

# Salvation

Salvation is being united fully (*Theosis*) with God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for eternity. It is achieved through a process (a “journey” or “pilgrimage” is the image that is often used today) which begins with Justification and is completed through Sanctification.

- Justification is being accepted by God as though we were righteous even though we are not: being “born again” (*Baptismal Regeneration*) and made a member of God’s Family, the holy Catholic Church. It is an unearned gift given to us through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.
- Sanctification is the process of becoming holy - whole, complete - as God created humankind to be. One must be whole and complete as God created us to be in order to be fully united with God for eternity (“to be in Heaven”). Heaven by definition is that state where all things are “made perfect.” A person cannot create or earn Sanctification him/herself. It can only come through God-given grace, and the principal – but not only - means of receiving that grace is the seven Sacraments, to which, however, we must respond and cooperate.

God is love, and God loves unconditionally. God wants to unite all people to Himself. God reaches out to all humankind in all ways possible that do not destroy His gift to humankind of free-will. God will take care of all persons of goodwill who are doing their best in the light of the knowledge they have and in accordance with their ability. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it, “all who die in God’s grace and friendship, even if still imper-

fectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation....”

The greatest of the medieval Western theologians, St Thomas Aquinas, wrote:

To be saved a person must live in union with Christ and with the Catholic Church which is His Mystical Body.

This union with Christ and the Church is fully achieved here on earth through the Eucharist.

The reception of Baptism begins a person’s union with Christ but is directed to the Eucharist as its completion and perfection.

For those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of all or part of God’s salvific plan in Christ, their efforts to live a good life in cooperation with grace and according to the dictates of conscience is to be seen as an implied desire for union with Christ, and therefore for the Eucharist, which is Christ.

The Catholic Church has three states: the Church “Militant” here on earth, the Church “Expectant” in Paradise (also called the Intermediate State and the Nearer Presence of God), and the Church “Triumphant” in Heaven.

When each person of good will – each “friend of God” - reaches the end of this life he/she has the choice of continuing his/her journey toward perfection as a member of the Church Expectant or being totally separated from

God for eternity (“going to Hell”). Each person who has died in the grace and friendship of God has this choice. This is known in theology as the Particular Judgment (not to be confused with the General Judgment, often called Judgment Day, when Christ returns to earth as Lord of lords and King of kings and all things will be seen as they truly are).

If one chooses to continue his/her journey as a member of the Church Expectant in Paradise, he/she can complete the process of Sanctification there. There are no shortcuts; in order to enter Heaven one must be made perfect. However God keeps reaching out to us and is always ready – whenever we will let Him – to draw us to Himself. The Church Expectant is one of the ways He keeps reaching out to us.

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*What you are presenting here is a loving God who is reaching out to all people. That is not what I have heard so often about Salvation. What I have heard is “hell-fire and brimstone” teaching about God’s judgment and His punishing sinners by sending them to Hell.*

There are actually two issues here.

First, in the West (i.e. continental Europe) in the Middle Ages there was a major shift in teaching, in spirituality, and in liturgy from the Incarnation as the foundation and structure of theology to the Atonement as the foundation and structure of theology.\* As the centuries passed the emphasis on humankind’s sinfulness and unworthiness grew into the popular teaching that humankind is totally depraved and needs to live in constant fear of God’s avenging wrath. This medieval Atonement-centered theology and preoccupation with human sin and God’s punishment was continued after the Reformation/Counter Reformation by both Protestants and Roman Catholics.

The Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Anglican Churches, however, maintained the original theological Incarnational foundation of the Early Christian Church. The Roman Catholic Church, beginning with the Second Vatican Council of the 1960’s, is now rediscovering and

recovering this original Christian theological foundation and structure.

Second, because of the extreme abuses in the continental European Church in the late Middle Ages, the Protestant reformers – Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, in varying degrees – threw out the Biblical teaching that the Church on earth is the divine Body of Christ which mediates saving grace and that the Church has three states. As a result they were forced construct out of “whole cloth” new (and completely unBiblical) teachings about Salvation. John Calvin taught that God predestined each human being either to be saved or to be damned to Hell, and there was nothing anyone could do about his/her predestined state. Martin Luther, on the other hand, taught in general and very nonspecific terms that a person is saved by having a relationship of “faith alone” with Jesus Christ. In addition Luther invented a “doctrine of assurance” which said that if one is saved, the person knows it.

Luther’s teaching was later developed and expanded into the Protestant Fundamentalist doctrine that each person in this life must “accept Jesus Christ as his/her personal Lord and Savior” and when he/she has done this once he/she goes directly to Heaven at the end of this life (there is no historic theological or Biblical basis for this teaching whatsoever). On the other hand, if one has not had this (generally defined as emotional) experience this life, the person at the end of his/her life goes directly to Hell, and there is nothing he/she can do about it. Hence the grim, unChrist-like (and again completely unBiblical teaching) that anyone not a “saved Christian” emotionally at the moment he/she dies is immediately and irrevocably damned to Hell. We must say that this is literally heresy: erroneous and dangerous teaching. God’s gift of Salvation does not depend on having had an emotional experience or a legalistic transaction. That view of God and His gift of Salvation is simply shallow and trivial as well as untrue.

*If that is true, why bother to live a Christian life now, if we get another chance in the “Church Expectant”?*

God is a God of perfect love. There are, however, no shortcuts. God is also a God of perfect justice. Heaven by definition is that state where all things are perfect, whole, complete as God created them to be. In order to enter Heaven we must become complete, perfect, whole

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\* For a detailed history of this shift see James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

("holy"). That is a "journey" or "pilgrimage" which is achieved only through the salvific grace of God. The growth in the Triune God we do not achieve in this life, we may choose to continue in Paradise; but that does not mean we can "get away with things" and "slip in the back door" of Heaven. Everyone must go through the process of Sanctification whether it is here on earth or in Paradise.

