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Man Elevated to Share in the Divine Life

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God's Universal Salvific Will



© **Dr. Lawrence Feingold STD**
Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy
Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, Archdiocese of St. Louis, Missouri

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Association of Hebrew Catholics • 4120 W Pine Blvd • Saint Louis MO 63108
www.hebrewcatholic.org • ahc@hebrewcatholic.org

God's Universal Salvific Will

Certainly one of the most consoling and beautiful teachings of the Catholic faith is God's universal salvific will. God "desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). God's universal salvific will is a simple consequence of God's love for all men. To love is to will the good for another. God so loves us that He wills for us the great good of sharing in His own beatitude and His own joy. As we read in John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

One of the most difficult and inscrutable problems regarding the Catholic faith concerns the mystery of predestination and how it can be reconciled with God's universal salvific will. Before considering the complicated and mysterious question of predestination, which we will look at in the following lecture, it is important to have a clear idea about God's universal salvific will.

Numerous texts of Scripture show that God truly wills the salvation of all men. In 1 Timothy 2:1-4, St. Paul tells Timothy that prayers should be made for all men, especially rulers, because God wills the salvation of all:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who *desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*

St. Paul then goes on to explain more fully this universal salvific will and its relation to Christ's mediation and sacrificial death of atonement: "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, *who gave himself as a ransom for all*, the testimony to which was borne at the proper time."

God's universal salvific will is manifested in the fact that Christ was born for the salvation of all, and died on the Cross "as a ransom for all." Christ's death on the Cross merited the forgiveness of all human sins, past, present, and future, because it was more pleasing to God (through the infinite charity of the offering) than all the sin of all human history was displeasing. Thus it gave more glory to God than all human sin was able to trample on His glory.

Many other texts also imply God's universal salvific will. John 3:16, like 2 Timothy 2:4, gives Christ's Passion as the proof of God's universal salvific will: "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Is there a limitation on God's universal salvific will? It can only come on the part of man who does not accept the offer of salvation or faith. As Jesus says, "whoever believes in Him will not perish," but experience shows us that not all men choose to believe. The text goes on to say that "he who does not believe is condemned already" (Jn 3:18). Therefore the fact that God wills that all be saved does not mean that all will actually be saved. For God also wills that salvation involve our free cooperation, as we saw last week when we discussed merit.

In his second Epistle, St. Peter speaks of God's universal salvific will as the motive for His forbearance. God does not immediately annihilate or judge the wicked, but gives them time to repent. This forbearance applies both to man's individual and social dimension. Not only are individuals given a time to repent that lasts until death, but also cultures and nations are given a time that lasts ultimately until the Second Coming. In 2 Peter 3:9 he writes: "The Lord is . . . forbearing toward you, *not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*"

John speaks of the universal salvific will indirectly in 1 John 2:2 when he says that Christ is the "expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."

Christ speaks of His universal salvific will in various ways. In the Sermon on the Mount, all are called to conversion and holiness: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48).

Christ also refers to God's universal salvific will in numerous parables and figures. In the parable of the sower, seed is sown everywhere. The seed is sown not only on the good soil, as a sensible farmer would do, but also on the thorny and rocky soil, and even the road! Why is the seed sown on the road? To point out the universal salvific will. No one can complain that no seed has been sown on them. The problem is not on the part of the sower, who bestows universally, but on the part of the disposition of the soil, by which it chooses to receive the seed.

Another instructive parable in this regard is that of the wedding feast in Matthew 22:1-14:

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the marriage feast; but they would not come. . . . Then he said to his servants, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find." And those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

In this parable, the universality of God's salvific will is shown by the fact that the king tells his servants to go out to the highways and invite everyone that they find. The salvific will is not limited to those first invited—such as the Chosen People—but extends to all manner of men, “both bad and good.” Many are called—an immense multitude. However, not all are chosen. This is shown to us in the detail of the man without a wedding garment.

But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment; and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?” And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, “Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.” For many are called, but few are chosen.

The wedding garment represents charity. God's salvific will extends to all, and thus all are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb. Not all correspond to the invitation, either by not showing up, or because they present themselves without the wedding garment of charity. Hence God's universal salvific will does not imply that all will necessarily be saved, for “many are called but few are chosen.” That is, some are not chosen either because, through lack of faith, hope, and charity, they choose not to enter the Catholic Church where the wedding feast of the Lamb is being celebrated, or because, even though they enter, they neglect to preserve the wedding garment of charity received at Baptism.

