

Why should Catholic schools teach about religions of the world?

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Abstract

On the part of Catholic educators there is often difficulty in articulating not only the stance taken by the Church in regard to religions other than Christianity, but also their own stance. Some of this difficulty in articulation centers on the extent to which the Church recognizes other religions as capable of mediating salvation to their adherents. With unanswered questions in their own minds, and perhaps fearful of questions from students which they may not be able to answer, Catholic teachers can be tempted to leave a study of world religions out of their religious education curriculum. This is regrettable not only from educational and sociological standpoints, but also from a theological one. In this paper I argue that the theological position taken by the Catholic Church to other religions, not only allows but encourages their study in a Catholic school.

Introduction

The fact that inter-faith education is a necessary part of Catholic education, can be demonstrated on many grounds, including theological, sociological and educational. In the multicultural, multi-faith community of today's Catholic classrooms, it is difficult to dismiss education about other religions on sociological or educational grounds. However, many Catholic teachers may not be able to argue for their teaching about other religions on theological grounds, even though this is a particularly rich area for theological consideration. Indeed it is all too easy for some to argue against inter-faith education in Catholic schools, on the basis of the mistaken premise that the Catholic Church adopts an exclusivist approach to salvation, and categorically states that **actual** membership of the Catholic Church is necessary for salvation. This position denies the spiritual riches of other religions and is not in keeping with contemporary Catholic interpretations,

particularly as given in papal statements. This paper seeks to set out the contemporary Catholic theological position on salvific potential of other religions, with an eye to the educational implications of this. In the historical analysis I am deeply indebted to Francis Sullivan's (1992) *Salvation Outside the Church?* surely the classic text in the field. Acknowledging this debt, I claim that the argument that the Church adopts an exclusivist approach to other religions cannot be cited in defense of leaving a study of world religions out of the Catholic religious education curriculum.

A Catholic theory of salvation in relation to other religions

The Fathers of the Church

The axiom of “no salvation outside the Church” was promoted during the patristic period, which is generally claimed to have ended with the Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381). In these first three centuries when Christians were still facing persecution, the anathema was directed to those Christians who had formed or joined schismatic, heretical cults. These were believed to be guilty of the greatest sin of all, that against Christian love and the unity of the Church (Sullivan, 1992).

From 311 the respective edicts of the emperors, Galerius (311) and Constantine (313) ended Christian persecution, by the end of the fourth century most of the Roman empire was Christian, and the Emperor Theodosius, (379-395) ruled that Christianity was the official religion of the Empire. In this context of a solidly established Church, it was assumed that the whole of the inhabited world would hear the gospel, and that every human being would be brought into contact with the Christian message. At this time, Christian writers began to apply the axiom, “no salvation outside the Church” to

“pagans” and Jews, for it was assumed that all had the advantage of hearing the gospel and those who rejected it were guilty of refusing God’s offer of salvation (Sullivan, 1992). Ambrose, bishop of Milan (340-397), Gregory of Nyssa (335-394) and St John Chrysostom (349-407) were among the prominent Church fathers who advanced this view.

Throughout this period, however, there was a central belief in God’s will for the salvation of all. Schismatic Christians were seen as guilty of sinning against Church unity, and so had exempted themselves from salvation. Jews and pagans living in a time when Christianity was widespread, were believed to have been offered salvation through the gospel, and to be aware of the necessity of the Church for salvation. Those who rejected the Church were therefore deemed to have rejected the salvation offered by God (Sullivan, 1992).

St Augustine

St Augustine also held that schismatics and heretics they were guilty of sinning against Christian charity and so, without repentance and a return to the Church, could not be saved. Indeed, according to Augustine, even martyrdom in the name of Christ would not save a schismatic Christian from damnation¹. Augustine held little hope of salvation for any Christian outside the Catholic Church, even if he or she were born into a heretical sect and were neither a founder nor originator of it (Sullivan, 1992). In addition, Augustine assumed that those who had heard the gospel and had rejected it had misused their free will and would be denied salvation. Soon, however, Augustine became aware that there were large areas of the world that had not been explored, and therefore numbers

of people to whom the gospel had not yet been preached. This led Augustine to the question whether God really did want all to be saved, and he concluded that those who are saved are saved because God has willed it. “In those he condemns we see what is due to all, so that those he delivers may thence learn what dire penalty was relaxed into their regard and what under grace was given them”.² With some exceptions, Augustine’s followers supported his views with Fulgentius of Ruspe (468-) Augustine’s disciple making the statement much quoted in relation to this, which was to be incorporated into a decree of the Council of Florence in 1442 (Sullivan, 1992).

