

The “Ignorant Native”

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"Who will teach me what is most agreeable to God, so that I may do it?"

Bl. Kateri Tekakwitha ¹

The salvation of the American Indians before Pentecost, the birthday of the Catholic Church, has never been considered a problem by theologians. Before the time of Christ pagans far removed from the special revelation given to the Jews could be saved by believing that God is, and that He is a remunerator (Hebrews 11:6), and by keeping the law of God, the ten commandments, engraven in their hearts (Romans 2:14,15). "But without faith it is impossible to please God. He that cometh to God, must believe that He is, and is a rewarder to them that seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6).

St. Thomas Aquinas in his commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews says:

"After the sin of our first parents no one could be saved from the guilt of original sin except by faith in the Mediator. But the character of that faith differed according to diverse periods and states of life. We who have received such immense benefits are more bound to believe than those who lived prior to Christ's coming. And of them some believed more explicitly than others, the leaders for example, and such as had received a special revelation. Those again who lived under the law had a more explicit belief than those who lived before it, for they had certain Sacraments prefigurative of Christ. For the heathen, on the contrary, who were saved, it sufficed to believe that God was their rewarder, which is only given through Christ. In this sense they implicitly believed in a Mediator." ²

St. Thomas also says that not only the Jews, but even some of the Gentiles, especially the leaders, were given an explicit revelation of the coming of Christ the Redeemer.

"Many of the Gentiles received revelations of Christ, as is clear from their predictions. Thus we read (Job 29:25): "I know that my Redeemer liveth." The Sibyl too foretold certain things about Christ, as Augustine relates (*Contra Faust.* 13:15). Moreover we read in the history of the Romans, that at the time of Constantine Augustus and his mother Irene, a tomb was discovered wherein lay a man on whose breast was a golden plate with the inscription: "Christ shall be born of a virgin, and in him I believe. O sun, during the lifetime of Irene and Constantine, thou shalt see me again." ³

But after Pentecost, says St. Thomas in his *Summa Theologica*, all men in order to be saved were bound to explicit faith in Christ and in the Blessed Trinity: ⁴ "After grace had been revealed both learned and simple folk are bound to explicit faith in the mysteries of Christ, chiefly as regards those which are observed and publicly proclaimed, such as the articles which refer to the Incarnation." ⁵

But after the discovery of the New World, where apparently vast numbers of souls had lived

and died before the coming of Columbus and the missionaries, some theologians, especially the Franciscan, Andreas De Vega (d. 1560), proposed that these souls since they lived in invincible ignorance of the true faith, could have been saved without an explicit belief in Christ and the Trinity.⁶

But St. Thomas also taught that invincible ignorance, while it undoubtedly excuses from sin, in this case the sin of infidelity, cannot save:

"If we consider unbelief as we find it in those who have heard nothing about the faith, it bears the character of punishment, not of sin, because such ignorance is the result of the sin of our first parents. When such unbelievers are damned, it is on account of other sins, which cannot be taken away without faith, not because of their sin of unbelief."⁷

St. John De Brebeuf (d. 1649), the great apostle of the Algonquins and the Hurons, was very pessimistic about the salvation of the Indians for whom he laid down his life. "There are some indications that they formerly had some more than natural knowledge of the true God, as may be seen in the details of their fables. But not willing to revere God in their manners and actions, they have lost the thought of Him and have become worse than beasts in His sight and in the respect they have for Him."⁸

But what of an Indian of good will who would be willing to believe, and do all that St. John De Brebeuf taught him, who lived between Pentecost and the coming of the missionaries? God in His Divine Providence is not limited to ordinary means, the missionaries, to furnish people of good will with the means of salvation, but can also resort to extraordinary means. Again St. Thomas:

"Everyone is bound to believe something explicitly...even if someone is brought up in the forest or among wild beasts. For it pertains to Divine Providence to furnish everyone with what is necessary for salvation, provided that on his part there is no hindrance. Thus, if someone so brought up followed the direction of natural reason in seeking good and avoiding evil, we must most certainly hold that God would either reveal to him through internal inspiration what had to be believed, or he would send some preacher of the faith to him as He sent Peter to Cornelius (Acts 10:20)."⁹

St. Thomas' contemporary the Franciscan Alexander of Hales (d.1245), writing on the same problem, says: "If he does what is within his power, the Lord will enlighten him with a secret inspiration, by means of an angel or of a man."¹⁰

But the opinion of Andreas De Vega was not shared by the majority of the theologians of the time. The great Jesuit theologian, Francisco Suarez (d. 1617), held fast to the teaching of St. Thomas and Alexander of Hales: "Whoever has not set up obstacles against it will receive the light or the call...either externally by means of men...or by interior illumination by means of angels."¹¹

Not only was the opinion of De Vega not accepted by the majority of the theologians of his day, it was rejected by the Magisterium as well. In 1679 Pope Innocent XI condemned the following

proposition which implied that one could be saved without supernatural faith or revelation: "A faith indicated from the testimony of creation, or from a similar motive, suffices for justification" (Denz. 2123).¹² As St. Paul taught, if salvation were possible by the Mosaic Law, or by the natural law as well, then "Christ died in vain" (Galatians 2:21).

