

Doctrinal Clarity for the New Evangelization:
The Importance of Lumen Gentium 16
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Blessed John Paul II's repeated calls for a "new evangelization" are well known. And now Benedict XVI has institutionalized this emphasis on evangelization with his establishment of the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization and his choice of topic for the next World Synod of Bishops to be held in 2012, namely, the "new evangelization."

In this study I would like to identify one aspect of the ecclesiology of Vatican II that is central for a well founded understanding of the importance of evangelization. It is an aspect that is often overlooked. Vatican II clearly teaches that it is possible to be saved without explicit faith in Jesus and incorporation into the Church, but at the same time it teaches, although this teaching is much less known, that such salvation is not to be presumed and, indeed, faces considerable obstacles.

Being clear about what Vatican II actually teaches about the fundamental reason for evangelization is important because we are increasingly living in the midst of a "culture of universalism," even within the Church, a culture which seriously undermines the urgency to evangelize. If it is the case that virtually everyone is ultimately saved, and there is minimal risk of being lost, the urgency to evangelize is considerably lessened. Not only is the urgency to evangelize lessened but also the motivation to resist temptation, to live a life of holiness and self-sacrificial love, and the motivation to become a priest or enter religious life.

John Sachs, S.J., in a lengthy article on universal salvation that appeared in *Theological Studies*, expresses what he claims is the current Catholic theological consensus.

We have seen that there is a clear consensus among Catholic theologians today in their treatment of the notion of apocatastasis and the problem of hell. . . . It may not be said that even one person is already or will in fact be damned. All that may and must be believed is that the salvation of the world is a reality already begun and established in Christ. Such a faith expresses itself most consistently in the hope that because of the gracious love of God whose power far surpasses human sin, all men and women will in fact freely and finally surrender to God in love and be saved.

When Balthasar speaks of the duty to hope for the salvation of all, he is articulating the broad consensus of current theologians and the best of the Catholic tradition. Like other theologians, notably Rahner, he intentionally pushes his position to the limit, insisting that such a hope is not merely possible but well founded I have tried to show that the presumption that human freedom entails a capacity to reject God definitively and eternally seems questionable. And, although this presumption enjoys the weight of the authority of Scripture and tradition, it would seem incorrect to consider this possibility as an object of faith in the same sense that the ability of human freedom in grace to choose God is an object of faith.¹

¹ John R. Sachs, "Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 252-253.

While neither Rahner, Balthasar, nor Sachs formally teach universalism the questions they raise about whether it is really possible for human freedom to finally reject God have contributed to an atmosphere of universalism. If I were to describe how many Catholics today think about the issue of the likelihood of those who are not explicitly Christians being saved, I would describe it like this:

Wide is the gate and easy the way that leads to salvation and many there are who are entering by it. Narrow the gate and difficult the way that leads to hell and few there are who are taking that way.

The difficulty with this prevailing mentality is that it is the exact opposite of what Jesus teaches about our situation.

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Mt 7:13-14) RSV

Or the parallel text in Luke:

Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few people be saved?" He answered them, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough. After the master of the house has arisen and locked the door, then will you stand outside knocking and saying, 'Lord, open the door for us.' He will say to you in reply, 'I do not know where you are from.' And you will say, 'We ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets.' Then he will say to you, 'I do not know where (you) are from. Depart from me, all you evildoers!'" (Lk 13:23-30) NAB

These are not isolated texts. The whole message of the NT is that one does not enter the kingdom by drifting along with the prevailing culture, the "broad way" of Mt 7:13-14.²

² The traditional interpretation of this text is that it means what it says; that many are heading to destruction and comparatively fewer are heading to salvation. Some modern commentators, uncomfortable with the traditional interpretation, look for alternate interpretations. The attempts to neutralize the text are well described by B. F. Myer, "Many (= All) are Called, but Few (= Not All) Are Chosen," *New Testament Studies* 36 (1, 1990): 89-97. Of the various attempts he identifies he thinks only one has any merit, that is, to try to ascertain the underlying Aramaic which does not have the clarity that the Greek has when referring to the many and the few. But, as the International Theological Commission pointed out in its document on eschatology, "Some Current Questions in Eschatology," in *International Theological Commission, vol. II, Texts and Documents 1986-2007*, ed. Michael Sharkey and Thomas Weinandy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 72, the Greek of the New Testament is no less inspired than the Hebrew of the Old Testament: "Looking at matters from another perspective it cannot be supposed that Hebrew categories alone were the instrument of divine revelation. God has spoken 'in many and varied ways' (Heb 1:1). The books of Sacred Scripture in which inspiration is expressed in Greek words and cultural concepts must be considered as enjoying no less authority than those which were written in Hebrew or Aramaic." The Greek words for many and few are not ambiguous in their meaning. Attempts to get behind the Greek to the Aramaic, while of interest, cannot replace our close attention to the inspired Greek text. John P. Meier, *Matthew: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, ed. Wilfrid Harrington, Donald Senior, *New Testament Message*, vol. 3. (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1980), 72-75, thinks it is important to see Mt 7:13-14 as part of the whole concluding discourse to the Sermon on the Mount with a strong eschatological framework that underlines the seriousness of

