

## **Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time: Mass Readings: August 24, 2025**

### **First Reading - Isaiah 66:18-66:21**

For I know their works and their thoughts, and I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory, and I will set a sign among them. From them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Put, and Lud—which draw the bow—to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations. They shall bring all your kindred from all the nations as an offering to the Lord, on horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and on mules, and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord, just as the Israelites bring a grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord. And I will also take some of them as priests and as Levites, says the Lord.

### **Second Reading - Hebrews 12:5-12:7, 12:11-12:13**

And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children— “My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts.” Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline?

Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

### **Responsorial Psalm 117:1, 117:2 - Praise the Lord , all you nations! Extol him, all you peoples!**

### **Gospel - Luke 13:22-13:30**

Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, “Lord, will only a few be saved?” He said to them, “Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then in reply he will say to you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’ But he will say, ‘I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!’ There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

Our readings for today's Mass explore the nature of salvation, emphasizing the universal call to holiness, the necessity of personal effort in following Christ, and the reality of the justice of God. They help us to better understand the universal call to salvation<sup>1</sup> while noting the demanding nature of entering God's kingdom. In the first reading from Isaiah 66, we are given a vision of salvation where God gathers all nations and languages, extending Divine glory beyond Israel. This reflects the universal scope of God's plan and the gathering of the lost tribes alongside Gentiles. Psalm 117, the shortest of all the psalms, calls on these nations to acknowledge God's supremacy, and essential part of a positive response to God's invitation. Based on scriptures such as these, the Vatican II document, *Lumen Gentium* stated in paragraph 13 that, "*all men are called to belong to the new people of God. This people therefore, whilst remaining one and only one, is to be spread throughout the whole world and to all ages in order that the design of God's will may be fulfilled: he made human nature one in the beginning and has decreed that all his children who were scattered should be finally gathered together as one*"<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 12 helps us to understand how in the life of a the mission minded disciple of Christ we must humbly receive the discipline of the Lord as a form of loving education, and an necessarily important part of our spiritual growth. The passage underscores the necessity of active participation in discipleship and the cross. The Gospel of Luke further specifies that Jesus' teaching on the narrow gate, emphasizes that many will try to enter but God's justice<sup>3</sup> will sift between those who authentically belong to the sheepfold of Christ.

"*Lord, will only a few be saved?*" The question itself is one that many people in every century ask and often struggle with. For the man in the Gospel reading, his context was a belief among Palestinian Jews that all Israelites have a share in the world to come. What, then, would be the relation of human beings to the kingdom that Jesus was preaching? No doubt, the man also had personal concerns, since Jesus does not directly answer the question but instead, he leaves that to God our Father. He puts emphasis instead on the effort that human beings will have to exert to get in.<sup>4</sup> He offers a response that highlights the more essential aspect of personal responsibility. Since, there is no advantage to those listening and looking for an answer, to know whether few or many would be saved. Rather, it is exceedingly necessary to know the way by which each of us can come to salvation.<sup>5</sup>

The question asked in the Gospel reading leads us to a deeper dive into the universal call / invitation to salvation which then raises another question asked by many, 'saved from what?'<sup>6</sup> The answer to which must deal directly with issues of human freedom<sup>7</sup>, human nature<sup>8</sup>, sin<sup>9</sup>, justice and mercy<sup>10</sup>, heaven<sup>11</sup> and hell<sup>12</sup>.

Everyone is called to form part of the Kingdom of God, since God "*desires all men to be saved*".<sup>13</sup> Salvation is not limited to a select few but is open to all nations and peoples, as reflected in Isaiah's vision of God gathering nations from distant lands to His holy mountain. This universal call challenges exclusivist attitudes and highlights the Church's mission to proclaim God's love to all, fostering a community

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part\\_three/section\\_one/chapter\\_three.index.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_three/section_one/chapter_three.index.html)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat\\_ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat_ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)

<sup>3</sup> <https://opusangelorum.org/the-justice-of-god-and-our-little-way-of-expiation/>

<sup>4</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer S.J., *The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, vol. 28A, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 1022.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Luke*, ed. John Henry Newman, vol. 3 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1843), 492-493.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 5:12-14

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part\\_three/section\\_one/chapter\\_one/article\\_3/ii\\_human\\_freedom\\_in\\_the\\_economy\\_of\\_salvation.index.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_three/section_one/chapter_one/article_3/ii_human_freedom_in_the_economy_of_salvation.index.html)

