

# Christ's Salvation, Church and Other Religions in Light of Vatican II

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Scitis autem dico, non per fidem, sed per amorem. Scitis dico, non ex credulitate, sed ex operatione.<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction

We would like to deepen the understanding of the salvific and providential openness towards the believers of Other Religions and their salvation in Christ with the sacramental mediation of his Church. Referring to *Lumen Gentium* (LG) and other crucial documents of the Second Vatican Council can lead us to a better grasp of what salvation in Christ and the theology of the Church entail in terms of the Trinitarian origins, the historical relation of the Church to the world as the new People of God and her eschatological fulfilment as the heavenly Jerusalem. Moreover, with a hermeneutical perspective taking into serious account the ecclesiology of LG, we feel confident that the nuptial sacramentality of the Paschal creation of the Church, her spousal form as body and bride of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, her head and spouse, can offer us further theological developments to a deeper contemplation of the World Religions and their members in God's plan of creation and salvation. It would be against the nature of a magisterial document to claim any finished and complete exposition of our topic as intrinsic tensions and the unfinished nature of the Church's living understanding of the

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1. "I assure you that it is not by faith that you will come to know him, but by love; not by mere conviction but by action". GREGORY THE GREAT, *Homily on the Gospels*, Homily 14, PL 76, 1129B.

overwhelming revealed Truth in the line of the Tradition requires further explanations, prayer, faithfulness and theological research<sup>2</sup>. Aware of the absence of any nuptial unifying category in LG as well as in other conciliar documents, we argue that the sacramental necessity of the Church for the salvation of all humanity, baptized and unbaptized alike, points to the ecclesial form of our communion with God as nuptial and fruitful for everyone who will be saved and eschatologically transfigured for eternal life.

## 2. That all may be saved

Human salvation and Christ's Paschal Mystery within their cosmological and eschatological dimensions are always at stake when we are asked to understand and inquire into the mystery of the Church and her relationship with World Religions (LG 13). The Second Vatican Council, especially in *Lumen Gentium* (LG), *Ad Gentes* (AG), *Nostra Aetate* (NA) and *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), providentially affirms confidence in the possibility of eternal salvation of the members of Other Religions in which seeds of religious truth, good and beauty have to be found as the providential graceful openness and preparation to the Christian Gospel<sup>3</sup>. The dogmatic Constitution on the Church clearly states that all human beings, baptized and unbaptized, according to God's creation and redemption, belong and are ordered in different ways and degrees to his Son's Church. Therefore, the soteriological and eschatological horizon of our discussion becomes so vividly present that all ecclesiological considerations we are about to make need to be always measured and challenged by the unique and eternal desire of God to save all humanity and the world he freely created out of his Trinitarian love (1Tim 2:3–4; John 11:51–52, 12:32; 1John 2:2). Fulfilment of God's creation and Jesus Christ's redemption, in the Church, reveal their correspondence and providential convergence in the Paschal Mystery of the crucified and risen Son

2. Cfr. P. LAKELAND, *Lumen Gentium: The Unfinished Business*, in «New Blackfriars» 90 (2009/90), 146–162, 153.

3. Cfr. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE and CONGREGATION FOR THE EVANGELIZATION OF PEOPLES, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, Vatican City, May 19, 1991, n. 15. Hereafter DP. Cfr. J.A. DINOIA, *The Diversity of Religions*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 1992, 27.

of God. "Salvation embraces all creation. It makes the unity of the supernatural order coextensive with the unity of the universe".<sup>4</sup>

*Lumen Gentium* (LG 14) and *Ad Gentes* (AG 7) uphold the need for the Christian faith of the Catholic Church and of baptism for all to be saved (Mk 16:16; John 3:5). The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, his body and Bride and our sacramental participation in the Paschal Mystery are essential for anyone, Christian (baptized) and non-Christian (unbaptized), to come to the fullness of life, to his eternal salvation<sup>5</sup>. Saint John Paul II reaffirms in his Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (December 7, 1990) the same traditional Catholic doctrine: the real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind and the necessity of the Church for this salvation (RM 9, 55). "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb 11:6), whose divine and prior initiative stirs and makes our salvific faith possible (John 3:16–17, 10:28–29; Rom 8:3–4; Gal 4:4–7; 1John 4:10). Theological charity, qualifying the soteriological efficacious quality of Christian faith, represents the working activity of a living faith in Christ and the transforming grace of his Paschal gift, the Holy Spirit. As well, full incorporation by baptism and Catholic faith are not *ipso facto* any guarantee of eternal salvation for the Catholic faithful (LG 14). A saving faith, if it is informed by charity, works as a bodily dimension of transfiguring Love (Gal 5:6; Rom 1:17; 2:13; James 2:26; Catechism of the Catholic Church 1814–1816).

The radical change from a pessimistic to an optimistic soteriology in the Church's understanding of the salvation of non-Christians requires unfolding how the essential need of Church, faith and baptism is to be understood (DP 14, 15). However, if we would like to understand how LG treats our topic we also need to take into consideration GS, because of its theological understanding of history and world within God's plan of salvation. There we can find the Christological and anthropological crucial element for the Church-World relationship, namely in GS 22 we read:

All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we

4. C. JACOBS-VANDEGEER, *The Unity of Salvation: Divine Missions, the Church, and World Religions*, in «Theological Studies» 75 (2014/2), 260–283, 280.

5. Cfr. G. COLZANI, *Universalità della Salvezza e Mediazione Sacramentale*, in «Euntes Docete» 2 (2008), 95–115. Cfr. S. BULLIVANT, *Sine Culpa? Vatican II and Inculpable Ignorance*, in «Theological Studies» 72 (2011), 70–86, 70.

ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this Paschal Mystery.

GS 22 does not speak of World Religions when it presents the central role of the Paschal Mystery and the idea of its involvement for those who do not belong to the Pilgrim Church. The human problem of suffering and death within the great mysteries of human life and the suffering of Christ represent the anthropological context for the salvation of all taught by GS 22. Therefore, men and women dealing with the essential quest for meaning in their life and death are open to religious experience which can take, for many but not for all, the historical form of their own religion practiced for the sake of the fullness of their human existence.

Salvation thus takes place by incorporation through baptism into the Paschal Mystery whose first fruit of the new Creation is the Church (Pentecost in Act 1) and her eschatological fulfilment (Ef 2; Rev 19 and 21). The soteriological centrality of the Paschal Mystery as the historical fulfilment and eschatological fullness of Jesus Christ's divine Incarnation brings to its completion God's Creation and its anthropological disclosure in the nuptial<sup>6</sup> image of man and woman, their original unity and divine vocation to be one and fruitful. The humanity Christ made his own by uniting himself with all human beings is taken to its fulfilment in the Paschal Mystery, by dying to its male headship, rising to the nuptial communion with the Church, his Bride, his female and generating body through the seed of the Holy Spirit. "God finds for himself a bride for the Son, the one bride who is the one Church"<sup>7</sup>. The nuptial relation safeguards the real unity between Christ and the Church without any fusion and merging substitution. No one, Christian, member of the World Religions or human being, can be saved outside the Paschal Mystery of Christ, new Adam (Rom 5:12–21; 1Cor 15:21–22.45), and the nuptial

6. Our understanding of the nuptial or spousal meaning and character of all reality (man and woman, human body, love, sexual difference, etc.) refers to and is founded upon John Paul II's anthropology, specifically articulated in JOHN PAUL II, *Man and Woman He Created Them. A Theology of the Body*, Pauline, Boston 2006. Cfr. A. SCOLA, *The Nuptial Mystery*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 2005. Cfr. M. OUELLET, *Divine Likeness. Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 2006. Cfr. C. ANDERSON-J. GRANADOS, *Called to Love*, Doubleday, New York 2009.

