

## **NO SALVATION OUTSIDE THE CHURCH IN VATICAN COUNCIL II**

1. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*)
- 2 The Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitas redintegratio*)
- 3 The Decree on Religious Freedom ( *Dignitatis Humanae*)
- 4 The decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad gentes divinitus*)

## INTRODUCTION

A priest acquaintance of mine, I will leave him anonymous, once wrote: “[Father Feeney played] an unwitting role in bringing the Church to an historical and theological turning point – that letter of Pope Pius XII (*Suprema haec sacra*) putting on record in a definitive manner the recognition that people of good will outside the Roman Catholic community can also find salvation for themselves...In my estimation this document of Pius XII set the stage for the Ecumenical Movement in the Catholic Church and, in fact, for the ecumenical theology declared by Vatican II.” Unfortunately this view of the “Letter of the Holy Office” and Vatican Council II, namely that the “Letter” and the Council taught that there is salvation outside the Catholic Church, is very common today.

Let me quote from Fr. Karl Rahner, probably the most influential *peritus* at the Council:

“...There can be, and actually are, individuals who are justified in the grace of God, who attain to supernatural salvation in God’s sight (and, moreover, to Christ as well), yet who do not belong to the Church or to Christendom as a visible historical reality as a result of having been touched by the preaching of the Gospel in any concrete ‘this worldly’ sense at any point in their lives. No truly theological demonstration of this thesis can be supplied here from Scripture or Tradition. Such a demonstration would not be easy to make, because the optimism of universal salvation entailed in this thesis has only gradually asserted itself in the conscious faith of the Church. We can trace a course of development from the optimism concerning unbaptized catechumens in Ambrose, through the doctrine of *baptismus fluminis* and the *votum ecclesiae* in the Middle Ages and at the Council of Trent, down to the explicit teaching in the writings of Pius XII to the effect that even a merely implicit *votum* for the Church and Baptism can suffice.” (Fr. Karl Rahner, S.J., “Problem of the Anonymous Christian,” *Theological Investigations*, Volume XIV, The Seabury Press, New York, 1976, p.283.)

The phrase “...the writings of Pius XII to the effect that even a merely implicit *votum* (“desire”) for the Church and Baptism can suffice,” is a not quite accurate reference to the “Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston.” Pius XII in his own writings did not teach that there is salvation outside the Church, quite the contrary. Father Rahner goes on to Vatican Council II:

“It was declared at the Second Vatican Council that atheists too are not excluded from the possibility of salvation, though here the distinction between positive and negative atheism, between atheism of greater or lesser duration, usually accepted up to that point were not applied at the Second Vatican Council. For when we consider the officially received theology concerning all these questions, which was more or less traditional right down to the Second Vatican Council, we can only wonder how few controversies arose during the Council with regard to these assertions of optimism concerning salvation, and wonder too at how little opposition the conservative wing of the Council brought to bear on this point, how all this took place without any setting of the stage or any great stir even though this doctrine marked a more decisive phase in the development of the Church’s conscious awareness of her faith than, for instance, the doctrine of collegiality in the Church, the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, the acceptance of the new exegesis, etc.” (Rahner, *Op. cit.*, p.284.)

Father Rahner’s preposterous claim that Vatican II taught that atheists can be saved hardly deserves consideration; it can be rebutted by a simple reading of the text, but it gives one an idea of how far the liberals are prepared to go in their false claims concerning Vatican II. Such claims are completely against the spirit of Pope John, now Blessed John XXIII which he set forth in his opening address to the Council:

“The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more efficaciously. That doctrine embraces the whole of man, composed as he is of body and soul. And, since he is a pilgrim on this earth, it commands him to tend always toward heaven...

“Our duty is not only to guard this precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our era demands of us, pursuing thus the path which the Church has followed for twenty centuries.

“The salient point of this Council is not, therefore, a discussion of one article or another of the fundamental doctrine of the Church which has been repeatedly taught by the Fathers and by ancient and modern theologians, and which is presumed to be well known and familiar to all.

“For this a Council was not necessary. But from the renewed, serene, and tranquil adherence to all the teachings of the Church in its entirety and preciseness, as it still shines forth in the Acts of the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council, the Christian, Catholic, and apostolic spirit of the whole world expects a step forward toward a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciousness in faithful and perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of the faith is one thing, and the way which it is presented is another. And it is the later that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary, everything being measured in the forms and

proportions of a magisterium which is predominantly pastoral in character.” (*The Documents of Vatican II*, edited by Fr. Walter M. Abbot, S.J. and Very Rev. Msgr. Joseph Gallagher, America Press, 1966, pp.713,715.)

Pope Paul VI made several valiant but futile protests against what the liberals were doing to the Council. One such protest was issued on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1966:

“...In professing fidelity to all that the Council teaches and prescribes for us, We feel that two possible errors must be avoided. The first is supposing that the Second Vatican Council represents a break with the doctrinal and disciplinary tradition which preceded it, as if the Council were such a novelty that it should be compared to a revolutionary discovery, to a subjective emancipation, which authorizes a separation...like a false liberation...from what the Church has authoritatively taught and professed until yesterday. Such an error allows the proposal of new and arbitrary interpretations of Catholic dogma, often borrowed from beyond the limits of an orthodoxy which we cannot renounce. It offers Catholic life new and intemperate expressions often borrowed from a worldly spirit. Such is not in conformity with the historical view of the Council nor with the authentic spirit as predicted by Pope John XXIII...