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part\\_three/section\\_one/chapter\\_one.index.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_three/section_one/chapter_one.index.html)

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part\\_three/section\\_one/chapter\\_one/article\\_8/ii\\_the\\_definition\\_of\\_sin.index.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_three/section_one/chapter_one/article_8/ii_the_definition_of_sin.index.html)

<sup>10</sup> <https://youtu.be/j9cqZBmFvV0?si=meAOinWNFtqn7gYz>

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part\\_one/section\\_two/chapter\\_three/article\\_12/ii\\_heaven.index.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_one/section_two/chapter_three/article_12/ii_heaven.index.html)

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part\\_one/section\\_two/chapter\\_three/article\\_12/iv\\_hell.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_one/section_two/chapter_three/article_12/iv_hell.html)

<sup>13</sup> 1 Tim 2:4

characterized by love, justice, and compassion. This is an important affirmation of what must be understood about our salvation. Salvation does not depend on race, creed, geography, politics, or anything else of that nature. Although those things and more can interfere with or influence our response to God, it is without exception, available to those who struggle to obtain it – who repent and believe. Salvation or its absence leads to one of two eternal experiences for human beings. To be saved is to have the hope of eternal life in union with God.<sup>14</sup> To lack salvation is to be assured of eternal separation from God.<sup>15</sup>

On a number of occasions Jesus describes eternal life as a banquet<sup>16</sup> to which all are invited: *“Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart and moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience: those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life. Whatever good or truth is found among them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life”*.<sup>17</sup>

Jesus, when answering the question about how many will be saved, focuses our attention on our participation in discipleship and the cross. He says, *“Strive to enter through the narrow door”*, by which Jesus conveys the idea of supreme effort, like the struggles in Olympic contests or hand-to-hand combat.<sup>18</sup> Jesus added, *“for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.”* Knowing the Lord and listening to his preaching is not enough for getting to heaven; what God judges is how we respond to the grace he gives us: *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven”*.<sup>19</sup> In so saying, he invites believers to break out of complacency and actively pursue a deeper relationship with Him, recognizing that grace must be met with human effort.<sup>20</sup> St J. Escrivá put it this way, *“A Christian’s struggle must be unceasing, for interior life consists in beginning and beginning again. This prevents us from proudly thinking that we are perfect already. It is inevitable that we should meet difficulties on our way. If we did not come up against obstacles, we would not be creatures of flesh and blood. We will always have passions which pull us downwards; we will always have to defend ourselves against more or less self-defeating urges”*<sup>21</sup>

Jesus also identifies himself as the narrow door or gate, through which salvation comes. He wants us to be on our guard against the danger of having a false sense of security. To belong to the people of God, or to have known Christ and heard him teach, is no guarantee of the reward of heaven. God will judge us on what we actually do—on our response to grace. The parable of the locked door illustrates that some who appear to be insiders may be rejected because they never truly embraced Christ. Only those who make a serious effort can reach the goal of salvation.<sup>22</sup>

Belonging to the People of God is both a privilege and a responsibility. Christians are called to live by love, which Jesus presents as the pathway to life. The narrow way of unconditional love is challenging and

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<sup>14</sup> Romans 5:1-11

<sup>15</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church 1033

<sup>16</sup> Luke 13:29; cf. 12:35–40; 14:15–24; Mt 8:11

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)

<sup>18</sup> Marvin Richardson Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), 376.

<sup>19</sup> Mt 7:21

<sup>20</sup> *“for unless the mind struggles manfully, the wave of the world is not overcome, by which the soul is ever thrown back again into the deep.”* Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Luke*, ed. John Henry Newman, vol. 3 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1843), 492.