Christ's desire to save all, and the tragic frustration of this desire by man's abuse of free will, is also beautifully manifested in Christ's weeping over Jerusalem (Mt 23:37): “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!”

Finally, the parable of the shepherd who leaves his ninety-nine sheep to seek for the lost one beautifully illustrates the universal salvific will of the divine Pastor, who leaves nothing undone for any of His sheep (Mt 18:10–14):

See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven. What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is *not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.*

Universal Means of Salvation

To say that God wills all men to be saved necessarily implies that God also provides a universal means of salvation. If He did not provide a universal means, then He could not properly be said to will the salvation of all.

The universal means of salvation is the Incarnation and Passion of Christ, who merited grace for all men, and the institution of the Catholic Church, in which we receive the sacraments that give us a participation in Christ's life.

If we analyze this universal means of salvation, we find that it is not a simple reality, but one that involves four steps. First there is the Incarnation and Passion of Christ; secondly, the grace merited by Christ; third, the Church instituted by Christ as universal sacrament of salvation; and finally the sacraments of the Church by which the graces merited by Christ are communicated to men as through ordinary channels.

The first of these means is universal in that Christ died for all men, and merited grace sufficient for all men. In other words, the universality of God's salvific will is shown by the fact that Christ's sacrifice on Calvary has infinite merit that can never be exhausted.

The second means—the grace of Christ—is also universal in that sufficient grace is given to all men. God's universal salvific will implies that Christ died for all so as to merit the forgiveness of sins for all, and also that sufficient grace be given to everyone who comes to the age of reason so as have the possibility of salvation. God could not be said to truly have a universal salvific will if He did not give sufficient grace to be saved to all those who come to the age of reason. Thus the sufficiency of grace given to every man (at the age of reason) is as certain as the universality of God's salvific will. For this reason no one in hell could ever complain that they were not given sufficient grace for salvation.

All men are given actual grace, in the form of operative or prevenient grace. However, not all cooperate with that grace, and so not all are given cooperative grace, which would lead to justification and the infusion of sanctifying grace. It is operative grace alone that is given sufficiently to all men. This is truly sufficient, however, for all can cooperate with that grace and thus come to salvation. Operative grace is the call by which Jesus says that “many are called.” In fact, we can say that *all* those who come to the age of reason are called through operative grace.

The third universal means of salvation is the Church instituted by Christ precisely as universal, or *Catholic*. All men of every culture, race, and language are called to enter the Church, just as in the parable all were called to fill up the wedding feast of the King's son.

Finally, in the Catholic Church, there exists a fullness of the means of salvation in her seven sacraments, which are salvific means capable of touching and sanctifying every part of personal and social life.

Although the Old Covenant was not yet a universal means of salvation, the Old Testament hints at the universality of God's saving will in the prophecies that speak of the universality of the Messianic Kingdom. Israel and the

ceremonial rites of the Mosaic Law prefigured the universal salvific means that were to come in the Messianic age. This is indicated already in the promise given to Abraham that all nations were to be blessed in his seed (Gen 12:3).

The universality of God's salvific will is the central message of the book of Jonah, who is sent to preach to the Assyrians of Nineveh, the most bitter enemies of the Chosen People. Jonah does not want their salvation but rather their condemnation. Fortunately, God does not share the view of Jonah, to whom He says (Jonah 4:11): "And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left?" God's care for the souls of Nineveh here is clearly a figure of his care for all men.

The Fathers and Doctors on the Universal Salvific Will

Let us look now at the development of the Church's understanding of God's universal salvific will. The Fathers of the Church speak of it in many texts, but nevertheless they sometimes experienced difficulty in reconciling God's universal salvific will with the fact that not all are saved. How can God truly will all men to be saved, if not all are in fact saved?