“The other error contrary to the fidelity we owe the Council is to fail to appreciate the immense richness of the teachings and the providential and abundant means for renewal that have come to us through the Council itself. We ought willingly to give the Council credit for beginning rather than for finishing a task. For it is true that historically and materially this Council is considered the logical complementary epilogue of the First Vatican Ecumenical Council, in reality it also represents a new and original act of awareness of life in the Church of God. It represents an act which opens up new and wonderful paths for the Church herself in her internal development, in her relationships with the followers of other religions and the modern world such as it is...magnificent and complex, formidable and tormented.” (Homily, “Mary – Blessed Among All,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, December 9,10, 1966.)

And finally, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation of the Faith, in an address to the Bishops of Chile, also spoke of the abuse of the Council:

“It is a necessary task to defend the Second Vatican Council against Msgr. Lefebvre, as valid, and as binding upon the Church. certainly there is a mentality of narrow views that isolates Vatican II and which has provoked this opposition. There are many accounts of it which give the impression that, from Vatican II onward, everything has been changed, and that what preceded has no value or, at best, has value only in the light of Vatican II.

“The Second Vatican Council has not been treated as a part of the entire living Tradition of the Church, but as an end of Tradition, a new start from zero. The truth is

that this particular Council defined no dogma at all, and deliberately chose to remain on a modest level, as a merely pastoral council; and yet many treat it as though it had made itself into a sort of super-dogma which takes away the importance of all the rest...

“All this leads a great number of people to ask themselves if the Church of today is really the same as that of yesterday, or if they have changed it for something else without telling people. The only way in which Vatican II can be made plausible is to present it as it is: one part of the unbroken and unique Tradition of the Church and her faith.” (Address given in Santiago Chile, July 13, 1988. Appeared in the July 30<sup>th</sup> – August 5<sup>th</sup> edition of *Il Sabato*, translated into English by Farley Clinton for *The Wanderer*, September 8, 1988.)

Let us examine the Council’s teaching on no salvation outside the Church as contained in four of its major documents in the chronological order in which they were issued: 1. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) issued November 21, 1964; 2. the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio*) issued on the same day; 3. the Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Unitatis humanae*) issued on December 7, 1965; and the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (*Ad gentes divinitus*) also issued on the same day.

### **THE DOGMATIC CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH (*Lumen Gentium*)**

In Chapter 1:8 of *Lumen Gentium* we read:

“This is the sole Church of Christ which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic, which our Saviour, after His resurrection entrusted to Peter’s pastoral care (Jn. 21:17), commissioning him and the other apostles to extend and rule it (cf. Matt. 28:18, etc.), and which He raised up for all ages as “the pillar and mainstay of truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. Nevertheless, many elements are found outside its visible confines. Since these are gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, they are forces impelling towards Catholic unity.” (*Lumen Gentium* 1:8, *Vatican Council II*, edited by Fr. Austin Flannery, O.P., The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1975, p.357.)

The liberals, of course, interpreted the phrase, “The sole Church of Christ...subsists in the Catholic Church” to mean that the “Church of Christ” was a larger entity than the Roman Catholic Church. For example, the Report of the Joint Lutheran/Roman Catholic Study Commission on “The Gospel and the Church” said: “It is pointed out on the Catholic side that there is no exclusive identity between the one Church of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church. This means that the one Church of

Christ is actualized in an analogous manner also in other churches. That also means that the unity of the Roman Catholic Church is not perfect but it strives towards the perfect unity of the Church.” (“Report of the Joint Lutheran/Roman Catholic Study Commission” on ‘The Gospel and the Church,’ *The Lutheran World*, 19, (1972), pp.270,271; quoted in Frank Mobbs, “The One True Church according to Vatican II,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, July, 1985).

But a simple reading of the *relationes*, the official explanations which accompanied the various drafts, show the falsity of this claim. The first draft of this passage had read: “The one Church of Christ...**is** the Catholic Church,” but in the second draft the “is” was changed to “subsists in.” The *relatio* gives the reason for the change. “Certain words have been changed: in place of ‘is,’ ‘subsists in’ is used so that expression may be in better harmony with the affirmation about ecclesial elements which are present elsewhere.” (*Acta Synadolia Sacrosancti Concili Oecumenici Vaticani II, Typis Polyglotis Vaticanis*, Rome, Vol. 1, pt. 4, p.177; Quoted in Fr. James T. O’Connor, “The Church of Christ and the Catholic Church,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, January, 1984, p.15.)

So “is” was changed to “subsists in” not to show that the Church of Christ is something larger than the Catholic Church, but to emphasize the fact that while “ecclesial elements,” like the sacrament of Baptism, can **exist** outside the Catholic Church, they act only as “forces impelling toward Catholic unity.”

When some of the bishops asked that this particular passage be further clarified, the Theological Commission replied: “The necessity of communion with the Catholic Church is sufficiently indicated in the whole context.” (*Acta*, p.35; quoted in O’Connor, *Op. cit.*, p.21).

Clearly the intention of the Council was to teach that the Catholic Church **is** the one Church of Christ, and that it is necessary for salvation.

Concerning these “ecclesial elements” such as Baptism which can exist outside the Church, the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio*) which was issued on the same day as *Lumen Gentium* said: “...of the elements or goods, which taken together build up and vivify the Church herself, certain and even many outstanding ones are able to exist outside the visible bonds of the Catholic Church...; all these which come from Christ and lead to Him, belong of right to the only Church of Christ.” (“Decree on Ecumenism,” 1,2, Fr. Austin Flannery, O.P., *Vatican Council II*, p.455).

