

## Can those who are not baptized in Christ be saved?

Jesuit theologian explains the tension between the universalism of God's grace and the need to bring all people to Jesus Christ.



Father Christoph Theobald

"Anonymous Christian" is a term that's most often credited to the influential 20th century Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner (1904-84). Rahner used it to try to explain how people who have never been baptized or have never known of Christ could still be saved. But he was not the first Catholic thinker to explore the means by salvation may be also available to non-believers. And it's still an issue that is debated in Church circles today.

Christoph Theobald, a professor at the Jesuit faculty of theology in Paris (Centre Sèvres) looked more closely at the topic in this interview with La Croix's Caroline Celle.

### **La Croix: In the history of Christianity, is it necessary to follow the precepts of the Church in order to obtain salvation?**

Father Christoph Theobald: From the very origins of Christianity, belonging to the Church has been the condition for obtaining salvation. But this Christian identity, which involves the performance of rites and participation in worship, is not everything. One of our greatest fathers of the Church, St. Augustine, explained in the fourth century that Christians can be members of the visible "body" of the Church without being members "of the heart".

When the inquisitor asks Joan of Arc, "Are you in a state of grace," she gives the right answer: "If I am in a state of grace, may God keep me there; if I am not in a state of grace, may he put me there.

"In the Middle Ages, Saint Thomas Aquinas said that even before receiving the sacraments, the desire to obtain grace allows one to enter into communion with God.

### **Does the Church consider that one can be saved even when one does not have the Christian faith?**

The question of the salvation of the "pagans" is a theological controversy that has traversed all the eras of Christianity.

In the Bible, we find among evangelists a permanent tension between particularity -- salvation will first be given to the people of Israel, God's chosen people -- and universalism -- salvation will be given to all people of good will who turn to God.

During the Renaissance, the certainties of European Christians were shaken: the Byzantine Empire fell into the hands of the Ottomans, a Muslim people, and explorers discovered new lands, new peoples, who had never known the Christian tradition.

This clash of cultures led Christian intellectuals to question themselves: are people who are not part of the Church condemned for that?

In 1453, shortly after the capture of Constantinople, the theologian and philosopher Nicholas of Cusa published a treatise, *On the Peace of Faith (De Pace Fidei)*. It is an important work in the history of interreligious dialogue because it sets the scene for a peaceful debate between a Christian, Muslim and Jew.

Then, in the 19th Century, the philosopher Maurice Blondel presupposes that the Holy Spirit is poured out throughout all humanity, and works in every human being without their needing to be aware of it.

### **Did the Second Vatican Council provide an answer to this controversy over the salvation of non-Christians?**

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, written during the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), defends the salvation of people who are deprived of the knowledge of the Gospel, if they behave in an upright and virtuous manner.

The Church believes that Christ died for all and considers that the human conscience, when upright, is ordered to the will of God.

It holds, therefore, that the Holy Spirit offers to all, in a way that only God knows, the possibility of being associated with the paschal mystery. This response to the question of salvation has led to divisions within the Church, since the most rigorous Christian movements have felt that Christian identity was being eroded, and that God's grace was losing its meaning. Some, in a desire for universalism, have tended to link up with other non-Christian militant movements and have favored this commitment to the detriment of their membership in the Church, which did not fail to stir up new tensions.

The post-conciliar popes have spoken repeatedly to maintain the paradoxical tension between the universalism of grace and the need for evangelization.

Read more at: <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/can-those-who-are-not-baptized-in-christ-be-saved/13598>

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