The Middle Ages

Augustine’s view’s were not accepted by the universal Church. His teaching that God did not indeed will the salvation of all was formally refuted by a local council called by Hincmar, archbishop of Reims³ (Sullivan, 1992). This council affirmed that God willed the salvation of all, for Jesus Christ had assumed the nature of all people. Those who did not choose to believe and to accept the gift of salvation brought about their own damnation.

Subsequently this was affirmed by the fourth Lateran Council (1215). The first canon of this Council declared: “There is one Universal Church of the faithful, outside of which there is absolutely no salvation.”⁴ In a development of this, Thomas Aquinas explained that there could be no salvation outside the Church because it was only in the Church that the faith and sacraments necessary for attaining salvation were to be found. However Aquinas argued that faith in Christ could be implied in faith in God, for all of the articles of faith, he claimed, were held in the one verse of the New Testament: “*And*

without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb 11:6)

In some cases this implied faith would suffice for salvation, although normally explicit faith in God and in Christ were necessary. This principle led to questions about for whom and under what circumstances implicit faith would suffice. Certainly it would suffice for Gentiles who had died before the coming of Christ, and for Gentiles who believed in God but had not heard the gospel. Because God wills the salvation of all, Aquinas taught, God would provide the means by which the gospel could be heard. Once the gospel had been preached, “all both the learned and the simple, are bound to have explicit faith in the mysteries of Christ...such as those which refer to the mystery of the incarnation”.⁵ Aquinas’ teaching in this area can be summed up in three points. First, although belief in Christ is necessary for salvation, faith in Christ may be implicitly contained in faith in God as described in Hebrews 11: 6. Second there was the possibility of baptism by desire when the sacrament could not be received in reality, and third Aquinas taught that salvation may be awarded through a person’s first moral decision, for, if ordered to goodness, this was capable of cancelling original sin.

The mediaeval world view, that all people had had the opportunity of hearing about Christ, was to be challenged by the discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Before this however, the *Decree for the Jacobites* of the Council of Florence (1431-1445), contained the following:

The Holy, Roman Church firmly believes, professes and preaches that all those who are outside the Catholic church, not only pagans but also Jews or heretics and schismatics, cannot share in eternal life and will 'go into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels', unless they are joined to the Catholic Church before the end of their lives. ⁶

The decree needs to be understood in light of what was then the common belief, that all pagans, Jews, heretics and schismatics were guilty of infidelity, since they had refused either to accept the true faith or to remain faithful to it. This followed St Thomas who had distinguished three kind of sinful unbelief: that of pagans, that of Jews, and that of Christian heretics and schismatics.

The discovery of the new world

Fifty years after the *Decree for the Jacobites* Columbus discovered America, and proved that the world was not co-extensive with Christendom. Now Christian thinkers were confronted with whether they could continue to judge all pagans as culpably unbelievers, when there were countless people who had had no opportunity or hear the gospel. Furthermore they were challenged to reconcile their belief in God's will for universal salvation, with the apparent fact that God had denied these countless people any possibility of becoming members of the Church, outside of which they could not be saved. Spanish Dominicans were among the first to face these questions, seeking to reconcile St. Thomas's teaching of no salvation outside the Church with their belief in the universal salvific will of God. Francisco de Vitorio (1493-1546) argued that for someone to be guilty of rejecting faith, the faith had to be put convincingly and persuasively with "propriety and piety"⁷ not, as the Spanish conquistadores had done, with hatred and scandalous behavior. Domingo Soto (1534-1560) argued that implicit faith in Christ, demonstrated in the keeping of the natural law, would have sufficed for the salvation of people who died before the coming of the missionaries. Refuting Calvin's (1509-1564) argument that it was predestination that gave salvation to some and denied it to others,

the Flemish theologian Albert Pigge (1490-1542) claimed that all that was necessary for those who had not heard of Christ was faith in God, as declared in Hebrews 11:6. This led him to the question, never broached until then, of whether Muslims, who were inculpably ignorant of the truth of Christianity, but believed in God, could find salvation through this faith.