The Patristic answer is that God wills all to be saved, but in a manner fitting for a free creature. Thus God's universal salvific will does not imply universal salvation, but makes that salvation dependent on man's cooperation with God's grace, given sufficiently to all. St. John Chrysostom says:

God never compels anyone by necessity and force, but He wills that all be saved, yet does not force anyone. . . . How then are not all saved if he wills all to be saved? Because not everyone's will follows His will. He compels no one.¹

St. Ambrose compares Christ to a physician:

For He saw that those who suffered could not be saved without a remedy, and so He provided medicine for the sick. He gave the means of health to all precisely in order that whosoever perishes should attribute the causes of his death to himself, he who was unwilling to be cured although he had the remedy by which he could escape. Let the manifest mercy of Christ to all be proclaimed: for those who perish, perish by their own negligence; but those who are saved, are delivered according to the sentence of Christ, 'who wills all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.'²

In some texts St. Augustine also speaks in this way. For example, he says that "'God wills all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth;' but He does not [will it] in such a way as to take free will from them, by the good or bad use of which they may be judged most justly."³ In other texts, however, St. Augustine seems to

limit the universal salvific will, supposing that it simply means that God wills to bring some men of all social conditions and cultures to salvation.⁴ This, however, was not the consensus of the Fathers. Tragically, it would be followed by the leaders of the Reformation.

The true solution was given later with clarity by St. John Damascene, who distinguishes between two senses of God's salvific will: antecedent and consequent. God's antecedent will is His will to save us, abstracting from our actual condition of resistance to His grace. God's consequent will takes our actual resistance or cooperation into account.

In human willing, a consequent will is said to be one that follows on deliberation or consideration of concrete circumstances, whereas an antecedent will is one that is prior to or abstracts from a consideration of concrete circumstances. For example, a merchant traveling by boat with his merchandise has an antecedent will that his goods not be thrown overboard, but in the midst of a terrible tempest, he may (consequently) will that his goods be thrown overboard to lighten the ship so as to save his life.

Similarly, a judge may have an antecedent will that a given man live in peace, but after his guilt has been revealed by trial and conviction, he may consequently desire that the man be executed. The consequent will takes concrete circumstances into account, from which the antecedent will abstracts.

St. John Damascene applied this distinction to explain how God's universal salvific will should be understood:

It is necessary to realize that God *antecedently* wishes all to be saved and to partake of his kingdom. For he did not make us to punish us but, since he is good, that we may be sharers of his goodness. However he wishes sinners to be punished since he is just. Therefore the first, antecedent will is called also good pleasure, being from him. But the second, *consequent* will is also called permission, *having its origin from us*.⁵

St. Thomas followed St. John Damascene in this interpretation. In *ST I*, q. 19, a. 6, ad 1, St. Thomas poses the question whether God's will is always realized. He argues for an affirmative answer on account of His omnipotence. However, a powerful objection is based on God's universal salvific will:

It seems that the will of God is not always fulfilled. For the Apostle says (1 Tim. 2:4): "God will have all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth." But this does not happen. Therefore the will of God is not always fulfilled.

St. Thomas responds by saying that the text of St. Paul can be understood in three ways. The third interpretation

1 St. John Chrysostom, *Homilia de ferendis reprehensionibus* 6; PG 51:144.

2 St. Ambrose, *De Cain et Abel* 2.3.11; PL 14:364–65.

3 St. Augustine, *De spiritu et littera* 33.58; PL 44:238.

4 St. Augustine, *Enchiridion* 103, PL 40:280.

5 *On the Orthodox Faith*, 2.29 (PG 94, 968). Damascene says that this will has its origin from us in that God's consequent will takes into account man's free and obstinate resistance to grace until the end.

involves the distinction of God's antecedent and consequent will:

According to Damascene (*De fide orthodoxa* 2.29), they are understood of the antecedent will of God; not of the consequent will. This distinction must not be taken as applying to the divine will itself, in which there is nothing antecedent nor consequent, but to the things willed. To understand this we must consider that everything, in so far as it is good, is willed by God. A thing taken in its primary sense, and absolutely considered, may be good or evil, and yet when some additional circumstances are taken into account, by a consequent consideration may be changed into the contrary. Thus that a man should live is good; and that a man should be killed is evil, absolutely considered. But if in a particular case we add that a man is a murderer or dangerous to society, to kill him is a good; that he live is an evil. Hence it may be said of a just judge, that antecedently he wills all men to live; but consequently wills the murderer to be hanged. In the same way God antecedently wills all men to be saved, but consequently wills some to be damned, as His justice exacts. Nor do we will simply, what we will antecedently, but rather we will it in a qualified manner; for the will is directed to things as they are in themselves, and in themselves they exist under particular qualifications. Hence we will a thing simply inasmuch as we will it when all particular circumstances are considered; and this is what is meant by willing consequently. Thus it may be said that a just judge wills simply the hanging of a murderer, but in a qualified manner he would will him to live, to wit, inasmuch as he is a man. Such a qualified will may be called a willingness rather than an absolute will. Thus it is clear that whatever God simply wills takes place; although what He wills antecedently may not take place.