And in 1703 during the reign of Pope Clement XI when the missionary effort to the Amerindians was at its height, the Holy Office responded to an inquiry from the Bishop of Quebec:

Question. Whether it is possible for a crude and uneducated adult, as it might be with a barbarian, to be baptized, if there were given to him only an understanding of God and some of His attributes, especially His justice in rewarding and punishing according to this remark of the Apostle: "He that cometh to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder" (Heb. 11:16), from which it is to be inferred that a barbarian adult in a certain case of urgent necessity, can be baptized even though he does not explicitly believe in Jesus Christ.

Response. A missionary should not baptize one who does not explicitly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, but is bound to instruct him about all those matters which are necessary, by a necessity of means, in accordance with the capacity of the one to be baptized" (Denz. 2380).

To an additional query the Holy Office responded, that even an adult Indian at the point of death, must make an act of faith in the Trinity and the Incarnation before he could be baptized. (Denz. 2381)

The most remarkable instance of Divine Providence's use of extraordinary means in our particular case, is the amazing, thoroughly documented, story of the Venerable Mary of Agreda (d. 1665). This humble nun while praying in her convent in Spain was miraculously transported to America and preached to various tribes, some a thousand miles apart, from Texas to the Pacific, before the arrival of the missionaries.¹³

But unknown to Andreas De Vega and his contemporaries, recent archaeological evidence has indicated that the ordinary means were also furnished to the Amerindians during the period between Pentecost and the arrival of Columbus. In a series of remarkable books, *America B.C.* (1977), *Saga America* (1980), and *Bronze Age America* (1982), the epigrapher, Barry Fell, has presented the archaeological evidence for this claim. He writes:

"Christian relics are widespread in America as the illustrations in this chapter explain. But we also find records of Christian flight to the New World among the inscriptions on the rocks of North Africa. A notable one is the very long text (pages 170-172) engraved by a monk who actually returned to Morocco from America, leaving his comrades behind in the wilderness; they had fled to escape the attentions of the Vandals in the fifth century of our era. Other texts from Nova Scotia, Connecticut, and places on the West coast of Canada and the United States tell us that small colonies of Christians had

come here at various times...The epigraphic evidence of ancient Christians in North America is unimpeachable." ¹⁴

Of the many petroglyphs (rock carvings) that Barry Fell has deciphered, my favorite is one called the "Horse Creek Petroglyph," which was deciphered in West Virginia. It is written in Old Irish in an ancient script called Ogam, and apparently dates from the sixth to the eighth centuries A.D.

"A happy season is Christmas, a time of joy and goodwill to all people. A virgin was with child; God ordained her to conceive and be fruitful. Ah, behold a miracle! She gave birth to a son in a cave. The name of the cave was the Cave of Bethlehem. His foster father gave Him the name Jesus, the Christ, Alpha and Omega. Festive season of prayer." ¹⁵

References

- 1 *Kateri*, Quartely bulletin of the Kateri Center, Kanawaka, Quebec, Fr. Henri Bechard, S.J., June 1983, p.8.
- 2 St. Thomas Aquinas, *On Hebrews*, 12:18-29.
- 3 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q.7, ad 3; cf. Baron. *Anal.* A.D. 780.
- 4 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q.2, a.7.
- 5 St. Thomas, *Op. cit.*, Q.2, a.7.
- 6 Cf. Address to the Confraternity of Catholic Clergy , Third National Colloquium, November 1977, by Fr. Peter Finnegan, O.P., "The Priest, the Word of God and the Magisterium," Cardinal Communications, New London, CN.
- 7 St. Thomas, II-II, Q.10, a.1.
- 8 Fr. Francis Talbot, S.J., *Saint Among the Hurons*, Harper and Row, New York, 1949, p.70.
- 9 St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Disputed Questions on Truth*, Q.14, a.11.
- 10 Alexander of Hales, *Summa Theologica, libri, inq. 3, tr. 3, sect. 1, q. 2, tit. 1, c. 8* (n. 325); quoted in Fr. Ricardo Lombardi, S.J., *The Salvation of Unbelievers*, translated by Dorothy White, The Newman Press, MD, 1956, p.232. 11 Francisco Suarez, *De Praedestinatione et Reprobatione*, 1, IV, c.3, n.19; quoted in Lombardi, *Op. cit.*, p.232.
- 12 Cf. James A. Carrico, *Life of Venerable Mary of Agreda*, Crestline Books, San Bernadino, CA, 1959.
- 13 Barry Fell, *Saga America*, Times Books, New York, 1980, p.190.
- 14 Barry Fell, "Christian Messages in Old Irish Script Deciphered from Rock Carvings in West Virginia," *Wonderful West Virginia*, March 1983, Department of Highways, State of West Virginia.