The Council of Trent and the Jesuits

The Council of Trent re-affirmed that faith in God and baptism were necessary for justification. It did not say than explicit faith in Christ was always necessary for justification, and so left open the questions that had been raised by the Dominican theologians and by Pigge. Furthermore it recognized that a baptism by desire could suffice for justification and did not refute Aquinas's view that this desire may not always be explicit. After the Council of Trent Jesuit theologians turned their mind to these complex questions. In Japan St Francis Xavier (1506-1552) appears to have believed that those people of good will who had died in Japan before the missionaries, would experience the mercy of God. St Robert Bellamine (1542-1621) argued than while the Church had a visible body it also had a soul. It was possible for someone to belong to the body of the Church but not its soul, that is to be without grace. Similarly it was possible for someone to belong to the soul of the Church in faith and charity without necessarily belonging to the body of the Church.⁸ Bellamine also discussed the question of salvation for those who had never heard the gospel, explaining that because God willed all to be saved, God would provide help to achieve salvation to everyone, at some time and place.⁹

In view of the fact that multitudes of people in the newly discovered parts of the world had lived and died in ignorance of the Christian faith. Francisco Suarez (1548-1619) drew the conclusion that just as there was the possibility of baptism of desire, the lack of actual faith in Christ could be supplied by the desire of having it. Suarez equated implicit faith in Christ with *desire* for faith in Christ, an implicit faith or desire for faith that would be rooted in the person's faith in God. This, Suarez believed, God would always make possible, perhaps through an interior illumination for those who were doing what they could to please him. Another Jesuit theologian, Juan de Lugo (1583-1660), went further, saying that implicit desire for faith, baptism and membership in the Church may be applied not only to those who had never heard the gospel, but also to those who knew about Christ but did not believe in him, or who had an unorthodox faith. In other words, contrary to the Council of Florence, heretics, Jews and Muslims might not be guilty of the sin of unbelief, and thus might be saved through their sincere faith in God expressed in their own religions. His conclusion rested on both a new understanding of geography, that there were vast continents whose inhabitants had lived for centuries without Christian faith, and on the developing understanding of human psychology that until people were convinced of the truth of Christianity they could not be guilty in their rejection of it.

The nineteenth century

In 1854, on the occasion of the definition of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, Pope Pius IX (Pope 1846-1878) reiterated what had become the official position, that it was necessary to belong to the true Church for salvation, understanding

this in the context of the justice of God, and the fact that he does not condemn the innocent. Pius IX referred to those who were culpably outside the Church as being excluded from salvation (Sullivan, 2002, p. 114), and his statement apparently recognized that those who were inculpably ignorant of their obligation of belonging to the Church could be saved. Franzelin (1816-1886) amplified Pius IX's teaching, clarifying that those who were inculpably ignorant of their obligation to belong to the Church, and were in the state of grace, could still be saved in and through the Church. They were saved *in* the Church by means of their adherence "to her spirit and also to her visible elements by their will, which is accepted by God in lieu of fact." They are also saved *through* the Church "to which the word of faith belongs and in view of which saving graces are given".¹⁰

The twentieth century prior to Vatican II

From the time of Pius IX, whose 1863 encyclical *Quanto Conficiamur Moerore* had authorized the view that while there was not salvation outside the Catholic Church, those who were invincibly ignorant of Christianity and co-operated with divine grace could arrive at justification, it was common Catholic doctrine that there were people in the state of grace and on the way to salvation who would never be visibly joined to the Catholic Church. However, such people must in some sense be joined to the Church in order to be saved. One proposed solution to this was the notion of a visible Church and an invisible Church, to which those who were not baptized Catholics may belong. The invisible Church existed and was hidden within the visible Church. While this notion of the invisible Church hidden in the visible Church was commonly associated with Lutheran theology, Catholic theologians put forward various interpretations of it. During the period between the first and second world wars, a distinction was made