Despite the clarity and ubiquity of the “two ways” theme in both the Old and New Testaments³ the question must be addressed: But what does Vatican II teach about this?

The primary text from Vatican II that most thoroughly and authoritatively deals with this question is *Lumen gentium* 16.⁴ There are two other Vatican II texts that deal with this question

Jesus’ teaching being followed in light of the impending judgment and separation of those who are on very different paths. He sees Matthew as using “antithetical parallelism” contrasting the two gates, the two ways, sheep and wolves, two types of trees, two foundations, as describing two types of disciples who despite external similarities live totally different lives before God. The current mixture in the Church will be revealed and separated at the final judgment. (*Lumen gentium* 14 transmits the same teaching). Meier points out that the future tense used in these parables of judgment is important to note. They show that the words of Jesus are not empty threats. The judgment will happen and will happen in accordance with the criteria that Jesus mercifully reveals to us. While Meier sees this text as referring to those who are actually members of the Church, the situation of those not explicitly members of the Church is even more challenging. As Peter puts it: “For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if the righteous man is scarcely saved, where will the impious and sinner appear?” (1 Pt 4: 17-18). Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, *Sacra Pagina Series*, vol. 1 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 108-111, concludes: “The scene is a warning to the audience that to enter the kingdom is hard and only a few do so.” He thinks this meaning is confirmed and deepened when we consider the larger section of which Mt: 7:13-14 is a part. Harrington, as do other commentators, points out the very similar message in a second set of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew 13: 1-52.

3 There are those who choose the way that leads to life and others that choose the way that leads to death, those who choose the blessing and those who choose the curse (Deut 30:15-20). We see the difference between the wise and the foolish (Sir 21:11-28), between those who serve God and those who refuse to serve him, between those who fear the Lord and trust in him and those who wickedly defy him and trust in themselves (Mal 3:16-21), between those who believe and those who refuse to believe, between those who truly know the Father and those who do not, between those who grieve and quench the Spirit and those who do not, between those who worship the one God in Spirit and truth and those who have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worship the creature, between the city of God and the city of man, between those who love the brethren and those who do not, between the good and the wicked. There are those who are “vessels of mercy” and those who are “vessels of wrath” (Rom 9:22-23), those for whom Christ is the “cornerstone chosen and precious” and those for whom he is a stumbling stone and scandal. (1 Pt 2:6-8) There are those who eagerly await the return of the Lord and cry out “Come Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20) and there are those who cry out to the mountains “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?” (Rev 6:16-17) This separation was signaled on the hill of Calvary when one thief humbly turned to Christ with faith, hope and love, and the other thief bitterly mocked and blasphemed him (Lk 23:32-43). St. Thomas Aquinas, ST III, q. 46, a. 11, comments on the significance of this separation of the human race that was manifested at the crucifixion itself, citing Chrysostom, Jerome, Pope Leo, Augustine, Hilary and Bede. Thomas’ citation of Augustine will give a sense of these patristic commentaries: ““The very cross, if thou mark it well, was a judgment-seat: for the judge being set in the midst, the one who believed was delivered, the other who mocked Him was condemned. Already He has signified what He shall do to the quick and the dead, some He will set on His right, others on His left hand” (Augustine, Jo. vii. 36). This separation which exists even now is finalized and the eternal reward and punishment appropriate to each individual is carried out definitively on the great Day of Judgment.”