7. J. RATZINGER, «The Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*», in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2005, 134.

communion of his Pilgrim Church, predestined from the outset of Creation to be, in Eve–Mary, the glorious Bride, spousal new Jerusalem for all peoples (Ef 5:21–33; Rev 12:17; 19:7; 21:2.9; 22:17) This Paschal grace works in the hearts of men and women of good will to fulfil their ultimate divine vocation to be one with the crucified and risen Lord in his Church, invisibly and mysteriously, known to God alone. It belongs to the sacramental nuptial communion between Christ and his Church and is invisibly active in all men and women's religious belonging.

The efficacious invisibility of this Paschal work of the risen Lord reaches all humanity for the sake of its salvation in the liturgical and missionary work of the Church. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC), the first Constitution and document to be approved by the Council Fathers (November 22, 1963), sets the foundational background for the Church's living experience of her sacramental instrumentality and her vicarious form on behalf of all humanity. "The Church derives from adoration, from the task of glorifying God. Ecclesiology, of its nature, has to do with liturgy".<sup>8</sup> She is the liturgical community of those marked by God's Word and Sacraments for the salvation of all humanity in the only mediation of Jesus Christ: on earth still as a pilgrim sacramental interceding community of God's People, in heaven as the glorious dwelling place of God with all the peoples. SC 2 presents the Eucharistic Church in her divine and human reality centered in the redemption of Jesus Christ for all humanity as the liturgical and eschatological outset of her nature in history and of her relationship with all peoples and their World Religions.

"While the liturgy daily builds up those who are within into a holy temple of the Lord, into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ, at the same time it marvelously strengthens their power to preach Christ, and thus shows forth the Church to those who are outside as a sign lifted up among the nations under which the scattered children of God may be gathered together, until there is one sheepfold and one shepherd" (SC 2).

Liturgical worship, Eucharist on her earthly pilgrimage and adoration in heaven, constitutes and reveals the mission of the Church as her essential nature (LG 11). By the attraction of her being lifted up on the Cross with her Spouse and not by proselytism or ecclesiastical strategies, the Church relates herself to her baptized and unbaptized children in

8. *Ibid.*, 126.

their religious experience (LG 3, 48). “The Church does not engage in proselytism. Instead, she grows by «attraction»: just as Christ «draws all to himself» by the power of his love, culminating in the sacrifice of the Cross, so the Church fulfils her mission to the extent that, in union with Christ, she accomplishes every one of her works in spiritual and practical imitation of the love of her Lord”<sup>9</sup>. The liturgy is the essence of her mission and her priority<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, her mission in and with the world unfolds her liturgical and nuptial unity with Christ, her Head and Spouse. Her relation to her risen Lord and to the world has always been crucified, experienced and revealed in the movement of the Eucharistic attraction, because of divine love, which is the only cause, reality and essence of God’s creation and redemption. Thus, divine love can only attract by self-giving, self-emptying and self-receiving for the sake of the salvation and glory of the O/other. The liturgical context sets us in the right eschatological horizon in our history to better understand how God’s grace works the salvation of all humanity, through the sacramental means and the Eucharistic form of his Church related to all human beings’ salvation and concrete religious experience in and through their World Religions. The Liturgy of the Church is clearly understood as the work of Christ, the only Mediator between God and Man (1Tim 2:5; LG 14, 50) for the salvation of all humankind for the perfect glory of God his Father. The Church stands as the first fruit of the new reborn humanity in Christ’s death and resurrection and the historical instrument and form of the Holy Spirit to achieve, in both visible and invisible ways, the salvation of all human beings. The Word of God, liturgically sacrificed in the Eucharist and sung in the Divine Office, is offered to the Church as her daily unceasing intercession for the salvation of all humanity in communion with her divine Lord, the incarnate author of the universal hymn of praise to God the Father in the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ prays for us, in us and is prayed by us for the universal salvation: he is the High priest of the New and Eternal Covenant (SC 7,83–88).

The unity of the whole human race in him, which began with the incarnation, must be understood to be strengthened and perfected through the crucifixion, resurrection, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Fi-

9. BENEDICT XVI, Homily at the Eucharist inaugurating the Fifth General Conference of Latin American Bishops, May 13, 2007, Aparecida Brazil. Cf. V GENERAL CONFERENCE OF THE BISHOPS OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, Concluding Document, Aparecida Brazil, 13–31 May 2007, n. 159. Cf. FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, n. 14.

10. Cf. C. JACOBS-VANDEGEER, *The Unity of Salvation*, 260–283, 280.

nally, it will be consummated when the human beings reach 'the halls of heaven'. This picture of Christ as the Cosmic Choirmaster serves brilliantly to symbolize the union in him of all the baptized and non-baptized alike. Long before they might become aware of this, even those who have never heard his name are mysteriously but, through grace, truly in the hands of Christ the Choirmaster of the world. The redemption may be depicted as a united musical engagement. Though its powerful image of Christ the universal Choirmaster and/or Cantor, the Council encourages those who pray and/or sung the Divine Office to give themselves wholeheartedly to two projects: praising God and interceding for the salvation of the whole world. Through its first document, Vatican II shows its openness to the entire human race and leaves us once again with the question: what should Christians, and especially those devoted to the Divine Office, believe and think about the divine plan of salvation for all human beings?<sup>11</sup>

### 3. The unity of humankind

LG 13 clearly states the ontological unity of all human beings in their proper nature as human and their call, from the very beginning of Creation, to be one as the unique and united People of God out of different peoples and nations in Christ the Head through and as a Church, the body and Spouse of his Son<sup>12</sup>. This anthropological unity is theologically prefigured and historically unfolded by God the Father in creating humanity (man and woman) for the sake of being one as Church (New Eve), beginning with the "first just man" (Ecclesia ab Adam, ab Abel in LG 2). The concept of the natural created unity of all humankind belongs to the very essence of the Christian faith and represents the foundation for the Catholic doctrine of World Religions<sup>13</sup>.

All men are called to belong to the new people of God. Wherefore this people, while remaining one and only one, is to be spread throughout the whole world and must exist in all ages, so that the decree of God's will may be fulfilled. In the beginning God made human nature one and decreed that all his children, scattered as they were, would finally be gathered together as one (Jn 11:52). It was for this purpose that God sent his Son, whom he

11. G. O'COLLINS, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, 67.

12. Cfr. E.T. GROPPE, *Revisiting Vatican II's Theology of the People of God after forty-five years of Catholic-Jewish Dialogue*, in «Theological Studies» 72 (2001), 586–619, p. 614.

13. Cfr. M. RUOKANEN, *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions*, E.J. Brill, Leiden–New York–Köln 1992, 49.

appointed heir of all things, (Ef 1:2) that he might be teacher, king and priest of all, the head of the new and universal people of the sons of God. For this too God sent the Spirit of his Son as Lord and Life-giver. (LG 13)

From Creation all human beings are one in origin and final destiny<sup>14</sup>. In their original unity as man and woman they belong to God's People as Eve–Mary–the Church belong to Christ–New Adam–Head and Spouse. Jesus Christ, the Logos of God the Father, is actively mediating the creation of all things within which man and woman are molded in the image of God (2Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3; Gen 1:27). In his Paschal Mystery, his Incarnation is revealed in terms of nuptial unity with the entire humanity as the Church, his Body and Bride (John 1:1–3,10; Acts 17:26; Ef 1:1–14,2:11–22,5:21–33; Col 1:15–20; 1Cor 8:6,15:28; Heb 1:2; Rev 19:6–9,21). By assuming the created image of man and woman in his Incarnation and Paschal nuptiality with the Church, the Son of God, the eternal icon of the Father, allows us to share the communion of divine life without contradiction and without dissolving, in a false mysticism, our natural consistency (AL 63, Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, March 19, 2016). The origin and destiny of all human beings, both in their original innocence and in their actual historical state of sin and redemption in Jesus Christ (AG 3), are one and unique for each man and woman, for all humankind. Human life and the created world are seen as a journey from God and to God (John 13:3). Man and woman in their anthropological nuptiality come to unfold the central place in which, thanks to their male and female body, the image of God is taken to its fulfilment for the fullness of human life, for the original unity of all humankind and for the glory of God, revealing the nuptial relationship between God and the world, Christ and the Church, through the sacramental reality of the People of God (LG 9–17), Head and Body (LG 7, 52, RM 18), Groom and Bride (LG 6, 9; RM 9).