Finally on March 20, 1985 a “notification” was released by the Vatican written by the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger, which was approved by Pope John Paul II, condemning a book by the Brazilian theologian, Fr. Leonardo Boff:

“This relativising concept of the church stands at the basis of the radical criticisms directed at the hierarchic structure of the Catholic Church. In order to justify it, L. Boff

appeals to the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*(No. 8) of the Second Vatican Council. From the Council's famous statement, "*Haec ecclesia (sc. Unica Christi ecclesia...subsistit in ecclesia Catholica*" ["this church (that is the sole Church of Christ subsists)...in the Church"], he derives a thesis which is exactly contrary to the authentic meaning of the council text, for he affirms: "In fact it (sc. The sole church of Christ) may also be present in other Christian churches" (p.75). But the Council had chosen the word *subsistit* – subsists – exactly in order to make clear that one sole "subsistence" of the true church exists, whereas outside her visible structure only *elementae ecclesiae* – elements of the church exist; these being elements of the same church – tend and conduct toward the Catholic Church (*Lumen Gentium* , 8). The decree on ecumenism expressed the same doctrine (*Unitatis reintegratio*, 3,4), and it was restated precisely in the declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (No. 1 AAS, LXV, 1973, pp.396-398).

"Turning upside down the meaning of the council text on the church's subsistence lies at the base of L. Boff's theological relativism, which is outlined above; a profound misunderstanding of the Catholic faith on the church of God in the world is developed and made explicit." (U.S. Catholic Conference, Documentary Service, April 4, 1985, Vol. 14; No. 42, pp.685,686.).

*Lumen Gentium* (1, 14) continues:

"This holy council first of all turns its attention to the Catholic faithful. Basing itself on Scripture and Tradition, it teaches that the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is the Mediator and the way of salvation; He is present to us in His Body which is the Church. He Himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and Baptism (cf. Mk. 16:16; Jn. 3:5), and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through Baptism as through a door. Hence they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse to enter it or remain in it.

"Fully incorporated into the Church are those who, possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept all the means of salvation given to the Church together with her entire organization, and who – by the bonds constituted by the profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesiastical government, and communion – are joined in the visible structure of the Church of Christ, who rules through her Supreme Pontiff and the bishops. Even though incorporated into the Church, one who does not however persevere in charity is not saved. He remains indeed in the bosom of the Church, but 'in body' not 'in heart.' All children of the Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results, not from their own merits, but from the grace of Christ. If they fail to respond in thought, word and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be more severely judged." (*Lumen Gentium*, 2,14, Flannery, pp.365,366.)

The next section which I shall cite, *Lumen Gentium* 2, 16, is crucial to a proper understanding of the Father Feeney Case, because it contains an official footnote referring to the "Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston" (Protocol 122/49):

“...Those who through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ of 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.<sup>19</sup> 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<sup>20</sup> and given by Him Who enlightens all men that they may at length have life. But very often, deceived by the Evil One, men have become vain in their reasonings, have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and served the world rather than the Creator (cf. Rom. 1:21 and 25). Or else, living and dying in this world without God, they are exposed to ultimate despair. Hence to procure the glory of God and the saaaaaalvation of these, the Church, mindful of the Lord’s command, ‘preach the Gospel to every creature’ (Mk. 16:16) takes zealous care to foster the missions.”

The two official footnotes for this passage are:

19. See *Epist. Of the Sacred Cong. Of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston*: Denz. 3869-72.
20. See Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, I. 1: PG 21, 28AB.

There is no mention in the *relations* of the “Letter of the Holy Office” but the Council obviously means to call it to our attention. The passage in *Lumen Gentium* to which the footnote is appended reads:

“Those who through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, but 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 – these too may achieve eternal salvation.”

This passage is no different from the teaching of Bl. Pope Pius IX which we have examined elsewhere (Cf. *They Fought the Good Fight: Father Feeney 1950*), but the *Denzinger* numbers of the official note, 3869-72, refer to the two passages in the “Letter” which Father Feeney found so objectionable:

“12...That one may obtain eternal salvation, it is not always required that he be incorporated into the Church actually as a member, but it is necessary that at least he be united to her by desire and longing.

“13. However, this desire need not always be explicit, as it is in catechumens; but when a person is involved in invincible ignorance, God accepts also an implicit desire, so called because it is included in that good disposition of soul whereby a person wishes his will to be conformed to the will of God.” (*Denz.* 3870).



However there is one significant difference between the “Letter” and *lumen Gentium*; the phrase “implicit desire” (*votum implicitum*) has been dropped. This ambiguous expression was extremely objectionable to Father Feeney, and served, as we have seen, as a launching pad for Father Rahner’s infamous “Anonymous Christianity.” But the Council says of persons of good will involved in invincible ignorance: “Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a “*preparation for the Gospel.*”

The phrase “preparation for the Gospel” (*praeparatio evangelica*), another official footnote tells us, is from a famous work by Eusebius of Caesarea, an early Church Father. The Council continues, that it is to such people of good will that the Church unceasingly extends her missionary efforts. “Hence to procure the glory of God and the salvation of these, the Church, mindful of the Lord’s command ‘preach the Gospel to every creature’ (Mk. 16:16) takes zealous care to foster the missions.”