⁴ The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) cites *LG* 16 as the authority for its teaching on the theological points that pertain to the salvation of those who have not heard the gospel. The treatment is straightforward and includes each of the three main units of *LG* 16. Numbers 761, 839, 841-844, 847, 1260 and 1281 of the Catechism all cite *LG* 16. There is though one unfortunate mistranslation of a key text which significantly changes the meaning of the original Latin. In #1281 of the 1994 edition of the Catechism, the English translation: “Those who died for the faith, those who are catechumens, and all those who, without knowing of the Church but acting under the inspiration of grace, seek God sincerely and strive to fulfill his will, are saved even if they have not been baptized (cf. *LG* 16).” The official Latin text though is this: #1281 *Qui mortem propter fidem patiuntur, catechumeni et omnes homines qui, sub gratiae impulsu, quin Ecclesiam cognoscant, Deum sincere quaerunt et Eius voluntatem implere conantur, salvari possunt, etiamsi Baptismum non receperint.* The key phrase

that should be noted: *Ad gentes* 7, and *Gaudium et spes*, 22. Since *LG* as a Constitution is considered the “keystone” of the documents of Vatican II, and other documents often explicitly ground their teaching by referencing it, we will focus, in this short article, only on the *LG* 16 text, since *AG* explicitly relates its teaching to the theological framework of *LG* and *GS* 22 specifically cites *LG* 16 as a basis for its teaching.

LG 16 is only 10 sentences long. The first four sentences explain how “those who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the People of God in various ways.” The Jews, Moslems and “those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God” are specifically mentioned. The “relatedness” is clearly a non-salvific relatedness. A footnote cites Aquinas’ teaching on the “potential” for membership in the Church that exists in every human being (ST III. Q. 8, a. 3, ad 1) as grounding for this “relatedness.”⁵ Because of the restraints of a short article we will focus on the last six sentences that treat of how salvation for various categories of non-Christians might be possible, and the difficulties in fulfilling these conditions.

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience⁶—those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, 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 Gospel⁷ and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life.

“salvari possunt” should be translated as “may be saved” or “can be saved” not as “are saved.” This is how the phrase is translated in the leading English translations of *LG* 16 and also how it is translated in other places where it appears in the Catechism. The jump from possibility to certainty about the salvation of people in this situation, common as it is, is not warranted by the text. This mistake was corrected in the 1997 edition of the Catechism but as of this writing (April 26 2011) the mistranslation is still present in the English text published on the official Vatican website. The 1992 French edition also mistranslates the text and has “sont sauvés” rather than “peuvent être sauvés.” The French translation on the Vatican website is now correct. According to Norman Tanner, *The Church and the World: Gaudium et Spes, Inter Mirifica* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 64-65, *LG* is the Council document most frequently cited in the CCC.

⁵ See also the recent doctoral dissertation of Caroline Farey: *A Metaphysical Investigation of the Anthropological Implications of the Phrase: “Ipse enim, Filius Dei, incarnatione sua cum omni homine quodammodo se univit”* (For, by his incarnation, he, the Son of God has in a certain way united himself with each man—*Gaudium et spes*, 22). PhD diss., Pontificia Universitas Lateranensis, 2008.

⁶ The following footnote is inserted here as part of the Council text: Cfr. Epist. S.S.C.S. Officii ad Archiep. Boston.: Denz. 3869-72. The reference to the *Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston*, which offers doctrinal clarifications on the issues raised by Fr. Leonard Feeney in his strict interpretation of *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Sallus* provides important insight to the proper understanding of the text as we will see.

⁷ The following footnote is inserted here by the Council Fathers as backing for this text: “See Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, I, 1: PG 21, 28 AB.” Joseph Ratzinger, “La Mission d’Après Les Autres Textes Conciliaires,” in *Vatican II: L’Activité Missionnaire de l’Église* (Paris: Cerf, 1967), 129, note 11, indicates that this reference to Eusebius does not really support the point being made, but, of course, the point can be supported in other ways. “The reason for this allusion is not very clear, since in this work Eusebius, in treating of the non-

We will designate the above three sentences of *LG* 16 as *LG* 16b.

The Council here is teaching that under certain very specific conditions salvation is possible for non-Christians. What are these conditions?

That non-Christians be not culpable for their ignorance of the Gospel.

That non-Christians seek God with a sincere heart.

That non-Christians try to live their life in conformity with what they know of God's will. This is commonly spoken of as following the natural law or the light of conscience. It is important to note, as the Council does, in order to avoid a Pelagian interpretation, that this is possible only because people are "moved by grace."

That non-Christians welcome or receive whatever "good or truth" they live amidst—referring possibly to elements of their non-Christian religions or cultures which may refract to some degree that light that enlightens every man (Jn 1:9). These positive elements are intended to be "preparation for the Gospel." One could understand this to mean either a preparation for the actual hearing of the Gospel or preparation for, perhaps, some communication of God by interior illumination.

