

The Chinese Catholic Church and Christ's Saving Grace

by A. B. Chang, S.J.

translated by Peter Barry, M.M.

In the midst of many calls for unity and reconciliation, it seemed advisable to write an article to try to root out some negative theories which are unconsciously propagated in the Catholic Church on mainland China. This article also means to emphasize the Chinese Church's mission as a sacrament of salvation. Its source is the documents of Vatican Council II and the words of Popes who have reigned after it.



1 "Outside the church there is no salvation"

The Second Vatican Council through various means has already affirmed that God's saving grace in Jesus Christ is really available to adherents of other religions and to people of no faith. The Council even declared:

Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of their own, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all people that they may at length have life." (*The Church*, no. 16)

How this is done concretely is really a mystery of God's love. (*Modern World*, no. 22) Although the Christian religion in China is faced with a population of over one billion souls the words of the Second Vatican Council still apply:

We must still hold that the Holy Spirit in a way known only to God offers to all the possibility of being made partners in the paschal mystery. (*Modern World*, no 22)

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Very often, deceived by the Evil One, people have become vain in their reasonings, have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and have served the world rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:21 and 25). Or else, living and dying in this world without God, they are exposed to ultimate despair. (*The Church*, no. 16)

This is said, however, not to pass judgment on the obtaining of salvation by individual persons, since this is in the hands of God, (cf. 1 Cor. 4:1-5) but rather to promote the cause of preaching the Gospel to all the nations.

It follows then that any fundamentalist explanation of "Outside the church there is no salvation" is completely unacceptable. The Second Vatican Council did teach, however,

Based on scripture and tradition, the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation." (*The Church*, no. 14)

Therefore all those who are saved must through various means be aligned with the Church. (*The Church*, no. 16) For the Church is "for each and everyone the visible sacrament of this saving unity." (*The Church*, no. 9) To determine and explain "the various means of alignment with the Church" is the task of theologians. In principle, everyone's deliberations begin with the universal nature of salvation in Christ and the necessity for entrance into the Church. This is because:

The one mediator and way to salvation is Christ; he is present to us in his body which is the Church...He thereby at the same time affirmed the necessity of the Church..." (*The Church*, no. 14)

I am certainly not unaware of the opinions of various theologians concerning the doctrine "Christ is the only mediator of salvation." However, the teaching of Pope John Paul II is quite clear:

No one, therefore, can enter into communion with God except through Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit. Christ's one, universal mediation...is a fact of which Christians are fully aware. Although participated forms of mediation of different kinds and degrees are not excluded, they acquire meaning and value *only* from Christ's own mediation, and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to his." (*Redemptoris Missio*, no. 5)

This should be considered the outer limit for theological reflection.

Returning to our question, we can, on the one hand, reject the traditional notion of "Outside the Church there is no salvation," however, on the other hand, we must still acknowledge the necessity of the pilgrim Church for salvation.

II. The Significance for salvation of the Catholic Church in China

This section of my article is more closely related to the problems of the Chinese Catholic Church. In the interests of clarity, I will divide this section into three parts.

1. The Catholic Church and its necessity for salvation:

The Second Vatican Council has said this about the one Church of Christ:

This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. (*The Church*, no. 8)

Fully incorporated into the Church are those who, possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept all the means of salvation given to the Church together with her entire organization, and who—by the bonds constituted by the profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesiastical government, and communion—are joined to the visible structure of the Church of Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops." (*The Church*, no. 14)

This Catholic Church is necessary for salvation.

The Council's description of the essential features of the Catholic Church is very rich. It is not necessary to spell out the different categories here. Suffice it to say that some are visible, like systems and structures, and some are spiritual, like the Spirit of Christ. For this reason, regarding the necessity of the Church for salvation, Vatican II said,

Those 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. (*The Church*, no. 14)

In the same paragraph, the Vatican document added,

Even though incorporated into the Church, one who does not persevere in charity, that is, one who is in the Church 'in body' but not 'in heart,' can still not be saved. (*The Church* no. 14)

Here we can observe in passing that while salvation is a matter for the individual person, Christ is the only saviour.