The *relation* which accompanies this text states that some of the Council Fathers after reading the first draft of this section had urged that “the abnormal state of pagans in the Messianic era be more strongly expressed,” and that in this draft “satisfaction to these requests is offered in the last sentence of the corrected text and in the following paragraph concerning the missions.” (*Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Oecumenici Vatican II, Periodus III, Relation De n. 16(D), p.206*)

So “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 – these too may attain eternal salvation,” – **but not where they are.** “Whatever good or truth is found among them is considered by the Church to be a *preparation for the Gospel*, and it is to such as these that the Church reaches out in its missionary activity. “...Hence to procure the glory of God and *the salvation of these*, the Church...takes zealous care to foster the missions.”

I think that by appending an official footnote referring to the “Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston,” to this passage, that the Council is giving us an orthodox and official interpretation of this much abused “Letter.” \*

This interpretation is one which I imagine Orestes Brownson would give had he been presented with the “Letter.” Brownson wrote: “That those in societies alien to the Church, invincibly ignorant of the Church, if they correspond to the graces they receive, and persevere, will be saved, we do not doubt, but **not where they are**, or

\* I should mention in passing that some people think that there are two official footnotes in the documents of Vatican II referring to the “Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston, but there is only one. I think they must be referring to a note in the Father Abbot edition of *The Documents of Vatican II*, in the “Decree on Ecumenism” page 346 note 18. But this is not an official note but one of Father Abbot’s. This is one of the weaknesses of this edition which doesn’t distinguish between Father Abbot’s notes and the official notes of Vatican II. See the Father Flannery edition, page 456, which gives only the official notes.

without being brought to the Church. They are sheep in the prescience of God Catholics, but sheep not yet gathered into the fold. ‘Other sheep I have,’ says Our Blessed Lord, ‘that are not of this fold; THEM ALSO I MUST BRING; THEY SHALL HEAR MY VOICE; and there shall be made one fold and one shepherd.’ This is conclusive; and that these must be brought, and enter the fold which is the Church in this life, St. Augustine expressly teaches.” (“The Great Question,” *Brownson’s Quarterly Review*, October, 1847).

To conclude with *Lumen Gentium* (3:26):

“In each altar community, under the sacred ministry of the bishop, a manifest symbol is to be seen of that charity and ‘unity of the Mystical Body, without which there can be no salvation.’”

An official footnote tells us that the Council is here quoting from the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas asks: “Whether the Eucharist is necessary for salvation?...the reality of the sacrament is the unity of the Mystical Body, without which there can be no salvation; for there is no entering into salvation outside the Church, just as in the time of the Deluge there was none outside the Ark, which denotes the Church, according to 1 Pet. 3: 20,21” (*Summa Theologica*, III, q. 73, a. 3).

So Vatican Council II clearly reaffirms the traditional doctrine that “there is no salvation outside the Church.” Unfortunately Father Feeney’s health was so poor at this time, he was suffering from Parkinson’s disease, that he was unable to study the documents of Vatican II himself, and was only aware of the abuses of the Council by the liberals. Had he been able to do so, he would have rejoiced over the Council’s orthodox and official interpretation of the “Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston,” and especially over the Council’s clear proclamation of the Church’s traditional doctrine on salvation for which he had suffered so much.

## **2. THE DECREE ON ECUMENISM (*Unitatis redintegratio*)**

Let me begin by repeating a quotation from a priest friend that I made at the beginning of this article: “[Father Feeney played] an unwitting role in bringing the Church to an historical and theological turning point – that letter of Pope Pius XII (*Suprema haec sacra*) putting on record in a definitive manner the recognition that people of good will outside the Roman Catholic community can also find salvation for themselves...In my estimation this document of Pius XII set the stage for the Ecumenical Movement in the Catholic Church and, in fact, for the ecumenical theology declared by Vatican Council II.”

It seems to me that such a statement I based on a complete misunderstanding of what ecumenism is all about, so let me begin by distinguishing between true and false ecumenism. Probably the most vivid summary of false ecumenism I have ever read is by the sociologist John Murray Cuddihy in his *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste*:

“True civility...can never be temporary (if it is, it is expedience, i.e. a means to an end). True civility, in fact, never defines the other person or religion in *temporal* terms, as a historical stage in one’s own development (for instance, Judaism as a preparation for Christianity, as a *praeparatio evangelica*). True civility’s vision tends to be spatial and parataxic: the religions are sitting side by side, or across the table from one another (“the civilization of the dialogue”), or, if they are moving, marching *together* till the end of time, or as in the parable of the tares, growing together until the harvest (Murray’s [Fr. John Courtney Murray, S.J.] legitimating trope). The civic culture thus puts an end to the *Interims*-etiquette of theological condescension. The “preamble” role Christians ascribe to Jews is ended. The Catholic “wrong turn” historiography of the Reformation is over. We are all here to stay, not only *de facto* but *de jure*. Each of us has a right to be here as one-among-many. Each accepts the others not in a provisionary and cautious way, not with stipulations and hidden provisos, and “for the time being,” and “subject to change without notice,” but permanently, unconditionally, whole heartedly.” (John Murray Cuddihy, *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste*, The Seabury Press, New York, 1978, p.124).

I think everyone will agree that this is not the Ecumenical Movement as the Council understands it. Here is the Council’ own statement:

“The term “ecumenical movement” indicates the initiatives and activities encouraged and organized, according to the various needs of the Church and as opportunities offer, to promote Christian unity. These are: first, every effort to avoid expressions, judgments and actions which do not represent the condition of our separated brethren with truth and fairness and so make mutual relations with them more difficult. Then “dialogue” between competent experts from different churches and communities; in their meetings, which are organized in a religious spirit, each explains the teaching of his communion in greater depth and brings out clearly its distinctive features. Through such dialogue everyone gains a truer knowledge and more just appreciation of the teaching and religious life of both communions. In addition, these communions engage in that more intensive cooperation in carrying out any duties for the common good of humanity which are demanded by every Christian conscience. They also come together for common prayer, where this is permitted. Finally, all are led to examine their own faithfulness to Christ’s will for the Church and, wherever necessary, undertake with vigor the task of renewal and reform.

