

HOMILY FOR THE FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD year A

Last week, on the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord, our reflection from the Catechism was about the Church as a visible institution, a community; as an interior reality formed from the union of believers with the Trinity through God's graciously given presence; and as a sacrament of this inner unity with God and of the unity of all human beings that God intends will develop from the inner union with God.

Next, the Catechism addresses the question, "For whom is this inner union intended?"

We've just heard St Peter's preaching, that is repeated in the Catechism, that 'In every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable' to God." (CCC #761; Ac 10:34)

As he preached, Peter had in view was God's invitation to the pagan nations to believe that Jesus is the Saviour. In our day, these words help us to understand how salvation is possible when we have a plurality of religions - our Christian faith, the faith of the Jewish people, the faith of Muslims, and the beliefs of non-christian religions.

It is difficult to reflect on this if I, perhaps without even realising it, think that my faith can only be true if someone else's is false.

HUMANITY'S SEARCH FOR GOD

The Catechism works out a solution to the question in several steps.

First, there is an underlying unity of all peoples “because all share a common destiny, namely God.” Judaism and Islam are clear in their belief in the one God. Other religions, “search, among shadows and images, for the God who is unknown ... All goodness and truth found in these religions is a preparation for the Gospel ,,, so that all may at length have life.” #843

Summing up, the Catechism teaches that all humans seek God who is our one destiny. Many men and women, actually the majority, search for God without achieving full clarity, yet goodness and truth are present in their religions.

THE INDIVIDUAL SEARCH

So much for the religious communities. What can we believe about the individual person’s experience of this search for God?

Paradoxically, we can reply that God has first sought every man and woman as his partner in a union of life and love. The human’s search for God is a response to God who first sought her or him.

The Catechism asks us to consider “Those, who through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his Church.”

If they “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 conscience .. they may achieve eternal salvation.” (#847, cf LG 16)

This does not detract from our missionary commitment to offer the gospel to all people. (#848, cf AG 7; EG 14, 15

CCC speaks of those who, with a sincere heart, and 'moved by grace', try to do God's will. Does this mean that they can be saved only if they seek for grace; that, if they seek grace, they must seek to be baptised in the Church?

This phrase, moved by grace, is not about a person's explicit choice. It is the Church's faith that grace is offered to all men and women. It means that no one will be saved without receiving and cooperating with God's help, even if the person may not be consciously aware of how God is drawing her or him to himself.

It is good to hear the exact words of the Catechism: "Since Christ died for all and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partakers, in a way known to God, of the (saving mystery)." (#1260, cf. GS 22, LG 16, AG 7). The optimism exhibited in the Catechism's presentation of the faith of the Church should console us every day.

CONCLUSION Grace more abundant ...

Perhaps our faith about the Holy Spirit is deficient. The Spirit is the active presence of God in every moment of human history. Jesus gave his Spirit so that his own presence would remain among us.

The Spirit working unseen and even unrecognized in human hearts is today's translation of Jesus coming to John for baptism. "Why do you come to me for baptism, when I should be coming to you?" asked John. It is not humankind

that goes to Jesus, but He who goes towards humankind, according to the logic of the Incarnation.

The Spirit is working in human hearts, drawing them to God, without any visible sign. But there is more, the joy of the one who realizes that she has been led by the Spirit and asks, “May I join his visible presence in the Church?”

This teaching consoles us every day in the Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass when we pray for the dead, particularly those who never manifested any faith:

EP II Remember our brothers and sisters who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection AND ALL WHO HAVE DIED IN YOUR MERCY

EP III To our departed brothers and sisters and to ALL WHO WERE PLEASING TO YOU AT THEIR PASSING FROM THIS LIFE, give kind admittance to your kingdom

EP IV Remember also those who have died in the peace of your Christ, AND ALL THE DEAD, WHOSE FAITH YOU ALONE HAVE KNOWN