All children of the Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results, not from their own merits, but from the grace of Christ. If they fail to respond in thought, word and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be more severely judged." (*The Church* no. 14)

I have already discussed the structure and system of the official church in mainland China.¹ The problems discussed and the questions raised regarding them have already been answered.² Neither had any direct connection with personal salvation. At this point we can take the discussion to another level.

2. Vatican II's affirmation of other Christian denominations: The attitude of the Catholic Church of the 20th century towards other Christian denominations is completely different from that of the past when division was clear and undeviating. The time of hurling denunciations like, "deserving of excommunication," or "punished by excommunication," are long gone. The negative aspects found in the above passage about the necessity of the Catholic Church for salvation, are clearly not aimed at the other Christian communions, because they do not "know that the Catholic Church was founded by God through Christ as the necessary way of salva-

tion..." (*The Church* no. 14). On the contrary, the Council affirmed that the Catholic Church has so many things in common with them, like the Bible, Baptism and other sacraments.

These Christians are indeed in some real way joined to us in the Holy Spirit for, by his gifts and graces, his sanctifying power is also active in them and he has strengthened some of them even to the shedding of their blood." (*The Church*, no. 15)

In the final analysis, Jesus Christ, the only mediator and way of salvation, also resides in them, sanctifying them through various kinds of graces and incorporating them into his own mission. Therefore all belong to the Church of Christ, even though errors exist among them to varying degrees.

3. The significance of salvation in the Chinese Catholic Church: This section must necessarily touch upon very complicated problems. In order to avoid confusion, we will discuss the matter, all of which has to do with salvation in Jesus Christ, under three headings: (1) one Chinese Catholic Church, (2) divisions in the Chinese Catholic Church, and (3) the unity of the Chinese Catholic Church.

(i) **One Chinese Catholic Church:** This is something that cannot be denied. First of all, when the Holy Father, exercising his primacy, speaks to the Chinese Catholic Church, he does so in just that way: *to the Chinese Catholic Church*, although he clearly knows that internally this Church is still in need of reconciliation and unity. This is an internal unity; it is not like the unity sought in "ecumenism." Secondly, the difficulties that remain are just due to the fact that everyone belongs to the one Chinese Catholic Church; otherwise it would not be necessary to be in a state of confrontation. Finally, the government in its dealings always aims at only one Catholic Church. This affirms, in continuity with the first part of this section, that the Chinese Catholic Church possesses, in common with the universal Catholic Church, the essential elements of the Church, including being necessary for salvation. By entering the one Church, all China's Catholics obtain the salvation of Christ: in faith, they share the common liturgical experience of salvation and participate in the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Also they jointly strive to acknowledge that they all belong to the same organization for salvation in Christ. Actually, the Council clearly pointed out that those

who belong to the Church must strictly observe charity; otherwise they cannot be saved. (*The Church*, no. 15) Only in charity can the one Chinese Catholic Church commonly offer thanks to the heavenly Father for his plan of salvation.

(ii) **Divisions in the Chinese Catholic Church:** The divisions in the Chinese Catholic Church are found in the structures and system of the official church. These involve the basic elements of the Church. Everyone is also aware that this is the result of the State's religious policy. What does this have to do with salvation in Christ? In giving the answer it is best to make distinctions.

First of all, most Catholics know that the Church is necessary for salvation, and so they enthusiastically enter it. But they are blissfully unaware of the structures and organization of the official Church to which they belong. They are even more ignorant of what effect, if any, these structures will have on their salvation in Christ. Practically speaking we can say that these structures do not have any effect on their life of salvation.

