

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” In my homily today I want to use this verse (Jn 14:6) as a starting point to look at who can be saved according to the teaching of the Catholic Church. This will be a teaching homily. I spend time on doctrine today because this is a question I get asked about – maybe you do too.

There are Christians at either extreme of the possible answers to this question. Some Christians are very narrow in their interpretation of Christ’s words. Only those people who explicitly profess Jesus as Savior are saved. There are other Christians who have a very broad interpretation of who is saved. They believe that basically everybody goes to heaven. There are many ways to salvation, some explicitly Christian, but there are also other ways.

The Catholic teaching on salvation is in the middle of these extremes. To go back to John 14:6 (Jesus as the way, truth, and life), we believe that Jesus is the way to salvation. In fact, He is the only way.

Jesus means it when He says, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” More on that at the end of the homily.

And Jesus is also life – eternal life. The very meaning of true life is to be connected to God – and the only way to do that is to be united in some way with Jesus Christ, the Mediator between heaven and earth.

Jesus is also the Truth – with a Capital “T”. And, therefore, what Jesus teaches is true. And we can know what He teaches through the Catholic Church that He founded. Now, other religions teach some of the same things. There’s overlap. And, in such cases, we can honestly say that other religions teach truth. But we also say that where there are contradictions between other religions and Catholic Christianity the other religions are mistaken.

So in these ways we Catholics are very strict in our teaching on the unique claims of Jesus. But it gets more complicated, because we do not teach that only those people who are explicitly Catholic, or at least Christians – who explicitly profess Jesus’ name, have the

possibility of being saved. We believe that God wants all people to be saved – scripture tells us this (1 Tim 2:4). Therefore, He must give them some chance to do that.

But there are millions, maybe billions, of people past and present who have never even heard of Jesus. They couldn't profess Jesus because they didn't know of Him. There are also so many people who have heard of Jesus but never in a way that was convincing. What happens to them?

The Catholic Church teaches that salvation consists in a union with Jesus, beginning with baptism, and not having rejected that relationship with Jesus through serious sin at the time of death. But God doesn't expect us to do the impossible. God knows what we each experience in life regarding faith and the Church. God knows what we could have believed, what we could have known about Him, what we could have done, and what we could not.

There are some people who couldn't have decided to explicitly become a Catholic Christian. It was impossible given their life situation. The Church teaches that in such situations God looks to see if these persons followed Him, via their consciences, to the best of their knowledge and ability. Have they done what they could? Would they have accepted Jesus if they had the chance? We believe, for example, that a faithful Muslim who only knows Jesus from the Quran can still be saved if he tries to live according to God's law as he knows it, even though he doesn't believe in Jesus' divinity, the Trinity, or Christianity. God sees into his conscience and knows if he has done his best with what he's been given. The same holds true for a Jew, or Buddhist, or anyone.

But, while it is possible to be saved without explicitly professing Christ if not doing so isn't a person's fault, that doesn't mean that salvation is automatic – or even easy. Those ignorant of the totality of the truth still must follow what truth they have. They also have the

freedom to reject their conscience and act against it. For instance, if a person feels drawn to Catholicism but doesn't accept or even investigate the faith because to become Catholic would require too big a sacrifice, that person is culpable. In doing so he or she is rejecting God. But here's the tricky part: that knowledge is limited to God and the person involved. The rest of us can't be sure. We're not in a position to judge someone else's salvation.

It may seem, therefore, from this teaching that the faithful are no better off than those outside the faith. But in this spiritual journey we're on it helps to have the truth and revelation of the Bible, the Sacraments and graces of the Church. The chances improve that we will follow the right road if it's well-lit by Christ Himself. So there are reasons we need to keep proclaiming the faith. Being part of the Body of Christ increases our chances and ability to keep saying "Yes" to Jesus.

I will end by saying something that goes back to Jesus' words in the Gospel today – something that will sound strange or offensive to

non-Catholics. Since Jesus says, “no one comes to the Father except through me,” even those non-believers who are saved by following what lights God did give them, are still saved by Jesus. He is the only way to the Father, the only Mediator between heaven and earth. That means everyone in heaven is at last a member of the Church, the Body of Christ – and, even if surprised, are overjoyed at the discovery.