There is a very important doctrinal clarification contained in the footnote in this section that references the *Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston*⁸, which, issued in 1949, gave an important ruling on Fr. Leonard Feeney's strict interpretation of the theological axiom *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*.⁹

Christian religions, has another emphasis than our text: Eusebius underlines the aberrations of the pagan myths and the insufficiency of Greek philosophy; he shows that Christians are right in neglecting these in order to turn to the sacred writings of the Hebrews which constitute the true 'preparation for the gospel.'" (La raison de cette allusion n'est pas très claire, car dans cet ouvrage l'orientation d'Eusèbe, par rapport aux religions non chrétiennes, est tout autre que dans notre texte: Eusèbe signale les égarements des mythes païens et l'insuffisance de la philosophie grecque; il montre que les chrétiens voient juste en les négligeant pour se tourner vers les livres saints des Hébreux qui constituent la véritable 'préparation évangélique.) The Sources Chrétiennes translation of this text, *La Préparation Évangélique: Livre I*, trans. Jean Sirinelli et Édouard des Places (Paris: Cerf, 1974), 97-105, shows that Eusebius, in the chapter cited, only mentions the non-Christian religions and philosophies as being in dire need of conversion. He speaks of them as representing a piety that is "lying and aberrant," (*mensongère et aberrante*) and cites the Scripture that speaks of "exterminating all the gods of the nations" and making them "prostrate before Him."

⁸ The entire text of the letter in its original Latin along with an English translation was first published in *The American Ecclesiastical Review* in October 1952. Vol. CXXVII, 307-315. It is also available in Neuner/Dupuis, 854-857, and DS 3866-3872.

⁹ There are many fine treatments of the history of the interpretation of this axiom, most of which are largely in agreement on how the Church's current understanding of this axiom historically developed. Maurice Emyan, *The Theology of Salvation*, (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1960); Francis Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church: Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2002); Karl Rahner, "Membership of the Church According to the Teaching of Pius XII's Encyclical 'Mystici Corporis Christi,'" in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1963): 1-88; Avery Dulles, "The Church as Locus of Salvation," in ed. John M. McDermott, *The Theology of John Paul II: A Collection of Essays and Studies* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1993), 169-187; Jean Guy Pagé, *Qui est L'Église ?* vol. III, *L'Église, Peuple de Dieu* (Montréal: Les Éditions Bellarmin, 1979); Gerard Philips, *L'Église et Son Mystère au IIe Concile du Vatican :*

To make a long and fascinating story very short: while originally the axiom seems to have been primarily intended to indicate the gravity of heretics and schismatics separating themselves from the Church, therefore seriously violating unity, charity and obedience, it later was extended to cover all “outsiders” as well. With the discovery of the “new world” and its vast unevangelized populations a theological ferment began which eventually reached a certain consensus and found magisterial confirmation in the Encyclical of Pope Pius IX, *Quanto conficiamur moerore*, published in 1863.¹⁰ The position taken in this Encyclical essentially prepared the way for *LG* 16.

It is known to Us and to you that those who labor in invincible ignorance concerning our most holy religion and who, assiduously observing the natural law and its precepts which God has inscribed in the hearts of all, and being ready to obey God, live an honest and upright life can, through the working of the divine light and grace, attain eternal life, since God, who clearly sees, inspects and knows the mind, the intentions, the thoughts and habits of all, will, by reason of his supreme goodness and kindness, never allow anyone who has not the guilt of willful sin to be punished by eternal sufferings.¹¹

In the same Encyclical Pius IX also reaffirmed the necessity of the Church for salvation and noted that those who are “contumacious against the authority and the definitions” of the Church or “who are pertinaciously divided” from her “cannot obtain eternal salvation.”¹²

Nevertheless, an important distinction must be kept in mind. Just because people are not culpably ignorant does not mean that thereby they are saved. Their personal response to the illumination that God gives is required. As Fr. Sullivan puts it:

For the first time in the history of the Catholic Church, we have papal authority for explaining that this axiom means: “No salvation for those who are *culpably* outside the Church”. . . . It is important to note *how* Pope Pius said they can be saved, because he has sometimes been taken to mean that people can be saved by ignorance, or merely by keeping the natural law. If one reads his statement carefully, one sees that being “invincibly ignorant of our most holy religion” is a *condition* that must be fulfilled to avoid culpability, but is in no sense a *cause* of salvation. Neither is it correct to say that people are saved merely by keeping the natural law; this would be to fall into