In other words, God wills all men to be saved and prepares for them a series of graces sufficient (and in fact, superabundant) to bring them to salvation. He leaves us free will, however, by which we may correspond with His grace or freely impede it by resisting the movements of His actual grace. His consequent will takes man's correspondence and resistance to His grace into account.

Denial of the Universal Salvific Will at the Reformation

At the time of the Reformation, Luther and Calvin ended up breaking with the earlier consensus and effectively denying the universality of God's salvific will. The root cause of this rejection lay in a denial of fallen man's free will to cooperate with grace. If man cannot of himself freely choose to cooperate with or resist grace, then the entire work of salvation will rest with God alone, who either chooses to give intrinsically efficacious or irresistible grace, or (inexplicably) chooses to withhold such a grace. In his work, *Bondage of the Will*, written against Erasmus who defended free will, Luther argued that the *human will cannot resist the interior influence either of God or of Satan*. If God moves our will interiorly by His

grace, we cannot resist it. How then is sin possible? Luther replies that God does not always so move our will with His irresistible grace. And if God does not move it, it is moved by another mover: the prince of this world, Satan:

In a word: if we are under the god of this world, strangers to the work of God's Spirit, we are led captive by him at his will, as Paul said to Timothy (2 Tim 2:26), so that we cannot will anything but what he wills. For he is a "strong man armed," who keeps his palace to such good effect that those he holds are at peace, and raise no stir or feeling against him. . . . So man's will is like a beast standing between two riders. If God rides, it wills and goes where God wills: as the Psalm says, "I am become as a beast before thee, and I am ever with thee" (Ps 73:22-23). If Satan rides, it wills and goes where Satan wills. Nor may it choose to which rider it will run, or which it will seek; but the riders themselves fight to decide who shall have and hold it.⁶

Luther applies this doctrine even to the sin of Cain, which God (Gen 4:7) said was in his power to resist (or rule over): "As I said, by statements of this sort, man is shown, not what he can do, but what he ought to do. Cain is therefore told that he ought to rule over his sin, and keep its desires under his control. But this he neither did nor could do, for the rule of another, Satan, already bore heavily upon him."⁷

In other words, the Christian combat is not a combat of the free will of each man by which he cooperates with grace or resists it, succumbing to the temptations of the Enemy. Rather Luther pictures it in this text as a combat exclusively between Christ and Satan. But if Satan is allowed to ride a man to the end, how can such a man have a true possibility of salvation? A necessary consequence of this way of considering the Christian life will be that God has predestined some to hell, as we shall see next week.

John Calvin came to the same basic conclusions. Instead of a universal salvific will manifested by the Passion of Christ atoning for all sins, the doctrine was formulated of limited atonement and a limited effective calling, implying double predestination (some to heaven and others to hell). Limited atonement is the idea that Christ's Passion was not intended to atone for the sins of all men, but only for the sins of the elect. A consequence of this would be that not all men are truly or effectively called to be saved, but only the elect.⁸

⁶ *On the Bondage of the Will: A New Translation of De Servo Arbitrio (1525); Martin Luther's Reply to Erasmus of Rotterdam*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (London: James Clarke & Co, 1957), 103–4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁸ This doctrine is formulated in chapter 10 of the Westminster Confession: "All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed time, effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ."

Denial of the Universal Salvific Will by Jansenism

The Calvinist position on limited atonement and double predestination was introduced within the Catholic Church by the Jansenists. The key error of Jansenius was his denial that sufficient grace is given to all men, and his affirmation that interior grace is irresistible. Like Luther and Calvin, Jansenists viewed all grace as intrinsically efficacious, and held that God does not give this grace to all men, but only to those predestined to salvation. The reprobate simply do not receive the graces necessary for salvation.

