# *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* by Francis A. Sullivan (review)

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*Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response.* By FRANCIS A. SULLIVAN. New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1992. Pp. i + 224. $12.95 (paper).

The subtitle of the volume describes well its purpose and content. The author surveys in chronological order, beginning with the earliest ecclesiastical writers and ending with John Paul II, the various interpretations of the axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. What prompted Sullivan to undertake a historical rather than systematic approach in his volume is the conviction that without taking into account the historical and cultural factors that conditioned the formulation of this axiom it is impossible to make sense of the shift from the exclusivism of the pre-Vatican II Church to the inclusiveness of Vatican II and post-Vatican II theology with regard to the salvation of those who are not members of the Roman Catholic Church.

The principle that guides Sullivan's attempt to disclose the *meaning* embodied in the manifold formulations of the axiom "there is no salvation outside the Church" is Pope John XXIII's distinction between "the substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith" and "the way in which it is presented," and the more recent emphasis of the Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973) on the historical condition affecting the expression of divine revelation.

As a historical study, *Salvation Outside the Church?* is an excellent continuation of Louis Caperan's two-volume work *Le problème du salut des infidèles,* which is still unavailable in English. Obviously an overview of almost two thousand years of theological discussion of this problem has to be highly selective if one is not to miss the forest for the trees, and Sullivan's choice of authors as well as of historical periods for discussion is judiciously made. If a complaint is to be made in this regard, it is that he has focused too much attention on magisterial documents, and Roman documents at that, and not enough on contemporary theology. True, he devotes a chapter to the theory of "anonymous Christians," espoused mainly by Karl Rahner (chapter 10), and defends it against criticisms by Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Hans Küng, and Max Seckler. He is well aware that Rahner's theory has become the position of mainstream Catholic theology and cites authors who support it in one way or another (p. 181). However, a book that claims to present "the Catholic response" to the problem posed by the axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* should, one would expect, have discussed in greater detail the various positions of contemporary Catholic theologians on this issue. It is to be fervently hoped that Sullivan will take up this task in his next book.

Sullivan's basic thesis is that the substance underlying the various negative formulations of the axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* is the positive belief that "God has assigned to the church a necessary role in the accomplishment of his plan for the salvation of humanity" (p. 12). Such a thesis is, of course, neither new nor startling. Hans Küng had already said that much in his 1967 *Die Kirche* (English translation, p. 318).

What is helpful in Sullivan's account is his explanation of both the intent of those who affirmed this axiom with its apparent exclusiveness and the limitations that prevented them from perceiving the universality of God's saving grace. With regard to intent, Sullivan shows convincingly that the patristic usage of the axiom is intended as a warning for those Christians who had separated themselves from the *catholica* either by schism or by heresy that they must remain within it in order to be saved, whereas the medieval usage is intended to warn pagans and Jews that they should accept the message of the Gospel now that it had been announced to them. With regard to limitations, Sullivan singles out two: the geographical and the psychological. On the one hand, there was before the discovery of America the conviction that the world was identical with Christian Europe. This belief led theologians to postulate that the Gospel had been spread throughout the world. On the other hand, their ignorance of the dynamics of human choice caused them to impute bad faith and guilt to all those who refused to accept the Gospel.

The shift from the pessimism of the pre-Vatican II Church to the optimism espoused by Vatican II and post-Vatican II theologians regarding the possibility of salvation for non-Roman Catholics is credited by Sullivan to two factors: Vatican II's teaching on the hierarchy of truths (the primacy being granted to God's universal will to save rather than to the necessity of baptism and the Church as means of salvation) and the broadening of theological horizons brought about by ecumenical and interreligious dialogues.

As a historical study, *Salvation Outside the Church?* is a helpful survey of a vexed issue in ecclesiology and the theology of grace. It accomplishes what it sets out to do, with clarity of exposition, economy of expression, and fairness of judgment, qualities that grace Sullivan's other works such as *Magisterium* and *The Church We Believe In.* As has been pointed out above, Sullivan's basic thesis is neither startling nor new, but theological merit often does not lie in radicality and novelty. One is grateful to Sullivan for having shown that the negative-sounding formula "No salvation outside the Church" is "only one way, and a very imperfect way at that, in which Christians have expressed their belief that God has given to his church a necessary part to play in his plan to save the world" (p. 204).

Excellent as Sullivan's book is, it has raised a host of questions which, though it cannot be fairly expected to discuss them at length, much less to resolve, are at the heart of ongoing reflections about the possibility of salvation outside the visible Church. Such questions concern the concrete ways in which God works in the lives of peoples of different religions, the unique and normative role of Christ in the history of salvation, the function of non-Christian religions as mediations of salvation, and so on. And the debate on these issues rages on among Catholic as well as non-Catholic theologians! One wishes that Sullivan had given a fuller account of this debate which is central in interreligious dialogue.

More directly connected with the method and approach of the book itself are the questions of dogmatic development and the hermeneutics of doctrines. To put it more concretely, was Leonard Feeney, with whose ironic fate the book opens and ends, simply expressing the ancient doctrine of the deposit of the faith concerning salvation in the Church in a negative and imperfect fashion? Or was he (and more importantly, popes and official teachers of the faith) wrong in affirming the exclusiveness implicit in the formula *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (which apparently they did)? If the latter, then the issues of infallible magisterium and dogmatic 'development' raise their ugly heads, and one has to come to terms with them.

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*Character.* By JOEL KUPPERMAN. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. Pp. vi + 193.

The two theses of J. Kupperman's *Character* are "that character is of central importance to ethics and that ethical philosophy will have to be restructured once this is understood" (p. 3). The argument has three stages: the first three chapters explicate the notion of character and its relationship to the notions of the self and of responsibility; the next two consider the dominant, rival theories in contemporary ethics; the last two address the topics of value and the place of character in ethics. In two appendices, Kupperman applies the substantive conclusions of the work to the issues of moral psychology and the education of character. A brief review cannot communicate the many nuances of argument and the precise and lucid style that distinguish the book. While certain parts of the argument seem problematic, or at least in