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“How is man saved?” An Essential Contribution by Joseph Ratzinger to the Theology of Religions

“W jaki sposób człowiek jest zbawiany?” – nowatorski wkład
Josepha Ratzingera w teologię religii

ABSTRACT: The article aims to present Joseph Ratzinger’s thought in the field of theology of religions, according to which both the salvific universality of Christ and the necessity of the Church for the salvation of every man (and thereby the deepest meaning of being Christian) appear inseparably. The author shows how Ratzinger outlines a vision with two focal points: the objective aspect of salvation with the theological understanding of the vicarious representation of Christ (and the Church with him) and the subjective conditions of salvation with a reflection on the human being. In the article, it is thus demonstrated how an essential salvific relationship – a synthesis of faith and love – can be established between man and God. It is further shown that Ratzinger also highlights the role which Christianity, together with world religions, can play in the common search for the truth about God and man, contributing to the unity of the human family. The article concludes with an observation that the depth of Ratzinger’s reflection on the question of salvation contributes to illuminating fundamental aspects of the complex theological problem of religions.

KEYWORDS: salvation, salvific relationship with God, vicarious representation, Church, truth in religions, theology of religions, Christianity and religions

ABSTRAKT: Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie myśli Josepha Ratzingera w dziedzinie teologii religii, zgodnie z którą zarówno zbawcza uniwersalność Chrystusa, jak i konieczność Kościoła dla zbawienia każdego człowieka (a tym samym najgłębszy sens bycia chrześcijaninem) są nierozdzielne. Autor pokazuje, że wizja Ratzingera koncentruje się wokół dwóch aspektów: teologicznego rozumienia zbawczego pośrednictwa Chrystusa (a wraz z nim Kościoła) oraz refleksji nad istotą ludzką i subiektywnymi warunkami zbawienia. W dalszej części artykułu wykazano, w jaki sposób między człowiekiem a Bogiem może zostać nawiązana istotna relacja zbawcza – synteza wiary

i miłości. Pokazano również, że Ratzinger podkreśla rolę, jaką chrześcijaństwo wraz z religiami świata może odegrać we wspólnym poszukiwaniu prawdy o Bogu i człowieku, przyczyniając się do jedności rodziny ludzkiej. Artykuł kończy się spostrzeżeniem, że głębia refleksji Ratzingera nad kwestią zbawienia przyczynia się do naświetlenia fundamentalnych aspektów złożonego teologicznego problemu religii.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: zbawienie, zbawcza relacja z Bogiem, zbawcze pośrednictwo, Kościół, prawda w religiach, teologia religii, chrześcijaństwo a religie

Introduction

Joseph Ratzinger's theological reflection is known to be accompanied, from beginning to end, by his interest in religions.¹ His thought regarding the relationship between Christianity and other religions, along with the resultant fundamental questions on salvation are far too abundant to be discussed in a short essay.² Though he did not elaborate a systematic thought, he helped to illuminate fundamental aspects of the complex theological problem of religions. It is on one of these aspects, of particular relevance, that we would like to focus our attention. It regards the clarification of *what the salvation of man is, what it consists of in its present realization, albeit in an incipient way*. For Ratzinger, it is a fundamental question for human existence which has always motivated philosophical research and which, at the same time, is "one of the main questions

¹ He himself recalls that the importance of the theme of religions was clear to him from the first years of teaching fundamental theology in Freising and Bonn, between 1955 and 1963. Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance. Christian Belief and World Religions*, San Francisco, CA 2004, p. 15. It is also significant that the fruit of his latest efforts, published posthumously under the name of Benedetto XVI, *Che cos'è il cristianesimo. Quasi un testamento spirituale*, Milano 2023, contains no fewer than three chapters dedicated to clarifying the nature of religion and to various themes of dialogue between Christianity and religions.

² See for this: S.V. Advani, *From Religious Pluralism to a Unity in Diversity. An Exploration and Analysis of Joseph Ratzinger's Theology of Religions*, Roma 2022; P. Blanco Sarto, *Joseph Ratzinger: Razón y Cristianismo. La victoria de la inteligencia en el mundo de las religiones*, Madrid 2005; more synthetic essays are those of: C. O'Regan, *The Theology of Religions of Benedict XVI*, [in:] *Evangelization as Interreligious Dialogue*, eds. J.C. Cavadini, D. Wallenfang, Eugene, OR 2019, pp. 45–79; E. Anton, *Joseph Ratzinger's Soteriological Inclusivism*, "The Journal of Theological Studies" 69/1 (2018), pp. 170–190; P. Rodríguez Panizo, *El cristianismo y las religiones según Joseph Ratzinger*, [in:] *El pensamiento de Joseph Ratzinger, teólogo y papa*, ed. S. Madrigal, Madrid 2009, pp. 243–275; P. Coda, *Sul posto del cristianesimo nella storia delle religioni. Rilevanza a attualità di una chiave di lettura*, "PATH" 6/1 (2007), pp. 239–253.

in the current theological debate.”³ In the words we have chosen as the title of this contribution, he poses the question: “How is man healed? How does he become righteous?”⁴ This question lies at the very heart of the problem: it is from here that the reflection on “Religion, Truth and Salvation” should properly begin.⁵ And it is with this interpretation that, in our opinion, Ratzinger succeeds in making a series of clarifications and insights that develop an essential theological understanding of the salvific relationship between man and God, from which also the reflection on the relationship between Christianity and religions can greatly benefit.

A first clarification involves critiquing the underlying approach to theology of religions, which forms the basis for distinguishing between exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism: Ratzinger believes that the question of religions is too easily identified with that of salvation. There is a tendency, on the one hand, to consider religions in an undifferentiated and generic way, circumventing the a more precise knowledge of individual religions and of their spiritual profile from a phenomenological point of view in order to recognize in them the common elements but also the notable differences;⁶ on the other hand, above all, one loses sight of the fact that the problem of salvation has to do with the whole of human existence and with the mystery of God’s action, which is at variance with the attempt to find solutions which are too general. Ratzinger provocatively asks: “How do we know that the theme of salvation should only be tied to religions? Do we not have to approach it, in a far more discriminating

³ Thus Ratzinger expressed himself in 1999, in a conference on the encyclical *Fides et ratio*, collected in J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., pp. 183–209, here 202.

