

EXTRA ECCLESIAM NULLA SALUS?

Is it true that 'outside the Church there is no salvation'? Do we have to drag people, willy nilly, into the Orthodox Church for them to be saved? Is this what 'mission' or 'evangelism' really comes down to? Is that what Saint Cyprian of Carthage intended?

Let's go back to the Gospels.

When Jesus asked his disciples: "Whom do men say that I am?" Peter replied: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Now listen carefully to Jesus' response: "It is not flesh and blood that has revealed this to you but my Father in heaven." In other words, Peter had not worked it out by himself through rational means; instead it had just come to him. It was a gift. It was an understanding that was quite beyond the usual Peter.

Indeed, when Jesus praised him for that statement ("You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church"), Peter was soon getting above himself. For when Jesus went on to tell his friends that soon he was going to be put to death, Peter, full of ideas of an all-victorious Messiah, took Jesus aside. You can imagine the patronising way he would put his arm round Jesus and lead him off, saying that such an event was utterly unthinkable. So imagine his surprise when Jesus rounded on him and told him: "Get thee behind me, Satan!"

In a few minutes Peter had gone from being golden boy to being the devil! All because he had relied on his own ideas, on flesh and blood.

Psalm 126 sums it up neatly: Unless the Lord builds the house, they labour in vain that build it. The Latin version would make us a good slogan: *Nisi Dominus frustra* – without the Lord everything is a waste of time.

My first point, then, is this:

evangelism springs from God's initiative.

The word 'mission' implies 'being sent' – a divine passive: God sends us. Our function is to recognise His initiative and go along with it.

From the Gospels we see that God's initiative is discovered in the most unlikely people. Take the centurion, for example, who asked Jesus to heal his young servant boy. "Don't come into my house," he said; "I am not worthy. Just say the word and my boy will be healed." Jesus' reaction says it all: "I have not seen such great faith, no, not in Israel!" This man was a pagan, not a Jew; an outsider to the House of Israel – and yet God had touched him! For all their temple sacrifices, for all their fasting and feasting, for all their Sabbath-keeping, this pagan had been more blest than the lot of them!

Let us not, then, think ourselves to be superior to those who are not Orthodox Christians. It bothers me a lot that amongst the Orthodox there are some quite horrid people despite their regularly receiving the sacraments, whereas I know many fine Christians who are not Orthodox.

Nor can I accept the view of some Orthodox that outside the Orthodox Church there is no salvation.

I can speak from my own experience that miracles do happen within the Anglican Church, for example. On one occasion as an Anglican priest I was called out to serve the Last Rites to a lady from Chesterfield who was dying in a hospital at Bakewell. I heard her confession, anointed her and gave her Holy Communion. Then I went next door and had a cup of tea with the nurses. Job done! Some weeks later I happened to meet the churchwarden of this lady's church in Marks and Spencer. "What happened to Mrs So-And-So?" I asked, expecting to hear how the funeral had gone. "Oh," he said. "She was in church on Sunday! Quite recovered!"

Then again I was asked by some parishioners to bless the house of their new neighbour. So I went into church, poured some tap-water into a container and blessed it. Then I did the usual house-blessing, sprinkling the holy water in each room, and left. Merely a routine service.

Next Sunday the parishioner said, "Well, it worked!"

"What worked?" I replied.

"The house blessing. Ever since the house was blessed the frantic crying of their baby has stopped and now she sleeps peacefully."

Those are just two examples from within the Anglican Church that I can vouch for personally. We must not be so blinded by man-made theories that we do not see where the Holy Spirit is acting. Remember it was the arrogant, exclusive-minded Pharisees who said that the healing by Jesus of the man blind from birth was the work of the Devil.

