

## Troubling Tradition: Wrestling with Problem Texts

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And he said to them, “Go into all the world and  
preach the gospel to the whole creation.  
He who believes and is baptized will be saved;  
but he who does not believe will be condemned” [Mark 16.15-16].

Mark ended his version of the Gospel with the silence of the women at the tomb of the Risen Christ [16.8], challenging his own community’s silence because they, too, were afraid, but in Catholic editions of the Bible – and most other editions as well – the Gospel according to Mark continues with a new, longer ending, verses 9 -20. This longer ending includes a series of three Post-Resurrectional appearances [verses 9-14] closely connected with the commissioning of the Eleven (the death of Judas had reduced the Twelve Apostles to Eleven) [verses 15-18], Jesus’ Ascension [vs 19], and the ensuing mission of the Eleven [vs 20]. This “longer ending” was, in the mind of several Church Fathers and later Biblical scholars, written and appended to Mark sometime in the second century AD, when the four Gospels were collected.

Eugene La Verdere, in his book *The Beginning of the Gospel; Introducing the Gospel of Mark*, notes that this “longer ending” was clearly not part of the original Gospel according to Mark, for had Mark written it, he “surely would have provided a smooth transition from the original ending to the new. As it is, there is no transition at all. Adapting the new ending to new circumstances, Mark would also have respected the style, the vocabulary, and the theology of his Gospel itself” [Vol 2, page 322].

There is, in fact, no literary transition from the traditional ending to the longer ending: both style and vocabulary are extremely different, as is the pastoral setting. From the world of Mark we are moved into a world facing a new set of challenges.

None of this is to say that the longer ending is non-canonical: the Council of Trent clearly defined as canonical those books of the New Testament “contained in the old Latin Vulgate edition,” which for the Gospel according to Mark included the longer ending, and thus it must be “wrestled with.”

This longer ending is apologetic in nature: it attempts to convince those who may have been wavering that their belief in the Resurrection of Christ and their mission as Christians was well founded. The apologetic nature of verses 9-20 of the final chapter of Mark seems to indicate a pastoral situation in which Christians either were questioning their own faith in the Resurrection of Christ or had to defend it against skeptics and non-believers. For such a setting, the author apparently found the original ending of Mark (16.1-8) with the women fleeing from the tomb of Christ in fear and astonishment and saying nothing to anyone, quite inadequate. The author’s interest “is pastoral, focusing not on the past but on the present and the

lack of belief among his readers” [LaVerdiere, op. cit, p 335]. His concern is the mission given originally to the Eleven and handed down by them to the Church. Pursing and fulfilling that mission depended on faith. To bolster the faith of his readers and help them respond to outsiders, the longer ending authenticates their belief and their mission.

The text under consideration is very different from the “Great Commission” which concludes the Gospel according to Matthew. There, Jesus continues to develop that commission. The focus is on the Eleven, those *who* are sent on mission. In the longer ending of Mark, the focus shifts from those who are sent to those *to whom* they are sent, those who should benefit from their being sent.

“Whoever believes,” that is, whoever is a believer and has faith, “and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe,” that is, whoever is an unbeliever and has no faith, “will be condemned.” Note the total emphasis on the absolutes of belief and unbelief and its consequences.

“Being a believer and being baptized is a condition for salvation. Someone who is an unbeliever will be condemned. Unbelievers are not simply people who have no faith. That could be no fault of their own. Unbelievers are like the Eleven, when they did not become believers after Mary Magdalene told them that Jesus was alive and been seen by her. Unbelievers are like the Eleven who did not believe two of their own number when they saw Jesus after he rose from the dead. In the context of the alternate ending, an unbeliever is someone to whom the gospel has been proclaimed by the Eleven, those who heard the Eleven and believed, or, later on, those who carried on the missionary tradition” [LaVerdiere, p350]. For those who do not believe, this mission will bring condemnation.

This is a challenging text. There are some of our fellow Christians, often vocal in their conviction that salvation is offered only to Christians, who quote this and similar texts as proof texts restricting salvation to those who make an explicit profession of faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Saint Cyprian of Carthage summarized this text and others by teaching that “outside the Church there is no salvation.” Others, then and admittedly now, narrow Cyprian’s focus even further by teaching that outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation!

Catholics should approach this text in the light of Vatican II (1962-65), which marked a new beginning in the Church’s relations with other religions. Since that time a significant shift has occurred from an attitude of tolerance at best and opposition at worst, to an attitude of positive commitment to dialogue and mutual enrichment. Similarly, Catholic theological evaluation of other religions has meandered from the disregard and rejection which sadly characterized much of our history, through a guarded acceptance and openness, to a positive assessment and the recognition of salutary values.

Father Thomas Ryan, CSP, in an article entitled “Catholic Perspectives on Interreligious Relations” (*Ecumenical Trends*, Vol 33 No 6, June 2004) correctly

notes that “in the conciliar history of the Catholic Church, Vatican II was the first to speak positively, albeit it guardedly, about the other religions. The Council of Florence in 1442 had assumed a narrow understanding of ‘outside the church, no salvation’. The Council of Trent, a century later, affirmed in its teaching on ‘baptism of desire’ the possibility of salvation for those who were outside the church. Later church documents reaffirmed such a possibility for individuals, but did not take a position on religions as such” [p 2].

But what prior church documents had affirmed cautiously as a possibility, Vatican II affirmed confidently in its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, also known as *Gaudium et Spes*: “in ways known to God’s own self, God can lead to faith those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the gospel” [7].