⁴ J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., p. 202. In the English edition, the German term “heil” is translated as “healed.” We think it more meaningful, given the context of the expression, to translate it as “saved,” as in the Italian edition (cf. J. Ratzinger, *Fede, verità, tolleranza. Il cristianesimo e le religioni del mondo*, Cantagalli, Siena 2012, p. 213). This is also what we have done in the title of this study.

⁵ This is the title of the paragraph in which Ratzinger poses this question, as the origin and guiding thread of all subsequent reflection on the relationship between salvation, truth and religions.

⁶ See the *Preliminary Remarks* with which Ratzinger introduces his 1963 essay on the place of the Christian faith among the world’s religions, in J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., pp. 15–19. The need for a better knowledge of the various religions in order to elaborate an adequate theology is indicated also in International Theological Commission, *Christianity and the World Religions*, 1996, no. 5. The importance of the approach given by Ratzinger to the question of religions and of the methodological approach that derives from it is underlined by P. Coda, *Sul posto del cristianesimo...*, op. cit., pp. 239–242.

manner, from human existence as a whole? And should not the highest respect for the mystery of God's activity always be our guide?"⁷

Through this initial clarification, Ratzinger's approach to the theme of man's salvation achieves a depth rarely encountered in other authors. Already in some of his 1960s writings, including the essay *No Salvation Outside the Church?*,⁸ we can see the outline of fundamental concepts concerning both the subjective and objective conditions of the relationship with God who renders man just and "saved." These ideas are further expounded in his later interventions from the 1990s, which are collected in the volume *Truth and Tolerance*. The central role of Christ in the salvation of man, including non-Christians, naturally emerges within the scope of this same reflection along with a first, invisible mode of the Church's participation in Christ's redemptive mediation. The first and second parts of this study will be dedicated to examining Ratzinger's vision of man's salvific relationship with God, as elaborated in the writings mentioned above.

A second important clarification made by Ratzinger is made possible by the first: having focused on the theme of salvation, distinguishing it from that of religions, allows one to look at the latter in a more serene and objective manner. Thus, the inescapability of the question of truth emerges clearly in Ratzinger's reflection, emphasizing the necessity of recognizing what is right, authentically "human," and what genuinely unites humans with God and among themselves. It becomes clear that it is to the extent that religions lead man to the true good, and ultimately to the one Good which is God, that they, as well as cultures, can contribute to man's salvific encounter with God. The reflection on the value of truth – even from the perspective of interreligious dialogue – and on the contribution that the Christian faith can bring in this regard is developed by Ratzinger, especially in his works produced after 1990, and it is to these that we will refer to in the third part of our study.

Before concluding this introduction, it is worth highlighting a reason for the particular interest in the analysis of Joseph Ratzinger's thought that we present here. The proposal of the German theologian and Pontiff not only sheds light on the limitations of exclusivist and pluralist positions in the field of theology

⁷ J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., p. 53.

⁸ The original text, *Kein Heil außerhalb der Kirche?* [1965], has only recently been partially translated into English by Jared Wicks and published in L. Boeve, G. Mannion (eds.), *The Ratzinger Reader: Mapping a Theological Journey*, London 2010, pp. 154–159. In the following we will refer, when possible, to the English translation; in the missing parts we will use our own translation, based on the Italian version, J. Ratzinger, *Nessuna salvezza fuori della Chiesa?*, [in:] *Il nuovo popolo di Dio* [1969], Brescia 1992, pp. 365–389.

of religions.⁹ It also has the unique ability to outline a theology of the religious relationship in which one understands how such a relationship can truly be established, by the grace of God, in the heart of every man, whatever the circumstances of his life, without sacrificing the uniqueness of Christ’s mediation and the necessity of the Church united to him, but rather emphasizing them. Indeed, Ratzinger demonstrates how the uniqueness of Christ’s mediation does not contradict but rather establishes and makes possible both the universality of salvation and the necessary role of the Church. This perspective thus also reveals the limitations of the theological position that, in order to affirm the necessity of faith and belonging to Christ in his Body, the Church, or the value of the Church’s mission, tends to ultimately reduce the scope of the salvific offer addressed in Christ to all men, emphasizing the difficulty of fulfilling the conditions it requires. Such a position has a long tradition, revived during the period of great missionary fervour between the 19th and 20th centuries and today supported, understandably, in opposition to the claims of salvific universalism typical of some pluralist theologies of religions.¹⁰ What is unsatisfactory in such a position is that it simultaneously obscures not only the light and the strength of the Father’s goodness towards every man but also the splendour of the salvation that He has revealed and accomplished in sending his Son, who became man, died, and rose for us. It is precisely this goodness and splendour that are highlighted in Joseph Ratzinger’s proposal.

The salvific relationship with God as a synthesis of faith and love: the subjective aspect of salvation

To address this first aspect, we refer specifically, as mentioned before, to Ratzinger’s essay *No Salvation Outside the Church?* In this essay, after demonstrating through historical analysis that a non-exclusivist interpretation of the patristic

⁹ As C. O’Regan’s essay *The Theology of Religions of Benedict XVI*, op. cit., convincingly shows.

¹⁰ The book of Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization*, Grand Rapids, MI 2012, is a good example of the theological position to which we refer. The author develops his argument on the basis of the final paragraph of *Lumen Gentium*, no. 16, in which the Council warns against man’s danger of getting lost in the search for truth and of living without God, finally emphasizing the indispensable role of missions. Drawing on this text, the author seems to want to limit the scope of the affirmation that salvation is possible for every man even without explicit knowledge of the Gospel, specifying the severity of the conditions under which this can really happen, in order not to induce Catholics to lose the evangelizing tension.

formula is possible – and indeed required by the overall logic of the Christian faith – he addresses the question of how salvation is concretely realised in man's life: that is, what are the “subjective conditions” of salvation.¹¹ Ratzinger responds how an essential and salvific relationship between man and God is realised. At the same time, the “objective conditions of possibility” of such a relationship emerge naturally; that is, as we shall see, the intimate connection between the actions of the subject and the redemptive work of Christ.¹²

Ratzinger begins by investigating what is required, according to Sacred Scripture, for a man to be saved or, as he puts it: “what a man must properly have to be a ‘Christian’.”¹³ He notes that the New Testament's answer consists of two complementary parts. The first and fundamental requirement is love: “he who has love has everything. It suffices fully, completely, unconditionally.”¹⁴ This answer emerges from various Gospel passages, prominently Matt 25:31–46,¹⁵ where *agape* appears as the sole criterion of judgment, and the “sacrament of the brother” is presented as “the only sufficient way of salvation.”¹⁶ Therefore, it is understood that God does not demand explicit recognition of Him from us; instead, He asks to be received in the other man, in our neighbour: “He continually comes to meet us in the least, He who had to become ‘the least’ of men.”¹⁷ In summary, man is saved not because he explicitly knows the Lord, but because he is open to “a ‘human’ relationship and encounter with the God hidden in man.”¹⁸

¹¹ In his text, Ratzinger divides the question of salvation into two paragraphs entitled respectively: a. The Subjective Aspect of the Question; b. The Objective Aspect. See J. Ratzinger, *No Salvation Outside the Church?*, [in:] *The Ratzinger Reader: Mapping a Theological Journey*, eds. L. Boeve, G. Mannion, London 2010, pp. 155–157.