Such actions, when they are carried out by the Catholic faithful with prudent patience and under the attentive guidance of their bishops, promote justice and truth, concord and collaboration, as well as the spirit of brotherly love and unity. The result will be that little by little, as the obstacles to perfect ecclesiastical communion are overcome, all Christians will be gathered, in common celebration of the Eucharist, into the unity of

the one and only Church, which Christ bestowed on His Church from the beginning. This unity, we believe, subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time. (“Decree on Ecumenism,” 1,4, *Vatican Council II*, Fr. Austin Flannery, O.P., The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1975, pp.456,457.)

After speaking of working toward Christian unity with the various non-Catholic as *groups*, the decree continues that this should in no way interfere with efforts to convert non-Catholics as individuals :

“However, it is evident that the work of preparing and reconciling those individuals who wish for full Catholic communion of its nature is distinct from ecumenical action. But there is no opposition between the two, since both proceed from the marvelous ways of God.” (“Decree on Ecumenism,” 1,4, Flannery, p.457.)

The “Decree on Ecumenism” should not be separated from the “Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity” *Ad gentes divinitus*. The one complements the other. *Ad gentes* states:

“It is clear, therefore, that missionary activity flows immediately from the very nature of the Church. Missionary activity extends the saving faith of the Church, it expands and perfects its catholic unity, it is sustained by its apostolicity, it activates the collegiate sense of its hierarchy, and bears witness to the sanctity which it both extends and promotes. Missionary work among the nations differs from the pastoral care of the faithful and likewise from efforts aimed at restoring Christian unity. Nevertheless, these two latter are very closely connected with the Church’s missionary endeavor because the division of Christians is injurious to the holy work of preaching the Gospel to every creature, and deprives many people of access to the faith. Because of the Church’s mission, all baptized people are called upon to come together in one flock that they might bear unanimous witness to Christ their Lord before the nations. And if they cannot yet fully bear witness to one faith, they should at least be imbued with mutual respect and love.” (“Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity” 1,4, Flannery, pp.820,821.)

True ecumenism then, is that movement which aims at restoring Christian unity, and deals with non-Catholic churches and communities as groups, but at the same time the Church does not relax its efforts to convert non-Catholics as individuals. Vatican Council II sets forth what it means by false ecumenism:

“The manner and order in which Catholic belief is expressed should in no way become an obstacle to dialogue with our brethren. It is, of course, essential that the doctrine be clearly presented in its entirety. Nothing is so foreign to the spirit of ecumenism as false irenicism which harms the purity of Catholic doctrine and obscures its genuine and certain meaning.” (“Decree on Ecumenism,” 2,11, Flannery, p.462.)

Pope John Paul II was later to say: “Ecumenism is not compatible with the blurring of confessional boundaries by the watering down of the content of the faith we have received from the Apostles, or by indiscriminate admission of the faithful of another ecclesial community to the Eucharist of our own” (Pope in Belize, *L’Osservatore Romano*, May 2, 1983, p.10). This warning of the Council regarding false ecumenism was completely endorsed by the non-Catholic observers present. One of them, Samuel McCrea Cavert, the former General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, said:

“While clearly committing the Catholic Church to ecumenical dialogue and action, the Decree wisely warns against ‘a false conciliatory approach.’ Such an approach it is rightly affirmed, would be ‘foreign to the spirit of ecumenism.’ When we are really trying to see things through the eye of another, we may be tempted to be so amiable that differences are obscured or blurred.” (*The Documents of Vatican II*, Fr. Walter Abbot, S.J., General Editor, The America Press, New Your, 1966, p.369.)

It should come as no surprise then, to see “The Decree on Ecumenism” make a strong, honest statement concerning the necessity of the Church for salvation:

“Nevertheless, our separated brethren whether considered as individuals or as communities or churches, are not blessed with that unity which Jesus Christ wished to bestow on all to whom He has given new birth into one Body, and whom he has quickened to newness of life – that unity which the Holy Scriptures and the ancient Tradition of the Church proclaim. For it is through Christ’s Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help towards salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained. It was to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, that we believe that Our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant, in order to establish on earth the one Body of Christ into which all of these should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the people of God. During its pilgrimage on earth, this people, though still in its members liable to sin is growing in Christ and is guided by God’s gentle wisdom, according to His hidden designs, until it shall happily arrive at the fullness of eternal glory in the heavenly Jerusalem.” (“Decree on Ecumenism,” 1,3, Flannery, p.456.)

### **3. THE DECLARATION ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM (*Dignitatis humanae*)**

Perhaps surprisingly for some, among the Council’s many statements concerning the necessity of the Church for salvation, one of the strongest is found in the “Declaration on Religious Liberty”:

“First, this sacred Synod professes its belief that God Himself has made known to mankind the very way in which men are to serve Him, and thus be saved in Christ and

come to blessedness. We believe that this one true religion subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church, to which to which the Lord Jesus committed the duty of spreading it abroad and among men. Thus he spoke to the Apostles: ‘Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you’ (Matt. 28:19,20). On their part all men are bound to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God and His Church, and to embrace the truth they come to know and to hold fast to it.