The following five positions of Jansenius were infallibly condemned by Innocent X in 1653⁹:

1. Some of God's commandments are impossible to the just, who wish and strive to keep them, according to the powers they actually have; the grace by which these precepts may become possible is also wanting.
2. In the state of fallen nature no one ever resists interior grace;
3. To merit, or demerit, in the state of fallen nature we must be free from all external constraint, but not from interior necessity.
4. The Semipelagians admitted the necessity of a prevenient interior grace for each act, even for the beginning of faith; and in this they were heretics, because they wished this grace to be such that the human will could either resist or obey.
5. To say that Christ died or shed His blood for all men, is Semipelagianism. Declared and condemned as false . . . and understood in this sense, that Christ died for the salvation of the predestined, impious, blasphemous, . . . dishonoring to divine piety, and heretical.

For Jansenius and the Jansenists, Christ did not die for all men, but only for the predestined! Obviously such an opinion is supremely injurious to the mercy of God manifested in Christ's Passion. Indeed, Christ died for all men, and sufficient grace merited by the Passion is given to all who reach the age of reason. However, not all men freely cooperate with the graces merited by Christ's Passion so as to be justified and saved.

Real Possibility of Salvation for All

It is theologically certain that sufficient grace to be saved is given to everyone who comes to the age of reason. This is implied in the condemnation of Jansenius (following Luther and Calvin), who denied that sufficient grace is given to those not predestined.

Catholic doctrine on this point is expressed in the axiom that God does not command the impossible, but is ready to aid us with his grace if we seek His help through prayer.

⁹ Constitution *Cum occasione*, May 31, 1658, in Denzinger 1092–96 (DS 2001–5).

The Council of Trent quotes St. Augustine who says: "For God does not command the impossible, but when He commands He admonishes you to do what you can and to pray for what you cannot do." Sufficient grace is given to all, but not all cooperate with the grace received. Therefore, every person who attains the age of reason has the real possibility of salvation through cooperation with the sufficient grace that is available to him. It could not be truly said that God desires the salvation of all if He did not give sufficient grace to all.

This raises the question of how this sufficient grace makes salvation possible for those who were never given a sufficient opportunity to know Christ, the Church, and the sacraments. In other words, how is salvation possible for those outside the visible Church through no fault of their own, and how is this compatible with the principle: *no salvation outside the Church?*

Lumen gentium 14 explains how this principle should be understood:

Basing itself upon Sacred Scripture and Tradition, [this sacred synod] teaches that the Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is *necessary for salvation*. Christ, present to us in His Body, which is the Church, is the one Mediator and the unique way of salvation. In explicit terms He 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.*

All men are called to the Church and all salvation comes from the redemptive sacrifice of Christ made present to us in the Church through her sacraments. This is true above all in the Eucharist, which renews on our altars that one sacrifice from which all grace flows.

Although the Church is necessary for salvation, unbelievers are not aware of this, sometimes through no fault of their own. There can still be salvation for those who remain outside the Catholic Church due to invincible ignorance (ignorance through no fault of their own), but not for those who are aware of the obligation but still refuse to enter, through causes such as prejudice, fear of worldly disadvantage or suffering, or ignorance that is culpable for not searching sufficiently for the truth about God.

Bl. Pius IX teaches that "it is necessary to hold for certain that they who labor in ignorance of the true religion, if this ignorance is invincible, are not stained by any guilt in this matter in the eyes of God. Now, in truth, who would arrogate so much to himself as to mark the limits of such an ignorance, because of the nature and variety of peoples, regions, innate dispositions, and of so many other things?"¹⁰

¹⁰ Pius IX, *Singulari quadam*, 1854, D 1647.

