

VATICAN II AND THE
CATHOLICITY OF SALVATION:
A RESPONSE TO RALPH MARTIN*

NICHOLAS J. HEALY, JR.

“Far from diminishing the urgency of the Church’s missionary task, a hope for the salvation of all is an invitation to be grasped, wholly and without reserve, by the urgency of the Gospel.”



In January of 1941, Henri de Lubac delivered two lectures on the theme of “The Theological Foundations of the Missions.”¹ These lectures are noteworthy for several reasons. First, it is helpful to recall the setting: early 1941 was a dark and difficult time for the Catholic faithful in France. Their country had fallen to Nazi Germany, and the seductive poison of Nazi ideology was making inroads in the Church. More than a few members of the Church were ready to collaborate with the Vichy regime. Together with

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1. Henri de Lubac, “The Theological Foundations of the Missions,” in *Theology in History*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996).

several confreres, de Lubac embarked on a program of aiding the resistance movement by providing “spiritual resistance” to anti-Semitism.² Accordingly, he used the occasion of a lecture on the theological foundations of the missions to remind the faithful of the essential unity of mankind and of Christianity’s abiding indebtedness to Israel, the root from which the Church springs.

When [Christ] speaks as the Son of God, he speaks at the same time as the son of Israel. He confides to his disciples the mission he received from his Father and that which he inherited from his people. Since he is the son of missionary Israel, the Church that he founds to continue Israel can only be missionary.³

The second reason it is worth rereading these lectures by de Lubac is that they anticipate and illuminate the Second Vatican Council’s teaching on the catholicity or universality of salvation. One of the basic questions that de Lubac explores is the relation between the Church’s missionary mandate and the possibility of salvation for those who have not encountered the Gospel. He writes,

Two responses present themselves, two responses that apparently clash, between which it seems that one might have to choose. Are the missions necessary in order to make salvation possible for the pagan, or merely to make it less difficult for him? Is it essentially a question of wrenching him from hell or of providing him with more numerous and more powerful means of grace?⁴

De Lubac labels these two answers a more “rigorist” solution and a more “laxist” solution. In his view, both solutions raise inextricable difficulties. “On the one hand, it is not legitimate to found zeal on false reasons. Now it is false to say that, without a mis-

2. Cf. Henri de Lubac, *Christian Resistance to Anti-Semitism: Memories from 1940–1944*, trans. Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990); see also de Lubac, “Letter to My Superiors,” in *Theology in History*, 428–39; Jacques Prévotat, “Henri de Lubac et la conscience chrétienne face aux totalitarismes,” in *Henri de Lubac et le mystère de l’Église* (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 183–208.

3. De Lubac, *Theology in History*, 379.

4. *Ibid.*, 382.

sionary, the ‘pagan’ would be irrevocably given up to hell.”⁵ Here de Lubac anticipates the teaching of *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes* on the possibility of salvation for those who, through no fault of their own, have not encountered the Gospel.⁶

On the other hand, the idea that the missions simply make it easier for the pagan to be saved “makes the inverse mistake of implying . . . that Christianity might not be absolutely necessary: as if Christianity did not always bring to everyone something which the world cannot do without.”⁷ *Lumen gentium*, 14 expresses the same teaching: “the Church is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church.”

5. *Ibid.*, 383.

6. Cf. *Lumen gentium*, 16; *Gaudium et spes*, 22; *Ad gentes*, 7. In his encyclical letter *Redemptoris missio*, 9–10, John Paul II summarizes Catholic doctrine on the possibility of salvation for nonbelievers. He writes:

[T]he Church believes that God has established Christ as the one mediator and that she herself has been established as the universal sacrament of salvation. . . . It is necessary to keep these two truths together, namely, the real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind and the necessity of the Church for salvation. Both these truths help us to understand the one mystery of salvation, so that we can come to know God’s mercy and our own responsibility. Salvation, which always remains a gift of the Holy Spirit, requires man’s cooperation, both to save himself and to save others. . . . 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. For this reason the Council, after affirming the centrality of the Paschal Mystery, went on to declare that “this applies not only to Christians but to all people of good will in whose hearts grace is secretly at work. Since Christ died for everyone, and since the ultimate calling of each of us comes from God and is therefore a universal one, we are obliged to hold that the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in this Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God.” (*Gaudium et spes*, 22)

7. De Lubac, *Theology in History*, 383.

If both rigorism and laxism are unacceptable, how are we to escape the dilemma? “It may be the case,” de Lubac suggests, that “we have let some error slip surreptitiously into the very givens of the problem. We must then go back to the point of departure and revise these givens.”⁸ First of all, he asks,

[I]s the notion of salvation that is at their foundation any good? Is this notion not basically entirely negative? It makes salvation consist in the attainment of a certain level—the same for all—by which one escapes damnation, and in consequence it sees above all in Christianity a privileged means for attaining this level.⁹

We should reverse the terms and model our concept of salvation on the Christian mystery itself. The gift of salvation offered in Jesus Christ is essentially a mystery of communion—communion with God and communion with all of the blessed. As one who has been loved by God in Jesus Christ, the missionary seeks to communicate this love and this gift of communion. In the words of de Lubac, “the Church is the body of charity on earth. She is the living bond of those in whom this divine flame burns . . . one does not possess charity if one does not want to spread it universally.”¹⁰ The Church, then, is missionary in her innermost nature and in all of her members.

We can now formulate the decisive insight of de Lubac: the salvation offered by God through Jesus Christ and his Church is essentially a social and ecclesial reality.