This sacred Synod likewise professes its belief that it is upon the human conscience that these obligations fall and exert their binding force. The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power. Religious freedom in its turn, which men demand as necessary to fulfill their duty to worship God, has to do with immunity from coercion in civil society. Therefore, it leaves untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ.” (“Declaration on Religious Liberty,” 1,1; *The Documents of Vatican II*, Fr. Walter Abbot, S.J., General Editor, America Press, New York, 1966, pp.676,677.)

This quotation is from the *Documents of Vatican II* edited by Fr. Walter Abbot, S.J., who makes an excellent comment on this passage in a footnote:

“...No man may say of the religious truth which subsists in the Church: ‘It is no concern of mine.’ Once given by Christ to His true Church, the true religion remains the one way in which all men are bound to serve God and save themselves. Consequently, religious freedom is not a title to exemption from the obligation to ‘observe all things whatsoever I have enjoined upon you.’ In fine, a harmony exists between man’s duty of free obedience to the truth and his right to the free exercise of religion in society. The duty does not diminish the right, nor does the right diminish the duty.

“This frank profession of Catholic faith at the outset of the Declaration on Religious Freedom, is in no sense at variance with the ecumenical spirit, any more than it is at loyalty to the principle of religious freedom. Neither the spirit of ecumenism nor the principle of religious freedom requires that the Church refrain from stating publicly what she believes herself to be. The demands of truth are no more opposed to the demands of freedom than they are to the demands of love.” (Abbot, *Op. cit.*, n.3, pp.676,677.)

The Council then passes from the absolute freedom of the Church which it has received from God, to the religious freedom of all men, which is based on the dignity of every human person.

“2. This Vatican Synod declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals and of any human power, in such wise that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. Nor is anyone to be restrained from

acting in accordance with his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others within due limits.

“The Synod further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person, as this dignity is known through the revealed Word of God and by reason itself. This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed. Thus it becomes a civil right.

“It is in accordance with their dignity as persons – that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility – that all men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth, once it is known, and to order their whole lives in accord with the demands of truth.

“However, men cannot discharge these obligations in a manner in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom. Therefore, the right to religious freedom has its foundation, not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature. In consequence, the right to this immunity continues even in those who do not live up to their obligation of seeking the truth and adhering to it. Nor is the just exercise of this right to be impeded provided that the just requirements of public order are observed.” (“Declaration on Religious Freedom,” *Op. cit.* pp.679,680.)

Father Abbot again adds a note explaining the harmony which exists between this Declaration of Vatican II and the Constitution of the United States. He also adds a few cautions concerning the often loosely used term “conscience”:

“It is to be noted that the word ‘conscience,’ found in the Latin text, is used in its generic sense, sanctioned by usage of ‘beliefs,’ ‘convictions,’ ‘persuasions.’ Hence the unbeliever or atheist makes with legal rights this claim to immunity from coercion in religious matters. It is further to be noted that, in assigning a negative content to the right of religious freedom (that is in making it formally a ‘freedom from’ and not a ‘freedom for’), the Declaration is in harmony with the sense of the First Amendment to the American Constitution. In guaranteeing the free exercise of religion, the First Amendment guarantees to the American citizen immunity from all coercion in matters religious. Neither the Declaration nor the American Constitution affirm that a man has a right to believe what is false or to do what is wrong. This would be moral nonsense. Neither error nor evil can be the object of a right, only what is true and good. It is, however, true and good that a man should enjoy freedom from coercion in matters religious.

“This brings up the second question, concerning the foundation of the right. The reason why every man may claim immunity from coercion in matters religious is precisely his inalienable dignity as a human person. Surely, in matters religious, if any where, the free person is required and entitled to act on his own judgment and to assume personal responsibility for his action or omission. A man’s religious decisions, or his

decision against religion, are inescapably his own. No one else can make them for him, or compel him to make this decision or that, or restrain him from putting his decision into practice, privately or publicly, alone or in company with others. In all these cases, the dignity of man would be diminished because of the denial to him of that inalienable responsibility for his won decisions and actions which is the essential counterpart of his freedom.

“It is worth noting that the Declaration does not base the right to the free exercise of religion on ‘freedom of conscience.’ Nowhere does this phrase occur. And the Declaration nowhere lends its authority to the theory for which the phrase frequently stands, namely, that I have the right to do what my conscience tells me to do, simply because my conscience tells me to do it. This is a perilous theory. Its particular peril is subjectivism – the notion that, in the end, it is my conscience, and not the objective truth, which determines what is right or wrong, true or false.” (Abbot, *Op. cit.*, 1,2, n.5, pp.678,679.)

We saw that Father Rahner after declaring that Vatican Council II taught that atheists could be saved, said: “...The only necessary condition which is recognized here is the necessity of faithfulness and obedience to the individual’s own personal conscience.” But Pope John Paul II said recently:

“It is not *sufficient*, therefore to say to man: ‘always follow your conscience.’ *It is necessary* to add immediately and *always*: ‘Ask yourself if your conscience is telling you the truth or something false, and seek untiringly to know the truth.’ If we were not to make this necessary clarification, man would risk to find in his conscience a force which is destructive of his true humanity, rather than the holy place where God reveals to him his true good.

“It is necessary to ‘form’ one’s own conscience. In that commitment the believer knows that he has a particular help in the doctrine of the Church. ‘The Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. It is her duty to proclaim and teach with authority the truth which is Christ and, at the same time, to declare and confirm by her authority the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself.’” (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 14, *L’Osservatore Romano*, August 18, 1983.)