Metropolitan Kallistos makes the point:

Outside the Church there is no salvation, because salvation is the Church Does it therefore follow that anyone who is not visibly within the Church is necessarily damned? Of course not; still less does it follow that everyone who is visibly within the Church is necessarily saved. As Augustine wisely remarked: "How many sheep there are without, how many wolves within!" (Homilies on John, 45, 12) While there is no division between a "visible" and an "invisible Church", yet there may be members of the Church who are not visibly such, but whose membership is known to God alone. If anyone is saved, he must in some sense be a member of the Church; in what sense, we cannot always say.

My second point, then, is:

we have to discern where God is already acting in people's lives.

"A *bruised reed* He will *not* break and a dimly burning wick He will *not* extinguish." *Matt 12:20*
We have to start where people really are, with their perceptions, their ideas, their spirituality. There can be no place for our feeling superior or condemning others. We are all of us on the road together.

That is not to say that there are not errors, nor is it to say that non-Orthodox Christians have the fulness of faith and the right praxis which is to be found only within the Orthodox Church. What I do say is that there is always the possibility of growth, and this is where evangelism comes in.

Evangelism is sharing the Good News.

Oh dear! What a mine-field that statement conjures up! But we are told by St Paul to be able to give an account of the faith that is in us, and that faith is that Christ has filled all things with joy!

This brings me to my third point:

evangelism has to be personal.

It is me, it is you - on the spot. When we are challenged, we are not to rely on hand-outs nor on sophisticated DVDs. "Do not worry beforehand what you will say; at the time it will be given you what to say." We are to rely on the Lord. It is frightening; it is exhilarating; it's exciting.

Our verbal bumbling is not the full content of the encounter, however. Rather it is the whole person: the way you approach the other person, the way you look, your attitude, your enthusiasm, the seemingly little things that are important to you; your personal take; the real you in your totality. For it is not you who speak but Christ who speaks through you; not you who live but Christ who lives in you.

Thus this approach relies on faith – our faith.

Let's take that incident when Jesus had just come down from Mount Tabor after the Transfiguration. A man came up to him complaining that the disciples had not been able to heal his son from epilepsy. First, Jesus berates the man's lack of faith: "Oh faithless and perverse generation! How long must I be with you?" but goes on to expel the demon and heal the boy. When later his disciples ask him why they were not able to heal the boy he cites their weak faith and explains that if only they had faith as little as a mustard seed they would be able to move mountains.

Now, let's examine that exchange. How was it that when Jesus himself came, the man's faith was suddenly roused so that Jesus was able to heal his son? Do we not have to accept that faith begets faith? The unwavering faith of Jesus called forth a corresponding faith in the heart of the boy's father. Conversely such weak faith as the disciples had was insufficient to evoke the man's faith, and the boy remained unhealed.

Again and again the Lord points to a person's faith as the catalyst of healing.

It is not for nothing that the first word of the Symbol of the Christian Faith (sic!) is, in Greek, 'pisteuomen': 'We put our faith in one God, the Father Almighty....' ('pistis' is the word for faith; 'pisteuomen' is the corresponding verb.)

The usual translation: 'I believe in' is so easily confused in our modern minds with a merely mental choice – 'I believe in having a good breakfast', 'I believe in eating wholemeal bread'....

To put my faith in the one God, to trust in him, to live my daily life within the Kingdom of heaven is a wholly different concept. It is this that makes a Christian different from other people. This is faith. This is the light for the world that just cannot be hidden. Therefore, the Lord tells us: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

This is evangelism. It is this that lifts our hearts above a merely intellectual approach. It has been well said: **Christianity is caught, not taught.**

So it matters what kind of soil God's seed falls onto. Some environments are more conducive to the growth of holiness than others, and it is here that the Orthodox Church comes into its own.

First, there is the sense of mystery: glimpses of the priest in the lighted area behind the royal doors; candle-lit icons; the quiet singing, people venerating icons; the quietness; parents standing attentively with an arm around a child... All these things point away to the beyond, to a reality that cannot quite be grasped, that passes our understanding. A reality that is clearly important to the worshippers.

As a banal comparison, try standing in the street looking up into the sky. Soon others will stand with you, trying to see what they think you are seeing.