The Church is a means, the great means of salvation, and she is also herself an end, the supreme end of creation. She is a visible and transitory body, and she is the body of Christ, mysterious and eternal. Just as Jesus Christ is the way that leads to life but also the life itself in which this way ends, so, too, is the Church, according to the aspect under which one considers her: way of salvation, she is also the end; *she is that spiritual unity in which the reality of salvation consists.*¹¹

8. *Ibid.*, 384.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, 386.

11. *Ibid.*, 391 (italics mine). In *Spe salvi*, 14, Benedict XVI commends de Lubac’s book *Catholicisme: les aspects sociaux du dogme* (1938) for helping Catho-

Lumen gentium sounds the same note: “God does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased him to bring men together as one people.”¹² As the “universal sacrament of salvation,” the Church is the locus of salvation—the “spiritual unity in which the reality of salvation consists.”¹³ If we understand this idea in its full depth, it is evident that the title of Francis Sullivan’s well-known book, *Salvation Outside the Church*,¹⁴ is one-sided and misleading. There is no salvation outside the Church for the simple reason that the mystery of the Church, ecclesial union, is itself salvation—given and received “for all and on behalf of all,” as the Byzantine liturgy sings. We will return to this point below.

De Lubac’s reflections on the ecclesial dimension of salvation suggest a path for a fruitful dialogue and debate with Ralph Martin, whose recent book *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization*¹⁵ explores this same question regarding the relationship between the Church’s duty to evangelize and the question of salvation for non-believers. In order to help frame a conversation with Martin, my plan is to proceed as follows: First, I will summarize the structure and basic argument of his book *Will Many Be Saved?* Secondly, I will outline some questions or friendly criticisms regarding his interpretation of the Second Vatican Council and the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Drawing on the work of Joseph Ratzinger / Benedict XVI, a concluding Part Three will present an alternative account of what Vatican II actually teaches about salvation and how this bears on the missionary task of the Church.

lic theology return to what is in fact a more traditional understanding of salvation as a communal reality. Benedict writes: “Against [the modern and falsely individualistic view of salvation], drawing upon the vast range of patristic theology, de Lubac was able to demonstrate that salvation has always been considered a ‘social’ reality. Indeed, the Letter to Hebrews speaks of a ‘city’ (cf. 11:10, 16; 12:22; 13:14) and therefore of communal salvation.”

12. *Lumen gentium*, 9.

13. De Lubac, *Theology in History*, 391.

14. Francis Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

15. Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012); hereafter *WMBS*.

I. AN OVERVIEW OF THE ARGUMENT IN
WILL MANY BE SAVED?

The aim of Ralph Martin's book *Will Many Be Saved?* is to renew the Church's commitment to evangelization in the context of a profound crisis of faith that stems in part from a forgetfulness of Jesus' teaching regarding hell. The argument unfolds in three steps. The first part of the book involves a careful exegesis of section 16 of *Lumen gentium*. This text contains an important teaching on the question of whether and how human beings who have not heard the Gospel can attain salvation.

In a nutshell, *Lumen gentium* (together with *Gaudium et spes*) affirms that all men and women are called by God to salvation. Salvation is possible for those who have not encountered the Gospel, but only under certain conditions:

i.) These individuals must not be culpable for their ignorance of the Gospel: "Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved."¹⁶

ii.) Salvation is possible by virtue of grace that comes from Christ's sacrifice and that is communicated by the Holy Spirit, in a manner known only to God.

iii.) For salvation to be accomplished or realized, there must be a free consent or cooperation with God's grace. It follows that the possibility of salvation for all does not guarantee that all will be saved.

iv.) As St. Paul teaches, human beings have often exchanged the truth of God for a lie. The consequence of dying without God (or what the tradition describes as dying in a condition of mortal sin) is eternal damnation.

The early chapters of *Will Many Be Saved?* situate this teaching within the context of *Lumen gentium* as a whole. Drawing on the work of Francis Sullivan, Martin recounts the development of doctrine that paved the way for Vatican II's teaching on the possibility of salvation for those who have not heard the Gospel. He also presents the scriptural foundations for *Lumen gentium*'s account of the sinfulness of the human condition and our tendency to reject the truth of God.

16. *Lumen gentium*, 14.

Of particular importance for the overall argument of the book are the concluding sentences of section 16 of *Lumen gentium*, which have not received the attention they deserve in most commentaries on Vatican II. These sentences immediately follow the affirmation that it is possible for non-Christians to attain salvation:

But often men, deceived by the Evil One, have become vain in their reasonings and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator. Or some there are who, living and dying in this world without God, are exposed to final despair. Wherefore to promote the glory of God and procure the salvation of all of these, and mindful of the command of the Lord, "Preach the Gospel to every creature," the Church fosters the missions with care and attention.

Interpreting this passage, Martin emphasizes that while salvation is *possible* for nonbelievers under certain conditions, very often these conditions are not met. Hence, "it matters whether the Gospel is preached or not."¹⁷

After presenting the teaching of *Lumen gentium*, the second step in the book's argument involves a critical assessment of the theology of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar. In the eyes of Martin, these two theologians have contributed to "an atmosphere of universalism" that has undermined the Church's commitment to evangelization. Specifically, Rahner's theory of "anonymous Christianity" and Balthasar's proposal that we should hope for the salvation of all have overshadowed and obscured the traditional teaching that many, if not most, human beings will suffer eternal damnation. Despite their different approaches to the singularity of Jesus Christ and the salvific mediation of the Church, both theologians have contributed to a culture of universalism—a presumption "that almost everybody is saved, and that perhaps only a few especially evil people end up in hell, and that there are many ways to salvation."¹⁸ And, Martin writes, "if it is not really necessary to become a Christian in order to be saved, why bother to evangelize?"¹⁹

17. *WMBS*, 92.

