

Proposal for an addition to the Pleshey DraftFr B SoaneThe Salvation of Unbelievers.

When people hear the Church's teaching about the necessity of faith for salvation they often express a concern for those who have never heard the gospel preached and, therefore, cannot assent to it. They think we are saying that such people are lost. People are often concerned also for their own relatives and friends who are not believers. While it may well be true that some of these may have closed their hearts to God's grace, we cannot say that this is necessarily so in all cases, neither does the Catholic Church teach that unbelievers cannot be saved. The following text from the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium) of the Second Vatican Council refers to this question:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience - those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all men so that they may at length have life. (LG 16)

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World said something similar:

All this holds true not only for Christians but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to the one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery. (GS 22).

It is not suggested that anyone can be saved apart from the grace of

God won by the merits of Christ's saving death and resurrection. Nor is it implied that anyone can rest content in ignorance of God. The Declaration on Religious Liberty makes this plain:

It is in accordance with their dignity as persons...that all men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth. (DH 2).

It seems to me that our statement should have something to say on this topic. Since the whole text is set in an ecclesial framework it is not easy to know where one would put this material. I suggest tentatively that it might be placed after 25 of the Wesley draft, among other individual topics.

What should the section contain? I suggest the following:

1. It might be helpful to distinguish between faith and religious belief. Nobody can be saved without faith. But one is only obliged to believe the gospel ~~when~~ one has heard it proclaimed and is convinced of its truth. Such belief is impossible without faith, but faith without doctrinal content is not impossible. The difficulty about this distinction between faith and religious belief is that ^{the wording} ~~it~~ is untraditional and our own text presumes that faith is a response to the proclamation of the Gospel.

2. It may also be necessary to say something about the traditional doctrine that there is no salvation outside the Church. I doubt if we want to get involved in a discussion of anonymous Christianity, but I cannot see how we can altogether avoid a discussion of the relationship of faith and Church membership.

3. We should also say that everyone has an obligation to search for the truth and the Church an obligation to preach and teach it.

With this in mind I have composed a tentative text. I am sure it needs radical revision, but it may give others something to get their teeth into. Of course, it might not be agreed that we should cover this topic, though I would argue strenuously that we should.

The Salvation of Unbelievers.

Nobody can come to salvation and eternal life without faith. This does not imply that they cannot be saved who have either never heard the gospel preached, or who, though they have heard of Christianity, have not had it presented and explained to them in such a way that, through divine illumination, they can be convinced of its truth. We believe that God offers to everyone the possibility of being associated with the saving work of Christ. If they accept this offer, albeit in a hidden way, then they are justified. Although it is so, everyone does have an obligation to seek for the truth and to assent to it when they discover it, and the Church has a corresponding obligation to preach and teach it, so that people may come to know the God to whom they have submitted in the inner sanctuary of their hearts.

Although unbelievers who, by God's grace, have received the gift of faith are not members of the visible Church, they belong to Christ and are related in a hidden way to his Church. There is only one Lord and one Spirit, and He draws all who receive Him into unity. It is true that there is no salvation outside the Church, but that does not mean that those who are not visibly members of the Church are totally outside her life. Wherever Christ is, there is the Church.