the 21<sup>st</sup> as in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the perennial Catholic teaching continues to be that all who die as unrepentant (formal) heretics and schismatics will be condemned to hell.

However, as regards “pagans and Jews”, and especially the former, I believe Sullivan’s reading of Florence is totally groundless. He offers no evidence to support his assertion that the Florentine Fathers assumed all these non-Christians to be “guilty of the sin of infidelity” by virtue of having “culpably refused . . . to accept the true faith”. He refers us to what St. Thomas said about “three kinds of sinful unbelief”, but fails to note

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<sup>56</sup> S, 67 (emphasis added).

<sup>57</sup> Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2089, *Code of Canon Law*, #751.

that St. Thomas was also perfectly well aware that unbelief on the part of pagans *who have never heard the Gospel* is *not* sinful. The Florentine Fathers were also surely well aware of that fact – which in any case is so self-evident that a child could understand it. Nevertheless, they are plainly asserting that *all* who die as Jews and pagans go to hell. In other words this judgment applies to them regardless of whether their unbelief in Christ was culpable or inculpable. But is this not unjust to the *inculpably* ignorant? No, for as Aquinas asserts, “If such like [invincibly ignorant] unbelievers are damned, it is on account of other sins, which cannot be taken away without faith, *but not on account of their unbelief*”.<sup>58</sup> This key point is totally overlooked by Fr. Sullivan in his reading of Florence.

He goes on:

On the other hand, the bishops at the Council of Florence certainly believed that God is good, that being good he is just, and that a just God does not condemn innocent people to the fires of hell. The conclusion is inescapable that they must have believed all pagans, Jews, heretics and schismatics to be guilty, and deserving of eternal punishment. We can agree with them that unrepented grave sin against faith would exclude people from eternal salvation; however, we cannot agree with their judgment that all those people were undoubtedly guilty of such sin.<sup>59</sup>

Once again, we must insist that, for the reason already given, the conclusion drawn here by Fr. Sullivan is by no means “inescapable”. Ignoring the classical Augustinian and Thomistic teaching – well known to the theologians of Florence – that pagans and Jews dying in invincible ignorance of Gospel truth will go to hell for *other* sins, and not for their lack of Christian faith, Sullivan draws the false conclusion that the Florentine Fathers were making the grievously rash and mistaken judgment that all pagans and Jews are in fact guilty of “grave sin *against faith*” (my emphasis). Such an interpretation of Florence in turn assumes that the Council must have been basing its alleged judgment on the situation of *contemporary* Jews and pagans, who, the Fathers supposedly would have assumed, had all received by that time ample opportunities to hear and accept Christianity, so that their unbelief could no longer in fact be inculpable. Sullivan writes:

We have to try to grasp the fact that it simply did not occur to the medieval mind that people like the Jews, *living in the midst of Christendom*, could persist in their Jewish belief and their rejection of Christian faith, and not be guilty of sin thereby. Still less could medieval Christians believe in the inculpability of the Moslems, *who were the enemies of Christendom against whom the crusades had been waged*, and who even at the time of the Council of Florence were threatening to conquer the city of Constantinople, the last stronghold of Christianity in the east.<sup>60</sup>

Now, it may well be true that most if not all medieval Christians tended to make this harsh judgment that contemporary Jewish and Muslim disbelief in Christ was by that

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<sup>58</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, Q. 10, a. 1c (emphasis added).

<sup>59</sup> S, 67-68.

<sup>60</sup> S, 67 (emphasis added).