Histoire, Texte et Commentaire de la Constitution Lumen Gentium, vol. I (Paris : Desclée, 1967); G. Thils, “Ceux qui n’ont pas reçu l’Evangile,” in *L’Eglise de Vatican II*, ed. Guilherme Barauna (Paris : Cerf, 1966); Kevin McNamara, “The People of God,” in ed. Kevin McNamara, *Vatican II: The Constitution on the Church: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1968), 142-146; Aloys Grillmeier, “The People of God,” trans. Kevin Smyth, in Vorgrimler, *Commentary*, vol. I, 169-175; Bernard Sesboué, *Hors de l’Eglise pas de salut: Histoire d’une formule et problèmes d’interprétation*. (Paris : Desclée, 2004); and the International Theological Commission’s document “Christianity and the World Religions,” in *International Theological Commission, vol. II, Texts and Documents 1986-2007*, ed. Michael Sharkey and Thomas Weinandy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 168-170. An excellent doctoral dissertation also exists which very thoroughly explores the history of the development of this doctrine: Richard A. Marzheuser, “The *Votum Ecclesiae* and the Necessity of the Church: An Examination of *Lumen gentium* of the Second Vatican Council (STD dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1988).

¹⁰ Sullivan, 108-112.

¹¹ *Acta Pii IX*, I/3, 613. Sullivan, 114. An English translation of the Encyclical is available : Claudia Carlen, ed., *The Papal Encyclicals: 1740-1878*, (Raleigh, NC: McGrath Publishing Co., 1981).

¹² *Ibid.*

Pelagianism, of which Pius IX is surely not guilty. The operative words in his statement are: “through the working of the divine light and grace.” It is this that effects salvation, provided, of course, that people freely cooperate with divine grace.¹³

The *Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston* sums up this long doctrinal development and makes some very important clarifications about the kind of “implicit” faith or “unconscious” desire or longing that are needed to be considered salvific, the kind of response to grace that is necessary. The *Letter* make clear that a rather “high level” of implicit desire is required for the possibility of salvation to be realized.

But it must not be thought that any kind of desire of entering the Church suffices that one may be saved. It is necessary that the desire by which one is related to the Church be animated by perfect charity. Nor can an implicit desire produce its effect unless a person has supernatural faith: “For he who comes to God must believe that God exists and is a rewarder of those who seek Him” (Heb. 11: 6). The Council of Trent declares (Session VI, chap. 8): “Faith is the beginning of man’s salvation, the foundation and root of all justification, without which it is impossible to please God and attain to the fellowship of His children” (DS 1532).¹⁴

Since supernatural faith and charity are necessary for salvation it is clear that not just any metaphysical or vague acknowledgement of God or “religion” or “morality” is sufficient in itself for salvation. Some kind of personal response to grace that involves a surrender in obedience to God who reveals himself, with an accompanying measure of the conforming of one’s life (charity) to his will as he makes it known and as he gives grace to live in harmony with it, and persevere in it to the end, is essential for salvation.

The Council doesn’t clarify how this all precisely happens but there is an interesting body of theological reflection that attempts to throw light on this question.

There continues to be significant theological reflection on how exactly it might be possible for someone who is inculpably ignorant¹⁵ of the Gospel to actually come to supernatural faith and charity without the “propositional clarity” of positive revelation. Rahner points to the probability of there being more dimensions to human consciousness than we have traditionally understood.

There must be more dimensions to human consciousness in its knowing and free decision making, more foreground and background, more data, verbalized or not, accepted or repressed, than traditional theology has explicitly recognized.¹⁶

Both Page¹⁷ and Journet cite Maritain as one who has made a significant contribution in understanding how this might be possible. Journet posits two kinds of “lights” that come to

¹³ Sullivan, 114-15.

¹⁴ DS 3872. Sullivan, 138. See Charles Morerod, *The Church*, 108-109, for a contemporary description of “implicit desire,” based on the teaching of Aquinas: “Implicit desire is possible—in the line of St. Thomas—because the articles of faith are included in some most basic truths (God’s existence and his providence [ST IIa IIae, q.1, a.7]), and thus someone may desire implicitly baptism by being firmly attached to the more elementary truths that he already knows [ST IIa IIae, q.2, a.5].”

¹⁵ See Stephen Bullivant, “*Sine Culpa?* Vatican II and Inculpable Ignorance,” in *Theological Studies*, vol. 72, no. 1 (March 2011): 70-86, for a recent consideration of how inculpable ignorance may apply to contemporary unbelievers.