¹² “In the above attempt to determine the subjective components of salvation (i.e. of the ‘Votum Ecclesiae’), the matter of the intrinsic necessity of the objective factor also arose” (J. Ratzinger, *No Salvation...*, op. cit., p. 157).

¹³ J. Ratzinger, *Nessuna salvezza...*, op. cit., p. 381. The sense in which he uses this expression is not identified with the concept of “anonymous Christianity” on which, as he notes, many clarifications need to be made (cf. J. Ratzinger, *No Salvation...*, op. cit., p. 157). It intends to indicate which attitude is designated as the “basic law [or constitution: *Grundgesetz*] of God” (ibid.), valid for man in general.

¹⁴ J. Ratzinger, *Nessuna salvezza...*, op. cit., p. 381.

¹⁵ In addition to Matt 22:35–40 par., and Rom 13:9. See J. Ratzinger, *Nessuna salvezza...*, op. cit., p. 381.

¹⁶ J. Ratzinger, *Nessuna salvezza...*, op. cit., p. 381.

¹⁷ J. Ratzinger, *Nessuna salvezza...*, op. cit., p. 381.

¹⁸ J. Ratzinger, *Nessuna salvezza...*, op. cit., p. 381. Ratzinger recalls here Matt 7:21 (“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven”).

At this point, however, Ratzinger observes that we must honestly recognize that we are not capable of truly loving. “No one really has love (cf. *Rom* 3:23). All our love is always corrupted and deformed by selfishness.”¹⁹ This realization motivates the second part of the New Testament’s answer to the question of what truly saves us. It is true that “by right we would be condemned, but Christ covers the *deficit* of our life with the overabundance of his representative love. Only one thing is necessary: that we open our arms and accept the gift of his benevolence.”²⁰ With St. Paul, Ratzinger recognizes that this interior gesture of openness to love, to the Lord’s benevolence is, in its essence, “faith.” He is aware that in its full and authentic sense, faith “presupposes all the fullness of the realities witnessed by the Bible,” but he affirms that the existence of “something like ‘a faith before faith’” can be recognized.²¹ So what, then, does this faith consist of? Ratzinger explains that it lies in the attitude of the *poor in spirit* (the *anawim* of Israel), in rejecting *hybris*, self-complacency, self-justification, and self-enclosure. It is the attitude that enables one to receive the Gospel when it is given; therefore, the developed faith is precisely the continuation of that essential form of faith understood as openness to the gift of love.

Now we can present Ratzinger’s synthesis of the faith-love attitude that constitutes the substance of the salvific relationship with God:

It [the New Testament] says simultaneously, ‘Love alone suffices,’ and ‘Only faith suffices.’ Both together, however, express an attitude of self-transcendence, in which the human being begins to leave his egoism behind and to go forth towards the other. Therefore, the brother, the fellow human being is the actual testing ground of this attitude; in his You, the You of God comes to the human being incognito.²²

¹⁹ J. Ratzinger, *Nessuna salvezza...*, op. cit., p. 381.

²⁰ J. Ratzinger, *Nessuna salvezza...*, op. cit., p. 382.

²¹ J. Ratzinger, *Nessuna salvezza...*, op. cit., p. 382. Ratzinger hints at the fact that this essential understanding of faith as opening oneself to the gift of the Lord’s representative love, is found in St. Paul. For the expression “faith before faith” he refers directly to Congar, to the German edition of his book: Y. Congar, *The Wide World My Parish. Salvation and its Problems*, Baltimore, MD–London 1964, pp. 104–110. Congar also employs two other complementary formulas, as we shall see: “grace before grace” and “love before charity.” The expression “grace before grace” is also found in Jean Daniélou, another author well known to Ratzinger, who refers it to the “preparation” that the Word carries out in the heart of the pagan and which makes his will “good.” Cf. J. Daniélou, *The Work of John the Baptist* [1964], Baltimore, MD–Dublin 1965, pp. 107–108.

²² J. Ratzinger, *No Salvation...*, op. cit., pp. 155–156.

An attitude of “overcoming oneself towards the other”: this, for every man, appears to be the way of living *an essential synthesis of faith and love*, which is founded on the openness to the gift of God’s love and realized in the good done to the brother, in whom God Himself is reached and encountered, though “incognito.”²³

At this point, Ratzinger broadens the view to show that, in addition to the other, to the neighbour as the primary way of encountering God (as the “primary incognito of God”), there are also many other forms in which God comes to us in disguise: “many of the realities of the religious and profane order can become a call to and a help in the saving exodus of self-transcendence.”²⁴ Therefore, it is possible to positively evaluate all the elements of truth and goodness present in the religious traditions to which the individual man belongs, as they help in his relationship with God. We will discuss this further in greater detail.

It is essential to note that at the root of the movement towards the other lies the openness (faith) of man to God’s benevolence and love. This openness, which draws man out of his own self-centeredness and makes him capable of being open to his neighbour, requires a free decision. Specifically, it necessitates listening to one’s conscience, where each person can hear “the call of God common to all,” the voice that commands what is true and good in religious systems but also what is not infrequently misunderstood in them: the precept “that every person be human to his fellow human being, that he should love.”²⁵ Ratzinger identifies this call heard in conscience with what he previously described as “faith and love” in an essential sense when he says, “Living according to conscience does not mean enclosing oneself in one’s so-called convictions, but following this call that is made to every person: the call to faith and love.”²⁶ Years later, as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, when he spoke on the topic of Christianity and religions, his treatment of the subjective aspect of the question remained substantially unchanged, although he was more attentive to the widespread relativism in religious and non-religious contexts, and therefore more sensitive to the question of truth and the objectivity of the good. His response to the question posed in the title of this essay, therefore, sounds like this: salvation begins here on earth and must consist of a form of life that makes man more “human” and, in doing so, more conformed to God; salvation consists in becoming righteous, it always has to do “with the unity

²³ Even with regard to the encounter with God in disguise, “incognito,” Ratzinger refers to Y. Congar, *The Wide World My Parish...*, op. cit., pp. 117–128.