18. *Ibid.*, 196.

19. *Ibid.*, 5.

The third step in the argument (outlined in the seventh and concluding chapter) is an exhortation for the Church to adjust or change her pastoral strategy. This is the reason the book was written; it accounts for the evangelical passion that radiates from every page of the book. According to Martin, the pastoral strategy adopted by the Second Vatican Council—a strategy that has been confirmed and adopted by Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI—is misguided or flawed. He writes:

Obviously the Council did not intend to depart from the Catholic tradition on this point [the reasons for evangelization]. . . . There was, though, perhaps an unwise silence on important elements of Scripture and tradition—with the best of intentions. It was a matter of a prudential judgment concerning pastoral strategy. In retrospect it might be fair to say it was an unwise silence, a flawed pastoral strategy.²⁰

According to Martin, the crucial mistake of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent magisterial teaching consists in a failure to explain the fundamental reason for evangelization. Throughout the Church's history, theologians and missionaries have presumed that most of humanity is going to hell. The knowledge that many individuals have been and will be eternally lost if they do not encounter the Gospel should be the primary or "most significant" motivation for evangelization.²¹

By contrast, Martin argues, Vatican II's Decree On the Church's Missionary Activity, *Ad gentes*, as well as popes Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI are all silent regarding this fundamental motivation for evangelization. In short, for the past fifty years, the teaching office of the Church has adopted the wrong pastoral strategy. This strategy is aptly summarized by Avery Dulles:

Neither Vatican II nor the present pope [John Paul II] bases the urgency of missionary proclamation on the peril that

20. *Ibid.*, 201.

21. Cf. *ibid.*, 197: "What motivated the Apostles and the whole history of Christian missions was knowing from divine revelation that the human race is lost, eternally lost, without Christ." Martin claims that that awareness was "the most significant motivation for 2,000 years of heroic evangelization."

the non-evangelized will incur damnation; rather they stress the self-communicative character of love for Christ.²²

Martin argues that it is past time for an adjustment. The “most significant” motive for evangelization should be the reality of eternal damnation for those who do not encounter the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Not only are these popes guilty of an “unwise silence,” the teaching of Benedict XVI in his encyclical letter *Spe salvi* has contributed to the culture of universalism that is undermining the Church’s missionary task. Martin even ventures to say that Benedict XVI’s teaching is in need of clarification.²³

II. CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

The purpose of these reflections is not simply to criticize Ralph Martin’s book, but to try to understand more deeply what the Church teaches about the gift of salvation and the missionary task of the Church.

The first point to note is that Martin’s book tends to confuse or conflate two distinct questions. The first question concerns the possibility of salvation for those who have not heard the Gospel. There is a long tradition of reflection and teaching on this question from the Church Fathers and medieval theologians through the struggle with Jansenism to the 1949 letter of the Holy Office concerning the case of Fr. Leonard Feeney.²⁴ In *Lumen gentium*, 16 and in two other impor-

22. Avery Dulles, “The Church as Locus of Salvation,” in *The Thought of John Paul II: A Collection of Essays and Studies*, ed. John M. McDermott (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1993), 176.

23. Cf. *WMBS*, 284, n. 14: “Unfortunately some of the remarks of Benedict have furthered this impression [that everyone or almost everyone will be saved], although it appears he may simply be stating theological speculation and not actually teaching in an authoritarian way. There are a number of texts that give this impression, but the most prominent appearance of this ‘supposition’ is in the encyclical *Spe salvi*. Sections 45–47 of *Spe salvi* seem to be giving the impression that only a few really evil people are candidates for hell and virtually everybody else will be in purgatory and ultimately heaven. The argument of this book would suggest a need for clarification.”

24. Cf. Josephine Lombardy, *The Universal Salvific Will of God in Official Documents of the Roman Catholic Church* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 2007); Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San

tant texts, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council explicitly address this question.²⁵ The teaching of Vatican II has been confirmed and further developed in subsequent magisterial teaching, especially *Redemptoris missio*, *Dominus Iesus*, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.²⁶

Martin's book makes an important contribution to a better understanding of the Church's teaching on this question, but he is less helpful on a second question: the final outcome of God's judgment. This question is reflected in the title of the book, *Will Many Be Saved?* It is the question broached by Hans Urs von Balthasar in his famous book, *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?* These two questions—the possibility of salvation for nonbelievers and the final outcome of God's judgement—are of course related, but they are not the same. The Second Vatican Council did not explicitly address this second question.

To conflate these two questions leads to a mistake in one of two directions. First, there are theologians like Richard McBrien, and to a lesser degree Karl Rahner, who take Vatican II's teaching on the *possibility* of salvation for all to entail a *presumption* in favor of universal salvation. This position, which Balthasar characterizes as "superficial optimism"²⁷ is not grounded in the texts of the Second Vatican Council. To say with John Paul II that there is "a real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind" does not mean that we can or should presume that all will be saved.

On the other side, Ralph Martin assumes a knowledge of the final outcome of the divine judgment that makes the damnation of individual human beings a certainty. This is a venerable theological opinion, but it should not be presented as the authoritative teaching of *Lumen gentium*. Let me cite a few texts from Martin's book to illustrate the interpretative leap. Referring to *Lumen gentium*, 16 he writes,

Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988); Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church*.

25. See the references in note 6 above.

26. John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, 9–10; CDF, *Dominus Iesus*, 20–22, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 846–56.

27. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5: *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 192.

the human race is lost, eternally lost, without Christ, and even though it is possible for people to be saved under certain stringent conditions without explicit faith, “very often” this is not actually the case.²⁸

Elsewhere he writes,

“very often” those for whom salvation is possible do not avail themselves of this possibility.²⁹

This is to presume too much. How, exactly, does Ralph Martin know this? He might of course appeal to the teaching of Augustine among others, but *Lumen gentium*, 16 itself, which is the text at issue here, does not speak of the final outcome of God’s judgment. Guided by the words of scripture, *Lumen gentium* tells us that human beings often exchange the truth of God for a lie, and are thus exposed to final despair. Eternal damnation is a real possibility. But *Lumen gentium* is careful not to say that these individuals are actually in hell. In fact, the precise words of *Lumen gentium*, 16 are an exhortation to work for the salvation of *all* such men [*salutem istorum omnium*]. It would be better and more faithful to the Second Vatican Council’s actual teaching to acknowledge the real possibility of damnation, while leaving final judgment to God.

This leads to my second criticism. In a section devoted to the development of doctrine, Martin writes, “Sometimes tracing the history of the development of an important doctrine can shed considerable light on what precisely are the theological issues involved and can make possible a more nuanced understanding of the doctrine.”³⁰ This claim is of course correct, and Martin’s chapter that traces the history of the axiom “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*” is both informative and illuminating. However, throughout this particular chapter and the book as a whole, Martin ignores an important aspect of the development of the Church’s doctrine concerning salvation. In order to understand the significance of Vatican II’s teaching on the real possibility of salvation for all mankind, it is necessary to recall the development of the

28. *WMBS*, 197.

29. *Ibid.*, 92.

30. *Ibid.*, 24.

Church's understanding of God's universal salvific will, especially in connection with the theology of predestination. Before considering the question of the conditions under which someone can be saved without hearing the Gospel, there is a more basic question that needs to be addressed. Does God truly want to save all of mankind, each and every human being without exception? Anyone familiar with the history of the doctrine of predestination knows that this is neither an idle nor an easy question.

During the course of his struggle with the Pelagian heresy, Augustine came to rely on the idea of limited predestination as the final ground that accounts for why some are saved and some are damned.³¹ For Augustine, "predestination is the divine will *ab aeternitate* to grant an invincible grace to a particular group of individuals chosen from the *massa perditionis* (into which humanity has fallen on account of original sin), so that they might persevere in faith and good works and thereby merit eternal glory."³² This doctrine of selective or limited predestination allowed Augustine to maintain the absolute gratuitousness of grace. That which distinguished the one who attained eternal glory from the one who did not was the divine choice from all eternity before any consideration of merit. Unfortunately, the idea that only some human beings are predestined for eternal life led the great saint to deny that God desires the salvation of all. This is evident in Augustine's interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:4.³³

St. Thomas Aquinas bears witness to an important development in the Church's understanding of God's universal salvific will. Overcoming a limitation in Augustine, Aquinas teaches that God desires to save all. But there remains a certain tension or ambiguity in his thought that stems from his accepting the Augustinian idea of limited predestination.³⁴ Consider how

31. For an overview of Augustine's doctrine of predestination, see Margaret Harper McCarthy, *Recent Developments in the Theology of Predestination* (Rome: Pontifical Lateran University, 1995).

32. *Ibid.*, 7.

33. Cf. Augustine, *Contra Julianum opus imperfectum*, 4, 44; *Enchiridion*, 103, 27; *De correptione et gratia*, 14, 44.

34. Cf. Micha Paluch, *La profondeur de l'amour divin. Évolution de la doctrine de la prédestination dans l'œuvre de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Librairie J. Vrin, 2004).

St. Thomas explains and justifies the idea of reprobation, which is the corollary of limited predestination. The objection that he poses reads as follows: “It seems that God reprobates no man. For no one reprobates what he loves. But God loves every man.”³⁵ In support, Thomas cites one of his favorite verses from the book of Wisdom 11:24: “Thou lovest all things that exist and thou hast loathing for none of the things thou has made.” He answers this objection as follows:

God loves all men and all creatures, inasmuch as he wishes them all some good; but he does not wish every good to them all. So far, therefore, as he does not wish this particular good—namely eternal life—he is said to hate or reprobate them.³⁶

In similar fashion, commenting on the prayer of Christ on the Cross, Aquinas says that “our Lord did not pray for all those who crucified him, as neither did he for all those who believed in him; but only for those who were predestined.”³⁷ It is well known how this unfortunate teaching regarding selective or limited predestination would be seized upon and further exaggerated by the Jansenists.

In 1653 Pope Innocent X condemned the proposition that “it is semi-Pelagian to say that Christ died or shed his blood for all men without exception.”³⁸ Confronted with various attempts to limit God’s universal salvific will, the Church has affirmed with increasing clarity and forcefulness that God desires to save all—each and every human being without exception.³⁹ This development of doctrine regarding the universal salvific

35. Aquinas, ST I, q. 23, a. 3.

36. Aquinas, ST I, q. 23, a. 3 ad 1: “deus omnes homines diligit, et etiam omnes creaturas, in quantum omnibus vult aliquod bonum, non tamen quodcumque bonum vult omnibus. In quantum igitur quibusdam non vult hoc bonum quod est vita aeterna, dicitur eos habere odio, vel reprobare.”

37. Aquinas, ST III, q. 21, a. 4 ad 2: “dominus non oravit pro omnibus crucifixoribus, neque etiam pro omnibus qui erant credituri in eum, sed pro his solum qui erant praedestinati ut per ipsum vitam consequerentur aeternam.”