¹⁶ Karl Rahner, “Forgotten Dogmatic Initiatives of The Second Vatican Council,” *TI*, vol. XXII, 9, 99.

human beings from God. One is “prophetic light” that illumines things that we must perceive for our salvation. The other is “sanctifying light” that calls us to assent to what is illumined in the prophetic light.¹⁸ Journet extensively quotes Maritain¹⁹ on how this process may possibly take place in a “pre-conceptual” manner among those who do not know the Gospel. Maritain himself bases his reflections on the teaching of St. Thomas (ST Ia-IIae, q. 89, a. 6) concerning the theological significance of the first human act of an unbaptized child.²⁰ Maritain’s point, following Thomas, is that contained in that first moral act—if it is an act that chooses the good—there may be an embryonic or rudimentary response to a prophetic and sanctifying light given by God that may actually involve a supernatural faith that is salvific, although quite vulnerable and perhaps unstable if it does not come to consciousness.

With this pre-conceptual, pre-notional knowledge, through the will, of the “good which brings salvation,” of the “good by which I shall be saved,” we receive the least degree of prophetic light necessary in order that theological faith should be able to come into action and make the understanding, really, actually, supernaturally, assent to the mystery of the God who “exists,” and who “rewards those who try to find him.” [Based on Hebrews 11:6, the two foundational beliefs—credibilia—that must be present for salvation.]

But this is a provisional, unstable, dangerous state of faith, a state of childhood; and knowledge of the mysteries of salvation will require that it should leave the shadows, be perfected, reach an adult state, and find its first conceptual expression in the two basic “credibilia.”²¹

Étienne Hugueny makes an even stronger point about the instability and fragility of such a first moral choice.

The good influences of the environment are unfortunately insufficient to prevent the falls and often the corruption of the will in formation; indeed, few there are who are able to resist the evil influences of the environment in which they are developing. It’s therefore common that the young unbeliever, in a pagan environment, will follow the inclination of his corrupt nature and the evil example of the environment where he lives, when the hour arrives for him to choose his primary orientation to his moral life. Avoiding therefore the call of God, the number of negative infidels [this refers to unbelievers who have not yet made a positive choice against God but are unbelievers because of the environment of unbelief in which they grow up] will grow, who by a first sin against God who presented himself to their reason, have placed an obstacle to interior

¹⁷ Pagé, 63-65.

¹⁸ Charles Journet, *What is Dogma?* (New York: Hawthorn, 1964), 15.

¹⁹ Jacques Maritain, “La Dialectique Immanente du Premier Acte de Liberté,” in *Raison et Raisons* (Paris: 1947), 131-156. Also in translation: *The Range of Reason* (New York: Scribner, 1952), 66-85 (cited in Journet, 130, ff).

²⁰ See Thomas O’Meara, “The Presence of Grace Outside Evangelization, Baptism and Church in Thomas Aquinas’ Theology,” in *That Others may Know and Love—Essays in Honor of Zachary Hayes OFM*, ed. Michael F. Cusato and F. Edward Coughlin (New York: The Franciscan Institute, 1997), 119-124, for a useful discussion of this concept in Aquinas. Riccardo Lombardi, in *The Salvation of the Unbeliever* (London: Burns & Oates, 1956), provides a comprehensive study of the question of what constitutes saving faith and how, in various situations, it might be possible for it to come into existence. Lombardi’s work particularly focuses on the theological works in Latin and Italian that explored this question before Vatican II.

²¹ Journet, 35.

illumination or to exterior revelation, through which God would have given them the gift of faith, bringing to perfection their first religious idea.²²

To casually jump from the possibility of people being saved without hearing the gospel, under certain specific conditions, to the presumption that almost everyone is probably saved, is not warranted by the text of *LGb* and the theological and doctrinal tradition of the Church within which it explicitly situates itself. Still less is it warranted by the scriptural foundations of our faith that are specifically cited in the last three sentences of *LG 16*, which we will designate *LGc* and to which we will now turn.