²⁴ J. Ratzinger, *No Salvation...*, op. cit., p. 156.

²⁵ J. Ratzinger, *No Salvation...*, op. cit., p. 157.

²⁶ J. Ratzinger, *No Salvation...*, op. cit., p. 157.

of the good, with the unity of what is true – with the unity of God and man.”²⁷ Referring to St. Paul in Rom 2:14, Ratzinger indicates moral conscience as the “organ” in which man finds his unity and can listen to God.²⁸ However, it is still about listening to God’s call to love and following it. Without making overly precise distinctions, Ratzinger indicates both the conscience and the heart as the place of listening to God, and affirms that “it is thus possible for us to transcend what is merely subjective in order to turn toward each other and toward God. And this is salvation.”²⁹

At this point, it is useful to highlight two aspects: the role that belongs to man in the dynamic of salvation and the action of Christ, who, with his love, compensates for man’s *deficit*. Regarding the first aspect, it should be noted that the salvific dynamism Ratzinger has in mind is by no means an automatism. Salvation is genuinely offered to every man, but it must be accepted; it requires man’s freedom, his assent.³⁰ Ratzinger is keen to emphasise that a readiness for *conversion* is also always necessary as well, since for man it is a question of going out of himself, in the direction of authentic humanity, of true good. This is precisely one of the points in which Ratzinger’s proposal differs from the Rahnerian approach to the problem of the salvation of non-Christians, where

²⁷ J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., p. 205.

²⁸ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., pp. 206–207. Here Ratzinger refers to his book, *Wahrheit, Werte, Macht*, Freiburg im Breisgau 1993 (new ed. 1999).

²⁹ J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., p. 207. In his essay, E. Anton emphasizes conscience as the point of encounter of man with God (cf. E. Anton, *Joseph Ratzinger’s Soteriological Inclusivism*, op. cit., pp. 179–180); in our opinion, also on the basis of other contexts of Ratzinger’s thought, it would be equally correct to speak of the heart, as the center of man which is “touched” by God’s love and made capable of loving in turn. Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., pp. 99, 173, 207; see also the reflection about the “touch” of *Logos* in the heart of man as the motive of the act of faith, in J. Ratzinger, *Fede e teologia. Discorso in occasione del conferimento del titolo di dottore «honoris causa» in teologia da parte della Facoltà teologica di Breslavia/Wrocław*, [in:] J. Ratzinger/Benedetto XVI, *Fede, ragione, verità e amore*, Torino 2009, pp. 117–126. The vocabulary of the “touch” of love in the heart, is also present in some passages of the encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, whose first draft was prepared, as is known, by Benedict XVI; cf. Francis, Encyclical Letter *Lumen Fidei*, 2013, no. 31.

³⁰ As Anton notes, Ratzinger’s proposal can be qualified as an optimistic vision on the salvation of men, but certainly not as a sort of *apokatastasis* (cf. E. Anton, *Joseph Ratzinger’s Soteriological Inclusivism*, op. cit., pp. 182–183). Already in his 1963 article on vicarious representation, Ratzinger specified: “It is also clear that the salvation arising in virtue of vicarious representation does not arrive mechanically in a person, but requires in the recipient some kind of openness and readiness.” J. Ratzinger, *Stellvertretung*, [in:] *Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe*, vol. 2, ed. H. Fries, München 1963, pp. 566–575; we refer to the English translation by Jared Wicks: *Vicarious Representation*, “Letter and Spirit” 7 (2011), p. 219.

man's need for conversion is not adequately taken into account. An explicit critique of Rahner's position will be formulated by Ratzinger in *Principles of Catholic Theology*.³¹ Here, he summarizes Rahner's view with the formula: "He who... accepts his existence... says... Yes to Christ."³² However, for Christian conscience it is clear that man is not only called to self-acceptance but also to convert, not simply to remain as he is, but to discern a just self-acceptance and true self-realization as opposed to decisions of self-affirmation that do not really make man go out of himself, in the direction of truth and love.³³ Here echoes what he had already written in *No Salvation Outside the Church?*: "there are things that will never be able to be an incognito of God."³⁴ In the last part of our study, we will see how Ratzinger's conviction on this matter naturally connects with what he says about the role of religions in bringing man closer to salvation.

The second point that deserves attention concerns God's action in the heart of man who opens up to the essential attitude of faith and love. It is evident that, for Ratzinger, "Christ's representative love," the gift of his benevolence, is a dynamic principle, a force that, once received by man, acts in his heart making him capable of genuine love, which, if left to himself, he would be incapable of. There is, therefore, a gift of God in the human heart; a gift that,

³¹ J. Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology. Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, San Francisco, CA 1987. Pedro Rodríguez Panizo offers a comment to Ratzinger's critique (cf. P. Rodríguez Panizo, *El cristianismo y las religiones según Joseph Ratzinger...*, op. cit., pp. 252–257). Regarding the genesis, well before the publication of *Principles of Catholic Theology* of Ratzinger's criticism of Rahner's proposal, see what he himself explains in J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., pp. 16–17.

³² J. Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology...*, op. cit., p. 165. This is, according to Ratzinger, the "formula of Christian existence," in which Rahner's theoretical elaboration is condensed. Its most extreme expression is the following: "the Christian is not so much an exception among men as simply man as he is" (ibid., p. 166). It is a formula in which Ratzinger sees not only the loss of the "newness of Christianity" but also what is in fact "man's self-affirmation. To be a Christian is to accept oneself" (ibid., pp. 166–167).

