

# Community in the Catholic Church

The branch of theology that reflects on the meaning of the Church—the body of the followers of Christ—is known as *ecclesiology*. The English word derives from the Greek *ekklesia*—the standard Greek term for *church* (literally those who are “called out” to form a community). We first consider the meaning of the word *church* (small *c*) in contrast to the word *Church* (capital *C*). We then consider why the Christian tradition teaches that belonging to a social group, the Church, is considered necessary for a person’s salvation.

To begin we must ask whether traditional teachings on ecclesiology are reasonable in the modern world. With our modern appreciation of freedom and individuality, does it make sense that people would have to join a group in order to worship or have a relationship with God? Isn’t that something people can do on their own?

When we consider specifically Roman Catholic claims, further questions arise. With our modern appreciation of pluralism and tolerance, can it make sense for one institution to claim that “it is through Christ’s Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help towards salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained” (*Decree on Ecumenism [Unitatis Redintegratio, 1964], 3*)?

## Is the Church Necessary for Salvation?

*Church* can have a variety of meanings. It can mean the building or the local congregation of faithful who gather in it. *Church* can also refer to larger branches or denominations of Christianity; thus we speak of the Lutheran Church or the Russian Orthodox Church. Finally, Christians speak of the “Church” in the sense described in the Nicene Creed: “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic,” the community of all Christians who follow the tradition handed down from the Apostles, regardless of denomination.

The purpose of any religion is to lead people to salvation: the overcoming of sin, weakness, and suffering and the fulfillment of human destiny in union with the divine or transcendent. The Catholic Church teaches plainly that the Church “is necessary for salvation” (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium, 1964], 14*). But even if we accept that people are too weak to free themselves from their sinful nature, and thus need the help of Christ, why would a church be necessary (see 7.23)? Couldn’t people obtain Christ’s help on their own, apart from the Church?

## The Social Character of Salvation

“Are you saved?” On any busy downtown street, we might find a Christian handing out tracts asking (and answering) this question. Such a tract generally says that to be saved one must confess that he or she is a sinner, ask Christ to come into his or her life, and accept Christ as his or her personal Lord and Savior.

As we have seen, the Roman Catholic Tradition would agree that God offers salvation through Christ, and that it is realized in people’s lives when they respond in faith. Catholic Tradition would insist, however, that salvation is not to be understood as individualistically as the above formulation suggests:

[God] has . . . willed to make men holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness. (*Church, 9*)

Consider some biblical examples. God called Abraham (see Genesis 12:2) not to save him as an individual, but so that he could become father of a community, Israel. In the desert God established a



covenant not with Moses as an individual, but with the people as a whole: “The LORD, our God, made a covenant with us at Horeb; not with our fathers did he make this covenant, but with us, all of us who are alive here this day” (Deuteronomy 5:2–3). Jesus, from the beginning, preached about a communal concept of salvation (the Kingdom of God) and took concrete steps to establish a new community around himself, led by the Twelve. Salvation would come by joining his community, the renewed Israel.

## Why Communal Salvation?

Recall that *salvation* means that persons overcome all that is dark or wrong in their lives and begin to live fully and completely as God intended. An essential ingredient in making our lives full and meaningful is precisely our relationships with other people. Our capacity to make friends, communicate with, love, and care for others, is essential to true happiness and thus ultimately salvation.

The root of sin, on the other hand, can be seen as the tendency to isolate ourselves, to treat others as less than human, to be antisocial, anti-community. Pope Benedict XVI teaches that sin “is understood by the Fathers as the destruction of the unity of the human race, as fragmentation and division.”<sup>i</sup> The original unity of all humanity, based on the premise that all people have God as Father and are created in God’s image, “was shattered into a thousand pieces” by sin.<sup>ii</sup> Salvation then is “the recovery of supernatural unity of man with God, but equally of the unity of men among themselves.”<sup>iii</sup>

In the Christian imagination, judgment and final destiny are pictured in social terms. On the Day of Judgment, *all people* will be raised. The Kingdom of God is pictured as a banquet (see Matthew 8:11) and Heaven as a city (see Hebrews 11:10).<sup>iv</sup> Eternal life is participation in the community of love within the Trinity. Aquinas taught that the final destiny of humans is “to attain to beatitude, and that can only consist in the kingdom of God, which in its turn is nothing else than the well-ordered society of those who enjoy the vision of God.”<sup>v</sup>

Only Hell, the loss of God and salvation, is without community.

For these reasons, Catholic Tradition teaches that people are not saved as isolated individuals, but rather as a social gathering of the faithful: the Church.

This does not imply that an individual Christian has no personal responsibility. On the contrary, the individual’s free personal choice is essential for salvation. The Catholic teaching, however, is that this personal choice can occur only within the larger context of the social gathering of the Church.

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<sup>i</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Saved in Hope: Encyclical Letter (Spe Salvi)* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), number 14.

<sup>ii</sup> Quotation from Maximus the Confessor (c. 580–662) in Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 33.

<sup>iii</sup> De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 35.

<sup>iv</sup> On the social understanding of eternal salvation, see de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 51–63.

<sup>v</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.50; quoted in de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 60.