38. Denzinger, 2005.

39. Cf. Bernard Sesbouïé, *Hors de l’Eglise pas de salut* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2004).

will was confirmed and deepened in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, especially in a text from *Gaudium et spes* frequently cited by John Paul II:

By his Incarnation, he, the Son of God united himself in some fashion to every man . . . since Christ died for all men (cf. Rom 8:32), and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this Paschal Mystery.⁴⁰

In my opinion, it is no longer tenable to teach that only some individuals are predestined for eternal life. John Paul II seems to concur. “Predestination,” he writes, “concerns all human persons, men and women, each and every one without exception.”⁴¹

Vatican II’s teaching on the possibility of salvation for all is not simply concerned with the conditions under which someone who has not heard the Gospel might be saved. At a more basic level, the Council presents a renewed understanding of the catholicity or universality of Jesus Christ’s saving work. In the words of *Gaudium et spes*, “Jesus Christ, who died and was raised for all . . . is the key, the center, and the purpose of the whole of history.”⁴² Therefore, the Church, which lives from Christ’s eucharistic gift of himself, is the “universal sacrament of salvation.”⁴³ Precisely this universality, however, grounds missionary activity, because “the church is called upon to save and renew every creature, so that all things might be restored in Christ.”⁴⁴ “God wills to gather up all that is natural and all that is supernatural into a single whole in Christ.”⁴⁵

The absence of any sustained reflection on the catholicity or universality of Christ’s saving work in Martin’s book is significant

40. *Gaudium et spes*, 22.

41. John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, 9; see also John Paul II, “The Mystery of Predestination in Christ,” General Audience (Vatican City, 28 May 1986).

42. *Gaudium et spes*, 10.

43. *Lumen gentium*, 1.

44. *Ad gentes*, 1.

45. *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 7.

both in terms of his interpretation of the Council and because this doctrine is the ground of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology of hope.

This brings me to a third area of criticism, which concerns the chapter devoted to Balthasar. There are a number of mistakes and misrepresentations in this chapter; I will note some of the more significant ones below. Before getting into the thicket of texts and arguments, it may be helpful to call attention to a more basic shortcoming that pervades the chapter as a whole. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius of Loyola outlines an important principle of interpretation for disputes between fellow Catholics. We should be "more ready," Ignatius tells us, "to put a good interpretation on another's statement than to condemn it as false."⁴⁶ In his treatise *Contra errores Graecorum*, Thomas Aquinas points to the same principle of interpretation: "If we encounter sayings in the ancient Fathers that seem incautious, their statements are not to be ridiculed or rejected. One ought rather to interpret them reverently [*exponere reverente*]."⁴⁷ This hermeneutical principle is not simply a matter of piety toward the Church Fathers, nor does it require glossing over or denying error. But the first task of the interpreter is to understand, and it matters a great deal to know that the author one is interpreting is seeking to communicate the common faith of the Church—to know that the author stands within the living tradition which is the medium of Catholic theology. A generous interpretation is not only a moral obligation, it is the most just and the most adequate to the truth.

In my view, Ralph Martin does not read Balthasar as a Catholic theologian, as someone who seeks to interpret and hand on the faith of the Church. While he mentions that "Balthasar frequently declared his intention to write and live as an orthodox Catholic theologian,"⁴⁸ he seems to question the genuineness of Balthasar's stated intention. We are told, for example, that Balthasar "cast[s] aside two thousand years of profound theological reflection;"⁴⁹ that he has succumbed to "the philosophical

46. Cf. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1951), 11.

47. Thomas Aquinas, *Contra errores Graecorum*, prol.

48. *WMBS*, 135.

49. *Ibid.*, 139.

pressure of Heidegger and the exegetical pressure of Bultmann;⁵⁰ that he “neutralizes scripture” and “rejects the traditional theological synthesis;”⁵¹ and that his “Christology appears . . . to be a cross between Arianism and monophysitism.”⁵²

Whenever there is an ambiguity in a text from Balthasar, instead of presupposing that Balthasar intends what he says to be an expression of, and measured by, the faith of the Church, Martin resolves the ambiguity negatively by trying to show that Balthasar is rejecting two thousand years of tradition and is abandoning the teaching of the New Testament. It would be instructive to compare Martin’s interpretation of Balthasar with his interpretation of Joseph Ratzinger, who holds essentially the same position on the question of whether we can hope for the salvation of all.

Closely connected to this failure to interpret Balthasar as a Catholic theologian is a surprising lack of attention to the basic distinction at the heart of Balthasar’s teaching on the question of salvation: the distinction between hope and knowledge. Martin mentions this distinction, but he consistently ignores or downplays its significance. Instead, he represents Balthasar’s position as: “the thesis that damnation is only a highly unlikely theoretical possibility;”⁵³ or as the “practical presumption that almost everyone will be saved.”⁵⁴ The whole point of Balthasar’s eschatology is that we should not presume; we do not know the outcome of God’s judgment.⁵⁵ As John Paul II teaches in *Redemptoris missio*, “it is necessary to keep these two truths together, namely, the real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind

50. *Ibid.*, 147.

51. *Ibid.*, 139, see also 161.

52. *Ibid.*, 273, citing Alyssa Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

53. *WMBS*, 147.

54. *Ibid.*, 189.