<sup>21</sup> <https://escriva.org/en/es-cristo-que-pasa/75/>

<sup>22</sup> Lk 16:16; Mt 11:12

requires perseverance. Failure to love others, especially the marginalized and vulnerable, jeopardizes one's standing before God. Some who consider themselves Catholics may face rejection if their lives lack genuine love and recognition of Jesus in others. Christians need to, as it says in paragraph 40 of *Lumen Gentium*, “*use the strength dealt out to them by Christ’s gift, so that, following in his footsteps and conformed to his image, doing the will of God in everything, they may wholeheartedly devote themselves to the glory of God and to the service of their neighbor.*”<sup>23</sup>

Further focuses on eternal separation from God, Hell, we must believe that this is a real possibility and contrary to various heretical declarations, it is in truth an eternal experience. The Church teaches that heaven, eternal existence lived in union with God, is real.<sup>24</sup> Conversely, hell as the manner of human existence marked by “*weeping and gnashing of teeth,*” representing the soul's eternal separation from God.<sup>25</sup> The person who dies in the state of grace will continue to exist in heaven, body and soul, after mortal death. The one who dies in rebellion against God, the state of mortal sin, will continue to exist in hell. As was previously said, salvation is not guaranteed by superficial association with Christ but requires a genuine, growing friendship with Him, involving effort, self-sacrifice, and continual striving to live according to His teachings. The Word of God, living and true, teaches that our final salvation or lack thereof, depends on the state of the soul at death. For those “*who endure[s] to the end will be saved*”.<sup>26</sup> The essence of salvation lies in friendship with Christ, which is rooted in the heart rather than external religious observance.

While the Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms the existence of hell and refers to it as an “eternal fire” of everlasting punishment, the teaching does remain a subject of both perennial and pressing debate. The first heresy to address is the so-called Gospel of Inclusion / Universal Salvation or Universal Reconciliation. During a 2024 interview Pope Francis said, “*This isn't dogma, just my thought: I like to think of hell as being empty. I hope it is.*” Some folks took this to mean that he was advocating for a growing theological movement toward a Gospel of inclusion. They were excited at the prospect of the Church finally declaring that hell is either not real at all or is a temporary experience. In truth, he was musing with hope, about the very question asked in today’s Gospel reading, “*Lord, will only a few be saved?*” The Church does not claim that anyone in particular has been eternally separated from God, only that according to the Word of God, it is possible even though as I’ve said, everyone is called to form part of the Kingdom of God, since God “*desires all men to be saved*”.<sup>27</sup> With that in mind, we can better understand Pope Francis’ hope. It is the hope of all children of God, though the evidence of human behavior would lead us to the sad truth that there are those who will reject God’s love and mercy – who will choose not to be saved.

Some Catholic theologians have a renewed interest in resurrecting what was error in the theological speculations of certain early Church Fathers. They wondered about if, in the end, all will be saved and reunited with God -- a universalism, they argued, that is more consistent with faith in an all-loving, all-powerful God. Ilaria Ramelli<sup>28</sup> wrote that saints such as Gregory of Nyssa, Isaac the Syrian and Maximus the Confessor were convinced that all people ultimately would be saved.

Jordan Daniel Wood<sup>29</sup>, a theologian at Belmont University in Nashville, was given the opportunity to defend hard universalism in a livestreamed debate at The Catholic University of America in 2024. Then, for some reason, in a February 2025 lecture to students and seminarians at Mount St. Mary’s University. I would

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<sup>23</sup>[https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)

<sup>24</sup>[https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part\\_one/section\\_two/chapter\\_three/article\\_12/ii\\_heaven.index.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_one/section_two/chapter_three/article_12/ii_heaven.index.html)

<sup>25</sup>[https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part\\_one/section\\_two/chapter\\_three/article\\_12/iv\\_hell.index.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_one/section_two/chapter_three/article_12/iv_hell.index.html)

<sup>26</sup> Matt. 24:13; cf. 25:31–46

<sup>27</sup> 1 Tim 2:4

<sup>28</sup> <https://profiles.stanford.edu/ilaria-ramelli>

<sup>29</sup> <https://belmont.academia.edu/JordanWood/CurriculumVitae>

argue that disciples of Christ ought not to invite anyone into any group for the purpose of defending what is clearly established as heresy. Happy for the opportunity, he argued that the idea of universal salvation is in fact the natural and consistent evolution of Church Doctrine. That the principles of doctrinal development allow for a radical revision of hell, making it temporary and its punishments remedial.