The Council continues saying that religious freedom is not only the prerogative of each individual, but also of individuals when they act in groups in the various non-Catholic churches and communities:

“4. The freedom of immunity from coercion in matters religious which is the endowment of persons as individuals is also to be recognized as their right when they act in community. Religious bodies are a requirement of the social nature both of man and of religion itself.

“Provided the just requirements of public order are observed religious bodies rightly claim freedom in order that they may govern themselves according to their own



norms, honor the Supreme Being in public worship, assist their members in the practice of the religious life, strengthen them by instruction, and promote institutions in which they may join together for the purpose of ordering their won lives in accordance with their religious principles.” (“Declaration on Religious Freedom,”” 1,4; Abbot, *Op. cit.*, pp.681,682.)

Father Abbot in a note again carefully distinguishes between the religious freedom claimed by the Catholic Church as of divine right, and the religious freedom of non-Catholic churches and communities which is based on the dignity of the human person:

“The freedoms listed here are those which the Catholic Church claims for herself. The Declaration likewise claims them for all churches and religious communities. Lest there be misunderstanding, however, it is necessary to recall here the distinction between the content or object of the right and its foundation. The content or object always remains freedom from coercion in what concerns religious belief, worship, practice or observance, and public testimony. Hence the content of the right is the same for both the Catholic Church and other religious bodies. In this sense, the Church claims nothing for herself which she does not also claim for them. The matter is different, however, with regard to the foundation of the right. The Catholic Church claims freedom from coercive interference in her ministry and life on grounds of the divine mandate laid upon her by Christ Himself. It is Catholic faith that no other church or community may claim to possess this mandate in all its fullness. In this sense, the freedom of the Church is unique, proper to herself alone, by reason of the foundation. In the case of other religious communities, the foundation of the right is the dignity of the human person, which requires that men be kept free from coercion, when they act in community, gathered into churches, as well as when they act alone.” (Abbot, *Op. cit.*, 1,4, n.9, p.682.)

Finally in a conclusion which the liberals completely ignore, lest Catholics become lax in their duties towards their neighbors who admittedly are free to profess any religion, The Council urges Catholics in all charity and with courage, to profess and spread their faith:

“14. In order to be faithful to the divine command, ‘Make disciples of all nations’ (Mt. 28:19), the Catholic Church must work with all urgency and concern ‘that the word of God may run and be glorified’ (2 Th. 3:1). Hence the Church earnestly begs of her children that, first of all ‘supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men...For this is good and agreeable in the sight of God Our Saviour, Who wishes all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1Tim. 2:1-4).

“In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. The Church is, by the will of Christ the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give utterance to, and authoritatively to teach, that Truth which is Christ Himself, and also to declare and confirm by her

authority those principles of the moral order which have their origin in human nature itself. Furthermore, let Christians walk in wisdom in the face of those outside, ‘in the Holy Spirit, in unaffected love, in the work of truth’ (2 Cor. 6:6,7). Let there be about their task of spreading the light of life with all confidence and apostolic courage, even to the shedding of their blood.

“The disciple is bound by a grave obligation toward Christ His Master ever more adequately to understand the truth received from Him, faithfully to proclaim it, and vigorously to defend it, never – be it understood – having recourse to means that are incompatible with the spirit of the Gospel. At the same time, the charity of urges us to act lovingly, prudently and patiently in his dealings with those who are in error or in ignorance with regard to the faith. All this is to be taken into account – the Christian duty to Christ, the life-giving Word which must be proclaimed, the rights of the human person, and the measure of grace granted by God through Christ to men, who are invited freely to accept and profess the faith. (“Declaration on Religious Freedom,” 2,14, *Idem*, pp.694,695.)

I can’t resist commenting at this point on our duty toward our neighbor of professing the Faith. If this profession omits or weakens the necessity of the Church for salvation, it will be useless or as Orestes Brownson puts it in his colorful Yankee style::

“There can be no more fatal mistake than to soften, liberalize, or latitudinize this terrible dogma, ‘Out of the Church there is no salvation’...If we wish to convert Protestants and infidels we must preach in all its rigor the naked dogma. Give them the smallest peg, or what appears so, not to you, but to them; - the smallest peg to hang a hope of salvation without being in or actually reconciled to the Church by the sacrament of penance, and all the arguments you can address to them to prove the necessity of being in the Church in order to be saved, will have no more effect on them than rain on a duck’s back” (“Answer to Objection,” *Brownson’s Quarterly Review*, July 1874, pp.413,414; *Works*, Vol. XX.)

#### **4. DECREE ON THE CHURCH’S MISSIONARY ACTIVITY** (*Ad gentes dvinitus*)

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, the Prefect for the Congregation of the Faith, in an address to the Bishops of Chile, complained of the harm that was being done to the missionary effort of the Church by false interpretations of Vatican Council II:

“In the spiritual movements of the post-conciliar era there is not the slightest doubt that frequently there has been an obliviousness, or even a suppression, of the issue of truth; here perhaps we confront the crucial problem for theology and pastoral work today.

“The ‘truth’ is thought to be claim that it too exalted, a ‘triumphalism’ that cannot be permitted any longer. You see this attitude plainly in the crisis that troubles the missionary ideal and missionary practice. If we do not point to the truth in announcing our faith, and if this truth is no longer essential for the salvation of Man, then the missions lose their meaning. In effect the conclusion has been drawn, and it is being drawn today that in the future we need only seek that Christians should be good Christians, Moslems good Moslems, Hindus good Hindus, and so forth.” (Address given in Santiago, Chile, July 13, 1988. Appeared in the July 30<sup>th</sup> - August 5<sup>th</sup> edition of *Il Sabato*; Translated into English by Farley Clinton, *The Wanderer*, September 8, 1988.)