Many commentators mention only the second part of the teaching of *LG 16* that we are considering (*LGb*) about the possibility under certain conditions of people who have never heard the Gospel being saved, ignoring the doctrinal specifications of the important footnote, and either briefly mentioning or more often, completely ignoring the third part of the teaching, the last 3 sentences of *LG 16*, which points out that very often these conditions are not met²³

But very often (*at saepius*)²⁴, deceived by the Evil One, men have become vain in their reasonings, have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and served the world rather

²² Étienne Hugué, “Le scandale édifiant d’une exposition missionnaire,” in *Revue Thomiste*, No. 76 (1933): 217-42, and No. 78-79 (1933): 533-67. The citation is on page 562. (Les bonnes influences du milieu ne suffisent malheureusement pas à empêcher les défaillances et souvent la corruption des volontés en formation ; mais très rares sont celles qui résistent aux influences mauvaises du milieu où elles s’épanouissent. C’est donc le plus souvent, que le jeune infidèle, en milieu païen, suivra la pente de sa nature corrompue et les exemples mauvais du milieu où il vit, quand viendra pour lui l’heure de poser la première orientation de sa vie morale. Se dérochant à l’appel de Dieu, il grossira le nombre des infidèles négatifs, qui, par un premier péché contre le Dieu que leur présentait leur raison, ont mis obstacle à l’illumination intérieure ou à la révélation extérieure qui leur aurait donné le Dieu de la foi, en perfectionnant leur première idée religieuse.)

²³ Josephine Lombardi, *The Universal Salvific Will of God in Official Documents of the Roman Catholic Church* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellon Press, 2007), 79-80, in the book based on her doctoral dissertation briefly mentions the full text of *LG 16* once, but leaves out the critical phrase “very often” and substitutes for it her minimizing paraphrase “some.” She refers repeatedly to the teaching of *LG 16b* (more than a dozen times) to reinforce her argument for a development of the Council teaching in the direction that she points out Jacques Dupuis and Paul Knitter have taken, but never avers to or comments on the significant “third part,” the *LG 16c* teaching. Karl Rahner when claiming support in the teaching of Vatican II for his theory of the “anonymous Christian” and the “salvation optimism” he claims is a major contribution of Vatican II, only mentions *LGb* and ignores the difficult obstacles noted in *LGc*. See Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christians,” in *Theological Investigations* vol. 6 of 23, trans. Karl-H and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), 397-398.

²⁴ The Walter Abbott translation that appeared in 1966 translates the Latin phrase as “But rather often.” The commonly used Flannery translation of the Council documents translates the Latin *at saepius* as “very often.” This is the translation we are using. (Austin Flannery, ed. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. New Revised Edition, vol. I, Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996). Other English translations use “but often,” (the translation of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, the precursor of the National Council of Catholic Bishops; contained in: *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II: Introductions by Douglas G. Bushman* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1999). The Vatican website translation which is available in Appendix I also uses “but often.” The English translation (by Clarence Gallagher) of *Lumen Gentium* in Norman Tanner’s two volume collection of the *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990) uses “more often, however.” The French translation of the text that Congar collaborated on translates *at saepius* as “mais trop souvent.” *L’Église de Vatican II*, Tome I, Texte Latin et Traduction, P.-Th. Camelot (Paris: Cerf, 1966). The Vatican website French translation uses “bien souvent.” The Italian translation on the Vatican website is “ma molto spesso.” The Spanish translation on the Vatican website is “pero con mucha frecuencia.”

than the Creator (cf. Rom. 1:21, 25). Or else, living and dying in this world without God, they are exposed to ultimate despair. Hence to procure the glory of God and the salvation of all these, the Church, mindful of the Lord's command, 'preach the Gospel to every creature' (Mk. 16:16) takes zealous care to foster the missions.

In other words, even though it is possible under certain very specific conditions for people who have never heard the Gospel to be saved, the environment in which such people live is not a "neutral" environment. It is the environment of original and actual sin, personal and social, that is so tellingly described in Romans 1- the whole chapter needs to be considered when understanding what the Council intends by the short citation given - and which more and more is coming to characterize even the environments of previously Christian cultures and civilizations. It is an environment of hostility to God, culpable suppression of the truth, rationalization and justification of abominable behaviors, and the disintegration of personal identity and relational cohesion. It is an environment in which as the societal supports for respect for God and his Law are stripped away it becomes more and more an environment in which "demonic lies" can be infiltrated into the lives of many, even many within the Church, through "plausible liars," and the destruction of human lives and relationships becomes manifest in an unrestrained lawlessness.²⁵

Fr. Francis Martin speaks of the often subtle individual responsibility in this suppression of the truth, but he also recognizes the creation of a *culture* that is constructed on a suppression of the truth. In commenting on the Greek word for "suppression," Martin says:

The verb used here designates the source of all that follows, pointing as it does to the way of a culture that has designed itself to be impervious to the evidence of God. However, the expression speaks most of all of a subtle interior movement by which what is dimly grasped is prevented from growing into full knowledge.²⁶

Most commentators focus on the individual's responsibility, but Martin broadens the discussion, which is important for the situation we are facing today, to include the reality of a culture of suppression and the particular responsibility of the leaders in constructing such a culture.