Rob Bell<sup>30</sup>, another proponent of Christian Universalism, describes it like this: *“At the heart of this perspective is the belief that, given enough time, everybody will turn to God and find themselves in the joy and peace of God’s presence. The love of God will melt every hard heart, and even the most “depraved sinners” will eventually give up their resistance and turn to God.”*

David Bentley Hart<sup>31</sup> is more of a ‘soft universalist’ who teaches that the unrepentant person will indeed face a form of God’s judgment in a temporary ‘hell’. He proposes that in this temporary experience of purgation, God’s discipline is restorative or pedagogical as opposed to perpetually retributive. Because Jesus has already objectively borne God’s judgment for sin through his death on the cross, he believes that a Hell that never ends trivializes Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross by rendering it only partly effective rather than a total rescue of the created order. He also believes that an eternal punishment makes for a unforgiving, not all loving, not all merciful God – referring to St. Isaac of Nineveh<sup>32</sup> who mused that: *“It is not the way of the compassionate Maker to create rational beings to deliver them over mercilessly to unending affliction in punishment for things of which he knew even before they were fashioned, aware how they would turn out when He created them—and whom nonetheless he created.”*

Many find it comforting to think that hell is temporary. That we will escape the judgment of eternal separation from God. If true, it would mean that we are safe even in our imperfections, our sins, our rebellion, and our blasphemies. It means we could offend God outright, boldly reject God, and not worry about our salvation - because we’ll all be saved no matter what we do in this life. Universalism is a theology of tolerance, of ease, and comfort. It feels good. To be clear, universalism is a false and dangerous, unbiblical doctrine.<sup>33</sup>

Critics say that making hell temporary would lessen the gravity of human freedom, threaten the missionary impulse, and contradict Christ's teaching on judgment. In truth, there is no shortage of ways in which to show that this theory of universal reconciliation is heresy. But two simple truths are enough to assure all but those who are obstinately entrenched in believing the heresy. The first and arguably most important is that God can love us and at the same time allow us to reject faith and belief without ceasing to love us.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, as Philosopher Robert Adams explains: *“God cannot demonstrate his inclusiveness toward separatists if they refuse to be included.... The persistent separatist thereby forces God to compromise his policy of inclusiveness itself: either he includes the separatist and excludes those with whom the separatist refuses to associate; or he includes the latter, and the former separate themselves.”*<sup>35</sup>

The second point, which tracks with our universally lived human experience, is a hammer to the keystone of the universalist structure of belief, that when faced with the discipline and punishment of a temporary hell, and the presumed enlightenment of the person, they would then choose for God. However, C. S. Lewis insightfully, citing John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, illuminates the state of mind whereby spiteful humans and demons cling to their insurgence: *“The choice of every lost soul is expressed in the words ‘Better to reign*

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<sup>30</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rob\\_Bell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rob_Bell)

<sup>31</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Bentley\\_Hart](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Bentley_Hart)

<sup>32</sup> <https://archive.org/details/04.CatholicEncyclopedia1912ClandDiocesan>

<sup>33</sup> *The Universal Mediation of Christ and Non-Christian Religions*; Thomas Joseph White, O.P. 2016 AD

<sup>34</sup> Dave Armstrong, *Biblical Catholic Salvation: “Faith Working through Love”* (Dave Armstrong, 2010), 121.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Merrihew Adams, “Christian Liberty,” in Thomas V. Morris, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, Notre Dame Studies in Philosophy Series (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 104.

*in Hell than serve in Heaven.' There is always something they insist on keeping even at the price of misery.... You see it easily enough in a spoiled child that would rather miss its play and its supper than say it was sorry and be friends."*<sup>36</sup> Human beings have agency, freedom. As St. Augustine said, we make choices, *"His mercy comes before us in everything. But to assent to or dissent from the call of God is a matter for one's own will."*<sup>37</sup> Timothy Keller elaborates this way: *"Hell, then, is the trajectory of a soul, living a self-absorbed, self-centered life, going on and on forever.... Hell is simply one's freely chosen identity apart from God on a trajectory into infinity."*<sup>38</sup> Or, as William Lane Craig specifies, *"insofar as the inhabitants of hell continue to hate God and reject him, they continue to sin and so accrue to themselves more guilt...hell is self-perpetuating....Every sin has a finite punishment, but because sinning goes on forever, so does the punishment."*<sup>39</sup>