This unique friendship between a man and a woman acquires an all-encompassing character only within the conjugal union. Precisely as all-encompassing, this union is also exclusive, faithful and open to new life. It shares everything in constant mutual respect. The Second Vatican Council echoed this by stating that “such a love, bringing together the human and the divine, leads the partners to a free and mutual self-giving, experienced in tenderness and action, and permeating their entire lives. (AL 125)

14. Cfr. *ibid.*, 56.



LG chapter 2 within the ecclesiological horizon of the baptismal People of God, bringing together the Old and the New People of God, affirms the common origins, vocation and predestination of all humanity to become the Church of Christ. People of God and Church, whose only Head is Jesus Christ (LG 7, 9, 13, 17), are used as synonymous in the documents of the Second Vatican Council<sup>15</sup> avoiding any contraposition between them, both highlighting the sacramental dimension of the People of God, on the one hand, and the biblical and historical character of the Church, on the other.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the Church has been designated a “people” in the New Testament texts (2Cor 6:16; Rom 9:25–26; Tit 2:14; 1Pet 2:9–10; Acts 15:14)<sup>17</sup>. She is the universal sacrament of salvation (LG 1, 9, 48; AG 1; GS 45) in order to grow, from being the sacramental seed and beginning of God’s kingdom on earth (LG 5) to her fullness in heaven (LG 48–51; AG 9; GS 40), uniting all peoples as one in communion with God and among themselves (LG 1). As the universal sacrament, the Church stands as a visible and efficacious sign and instrument for all the work God is accomplishing in the world. The Church is God’s work as “reconciling the world to himself” (2Cor 5:18), making her the Paschal and eschatological fruit, the visible sign and efficacious means for the salvation of all humankind in one new people. The essence of the Church resides in her sacramental communion with God and unity among all men and women. “By the power of the Holy Spirit the Church is the faithful spouse of her Lord and will never fail to be the sign of salvation in the world” (GS 43). Through the Church the world should be filled with the Spirit of Christ who increasingly illuminates the whole human society with his saving light (LG 36). Her sacramentality is universal because she is related to the salvation and communion with the God of all peoples, both baptized and non-baptized, belonging to the New People of God, to the Old People (Jews) and to men and women of Other Religions or unbelief. Jesus Christ is the Head, the only Savior and Redeemer of the entire human race (LG 1–8, 16, 17; SC 83; AG 1–9; GS 22). Christ, invisible image of God, in his Cross, restores the unity of humanity and in overcoming the fragmentation of sin, he reconciles

15. Cfr. F.A. SULLIVAN, *Salvation outside of the Church*, Paulist Press, New York 1992, 153.

16. Cfr. R. RYMARZ, *The New Evangelization in an Ecclesiological Context*, in «The Heythrop Journal» 52 (2011), 772–784, 773.

17. Cfr. E.T. GROPPE, *Revisiting Vatican II's Theology of the People of God*, 594.

man with God, with himself, with his fellow humans and with the entire creation. The unity given by Christ's grace in our redemptive filial adoption reveals the ultimate gratuity and unmerited love of all creation in its unity in and through the eternal Logos<sup>18</sup>. His divine presence and grace embrace everyone and draw all peoples to the Father through himself in the personal communion of the Church.

Given to this unity in origins and destiny, which is positively grounded by NAE (1, 5) and GS (12, 22, 24, 29, 34, 41, 52 and 68) on being created in the image of God, all people are ordered, oriented, destined and called to become full members of the Church (LG 11, 13, 16). God's image grounds and defines the dignity and equality of all human beings (NA 5; AG 12). This dignity consists of living our existence according to a law written by God in our human heart upon which all will be judged (Rom 1:19–21; 2:13–16). Conscience is the most intimate core and sanctuary where men and women are alone with God, whose voice echoes in their innermost being (GS 16). The religious openness of the human heart searches for the meaning of human existence, life and death, suffering and injustice, illness and pleasure, about the mystery of God and the world. All these existential questions are common to all human beings (GS 3, 4, 10, 18, 21, 22) and lie at the root of all religious traditions (NA 1). "The voice of the Creator in the depth of human conscience is not limited to strictly moral questions, but conscience also touches the question of religious truth".<sup>19</sup>

On the path to salvation towards its eschatological fulfilment, all human beings, in different degrees, are ordained to the Church in a way, described by LG 13–17, of a concentric centripetal movement toward God, through Christ in the Spirit (LG 4, 48). By his Incarnation, Christ unveils the full meaning of our humanity (GS 22) answering all religious questions of the human heart (GS 41) and revealing the uniqueness of man and woman as the only creatures willed and created for their own sake fulfilled in their own self-giving. The idea of the growth of humankind towards its unity is an essential part of the theological understanding of the created world in the Vati-

18. Cfr. P. O'CALLAGHAN, *Cristo revela el hombre al propio hombre*, in «Scripta Theologica» 41 (2009/1), 85–111, 105. Cfr. A. WALKER, *The Original Best: the "Coextensiveness" of Being and Love in light of Gaudium et Spes*, 22, in «Communio» 39 (Spring–Summer 2012), 59.

19. M. RUOKANEN, *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions*, 57.

can II documents<sup>20</sup>. In a very ordered manner Catholics, Christians, Jews (LG 16; NA 4), Muslims (LG 16; NA 3) and all peoples of Other Religions are called and drawn to God in the ecclesial form of the catholic unity (LG 16). For the first time in history, an Ecumenical Council (LG 16) speaks positively of Muslims, their monotheistic and Abrahamic faith, worship and hope in God our Creator. NA 2, in the line of human existential questions for meaning rooted in our heart, will also add a positive evaluation of the religious experience of Hinduism and Buddhism.

All men are called to be part of this catholic unity of the people of God which in promoting universal peace presages it. And there belong to or are related to it in various ways, the Catholic faithful, all who believe in Christ, and indeed the whole of mankind, for all men are called by the grace of God to salvation. (LG 13)

In Christ, whose holy name has a universal soteriological and unique role (Acts 4:12), all human beings find the fullness of their life, the truth and the path of everything good and true, holy and graceful in their Religions (NA 2; GS 95). GS 57, speaking of the human family in its cultural and scientific undertakings for a more human world, also adds beauty to truth and goodness. While the fullness of God's salvific Revelation is to be found in Jesus Christ, those who live and belong to Other Religions, beyond the visible boundaries of his Church, are not left in any meaningless soteriological emptiness or insignificant call and relation to the truth and its life in Christ (RM 28, 29). God's reconciliation in Christ of all human beings happens through, in and for the ecclesial sacramental mediation (2Cor 5:18–19 cited in the footnote of NA 2). The Church, therefore, is not only instrumental, and is not just the fullness to achieve the salvation of all humankind. As nuptial unity with God through Christ, she is also the existential, personal and eschatological form of being one with God and with all human beings.<sup>21</sup>

Yet the Church, which has received from the Lord Jesus the mission of proclaiming the Kingdom "is, on earth, the seed and the beginning of that Kingdom." At the same time the Church "slowly grows to maturity (and) longs for the completed Kingdom" (LG 5).

20. Cfr. *ibid.*, 46.

21. Cfr. R. KERESZTY, *Catholicity and the Mission of the Church*, in «Communio» 39 (Spring–Summer 2012), 72.

Thus, “the Kingdom is inseparable from the Church, because both are inseparable from the person and work of Jesus himself. . . It is therefore not possible to separate the Church from the Kingdom as if the first belonged exclusively to the imperfect realm of history, while the second would be the perfect eschatological fulfillment of the divine plan of salvation” (DP 34).

