

COMMENT

'Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus'

It has been suggested that by way of supplement to and confirmation of the Comment under the above heading in the January-February number of THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT it might be useful to print the doctrinal portion of the Letter of the Congregation of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston of August 8, 1949.

This Letter is the latest authoritative pronouncement of the Holy See on the subject since the Encyclical Mystici Corporis. The Boston Letter, as it is called, was occasioned by misunderstanding, on the part of a certain group in that city, who interpreted the axiom extra ecclesiam nulla salus altogether too exclusively. The Letter was drawn up by the Cardinals of the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office in plenary session on July 28, 1949, and approved on the next day by the Holy Father. It embodies the following explanations concerning the doctrine that outside the Church there is no salvation.

WE are bound by divine and Catholic faith to believe all those things which are contained in the Word of God, whether it be Scripture or Tradition, and are proposed by the Church to be believed as divinely revealed, not only through solemn judgment but also through the ordinary and universal teaching office (Denzinger, n. 1792.)

Now, among those things which the Church has always preached and will never cease to preach is contained also that infallible statement by which we are taught that there is no salvation outside the Church.

However, this dogma must be understood in that sense in which the Church herself understands it. For, it was not to private judgments that our Saviour gave for explanation those things that are contained in the deposit of faith, but to the teaching authority of the Church.

Now, in the first place, the Church teaches that in this matter there is question of a most strict command of Jesus Christ. For he explicitly enjoined on his apostles to teach all nations to observe all things whatsoever he himself had commanded. (Matt. 28, 19-20.)

Now, among the commandments of Christ, that one holds not the least place by which we are commanded to be incorporated by Baptism into the Mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church, and to remain united to Christ and to his Vicar, through whom he himself in a visible manner governs the Church on earth.

Therefore, no one will be saved who, knowing the Church to have been divinely established by Christ, nevertheless refuses to submit to the Church or withholds obedience from the Roman Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ on Earth.

Not only did the Saviour command that all nations should enter the Church, but he also decreed the Church to be a means of salvation, without which no one can enter the kingdom of eternal glory.

In his infinite mercy God has willed that the effects, necessary for one to be saved, of those helps to salvation which are directed towards man's final end, not by intrinsic necessity, but only by divine institution, can also be obtained in certain circumstances when those helps are used only in *desire and longing*. This we see clearly stated in the sacred Council of Trent, both in reference to the sacrament of Regeneration and in reference to the sacrament of Penance. (Denzinger nn. 797, 807.)

The same in its own degree must be asserted of the Church, in as far as she is the general help to salvation. Therefore, that one may obtain eternal salvation, it is not always required that he be incorporated into the Church *actually* as a member, but it is necessary that at least he be united to her by *desire and longing*.

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

These things are clearly taught in that dogmatic letter which was issued by the sovereign Pontiff Pope Pius XII, on June 29th, 1943, 'On the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ.' (A.A.S., vol. xxxv, an. 1943, p. 193ff.) For in this letter the sovereign Pontiff clearly distinguishes between those who are *actually* incorporated into the Church as members, and those who are united to the Church only by *desire*.

Discussing the members of which the Mystical Body is composed here on earth, the same august Pontiff says: 'Actually only

those are to be included as members of the Church who have been baptized and profess the true faith, and who have not been so unfortunate as to separate themselves from the unity of the Body, or been excluded by legitimate authority for faults committed.'

Towards the end of this same Encyclical Letter, when most affectionately inviting to unity those who do not belong to the body of the Catholic Church, he mentions those who 'are related to the Mystical Body of the Redeemer by a certain unconscious yearning and desire', and these he by no means excludes from eternal salvation, but on the other hand states that they are in a condition 'in which they cannot be sure of their salvation' since 'they still remain deprived of those many heavenly gifts and helps, which can only be enjoyed in the Catholic Church'. (A.A.S. loc. cit., 243.)

With these wise words he reproves both those who exclude from eternal salvation all united to the Church *only by implicit desire*, and those who falsely assent that men can be saved equally well in every religion. (cf. Pope Pius IX, Allocution *Singulari quadam*, in Denzinger, nn. 1641, ff.—also Pope Pius IX in the Encyclical Letter *Quanto conficiamur moerore* in Denzinger, n. 1677.)

But it must not be thought that any kind of desire of entering the Church suffices that one may be saved. It is necessary that the desire by which one is related to the Church be animated by perfect charity. Nor can an implicit desire produce its effect, unless a person has supernatural faith: 'For he who comes to God must believe that God exists and is a rewarder of those who seek him' (Heb. 11, 6.) The Council of Trent declares (Sess. vi chap. 8): 'Faith is the beginning of man's salvation, the foundation and root of all justification, without which it is impossible to please God and attain to the fellowship of his children.' (Denzinger, n. 801.)

The above is the official translation. A translation of the document as a whole will be found in The Irish Ecclesiastical Record, August 1953, page 132.