³³ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology...*, op. cit., p. 171. The fact that Rahner's conception of salvation "overlooks the drama of change and renewal that is central to Christianity" was reaffirmed by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI also in one of his latest interventions, an interview given in 2015 and published in English with the title *The Christian Faith Is Not an Idea but a Life*, <https://insidethevatican.com/magazine/people/interview/christian-faith-not-idea-life/> [access: 1.06.2023]; the Italian translation, by Jacques Servais, is contained in Benedetto XVI, *Che cos'è il cristianesimo...*, op. cit., pp. 85–95. Anton observes that Ratzinger also speaks of the need for conversion in his *Eschatology*, with regard to purgatory, reiterating the same thought later, as Pontiff, in the encyclical *Spe Salvi*. See E. Anton, *Joseph Ratzinger's Soteriological Inclusivism*, op. cit., pp. 186–189.

³⁴ J. Ratzinger, *No Salvation...*, op. cit., p. 156.

though Ratzinger does not explicitly use the term “grace” in the context of *No Salvation Outside the Church?*, is genuinely Christ’s grace communicated through the Spirit.³⁵ Likewise, Yves Congar, in the text to which Ratzinger extensively references in his essay, reflecting on the attitude of “faith before faith” and “love before charity,” which constitute an implicit desire for God in the heart of the non-Christian and therefore an orientation towards Christ and the Church,³⁶ affirms: “A love before charity must be a true love,” that is “a self-giving love.” And provocatively asks: “may it not be thought that when there is love [...] a true selfless love [...] there is grace from God, an initial giving in relation to life and the meaning of the world, whose complete fulfillment will be in Paradise?”³⁷ In the same years as the publication of the essay on the salvation of non-Christians in its definitive version in *Neues Volk Gottes* (1969), while commenting on *Gaudium et Spes* 22, Ratzinger strongly emphasized that man’s salvation is essentially the work of God, which consists of man being associated with Christ’s paschal mystery through the mysterious action of the Spirit.³⁸ In short, man’s *deficit* of love is not merely compensated by Christ’s representative love “from outside,” extrinsically; that love, in a real communication of grace, is given to man himself, who must indeed welcome

³⁵ In *Vicarious Representation*, which provides the theological basis for the idea of Christ’s representation service employed in *No Salvation...*, Ratzinger clearly states that the attitude of essential faith which can constitute the subjective aspect of salvation in man requires, in order to have sense, to also consider the objective aspect: the service of Christ (and of the Church with him), and therefore the “doctrine of grace” (J. Ratzinger, *Vicarious Representation*, op. cit., p. 219).

³⁶ Congar uses as magisterial doctrinal references: the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* (1943) of Pius XII with the concept of “relation to the Mystical Body” of the Church of those who, even without belonging to it, are justified and therefore possess supernatural faith and love (cf. Y. Congar, *The Wide World My Parish...*, op. cit., p. 102); above all, the *Letter of Pius XII to the Archbishop of Boston* of 8 August 1949, with the concept of the implicit desire to conform one’s will to that of God (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 117ff). Ratzinger too, in his essay on salvation, refers to these magisterial places and, in his reflection, proposes the attitude of faith and love that we have described as the essence of a “votum,” an implicit desire for Christ and the Church (cf. J. Ratzinger, *Nessuna salvezza...*, op. cit., pp. 377, 381, 384, 385). Y. Congar, *The Wide World My Parish...*, op. cit., pp. 121–122.

³⁷ Cfr. J. Ratzinger, *The Church and Man’s Calling. Introductory Article and Chapter I*, [in:] *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 5, ed. H. Vorgrlimer, New York – London 1969, pp. 159–163. We note in passing that, according to Ratzinger, the text of *Gaudium et Spes* 22 surpasses and improves the expressions of *Lumen Gentium* 16 about “the salvation of the many” and should be taken as a reference text for further reflections. This does not correspond to Martin’s belief that *Lumen Gentium* 16 is the fundamental conciliar text on the salvation of the many, and that the other texts do nothing but build on what is stated here (cf. R. Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?...*, op. cit., pp. 7–10).

it in the attitude that Ratzinger calls “faith” and make it operative in “love,” in his self-transcendence towards others and, ultimately, towards God. In this way, man already begins to become righteous, more “human,” converting and conforming to God in himself and in his relations with others.³⁹

The necessity of Christ and the Church. The objective aspect of salvation

As noted by Ratzinger, regarding what was said about the subjective aspect of salvation, “the matter of the intrinsic necessity of the objective factor also arose.”⁴⁰ It has already been stated that Jesus’ “representative service,”⁴¹ his love “for” men, is necessary to heal the radical insufficiency of man’s love, which is otherwise corrupted and turned inward by selfishness.⁴² This is the objective foundation and the intrinsic element of the subjective attitude of faith and love discussed earlier. And it is here that the Church’s participation in the salvation of every man also comes into play. The Church, participating in Christ’s representative service and love, also partakes in the salvation of all. In Ratzinger’s words:

Every time a human being is saved, according to Christian belief, Christ is at work. Where Christ is, however, the Church is also involved, because he did not want to remain alone [...] he created a ‘body’ for himself. ‘Body of Christ’ means just

³⁹ Ratzinger (*Vicarious Representation*, op. cit., p. 212) specified that “the conferral of salvation on ‘the many’ does not follow magically and automatically. Instead, those who are saved must be converted and give their interior compliance.”

⁴⁰ J. Ratzinger, *No Salvation...*, op. cit., p. 157.

⁴¹ We observe that the English translation frequently employs the expression “substitutionary ministration,” while the Italian translation prefers “servizio di rappresentanza” (that we can translate: *representative service*). We think the second expression is preferable, as it better reflects the concept of “vicarious representation” [*Stellvertretung*], indicating that Christ’s role is more a “representative” than a “substitutionary” role. See the clarification offered by B. Lleó, *La representación vicaria (Stellvertretung) en la teología de Joseph Ratzinger*, Roma 2022, pp. 20–21.

