

Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus and the Substance of Catholic Doctrine: Towards a Realization of Benedict XVI's “Hermeneutic of Reform”

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Introduction: Two Rival Hermeneutics

“Hence, too, that meaning of the sacred dogmas is ever to be maintained which has once been declared by Holy mother Church, and there must never be any abandonment of this sense under the pretext or in the name of a more profound understanding.”¹ Catholics who come across this statement issued by the First Vatican Council could easily be dismayed at its apparent discrepancy with the Second Vatican

¹ First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius* (1870), ch. 4 (Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* [hereafter, Denzinger], no.1800, available at <http://patristica.net/denzinger>). See ch. 4, can. 3: “If anyone says that it is possible that, at some time, given the advancement of knowledge, a sense may be assigned to the dogmas propounded by the Church which is different from that which the Church has understood and understands: let him be anathema” (Denzinger, no. 1818). See the discussion of this formula in Charles Journet, *What Is Dogma?* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 20 and 98. For the rejection of any form of “evolutionism” in the Church, see also Pius X’s Syllabus *Lamentabili Sane* (1907), his *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907), §§26–28 (all papal documents can be found at the Vatican website: <http://w2.vatican.va>), and his “Oath Against Modernism” *Sacrorum Antistitum* (1910): “I reject entirely the heretical misrepresentation that dogmas evolve and change from one meaning to another different from the one which the Church held previously” (<http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10moath.htm>).

Council's theology of doctrinal development. For, while Vatican I was reluctant to accept the suggestion that Catholic doctrine developed over the centuries, the Church's most recent ecumenical council appears to teach the precise opposite in affirming that "[t]he tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit" and that over time "there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down."²

Dissenting Catholics of various stripes base their rejection of today's Magisterium precisely on the seeming contradiction between formulas such as these. For those of a certain persuasion described by Pope Benedict XVI as "progressivist," discontinuity in Catholic doctrine over the years is an indication that the Magisterium is a fallible human institution susceptible to correction in accordance with the signs of the times and the demands of the faithful. Benedict famously labeled this approach a "hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture" and all-too accurately observed that "it has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media."³ Regrettably, many Catholics today know

² Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (1965), §8: "This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (Luke: 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her."

³ Benedict XVI, Christmas Address to the Roman Curia (December 22, 2005). In one of his final public addresses as pope, the Pontiff returned to treat the variant interpretations of Vatican II, observing that "there was the Council of the Fathers – the real Council – but there was also the Council of the media." He lamented, "We know that this Council of the media was accessible to everyone. Therefore, this was the dominant one, the more effective one, and it created so many disasters, so many problems, so much suffering: seminaries closed, convents closed, banal liturgy." At the same time, in this speech Benedict exuded a firm hope that the media's portrayal of Vatican II as a rupture will not be the final word and that the Church has great reason to rejoice in finally seeing the council bear the fruit it was designed to yield (Address to the Parish Priests and Clergy of the Rome Diocese, February 14, 2013). As for the damage that occurred to the Church after Vatican II, Benedict had earlier stated, "I am convinced that the damage that we have incurred in these twenty years is due, not to the 'true' Council, but to the unleashing within the Church of latent polemical and centrifugal forces; and outside the Church

only this popularized misinterpretation of Catholic doctrine.

On the other side of the spectrum, one finds Catholics who subscribe to what Benedict calls "traditionalism," a view that has led some into schism over the direction taken by the Magisterium since the time of Vatican II. Unlike their counterparts already mentioned, these individuals claim to accept the Church's traditional teaching in matters of faith and morals, yet like the former, they interpret the Council through a hermeneutic of rupture and thereby draw the same basic conclusion: the teachings of today's official Magisterium are not warranted and thus fail to merit assent on the part of the faithful. According to Benedict, these contradictory partisan perspectives both fundamentally undermine the unity of the Catholic faith "which can exist only as an indivisible unity" over time.⁴

The question of how to reconcile the teaching of Vatican II and the post-conciliar Magisterium with what preceded it becomes especially thorny when one endeavors to pause and consider particular cases of doctrinal development throughout history.⁵ This essay will treat one

it is due to the confrontation with a cultural revolution in the West" (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985], 30). In this text, Benedict observed that, historically, any ecumenical council is typically followed by tumult, for which reason John Henry Newman spoke of the danger involved with convoking councils (*ibid.*, 39–40). Note that, to simplify matters, I have for the most part opted for the convention of referring to the one man Ratzinger/Benedict as "Benedict" throughout this article, even in writings antedating his pontificate.

⁴ "It is impossible ('for a Catholic') to take a position for or against Trent or Vatican I. Whoever accepts Vatican II, as it has clearly expressed and understood itself, at the same time accepts the whole binding tradition of the Catholic Church, particularly also the two previous councils. And that also applies to the so-called 'progressivism,' at least in its extreme forms. . . . It is likewise impossible to decide in favor of Trent and Vatican I, but against Vatican II. Whoever denies Vatican II denies the authority that upholds the other two councils and thereby detaches them from their foundation. And this applies to the so-called 'traditionalism,' also in its extreme forms. . . . Every partisan choice destroys the whole (the very history of the Church) which can exist only as an indivisible unity." (Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report*, 28–29). For further comments in this regard, see Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., "Benedict XVI: Interpreter of Vatican II," in *Church and Society: The Laurence J. McGinley Lectures, 1988–2007* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 468–484.

⁵ Concerning "the problem of the historical dimension in theology which underlay the problems of revealed truth, scripture, and tradition," then-Father Ratzinger states that it "set off a most violent controversy" among the fathers of the Second Vatican Council (*Theological Highlights of Vatican II* [New York: Paulist Press, 1966], 147).

such area that sometimes proves to be an obstacle for assent to the Magisterium: the doctrine *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (hereafter, EENS) and the question of whether salvation is possible for those outside of the visible Catholic Church. When examined in its various formulations over the course of the centuries, the Church's doctrine on this point seemingly proves to be a case of discontinuity rather than legitimate development.

As Benedict indicated on a couple of occasions, John Henry Newman's theory of doctrinal development offers an invaluable aid for considering these matters. Newman pithily remarked, "Young birds do not grow into fishes."⁶ In this light, the question that arises from an enquiry into the development of doctrine is whether a particular doctrine has preserved its substance by maintaining *a consistent meaning* over time according to the standards of Vatican I, which in turn would justify recognizing in it genuine doctrinal development according to the teaching of Vatican II.⁷ In response to this question, this essay proposes that assent to the doctrine of EENS or other apparently contradictory teachings of the Catholic Church is warranted if we tease out the substance of said doctrines in light of their entire history and of the Magisterium's counsel to "define exactly the intention of teaching proper to the various formulas."⁸ To borrow an expression frequently found in the writings of Benedict XVI, this article will attempt to ascertain "the essential point" that contentious texts wish to assert. In discerning the core assertions of doctrinal formulas, we discover the abiding substance of the Catholic faith.⁹

⁶ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 172.

⁷ Francis Sullivan, S.J., poignantly formulates this question in his *Salvation Outside the Church: Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 9.

⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (hereafter, CDF), *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973), §5.

⁹ Benedict frequently employs this phrase and several variations upon it when seeking to discern the principal affirmation of a problematic biblical text. Although an examination of Benedict's exegesis is beyond the scope of this essay, it is instructive to observe the affinity between his method of dealing with problematic texts in the Bible and in the Magisterium. For just a few among dozens of examples, see his *God and the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 45, 75ff, 104, 165–168, and his *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 215–216. For an application of this method to some of the "darkest" passages in the Bible, see Matthew Ramage, *Dark Passages of the Bible: Engaging Scripture with Benedict XVI and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013).

This enterprise lies at the heart of what is needed to counter the hermeneutic of rupture and implement what Benedict calls a "hermeneutic of reform" in the Church. In this Pontiff's view, a robust hermeneutic must, to a certain extent, grant the former hermeneutical point that the writings of the Vatican II reveal a certain discontinuity with respect to what preceded the Council. At the same time, Benedict has incorporated Newman's language in affirming that a sound hermeneutic also must firmly insist on the existence of a "permanent aspect" in the Church's teaching and that at Vatican II "the continuity of principles proved not to have been abandoned."¹⁰ Thus for the Pontiff, "It is precisely in this combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels that the very nature of true reform consists."¹¹

¹⁰ I find it significant that Benedict's choice of the expression "continuity of principles" (translated into English) reflects verbatim Newman's second "note" for distinguishing a genuine doctrinal development from a "corruption" (Pope Benedict XVI, Christmas Address to the Roman Curia, December 22, 2005). Cf. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 178–785. Regarding the language of permanence used by Benedict, see *ibid.*, 178, where Newman states, "Doctrines grow and are enlarged; principles are permanent." See also the discussion of these parallels in Gerard O'Collins, S.J., "Does Vatican II Represent Continuity or Discontinuity?" *Theological Studies* 73 (2012), 793. For a further indication of Benedict's dependence upon Newman, his reflection in the following speech is highly instructive: "Even deeper for me was the contribution which Heinrich Fries published in connection with the Jubilee of Chalcedon. Here I found access to Newman's teaching on the development of doctrine, which I regard along with his doctrine on conscience as his decisive contribution to the renewal of theology. With this he had placed the key in our hand to build historical thought into theology, or much more, he taught us to think historically in theology and so to recognize the identity of faith in all developments. Here I have to refrain from deepening these ideas further. It seems to me that Newman's starting point, also in modern theology, has not yet been fully evaluated. Fruitful possibilities awaiting development are still hidden in it. At this point I would only like to refer again to the biographical background of this concept. It is known how Newman's insight into the ideas of development influenced his way to Catholicism. But it is not just a matter of an unfolding of ideas. In the concept of development, Newman's own life plays a role. That seems to become visible to me in his well-known words: 'to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often'" (Joseph Ratzinger, Presentation on the Occasion of the First Centenary of the Death of Cardinal John Henry Newman, April 28, 1990).