Secondly, the Catholics, at the leadership level of the official Church, should know that the structures and organization are not completely in conformity with the principles of the universal Catholic Church. It can generally be said that, existing within this system and organization, while they may be "aware," it is difficult to say that they are consciously "at fault." Therefore they continue to participate the Catholic Church. Although their communion is not complete, it is difficult to judge how much this effects their life of salvation. Generally speaking, there are also pastoral reasons behind their "offense." But these have already become matters for their conscience, and there is no need for outsiders to speculate about them.

This is not to say that the system and structures of the Catholic Church passed on to us from the apostles are not important. Rather it is to point out that the divisions within the Chinese Catholic Church do not have any great effect on this Church's meaning for salvation. A Catholic Church should maintain charity among its members and thus experience salvation. Speaking from the point of view of salvation, even the unofficial Church should not find this hard to accept.

(iii) **Unity in the Chinese Catholic Church:** As stated above, the "unity" we speak of here is not the same as the unity in "ecumenism." Rather it has its own characteristics. Besides the system and structures of the official Church, there are also many other factors: historical, personal and psychological. This writer has already written an article on the appeals of the Holy Father.³ Following the train of thought of this essay, the author would urge the Chinese Catholic Church to place more emphasis on the salvation they possess in common in the one mediator Jesus Christ, the action of the Holy Spirit, and the communal sharing of the experience of salvation. The apostle Paul based his appeal for unity in the Church of Ephesus on the heavenly call the Ephesian Christians received from God. (Eph. 4: 1-6) This is a worthy motivation for the Chinese Catholic Church to solve together its problems of systems and structures. Paul placed bodily structures after spiritual unity (Eph. 4: 1-16). No matter what, doing away with negative arguments and acknowledging the grace of the one saving Lord has a firmer basis in faith. While it is true that love is based on truth, love also has its own self-generating power which searches for and upholds truth.

III. The Church is the Sacrament of Christ's salvation

A "sacrament" is truly both a symbol and an effective sign. The Church not only experiences Christ's saving grace, but she also witnesses to it and distributes it; she preaches it and accomplishes it. Each aspect of the Church is a sign and a symbol.

Even though the Chinese Catholic Church is in a situation of "poverty" both internally and externally, it is still not difficult to discover Christian salvation through the Holy Spirit within it. In Jesus' sermon at Nazareth (cf. Luke 4: 16-20) she too has heard the Good News being preached to her. This is the Good News of the justice, love, peace and communion bestowed by our heavenly Father. Through the Holy Spirit the dead and resurrected Christ continues to give the Chinese Catholic Church liberation, light, freedom and grace. This is to experience the salvation of Christ. It is also the universal Catholic Church's experience. This common experience "would enable Chinese Catholics to live their faith fully inserted into the communion of the whole Church as she approaches the Great Jubilee."⁴ This is the hope of Our Holy Father Pope John Paul II for

this year: in a spirit of communion to seek that the Chinese Catholic Church be completely accepted into the structure of the universal Catholic Church.

As the sacrament of salvation, the Chinese Catholic Church should have the capability to become the light of the world and to function as the salt of the earth. Although in such a large country as China, she is just a "little flock," Jesus speaks to her and says: "Do not be afraid; it has pleased my Father to give you the kingdom of heaven." (Luke 12: 31) The "kingdom of heaven" is nothing other than the Good News of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. This is just what countless Chinese people in the deepest recesses of their hearts are really longing for. When the Chinese Catholic Church overcomes its internal difficulties and steps out into the outside world, its prospects could be bright, even though the road may be long and arduous. A Chinese Catholic Church full of God's saving grace would gain the recognition of society and the nation's respect. It would even change everyone's impression of Christianity.

Perhaps in the view of sociologists this is just a pipedream. But should the Church of Christ completely conform to the standards of sociology?

Endnotes

¹ *Tripod*, no. 89, Chinese section, pp. 4-14.

² *Tripod*, no. 99, Chinese section, p. 6.

³ *Tripod*, no. 99, "Pope John Paul II and the Unity of the Catholic Church in China," Chinese section, pp. 4-13.

⁴ The address of Pope John Paul II to the diplomats accredited to the Holy See, January 10, 1998.