between the Church as Mystical Body and the visible Church. Membership in the mystical body, which went beyond the bounds of the visible Church, was understood to depend on the degree to which one shared in the life of Christ by grace, whereas membership in the institutional Church required profession of the Catholic faith, reception of the sacraments, and being in communion with the Catholic bishops and the pope. “Mystical body” was a traditional way of referring to the Church so the doctrine that no-one was saved outside the Church could mean that some people not joined to the institutional Church, but in a state of grace, could belong to the mystical body of Christ. While this notion attracted support among Catholic writers during the period between the wars, the notion had the potential to lead to the same dichotomy between the visible and invisible Church (Sullivan, 2002, p.128). Congar (1937) refused to separate the Church into mystical body and the visible Church, but he did recognize that there were elements of the mystical body outside the Church. These elements such as faith and grace meant that non-Catholics living in the grace of Christ could be said to belong to the Church invisibly and incompletely yet really. For Congar there were not a visible and an invisible Church but one Church which was both visible and invisible (Potvin, 2003). The mystical body and the Church were not two different realities, although elements of the mystical body could exist abnormally outside the Church. Where such elements exist effectively, i.e. where non Catholics live by the grace of Christ, they belong to the Church by desire if not in fact.

Pius XII's (1943) *Mystici Corporis* was premised on the fundamental principle that the Roman Catholic Church and it alone was the Mystical Body of Christ. Since only Roman Catholics were really members of the Church, only they were really members of

the mystical body. However the encyclical recognized the possibility, that those who are not yet members of the Church and are inculpably outside the Church, may be saved. Catholics were urged to pray for those separated from the Church by a breach of faith and unity, and also those who have not been enlightened by the gospel. The encyclical showed that non Catholics could be saved by being *related* to the Mystical Body of Christ, and thus to the Catholic Church, by wish or desire (#143). However, the encyclical was criticized for its lack of distinction between Christians and those of other religions. It was objected that the encyclical ignored the fact that by virtue of their baptism Christians are sacramentally incorporated into Christ, and must belong to the Mystical Body in a way that non-Christians do not. This was clarified in 1949 in a letter from the Holy Office to Archbishop Cushing in response to an argument that had arisen in his archdiocese, where he argued that people who are invincibly ignorant of the fact that God has established the Church as a means necessary for their salvation could have a saving relation with the Church by a desire which was implicit in their will to know and love the good. (Sullivan, 1992, p.139)

The Second Vatican Council

In relation to other Christians

The first change made by Vatican II was in relation to salvation for Christians other than Catholics. The Council did not claim that the Church of Christ *was* the Roman Catholic Church. Rather it stated that the “the Church of Christ subsists in the Roman Catholic Church” (Pope Paul VI, 1964, #8) affirming that the Church founded by Christ and entrusted to the apostles continues to exist in the Catholic Church, but not saying

than the Church of Christ existed nowhere else but in the Catholic Church. In this wording there was a significant potential recognition of ecclesial reality in other Christian Churches and communities (Sullivan, 1992).

Vatican II also did not claim that only Roman Catholics are really members of Christ's Church, instead saying that "only those Catholics are fully incorporated into the Church who are living in a state of grace" (Pope Paul VI, 1964, #14). This statement introduced the notion of different degrees of incorporation into the Church, applying it first to Catholics. It follows that if some Catholics are more fully incorporated into the Church than others, degrees of incorporation on the part of other Christians should also be acknowledged, since baptism has always been seen as the sacrament by which one becomes a member of the Church. Now official recognition was given to the fact that that by their baptism, other Christians were really, if not fully, incorporated into the Church of Christ. Other Christian communities were referred to as "ecclesial communities" (Pope Paul VI, 1964, #15) and it was stated that "in some real way they are joined with us in the Holy Spirit". This close connection between the Catholic Church and the ecclesial communities that belong to the wider Church of Christ was reiterated in the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio* [UR] 3#). The second Vatican Council reaffirmed what had been official Catholic doctrine since the time of Pius IX, that it is only those culpably outside the Church who are excluded from salvation. However, while in the past there was a presumption of guilt, (Sullivan, 1992), Vatican II presumed the innocence of the majority of those outside the Church. The question then became not whether they can be saved but *how*.