¹¹ Benedict XVI, Christmas Address to the Roman Curia, December 22, 2005. To understand what Benedict is up to here, it is important to note that he is not proposing a "hermeneutic of continuity," but rather a hermeneutic of reform that accounts for elements of continuity as well as discontinuity. For

Benedict explained this in a particularly interesting way in a Wednesday catechesis on the life of St. Bonaventure:

Indeed, we know that after the Second Vatican Council some were convinced that everything was new, that there was a different Church, that the pre-Conciliar Church was finished and that we had another, totally “other” Church, an anarchic utopianism! And thanks be to God the wise helmsmen of the Barque of St Peter, Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II, *on the one hand defended the newness of the Council, and on the other, defended the oneness and continuity of the Church*, which is always a Church of sinners and always a place of grace.¹²

Benedict notes that St. Bonaventure, serving as Minister General of the Franciscan order in his day, faced a problem similar to that faced by the Church in the modern period. For the sake of unity in his order, Bonaventure made it a pastoral priority to combat the widespread “anarchic utopianism” that caused many to dissociate the search for authentic spirituality from the hierarchical structure of the Church. As indicated above, this is precisely the type of attitude we often witness today: the search for spirituality or freedom to the neglect of the hierarchical Church, a search that takes its cue from the supposition that Vatican II is completely new and that it has fundamentally changed the nature of the rigid, pre-conciliar, hierarchical, outdated institutional church. That said, in these passages, Benedict does indeed acknowledge a real “newness” and “discontinuity” in Vatican II. It will thus be necessary to address the extent to which the Church’s doctrinal formulas are conditioned by history, and therefore subject to certain changes.

Foundational Principles from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

Before tackling thorny doctrinal formulations of EENS on an individual basis, it is important first to elucidate at greater length the hermeneutical foundations of this essay, based primarily on principles outlined by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (hereafter, CDF). To this end, the 1973 declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* is of particular importance. At the beginning of a pivotal section entitled “The

this principle and its application to the thorny issue of religious freedom, see Martin Rhonheimer, “Benedict XVI’s ‘Hermeneutic of Reform’ and Religious Freedom,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 9, no. 4 (2011): 1029–1054.

¹² Benedict XVI, Audience, March 20, 2010.

Notion of the Church's Infallibility Not To Be Falsified" it indicates that difficulties arise in this domain for two reasons: from the fact that God's mysteries so transcend the human intellect that they remain "wrapped in darkness" in this life; and from "the historical condition that affects the expression of revelation."¹³

Spelling out what is meant by this "historical condition," the CDF argues first that "the *meaning* of the pronouncements of faith depends partly upon the expressive power of the language used at a certain point in time and in particular circumstances." The word meaning (*sensum*) is significant because it echoes the text of the First Vatican Council mentioned above, wherein the Church anathematizes those who would claim that the meaning of dogmas can change over time. Next, the CDF admits the possibility that a dogma "is first expressed incompletely (but not falsely), and at a later date, when considered *in a broader context* of faith or human knowledge, it receives a fuller and more perfect expression." Here the CDF signals the importance of *context* in the formulation of dogma: different contexts throughout history enable the Church to express the truth more fully. Third, when one attends to these contexts, we see that the Church "usually has the *intention* of solving certain questions or removing certain errors," and that "all these things have to be taken into account in order that these pronouncements may be properly interpreted." Though not explicitly mentioned in the document, the intention and context above naturally assume the need to consider the audience for whom a given document is destined. Finally, ever affirming that the truths of the faith are not dependent upon "the changeable conceptions of a given epoch," the document acknowledges that "it can sometimes happen that these truths may be enunciated by the Sacred Magisterium in terms that bear traces of such conceptions."¹⁴ This is significant because, in conjunction with a consideration of meaning, context, and intention, it helps theologians explain aspects of dogmatic formulas that today's faithful Catholic may find untenable.

In light of the foregoing argument, the document concludes that, while the Church's ancient dogmatic formulas "remain forever suitable" when interpreted correctly, "it does not however follow that every one of these formulas has always been or will always be so to the same extent." This concession is followed by a commendation of the enterprise in which theologians demonstrate the truth of the Catholic faith as they endeavor to ascertain and "define exactly the intention of

¹³ CDF, *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, §5, echoing the words of *Dei Filius*, ch. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* (emphasis mine).

teaching proper to the various formulas.” In carrying out this work, they are thus “of considerable assistance to the living Magisterium of the Church, to which they remain subordinated.” Once again, however, the CDF reminds us that every such effort, if authentic, will “maintain . . . completely the same meaning” that dogmatic truths have always had from the beginning.¹⁵

A second CDF document, the 1990 instruction on “The Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian,” further elaborates on how theologians are to deal with magisterial documents that contain problems when viewed from the vantage point of later texts that deal with the same issue. Of particular interest is what *Donum Veritatis* has to say about interventions of the Magisterium in the prudential order. “It could happen,” the text allows, “that some Magisterial documents might not be free from all deficiencies. Bishops and their advisors have not always taken into immediate consideration every aspect or the entire complexity of a question.”¹⁶ The importance of this statement lies in the fact that it indicates that certain aspects of magisterial utterances contain “deficiencies”—to borrow a term from *Mysterium Ecclesiae* above—that are not intended to be the comprehensive final word in response to their respective questions. In order to pursue his discipline well, the theologian must be competent in history in order to ascertain correctly the context in which dogmatic formulas arise and to be mindful of “the filtering which occurs with the passage of time.” While the document is careful to ensure that this statement not be construed as “a relativization of the tenets of the faith,” it proceeds to add these poignant words:

The theologian knows that some judgments of the Magisterium could be justified at the time in which they were made, because while the pronouncements contained true assertions and others which were not sure, both types were inextricably connected. Only time has permitted discernment and, after deeper study, the attainment of true doctrinal progress.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid. The document proceeds to indicate two options that the faithful are to “shun” in this regard: first, that dogmatic formulas “can only offer changeable approximations to [the truth], which to a certain extent distort or alter it; and second, that these formulas signify the truth only in an indeterminate way, this truth being like a goal that is constantly being sought by means of such approximations.”

¹⁶ CDF, *Donum Veritatis* (1990), §24.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The first line cited here indicates that certain magisterial judgments throughout history cannot remain justified today even though they are "inextricably connected" with other truths that are *de fide*. This admission may sound alarming to some Catholics, but the reader later discovers that the document insists on the necessity of time and deeper study in order to discern properly in matters concerning the development of doctrine.

We find further elaboration on this theme in Benedict's initial presentation of *Donum Veritatis* to the press:

The text also presents the various forms of binding which correspond to the grades of [magisterial teaching]. It states—perhaps for the first time with such candor—that there are magisterial decisions which *cannot be the final word* on a given matter as such but, despite the permanent value of their principles [a substantial anchorage in the problem], are chiefly also a signal for pastoral prudence, a sort of provisional policy. Their *kernel* [core] remains valid, but the particulars determined by circumstances can stand *in need of correction*.¹⁸

¹⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, "On the 'Instruction Concerning the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian,'" in *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Approaches to Understanding Its Role in Light of the Present Controversy*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 106 (emphasis added). Again, it is illuminating to observe that he displays similar outlooks on the nature of magisterial authority and biblical inerrancy: "It is one thing to regard the Bible strictly as a collection of historical documents, which expose the human element, so to speak, without mercy. It is another thing to see the Bible as a whole as the Word of God, in which everything relates to everything else, and everything is disclosed as you go on. It follows straightaway that neither the criterion of inspiration nor that of infallibility can be applied mechanically. It is quite impossible to pick out one single sentence and say, right, you find this sentence in God's great book, so it must simply be true in itself" (*God and the World*, 153). See also Benedict XVI, Address to Participants in the Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, May 2, 2011: "Lastly, I would only like to mention the fact that in a good hermeneutic it is not possible to apply mechanically the criterion of inspiration, or indeed of absolute truth by extrapolating a single sentence or expression. The plan in which it is possible to perceive Sacred Scripture as a Word of God is that of the unity of God, in a totality in which the individual elements are illuminated reciprocally and are opened to understanding." For another thought-provoking take on the relationship between magisterial infallibility and biblical inerrancy, see James Tunstead Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration since 1810: A Review and Critique* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 299, 303–304.

