Lesson 59: The Call to Christian Witness (People of other Religions)

Revision from previous lesson:
In the previous lesson, we learned that every Christian, by virtue of our Baptism into the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, has an obligation to be a witness to the faith. In this lesson, we learn to understand how even people who are unbaptised are actually related to the Church, and how we can witness the Christian faith to them.

Current lesson:

1. One of the complications arising from living in Asia stems from the religious composition of the Asian population. The Asian continent is the very source of the world religions that thrive in the world today: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and a good many other religions. Because of this, a common question among many Catholics is whether people who are not baptised (i.e. who are either believers of other religions or who do not believe in God at all) can still be saved. Some Catholics mistakenly think that the Catholic Church has changed its doctrine of salvation in recent years (since the Second Vatican Council).

2. There are two common notions among Christians about people of other religions:

   A) *Only Christians will be saved*. If you have friends around you who are non-Catholic Christians, you may very likely have heard the claim that only Christians can be saved, and that for as long as a person has not "received Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Saviour", he is bound for damnation. This is the prevalent notion among Evangelical (Protestant) Christians. This view is called exclusivism.
   B) *Everybody will be saved regardless of their religion*. Another common position, strangely, seems to be very prevalent among Catholics in this part of the world. It is the position which claims that all religions lead to salvation, and that no one religion is better than others. This view is called pluralism. This notion is, of course, rejected by the Catholic Church. If all religions led to salvation, then Jesus Christ would have been a most foolish or insane person to think that He would have to die for the sins of the world. Furthermore, if the truth claims of all religions were equal, then it does not seem logical that all these various religions have conflicting teachings and claims. Where beliefs conflict with one another, they cannot all be true. Where two religious claims conflict, one must be correct and the other wrong.

   The Catholic Church does not agree with either of the two positions above. The Church's position is neither exclusive nor pluralistic. Rather, it is inclusive, which takes into account God's grace and love for our neighbours but without having to compromise the uniqueness of Jesus Christ who gave His life for the sins of the world.

3. The Second Vatican Council teaches that God's salvation plan includes all peoples: even Jews, Muslims, and peoples of other non-Christian religions.

Dialogue and Proclamation, 15: "Christ, the New Adam, through the mystery of His incarnation, death and resurrection, is at work in each human person to bring about interior renewal."

Gaudium et Spes, 22: "This holds true not for Christians only but also for all persons of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the Paschal mystery."

4. The Church further goes on to say that all these who have "not yet received the Gospel are related to the people of God in various ways" (CCC 839). In CCC 839 to 842 (also in *Lumen Gentium*, 26), further explanation is given on the unique nature of each of these relationships. And in CCC 843, the Church states its recognition that these religions represent man's search for God.

   CCC 839: "Those who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the People of God in various ways."
   "*The relationship of the Church with the Jewish People*. When she delves into her own mystery, the Church, the People of God in the New Covenant, discovers her link with the Jewish People, 'the first to hear the Word of God.' The Jewish faith, unlike other non-Christian religions, is already a response to God's revelation in the Old Covenant. To the Jews 'belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ', 'for the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.'"

   CCC 840: "And when one considers the future, God's People of the Old Covenant and the new People of God tend towards similar goals: expectation of the coming (or the return) of the Messiah. But one awaits the return of the Messiah who died and rose from the dead and is recognized as Lord and Son of God; the other awaits the coming of a Messiah, whose features remain hidden till the end of time; and the latter waiting is accompanied by the drama of not knowing or of misunderstanding Christ Jesus."

   CCC 841: "*The Church's relationship with the Muslims*. The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day."

   CCC 842: "*The Church's bond with non-Christian religions* is in the first place the common origin and end of the human race: All nations form but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth, and also because all share a common destiny, namely God. His providence, evident goodness, and saving designs extend to all against the day when the elect are gathered together in the holy city…"

   CCC 843: "The Catholic Church recognises in other religions that search, among shadows and images, for the God who is unknown yet near since He gives life and breath and all things and wants all men to be saved. Thus, the Church considers all goodness and truth found in these religions as "a preparation for the Gospel…"

5. Notice that the Church does *not* say that all religions are equal or that all religions bring salvation. In fact, the CCC also speaks of how "in their religious behavior… men (i.e. people of other religions) also display the limits and errors that disfigure the image of God in them" (CCC 844). This points to the necessity of evangelisation.

   Without denying that there are truths and values in other religions, the Church teaches that these truths and values are commingled with serious errors, and that even the truths have salvific value only to the extent that they are preparations for, or reflections of, the Christian Gospel (*Lumen Gentium,* 16). In other words, even though God's salvation plan includes even people of other religions, these religions themselves (which do not believe in the saving power of Jesus Christ) do not have the power to save mankind.

6. The Second Vatican Council taught that salvation cannot be found in any other name than that of Jesus (Acts 4:12; *Ad Gentes*, 9; *Gaudium et Spes*, 10). In solemn language it declared: "This sacred Synod professes its belief that God has made known to mankind the way in which men are to serve him, and thus to be saved in Christ and come to blessedness" (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 1).