It is important to realize that this suppression is initially personal, on the part of some leaders who shape the culture, and then also communal or cultural in that the resulting lack of the knowledge of God and the consequences of this becoming embodied in the institutions and thought world of the society. Paul is condemning a *culture* and is uncovering . . . the root cause of an aberration that is so mysteriously easy to generate and perpetuate and finally results in a culture that becomes a bondage.²⁷

²⁵ See 1 Tim 4:1-2; 2 Pet 2:1-22; 2 Pet 3:1-4; 2 Thes2:3-10.

²⁶ Francis Martin, "Revelation as Disclosure: Creation," in ed. Michael Dauphinais & Matthew Levering, *Wisdom and Holiness, Science and Scholarship: Essays in Honor of Matthew L. Lamb* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007), 219.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 223.

The actual condition of the culture in which theology happens can very much influence its preoccupations and even its conclusions. The theology done in a Christendom situation was different than theology done when the Church was illegal and persecuted. As we transition into a post-Christendom situation in the West and deal increasingly with cultures that are hostile to Christianity, our theology and our pastoral strategies will be impacted. Parts of Scripture that did not “resonate” or “make sense” will again make sense. The analysis of hostility to God and the personal and social decay found in Romans 1, which wasn’t applicable in the same way at other times in the Church’s historical embodiments, is becoming increasingly applicable and relevant to our own contemporary situation.²⁸

As Fr. Francis Martin puts it in his study of John’s Gospel as it relates to evangelization:

The essential action of the Paraclete in this passage [Jn 16:7-11] is to prove that the world is culpably wrong, to establish its culpability as world. The difficulty arises when we seek to define the recipient of this action. Is it that the world is brought to acknowledge its sin or that the believers are given irrefutable proof that the world is in sin? Basically, it must be the second. If the world were able to acknowledge its sin, it would no longer be the “world,” that is, a place which, despite the fact that there is still room for freedom and choice, is nevertheless at its depths a ‘demonic, universe of refusal and rejection. . . . The root sin of the world is refusal to believe in Jesus and the place he holds next to the Father as the Revelation of the Father, the root sin is to reject the Truth. “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath.” (Jn 3:36)²⁹

LG 16 as it locates its teaching firmly within the biblical world view of Romans 1, and the doctrinal tradition of the Church, shows how appropriate a “hermeneutic of continuity” is in the interpretation of this important text. Closely read, *LG 16* reaffirms the basic biblical and doctrinal tradition that make of evangelization not simply an “enrichment” for those who are already for the most part “anonymously Christian,” or an “extra” for those who won’t ultimately be able to resist the offer of salvation anyway, no matter what they do, but an urgent responsibility concerning the salvation of many. Those many who are loved by God and for whom Christ died who have not responded in faith and charity to the light that God has given them but have “exchanged the truth for the lie,” culpably suppressing the truth, and have been given over to “foolish thinking” and destructive behavior, desperately need to be called to

²⁸ Richard John Neuhaus, on the *First Things* website (www.firstthings.com), *The Coming Kulturkampf*, November 14, 2008), commenting on H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic book, *Christ and Culture*, states that we are again entering a time when we need to reassess the relationship between Christ and the Church and culture: “Anytime is the right time for Christians to think anew about the perennial question of Christ and culture. *Christ*, in the phrase *Christ and culture* always means Christ *and* his Church. Christ and the Church constitute a distinct society within the surrounding culture that is Babylon. At least that is the depiction in the New Testament and the Great Tradition of Christian teaching. In this community, the promised *not yet* keeps breaking into the *now*. The surrounding Babylon assumes many different cultural forms that may be viewed as different cultures. To look at the larger picture of the relationship between Christ and culture is, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a dizzying experience.”

²⁹ Francis Martin, “The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me: The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Work of Evangelization,” in ed. Steven Boguslawski and Ralph Martin, *The New Evangelization: Overcoming the Obstacles* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 72-73. See also 74-76.

repentance and faith, for the sake of their salvation. As Joseph Fitzmyer, in his commentary on Romans, puts it:

Paul regards this futility of thinking and misguided conduct as manifestations of the wrath of God, not provocations of it. He realizes that *only the apocalyptic light of the gospel can penetrate such darkness*.³⁰

The “new evangelization,” if it is to be successful, must embody a doctrinal clarity that a careful reading of *LG 16* can provide.

Author Note

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³⁰ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 283. Emphasis is mine.