This citation contains two points germane to our endeavor. First, Benedict confirms that some magisterial decisions are not intended to be definitive, but rather “provisional” determinations of pastoral prudence. Second, he indicates that such statements have a “kernel” or substance that remains valid throughout history, while certain “particulars” or accidental features “can stand in need of correction” by later formulations. In this connection, Benedict mentions two examples where this teaching can be applied.¹⁹ While neither of these directly concerns the doctrine of EENS, the principles articulated here can be applied in the case of this and many other Catholic doctrines. The upshot is that, in evaluating the various magisterial formulations of EENS we will come across, it is necessary to locate their core and distinguish it from accidental features that needed to be corrected in light of later theological knowledge and pastoral prudence.

The Doctrine of EENS throughout Catholic History

With the above principles in place, the next step of our endeavor is to survey the history of the formula EENS such as it has been articulated over two millennia.²⁰ The formula is grounded in Scripture and the writings of the apostolic Fathers, but it first appears explicitly in the third century, where Origen and St. Cyprian expressed it in reference to apostates and schismatics.²¹ The Fathers of subsequent centuries

¹⁹ Benedict offers two examples that illustrate this point: the first one involves papal statements of the last century concerning religious freedom. The second has to do with the Church’s attitude towards modern methods of biblical exegesis. While these are both important issues, in this essay I have chosen to focus exclusively on another similar issue Benedict discusses in his corpus: the question of salvation for non-Christians.

²⁰ There are a number of outstanding sources that treat the history of the problem. In particular I will be drawing from Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012) and Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?* Shorter, but also helpful, is Martin’s article “Doctrinal Clarity for the New Evangelization: The Importance of *Lumen Gentium* 16,” *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly* 34 (2011): 15n9. My point in this article is not to provide an exhaustive history of the doctrine in question. Here I focus on a representative sample of texts in light of the systematic treatments of them in the above sources.

²¹ Origen, *Honiliae in Jesu Nave* 3:5 (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* [hereafter, *PG*] 12:841–842); Cyprian, *Epist.* 4,4; (*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* [hereafter, *CSEL*] 3,2:476–77): “Let them not think the way of life or salvation exists for them, if they have refused to obey the bishops and priests. . . . For they cannot live outside, since there is only one house of God, and there can be no salvation for anyone except in the church.” For an

preserved and extended the scope of EENS, with St. Augustine holding that neither those of his day who remained pagans and Jews nor those of the pre-Christian era who lacked faith in Christ could be saved.²² The strictest articulation of the doctrine came in the early sixth century from a North African bishop and follower of St. Augustine, Fulgentius of Ruspe, a teaching that would become mainstream in the Church: "Most firmly hold and by no means doubt, that not only all pagans, but also all Jews, and all heretics and schismatics who die outside the Catholic Church, will go to the eternal fire that was prepared for the devil and his angels."²³

The popes and ecumenical councils of subsequent centuries continued to teach EENS. In a profession of faith to be made by the Waldensians who wished to be reconciled with Rome, Innocent III wrote (in 1208) that "there is one church, not that of the heretics, but the holy Roman Catholic and apostolic church, outside of which we believe that no one is saved."²⁴ Under the same pope, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) issued a similar definition against the Albigensians.²⁵ After reiterating this teaching in his bull *Unam Sanctam* (1302), Boniface VIII added the well-known words, "Moreover, we declare, state, and define that for every human creature it is a matter of strict necessity for salvation to be subject to the Roman Pontiff."²⁶ In the fifteenth century, the Council of Florence issued an important decree for the Jacobites, in which it reproduced almost verbatim the formula of Fulgentius:

[The Holy Roman Church] firmly believes, professes, and teaches that none of those who exist outside of the Catholic Church—neither pagans nor Jews nor heretics nor schismatics—can become sharers of eternal life; rather, they will go into

excellent overview of the biblical foundations of the doctrine, see Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 57–92. In particular, Martin highlights Rom 1–2 and Mk 16:14–16. Romans demonstrates that humans are not worthy of heaven simply by the fact that they have not explicitly heard the Gospel. Jesus's words in Mark, meanwhile, contain the commandment to preach the Gospel to the whole world, along with the harrowing teaching that those who do not believe will be condemned.

²² See the many works of Augustine cited in Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 28ff.

²³ Fulgentius of Ruspe, *De fide, ad Petrum* 38 (79) (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* [hereafter, *PL*] 65:704); See also Sullivan, S.J., *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 42–43.

²⁴ Denzinger, no. 792.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 802.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 875; cf. no. 870.

the eternal fire . . . unless, before the end of their lives, they are joined to that same church.²⁷

The Council of Trent's Profession of Faith (1564) would teach likewise, albeit in not so explicit a manner, as would Leo XII's *Ubi Primum* (1824) and Gregory XVI's *Summo Iugiter Studio* (1832).²⁸ In 1854 and 1863, respectively, we find Pius IX declaring, "Certainly we must hold it as of faith that no one can be saved outside the Apostolic Roman Church" and, "It is a well-known Catholic dogma that no one can be saved outside the Catholic Church." Pius's 1864 *Syllabus of Errors* enshrined the same teaching.²⁹ The popes of the first half of the twentieth century maintained this tradition, as evident in Pius X's *Iucunda Sane* (1904), Benedict XV's *Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum* (1914), and Pius XII's *Humani Generis* (1950). The last observed that, while knowing that "the Mystical Body of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church are one and the same thing, [s]ome reduce to a meaningless formula the necessity of belonging to the true Church in order to gain eternal salvation."³⁰ According to Benedict XVI, an obsessive preoccupation with combating modern thought persisted as a sort of "camped thinking" in the Church "until its last reverberation" in *Humani Generis*.³¹

²⁷ Ibid., no. 1351.

²⁸ Leo XII, *Ubi Primum*, §14; Gregory XVI, *Summo Iugiter Studio* (1832), §§4–5. As proof of this doctrine, Gregory calls on its precedents in St. Gregory the Great, Innocent III, and the Fourth Lateran Council, see also Pius IV, *Iniunctum nobis* (Denzinger, no. 1870).

²⁹ Pius IX, *Singulari quadam* (Denzinger, no. 2865) and *Quanto conficiamur moerore* (Denzinger, no. 2867). See also the condemnations in his 1864 "Syllabus of Errors," §§16–17. In *Quanto conficiamur moerore*, he acknowledges, "There are, of course, those who are struggling with *invincible ignorance* about our most holy religion. Sincerely observing the natural law and its precepts inscribed by God on all hearts and ready to obey God, they live honest lives and are able to attain eternal life by the efficacious virtue of divine light and grace. Because God knows, searches and clearly understands the minds, hearts, thoughts, and nature of all, his supreme kindness and clemency do not permit anyone at all who is not guilty of deliberate sin to suffer eternal punishments." In the words that follow, we see that the specific object of his teaching concerns those who have been inside the Church and then rejected its authority: "Also well known is the Catholic teaching that no one can be saved outside the Catholic Church. Eternal salvation cannot be obtained by those who oppose the authority and statements of the same Church and are stubbornly separated from the unity of the Church and also from the successor of Peter, the Roman Pontiff."

³⁰ Pius XII, *Humani Generis* (1950), §27, referencing his *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943).

³¹ *Theological Highlights*, 42.

ENNS, Vatican II, and the Post-Conciliar Church

What, then, could be problematic when the Church has such a unanimous and longstanding tradition concerning the dogma of EENS?³² The issue is precisely this: Vatican II and the post-conciliar Magisterium seem to teach an entirely different doctrine from what was taught over the greater part of the previous two thousand years. In the statements we will examine below, the Magisterium appears to have violated Vatican I's declaration that the "meaning of the sacred dogmas is ever to be maintained which has once been declared by Holy mother Church." For, while the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* (1964) articulates EENS in its own way, its scope appears to have been reduced to the point of yielding an altogether different meaning:

In explicit terms [Christ] Himself affirmed the necessity of faith and baptism and thereby affirmed also the necessity of the Church, for through baptism as through a door men enter the Church. Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved. . . . He is not saved, however, who, though part of the body of the Church, does not persevere in charity.³³

The novelty here is that Vatican II reformulates the ancient dogma of EENS and recasts it in a positive light, restricting its application to those who *know* the Church is necessary for salvation and still refuse to enter or remain in it. However, it leaves open the question of what it means to truly "know" this reality.

As an indication of what the Council intends, *Lumen Gentium* proceeds to discuss the positive elements the Church sees in other Christian communities, as well as in Judaism, Islam, and other religions

³² Sullivan cites a text from Frank Sheed that sheds light on the longstanding Catholic belief that non-Catholics, or at least non-Christians, could not be saved: "In the handling of Father Feeney we hear a troubling echo of the handling of the Modernists at the turn of the century. Like them he was condemned but not answered. When Boniface VIII said in the bull *Unam Sanctam* that it was 'altogether necessary for salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff,' he seemed to be saying not only what Father Feeney was condemned for saying, but what a vast number of yesterday's Catholics had grown up believing" (Frank Sheed, *The Church and I* [Garden City: The Catholic Book Club, 1974], 166). Cf. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 4.