The second erroneous position about salvation that needs to be addressed is variously known as the perseverance of the saints, eternally security, or once saved always saved. Again, this is a scripturally unfounded idea and directly contradicts Jesus' statement in today's Gospel reading. We cannot possess absolute assurance of own salvation or for anyone else. That Jesus gives eternal life to His sheep is without question, true. However, that's different from a person "knowing" for sure whether he or she is one of among the sheepfold of Christ, with absolute certainty. We can, however, arrive at a *moral* or *practical* assurance, after an examination of conscience, that we are presently in Christ, and following His will, as it is revealed in Holy Scripture, and in good graces with God, which is to be free of mortal sin. Jesus speaks about *"those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment."*<sup>40</sup>

Dave Armstrong, on the subject of Salvation wrote, *"Adherents to this heresy would argue that if an apparent Christian later fell into serious sin or fell away completely, then despite everyone having assumed they were indeed saved, they were not. As is proved by their actions. Yet, this also shows their error, since neither that person nor their previously believed to be brothers and sisters in Christ actually possessed the assurance promised."*<sup>41</sup> Final justification and salvation are conditioned upon remaining in him if he is to remain in us.<sup>42</sup> St. Paul later in his epistle emphasizes that attaining salvation is an ongoing struggle, possible only by God's grace: *"be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil"*.<sup>43</sup> St. Paul is urges perseverance, *"take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand"*.<sup>44</sup> In fact, writing about his thoughts on his own salvation, St. Paul said, *"Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."*<sup>45</sup>

We return to the initial words of Jesus in answer to the question. Jesus urges us to examine our lives and ensure that we are truly striving to enter through the narrow door. That salvation requires more than external religious activity; it demands a living relationship with Christ marked by love, effort, and

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<sup>36</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

<sup>37</sup> St. Augustine *De spiritu et litt.* 34, 60

<sup>38</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 77-78

<sup>39</sup> William Lane Craig, "Diversity, Evil, and Hell," in Chad Meister and James K. Dew, eds., *God and Evil: The Case for God in a World Filled with Pain* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 233

<sup>40</sup> John 5:29

<sup>41</sup> Dave Armstrong, *Biblical Catholic Salvation: "Faith Working through Love"* (Dave Armstrong, 2010), 131-134.

<sup>42</sup> Eph 2:10; cf. 4:22-32; 5:1-18

<sup>43</sup> Eph 6:10-11

<sup>44</sup> Eph 6:13-18

<sup>45</sup> Phil 3:12-14

perseverance. The Christian life is like an endurance race, requiring supreme effort, patience, and hope. There is no place for presumption of personal salvation or that God's love and mercy will negate our freedom to choose against God on this side of death. Rather we must cultivate a hopeful and active faith that embraces the cross and follows Jesus faithfully. To understand properly the invitation "to enter through the narrow door", we must remember the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John, "I am the gate; whoever comes in by me will be saved."<sup>46</sup> To enter through the narrow door is to follow Jesus: to learn to live like him; to take up his cross and trust in the Father who raised him from the dead. When we follow Jesus, our freedom doesn't mean we can do anything we want with impunity. We must respond faithfully to the love of the Father. What Jesus asks is not scrupulous observance of the law, but radical love of God and neighbor. Therefore, his call is a source of responsibility, but not of anguish. Jesus is always an open door. No one can close it. It is we who choose not to enter.<sup>47</sup>

## Glossary of Key Terms

- **Universal Call to Salvation:** The theological principle that God desires all people to be saved and extends an invitation to salvation to all nations and individuals.
- **Narrow Gate/Door:** A metaphor used by Jesus (Luke's Gospel, John 10:9) to describe the challenging and demanding path to salvation, requiring sincere effort and authentic discipleship.
- **Discipline of the Lord:** As mentioned in Hebrews 12, the loving correction and guidance from God that serves as a necessary part of a disciple's spiritual growth and education.
- **Lumen Gentium:** A document from the Second Vatican Council that emphasizes the universal call to holiness and the gathering of all men into the new People of God, including those without explicit knowledge of Christ who seek God sincerely.
- **Heaven:** The eternal existence of perfect life and union with God, characterized by joy and peace, and described by Jesus as a banquet.
- **Hell:** The eternal separation from God, described as "weeping and gnashing of teeth," a state chosen by those who die in rebellion against God (mortal sin).
- **Universal Salvation (Universal Reconciliation / Gospel of Inclusion):** A theological error that proposes all individuals will ultimately be saved and reunited with God, often suggesting hell is either non-existent or temporary/remedial.
- **Perseverance of the Saints (Eternal Security / Once Saved Always Saved):** A theological error that asserts that once a person is saved, their salvation is eternally secure and cannot be lost, regardless of subsequent actions or choices.
- **Human Agency/Freedom:** The capacity of human beings to make free choices, including the choice to assent to or dissent from God's call, which is central to the understanding of salvation and eternal destiny.
- **Moral/Practical Assurance:** A level of certainty one can achieve through self-examination and striving to live according to God's will, indicating that one is presently in a state of grace, as opposed to absolute assurance of final salvation.
- **Friendship with Christ:** The essence of salvation, described as a genuine, growing, and heartfelt relationship with Jesus, requiring effort, self-sacrifice, and continual adherence to His teachings.