This is the theological meaning of her being the universal sacrament, the graceful personal and communal transfiguration of all peoples in the one New People of God. Our salvation, as reconciling recapitulation in Christ of all realities, is performed and achieved by God who is pleased to call men and women to share his divine life (AG 3). Not just singly, apart from any mutual bond, but rather God the Father wishes to mold all human beings, baptized and unbaptized, into a people in which his children, once scattered, might be gathered together again (cf. John 11:52), according to LG 13 and AG 2. In virtue of her being the efficacious sign of the unity of all humanity in Christ, the Church is a visible and structured society (LG 8; GS 40, 44). The Logos by his Incarnation, entering the world, assumes our historical humanity into himself by recapitulating the entire creation in his own Paschal redemption (GS 38, 45; AG 3).

Finally, according to LG (13, 16), the Catholic faithful, catechumens and other Christians belong (*pertinent*) to the new people of God in varying ways by incorporation through baptism, while the unbaptized, all those who do not belong to God’s people, are called, ordained (*ordinantur ad*) and oriented to it in a concentric centripetal soteriological movement of attraction from and toward God in Jesus Christ<sup>22</sup>. While LG (November 21, 1964) places the Jewish people in the second group of those who are called and ordained, eleven months later, NA 4 (October 28, 1965), always referring to Paul’s letter to the Romans (Rom 11:17–24), “describes the church’s relation to the Jewish people in terms that can support the position that Jews do in fact belong (*pertinent*) to the people of God”<sup>23</sup>.

To the Church, as the sacrament in which the Kingdom of God is present “in mystery”, are related or oriented (*ordinantur*) (LG 16) the members of other religious traditions who, inasmuch as they respond to God’s calling as perceived by their conscience, are saved in Jesus Christ and thus already share in some way in the reality which is signified by the Kingdom. The

22. Cfr. E. T. GROPPE, *Revisiting Vatican II’s Theology of the People of God*, 586–619, 601.

23. *Ibid.*, 586–619, 606, 618.

Church's mission is to foster "the Kingdom of our Lord and his Christ" (Rv 11:15), at whose service she is placed. Part of her role consists in recognizing that the inchoate reality of this Kingdom can be found also beyond the confines of the Church, for example in the hearts of the followers of other religious traditions, insofar as they live evangelical values and are open to the action of the Spirit. It must be remembered nevertheless that this is indeed an inchoate reality, which needs to find completion through being related to the Kingdom of Christ already present in the Church yet realized fully only in the world to come. (DP 35)

#### **4. The Church fullness of form and means for our salvation**

Even though LG does not outline any spousal understanding of the relationship between the Catholic Church and Other Religions in the filial vocation and nuptial destiny of their members, we can affirm that, by placing the Paschal Mystery at the core of universal salvation as the fullness of God's self-revelation, the real unity of the universal human community and of each person in Christ from creation to its fulfilment in the eschatological kingdom (Ef 1:3–14 and Col 1:12–23; RM 5, 10), can be achieved. This can occur only in and through the Church as the ecclesial form, body and bride of Jesus Christ, Head and risen Spouse. Within the Paschal Mystery (GS 22) we come to understand the unity of all humanity in its created origins, in its eschatological destiny and its historical pilgrimage as New People of God, Church of Christ as seed and beginning of God's kingdom (LG 5). The crucial and essential place of the Paschal Mystery as the heart of the created world establishes, a very concrete, given and unequivocal form for all (Christians and World Religion's members) to be related and associated to Jesus Christ and his Church. The absoluteness of Christian Revelation mirrored in the Catholicity of Christ's Church relates to the work of Christ's Spirit in the universe due to the very fact that the fulfilling, definitive and unsurpassable character of the Paschal Event entails an intrinsic positive freedom from limits, a self-gift of God to the world by means of a saving crowning of all things he created. Other Religions and God's grace working in and through them are always related, being ordained to their Paschal fullness, in the event of Jesus Christ, Head and Body, Spouse and Bride<sup>24</sup>. As the eschatologically redeemed humanity,

24. Cfr. H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the Catholicity of the Church*, in «Communio» I (Spring 2013), 132–160, 133.

the Church in her unique spousal identity as the woman, from the very beginning, has been created to be in and through Mary, the new Eve mother of all living human beings, the ecclesial body-bride of her risen Lord in the attractive burning love of the Spirit. Everyone, either belonging through baptism and faith to the Church or as a member of Other Religions, is predestined to be saved in the form of the risen Lord, and his Paschal nuptial relationship with the redeemed humanity, the new Jerusalem, the Church, which in heaven corresponds to the eschatological fulfilment of God's Kingdom (LG 48).

The fullness of means found in the Catholic Church (LG 14; UR 3) (Divine Scriptures, Sacraments and Charity) for the sake of communicating the fullness of salvation and revelation of life and truth of Jesus Christ to all humanity, according to Vatican II (LG 13–17 and GS 22, 24), does not reduce the Church to a simple instrument for universal salvation. She does not merely offer the means for our salvation, as if once achieved, the Church could be left behind and the saved humanity could move forward and meet the risen Christ beyond her and without her. In the Eucharist, sacramental memorial of Christ's Paschal Mystery, the Church is generated as body and bride revealing the eschatological fullness of the image of God by which all human beings are marked. The communio-ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council "is in its inmost nature a Eucharistic ecclesiology"<sup>25</sup>. Through the Eucharistic sacrifice, she unfolds and realizes for all men and women, baptized and unbaptized, the real meaning of their humanity, bodies, sexual difference and anthropological fruitfulness. Filiality, nuptiality and fruitfulness are intrinsically meant for all to achieve salvation, as fullness of life and love in God within his spousal communion which is the Church<sup>26</sup>. Indeed, the Eucharist is not mentioned in LG and AG as one of the three necessary elements for our salvation in Christ, because it is the form of the Church, as Christ's ecclesial body wherein men and women are defined as members of the Eucharistic communion in order to be offered as the Church Bride for the holy, living and acceptable sacrifice (Rom 12:1–2)<sup>27</sup>. This Eucharistic form of the Church as fulfilment of the redeemed hu-

25. J. RATZINGER, «The Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*», in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2005, 131.

26. Cfr. A. LOPEZ, «Blessed is She Who Believed»: *Mary's faith and the Form of the Christian Existence*, in «Communio» 4 (Winter 2013), 680–712, 681.

27. Cfr. R. RYMARZ, *The New Evangelization in an Ecclesiological Context*, 777.

manity reveals, anthropologically for all human beings, the meaning of their human body, sexually differentiated and its fruitfulness in the gift of self (AL 74, 75, 151). In the universal human experience of conjugal love, all, even the unbaptized, can experience the Eucharistic fruitfulness of their bodies in the irreversible reciprocal gift of their selves in the unity of their marriage and family wherein "one learns that love always bears fruit"<sup>28</sup>, the undivided unity of the couple and the generation of children.

The Eucharistic form of Christ's historical life is the living source of the Church's cosmic liturgy. When he hands over the substance of his life to the Church, Christ communicates a form or a way of life that can include or embrace every aspect of human existence, and ultimately the entire material order of creation. To receive this gift in the Spirit in which it was given is to offer the whole of one's life in communion with the Son.<sup>29</sup>

The family is a school of deeper humanity (GS 52) because it is a school of unifying love and birth<sup>30</sup> (AL 165, 168, 172). In the sacramental dimension of the Christian family the natural marriage and family are taken to their Christological and ecclesiological fulfilment by manifesting to all, baptized and unbaptized, the living presence of Christ the Savior in the world and the relation of the Church to the world (GS 48). "Natural marriage, therefore, is fully understood in the light of its fulfilment in the sacrament of Matrimony: only in contemplating Christ does a person come to know the deepest truth about human relationships" (AL 77).