³³ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), §14.

whose members “in shadows and images seek the unknown God.” It affirms that “those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God.”³⁴ Citing St. Paul concerning God’s desire to save all men, the document reflects the reality of invincible ignorance in stating, “Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.”³⁵ Even non-theists are potential recipients of salvation: “Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life.”³⁶ The Council’s constitution on the Church in the modern world likewise embraces this possibility with open arms:

All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.³⁷

So significant was the message of this paragraph for the history of Catholic doctrine that Benedict wrote, “If it is desirable to offer a diagnosis of the text as a whole, we might say that (in conjunction with the texts on religious liberty and world religions) it is a revision of the Syllabus of Pius IX, a kind of countersyllabus.”³⁸ Benedict further

³⁴ Ibid., §16, with allusions to Paul’s preaching at the Athenian Areopagus in Acts 17:25–28 and 1 Tim 2:4, in which the apostle writes that God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” It should be observed that the word *ordinantur*, translated here “related,” implies that non-Christians are “ordered towards” or called to full membership in the People of God, as is stated in *Lumen Gentium*, §13. See also the Council’s declaration *Nostra Aetate* (1965), which is dedicated to elucidating the positive elements the Church shares with non-Christian religions. Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, in turn, have sought to do this in their own writings. See John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Knopf, 1994), and Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (2010), §§117–120 (Frederick, MD: Word Among Us, 2010).

³⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, §16.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), §22.

³⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 381.

describes the "generous spirit" of Pope John XXIII and Vatican II as a "cure" for "the anti-Modernistic neurosis which had again and again crippled the Church since the turn of the century."³⁹

While the above texts are quite difficult to reconcile with the ancient doctrine of EENS, it is not just Vatican II that teaches a doctrine concerning non-Christians that is seemingly incongruous with the theology of times past. In *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), John Paul II wrote that the Holy Spirit operates through other religions, leading their adherents to belief in God. He described this in terms of "the firm belief of the followers of the non-Christian religions—a belief that is also an effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body."⁴⁰ The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue's *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991) cites the aforementioned passage and writes that "the Council has openly acknowledged the presence of positive values not only in the religious life of individual believers of other religious traditions, but also in the religious traditions to which they belong."⁴¹ Citing Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* (1965), it adds this exhortation: "Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral good found among non-Christians, as well as their social and cultural values."⁴² Referencing Vatican II's *Ad Gentes* (1965) on the mission activity of the Church, the document concludes:

From this mystery of unity it follows that all men and women who are saved share, though differently, in the same mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ through his Spirit. . . . Concretely, *it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their conscience* that the members of other religions respond positively to God's invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their savior.⁴³

³⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁰ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), §6.

⁴¹ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (hereafter, PCID), *Dialogue and Proclamation* (Vatican City: Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 1991), §17.

⁴² Ibid.; cf. *Nostra Aetate*, §2.

⁴³ PCID, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, §29 (emphasis added); cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes* (1965), §§3, 9, and 11.

Although this document does not have the same authority as a papal encyclical or ecumenical council, it is representative of a common ecclesiastical stance vis-à-vis the question of salvation for non-Christians such as it has developed over the past fifty years. What is striking about these last statements is that they ascribe “firm belief” to people who practice religions other than Christianity, and even go so far as to teach that such individuals respond to God’s call precisely through “the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions.”

As we will discuss below, the above affirmation does not mean that non-Christians have no need of Christ’s grace, yet it appears to be worlds apart from the teaching of the past in which those who refused to submit explicitly to the authority of the pope were condemned along with their religious traditions. Francis Sullivan poses the problem in this way:

The question is whether this radical change from pessimism to optimism, this about-face from the position of “no salvation outside the Catholic Church” to the recognition by Vatican II of the universal possibility of salvation, can really be seen as a genuine development of the church’s understanding of her faith. In other words, can this be justified as a legitimate development of doctrine? . . . Is there any consistent meaning which would justify recognizing this as a legitimate development of doctrine?⁴⁴

Sullivan’s question dovetails perfectly with the overall scope of this essay. If the changes we have witnessed from the time of Vatican II forward are to be considered legitimate developments of doctrine according to the standards famously articulated by Newman, then it must also adhere to the standard of Vatican I, which taught that dogmas maintain a consistent meaning over the millennia.

Historical Conditioning and the Substance of EENS

In response to his own challenging question, Sullivan emphasizes the necessity of recourse to the principles of *Mysterium Ecclesiae* outlined above. For Sullivan, it is of paramount importance to deal with the reality that magisterial pronouncements are to a certain extent “histor-

⁴⁴ Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 9–10. See below for a discussion of Sullivan’s comments regarding the “radical change from pessimism to optimism,” as Ralph Martin and Avery Dulles offer helpful criticisms to keep us from misconstruing the “change” of which Sullivan speaks.

ically conditioned.”⁴⁵ In this document, the CDF has called on scholars to identify historical factors that have influenced the way the Church expressed her faith through the ages. Sullivan takes up this call and applies it to EENS, beginning with this brief sketch of the dogma in historical context:

*During the first three centuries of church history, “No salvation outside the church” was used exclusively as a warning to Christians who had separated themselves from the *catholica* through adherence to a heretical or schismatic sect. . . . But from the end of the fourth century, when Christianity had become the official religion of the empire, we begin to find the fathers of the church addressing a similar warning to pagans and Jews. Here their argument was that by now the gospel had been preached everywhere in the world, all had had ample opportunity to hear and respond to it, and there was no excuse for those who persisted in their refusal to accept it. Now, not only Christian heretics and schismatics, but pagans and Jews were judged guilty of grave sin for refusing to join the Christian community. And so, in the sixth century, we find Fulgentius, bishop of Ruspe, formulating the doctrine of the necessity of belonging to the church in terms of the belief that all pagans, Jews, and schismatics would be condemned to Hell. That this remained the standard expression of the doctrine for almost a thousand years is shown by the fact that the Council of Florence, in 1442, incorporated Fulgentius’ formula into its Decree for the Jacobites.*⁴⁶

Here Sullivan identifies three stages in the history of EENS, from its initial use directed towards Catholics themselves in the context of schism, to its later application in which pagans and Jews were considered damned due to the assumption that they had heard the gospel and knew better, to Fulgentius’ blanket condemnation of all pagans, Jews, and schismatics.

The first of these cases is the easiest to justify. As Benedict indicates in an objection to the teaching of St. Cyprian, the earliest expressions of EENS were conditioned by a context of persecution and schism in the Church:

⁴⁵ Ibid., 199–200; CDF, *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, §5.

⁴⁶ Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 200–201.

Cyprian is talking about the relationship between God and the Church *in the context* of persecution. He is thinking of people who leave the Church because of their fear of being martyred and who think that they will, of course, still keep on with Christ and God. He is telling them that whoever leaves the living community, the living body, is climbing out of Noah's ark and will drown in the flood. It is in this sense that he is showing them how the Church and faith in Christ are indivisible. . . . Cyprian did not invent any theory concerning what God will do about those who did not know the Church. Even Saint Paul, who so insists on the importance of the Church, tells us that we must behave as we should *within* the Church; God will do whatever he is going to do about those outside.⁴⁷

As Benedict shows, EENS was originally intended to indicate only what happens to a Catholic who leaves the Church, a teaching that Vatican II reiterates in no uncertain terms. Unlike Vatican II, however, Cyprian did not have in his immediate sights the fate of those who never belonged to the Church in the first place.

In another text Benedict makes a similar point and adds further distinctions regarding the formula's meaning that he describes in terms of its concern, assertion, or preoccupation:

Cyprian, for instance, is *concerned* with defending the unity of the Church in each individual bishop, and with opposing any attempt at independence and separation from the ecclesiastical community rooted in the bishop. The *meaning* of his statement is the *positive assertion* that the episcopal structure is absolutely essential to the Church, *rather than the negative statement* that the majority of mankind is lost. This question, in all its universal implications, was not the concern [of] Cyprian, [who] was *preoccupied only with the danger* that threatened the Church from schism, and *not with the speculations* about the salvation of mankind.⁴⁸

In this piece, Benedict distinguishes a "positive assertion" concerning the essential role of the episcopacy from a "negative statement" regarding the salvation of mankind. While he does not deny the implications

⁴⁷ Ratzinger, *God and the World*, 88–89 (emphasis added).

⁴⁸ Ratzinger, "Salus Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Est," *Documentatie Centrum Concilie*, Series I, no. 88 (1963), 1 (emphasis added).

of Cyprian's thought for the latter, it is the former with which Benedict is preoccupied and that he considers to be the real truth claim at stake in Cyprian's formulation of EENS.