55. Cf. Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 166: “we stand completely and utterly *under* judgment, and have no right, nor is it possible for us, to peer in advance at the Judge’s cards. How can anyone equate hoping with knowing? I hope that my friend will recover from his serious illness—do I therefore know this?” See also *ibid.*, 27–28, 45, 177, 187, 197.

and the necessity of the Church for salvation.”⁵⁶ Balthasar claims that holding these truths together means hoping for the salvation of all, while renouncing the claim to know that all will be saved. The distinction between hope and knowledge is crucial. Human beings *in via* do not know the outcome of God’s judgment.⁵⁷ We should leave judgment to God, trusting in his love and mercy, while remaining mindful of our own sinfulness, of the tendency of human beings to reject God’s love, and of the possibility of eternal damnation.

Of course, it is possible to strongly disagree with this proposal, and to argue that Jesus’ words in the New Testament require us to say that there are human beings suffering eternal damnation. But as theologians such as Avery Dulles have shown convincingly, the Church has not pronounced on this question; Balthasar’s proposal is firmly within the bounds of orthodoxy.⁵⁸

Let me turn, then, to some specific mistakes or misrepresentations in the book. Martin asserts repeatedly that Balthasar affirms the possibility of conversion after death: “Balthasar posits the possible chance(s) [for conversion] after death.”⁵⁹ “Balthasar speculates that perhaps . . . another chance will be given after death for repentance to happen.”⁶⁰ Despite the frequency of this assertion, Martin does not reference a single text from Balthasar that supports this claim.

What is Balthasar’s position on the possibility of a conversion after death? He explicitly and repeatedly rejects the position that Martin ascribes to him. “The absolute decision,” he writes, “must be made in one’s earthly life; in the hereafter, it will be too late.”⁶¹ Speaking of the encounter with Christ in

56. John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, 9.

57. “That Jesus Christ could not give us, nor wished to give us—living as we do in constant danger of sinning, even grievously—a ‘report’ on our life after death but rather enough light to enable us to have hope in God plus a sufficiently serious warning that we must take account of the real possibility of forfeiting our salvation” (Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 177).

58. Avery Dulles, “The Population of Hell,” *First Things* 133 (May 2003): 36–41.

59. *WMBS*, 155.

60. *Ibid.*, 180; see also 162–64.

61. Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 182.

death, he writes, “this is not to imply that a further conversion is still possible at the Judgment, after death.”⁶² Finally, “each human life is unique . . . it is also a life in which each human being confirms his personal freedom. . . . The decision made in time is and remains the basis of his eternity.”⁶³

A second misrepresentation concerns the role of human freedom in relation to salvation. Martin characterizes Balthasar’s position as follows: “we hope in the sure promise of Christ to save everyone no matter what their response to grace is during their lifetime.”⁶⁴ “Balthasar,” he writes, “seems to be championing a supernatural hope that is not conditional on human response.”⁶⁵ It is unclear why Martin ignores the countless texts where Balthasar explicitly denies that we can be saved without regard to our free consent. For example, “Jesus will not ‘do his work without the participation of believers; . . . They are not seized by redemption against their will.’”⁶⁶ Elsewhere the Swiss theologian writes, “we shall not be saved against our own will. We shall be redeemed as living agents who give lively consent to be rescued.”⁶⁷ Finally, at the conclusion of his trilogy he states that

God never forces his love . . . Jesus can hardly push the sinner aside to make room for his own place. He cannot appropriate for himself the sinner’s freedom to do with it what the sinner did not himself want to do. Even more pointedly: he can “redeem” (the word “redemption” refers primarily to ransom paid to release someone from prison, slavery, or debt), but never without my permission: I must continually accept this deed, letting it be true for me. Free men are not pieces of luggage, after all, that can be “redeemed” from the lost and found.⁶⁸

62. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5, 297.

63. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Eschatology in Outline,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 4: *Spirit and Institution*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 423–67, at 462.

64. *WMBS*, 173.

65. *Ibid.*, 176.

66. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5, 287; citing Adrienne von Speyr, *The Letter to the Colossians* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983).

67. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5, 288.

68. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Epilogue*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Fran-

These are not stray remarks. The soteriological significance of human freedom is a central concern of Balthasar from his early writings on Maximus the Confessor through the *Theo-Drama*.

There are other mistakes in Martin's book, such as the idea that Balthasar rejects the validity of distinguishing between God's antecedent will and his consequent will, or the claim that Balthasar simply adopts as his own Rahner's hermeneutics of eschatological statements, or that he thinks grace is irresistible. In summary, Martin's treatment of Balthasar in *Will Many Be Saved?* suggests an unfamiliarity with his corpus of writings coupled with an unfortunate disdain for his person that seems to flow from Martin's opinion that the Swiss theologian has deliberately rejected the teaching of the New Testament and Catholic tradition.

III. THE CATHOLICITY OF SALVATION AND THE PASTORAL STRATEGY OF VATICAN II— THE CONTRIBUTION OF POPE BENEDICT XVI

I conclude by returning to the initial questions that prompted Ralph Martin's study. What does Vatican II actually teach about salvation? What kind of pastoral strategy is adequate to the Council's teaching and ultimately the Gospel itself?

I agree with Ralph Martin that we are living in the midst of a profound crisis of faith. "The real problem at this moment of our history," suggests Benedict XVI, "is that God is disappearing from the human horizon, and, with the dimming of the light which comes from God, humanity is losing its bearings, with increasingly evident destructive effects."⁶⁹ As many others have noted, within the Church there has been a massive failure of catechesis, especially regarding man's ultimate destiny. We are reaping the fruits of a failure of Catholic imagination that is both a sign and symptom of a crisis of faith in the resurrection of the body and the significance of eternal life, including the possibility of eternal damnation. Hans Urs von Balthasar shares all of these

cisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 118–19.