Vatican II and non Christians

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Pope Paul VI, 1964, #16) said that “those who have not yet received the gospel are related in various ways to the People of God”. According to the Constitution, God wills the salvation of all, and all are called to belong to the Church. The Catholic faithful *belong* to the Church through their baptism and their continued fidelity to the sacraments and life of the Church. Others are *related* to the Church in various ways which include relatedness through the covenant and promises of the Old Testament, relatedness through belief in God as one, as merciful and as creator, relatedness through seeking God in shadows and images, and relatedness through sincerity of heart and the genuine desire to do God’s will. While the Jews are in a unique relationship with the Church, other groups are included in God’s plan of salvation and are offered the grace that directs them towards salvation. Since all grace is directed towards a gathering of the universal Church in the eschatological kingdom, (Pope Paul VI, 1964, #2) it is therefore also directed toward the Church on earth. In addition, grace brings the possibility of faith, and no matter how conceptually imperfect (Sullivan, 1992) this faith is, it is “intrinsically directed towards the full profession of faith in divine revelation which is had only in the Church (Sullivan, 1992, p.155). Finally the grace of salvation brings the gift of charity which directs the person intrinsically towards the communitarian charity which is at the heart of the Church. Vatican II however claimed that the Church was the efficacious sacrament of salvation, and has an instrumental role in God’s plan for salvation (Pope Paul VI, 1964, #9). In other words, in regard to the great majority of people in the world who have neither Christian faith nor baptism, Vatican II affirmed that

they are not only related to the Church by the grace that the Holy Spirit offers to them, but that the Church is also the sign and instrument of their salvation.

Vatican II on the good to be found in other religions

The *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions* (Pope Paul VI, 1965) advocated Christ as the "way" of salvation, then dealt very briefly with the issue of truth in other religions, claiming that "certain ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth" "often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men" (# 2). So while Christ is the fullness of truth, other religions in various ways reflect that truth. The document did not actually announce that salvation may be achieved through other religions, but implied that this was possible to the extent that they "reflect" the salvific truth of Christ. Further, the document did not indiscriminately give this status to all religious phenomena, but left the way open for the process of critique and discernment. It encouraged a search for understanding and engagement between Catholics and those of other religions (#2).

In summary, the Second Vatican Council claimed the following in relation to religions other than Christianity. First, God wills the salvation of all, and this salvation is not offered or carried out in secret, but through visible mediations. Second, the Church recognizes in other elements that come from God. Third these elements can serve as a preparation for the gospel. The Council however did not imply that given the presence of these divine elements in other religions that the Church's missionary endeavor should cease. However it did insist that there be dialogue and collaboration between Catholics

and the followers of other religions in which the spiritual and moral goods as well as values in these cultures would be acknowledged, preserved and promoted.

Developments after Vatican II

Can other religions be mediators of salvation for their followers?

Vatican II did not explicitly claim that other religions could be mediators of salvation for their followers, even though it recognized divine elements in these religions and affirmed that these divine elements related the followers to the Catholic Church through whom salvation comes. Rahner (1904-1984) took this position one step further with his coining of the term “anonymous Christian”. If God’s salvific will is universal, Rahner argued, there is the possibility for all to be saved. However, the Church holds that salvation is possible only through faith in Jesus Christ and belonging to the People of God. This contradiction was solved for Rahner in the theory that because all people have a transcendental dimension, they can receive God’s grace and revelation. The *response* to God’s self communication is given in loving others as oneself, for the love of neighbor is ultimately love of God. Consequently, Rahner argued, those who do not confess Jesus Christ explicitly and do not become members of the Catholic Church, “must have the possibility of a genuine saving relation with God” (Rahner, 1993, p. 54) and therefore they are called “anonymous Christians.” However, the anonymous Christian’s response to God’s self-communication is not private and anonymous. The social nature of the human person means that this response is carried out through a communal expression. Normally this will take the form of the religion to which the person belongs. Until non-Christians become so convinced of the truth of Christianity that they must abandon their

religion and become Christian, their own religion continues to be the way that God intends they express their relationship with him and arrive at salvation. From this it follows that non-Christian religions remain, under God's providence, legitimate ways of salvation for the majority of the world's people. These ways should not be thought of as independent of the salvation offered by Christ who is the unique source of grace through which adherents of all religions are saved. However, Rahner insisted that because of the role which the non-Christian religions play in the divine plan of salvation for most of the world's people, we can expect to find supernatural elements in them which can serve as mediators of God's grace.