Lumen gentium 16 develops this doctrine:

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. 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.¹¹

The number of people who are saved in this way is “known only to God,” as stated in the Creed of the People of God, promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1968:

We believe that the Church is necessary for salvation, because Christ, who is the sole mediator and way of salvation, renders Himself present for us in His body which is the Church. But the divine design of salvation embraces all men, and those who without fault on their part do not know the Gospel of Christ and His Church, but seek God sincerely, and under the influence of grace endeavor to do His will as recognized through the promptings of their conscience, they, in a number known only to God, can obtain salvation.¹²

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1260, explains the possibility of salvation for those with an implicit desire for Baptism:

“Since Christ died for all, and since all men 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 partakers, in a way known to God, of the Paschal mystery.”¹³ Every man who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved. It may be supposed that such persons would have desired Baptism explicitly if they had known its necessity.

In other words, the Church specifies that in order to 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.”¹⁴

This desire can be either explicit or implicit. An explicit desire to enter the Church presupposes knowledge of revelation and faith in the Church as the ark of salvation willed

by God. This is the condition of catechumens. However, there can be a true *implicit* desire to enter the Church even among those who are not aware that God has instituted the Catholic Church as the ark of salvation.

In 1949, the Holy Office (predecessor of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) wrote an important letter to the Bishop of Boston on this issue of salvation outside the Church. A priest of that diocese, Fr. Leonard Feeney, held a rigorist view on salvation outside the Church. The Holy Office affirmed the possibility of salvation for those outside the Church who have invincible ignorance and a true and efficacious desire to follow God's will for their salvation. Such a desire would implicitly include a desire to enter the Church, if they knew it was the ark of salvation.

The Letter defines this implicit salvific desire as follows:

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.

However, the Letter adds: “It must not be imagined that any desire whatsoever of entering the Church is sufficient for a person to be saved. It is necessary that the desire by which one is related to the Church be informed with perfect charity. And an implicit desire cannot have its effect unless one has supernatural faith.”¹⁵ The document here quotes Hebrews 11:6: “Without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

God grants sufficient grace to all men to begin and to sustain the process of conversion and sanctification, but not all choose to cooperate with the sufficient grace they receive. It is important, however, to note the conditions that are necessary for someone to be saved outside the visible body of the Church. There must be *invincible ignorance, which excludes religious indifferentism or grave negligence; there must be the sincere desire to do the will of God as known by conscience; there must be supernatural acts of faith, hope, and charity; and there must be perfect contrition for grave sins.*

It must be borne in mind, however, that the situation of those who are outside the Church through invincible ignorance is not an enviable one, for they are lacking the fullness of the means of salvation that are present only in the Catholic Church. Pius XII addresses such persons in his encyclical on the Church, *Mystici corporis*:

They who do not belong to the visible bond of the Catholic Church... [we ask them to] strive to take themselves from that state in which they cannot be sure of their own eternal salvation; for even though they are ordered to the mystical body of the Redeemer by a certain desire and wish of which they are not aware [implicit in the general wish to do what

11 It should be observed that *LG* states that these people who are in invincible ignorance can only be saved through the aid of God's grace, from which flow faith, hope, and charity, and perfect contrition for their sins.

12 The doctrine also Pius XII, *Mystici corporis* (1943: DS 3821): “They who do not belong to the visible bond of the Catholic Church... [we ask them to] strive to take themselves from that state in which they cannot be sure of their own eternal salvation; for even though they are ordered to the mystical body of the Redeemer by a certain desire and wish of which they are not aware [implicit in the general wish to do what God wills], yet they lack so many and so great heavenly gifts and helps which can be enjoyed only in the Catholic Church.”

13 *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

14 Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston, of August 8, 1949.

15 Letter of August 8, 1949.

God wills], yet they lack so many and so great heavenly gifts and helps which can be enjoyed only in the Catholic Church.

Generally, it is very difficult to know with moral certainty whether a person has invincible ignorance, for who can claim to have no culpable negligence or prejudice impeding their search for truth? Only God knows.

Furthermore, even though following an erring conscience through invincible ignorance excuses one from culpability, it is still a tragic state of affairs, for it blocks one from achieving the full good that one could have achieved if one hadn't been ignorant. For example, it is possible for an Orthodox Jew, Muslim, or Protestant today to be invincibly ignorant that Catholicism is the true religion, and thus his lack of Catholic worship is not culpable. Such a person, if he also has faith, hope, charity, and perfect contrition for sins, can be in a state of grace. However, invincible ignorance is still a misfortune, for such persons are not able to know the full truth about Christ and His Church, and thus attain to the full sacramental channels of grace.