⁴² “The whole of humanity lives from Jesus Christ’s act of love, from the ‘for’ in which he situated his life (cf. Mark 10:45; 14:23 in view of Isa 53:10–12).” (J. Ratzinger, *No Salvation...*, op. cit., p. 157). Understanding the person and mission of Christ as essentially “being for” (as well as “being from” as generated and sent by the Father), is a fundamental characteristic of J. Ratzinger’s Christology (and therefore of Anthropology). Suffice it to mention J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, New York 1970, pp. 135–136, 167, 180.

that: the participation human beings to Christ’s ministry, so that they become, so to speak, his ‘organs’ and he can no longer be thought of without them.⁴³

This is the most fundamental modality in which the Church, inseparably connected to Christ, serves the salvation of all. She is, in this sense, necessary for all humanity. It is a mysterious and invisible way, yet absolutely real. Here is also found the answer to the question that Ratzinger starts with in his essay: “Why are we Christians after all?” Why carry the “weight” of this name when others might save themselves in a seemingly, at least apparently, more comfortable way?⁴⁴ Ratzinger’s answer deserves to be quoted in its entirety, as it appears in *Vicarious Representation*:

Being Christian appeals to human beings in their generosity and in the large-heartedness of being ready, like Simon of Cyrene, to serve under the world-historical cross of Jesus Christ, and so to take on the burden of all history and thereby to render service to true living. Christians will not look aside enviously to compare the weight of the burdens laid on them with what seem to be much lesser burdens laid on the others, whom we do believe will arrive in heaven. [...] This service does not have its greatness in our being saved while the others are lost – which would be the attitude of the envious older brother and of the workers of the first hour – but it is great because the others also reach salvation *through* this our service!⁴⁵

But how can we understand, in its intrinsic dynamics, this participation of the Church and the Christian in the work of salvation accomplished by Christ? Well, the biblical and dogmatic foundation of both Christ’s role and the Church’s participation can be found, as we have already mentioned, in the reality of “vicarious representation.” Ratzinger had already reflected on it in his early theological writings, and in the essay we are examining, he offers an application of this category – which he considers essential for understanding the entire economy of salvation and, above all, its Christological foundation – to the theme of the salvation of non-Christians. Therefore, in the section dedicated to the objective aspect of salvation, Ratzinger refers to what he had written in *Vicarious Representation*.⁴⁶ The central importance that this category

⁴³ J. Ratzinger, *No Salvation...*, op. cit., p. 158.

⁴⁴ See J. Ratzinger, *Nessuna salvezza...*, op. cit., pp. 365–366, 379–380.

⁴⁵ J. Ratzinger, *Vicarious Representation*, op. cit., p. 218. Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Nessuna salvezza...*, op. cit., p. 387.

⁴⁶ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Nessuna salvezza...*, op. cit., p. 385, note 39.

holds in Ratzinger's theological conception has been recently highlighted.⁴⁷ We are particularly interested in noting its efficacy in illuminating, as Ratzinger does in *No Salvation Outside the Church?*, the fundamental modality of the Church's participation in communicating Christ's gift of grace to men. The reason for this efficacy is, in our opinion, the fact that Ratzinger connects his previous reflection on vicarious representation with the analysis of salvation made from the perspective of the subject and its intrinsic requirements, namely faith and love understood in an essential sense.

Thus, Ratzinger's proposal achieves greater depth, at least in this regard, compared to other proposals, even those to which he acknowledges his indebtedness. Compared to Karl Barth, whom he credits with having revived the doctrine of vicarious representation,⁴⁸ Ratzinger surpasses the crudely dialectical nature of Barth's thought, and emphasizes divine mercy as the motive for the salvific economy, the eminently personal nature of vicarious representation, and love – for God and for others – as its essence. Vicarious representation is a service of love: primarily in Christ, to whom all humanity owes the real possibility of salvation; but it is so also in those who, reached by his saving action, “become like him” and live with him the “constant Pascha of the transition from being for itself into being for one another.”⁴⁹ Ratzinger feels particularly indebted to Henri de Lubac, whom he recognizes for his contribution to the reflection

⁴⁷ In his translation of the article, in 2011, J. Wicks already noted the central importance of the concept of pro-existence as Christ's representative role (cf. J. Ratzinger, *Vicarious Representation*, op. cit., p. 209); the first dedicated essay is: C. Ruddy, “For the many”: *The Vicarious-Representative Heart of Joseph Ratzinger's Theology*, “Theological Studies” 75 (2014), pp. 564–584; E. Anton, *Joseph Ratzinger's Soteriological Inclusivism*, op. cit., examines the category of vicarious representation in Ratzinger's theology to classifying it as a type of inclusivism; and recently an extensive study has been published on it by B. Lleó, *La representación vicaria...*, op. cit.

⁴⁸ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Vicarious Representation*, op. cit., p. 217. An analysis of the roots and influences on Ratzinger's thought regarding the category of vicarious representation is carried out in B. Lleó, *La representación vicaria...*, op. cit.: see pp. 66–77 for the influence of K. Barth, that Ratzinger approaches thanks to the study of Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth. Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* (1951). With Balthasar, Ratzinger shares the positive evaluations but also the reservations regarding the Barthian dialectic, pushed almost to the point of “logical inconsistency” (ibid., pp. 75–76).

⁴⁹ J. Ratzinger, *No salvation...*, op. cit., p. 158. Ratzinger expresses himself in a similar way in his commentary on *Gaudium et Spes* 22, explaining how salvation consists in being associated with the paschal mystery of Christ and therefore also with the saving mission itself. Cf. J. Ratzinger, *The Church and Man's Calling...*, op. cit., pp. 160–162.

on vicarious representation and the related concept of pro-existence.⁵⁰ The French theologian, a pioneer and leading figure in theological reflection on religions,⁵¹ understands the necessity of the Church for salvation in the light of the relationship that exists, in God's plan, between the Church and the whole of humanity. In this unitary vision, dear to the Fathers, the Church is the one who receives Christ's form and must make the whole of humanity participate in it; suggesting an extension of the dogma of the communion of saints, de Lubac argues that one must think of a real communication of grace that reaches all of humanity from the Church. Every grace present and operative in the Church and in Christians must, therefore, be thought of as "*gratia gratis data*," given in view of others.⁵² Compared to de Lubac's soteriological doctrine, Ratzinger's analysis more precisely focuses on the effect of grace in the human heart, in overcoming oneself toward the other and toward true good.

Ratzinger's vision is undoubtedly very close to that of Congar, to whom he refers in various parts of his essay on salvation. Even the French theologian, reflecting on the interior constituents of salvation, on how it is prepared and realized in the heart of the man who does not know Christ, insists on love – a love endowed with a certain character of absoluteness, driving towards the overcoming of oneself, especially towards the other man, who can be a "sacrament," the presence of God in disguise.⁵³ Undoubtedly acute in his interior

⁵⁰ Cf. Ratzinger's interview *The Christian Faith Is Not an Idea but a Life*, op. cit. In the bibliography to J. Ratzinger, *Vicarious Representation*, op. cit., one can find the work of H. de Lubac, *Catholicisme. Les aspects sociaux du dogme*, Paris 1938. As, Lleó notes, Ratzinger draws inspiration above all from the Adamic Christology and the social dimension of Christianity elaborated by Henri de Lubac (cf. B. Lleó, *La representación vicaria...*, op. cit., pp. 60–66, 411).