## Briefing Document: The Nature of Salvation, Personal Effort, and Divine Justice

### I. Introduction

This briefing document summarizes the core themes and critical points regarding the nature of salvation, the necessity of personal effort, and the reality of God's justice, as presented in the provided source. The

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<sup>46</sup> John 10:9

<sup>47</sup> José Antonio Pagola, [Following in the Footsteps of Jesus: Meditations on the Gospels for Year C](#), ed. Rafael Luciani, trans. Valentine de Souza, Series Ministeria (Miami, FL: Convivium Press, 2012), 126.

readings emphasize the universal call to holiness and salvation while acknowledging the demanding nature of entering God's kingdom and refuting common heresies concerning salvation.

## II. Main Themes and Key Ideas

### A. The Universal Call to Salvation and Holiness

- **God's Universal Plan:** Salvation is not limited to a select few but is open to all nations and peoples. Isaiah 66 offers a "vision of salvation where God gathers all nations and languages, extending Divine glory beyond Israel," reflecting the "universal scope of God's plan." Psalm 117 further calls on all nations to "acknowledge God's supremacy."
- **One People of God:** The Vatican II document, *Lumen Gentium*, paragraph 13, states that "all men are called to belong to the new people of God. This people therefore, whilst remaining one and only one, is to be spread throughout the whole world and to all ages in order that the design of God's will may be fulfilled: he made human nature one in the beginning and has decreed that all his children who were scattered should be finally gathered together as one."
- **Inclusivity, Not Exclusivity:** This universal call "challenges exclusivist attitudes and highlights the Church's mission to proclaim God's love to all, fostering a community characterized by love, justice, and compassion." Salvation is available to "those who struggle to obtain it – who repent and believe," regardless of "race, creed, geography, politics, or anything else of that nature."
- **Salvation for Those Who Seek God Sincerely:** The document notes that "Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart and moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience: those too may achieve eternal salvation." Divine providence will not deny assistance to those who strive to lead a good life without explicit knowledge of God.

### B. The Necessity of Personal Effort and Discipleship

- **The Demanding Nature of Entry:** The Gospel of Luke, through Jesus' teaching on the "narrow gate," emphasizes that "many will try to enter but God's justice will sift between those who authentically belong to the sheepfold of Christ." Jesus' response to the question, "Lord, will only a few be saved?", focuses on "the effort that human beings will have to exert to get in."
- **Striving for the Narrow Door:** Jesus urges believers to "Strive to enter through the narrow door," conveying the idea of "supreme effort, like the struggles in Olympic contests or hand-to-hand combat." He states, "for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able."
- **Beyond Superficial Association:** "Knowing the Lord and listening to his preaching is not enough for getting to heaven; what God judges is how we respond to the grace he gives us: 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven'."
- **Active Participation in Discipleship:** Hebrews 12 highlights that "in the life of a the mission minded disciple of Christ we must humbly receive the discipline of the Lord as a form of loving education, and an necessarily important part of our spiritual growth." Grace must be "met with human effort."
- **Unceasing Struggle:** St. J. Escrivá describes a Christian's struggle as "unceasing, for interior life consists in beginning and beginning again. This prevents us from proudly thinking that we are perfect already."
- **Jesus as the Narrow Door:** Jesus identifies himself as "the narrow door or gate, through which salvation comes." Belonging to the People of God requires living by "unconditional love," which is "challenging and requires perseverance." Failure to love others "jeopardizes one's standing before God."

- **The Essence of Salvation:** Salvation is rooted in a "genuine, growing friendship with Him, involving effort, self-sacrifice, and continual striving to live according to His teachings."