The family as the domestic Church (LG 11) reveals the Church as a real family of God, but also as the spousal dimension of all humanity in its unity and in the bodily individuality of each man and woman. As the universal sacrament of human salvation in Jesus Christ, the Church is the only and unique communal form of all human beings in their eschatological creation and redemption by the union with God (LG I, 9, 48, 49; AG I; GS 45). Quite invisibly, but really and efficaciously, she gives form to the new eschatological identity of those redeemed, either coming from the earthly pilgrim historical Church or unbaptized members of Other Religions. The

28. J. GRANADOS, *The Liturgy: Presence of a New Body, Source of a Fulfilled Time*, in «Communio» 4 (Winter 2012), 529–553, 551.

29. N.J. HEALY JR., *The Eucharist as the form of Christian Life*, in «Communio» 4 (Winter 2012) 587–593, 592.

30. Cfr D.S. CRAWFORD, in «Communio» 39 (Spring–Summer 2012), 169–185, 182.

Church, in the glorified Virgin Mary (LG 63–65 and 68), Mother of the Church and Bride of the crucified and risen Lamb, shapes and places, through the Holy Spirit, all saved and reborn children of God (John 3:1–21; Rm 6:1–14; Gal 4:26; Heb 12:22; Rev 3:12, 21:2–3.9–10) in the glorious Jerusalem descending from heaven as the Bride of Christ, dwelling place of God with humanity and Temple of the Spirit (SC 2; LG 4).

The centrality of the Paschal Mystery in its nuptial relationship of Christ–Church, the unity in origins and destiny of all human beings as the family of God, the universal anthropological character of the human sexual difference as image of God, require us to understand the relationship between the Church and the World Religions in terms of the eschatological nuptial mystery. Indeed, the followers of Other Religions are still men and women called to unifying conjugal love, to form families and communities and give birth to children according to their own scriptures, cultic rites and moral precepts. The Church, through the anthropological centrality of man and woman, is the entire creation saved and glorifying God through the Paschal transfiguration of the world. The Church is more than the ecclesial instrument of and for our salvation — she is the nuptial destiny and eschatological goal of God’s creation since the very beginning of time. As well as being the efficacious instrument, the Church is the original and final bodily form of all created matter called to be personally and fruitfully saved and glorified in us as Christ’s Bride. All matter wishes to become human body to be offered in freedom, love and fruitfulness for the glory of its Creator through the mediation of the human spiritual body (Phil 3:20–21)<sup>31</sup>. Thus, the anthropological and universal sexual difference and its nuptial reality unfold the real meaning of matter and living spirit explicitly signified in the sacrament of marriage as the foundation of the family and the Church from creation. God entrusts the human family with the divine task to make the world a domestic community in which everyone should love and be loved as brothers and sisters, since all are, through the mediation of their earthly parents, the real children of God, the Father (AL 183, 188, 194, 276, 315). “Begetting and raising children, for its part, mirrors God’s creative work” (AL 29).

31. Cfr. R. KERESZTY, *Catholicity and the Mission of the Church*, in «Communio» 39 (Spring–Summer 2012), 78.



Furthermore, "if we recognize the possibility for people outside of the Church to love with the habit of charity, then we acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit in their hearts and their attainment of the divine nature"<sup>32</sup>. Faith as knowledge of God's self-disclosure and self-communication, even when he cannot be believed and professed in the fullness of Christian revelation as Trinitarian and Incarnated God, can be experienced and believed in and through a specific form of love, which is unifying, fruitful and self-giving. This experience is normally available to all men and women in their nuptial filiality and sexual difference oriented to marriage, especially monogamous and indissoluble marriage (GS 47-52). Thus, the Church is not only a final eschatological causality for the members of Other Religions, but also the instrumental, efficient and formal causality for the salvation of all, baptized and unbaptized<sup>33</sup>. "Non-Christians are neither formally nor anonymously part of the church, but they participate in the supernatural order of salvation, the constitution of which requires the church"<sup>34</sup>. Members of other religious traditions are also called and live the ordinary human experience to become one in flesh without destroying their anthropological sexual differentiation and, because of it, becoming fruitful. Rites, myths and moral precepts should help them to be concretely loving persons in the serious self-giving of the conjugal relationship or in the virginal ascetical life without any depreciation of their body, of its anthropological sexual difference and of their conjugal love (AL 77). Beyond the visible boundaries of the Church, but never without or against Christ's Church, the positive response to grace, working throughout the universe of those belonging to World Religions, would stand in their concrete and charitable love in the ordinary and universal experience of marriage and family. Conjugal love, in its universal created primordially, constitutes the universal order of love in the elementary experience of our humanity, in its male and female revelation. Choosing the good of this order entails love for all who benefit from this natural relation of marriage and family, the anthropological foundation of every interpersonal relationship<sup>35</sup> in their nuptial order (spouses, parents, children, brothers and sisters, relatives, friends etc.).

32. C. JACOBS-VANDEGEER, *The Unity of Salvation*, 260-283, 274.

33. Cfr. *ibid.*, 260-283, 276, 281.

34. *Ibid.*, 260-283, 281.

35. Cfr. *ibid.*, 260-283, 279.

For it is through the body that man perceives an original language, a language he has not created but is nonetheless interior to him, and that allows him to love. Thanks to the recovery of the language of the body he perceives that nature is not external to human action, but is a dimension of human action: man's primordial receptivity. [...] It is through the consideration of the body that human love is open from itself to a transcendent dimension, and God can join together without becoming oppressive, for he does so by the same action in which man and woman join together<sup>36</sup>.

Marriage as the primordial sacrament<sup>37</sup>, efficaciously manifests for all human beings, baptized and unbaptized, the protological and eschatological form of our salvation as graceful fulfilment of our created humanity in the Church as Christ's Bride. Being created for the Lord, we belong to him and become one spirit with him in and through our body, sexually differentiated by its nuptial vocation for love and self-giving (1Cor 6:12–20). Creation is a gift, and the capacity of nature to desire what can only be received as a gratuitous gift is a sign of God's generosity<sup>38</sup>. Religious experience that would not become source of power and loving openness towards the human concreteness but would persist in the abstractive and subjective movement towards the universal, would thereby prove that is not yet able to nourish and fruitfully communicate the unconditioned divine Origin<sup>39</sup>. Therefore, the unity and fruitfulness experienced in conjugal love, from the very beginning of the world, entails the anthropological openness of all men and women to Christ, concretely and historically. Members of Other Religions can be, concretely more open, affected and shaped by God's saving grace in the form of the nuptial mystery of Christ and the Church thanks to their human conjugal and family love.

"The idea of sacramentality suggests that God uses created realities as instruments of grace, that we especially mediate God's love to one

36. J. GRANADOS, *The Body, the Family and the Order of Love: the interpretative key to Vatican II*, in «Communio» 39 (Spring–Summer 2012), 201–226, 208–209.

37. JOHN PAULL II, *Man and Woman He Created Them. A Theology of the Body*, Pauline, Boston 2006, 19 and 97.

38. Cfr. N.J. HEALY JR., *Christian Personalism and the Debate over the Nature and Ends of Marriage*, in «Communio» 39 (Spring–Summer 2012), 186–200, 198.