Subsequent formulations of the dogma require more effort to harmonize with the Magisterium's teaching today. In order to do this, we have to acknowledge two further factors that conditioned these stricter articulations of EENS. Sullivan explains:

First of all, there was the fact that their world was practically identical with Christian Europe. . . . When they spoke of the possibility that someone might never have heard the gospel preached, they imagined the case of a child brought up in the wilderness. *The limits of their geographical horizon* led them to the conviction that everyone had had ample opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel. At the same time, *the limits of their grasp of human psychology* led them to the conviction that all those who had heard the message of the gospel and did not accept it must be guilty of sinning against the truth which surely was evident to them.⁴⁹

This is a fascinating explanation because it shows that false presuppositions have sometimes led the Church to express her teachings in a way that fails to square with what we know to be true today in hindsight. If Fulgentius, Boniface VIII, or the Fathers of the Council of Florence had enjoyed the better grasp of psychology we have today, they may

⁴⁹ Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 201. On the subject of the limits of medieval Christendom's geographical horizon and its impact on their position concerning the salvation of non-Christians, see Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., "Saint Thomas et les non-chrétiens," *Revue Thomiste* 106 (2006): 17–49. Ralph Martin summarizes this reality as follows: "Given the common medieval understanding that Christianity was so widely known and promulgated that invincible ignorance would be extremely rare, it was assumed that nonbelievers were culpable for their unbelief" (*Will Many Be Saved?*, 37–38). While not referencing Torrell, the treatment of this issue in Martin and Sullivan aligns well with his careful analysis. Martin and Torrell both cite Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q.14, a.11 ad 1, in which Thomas discusses the hypothetical case of the invincibly ignorant person raised in the wilderness or by animals. According to Thomas, we must most certainly hold (*certissime tenendum est*) that God would reveal himself to this person by means of an interior inspiration or by a preacher specifically sent to him. It is pivotal to recall here, however, Aquinas's stipulation that God will extend such an offer "provided that he followed his natural reason in seeking the good and avoiding evil."

not have concluded that all who refused to accept Christ explicitly were fully aware of the grave repercussions of their decision. Likewise, had they known about the New World and all the other peoples of the earth who had never heard the Gospel, they likely would have articulated their doctrine differently to account for this knowledge.

As Benedict recalls, the ancient worldview underlying many formulations of EENS took it for granted that the Gospel had been preached to all mankind and that only culpable hardness of heart kept people from the Church. "In this light," he articulates, "it would seem that the phrase, which is correct *in its content*, was colored by a geographic and historical misconception concerning the extent of the Church on earth."⁵⁰ In other words, the essential point of the affirmation in question remains valid despite the fact that it was bound up with a certain false assumption or misconception. Benedict adds, "In order to arrive at its enduring theological meaning, we must see the phrase apart from the historical context which influenced its formulation. The phrase should not be seen in isolation, but as part of a whole process of dogmatic development."⁵¹ To accurately assess the various formulations of EENS, we have to understand their immediate context as well as placing them in the broader context of dogmatic development that led the Church to where she is today. Here, Benedict's statement that we need to see the phrase "apart from its historical context" means that we need to elucidate its "enduring theological meaning." Ironically, if we took Benedict's statement "apart from the historical context," out of its own context within his essay, he would seem to be saying that context is an irrelevant hermeneutical factor!

If the above historical factors have conditioned the Magisterium's position on the salvation of non-Christians over the centuries, then it remains to ask: what is the *substance* of the formula EENS that has endured over the centuries? In the words of Sullivan, it is as simple as this:

As I see it, the "substance" of the doctrine whose history we have been following is that God has assigned to the Church a necessary role in the divine economy of salvation. As Christ is the one mediator, so his body, the church, has a subordinate but necessary role of mediation in the salvation of mankind.⁵²

⁵⁰ Ratzinger, "Salus Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Est," 1 (emphasis added).

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, 199.

Sullivan employs the vocabulary of "substance" in the endeavor to elucidate what precisely is the common thread, the real point, in the Magisterium's teaching over the millennia vis-à-vis the salvation of non-Christians. He recalls John XXIII's opening words at the Second Vatican Council: "The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another."⁵³ According to Sullivan, the Church has presented the same truth in various ways over the centuries. To apply Newman's thought, we might say that the Church's modern distillation of EENS is something that Catholics of all epochs, if given the knowledge we have today, would agree upon.⁵⁴

What does Sullivan mean in expressing the formula in this way? Precisely what would we be agreeing upon with our fathers in the faith if we had the chance to bounce our expressions of EENS off of one another? The truth is that, while God desires all to be saved, salvation of non-Christians is in no way guaranteed. Indeed, no one can be saved without the grace of Christ operating through the "sacrament of salvation," the Church. Thus, Catholicism of both the past and the present teaches that the Church is necessary for salvation.⁵⁵ In his evaluation of Sullivan's work, Ralph Martin adds further important clarifications to the Church's current way of articulating EENS, stressing something that he believes Sullivan's treatment inadequately presents: the reality

⁵³ John XXIII, Opening Address of the Second Vatican Council (1962), 6. This is a rather loose translation of the Latin text, which reads: *Est enim aliud ipsum depositum Fidei, seu veritates, quae veneranda doctrina nostra continentur, aliud modus, quo eadem enuntiantur, eodem tamen sensu eademque sententia.*

⁵⁴ Cf. John Henry Newman, "The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrine," in *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 312–351. See Newman, *The Theological Papers of John Henry Newman on Biblical Inspiration and on Infallibility*, ed. J. Derek Holmes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 157: "The Church does not know more than the Apostles knew. . . . I wish to hold that there is nothing which the Church has defined or shall define but what an Apostle, if asked, would have been fully able to answer and would have answered, as the Church has answered, the one answering by inspiration, the other from its gift of infallibility." Cf. Ian Ker, foreword to Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, xxiii–xxiv.

⁵⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §48. Speaking on the subject of non-Catholic churches and ecclesiastical communities, the Council lays the foundation for this understanding by reminding us, "For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Church." See also Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964), §3.

that anyone who is to be saved must possess supernatural faith and supernatural charity.⁵⁶ Expounding upon the implications of this need in the case of persons who are inculpably ignorant of the faith, he writes:

Just because salvation is possible for people who are inculpably ignorant of the gospel or who have not heard a presentation that is adequate, does not mean they are hereby saved. It is essential that the initial, mysterious “yes” that is said to God be followed by perseverance in that “yes” to the end.⁵⁷

Thus, not only must a person make a supernatural assent to God in one way or another at some point in his life; he who is saved must

⁵⁶ Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 53. Charles Journet provides an illuminating analogy to illustrate the role of grace in the salvation of non-Christians who lived before the Incarnation in *What is Dogma?*, trans. Mark Pontifex, O.S.B. (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1964), 38–39: “Christianity existed in embryo form before Christ. . . . Those who were saved before Christ were saved through him; they constituted, by anticipation, his Mystical Body, his Church. For, even then, grace was Christian.” In these same pages, Journet develops another insightful analogy, likening an acceptance of God’s existence and providence to an embryo that contains the whole substance of the Christian faith or a rosebud that has yet to fully blossom. Journet’s analysis is but a modern commentary on the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.2, a.7, ad 3; cf. *ibid.*, II-II, q.1, a.7. For his part, Journet draws on the thought of Jacques Maritain to go a step beyond Aquinas in suggesting that there exists a situation in which an individual could possess the entire substance of the Christian faith and be saved, even if he lacks conscious assent to God’s existence and providence. In Journet’s theology, this person arrives at possession of the entire substance of the Christian faith through an act of the will rather than the intellect. He there encounters in an implicit manner the full mystery of the Church (see Journet, *What is Dogma?*, 30–35, as well as a compatible treatment of the subject in Torrell, “Saint Thomas et les non-chrétiens”). See also the discussion of Journet in Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 51–52. Martin is careful to observe that Journet is not advocating a sort of naïve optimism that would hold that everyone is saved. For, Journet adds, “But this is a provisional, unstable, dangerous state of faith, a state of childhood” (*What Is Dogma?*, 35). In other words, the non-believer who is fundamentally ordered toward God remains in peril of damnation, and eventually such a soul is required to leave his ignorance and acknowledge the reality of God’s existence and providence. For an application of Journet’s theology to the development of doctrine within the Bible, see Ramage, *Dark Passages of the Bible*, especially ch. 4.

⁵⁷ Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 53. For a brief recent helpful treatment of Journet’s thought in this regard, see Charles Morerod, O.P., “Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus,” *The Thomist* 75 (2011): 517–536.

further carry out this belief in supernatural charity until he dies. All this requires grace, a grace mysteriously offered even to those who have no explicit knowledge of God.