Far from this corrosive liberal spirit, the Decree *Ad Gentes* begins by stating that missionary activity is essential to the very nature of the Church. No missions, no Church!

“5. From the beginning of His ministry the Lord Jesus ‘called to Himself those whom he wished, and he caused twelve of them to be with Him and to be sent out preaching’ (Mk. 3:13; cf. Mt. 10:1-42). Thus the apostles were both seeds of the new Israel and the beginning of the sacred hierarchy. Later before He was assumed into heaven (cf. Acts 1:11), after He had fulfilled in Himself the mysteries of our salvation and the renewal of all things by His death and resurrection, the Lord who received all power in heaven and on earth (cf. Mt. 28:18), founded His Church as the sacrament of salvation; and just as He had been sent by the Father (cf. Jn. 20:21), so He sent the apostles into the whole world, commanding them: ‘Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you’ (Mt. 28:19ff.); ‘Go into the whole world, preach the Gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized shall be saved; but he who does not believe shall be condemned’ (Mk. 16:15ff.). Hence the Church has an obligation to proclaim the faith and salvation which comes from Christ, both by reason of the express command which the order of bishops inherited from the apostles, an obligation in the discharge of which they share with the successor of St. Peter, the supreme pastor of the Church, and also by reason of the life which Christ infuses into His members: ‘From Him the whole body, being closely joined and knit together through every joint of the system, according to the functioning in due measure of each single part, derives its increase to the building up of itself in love’ (Eph. 4:16). The mission of the Church is carried out by means of that activity through which, in obedience to Christ’s command and moved by the grace and love of the Holy Spirit, the Church makes itself fully present to all men and peoples in order to lead them to the faith, freedom and peace of Christ by the example of its life and teachings, by the sacraments and other means of grace. Its aim is to open up for all men a free and sure path to full participation in the mystery of Christ.” (*Ad gentes*, 1:5, *Vatican Council II*, Fr. Austin Flannery, O.P., The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1975, pp.817,818.)

The Council then discusses missionary activity in its more popular usage of “foreign missions”:

“The special undertakings in which the preachers of the Gospel, sent by the Church, and going into the whole world, carry out the work of preaching the Gospel and implanting the Church among the people who do not yet believe in Christ, are generally called ‘missions.’ Such undertakings are accomplished by missionary activity are, for the most part, carried out in defined territories recognized by the Holy See. The special end of this missionary activity is the evangelization and implanting of the Church among peoples or groups in which it has not yet taken root. All over the world indigenous particular churches ought to grow from the seed of the word of God, churches which would be adequately organized and would possess their own proper strength and maturity. With their own hierarchy and faithful and sufficiently endowed with means adapted to the living of a full Christian life, and they should contribute to the good of the whole Church. The principal instrument in this work of implanting the Church is the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was to announce this Gospel that the Lord sent His disciples into the whole world, that men, having been reborn by the Word of God (cf. 1 Pet. 1:23), might through Baptism, be joined to the Church which, as the Body of the Word Incarnate, lives and is nourished by the Word of God and the Eucharist (cf. Acts 4:23).” (*Ad gentes*, 1,6, Flannery, *Op. Cit.*, p.819.)

The Council then distinguishes missionary activity from the pastoral care of the faithful and from the Ecumenical Movement:

“It is clear, therefore that missionary activity flows immediately from the very nature of the Church. Missionary activity extends the saving faith of the Church, it expands and perfects its Catholic unity, it is sustained by its apostolicity, it activates the collegiate sense of its hierarchy, and bears witness to the sanctity which it extends and promotes. Missionary work among the nations differs from the pastoral care of the faithful and likewise from efforts aimed at restoring Christian unity. Nevertheless, these two latter are very closely connected with the Church’s missionary endeavor because the division of Christians is injurious to the holy work of preaching the Gospel to every creature, and deprives many people of access to the faith. Because of the Church’s mission, all baptized people are called upon to come together in one flock that they might bear unanimous witness to Christ their Lord before the nations. And if they cannot fully bear witness to one faith, they should at least be imbued with mutual respect and love.” (*Ad gentes*, 1:6; Flannery, pp.820,821.)

The ecumenical movement has not ended the Church’s missionary role, as some liberals seem to think, but on the contrary, because the Church is necessary for salvation, its missionary work will always be essential:

“7. The reason for missionary activity lies in the will of God, ‘Who wishes all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and Mediator between God and men, Himself a man, Jesus Christ, Who gave Himself as a ransom for all’ (1 Tim. 2:4,5), ‘neither is there salvation in any other’ (Acts 4:12). Everyone, therefore, ought to be converted to Christ, Who is known through the preaching of the Church which is His Body. Christ Himself explicitly asserted the

necessity of faith and baptism (cf. Mk. 16:16; Jn. 3:5), and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church, which men enter through Baptism as through a door. Hence those cannot be saved, who knowing that the Catholic Church was founded through Jesus Christ, by God, as something necessary, still refuse to enter it, or to remain in it. So although in ways known to Himself God can lead those, who through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please Him (Heb. 11:6), the Church nevertheless, still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize. And so, today as always, missionary activity retains its full force and necessity.” (*Ad gentes*, 1,7; Flannery, p.821.)

From this brief glance at these few excerpts from just four of the documents of the Council, I think any honest person will admit that Vatican Council II laid great stress on the necessity of the Catholic Church for salvation.

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