period of history always inexcusable and therefore gravely culpable. But this probable prejudice on their part is irrelevant here. Indeed, to introduce it, as Sullivan does, as a relevant factor in the interpretation of the Florentine decree seems to me a major hermeneutical error. For there is not the slightest indication that the Fathers were intending to express a prudential judgment *here, in this document*, as to how subjectively culpable or otherwise the unbelief of their Jewish and Muslim contemporaries would have been.<sup>61</sup> Fr. Sullivan forgets the literary context of the Council's severe declaration about their eternal destiny: the Bull *Cantate Domino*. This is not some kind of 15th-century equivalent of Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* – a “pastoral” document intending to *apply* Catholic doctrine to the conditions of contemporary European and world culture. No, it is from start to finish a formal and solemn declaration of pure, timeless Catholic doctrine itself – that is, of revealed truths proposed as being immutably and eternally true in *any* time or place (or at least, ever since Christian revelation was completed about fourteen centuries earlier). The Bull begins by expounding the dogma of the Most Holy Trinity,<sup>62</sup> and continues with other strictly dogmatic truths regarding the Creation,<sup>63</sup> the authentic Canon of the Old and New Testaments,<sup>64</sup> the Incarnation,<sup>65</sup> the Redemption,<sup>66</sup> and the cultic, dietary and sacramental systems under the Old and New Covenants respectively.<sup>67</sup> Only after all this does the Council proclaim, using exactly the same solemn terminology as for all the preceding dogmatic themes, the certain damnation of all those dying outside the Church, including pagans and Jews. The Florentine document thereby leaves no doubt that their lamentable fate is being proposed as a truth just as perennial, universal and unqualified as all the other dogmas proclaimed in the Bull. That is, it is clearly *prescinding* from the contingent historical question of how many of these non-Christians are damned for sins *specifically against faith* as opposed to sins against other virtues – something which, as the Fathers would surely have realized, could vary greatly according to individual, cultural and historical circumstances and would in any case be known with certainty only to God. Indeed, the virtue of faith is not even mentioned in the relevant twelve-line paragraph of *Cantate Domino*.<sup>68</sup> The Fathers would presumably have all agreed that at *some* time since the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D., even if perhaps

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<sup>61</sup> In any case, as regards “pagans”, the Fathers would all have been aware that this term they used covered not only the Muslims (the only “pagans” mentioned by Sullivan in this context), but also other remote and unevangelized African and Asian tribes whose unbelief even “medieval Christians” would have recognized as inculpable.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. DS 1330-1332 = D 703-705.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. DS 1333, 1336 = D 706-707.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. DS 1334-1335.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. DS 1337-1346 = D 708-710.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. DS 1347 = D 711.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. DS 1348-1350 = D 712-713.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. DS 1351 = D 714. The emphasis here is much more on the *unity of the Church* than on faith as such. This unity can of course be violated by schism – essentially a sin against charity – even without the commission of any sin against faith.

not after Christendom was well established, there would have been at least some Jews, somewhere (along with multitudes of pagans), who had died invincibly and inculpably ignorant of Christ. But that ignorance, according to the faith proclaimed by the Florentine Fathers, would not in any case mean there was a possibility of their being saved. It would merely imply they were damned for some sin other than the sin of unbelief.

Fr. Sullivan also goes on to falsely attribute the same rash and mistaken judgment – namely, the judgment that all dying as non-Christians are damned precisely for the sin of culpable unbelief – to Fr. Feeney and Saint Benedict Center:

I do not know how they could return to the medieval understanding of *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, unless they also returned to the unspoken premise of that understanding: namely, that all those who die outside the Catholic Church must be guilty of the sin of heresy, schism or unbelief. It is possible to understand how medieval Christians could have made such a judgment, given their limited knowledge of the world outside Christendom, . . . But it is indeed hard to understand how Fr. Leonard Feeney, a man of the twentieth century, could make such a judgment about all the millions of people in the world who were not Roman Catholics. But if he did not judge them all guilty, the only alternative is that he must have believed that God condemns the innocent to the torments of hell, and that would be a more grievous error than the first.<sup>69</sup>

If there is anything really “hard to understand” here, it is not Fr. Feeney’s own position, but rather, the grave misrepresentation of both that position and the teaching of Florence, by a Jesuit theologian who is supposed to be a world expert on these matters! (Fr. Sullivan taught dogma at the Church’s most prestigious academy, the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, for 35 years until 1993.)