⁵¹ Henri de Lubac is mentioned, together with J. Daniélou, in International Theological Commission, *Christianity and the World Religions*, no. 4; his theology of religions and of salvation has been deeply studied by Ilaria Morali, *La salvezza dei non cristiani. L'influsso di Henri de Lubac sulla dottrina del Vaticano II*, Bologna 1999; I. Morali, *Le religioni non cristiane secondo Henri de Lubac*, "Lateranum" 64 (1998), pp. 533–557; cf. also G. Trapani, *H. de Lubac e il rapporto tra il cristianesimo e le religioni*, [in:] *Gesù Cristo e l'unicità della mediazione*, ed. M. Crociata, Milano 2000, pp. 128–157.

⁵² See especially chapter VII, entitled *Salvation through the Church*, in H. de Lubac, *Catholicism. A Study of Dogma in Relation to the Corporate Destiny of Mankind*, New York 1958, pp. 107–125, in which de Lubac repropose with some variations what he had already affirmed in a conference in Strasbourg in 1933. For an analysis of the doctrine presented here, see: I. Morali, *La salvezza dei non cristiani...*, op. cit., pp. 24–44, 50–53.

⁵³ "There is one thing that is privileged to be a paradoxical sign of God, in relation to which man are able to manifest their deepest commitment – our Neighbour. The sacrament of our Neighbour!" (Y. Congar, *The Wide World My Parish...*, op. cit., p. 124).

analysis, Congar perhaps remains less effective than Ratzinger in grounding the objective possibility of salvation in the biblical and theological category of Christ's vicarious representation and of the Church with him. Nevertheless, Congar approaches this notion by identifying the biblical principle of the "*pars pro toto*" and that of the "first-fruits" as the characteristic way in which God operates the salvation of "the many" through the few who represent them. Ratzinger takes up this idea from Congar,⁵⁴ but only to clarify that the Church's quantitatively limited presence in the world does not invalidate the universality of her saving function: "in order to be salvation for all, the Church does not have to correspond physically to that all. Its nature is far more, [...] to be the few through whom God wants to save the many."⁵⁵

We could certainly further explore the link in Ratzinger's thought between the doctrine of vicarious representation and that of the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation. The Church lives by Christ's representative service, which finds its highest expression in his *pascha* of death and resurrection, continually made present and active in the Eucharist. Therefore, the Church is a community that, through participation in the Eucharist, becomes the Body of Christ and capable of its own salvific dynamism – of his "being for" – which embraces all of humanity and the cosmos.⁵⁶

However, this reflection would divert us from our objective, which is to show what Ratzinger considers the most proper theme of theology and dialogue between religions: namely the common reflection on truth and good, on the unity between God and man. Contributing to this search is a second way in which the Church serves the world, and here she finds as companions all the subjects and instances capable of contributing to the growth of humanity in the direction of truth and good: among these are, undoubtedly, cultures and, above all, religions.

⁵⁴ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *No Salvation...*, op. cit., p. 159; the reference is to Y. Congar, *The Wide World My Parish...*, op. cit., pp. 11–16.

⁵⁵ J. Ratzinger, *No Salvation...*, op. cit., p. 387.

⁵⁶ In 1964, in the same years in which he wrote his texts on vicarious representation and on the salvation of non-Christians, Ratzinger also published an essay on the Church as a universal sacrament of salvation in which these ideas are already present: J. Ratzinger, *Zeichen unter den Völkern*, [in:] *Wahrheit und Zeugnis*, eds. M. Schmaus – A. Läpple, Düsseldorf 1964, pp. 456–466. Perhaps the most significant text on the subject, however, is the one written in 1977, and published in English as: J. Ratzinger, *The Church as the Sacrament of Salvation*, [in:] J. Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology. Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, San Francisco, CA 1987, pp. 44–55. For a reflection on this issue, see F. Ocariz, *La Iglesia, sacramentum salutis según J. Ratzinger*, "PATH" 6/1 (2007), pp. 161–181.

Culture, religion, and faith: the question of truth

For the considerations that we will now develop, we will largely rely on the contributions gathered in the volume *Truth and Tolerance. Christian Belief and World Religions*.⁵⁷ As we have already mentioned, Ratzinger criticizes the formulation of the problem of salvation that underlies the distinction between exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism because it too easily identifies the problem of religions with that of salvation, which, on the contrary, concerns truth and the authentic good of man and the whole of his existence.⁵⁸ By relieving the discourse on religions of the burden of having to exhaustively clarify their relationships with salvation, Ratzinger turns his gaze to what religions can truly dialogue about and what they can journey towards together: namely, the question of truth.

Indeed, he further extends the vision, encompassing cultures, which, in fact, always have a religious nucleus, as they confront the problem of the divine in various ways. On closer inspection, every culture, to the extent that it is authentically human, holds a potential universality, insofar as "the same human nature" is at work and "there is a common truth of humanity alive" in it.⁵⁹ The dignity of a culture is demonstrated precisely in its openness, "in its power to develop further, to let itself be purified and thus to become better adapted to the truth and to man,"⁶⁰ as it also contains elements that do not truly express the human, that clam up and divorce from other cultures. Therefore, it is precisely in relation to this vision of the diverse cultures, their dignity, and their limits in relation to the truth of man, that the particular self-understanding of the Christian faith emerges:

It knows very well, if it is aware and uncorrupted, that there is a great deal of what is human in its particular cultural forms, a great deal that needs purifying and opening up. But it is also certain that it is at heart the self-revelation of truth itself, and therefore, redemption. For the real problem of mankind is the darkening of truth. This distorts our action and sets us against one another, because we bear our own evil within ourselves, are alienated from ourselves, cut off from the ground of our being, from God. If truth is offered, this means a leading out of alienation and thus out of the state of division; it means the vision

⁵⁷ The volume, published in 2004, collects interventions by J. Ratzinger that can be dated for the most part to the 1990s.