There have been a number of objections to Rahner's notion of the "anonymous Christian" and of the salvific dimension thus attributed to non-Christian religions. The first objection was that this made redundant the Church's missionary efforts. It is true, Rahner responded, that missionary activity can no longer be undertaken on the basis of a belief that no-one can be saved without explicit faith in Christ, along with the reception of baptism and membership in the Church. The work of evangelization is now optimistic about the possibility of salvation for those who do not accept Christ. Catholic evangelizers must accept that many people who do not have explicit Catholic faith, are nevertheless living in the grace of Christ. Those who have this predisposition of grace in any case will be best disposed to respond to the Church's missionary efforts. In addition, Rahner responded, the nature of the Church demands that it incarnate itself in every culture, just as God was incarnated in human flesh. The Church provides the fullness of the life of grace which other religions cannot do for "anonymous Christians".

Papal teaching after Vatican II

The thought of Pope Paul VI expressed most fully in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1974) was less positive. First great admiration is expressed for the spiritual values found in other religions, but alongside this is a re-affirmation of Christianity as the religion which provides a genuine and unique way to salvation, and a minimizing of the potential of other religions to provide salvation (Pope Paul VI, 1974, #53). Following from this was a call for renewed efforts at evangelization throughout the world. However, the key element in the teaching of his successor, Pope John II, in regard to other religions was respect for the presence and activity of the of the Holy Spirit in non Christians and in their religions –seen in their practice of virtue, their spirituality and their prayer. John Paul II claimed that the missionary attitude begins with a deep respect for what is already there “by the Spirit” (Pope John Paul II, 1979, #15). Recognition of the truth and the action of the Holy Sprit in other religions, according to Pope John Paul II, made true dialogue possible.¹¹

The theme of the universal action of the Holy Spirit was further developed in *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986) where he spoke of the action of the Holy Spirit even before Christ, in history and “outside the visible body of the Church” (#53). Reflecting on the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi (1986) he explained that “every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person”.¹² Like Paul VI however, John Paul II insisted that recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit in other religions did not diminish the need for Christian missionary activity. His thought on this should be quoted in full.

The universality of salvation means that it is granted not only to those who explicitly believe in Christ and have entered the Church. Since salvation is offered to all, it must be made concretely available to all. But it is clear that today, as in the past, many people do not have an opportunity to come to know or accept the gospel revelation or to enter the Church. The social and cultural conditions in which they live do not permit this, and frequently they have been brought up in other religious traditions. For such people salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. This grace comes from Christ; it is the result of his Sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit. It enables each person to attain salvation through his or her free cooperation. (1986, # 10).

Pope John Paul II saw inter-religious dialogue as part of the evangelizing mission of the Church, describing it as both connected with and distinct from the Church's missionary activity. (Pope John Paul II, 1990, #55)

Dominus Iesus (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2000) encouraged the continuation of inter-religious dialogue, and again placed this within the context of the Church's missionary vocation. Inter-religious dialogue is "part of the Church's evangelising mission" (# 2). An important purpose of the document, reiterated several times, was to set down "certain indispensable elements" of Christian doctrine in relation to world religions, particularly in the context of "relativistic theories" which, in justifying religious pluralism, seemed to dismiss or down play the necessity of Christ for salvation, the definitive nature of the revelation of Christ, and the Christian economy of salvation or elements of it (# 4). The document then listed the elements of this economy of salvation as the creating and redeeming grace of God as offered to humankind, the Incarnation as the fullness of God's revelation and the requirement of the "obedience of faith" (Rom 16:26) to this revelation; the work of the Holy Spirit in effecting and

teaching the mystery of salvation within the lives of the faithful and the role of the Church as the mediator of salvation. The universality of God's will to save all people was re-affirmed, but it was made clear that this salvation is in and through Christ (#15).