### C. The Reality of Divine Justice, Heaven, and Hell

- **Eternal Consequences:** Salvation or its absence leads to one of two eternal experiences: "To be saved is to have the hope of eternal life in union with God. To lack salvation is to be assured of eternal separation from God."
- **Heaven:** The Church teaches that "heaven, eternal existence lived in union with God, is real."
- **Hell:** Conversely, "hell as the manner of human existence marked by 'weeping and gnashing of teeth,' representing the soul's eternal separation from God." It is a "real possibility" and "an eternal experience." The person who dies "in rebellion against God, the state of mortal sin, will continue to exist in hell."
- **God's Love and Freedom to Reject:** The document asserts that "God can love us and at the same time allow us to reject faith and belief without ceasing to love us." Human beings have "agency, freedom." As St. Augustine said, "to assent to or dissent from the call of God is a matter for one's own will."
- **Hell as Self-Perpetuating:** Timothy Keller describes hell as "the trajectory of a soul, living a self-absorbed, self-centered life, going on and on forever.... Hell is simply one's freely chosen identity apart from God on a trajectory into infinity." William Lane Craig adds that "insofar as the inhabitants of hell continue to hate God and reject him, they continue to sin and so accrue to themselves more guilt...hell is self-perpetuating."

### D. Refutation of Heretical Doctrines on Salvation

- **Universal Salvation / Universal Reconciliation: The Heresy:** This doctrine posits that "in the end, all will be saved and reunited with God." Proponents like Rob Bell believe that "given enough time, everybody will turn to God and find themselves in the joy and peace of God's presence." David Bentley Hart suggests a temporary, purgatorial hell that is "restorative or pedagogical as opposed to perpetually retributive."
  - **Pope Francis's Hope vs. Dogma:** Pope Francis's comment, "This isn't dogma, just my thought: I like to think of hell as being empty. I hope it is," is clarified as a "musing with hope" rather than an endorsement of universalism. The Church "does not claim that anyone in particular has been eternally separated from God, only that according to the Word of God, it is possible."
  - **Critique:** Universalism is labeled a "false and dangerous, unbiblical doctrine." Critics argue it "would lessen the gravity of human freedom, threaten the missionary impulse, and contradict Christ's teaching on judgment."
1. **Core Truths Against Universalism: God's Love and Human Freedom:** God allows individuals to reject His love without ceasing to love them.
  2. **Persistent Separatism:** As Robert Adams explains, "God cannot demonstrate his inclusiveness toward separatists if they refuse to be included.... The persistent separatist thereby forces God to compromise his policy of inclusiveness itself."
  3. **Clinging to Insurgence:** C.S. Lewis, citing Milton, notes that lost souls might choose "'Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.' There is always something they insist on keeping even at the price of misery...."
- **Perseverance of the Saints / Once Saved Always Saved: The Heresy:** This idea suggests that once a person is saved, they possess "absolute assurance of own salvation" and cannot lose it.
  - **Critique:** This is a "scripturally unfounded idea and directly contradicts Jesus' statement in today's Gospel reading." While Jesus gives eternal life to His sheep, "that's different from a person 'knowing' for sure whether he or she is one of among the sheepfold of Christ, with absolute certainty."

- **Moral Assurance:** We can achieve a "moral or practical assurance" through "examination of conscience, that we are presently in Christ, and following His will...and in good graces with God, which is to be free of mortal sin."
- **Ongoing Struggle:** St. Paul emphasizes that salvation is an "ongoing struggle, possible only by God's grace," urging perseverance: "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." He even speaks of his own ongoing striving: "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own."
- **Conditional Justification:** "Final justification and salvation are conditioned upon remaining in him if he is to remain in us."

### III. Conclusion

The path to salvation, though universally offered, is demanding and requires continuous, active personal effort in following Christ and living a life of radical love and obedience. While God desires all to be saved, human freedom allows for the rejection of His love, leading to eternal separation. Heretical views like universal salvation and "once saved, always saved" undermine the gravity of human choices and the ongoing struggle inherent in discipleship. Salvation is ultimately a living friendship with Christ, characterized by perseverance and a faithful response to God's grace. "To enter through the narrow door is to follow Jesus: to learn to live like him; to take up his cross and trust in the Father who raised him from the dead."