The bottom line, then, is that Fr. Sullivan dissents in substance from the infallible teaching of Florence regarding the fate of those dying as pagans and Jews. He does not openly admit his dissent (although he comes close by using the word “atrocious” to describe the Florentine “formulation” of the doctrine<sup>70</sup>). Rather, Sullivan insinuates that he accepts the strictly doctrinal teaching of Florence, while strongly disagreeing with a contingent, non-doctrinal judgment of fact that – according to him – was simultaneously implied by the Council Fathers. This true and acceptable *doctrine* of Florence, Fr. Sullivan would have us believe, is that *all those dying with grave and unrepented sins against the virtue of faith will go to hell*. Let us call that proposition D. And the unacceptable non-doctrinal judgment of fact (we’ll call it proposition F) that supposedly went hand-in-hand with D is this: *all Jews and pagans are, as a matter of fact, guilty of unrepented sins against the virtue of faith*.

The trouble with this Sullivanian reading of the Council, however, is quite simply that neither D nor F is affirmed, or even implied, by the text of *Cantate Domino*. The Florentine Fathers, like Fr. Sullivan and orthodox Catholics in any century, would of course have agreed with the doctrinal proposition D: all who die with grave and

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<sup>69</sup> S, 136.

<sup>70</sup> S, 201.

unrepented sins against faith do indeed go to hell. But that is manifestly *not* the doctrine they are enunciating in this paragraph of *Cantate Domino*, which does not even mention the word “faith”. The doctrine they *are* enunciating here is simply that everyone dying outside the Catholic Church – pagans, Jews, heretics and schismatics – goes to hell. And their unstated assumption (as we can reasonably deduce from the commonly held theology at that time) is not, as Fr. Sullivan supposes, proposition F above, but rather, that the mortal sin for which those outside the Church are sent to hell *could be either sin against the virtue of faith or sin against some other virtue(s)*. Indeed, as already noted,<sup>71</sup> the main emphasis in this paragraph of *Cantate Domino* is against schismatics, who sin first and foremost against charity rather than faith. As regards proposition F, there is not the slightest indication of this judgment of fact in the text. Indeed, it seems extremely unlikely, *a priori*, that there would have been any consensus among the Florentine Fathers that by that point in history all *pagans* (as well as all Jews) were in fact guilty of sins *against faith*; for it was fairly common knowledge at that time – even before the discovery of the Americas – that there were remote African and Asian tribes still unreached by missionaries whose lack of Christian faith could therefore not be sinful and culpable. The one and only reason Fr. Sullivan tortuously reads these propositions D and F into a magisterial text that does not contain them is, as we have explained above, his failure to realize something that the Florentine Fathers, with their knowledge of Augustine, Aquinas and other classical doctors, would certainly have realized, namely, that the proposition, “All who die without believing in Christ go to hell” by no means implies the proposition, “All those who die without believing in Christ go to hell *because their unbelief is culpable*”.

In regard to the dogma *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* in its fullest extent (as distinct from its application just to pagans and Jews, the main theme of this present study), Fr. Sullivan “interprets” it to mean in substance nothing more than the following very bland idea: “God has assigned to the church a necessary role in the divine economy of salvation”.<sup>72</sup> In other words, he admits that we need the Church to be there, for it is the instrument through which God has decided to communicate his salvific graces to the world. Well, no faithful Catholic will disagree with that. But the dogma, as defined at Florence, says a whole lot more than that. And Fr. Sullivan denies what the Council specifically asserts, for he manifestly does not believe that all pagans and Jews (just as much as heretics and schismatics) must in fact convert and be “aggregated” to the Catholic Church prior to death if they are to be saved. No, he actually describes that proposition as “atrocious”, because what he thinks is that some pagans and Jews can be saved *even if they die as pagans and Jews*. In other words, he and legions of other like-minded Catholics are blatantly changing the meaning of the dogma that was laid down once and for all by Florence. For according to these Catholic liberals, the dogma does not really mean what it plainly says (“*Outside the Church there is no salvation*”), but rather, “*Without the Church (meaning, In the absence of the Church, or If there were no Church) there would be no salvation.*” But in Latin that would not be “*extra ecclesiam nulla*

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<sup>71</sup> Cf. note 68 above.

<sup>72</sup> S, 199.



*salus*” at all. Rather, it would be “*sine ecclesia* (or *absque ecclesia*) *nulla salus*”. We cannot make words mean whatever we want them to mean.