

Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization by Ralph Martin (*Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012*), xvi + 316 pp.

IT IS NOT WITHOUT MERIT that Ralph Martin's recent volume is prefaced by some sixteen endorsements from leading theologians, bishops, and cardinals. *Will Many Be Saved?* is an erudite but accessible work that raises the long-overdue question of whether we have properly received Vatican II's teaching vis-à-vis the possibility of salvation for non-Christians.

As Martin indicates in his preface, the book's principal focus concerns the proper interpretation of *Lumen Gentium* 16, a text that constitutes "the most extensive treatment of this question in the conciliar documents" (xi). At the heart of the author's argument is his contention that the text's last three sentences are almost always ignored. From an analysis of these sentences Martin develops his thesis that they "contain a key to overcoming a doctrinal confusion that is hindering our response, as individuals and as a Church, to the recent popes' persistent calls for a 'new evangelization' <TH>" (xii). This confusion, Martin maintains, involves the widespread supposition that the majority of mankind will somehow or another be saved. In contrast, Martin takes "a position that is not often argued—namely that the conditions under which people can be saved who never heard the gospel are very often, in fact, not fulfilled" (xii).

Martin sets the stage for his argument in a brief opening chapter. Citing Ratzinger, he observes that we are witnessing a mass apostasy in today's Church (3). Evangelization is therefore just as important as ever, but the importance of mission is not sufficiently recalled today. Martin pointedly frames the issue:

If it is not really necessary to become a Christian in order to be saved, why bother to evangelize? The reasons often given for evangelizing include appeals to a "greater richness" or a "greater fullness" or a "making explicit what is already implicitly there." In a culture that is characterized by hostility to claims of absolute truth and unique means to salvation, many Catholics apparently find these reasons to be less than compelling (5).

At least to this reader, it is not obvious how this last sentence follows from Martin's brief summary of the reasons for evangelization mentioned immediately beforehand. Yet while these and other potential reasons could have been taken more seriously, the soundness of Martin's point is seen in the very fact that Catholics often seem uninterested in evangelizing. Even among those of us who do engage in a ministry of evangelization, our ministry often lacks urgency. Martin recognizes that a reason for this is that there does exist a "certain tension" between the call to evangelize and the fact that the Church affirms salvation is possible for those who have never heard the Gospel (5).

Chapters 2 and 3 contain a detailed examination of Lumen Gentium 16. According to the conciliar text, salvation is possible for non-Christians "under certain very specific conditions": that their ignorance of the Gospel not be culpable, that they sincerely seek God, that they follow the light of conscience as moved by God's grace, and that they welcome whatever good or truth they live amidst (9). However, Catholics often gloss over the final three sentences of *LG* 16, which indicate that the above conditions are not always met. Indeed, some translations fail to capture the sense of the Latin *saepius* in this text, which means that "very often" non-Christians find themselves deceived by the Evil One and exchange the truth of God for a lie (15, 58).¹

A significant portion of chapter 3 is dedicated to tracing the history of the doctrine *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (EENS) based on Francis Sullivan's chronology.² With Fr. Sullivan, Martin is aware that the various formulations of the doctrine must be understood within their proper historical context and thus in light of their audience and intention. Issued in 1949 in response to the teaching of Fr. Leonard Feeney, the *Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston* is described by Martin as the culmination of the doctrinal development he has surveyed. Cited by *LG* 16 in support of its teaching, the letter "reaffirmed the 'broader' understanding of EENS that did not require explicit

¹ . As a possible indication of the Council's intention here, Aloys Grillmeier notes that the original draft of the section now known as *LG* §16 had the heading "Of non-Christians who are to be led to the Church." *Ibid.*, 18.

² Francis Sullivan, S.J., *Salvation outside the Church: Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

membership in the Church for salvation, but allowed for relatedness by implicit, even unconscious, desire” (47-48).³

Martin’s conclusions at the end of chapter 3 provide a clear summary of what *LG 16* is and is not teaching. On the one hand, it is important to consider that not every proclamation of the Gospel can be deemed “adequate,” and thus not everyone who rejects such a proclamation can be judged culpable of unbelief (53). However, Martin balances this positive observation with a note of realism: “Just because salvation is possible for people who are inculpably ignorant of the Gospel or who have not heard a presentation that is adequate, does not mean they are hereby saved” (53). Salvation requires grace, and a person who says “yes” to God in the depths of his conscience must persevere in corresponding to this grace until death. Inattention to this last point has led many Catholics “to take a superficial and cavalier attitude” toward the possibility of non-Christians being saved (53).

One of the theologians claiming “salvation optimism” is none other than Francis Sullivan, upon whose chronology of EENS Martin has drawn. While giving due respect to Sullivan’s careful analysis of the doctrinal history of EENS, he critiques the latter for claiming that there has been a reversal from pessimism to optimism in the Church’s official stance on the salvation of non-Christians (54-55). “Unfortunately,” Martin does well to observe, “no sources are indicated for the alleged ‘presumption of innocence’ that is supposedly the ‘official attitude’ of the Church. Huge leaps in logic are being made here” (55). When the innocence of non-Christians is presupposed, the possibility of salvation described in *LG 16* is often wrongly taken to mean probability, and this is what is damaging. For this reader, Martin’s criticism of Sullivan on this point was one of the highlights of the book. It is a salutary reminder that Vatican II’s teaching does not amount to an official perspective change whereby we may presume innocence, and therefore salvation, in the case of non-Christians.