39. Cfr. K. RIESENHUBER, *Understanding Non-Objective Meditation*, in «Communio» (Winter 1988/4), 451–467, 465.

another"<sup>40</sup>. At the end of our life we will be judged upon love<sup>41</sup>. Indeed, the Lord will judge us according to our works of charity (Mt 25:31–4). Insofar as all peoples, baptized and unbaptized, will be saved thanks to faith informed by charity and becoming heavenly Church, more will be asked from Christians since they received, in Scripture and sacraments, the fullness of Christ's saving revelation in history. All peoples, bad and good alike, are called to the eschatological nuptial banquet of heaven. The heavenly king, in his loving compassion will not treat us according to our sins nor repay us according to our faults (Psalm 103:8–10), but will judge us "according to our wedding garment" for the nuptial banquet of his Son (Mt 22:1–14). Namely, salvation will be freely and gratuitously granted to those who, "dressing the appropriate wedding garment", will be able to participate in the everlasting nuptial communion between God and humankind. According to Jesus' parable, those who refuse to come to the nuptial banquet and those without the wedding garment will be "condemned", and not those who, in ways known only to God (GS 22), accept the invitation and enter the banquet hall nuptially dressed. All sinners, baptized and unbaptized, will be offered nuptial salvation as a pure and unmerited gift provided that our God is good and merciful beyond any human expectation (Mt 5:45; 7:7–12; 20:1–16). The constitutive sexual differentiation, thus, offers to everyone, in his or her earthly pilgrimage, the existential way and supernatural call to God's love in its nuptial mystery. Jesus Christ's historical revelation, his Bride the Church and the sacrament of marriage unveil, still on earth, the meaning and the graceful fulfilment of our anthropological nuptiality that is offered to everyone as the ordinary place wherein we can love, and become fruitfully one. "The strength of the family lies in its capacity to love and to teach how to love" (AL 53).

Other Religions provide signs and elements of truth and goodness that enable their followers to acquire the wedding garment in the elementary human experience of the sexual difference, unifying love and generative fruitfulness. By dying after a life of fruitful love, God's grace will also configure, form and associate them to the Bride of his Son, the heavenly Church. Human death, for those who have lived out Christ's love in the way providentially possible to them, will be the passage and Paschal entrance to God's kingdom, the fullness

40. C. JACOBS-VANDEGEER, *The Unity of Salvation*, 260–283, 277.

41. JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Families* (February 2, 1994), n. 22.

of the sacramental baptism and Christian faith for Christians, and the novelty of supernatural baptism and light of nuptial truth for all the redeemed unbaptized on earth (Rom 6:1-10).

## 5. The nuptial mystery of the Church and Other Religions

As we can realize, Vatican II does not give any salvific role to World Religions as sacred institutions or ways of salvation, but teaches that God's revelation and salvation, in some sense, are universally available and invisibly efficacious for their followers. It declares the theological predestination, ordination and vocation of all humankind and of individual members of Other Religions to the New People of God, the Church of his Son Jesus Christ, in their respective order of Catholics, Christians, Jews, Muslims, members of Other Religions and unbelievers. The christological centrality of Jesus Christ's Paschal Mystery, including the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the movement of invisible but real attraction of all human beings to God through Christ by the Spirit and the logic of the order and vocation of all human peoples to the Church, leads us to understanding that Other Religions, as human, historical and spiritual institutions of religious scriptures, rites and moral precepts generating culture and societies, need to be theologically analyzed for their anthropological concerns and symbolic openness to the filial, nuptial and fruitful identity and dignity of all human beings created in God's image. All men and women are called to love and to the human generative unity in body and spirit. The soteriological meaning and the eschatological value of World Religions should be discerned in terms of how they offer religious instruments, cults and moral aid to their members so that they continuously become more capable of loving in terms of marriage and family (DP 29, 30). Insofar as faith informed by charity is essential for the salvation of the baptized, fruitful love comes to be the ordinary way by which all men and women are opened up to God's saving grace and reach, invisibly, Christ's salvation. The invisible presence of Christ is patterned, measured and discernable from his historical revelation and salvation in Jesus Christ and his Church (RM 29). In other words, there is an ecclesial character, an orientation toward the Church, in every offer of grace. And since the offer of grace is made to all, all are, by that fact, "related to the

church"<sup>42</sup>. Since God does not want to save men and women as individuals but, instead, he redeems a people for himself (LG 9), the communal and social dimension of becoming one people entails and refers, anthropologically speaking, to the conjugal reality of human love in its bodily sexual differentiation and its generative fruitfulness. The Church, both as Body–Spouse and People of God, is involved in the anthropological process of becoming one with Christ for men and women, who love, marry and give birth to children, thanks to their religious belief and hope for the fullness of life.

LG affirms that all humankind will be saved as Church, People of God (LG 13). Moreover, GS explicitly points out that all human beings will be saved through the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ reaching all of them in invisible ways known only to God. Therefore, we can come to recognize that if there is any salvific role for World Religions referring to their followers, it does not lie in themselves as institutions. It would be misleading to try to identify from the Christian perspective soteriological practices of Other Religions and label them as positively salvific in disconnection with the entire religious tradition of their scriptures, rites and doctrines<sup>43</sup>. We do not have the theological right to judge and define their religious practices for the sake of our theological understanding of the relation and comparisons between Christian salvation and their offers of salvation. This implies a disrespect for the peculiarity of each religious tradition, its specific value for the life of its members as a whole and an impoverishment of the cultural richness of the diversity of World Religions for interreligious dialogue. They cannot save unless Jesus Christ saves in, through and with his Church. Even before accepting the Gospel, members of Other Religions in their own cultural and religious scriptures, rites and moral precepts, already enjoy some elements which are good and true, the real presence of God's grace among. Beyond LG 17, the decree on the missionary activity of the Church (AG 9, 11, 15 and 18) introduces and develops the patristic theme of the seeds of the Word<sup>44</sup>, spread invisibly in the cosmos and, thus, in other religious experiences outside of the Church. These living seeds of the divine Word sown and hidden

42. F.A. SULLIVAN, *Salvation outside of the Church*, Paulist Press, New York 1992, 155.

43. Cfr. J.A. DINOIA, *The Diversity of Religions*, 61.

44. Unlike LG 16 which refers in its footnote to Eusebius of Caesarea, AG 3 cites Irenaeus and Clemens of Alexandria.

in creation and in other religious traditions, coming from God and leading to him, are in the Holy Spirit at work in the heart of all human beings (GS 38). «All the “logoi spermatikoi” already are, and always have been, integrated within the fullness of Christ»<sup>45</sup>. Any sort of separation between the divine Word of God, its seeds and Jesus Christ is contrary to the Christian faith (RM 6). Historical revelation in Jesus Christ and the universal gracious presence of God to all creation and in the depth of human spirit, even if it is not consciously reflected, “are identical in content. Surrender to the unconditioned Mystery in the depths of the spirit thus does not detract from its manifestness in the man Jesus, but is ordered to it and discloses it to understanding (cf. Jn 6:45)”<sup>46</sup>. Salvation entails an ever-increasing intimacy with God’s love<sup>47</sup> and the offer of salvation, through human history, beyond the visible boundaries of the Church, always involves the gift of the Triune God<sup>48</sup>. Thanks to this invisible but active presence of God’s grace even those who do not know the Gospel of Christ and his Church, without personal fault and rejection, can be saved. Seeking God for the sake of truth<sup>49</sup>, trying to do his will as they understand it through the dictates of their conscience (Rom 1:19–20; 2:14–16) and conjugal and fraternal love, are all fruits of the invisible growth in the Spirit of the risen Lord (LG 16).

Where *Lumen Gentium* 16 considers “preparation for the Gospel” to be all that is “good or true” (found before accepting faith in Christ) “given by him who enlightens all human beings in order that they may finally have life” (John 1:4,9), *Ad Gentes* 3 speaks of this preparation taking place through “human undertakings”, including religious ones, that are providentially guided by God. John’s Gospel inspires the first way (found in LG) of describing the “preparation for the Gospel”, and the Acts of the Apostles (esp. Ch.17), the second way (found in AG). Neither way envisages the search for God involving merely human efforts. For the first way, the light and life

45. H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the Catholicity of the Church*, in «Communio (Spring 2013/1), 132–160, 156.

46. K. RIESENHUBER, *Understanding Non-Objective Meditation*, 451–467, 459.

47. Cfr. C. JACOBS–VANDEGEER, *The Unity of Salvation*, 260–283, 261, 264.

48. *Ibid.*, 260–283, 265.