69. Benedict XVI, "Letter Concerning the Remission of the Excommunication of the Four Bishops Consecrated by Archbishop Lefebvre" (10 March 2009).

concerns. What mattered most to him, writes Joseph Ratzinger, “may well be encapsulated in a single phrase of St. Augustine: ‘Our entire task in this life, dear brothers, consists in healing the eyes of the heart so they may be able to see God.’”⁷⁰ “This is what mattered to Balthasar,” Ratzinger continues, “healing the eyes of the heart so they would be able to see the essential, the reason, and the goal of the world and our lives: God, the living God.”⁷¹ Ralph Martin presents a radically different assessment of the Swiss theologian. Because he conflates Christian hope with “salvation optimism,” Martin overlooks and misrepresents the theocentric catholicity and the missionary dynamism animating the life and work of Balthasar.

There is, however, a more important weakness or imbalance in Martin’s book that goes beyond his judgment about a particular theologian. When Martin unfolds and elaborates the pastoral strategy of Vatican II, it amounts essentially to “a desire to accentuate the positive.”⁷² Hence the need for an adjustment.⁷³ I am not sure that Martin’s account does justice to the theological vision and pastoral concern of the ecumenical council, and I think it overlooks the most important contribution that the Second Vatican Council has made to evangelization.

At the heart of the Council’s teaching is a confession of

70. Joseph Ratzinger, “Homily at the Funeral Liturgy of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 291–92; the citation from Augustine is from *Sermo* 88, 6 (PL 38, 542).

71. *Ibid.*

72. Cf. *WMBS*, 191f.: “There is a general consensus among commentators on Vatican II that a conscious decision was made, by John XXIII before the Council, affirmed at the Council itself, to change the pastoral strategy of the Catholic Church in an attempt to communicate more effectively with the modern world. . . . The Council chose to ‘accentuate the positive’ in its presentation of the Gospel, highlighting the great beauty of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the ineffable mercy and goodness of God, and the beauty of the Church as a sacrament of Christ showing forth his face to the world. It chose to affirm everything it could about the endeavors of the modern world and modern man and not speak much about the consequences of rejecting the good news. . . . This pastoral strategy has continued to guide the teaching on evangelization and mission in the postconciliar Church.”

73. Cf. *WMBS*, 195: “While there are many sound reasons to emphasize the positive in the Church’s relations with the modern world, it has also become clear that an adjustment in her pastoral strategy is needed.”

faith in Jesus Christ. It is good to recall the words of Pope Paul VI at the start of the second session:

From what point, dear brethren, do we set out? . . . What is the road we intend to follow? What is the goal we propose to ourselves? These three very simple and at the same time very important questions have, as we well know, only one answer, namely that here at this very hour we should proclaim Christ to ourselves and to the world around us; Christ our beginning, Christ our life and guide, Christ our hope and our end. . . . Let no other light be shed on this Council, but Christ the light of the world! Let no other truth be of interest to our minds, but the words of the Lord, our only Master! Let no other aspiration guide us but to be absolutely faithful to him!⁷⁴

As Paul VI's words suggest, the confession of faith in Jesus Christ as the center of history and the cosmos is the foundation and capstone of the pastoral program of the Council.⁷⁵ Put another way, the novelty of the Council's theological vision, which is also the most ancient and traditional teaching, concerns the centrality and the catholicity of Jesus Christ—the Alpha and the Omega, the one in whom all things hold together.⁷⁶

According to the Council, Jesus Christ has bestowed his catholicity upon the Church. Christ has united himself to each and every human being, and ultimately the whole cosmos. By the same token, the Church's catholicity is vertical and horizontal: it embraces all men and all of man, and ultimately the entire cosmos. As *Lumen gentium* already teaches, God does not want to save us alone; i.e., as so many isolated individuals. Interpreting and developing the eschatological vision of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Benedict XVI poses an incisive question in *Spe salvi*:

74. Paul VI, "Opening Speech of the Second Period of the Council" (29 September 1963), *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, vol. 2, pars I, 85.

75. Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 10.

76. For example, the reason why the Council is interested in a dialogue with the modern world is faithful obedience to "the plan of God to gather up all that is natural and all that is supernatural into a single whole in Christ" (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, 7).

[H]ow could the idea have developed that Jesus's message is narrowly individualistic and aimed only at each person singly? How did we arrive at this interpretation of the "salvation of the soul" as a flight from responsibility for the whole? . . .

[W]e must also acknowledge that modern Christianity, faced with the successes of science in progressively structuring the world, has to a large extent restricted its attention to the individual and his salvation. In so doing it has limited the horizon of its hope and has failed to recognize sufficiently the greatness of its task.⁷⁷

Pope Benedict suggests that in order to renew the missionary dynamism of the Church, it is necessary to move beyond a falsely individualistic understanding of salvation. Guided by the words and deeds of Christ, the Christian faithful are called to re-discover the catholicity or universality of God's saving work. As Paul teaches, creation itself groans in travail and eager longing for the revelation of the sons of God (cf. Rom 8:19–22). The gift of salvation in Christ presupposes and discloses anew the relational or social dimension of human nature:

[W]e should recall that no man is an island, entire of itself. Our lives are involved with one another, through innumerable interactions they are linked together. No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone. . . . So my prayer for another is not something extraneous to that person, something external, not even after death. In the interconnectedness of being, my gratitude to the other—my prayer for him—can play a small part in his purification. And for that there is no need to convert earthly time into God's time: in the communion of souls simple terrestrial time is superseded. It is never too late to touch the heart of another, nor is it ever in vain. In this way we further clarify an important element of the Christian concept of hope. Our hope is always essentially hope for others.⁷⁸

Pope Benedict's understanding of Christian hope, shared by Hans Urs von Balthasar, is neither presumptuous nor indiffer-

77. Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, 16, 25.