7. Faith and baptism are necessary for salvation (Mark 16:16, John 3:5), and that, since baptism is the door to the Church, the Church too is necessary. Anyone who knows that the Church is necessary has the obligation to enter it and remain in it as a condition for salvation (*Lumen Gentium*, 14).

   CCC 845: "To reunite all his children, scattered and led astray by sin, the Father willed to call the whole of humanity together into his Son's Church. The Church is the place where humanity must rediscover its unity and salvation. The Church is 'the world reconciled'. She is that bark which 'in the full sail of the Lord's cross, by the breath of the Holy Spirit, navigates safely in this world'. According to another image dear to the Church Fathers, she is prefigured by Noah's ark, which alone saves from the flood."

   CCC 846: "'Outside the Church there is no salvation.' How are we to understand this affirmation, often repeated by the Church Fathers? Re-formulated positively, it means that all salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is his Body: Basing itself on Scripture and Tradition, the Council teaches that the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church. He himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and Baptism, and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through Baptism as through a door. Hence they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or to remain in it."

   CCC 1257: "The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation. He also commands his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to baptize them. Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament. The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude; this is why she takes care not to neglect the mission she has received from the Lord to see that all who can be baptized

are 'reborn of water and the Spirit'. *God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments.*"

CCC 1277: "Baptism is birth into the new life in Christ. In accordance with the Lord's will, it is necessary for salvation, as is the Church herself, which we enter by Baptism."

8. The Second Vatican Council did, however, face the question of whether persons who have no opportunity to hear the Gospel are necessarily lost. It replied that they can be "associated with the paschal mystery" if, with the help of God's grace, they consistently strive to do God's will as it is known to them (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

   CCC 847: "This affirmation is not aimed at those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his Church: Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation."

9. But because people outside the Church fall frequently into sin and error, the Gospel and the Church could greatly help them on their way to salvation (*Lumen Gentium*, 16). For this reason, all the members of the Holy Catholic Church must continue with the sacred task of evangelisation.

   CCC 848: "Although in ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel, to that faith without which it is impossible to please him, the Church still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize all men."

10. In summary, the Holy Catholic Church acknowledges the goodness found in all religions, and the possibility of salvation for those who seek God to the best of their abilities. However, in the same breath, she affirms the effectiveness of Christ's work to save the world. In other words, we believe that if people are saved, regardless of their religious adherence, it is *Christ* who saves them. Other religions are a preparation for the Gospel of Christ; they are not the Gospel itself.

11. These days, there are Catholics who have become confused in their understanding of the Church's teaching on this matter. Instead of evangelising the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, some turn to the scriptures and practices of other religions. Many even involve themselves in the religious rites of other faiths instead of making a firm stand on the Gospel that they have embraced in Christ. There are also Catholics who seem to find attraction in quoting the words of heroes and teachers of other religions rather than the words of Christian Scripture and those of Christian saints, as if the teachers of other religions occupy an equal position in the scheme of their Catholic belief. This is unfortunate and certainly a sinful compromise of their commitment to the true God. We should never forget that the fullness of divinely revealed truth that is necessary for the salvation of mankind is found in the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

12. There are two ways that the Holy Catholic Church says we should evangelise people of other religions (including people who do not adhere to any religion). These two ways are *dialogue* and *proclamation*.

Proclamation is squarely "the communication of the Gospel message, the mystery of salvation realised by God for all in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit. It is an invitation to a commitment of faith in Jesus Christ and to entry through baptism into the community of believers which is the Church" (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 10).

Dialogue refers to "'all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment', in obedience to truth and respect for freedom. It includes both witness and the exploration of respective religious convictions" (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 9).

13. Obviously, proclamation is a more straightforward action than dialogue. But yet, the Church deems it fit that dialogue be an integral part of our evangelisation activity because we represent a God who dialogues.

    Dialogue and Proclamation, 38: "God, in an age-long dialogue, has offered and continues to offer salvation to humankind. In faithfulness to the divine initiative, the Church too must enter into a dialogue of salvation with all men and women."

14. The Church speaks of four different forms of interreligious dialogue in no particular order of priority (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 42):

    A) The *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.
    B) The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.
    C) The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values.
    D) The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.

15. Dialogue is indeed an integral part of the evangelising mission of the Church. But let us also not forget, proclamation is the "foundation, centre, and…summit" of evangelisation (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 27). To drive this point further, we can surmise that the Church would not have so emphasised the importance of proclamation as "foundation, centre, and…summit" of evangelisation if all religions were equal in revelation and truth. We can dialogue and share in order to learn, understand and respect one another. But ultimately, the truth must be spoken, and all dialogue must be at the service of truth. There must be a point at which dialogue translates into proclamation.

16. At the same time, the religious conscience of the human person must be respected, no one must be "forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience...[or] restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious" (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 3). Dialogue ensures that the graces of voluntary and willing conversion are preserved in the evangelisation efforts of the Church.

17. From this entire discussion, it is clear that unbaptised people are not necessarily condemned. And yet, Holy Mother Church continues to invite our non-Catholic neighbours to dialogue, and to ultimately proclaim among them the truth of Jesus Christ.

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