49. J. RATZINGER, *Truth and Tolerance. Christian Belief and World Religions*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2004, 83: “This desire for rationality, which still constantly pushes reason to go beyond itself in a way it would rather avoid, is part of the essence of Christianity. We could also say that the Christian faith, which grew out of the faith of Abraham, insists relentlessly on the question of truth and, thus, on what in all circumstances concerns all men and unites them all. For we have all to be pilgrims of truth”.

coming from the Word of God are essential; for the second way, God is the intimately present Pedagogue whose providential guidance prepares people to receive the gospel"<sup>50</sup>.

After Vatican II, in the field of Christian theology of World Religions, serious and considerable attempts have been made in order to argue, in the Rahnerian light of a Christocentric inclusive pluralism<sup>51</sup>, the salvific value of Other Religions and their institutions of sacred scriptures, rites and moral precepts. Going beyond a positive evaluation of what goodness and truth can be found in them and their theological relationship with Christ and his Church for the individual salvation of their followers, World Religions as such are thought to have their own salvific and revealing value in God's plan of salvation for all those who will not, without fault, become Christian and a member of the Church. The cosmic and eschatological Logos, Son of God, would salvifically act in ways that go beyond his humanity, though always related to the humanity he assumed in his Incarnation. The christological origins and character of creation would offer to all human beings a certain type of Christ's revelation of the Father in God's self-communication to every human being and his own Religion. The Holy Spirit, as well, permeates the universe making God's self-revelation accessible to individuals thanks to their religious tradition<sup>52</sup>. Furthermore, if these Religions are carrying elements of truth (revelation) and good (salvation) whose fullness lies in the purification, elevation and consummation of the Church mission, this evangelizing process entails a degree of continuity between what God has already granted to Other Religions and what they become. In light of the understanding that Other Religions have salvific value for their followers, even after the coming of Jesus Christ, these religions "can be encompassed in God's will to save their adherents insofar as these Religions can provide the means by which non-Christians can express their acceptance of God's offer of grace"<sup>53</sup>. Therefore, Other Religions are held as "participated mediations" in the one, unique me-

50. G. O'COLLINS, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, 115–116. Cfr. G. PHILIPS, *La Chiesa e il suo Mistero. Storia, testo e comment della Lumen Gentium*, Jaca Book, Milano 1975, 189.

51. J. DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 1997. G. O'COLLINS, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*.

52. Cfr. J. DUPUIS, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 316. Cfr. J. DUPUIS, *Christianity and the Religions. From confrontation to dialogue*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll NY 2002, 160, 186.

53. J.A. DINOIA, *The Diversity of Religions*, 77.

diation of Christ in creation and salvation, fully visible and active in his Church, the sacrament of God's Kingdom<sup>54</sup>. By practicing their religious traditions, their members would be transcendently opened to God's self-communication through a positive response in their belief and loving service of the others. Other Religions, thus, would mediate a faith that pleases God manifesting how this graceful saving faith is a possibility open to all<sup>55</sup>. God is not far from everyone (AG 3) and Christ has united himself in some way to every human being (GS 22) and to his cultural and social reality (AG 10). There is no possibility for anyone to be outside of God's grace. Christ's Paschal Mystery and the universal cosmic presence of the Holy Spirit would be historically and anthropologically mediated to their members through Other Religions. In them God provides ways to know him and be saved, although the Church founded by Christ would offer fuller knowledge of God and richer means of salvation. Some form of knowledge of God is possible through the power of reason and by discerning created nature, however, the fullness of God's knowledge is achievable only through divine self-revelation<sup>56</sup>. They claim that Vatican II «does not expressly speak of "ways of revelation and salvation", but what it says of Islam and, to a lesser extent, Hinduism and Buddhism, and Other Religions, amounts to recognizing them to be such "ways" to God»<sup>57</sup>.

In its doctrines, rites and moral values, each religious tradition fosters not only ways of thinking and believing but also ways of being, acting, loving and working that encompass the entire life of their

54. "In Christianity, God's personal presence to human beings in Jesus Christ reaches its highest and most complete sacramental visibility through the word revealed in him and the sacraments based on him. However, this complete mediation of the mystery of Christ reaches only Christians, members of the sacrament-church, from which they receive the word and whose sacramental economy they share. Can other religions contain and signify in some fashion God's presence to human beings in Jesus Christ? Does God become present to them in the very practice of their religions? The answer has to be "yes". Their religious practice is indeed what gives expression to their experience of God and of the mystery of Christ. It is the visible element, the sign, the sacrament of that experience. This practice expresses, sustains, supports, and contains, as it were, their encounter with God in Jesus Christ". In J. DUPUIS, *Christianity and the Religions*, 188. Cfr. J.A. DINOIA, *The Diversity of Religions*, 48. Cfr. G. O'COLLINS, *Salvation for all. God's other peoples*, Oxford University Press, New York 2008, 218.

55. Cfr. G. O'COLLINS, *Salvation for all*, 248. G. O'COLLINS, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, 120-127.

56. Cfr. R.B. SHEARD, *Interreligious Dialogue in the Catholic Church since Vatican II*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston NY 1987, 41.

57. G. O'COLLINS, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, 163.



members<sup>58</sup>. Its soteriological endeavor shapes distinctive conceptions of human nature, created world and afterlife existence. In order to take into serious consideration the plural variety and particular difference of each religion in God's plan of creation and salvation, it is impossible to try to understand them only from a soteriological perspective, as the question of salvation for unbaptized members of Other Religions can render the existent difference among religions irrelevant<sup>59</sup>. Instead, LG and Vatican II do not declare any theological recognition and soteriological sufficiency for the World Religions as saving institutions mediating Christ's salvation for their members. The secret and invisible presence of Christ as the cosmic Logos, also in religious efforts, is understood as divine pedagogy to prepare the way for the Gospel (AG 3, 9) within the universal presence of his Holy Spirit who fills the whole world (GS 11). The mission of the Church, by healing, elevating, fostering and consummating them in the fullness of her Head and Bridegroom's revelation and salvation (John 1:17), leads them to their divine origins and eschatological and Paschal fulfilment (LG 13, 17, AG 9, GS 76). Following the Roman Catholic Tradition, according to LG, their religious traditions as such, are not ordinary ways of salvation for their adepts<sup>60</sup>.

On the contrary, they can be theologically evaluated and soteriologically scrutinized in terms of how they can help their members to be increasingly transfigured in God's image as man and woman, children of the Triune God called to be fruitfully one in body and spirit (love, marriage and family)<sup>61</sup>. Doing so, they can love sharing God's salvific grace in the spousal form of Christ–Church unity without being historically baptized members of the Church on earth. Marriage as the primordial sacrament in God's creation establishes a conjugal form of love for all men and women in their concrete filial, nuptial and fruitful vocation to become in the Paschal Mystery, when and how known only to God, the Church of Jesus Christ for the heavenly glorification. By ordering and clearly drawing all peoples to God in the Church of his

58. Cfr. J.A. DINOIA, *The Diversity of Religions*, 56.

59. Cfr. S. MADRIGAL, *Iglesia es Caritas. La eclesiología teológica de Joseph Ratzinger–Benedict XVI*, Sal Terrae 2008, 410.

60. Cfr. R.B. SHEARD, *Interreligious Dialogue in the Catholic Church since Vatican II*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston NY 1987, 47. Cfr. M. RUOKANEN, *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions*, 70, 99.

61. Cfr. G. COLZANI, «L'Umanità di Gesù Testimonianza dell'Antropologico Universale», in *Euntes Docete 2* (2008), 27–57,45.