Importantly however, the document did not identify the Catholic Church with the Kingdom of God. This kingdom is the "manifestation and the realisation of God's plan in all its fullness" (#19) and while it takes in the Catholic Church whose task is to promote the Kingdom of God on earth, it is not restricted by it: "the action of Christ and the Spirit outside the Church's visible boundaries must not be excluded" (#19). The document asserted therefore the same two seemingly contradictory truths, that have appeared throughout the history of Church thinking about this issue. God wills all to be saved, and yet Christ, the Church and baptism are necessary for salvation. What then of the committed adherents of other religions? While acknowledging that this issue needs much more theological study, the document asserted that God "in ways known to himself" (# 21) makes accessible and available outside the visible Church, a grace from Christ (# 20) which effects salvation within their "spiritual and material situation" (# 20). While the Church is the way to salvation, those outside the Church are enabled, in an act of grace, to share in the salvific truth of Christ through their own religious paths. Therefore there is one way of salvation (# 21) but other religions, as affirmed by *Nostra Aetate*, contain "elements which come from God" (# 21) and through these elements in a "mysterious relationship with the Church" (# 20) salvation is offered. The document finally cautioned Christian believers against an indiscriminate acceptance of all elements of religions, seeing that while some were "from God" (# 21) others arose from superstitions and were an obstacle to truth.

Dominus Iesus promulgated the same teaching as *Nostra Aetate* but in a more detailed and expository way. It asserted the centrality of Christ and the Church in the plan of salvation, but acknowledged that she does not have the last word, that the Kingdom of God is bigger than the Church, and that the elements of truth in other religions may certainly be channels of salvific grace. To summarize then, the contemporary Catholic position is an inclusive one, with Christ and the Church deemed to be necessary for salvation but with the allowance that the grace of God can and does work outside of the Church in "mysterious" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2000, # 2) ways through the "rays of truth" (Pope Paul VI, 1965, #3) that can be found in other religions, and which draw their adherents to the salvific grace which comes through the Church.

Educational implications

We have established that the Catholic Church both recognizes that elements in other religions can be the means of salvation for their followers, and encourages Catholics to enter into respectful dialogue with other Christians and adherents of other religions. Furthermore we can be in no doubt that the Church sees Catholic schools as communities of inclusion.

In the certainty that the Spirit is at work in every person, the Catholic school offers itself to all, non-Christians included, with all its distinctive aims and means, acknowledging, preserving and promoting the spiritual and moral qualities, the social and cultural values, which characterize different civilizations (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, #47).

and

Catholic schools are at once places of evangelization, of complete formation, of enculturation, of apprenticeship in a lively dialogue between young people of different religions and social backgrounds".(Pope John Paul II, 1995, #102.)

The “lively dialogue” about religions referred to by Pope John Paul II is encouraged in the Catholic school. Yet, as Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, (2003) has pointed out, this dialogue cannot even begin unless there is first some basic education in the phenomenon of religion, and its expressions in the religions of the world.

We first have to try and understand them as they are, in their historical dynamic, in their essential structures and types, as also in their possible relations with each other or as possible threats to each other, before we try to arrive at any judgments (Ratzinger,2003, p. 10).

Ratzinger asks those who would engage in inter-religious dialogue to enter objectively into the religious worlds of others. This involves listening, learning, asking questions and distilling knowledge before reflection and dialogue can take place. Learning about the other is the first task of inter-faith dialogue and both are within the work of the Catholic school. Ultimately attention to this goal will allow for the achievement of two other goals of the activities of learning about world religions and establishing inter-faith dialogue in the school, these being an enriched understanding and appreciation of one’s own religion, and the establishment of a foundation for common life and action for justice in the school. (Swidler, 1986).

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¹ Augustine (400) On Baptism: Against the Donatists. Ch 9#12.

² Augustine, (412), *Contra Julianum*, cited in Sullivan, 1992, p. 39).

³ held at Quiercy-sur-Oise in 849.

⁴ Innocent III, 1215, *Firmiter*, Canon 1.

⁵ (*II-II,q.2, a.7*).

⁶ *Pope Eugenius IV, A.D. 1431-1447, at the Ecumenical Union Council of Florence.*

⁷ *De Indis* p.144.

⁸ *De Ecclesia Militante, cap.6;ed. Guiliano, vol2, p.80.*

⁹ *De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio, lib 2,cap.8;ed. Guiliano, vol4, p.308.*

¹⁰ *Theses De Ecclesia Christi. Ed 2: 1907, p.413*)

¹¹ Address given in Madras to the leaders of the Indian religions 21/2/86.

¹² Christmas address to the Roman Curia 22/12/86.

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