³ For a particularly insightful treatment of the mechanism by which non-Christians may respond to grace in a “pre-conceptual manner,” see the following work discussed by Martin: Charles Journet, *What Is Dogma?*, trans. Mark Pontifex, O.S.B. (New York: Hawthorn, 1964), 30–39. For a further application of Journet’s theology, see Matthew Ramage, *Dark Passages of the Bible* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), esp. chap. 4.

In chapter 4, Martin switches gears to treat the biblical foundations of *LG 16*. The primary focus of the chapter is Romans 1–2, which is both explicitly cited and implicitly alluded to in the council text. Romans is important because it “shows us that something is really at stake: eternal salvation or damnation” (91). When Romans 1 teaches that the Gentiles have the law written on their hearts, Paul is using this observation not to exonerate the Gentiles, but rather to indict them. The Gentiles are far from innocent: they are “without excuse” (Rom 1:20). Also covered in this chapter—more briefly—is Mark 16:14–16, another text cited by the council. While Martin does well to focus on these texts, it does seem odd that a chapter dedicated to the biblical foundations of *LG 16* would not devote more time to the other two texts cited in this section of the text, in particular 1 Timothy 2:4 which would have provided a more “optimistic” balance to Martin’s assessment. As a general but related observation, there seems to be a lacuna in the work insofar as it pays minimal attention to the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Many statements from these pontiffs seem to paint a more optimistic portrait of non-Christians than one finds in Martin’s analysis. These must be given more attention if we are to ascertain that in which a proper reception of *LG 16* consists.⁴

Comprising nearly half of the book, chapters 5 and 6 investigate and critique the theology of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar, men selected because “their views on the possibilities of universal salvation are cited as the basis of a prevailing consensus among Catholic theologians in favor of a strong hope that everyone may be saved” (129). For his part, Rahner overestimates the “response rate” of the human race to the grace of God (101). According to Martin, Rahner’s “completely optimistic description of the conciliar teaching . . . is only possible when the complete text is ignored” (107). Further, Rahner insinuates that *Lumen Gentium* was not itself dogmatic but a “start” to further dogmatic devel-

⁴ In particular, the book would have benefited from more attention to John Paul’s *Redemptoris Missio*, which is mentioned a handful of times; *Dominum et Vivificantem*, which is mentioned only once; and *Redemptor Hominis*, which is omitted entirely. Similarly, Benedict XVI’s encyclical on hope, *Spe Salvi*, is mentioned only once within a footnote (284n14). Though not magisterial, the document *Dialogue and Proclamation* from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue is another significant document that should be mentioned in the endeavor to properly receive the teaching of *LG §16*.

opment (124). Bringing Ratzinger's analysis to bear on this view, Martin sharply criticizes Rahner for disregarding the council's actual texts in the name of a supposed "spirit" implied in them (124).

Nearly twice as long as his chapter on Rahner, Martin's critique of Balthasar in chapter 6 is thorough and incisive. Contrasting the approaches of these two thinkers, Martin describes Rahner's theology as an attempt to "dive under" the words of Scripture, finding in human anthropology "a transcendental subjectivity that is already addressed by God and is most likely positively responsive to the 'supernatural existential'" (134). Balthasar, on the other hand, attempts to "jump over" the words of Scripture in positing extrabiblical possibilities of salvation (e.g., through a conversion after death). Martin's conclusion is that Balthasar "departs from the content of revelation and the mainstream theological tradition of the Church in a way that undermines the call to holiness and evangelization and is pastorally damaging" (178). Specifically, Balthasar's declaration of a "stalemate" between biblical passages that seem to speak of universal salvation versus those which speak of a densely populated hell "makes clear his belief in an all-but-certain universal salvation" (183). Also problematic in Martin's view is Balthasar's claim that we have a "duty to hope for the salvation of all" (169). Martin finds there to be an equivocation on "hope" here. The term is not problematic if taken to mean "we hope and pray" that all be saved, but it is another thing to affirm we can have supernatural hope for the salvation of all men. Martin believes—with good reason—that Balthasar is using hope in the latter of the two senses (173-74). While still admiring Balthasar's genius, this reader has had to revisit his own assessment of Balthasar's soteriology in light of Martin's analysis.

In sum, Martin's recent work is a timely reminder that the true spirit of Vatican II is to be found within its texts in their entirety. To be sure, *Lumen Gentium* represents a development with regard to how the Church views the status of non-Christians. However, *LG* 16 also soberly reaffirms the real possibility of damnation and thus the need for Christian missionary activity. The Church today needs a properly balanced pastoral strategy cognizant of both the universal action of the Holy Spirit and the pervasiveness of sin, which poses a real threat to salvation. **N&V**

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