The same text explains that this happens through the universal working of the Spirit of God: “Christ died for all human beings, and since all human beings 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 associated, in a way known to God, with the Paschal Mystery” [22].

Other documents from the Second Vatican Council provide further development of the themes of salvation of people outside the Church, the authentic values found in non-Christians and in their Religious Traditions, the Church’s appreciation of these values and the consequent attitude which the Catholic Church takes towards these religions and their adherents. I refer in particular to *The Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, *the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*, and *The Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (Ad Gentes)*.

For example, *Nostra Aetate’s* general assessment of non-Christian religions and the attitude that the Church consequently assumes toward them is expressed in these famous words:

“The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men..... The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men” [2].

This attitude was most effectively expressed in the highly significant actions of the great interpreter of Vatican II, Pope John Paul II of Blessed Memory in his visit to the chief rabbi of Rome, in his speech to young Muslims in the stadium in Casablanca, in the gatherings of world religious leaders at Assisi, in his visit to Yad Vashem and the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, and in his visit to the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. These encounters represented a revolutionary transformation in Catholic theological

understanding, a development which is being continued by his successor, Pope Benedict XVI with his visits to the Cologne Synagogue and to the Blue Mosque in Istanbul.

However, we must admit that while *Nostra Aetate* called for dialogue with non-Christian Religions, it did not categorically refute the statement that “outside the Church, no salvation.” Just how effective for salvation is what is “true and holy” in these religions? Do adherents of these religions attain salvation outside of or within the life of their respective religions as such? Because of, or in spite of, their religions? “Although much of what the Council affirms suggests a positive answer, the question is not explicitly answered” [Ryan, op cit, p 4].

However, in a document jointly published in 1991 by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples entitled *Dialogue and Proclamation*, we read:

“Concretely, it will be 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” [29].

“Even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their Savior” - this certainly goes far beyond any previous Church document in expressing the positive role played by non-Christian religions in the salvation in Jesus Christ of their adherents. On the level of the Church’s magisterium or teaching authority there appears to be a recognition of a “participated mediation” of other religions traditions in the salvation of their adherents.

John Paul II, in his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer*, spoke of “participated mediations,” recognizing that while God’s grace is certainly one, is it visibly mediated in different ways, not only in degree but also in nature. What His Holiness clearly affirms here is that, according to our faith, while there is only one mystery of salvation in Christ, this mystery is present to human beings outside the boundaries of Christianity.

Much of Catholic theological development since Vatican II has been a response to the directive to take religious pluralism – as distinct from religious relativism – seriously as a cultural and religious fact, and to recognize the “spiritual and moral” good, of which *Nostra Aetate* spoke, found in other religions. Even the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith’s Declaration in 2000 *On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* – better known as *Dominus Jesus* – exhorted Catholic theologians to seek to understand more fully the question of “the way in which the salvific grace of God – which is always given by means of Christ in the Spirit and has a mysterious relationship to the Church – comes to individual non-Christians” [21].

“While we believe that the Church is the place of the sending of the Spirit, the Spirit is not, however, so bound to the Church, to its ministry and institutions, that its

presence and work of salvation are impaired outside of it” [Ryan, op cit, p 7]. In other words, we believe we know where the Spirit is: we do not know where the Spirit is not.

The task, then, set before Catholic theologians is to formulate a theology of a multiplicity of ways to God without compromising the uniqueness of Christ’s mediation.

For example, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published in 1994, states: “When she delves into her own mystery, the Church, the People of the 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 Testament. 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” [839]. If the Jewish covenants are *irrevocable*, then salvation is clearly possible outside the Church.

*The Catechism* similarly refers to Islam: “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” [841]. “The plan of salvation *also* includes those who acknowledge the Creator” – again, I think, a statement of the possibility of salvation outside the Church.

There is, I believe, room for a complementarity of Divine Revelation not only between the two Testaments of the Christian Bible, but also between biblical and non-biblical scriptures. The latter may contain aspects of the Divine Mystery which the Bible does not equally highlight. An example of this might be, in the Qu’ran, the sense of a human being’s submission to the holiness of God’s eternal decrees.

On the night he was elected to the Papacy as Benedict XVI, I vividly recall watching what at the time was announced as the most detailed television interview given in English by him as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Pontifical Council for the Doctrine of the Faith. In that interview he was pointedly asked how we, as Catholics, can reconcile the many post-Conciliar documents and statements from the Catechism such as those I have shared above and the Biblical verse we are examining this morning. In other words, how do we reconcile Mark’s statement that “he or she who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he or she who does not will be condemned” with the many indications in Church documents since Vatican II and the teachings of John Paul II that salvation *is* possible outside the Church? He quite clearly said, “Maybe we do not know!” And this from the Prefect of the Pontifical Council for the Doctrine of the Faith!

Wrestling with these concepts is nothing new. Saint Paul, in his Letter to the Romans 9 – 11 wrestled with God’s relationship with Israel vis-à-vis God’s relationship with the world in Jesus Christ. At the end Paul, unable to reach resolution, cedes the

issue to the mysterious ways of God and concludes that God's promise to Israel remains intact and that God has also made promises to the world through Jesus.

Catholics acknowledge truth and holiness in non-Christian religions, particularly Judaism and Islam. Just how that truth and holiness are able to save without explicit belief in Christ and Baptism in his name, "maybe we do not know," and maybe we do not have to know. What we do know is that "the Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or *religion*" [*Nostra Aetate*, 5], and thus we are called to live with our Jewish and Muslim sisters and brothers harmoniously as a people who share a common origin and common destiny.