Precisely *how* and *whether* this grace reaches an individual non-Christian is another question. Earlier generations of Christians were hesitant to accept that Christ's salvific grace reached anyone outside the visible confines of the Roman Catholic Church. Although the teaching of the later Magisterium would correct this conception, the ancient and the modern Church agree in maintaining the essential truth of the Church's necessity as well as the sobriety to refrain from affirming that particular non-Christians are in fact saved—thus leaving the “how” and “whether” questions in the hands of God. In this way the centuries-long equation of Christ's Church with the *visible* Roman Catholic Church may no longer be taught, but it does contain an important theological kernel and must be therefore understood within its proper context. Benedict explains:

The definition of the Church, born in the battles of the Reformation, which had prevailed until the present century, was that of Robert Bellarmine. It got off to a bad start by being a definition “against” something. Bellarmine, in opposition to the reformers' idea of an invisible church, placed great stress on its institutional character. So much did he emphasize the Church's juridical aspects that he was able to put this in the formula that the Church was as visible as the Republic of Venice.⁵⁸

Like the other factors above, the Reformation as a historical circumstance conditioned the Church so as to emphasize, and sometimes over-accentuate, her institutional dimension. However, this formulation was made primarily “against” the reformers' view of the invisible Church and ought to be read as such. Following this trajectory were post-Tridentine formulations of EENS all the way up to those of the mid-twentieth century. Benedict described the thinking behind such statements as at once “cramped,” and yet “once so necessary as a line of defense.”⁵⁹ As we saw above in the case of St. Cyprian's early doctrine of EENS, we have to concentrate our efforts on discerning the “positive affirmation” being made in these defensive formulations. Only over time and in a context more removed from the quarrels of the Refor-

⁵⁸ Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights*, 73–74.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

mation would the Magisterium be able to clarify that her emphasis on the visible does not entail the exclusion of the Church's invisible dimension and Christ's ability to convey grace to non-Catholics.

The clarity and balance of the Church's current teaching on the salvation of non-Christians was made possible through her encounter with challenges like that of the Reformation and through the long process of reflection we have surveyed above. This refreshing refinement comes across when reading the various magisterial documents of the past half century, from Vatican II to the writings of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue to the works of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Benedict for his part, while maintaining that Christ wishes to save all men and that there can even be "pagan saints,"⁶⁰ remained sober and balanced in reiterating the conviction that Christ's Church fully "subsists" only in the visible Catholic Church."⁶¹ This view is based on Scripture and the magisterial tradition of Vatican II. Christ remains the one true mediator of God and man, and it must be remembered that the good in other traditions is to be seen as

⁶⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 207.

⁶¹ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §8. Elucidating the meaning of this formula, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith states: "With the expression *subsistit in*, the Second Vatican Council sought to harmonize two doctrinal statements: on the one hand, that the Church of Christ, despite the divisions which exist among Christians, continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church, and on the other hand, that 'outside of her structure, many elements can be found of sanctification and truth,' that is, in those Churches and ecclesial communities which are not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church" (CDF, *Dominus Iesus* [2000], §16). Note that, while the document does not preclude the existence of "elements of sanctification and truth" outside of Christianity, what it describes here are those elements residing within non-Catholic Christian communities. It is illuminating to read Benedict XVI's comments on this formula in his private academic writings: "With the *subsistit* formula, Vatican II intended—in line with the Catholic tradition—to say something the exact opposite of 'ecclesiological relativism': there is a Church of Jesus Christ. . . . The distinction between *subsistit* and *est* contains and conceals the entire difficulty of ecumenism." In this piece, Benedict is combatting the claim that Vatican II intended to weaken the ancient tradition that Christ's Church is (*est*) the Catholic Church. On the contrary, he indicates, *subsistit* is the Latin counterpart of the Greek *hypostasis*. With this word, Vatican II was trying counter a certain "ecclesiological relativism" so as to show that there indeed exists a unique Church that alone contains the fullness of the means of salvation. A *hypostasis*, he observes, "can happen only once" (Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005], 147).

a preparation for the Gospel.⁶² Furthermore, part of this balanced attitude involves the recognition that non-Christian religions sometimes contain elements that are not the effect of grace and that may well constitute obstacles to salvation.⁶³ This essay maintains that such a view is substantially the same as the formula EENS such as it was articulated by St. Cyprian, Boniface VIII, the Council of Florence, and the entire cloud of authoritative witnesses throughout Church history.

On the Fear of a Slippery Slope

The foregoing discussion raises an important question for the Catholic who follows Benedict XVI's "hermeneutic of reform" in admitting the presence of both continuity and discontinuity in magisterial doctrines such as EENS: why should we assent to the Church's teaching today, knowing that certain aspects of it theoretically could change tomorrow and that, ultimately, sometimes only time allows us to discern the substance of doctrinal affirmations? Indeed, in addition to the problem of EENS explored in here, one could adduce other equally challenging instances of doctrinal discontinuity throughout Church history.⁶⁴ How

⁶² "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

⁶³ Benedict sharply criticizes certain trends in modern theology as "alien to the biblical thought-world or even antipathetic to its spirit. The prevailing optimism, which understands the world religions as in some way salvific agencies, is simply irreconcilable with the biblical assessment of these religions" (*Theological Highlights*, 246). See *Lumen Gentium*, §§16–17, and PCID, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, §31. As explained by the CDF with then-Cardinal Ratzinger at its helm, "Furthermore, it cannot be overlooked that other rituals, insofar as they depend on superstitions or other errors (cf. 1 Cor 10:20–21), constitute an obstacle to salvation. . . . If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation" (*Dominus Iesus*, 21–22). See also John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), §§10–11 and 55.

⁶⁴ Hans Küng is well-known for his criticism of the Church concerning these matters. For an example of this reaction, which requires an erudite response on our part, see his *Infallible? An Inquiry* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), 30ff. Küng believes that "classical errors of the ecclesiastical teaching office" include the excommunication of Photius, which made formal the schism with the Eastern Church, the prohibition of interest at the beginning of modern times, the condemnation of Galileo, the condemnation of new forms of worship in the "Chinese Rites controversy," the insistence on the secular power of the pope up to the First Vatican Council, and "the numerous condemnations of the approach of modern critical-historical exegesis." He likewise identifies as problematic the Church's past anti-modernistic condem-

then are we to stem the “slippery slope” tide of dissent that becomes possible when people become acquainted with the undeniable presence of discontinuity in certain areas of Catholic teaching?

In response, it is critical—and relieving—to emphasize that the Church recognizes various levels of magisterial teaching commanding correspondingly different types of assent. Among the various doctrines of the Church, the CDF indicates that many require “irrevocable assent,” since of their own nature they are “irreformable.”⁶⁵ These teachings form the *substance* of the Catholic faith that cannot change. For example, the CDF has taught that a Catholic may never withhold assent to a divine revealed truth, such as the articles of the Creed, Marian dogmas, the inerrancy of Scripture, and papal infallibility. Likewise, a Catholic may never refuse to accept “those *teachings belonging to the dogmatic or moral area, which are necessary for faithfully keeping and expounding the deposit of faith, even if they have not been proposed by the Magisterium of the Church as formally revealed.*” Among many doctrines that fall within the scope of this statement, the CDF reminds us of the illicitness of euthanasia, the legitimacy of saint canonizations, and the reservation of priestly ordination only to men, to name only a few examples.⁶⁶ That said, with this the CDF has not intended to provide a complete list of truths that Catholics are bound to hold as irreformable. Indeed, it even elucidates a third category of teachings “which either the Roman Pontiff or the College of Bishops enunciate when they exercise their authentic Magisterium.” Even if these are not proclaimed “by a definitive act,” the document indicates that they nevertheless require “*religious submission of will and intellect*” on the part of the faithful.⁶⁷

In this regard, I would like to recall that, while this essay clearly does not offer an exhaustive *apologia* for warranted assent to the Catholic magisterium, it seeks to remove a certain type of obstacle for such assent. It provides a framework to help Catholics face some of the greatest challenges to the Church’s authority in a way that recognizes legitimate difficulties in doctrinal development over the centuries

nations of theories involving evolution and development of dogma. As we saw above, Benedict XVI himself also signals the Church’s past teaching on religious liberty as a problematic area that stood “in need of correction” by the later Magisterium.

⁶⁵ CDF, Doctrinal Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the *Professio Fidei* (1998), §§5 and 8.

⁶⁶ For a delineation of these levels along with examples of doctrines that have an “irrevocable character,” see *ibid.*, §11.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, §10.

while also remaining firm in the conviction that the Magisterium today has safeguarded for believers the same revelation entrusted to the Church by Jesus himself. We must therefore regard as illegitimate the moves of those who, believing themselves to be ahead of the curve in matters of doctrinal development, dissent from today's Magisterium on the hypothetical grounds that its teaching *might* change some day and that, at any rate, their views do not deny anything "irreformable."⁶⁸ Indeed, given what was said above, certain features some consider essential to the faith eventually could be shown to be accidental, but the CDF rightly reminds us that individual Catholics are in no position to preempt the Magisterium in these matters.