Second, there is the strangeness of the worship. No jolly worship songs; the priest with his back to the congregation; everything intoned, rather than spoken; the glorious vestments; the elaborate gestures: bowing, prostrations, the signing of the Cross. The seven branched candlestick. Clearly it is worship, all God-centred, not an entertainment, not a teaching session. So is it just old-fashioned? Or is there a reason for such worship?

Here is a golden opportunity to speak about the revelation to Moses of worship in heaven and how he was told to copy it on earth; an opportunity too to emphasise the continuity of Christian worship with the worship of Israel that Jesus himself was brought up in and approved of; an opportunity also to speak of the way in which the prayers of holy men throughout the ages have been incorporated into our Liturgy, and of the continuity of Orthodox Christian worship both in time and geographically.

This brings us, thirdly, to the veneration of the saints of the Church as an ever-present reality within the Church, not just a cloud of witnesses urging us on but our friends who can teach us and help us.

Help us do what? (And here we come to the biggest challenge for people.)

Again we return to the Gospels.

What was the first word Jesus is reported as saying?

It is (in Greek) 'METANOEITE'. 'Meta' means 'change'; 'NOEITE' is the verb from 'nous' (= our spiritual heart). So Jesus is saying: 'let your heart be changed'. And it is a continuous tense: Let your heart keep on being changed – for ever!

Our outside can be manipulated by worldly power structures – threats of physical violence, economic factors, political ideologies and so on.

By contrast we alone have control over the door to our hearts. Thus Jesus says: “Behold! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone opens to me, I will come in and sup with him.”

We cannot change ourselves; instead, we have to be changed, changed from the inside, from the heart, from the 'nous'.

This change is slow, difficult and continuous. It is a process of dying to oneself and living to Christ.

This approach is quite different from that of people who do good to others in the hope that they will then merit getting into heaven as a kind of reward. This is just selfishness. A teaching colleague once said, “You Christians are really the most selfish people in the world! You only do good in

order to get into heaven.”

So the final point is that a truly Christian life is an heroic one. It requires constant effort

To be saved is to be transformed, to be restored to what God always meant us to be. The purpose of life is to be drawn back from alienation from each other and from God into communion. This is the life of the Kingdom. “He who seeks to save his life will lose it; and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.”

So evangelism is also a challenge. Christianity is not wishy-washy self-improvement; not a charter for do-gooders; not cosy hymn-singing. Christianity is for heroes, nothing less.

And the purpose of this heroic, ascetic life is to be freed from the self.

Why?

In order to be able to love.

In order that the love with which God has first loved us may be shown forth through us.

This is true mission;

this is true evangelism,

for only love is truly Good News, the truly international language which everyone understands and warms to,

a love not limited according to the worthiness of the recipient,

but love even for one's enemies – unlimited love.

And the wonderful thing about love is that LOVE BEGETS LOVE.

This process is the only thing that can turn the world upside down.

So this is our real goal,

a goal only achievable within the Church, as we are built up into the body of Christ Himself, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God our Father.

To return to our original question: is the Church the only way to salvation?

- if we mean by 'Church' an institution, especially an institution reduced to nationalism, to clericalism, to the Phariseism of mere rule-keeping – then the answer is NO.

- but if we mean by 'Church' the people of God, the people who have heard God calling them out of the world and who have responded; the people who trust God to rescue them from self-centredness, to empower them to say No to all that is not of God; to open their eyes and to say Yes to what eye has not seen and what has hitherto not entered into the heart of man; to trust Him and Him alone; to step out into the adventure of holiness – if that is what is meant by the Church, then Saint Cyprian is right: the Church *is* the true and tested Way, it *is* the straight path that leads to the narrow gate, it *is* the only way to salvation.

For the true Church is none other than Christ Himself still operative in the world through the Holy Spirit, drawing all men to Himself. He tells us authoritatively that He, and no other, is the true shepherd, the only Way, the only Truth, indeed, Life Itself. In other words: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus!*

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