

LETTER OF THE HOLY OFFICE TO ARCHBISHOP CUSHING OF BOSTON, 1949

An unfortunate controversy over the dictum: "**Outside the Church there is no salvation**" was the occasion of the following letter. The letter, dated August 8, 1949, is important for the explanation it gives of the necessity of the Catholic Church. The Church is necessary for salvation because such is the command of Christ and because the Church is a necessary means for salvation. But since the Church is such a means only by divine institution, not by intrinsic necessity, membership itself in the Church is not required of all men under all circumstances. (The following translation is made from the Latin published in the *American Ecclesiastical Review*, CXXVII [October, 1952], 307-11.)

We are bound to believe by divine and Catholic faith what is contained in the written word of God or in tradition, and is proposed by the Church as a divinely revealed object of belief either in a solemn decree, or in her ordinary, universal teaching.

The infallible dictum which teaches us that outside the Church there is no salvation, is among the truths that the Church has always taught and will always teach.

But this dogma is to be understood as the Church itself understands it. For our Savior did not leave it to private judgment to explain what is contained in the deposit of faith, but to the doctrinal authority of the Church.

The Church teaches, first of all, that there is question here of a very strict command of Jesus Christ. In unmistakable words he gave his apostles the command to teach all nations to keep whatever he had commanded (*see Matt. 28:19 f.*).

Not least among Christ's commands is the one which orders us to be incorporated by baptism into the mystical body of Christ, which is the Church, and to be united to Christ and to his vicar, through whom he himself governs the Church on earth in a visible way.

Therefore, no one who knows that the Church has been divinely established by Christ and, nevertheless, refuses to be a subject of the Church or refuses to obey the Roman Pontiff, the vicar of Christ on earth, will be saved.

The Savior did not make it necessary merely as by precept for all nations to enter the Church. He also established the Church as a means of salvation without which no one can enter the kingdom of heavenly glory.

Of those helps to salvation that are ordered to the last end only by divine decree, not by intrinsic necessity, God, in His infinite mercy, willed that such effects of those helps as are necessary to salvation can, in certain circumstances, be obtained when the helps are used only in *desire* or *longing*. We see this clearly stated in the Council of Trent about the sacrament of regeneration and about the sacrament of penance.

The same, in due proportion, should be said of the Church insofar as it is a general help to salvation. To gain eternal salvation it is not always required that a person be incorporated in fact as a member of the Church, but it is required that he belong to it at least in *desire* and *longing*.

It is not always necessary that this desire be explicit as it is with catechumens. When a man is invincibly ignorant, God also accepts an implicit desire, so called because it is contained in the good disposition of soul by which a man wants his will to be conformed to God's will.

This is clearly taught by the Sovereign Pontiff Pope Pius XII in his dogmatic letter on the mystical body of Christ, dated June 29, 1943. In this letter the Sovereign Pontiff clearly distinguishes between those who are actually incorporated into the Church as members and those who belong to the Church only in desire.

In treating of the members who make up the mystical body here on earth, the Sovereign Pontiff says: "*Only those are really to be included as members of the Church who have been baptized and profess the true faith, and who have not had the misfortune of withdrawing from the body or for grave faults been cut off by legitimate authority*".

Towards the end of the same encyclical, when with all his heart he invites to union those who do not pertain to the body of the Catholic Church, the pope mentions those "*who unsuspectingly belong to the mystical body of the Redeemer by some kind of desire or longing*." He by no means excludes these men from eternal salvation; but, on the other hand, he does point out that they are in a condition "*in which they cannot be secure about their salvation . . . since they lack many great gifts and helps from God, gifts they can enjoy only in the Catholic Church*."

With these prudent words the pope censures those who exclude from eternal salvation all men who belong to the Church only with implicit desire; and he also censures those who falsely maintain that men can be saved equally as well in any religion.

It must not be imagined that any desire whatsoever of entering the Church is sufficient for a man to be saved. It is necessary that the desire by which a man is related to the Church be informed with perfect charity. An implicit desire cannot have its effect unless a man has supernatural faith: "*For he who comes to God must believe that God exists and is a rewarder to those who seek Him*" (Heb. 11:6). The Council of Trent says: "*Faith is the beginning of man's salvation, the foundation and source of all justification without which it is impossible to please God and to be counted as His sons*."