Son, Vatican II reveals that for all human beings, Christians and unbaptized, the Church is both the sacramental means and eschatological form of being saved, of belonging to God as sons and daughters in his only-begotten and risen Son. Marriage and family represent, from the outset of creation and from the completion of Jesus Christ's redemption, the innermost core of the human condition of life and love experienced, celebrated, taught and practiced by all human beings due to their particular religious traditions. Although the Church does not judge and evaluate specifically which sacred scriptures, rites and moral precepts of Other Religions are ways to Christ's salvation for their members, fruitful and unifying love remains the universal ordinary way for the salvation of all. Any ascetical and monastic abstinence of conjugal love in marriage present in Other Religions can graciously open to God's salvation provided it is not a form of despising or depreciation of the human body and its nuptial sexual difference and fruitfulness. Moreover, abstinence and monastic life, in Other Religions as well, represent a state of life for a few elected people. It cannot represent the common ordinary way of historical existence for the great majority of their members. Due to the unity of humankind and to the sacramental nuptial form of Christ-Church's redemption, the Church may and should challenge her interreligious dialogue and mission in favor of love and life within the marriage and family experience accessible to every human being. He who does not love, does not know God (1John 4:8 in NA 5). Human love in its divine origins and essence is always already nuptial for the personal communion with God reflected in our experience, as men and women, of marriage and family.

The unity in origins and destiny of all humankind finds its concrete fulfilment in the belonging and different ordering orientation of all to the People of God. The Catholic unity, ordered according to the sacramental belonging to Christ through faith, baptism and Church, shapes men and women upon the personal truth of the incarnate Son. Through his Incarnation, he united himself to each human being, sharing the form of being the child of God by embracing everyone and everything in him, no one being omitted (Col 3:11; 1Cor 15:28; John 1:11-14)<sup>62</sup>. Once in Christ, the universal possibility for everyone to belong to God and to become his people has historically and bodily begun with the foundation of his Church in the Paschal Mystery

62. A. LOPEZ, *Vatican II's Catholicity: a Christological Perspective on Truth, History, and the Human Person*, in «Communio» 39 (Spring-Summer 2012), 82-116.

(Ef 2:14). World Religions should be evaluated in their openness to salvation, in what is the most uniquely human and unifying for all humankind, namely being created man and woman in the image of God. This nuptial dimension is so humanly universal that it has been willed by God the Creator as the form of his communion with us, as people. Indeed, the Church is in the blood of Christ, recreated humanity as his bride.

## **6. The mission of the Church**

The Council manifests a positive tension between a providential presence of human beings belonging to other religious traditions and the urgent necessity for the Church's mission. According to LG 17, obeying her risen Lord's command (Mt 28:19–20; Jn 20:2; 1Cor 9:16), the Church driven by the Holy Spirit cooperates so that the plan of God the Father, who established Christ as the cosmic principle of his creation and Mediator of his universal salvation of the entire humankind (LG 14, 56, 60, 62; AG 3; RM 5), can be fulfilled. "Only in Jesus can human beings be saved, and therefore Christianity has an evident claim to universality. The Christian message is directed consequently to all human beings and has to be announced to all"<sup>63</sup>. Spreading and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, calling to conversion is essential for the Church's witness and martyrdom, in words and deeds (AG 13, 15, 39, 40)<sup>64</sup>. The urgency of Church's mission derives from the radical newness and fullness of life revealed in Jesus Christ and lived by his disciples (RM 7). The love of Christ impels us (2Cor 5:14): "the mission is an issue of faith, an accurate indicator of our faith in Christ and his love for us" (RM 11). By attraction and not by proselytism, the Church, drawn by Jesus Christ and prompted by his Spirit (Rev 22:17) through the intercession of the Virgin Mary Queen of the Apostles (LG 17; AG 42; GS 3), attracts all peoples and the entire world into the New People of God, Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit for the glory of God (2Cor 4:6). The mission of the Church, just as that of Jesus, the first coming of the Lord and the second when the Church will be gathered from

63. INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Christianity and the World Religions*, Vatican City 1997, n. 49.

64. Cfr. M. RUOKANEN, *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions*, 91.

all peoples like a harvest into the kingdom of God (LG 7, 13, 17, 19, 20). The Gospel must be preached to all nations before the Lord shall come (cf. Mark 13:10). Missionary activity involves the manifestation and fulfilment of God's plan of salvation in the world. "The goal of the mission of the Church is the glory of God and of Christ who desires the salvation of all people through the foundation of new ecclesial communities [...] The Holy Spirit prompts them to that"<sup>65</sup>. The Church serves the kingdom of God by establishing communities and founding new particular churches (RM 20, 48). Through the preaching of the Gospel and the celebration of the sacraments, the Church will be gathered from all nations and be eschatologically fulfilled in the kingdom of God as the Spouse of Christ, the author of our salvation (AG 9). The active mission of the Church enhances the pneumatological transfiguration of the world, the christification of men and women making the universe grow in the fullness of God's Kingdom, the heavenly Jerusalem, Holy City and Bride of the Lamb (LG 7). Moreover, as we have already seen, there is a missionary aspect to liturgy: public worship, especially in the Eucharist, and personal prayer are at the service of humanity's salvation for the sake of God's glory (LG 17).

The Church of Jesus Christ in her apostolic and catholic constitution finds herself truly in the mission that constitutes her and gives her the ecclesial vocation to be a living communion with God and unity of whole humankind. Her mission springs from God's creation (the Christological unity in origins and destiny of all human beings and of the entire creation), and from the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ (Cross and resurrection of Christ in a nuptial outpouring of the Holy Spirit for the unity with his Church) revealing the meaning of Incarnation and the pneumatological predestination of all to be eschatologically recapitulated in Jesus Christ. The Church's mission, according to Vatican II, entails the historical growth of men and women toward the fullness of their humanity, Jesus Christ, in and through their spiritual and physical participation in his death and resurrection (Rom 6:1-10). Indeed, the Holy Spirit, present in all creation (Gen 1:1; John 3:8) and in the heart of every human being created in the image of God, anticipates and prepares the missionary work of the Church (AG 4). God makes himself present in many ways, "not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their

65. G. PHILIPS, *La Chiesa e il suo Mistero*, 194.

spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain gaps, insufficiencies and errors” (RM 55).

Sin and responsible rejection of truth and goodness demand from the Church the essential need for her missionary preaching of Christ's salvation. “But very often, men, deceived by the evil one, have become vain in their reasoning and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator (Rm 1:21 and 25)” (LG 16). Any hopeful desire for universal salvation in Christ for all and any positive evaluation of World Religions for what good, true, and beautiful we can recognize in them must not avoid the explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ's salvation and the sacramental need of his Church and mission (RM 44, 46)<sup>66</sup>. «Through her mission, the Church liberates men from “the slavery of error” and purifies that which is good in the hearts and cultures of men “for the glory of God and the confusion of the devil”»<sup>67</sup> (LG 17; AG 9). The invisible seeds of the cosmic Logos, as preparation for the Gospel, yearn to be brought to the fullness of growth and redemption from sin in the Incarnate and Paschal Jesus Christ, now present and active in and through the universe by his glorified body and living Spirit (RM 29). Salvation from sin and from culpable refusal of God and his spousal love is very possible also for those who belong to Other Religions and have not received the Christian baptism yet. “It is only those who are culpably outside the Catholic Church who are thereby excluded from salvation”<sup>68</sup>, according to the official Catholic doctrine reaffirmed by LG 14. Sinfulness of Christians and need of conversion for Catholics, as well, keep alive the sacramental need of the mission of the Church in a purifying dialogue with the world (GS 43). God's reconciling mercy requires the urgent and universal need of the mission of the Church for all human beings, baptized and unbaptized (DP 31, 32, 36). All of us, sinners, need sacramental forgiveness and reconciliation (LG 8). All of us are in need of his divine mercy (Rom 3:23–24).

66. Cfr. R. MARTIN, *Will many be saved?*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI–Cambridge, UK 2012. The attempt to support the need of the mission of the Church based on the sinfulness and possible damnation of baptized and unbaptized sinners is exaggeratedly overemphasized and quite impossible to uphold. LG 16 seems to be insufficiently studied given the absence of a broader connection with other significant texts of Vatican II.

67. M. RUOKANEN, *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions*, 103.

68. F.A. SULLIVAN, *Salvation outside of the Church*, 151.