78. *Ibid.*, 48.

ent to the drama of heaven and hell. Far from diminishing the urgency of the Church's missionary task, a hope for the salvation of all is an invitation to be grasped, wholly and without reserve, by the urgency of the Gospel. Hell remains real, the possibility of damnation bespeaks the seriousness and the dignity of human freedom and the drama of life on earth. *Caritas Christi urget nos.*

This proposal of a missionary hope for the salvation of all does not make sense within Martin's framework, but the problem is precisely that Martin's framework needs to be questioned. Thinking with the Church means thinking more deeply about the meaning of "salvation" in light of the Church's confession that Jesus Christ is "the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rv 22:13). By dying and rising "in place of all," Christ actually creates the entire choice between heaven and hell. This choice does not exist where Martin tacitly thinks it does: in some neutral space between two purely future possibilities. Rather, it can exist only as a choice between Him Who Is, prior to my choice, the already existing fullness of being or self-exclusion from him. Christ makes his dying and rising the Reality encompassing and preceding all our choice; he therefore makes "being-saved" the Reality encompassing and preceding all our choice; and, in doing so, he reveals what salvation is: indivisible wholeness. This calls for further explanation.

The foregoing is a strict requirement of the doctrine of the Resurrection, which Paul, for example, reads in a truly "cosmic perspective," e.g., in Romans 8 salvation is liberation from "*p̄thora*," meaning the corruption or disintegration which keeps us apart from God, from one another, and from ourselves. And all creation is to participate in that "freedom of glory." In this sense, salvation is by definition universal. Salvation is not just catholic; it is, consists in, catholicity, i.e., wholeness.

Salvation, then, is wholeness. This wholeness is invested centrally in man as what de Lubac calls "*un seul tout*," which applies at once to the body-soul composite as a single whole and, inseparably, to man, or the *genus humanum*, which Augustine calls a "*sociale quiddam*." When Pope Benedict says that "no one is saved alone," he is not only speaking about the means of salvation, but the content or form of salvation itself. The crucial point is that both aspects of the gift of salvation-as-wholeness (personal and social) are already realized and present in the form of an

intact, incorruptible body: the body of the Risen Christ, which unfolds in “his body, the Church.” The Church is the body of salvation—present under a sacramental veil.

Why is it important that the Church prays and hopes for the salvation of all?⁷⁹ This hope expresses the Church’s faith that Christ has already died and risen, and that his death and Resurrection are now the Really Real that always precedes all of us. Through the Holy Spirit, the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection is “*interior intimo*” to all our freedom. To hope for all is to realize the priority of the actuality of salvation over our choice of it—and, therefore, to realize just how real, and how profound, that choice is. Which means that it is because we have hope for all that we undertake mission to unbelievers for the sake of their salvation.

With this last claim we return to Henri de Lubac’s question about how to hold together the Church’s missionary mandate and the possibility of salvation for nonbelievers. What was said above implies both a strong affirmation that there is no salvation outside the Church and, at the same time, an equally strong affirmation that nonbelievers can be saved through an invisible integration into the Church. The key is the notion of hope.

If hope becomes mission, the hidden heart of mission becomes substitution. To hope is to “realize” what it means for Christ to have died and risen for all, and in the person of all; to realize that, however, is to take over the attitude involved in that death/resurrection, which is precisely the attitude of substitution.

Which means that the kind of “certainty” involved in hope can be “declarative” only to the extent that it is “performative,” i.e., to the extent that I vouch for and enact its truth dramatically through substitution. Precisely in the night of abandonment, where all is given over, but no fruit is visible—precisely there the absolute priority of salvation shines forth . . . in hidden, sacramental form.

This does not mean that the Church can diminish her commitment to overt mission. It means, rather, that the depth-

79. “Lord, accept the offering of your Church; and may what each individual offers up to the honor of your name lead to the salvation of all. For this we pray to you through Christ our Lord” (Weekday Mass I, Tuesday, Offertory Prayer).

dimension of overt mission is substitution. This is why, e.g., Thérèse, the Carmelite, is also the patroness of the missions.

So how does this answer the question about the salvation of those outside the visible Church? It remains true that there is no salvation outside the Church, because individual salvation is incorporation into the Body that is “universal salvation,” i.e., salvation as a “concrete universal.” But the point is that, to participate in that salvation is, by definition, to be caught up in the dynamic of substitution. And so to offer myself, my body, as a “place” where—also in virtue of the natural bonds uniting us all—*gratia perficit naturam*—those “outside” can come to be integrated, invisibly, into the “inside.”

This is just the opposite of a kind of diffuse Rahnerian universality of grace, as if grace were in the air like a gas. The point is that the saving grace that is made available through the Holy Spirit to unbelievers always depends on the treasury of the Church’s merits, which flow from and return to the body of the crucified and risen Lord. This also underscores, once again, how substitution for nonbelievers is itself an act of mission, and the core of the missionary enterprise.

For the saints, “Hell” is not so much a threat to be hurled at other people but a challenge to oneself. It is a challenge to suffer in the dark night of faith, to experience communion with Christ in solidarity with his descent into the Night. One draws near to the Lord’s radiance by sharing his darkness. One serves the salvation of the world by leaving one’s own salvation behind for the sake of others.⁸⁰

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NICHOLAS J. HEALY, JR. is assistant professor of philosophy and culture at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

80. Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 218.