Salvation is not just being saved from Hell in the next life. It is also being saved for the fullness of life here on earth now. One theologian has said that Salvation is "God's activity on behalf of creation and especially humans in bringing all things to God's intended goal. More specifically, salvation entails God's deliverance of humans from the power and effects of sin so that creation in general and humans in particular can enjoy [now] the fullness of life intended for what God has made."

*What about Jesus' saying that "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me" and the teaching of the Church that, as St Thomas Aquinas put it, "to be saved a person must live in union with Christ and the Catholic Church which is His Mystical Body"?*

God's gift of saving grace comes to us from the Father, through the Son, by means of the power of the Holy Spirit. This is true both when we receive grace in the Church Militant on earth and when we receive grace in the Church Expectant in Paradise.

Likewise the Catholic Church has three states: on earth, in Paradise, and in Heaven. Saving grace comes through union with the Church. This is true both of the Church Militant and the Church Expectant.

Our Lord's saying and St Thomas Aquinas' teaching are gracious and inviting promises. They only become narrow, negative, and punitive if one – like the Protestant reformers – denies the Bible's teaching about the Church Expectant.

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In discussing the Early Christian understanding of Salvation, which is historically the defining soteriology for Eastern Orthodoxy and Anglicanism, Dr Donald Fairbairn has written\*:

– In the [Early Christian] understanding of reality, veneration of Saints is not a threat to the unique place of Christ but actually affirms Christ. The Saints are Saints precisely because of their relationship to Christ, and paying honor to them constitutes giving honor to Christ and to the fullness of his Church.

Just as God is not "individualistic" but is a fellowship of three eternal persons, so also all of life reflects communion between persons. Honoring Saints who are a part of this communion does not dishonor God in any way at all. Honoring the Saints is a way of gaining encouragement as we follow their footprints along the path to *Theosis*; we do not walk where no one has ever trod before.

– The Saints are not mediators between people and God. Instead they are intercessors who pray for believers on earth. Consequently, when Christians invoke the aid of Saints, this act is no different from asking other living believers to pray for them.

– The attention given to Saints [in the Early Christian Church] was the result of their understanding of *Theosis*; the Saints are those people who have most fully achieved union with God. One theologian has written "All mankind is involved in the process of *Theosis* and the Saints are those who, having advanced nearer to the ultimate goal, can uplift the rest." The way the Saints "uplift the rest" is through their example and their prayers.

– Of all the Saints easily the most honored was Mary, the Mother of God. Mary has most completely achieved the goal of *Theosis*. Mary is the fulfillment of humanity's vocation, the completion of the holiness to which the Church is called. Because Mary is in complete union with God, she is the chief intercessor for all people as we attempt to achieve such union ourselves. She prays for the whole human race.

– Mary represents the summation of *Theosis*. Humanity's purpose is to partake of God's nature, and those who have done this most fully are able to help others progress along the road of *Theosis*.

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\* Donald Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy Through Western Eyes*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

# The Christian Hope

Q. *What is the Christian hope?*

A. The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God's purpose for the world.

Q. *What do we mean by the coming of Christ in glory?*

A. By the coming of Christ in glory, we mean that Christ will come, not in weakness but in power, and will make all things new.

Q. *What do we mean by heaven and hell?*

A. By heaven, we mean eternal life in our enjoyment of God; by hell, we mean eternal death in our rejection of God.

Q. *Why do we pray for the dead?*

A. We pray for them, because we still hold them in our love, and because we trust that in God's presence those who have chosen to serve him will grow in his love, until they see him as he is.

Q. *What do we mean by the last judgment?*

A. We believe that Christ will come in glory and judge the living and the dead.

Q. *What do we mean by the resurrection of the body?*

A. We mean that God will raise us from death in the fullness of our being, that we may live with Christ in the communion of saints.

Q. *What is the communion of saints?*

A. The communion of saints is the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise.

Q. *What do we mean by everlasting life?*

A. By everlasting life, we mean a new existence, in which we are united with all the people of God, in the joy of fully knowing and loving God and each other.

Q. *What, then, is our assurance as Christians?*

A. Our assurance as Christians is that nothing, not even death, shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

- Catechism

*Book of Common Prayer (1979)*

For all the Saints, who from their labors rest,  
who thee by faith before the world confessed,  
thy Name, O Jesus, be for ever blessed.  
Alleluia, alleluia.

Thou wast their rock, their fortress, and their might;  
thou, Lord, their Captain in the well-fought fight;  
thou, in the darkness drear, the one true Light.  
Alleluia, alleluia.

O may thy soldiers, faithful, true, and bold,  
fight as the Saints who nobly fought of old,  
and win, with them, the victor's crown of gold.  
Alleluia, alleluia.

O blest communion, fellowship divine!  
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;  
yet all are one in thee, for all are thine.  
Alleluia, alleluia.

And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,  
steals on the ear the distant triumph song,  
and heart are brave again, and arms are strong.  
Alleluia, alleluia.

The golden evening brightens in the west;  
soon, soon to faithful warriors cometh rest;  
sweet is the calm of Paradise the blest.  
Alleluia, alleluia.

But lo! there breaks a yet more glorious day;  
the Saints triumphant rise in bright array;  
the King of glory passes on his way.  
Alleluia, alleluia.

From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,  
through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,  
singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,  
Alleluia, alleluia.

- Hymn 287

*The Hymnal 1982*