The Perennial Truth of EENS Leaves No Room for Naïve Optimism or a "Spirit" of Vatican II

The above principles apply to all kinds of matters in which we observe open dissent within the Church today. However, it also applies to the seemingly benign popular assumption that more or less all human beings are going to be saved regardless of whether they accept the Gospel or not. Martin describes this widespread optimism in terms of a post-conciliar "culture of universalism." It is here that Martin, while giving due respect to Sullivan's careful analysis of the doctrinal history of EENS, critiques the latter's work for exhibiting an unfounded optimism regarding the salvation of non-Christians:

Even Francis Sullivan, who provides such a valuable history of the development of the doctrine EENS, seems to have strong views about how the doctrine should keep developing in a certain direction, and he invokes the "optimism" of Vatican II as support. He speaks sometimes as if a total reversal has been made from "pessimism" to "optimism" even though he himself has traced out the painstaking and precise development of the doctrine, which as we see is rather nuanced. . . . In his treatment of *LG* 16, he simply does not comment on the significant qualification that *LG* 16 puts on its "salvation optimism." If one ignores or glosses over *LG* 16c, one cannot possibly give

⁶⁸ For example, the CDF does not explicitly identify such issues as the immorality of contraception or homosexual practice as irreformable in this document. The Magisterium's mind on these matters has been made manifest in myriad other ways that call for the "religious submission" of the Catholic's will and intellect.

a balanced judgment about the teaching of the council on the status of non-Christians.⁶⁹

In fairness to Sullivan, however, it is not just he who holds this sanguine view vis-à-vis the salvation of non-Christians. Benedict has more than once voiced his concern for the presence of this mentality at certain points within Vatican II itself. Thus, while praising *Gaudium et Spes* for moving away from “the creed of obligation,” the “anathema of negation,” and “a posture of authoritative imperatives” with regard to doctrine, he saw in the document “an almost naïve progressivist optimism” and a failure to emphasize the continuing need to evangelize.⁷⁰

The foregoing reflections lead Martin to offer an important corrective to the prevailing opinion concerning EENS within the Church today:

An important distinction needs to be made, it seems to me, about an “optimism” that sees the possibility of people who have never

⁶⁹ Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 54–55.

⁷⁰ “But another distinction should have been made between pronouncement and dialogue. The first would have been to replace authoritative imperatives with the proclamation of the gospel—thus opening up the faith to the nonbeliever” (Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights*, 224–225 and 227). Benedict XVI elsewhere critiqued the council fathers for exhibiting an excessively self-deprecatory posture with regard to the history of the Catholic Church. This “self-rejection,” he argues, was bound up with the “naïve optimism” and “utopianism” typical of the Kennedy era. He further stated, “The kind of self-accusation at which the Council arrived . . . expressed itself in ways that can only be called neurotic” (*Principles of Catholic Theology*, 372–373). For more on the “thoughtless optimism” that he sees as the dominant mentality today, see Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., “The Population of Hell,” in *Church and Society*, 387–400: “Today a kind of thoughtless optimism is the more prevalent error. Quite apart from what theologians teach, popular piety has become saccharine. Unable to grasp the rationale for eternal punishment, many Christians take it almost for granted that everyone, or practically everyone, must be saved. The Mass for the Dead has turned into a Mass of the Resurrection, which sometimes seems to celebrate not so much the resurrection of the Lord as the salvation of the deceased, without any reference to sin and punishment” (397–398). Also germane to the subject is Dulles’s lecture “Who Can Be Saved?” (*ibid.*, 522–534). As Martin observes, even Karl Rahner—whose great optimism Martin spends a substantial chapter of his book critiquing—states: “Although I took part in the elaboration of *Gaudium et Spes* at the Council I would not deny that its undertone is too euphoric in its evaluation of humanity and the human condition” (Karl Rahner, “Christian Pessimism,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 22, *Human Society and the Church of Tomorrow*, trans. Joseph Donceel [London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1991], 157–158).

heard the gospel, or who have never heard it "adequately," having a possibility of being saved under certain very specific conditions. . . . and an "optimism" that presumes that "possibility" means in fact "probability." It is a short step from an assumed "probability" concerning salvation to the widespread assumption now common in the culture of the Church as well as in the culture at large, that virtually everyone will be saved. Fr. Sullivan even claims that the Council's optimism implies a "general presumption of innocence" among those who have not heard the gospel. . . . Unfortunately, no sources are indicated for the alleged "presumption of innocence" that is supposedly the "official attitude" of the Church. Huge leaps in logic are being made here.⁷¹

Martin's point is quite simple. While Vatican II did bring about real development vis-à-vis the doctrine of EENS, this development is not tantamount to an official attitude of optimism or a presumption that those outside the visible Catholic Church are inculpably ignorant. Catholics can debate the nature and mechanism whereby non-Christians may be saved, but the Church has never taught that non-Christians are presumed innocent and therefore saved.

In his lecture, "The Population of Hell," Avery Dulles provides a balanced summary of the proper way to assess the current state of affairs vis-à-vis the doctrine of EENS in the Church:

One might ask at this point whether there has been any shift in Catholic theology on the matter. The answer appears to be Yes, although the shift is not as dramatic as some imagine. The earlier pessimism was based on the unwarranted assumption that explicit Christian faith is absolutely necessary for salvation. This assumption has been corrected, particularly at Vatican II.⁷²

In the above piece, Dulles also treats the contributions of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar, to each of whose work Martin dedicates a chapter of his book. As Dulles indicates, Rahner held the possibility that Hell is empty, but he also allowed for the real possibility of eternal damnation. Von Balthasar wrote that Christians have a right and duty to hope for the salvation of all, yet he, too, granted the possibility of eternal damnation.⁷³ While acknowledging that the relative optimism

⁷¹ Ibid., 55.

⁷² Dulles, "The Population of Hell," 397.

⁷³ Ibid., 393.

of these two scholars represents a minority view in the Christian tradition, Dulles is also careful to recall, “Even if this consensus be granted, however, it is not binding, because the theologians did not claim that their opinion was revealed, or that to take the opposite view was heretical. Nor is the opinion that most people attain salvation contradicted by authoritative Church teaching.”⁷⁴

As an indication of the truth of Dulles’ conclusion, it should be noted that Benedict XVI himself at times seems to espouse the sort of optimism which Martin criticizes. One such instance is found in *Spe Salvi*, a text to which Martin’s work drew attention, thus sparking a lively debate in the internet blogosphere. Benedict states, “For the majority of people—we may suppose—there remains in the depths of their being an ultimate interior openness to truth, to love, to God.”⁷⁵ While this is not the place to enter into the details of the debate sparked by Martin’s comments regarding this text, his words are worth recalling: “Unfortunately some of the remarks of Benedict XVI have furthered this impression [that most people will be saved].” Martin suggests that Benedict is not teaching authoritatively here but rather stating theological speculation. He understandably adds that the argument of his book “would suggest a need for clarification.”⁷⁶ Whether or not one shares Martin’s reservations concerning Benedict’s mode of speaking, the fact remains that Benedict exudes a rather sanguine attitude in an authoritative papal encyclical. It may not be a definitive teaching, but as Dulles said above, it is certainly not contradicted by authoritative Church teaching.

Granted Benedict’s rather optimistic stance, Martin, Dulles, and he are all careful to remind us that articulating Catholic dogma requires the sobriety to stick to the evidence we have, not the conclusions we would like to have. Even if Benedict hopes that most people will in fact be saved, he does not claim to know this for a fact or to teach it definitively. As the great Pontiff so lucidly taught us throughout his pontificate, we must have the courage and patience to deal with the existing formulations of the various thorny doctrines held by the Catholic Church. There is no “spirit” of Vatican II’s teaching on EENS that would warrant the definitive claim that all or most human beings will

⁷⁴ Ibid., “The Population of Hell,” 391. Representatives of the minority view among the Fathers include Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa. See John Sachs, “*Apocatastasis* in Patristic Theology,” *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 617–640.

⁷⁵ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* (2007), §46.

⁷⁶ Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 284n14.

be saved. To properly understand what EENS means today, we have to stick to the actual texts of Vatican II and the post-conciliar magisterium. Benedict warns:

An interpretation of the Council that understands its dogmatic texts as mere preludes to a still unattained conciliar spirit, that regards the whole as just a preparation for *Gaudium et spes* and that looks upon the latter text as just the beginning of an unswerving course toward an ever greater union with what is called progress—such an interpretation is not only contrary to what the Council Fathers intended and meant, it has been reduced *ad absurdum* by the course of events. Where the spirit of the Council is turned against the word of the Council and is vaguely regarded as a distillation from the development that evolved from the "Pastoral Constitution," this spirit becomes a specter and leads to meaninglessness.⁷⁷

As with all magisterial documents, the true spirit of the Council is expressed in its texts. The hopefulness of *Gaudium et Spes* is real, but it is far from the text of Vatican II that must be brought to bear on the question of salvation for non-Christians. The Church must not fail to recall the sober optimism of *Lumen Gentium*, its affirmation of the possibility of damnation, and its continued emphasis on the need for Christian mission activity. Ralph Martin's recent book stands out as a shining illustration that the Church has not forgotten the truth professed in this text. For his part, Benedict XVI believes that the Church is only now truly beginning to discover and see the fruit of Vatican II's texts: "It seems to me that, 50 years after the Council, we see that this virtual Council is broken, is lost, and there now appears the true Council with all its spiritual force."⁷⁸ That said, the pontiff's earlier thought concern-

⁷⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 390. Matthew Lamb and Matthew Levering neatly summarize Benedict's thought concerning a hermeneutic of rupture by saying that "it was more the spirit of the age (*Zeitgeist*) than the Holy Spirit." *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition*, eds. Matthew Lamb and Matthew Levering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

⁷⁸ Address to the Parish Priests and Clergy of Rome, February 14, 2013. It was especially heartening to hear these words from Benedict when we compare them with his assessments in previous decades. In 1985, he had spoken similarly (but less favorably) concerning the state of affairs at the time: "I believe . . . that the true time of Vatican II has not yet come, that its authentic reception has not yet begun: its documents were quickly buried under a pile

ing Vatican II loses none of its initial force, as he reminds us that the destiny of the Council lies in our hands: "If, in the end, it will be numbered among the highlights of Church history depends on those who will transform its words into the life of the Church."⁷⁹

EENS, Conscience, and Christian Mission Today

Martin draws attention to a singularly harmful consequence of the so-called "spirit of Vatican II" and the "culture of universalism" prevalent in today's Church: the increasingly deteriorating state of Catholic missionary activity over the past several decades. Reflecting on his time spent as a *peritus* at the Second Vatican Council, Benedict wrote of a "crisis of missions" in the Catholic Church beginning as early as the early 1960s:

The crucial issue, which gravely affected the whole context in the question, especially for the missionary bishops, was the crisis in which the very idea of missions found itself. The cause of this crisis lay in profound changes in modern thinking about the

of superficial or frankly inexact publications. The reading of the letter of the documents will enable us to discover their true spirit. If thus rediscovered in their truth, those great texts will make it possible for us to understand just what happened and to react with a new vigor" (*The Ratzinger Report*, 41). Ratzinger made poignant comments such as these throughout the course of his academic career, of which the following is particularly incisive: "Does this mean that the Council itself must be revoked? Certainly not. It means only that the real reception of the Council has not yet even begun. What devastated the Church in the decade after the Council was not the Council but the refusal to accept it. This becomes clear precisely in the history of the influence of *Gaudium et spes*. What was identified with the Council was, for the most part, the expression of an attitude that did not coincide with the Statements to be found in the text itself, although it is recognizable as a tendency in its development and in some of its individual formulations. The task is not, therefore, to suppress the Council but to discover the real Council and to deepen its true intention in the light of present experience. That means that there can be no return to the Syllabus [of Pius IX], which may have marked the first stage in the confrontation with liberalism and a newly conceived Marxism but cannot be the last stage. In the long run, neither embrace nor ghetto can solve for Christians the problem of the modern world. The fact is, as Hans Urs von Balthasar pointed out as early as 1952, that the 'demolition of the bastions' is a long-overdue task. . . . But the demolition of bastions cannot mean that she no longer has anything to defend or that she can live by forces other than those that brought her forth" (*Principles of Catholic Theology*, 390–391).

⁷⁹ Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 378.

necessity of missions. The motive which had driven missionaries in the past to bring other people to Christ had increasingly lost its urgency. What drove the great missionaries in the beginning of the modern era to go out into the world, and what filled them with holy unrest, was the conviction that salvation is in Christ alone.⁸⁰

The issue concerning Martin, Benedict, and the bishops of Vatican II is that if we lose a proper understanding of EENS—the necessity of Christ and his Church for salvation—the Church is bound to lose her missionary impulse. If everyone is saved, why bother inconveniencing ourselves with evangelizing them? Non-Christians are just as well off if we leave them alone.

Benedict observes a disturbing corollary to this pervasive optimism, namely the underlying suggestion that non-Christians are not merely as well off left alone, but that they may in fact be better off than Christians themselves. How can this be so? Already, at the beginning of his academic career in the early 1950s, then-Father Ratzinger was witnessing the spread of a deeply misguided perception of the relation of conscience to freedom, truth, and the Church. He felt particular concern because this false notion was rooted not merely among dissenters but even in the thought of a senior colleague whom he considered a “sincere believer” and “a strict Catholic.” On the subject of his conversations with this professor, he writes:

What disturbed me was the notion that it harbored, that faith is a burden which can hardly be borne. . . . According to this view, faith would not make salvation easier but harder. Being happy would mean not being burdened with having to believe or having to submit to the moral yoke of the faith of the Catholic church. The erroneous conscience, which makes life easier and marks a more human course, would then be a real grace, the normal way to salvation. Untruth, keeping truth at bay, would be better for man than truth. . . . In the last few decades, *notions of this sort have discernibly crippled the disposition to evangelize*. The one who spoke in this manner was a sincere believer, and, I would say, a strict Catholic who performed his moral duty with care and conviction. But he expressed a form of experience of faith which is disquieting. *Its propagation could only be fatal to the faith*.

⁸⁰ Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights*, 245.

The almost traumatic aversion many have to what they hold to be “pre-conciliar” Catholicism is rooted, I am convinced, in the encounter with such a faith seen only as encumbrance.⁸¹

According to Benedict, people like this man consciously or unconsciously harbor the belief that truth is not liberating for man, but rather a burden upon him that only hinders his freedom and happiness. From this perspective, having the opportunity to hear the Gospel and profess the Church’s teachings is a burden—something that is more likely to lead a person away from salvation than toward it. An inculpably erroneous conscience, meanwhile, “would then be a real grace, the normal way to salvation.” It is not difficult to see the implications of this false understanding for Christian mission. As Benedict pointedly observed in the above passage, “Notions of this sort have discernibly crippled the disposition to evangelize,” and “Its propagation could only be fatal to the faith.”

Benedict’s portrait here at first may appear to be a caricature, but its effects are all-too obvious in the Church today. Deep down, many Christians envy the lot of nonbelievers who get to do what they want in life and yet still get rewarded in the end. We tend to harbor the feeling that our freedom is compromised, rather than fulfilled, through the obedience of Christian faith. The fact of the matter is, though, that a person does not get rewarded for doing whatever he pleases, or even for being a good person. EENS means that salvation comes through Christ and his Church alone.

If salvation is possible and even probable outside the confines of the visible Catholic Church, then a final question remains: why evangelize at all? Martin eloquently and forcefully makes the case that today’s Catholics need to make it a priority to answer this very question. As for the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent magisterial tradi-

⁸¹ Joseph Ratzinger, “Conscience and Truth.” Presented at the 10th Workshop for Bishops in Dallas, Texas, February 1991 (available at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/ratzcons.htm>). In this essay, Ratzinger discusses Newman’s theory of the papacy as a divinely instituted guide “not put in opposition to the primacy of conscience but based on it and guaranteeing it.” He elaborates, “For Newman, the middle term which establishes the connection between authority and subjectivity is truth. I do not hesitate to say that truth is the central thought of Newman’s intellectual grappling.” For the purpose of this essay, Ratzinger’s observation becomes significant when we consider that he has seen Newman’s writings on conscience and development of doctrine to be his two great intellectual contributions to the Church.

tion, however, the answer is already there for the finding in the section Martin referred to above as "LG 16c":

But often men, deceived by the Evil One, have become vain in their reasonings and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator. Or some there are who, living and dying in this world without God, are exposed to final despair. Wherefore to promote the glory of God and procure the salvation of all of these, and mindful of the command of the Lord, "Preach the Gospel to every creature," the Church fosters the missions with care and attention.⁸²

As this passage reveals, Vatican II no more intended to call off the missions than it did to change the doctrine of EENS. We evangelize not merely to give people a better life on earth or to get them a better place in Heaven, but to get them to Heaven in the first place—because "some" people without God fall into final despair, and "often" they find themselves deceived by the Evil One.

The call to mission issued by Vatican II is an urgent matter for all Christians today. It is a mission that takes many forms, both domestic and abroad. Nobody has put this better than Saint John Paul II:

God is opening before the Church the horizons of a humanity more fully prepared for the sowing of the Gospel. I sense that the moment has come to commit all of the Church's energies to a new evangelization and to the mission *ad gentes*. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples.⁸³

⁸² *Lumen Gentium*, §16.

⁸³ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, §3. The Pontiff makes several related comments in this great encyclical, for example: "On the other hand, the boundaries between *pastoral care of the faithful, new evangelization and specific missionary activity* are not clearly definable, and it is unthinkable to create barriers between them or to put them into watertight compartments. Nevertheless, there must be no lessening of the impetus to preach the Gospel and to establish new churches among peoples or communities where they do not yet exist, for this is the first task of the Church, which has been sent forth to all peoples and to the very ends of the earth. Without the mission *ad gentes*, the Church's very missionary dimension would be deprived of its essential meaning and of the very activity that exemplifies it" (§34). Throughout the document, John Paul goes even further by repeatedly recalling the words of Paul VI to the effect that all people "have the right to know the riches of the

In John Paul's exhortation, we face a certain element of "newness" in the call for a "New Evangelization," but the essential content of the Church's ancient missionary mandate remains the same. Most Christians today will not proclaim the Gospel in foreign lands, but every day we do have the opportunity to evangelize our fallen-away brother or our uncatechized neighbor who needs to hear the good news that salvation is to be found in Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church. **N-V**

mystery of Christ—riches in which we believe that the whole of humanity can find, in unsuspected fullness, everything that it is gropingly searching for concerning God, man and his destiny, life and death, and truth." Paul VI added, "This is why the Church keeps her missionary spirit alive, and even wishes to intensify it in the moment of history in which we are living" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* [1975], §53). For a helpful treatment of Vatican II's *Ad Gentes* in light of these post-conciliar writings, see Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I., "The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes*," in *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition*, 287–310.