⁵⁸ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., pp. 53–54.

⁵⁹ J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., pp. 59–60.

⁶⁰ J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., p. 60.

of a common standard that does no violence to any culture but that guides each one to its own heart, because each exists ultimately as an expectation of truth.⁶¹

The role that the Christian faith plays from a point of view that we could call “sociological-historical,” borrowing the expression used by Ratzinger himself in *No Salvation Outside the Church?*, seems to be essentially outlined.⁶² Besides her invisible service in the order of grace, the Church is called to perform a further service for the unity of humanity. By proclaiming the truth about God and man, fully revealed in Christ, she can foster the authentic development of cultures towards man’s true dignity and facilitate their friendly encounter.

What holds true for cultures applies, even more so, to religions, concerning which Ratzinger states: “the Christian faith, which carries within itself the great heritage of the religions and which opens up this heritage to the *Logos*, to true reason, could offer a new basis to them at the deepest level.”⁶³ This is the point where one of the most characteristic ideas of Ratzinger’s thought on religions and on their relationship with Christianity strongly emerges. He assigns a decisive role to the *question of truth*, which is, in itself, a gift and a liberation for man, never an alienation or an instrument of power or intolerance. He opposes the idea of *equivalence* among religions in the name of a conception of the divine as absolutely ineffable, such as that typical of the great Asian religions, which accepts all human attempts to grasp and express the divine at the price of radically relativizing them. Such a conception, foundational to some versions of the current pluralistic approach to the theme of religions as ways of salvation, is contested by Ratzinger not only based on the conviction that it is essential for man to seek the truth, but also on the basis of the fundamental self-awareness of the Christian faith.⁶⁴ The Christian faith does not arise as the deepening of a “mystical” experience. In the Christian sense, “experience” is rather delimitable with the categories of “encounter,” “otherness,” and “event.” Indeed, the experience of faith is:

⁶¹ J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., pp. 66–67.

⁶² In J. Ratzinger, *No Salvation...*, op. cit., p. 158, referring to the necessity of the Church’s ministry to humanity, he states: “I believe that this idea can be made clear in a very concrete sociological-historical way. If there were no Church anymore [...] the world would look quite different.”

⁶³ J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., p. 78.

⁶⁴ Cf. the fine essay by C. O’Regan, *The Theology of Religions of Benedict XVI*, op. cit., on Ratzinger’s critique of the pluralistic conception in the field of the theology of religions; see in particular the synthetic vision outlined in pp. 47–48.

the result of an event, not of reaching deeper into ourselves. This is exactly what is meant by the concept of revelation: something not ours, not to be found in what we have, comes to me and takes me out of myself, above myself, creates something new. That also determines the historical nature of Christianity, which is based on events and not on becoming aware of the depths of one's own inner self, what is called "illumination". The Trinity is not the object of our experience but is something that has to be uttered from outside, that comes to me from outside as "revelation". The same is true for the Incarnation of the Word, which is indeed an event and cannot be discovered in one's inner experience.⁶⁵

As we have already noted concerning the subjective conditions of salvation, Ratzinger also emphasizes that the Christian conscience cannot renounce two fundamental concepts: *conversion* and *mission* simply because it "believes that in Christ the living God calls us in a unique way, which demands obedience and conversion."⁶⁶

In addressing the question of religions as possible ways of salvation, Ratzinger once again points to the *criterion of truth* as a rule for discerning what can bring man closer to God or not. He notes: "the theory has been fairly generally accepted that the religions are paths of salvation. Perhaps not the proper, ordinary path of salvation, but – if at all, then 'extraordinary paths of salvation': one attains salvation through all the religions, that has become the current view."⁶⁷

This vision corresponds both to the widespread ideal of tolerance and to the modern image of God. However, it is a fundamentally relativistic conception that must confront a very concrete problem, namely the fact that "what each of these religions demands of people is, not just different from, but contrary to what is demanded by others. [...] It is being silently assumed that all contents are basically of equal use." But in this way "the question of truth is excised from the question concerning religions and the matter of salvation."⁶⁸ Instead, we must honestly acknowledge, says Ratzinger, that: "there are in fact sick and degenerate forms of religion, which do not edify people but alienate them. [...] And even religions whose moral value we must recognize, and which are on their way toward the truth, may become diseased here and there."⁶⁹

⁶⁵ J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., pp. 88–89.

⁶⁶ J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., p. 105.

⁶⁷ J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., p. 202.

⁶⁸ J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., p. 203.

⁶⁹ J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., p. 204.

Of course, not even Christianity is exempt from this danger, as it can sometimes take pathological forms.⁷⁰ This means, for Ratzinger:

religion demands the making of distinctions, distinctions between different forms of religion and distinctions within a religion itself, so as to find the way to its higher points. By treating all content as comparably valid and with the idea that all religions are different and yet actually the same, you get nowhere. [...] The renunciation of truth does not heal man.⁷¹

To make this discernment, we need to ask ourselves what salvation, eternal life, truly means and how it relates to man's life on earth. In short, we need to ask ourselves how man is truly saved. Here, Ratzinger's thought naturally reconnects with what we have seen regarding the first aspect addressed: the essential relationship between man and God in truth and love. It is worth quoting in full a passage from *Truth and Tolerance* partially mentioned before:

Future salvation must make its mark in a way of life that makes a person "human" here and thus capable of relating to God. That in turn means that when we are concerned with the question of salvation, we must look beyond religions themselves and that this involves standards of right living that one cannot just relativize at will. I would say, therefore, that salvation begins with man becoming righteous in this world – something that always includes the two poles of the individual and society. There are kinds of behaviour that can never serve man's growth in righteousness and others that are always a part of man's righteousness. *That means that salvation does not lie in religions as such, but is connected to them, inasmuch as, and to the extent that, they lead man toward the one good, toward the search for God, for truth, and for love.* The question of salvation therefore always carries within it an element of the criticism of religion [...]. It has in any case to do with the unity of the good, with the unity of what is true – with the unity of God and man.⁷²

In this search for the unity of truth and goodness, for the true communion between God and man, between religions, among them Christianity, fertile ground for dialogue can be found, which can foster the unity of the human family. While deeply aware of the indispensable gift of truth bestowed by God

⁷⁰ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., p. 204.

⁷¹ J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., p. 204.

⁷² J. Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance...*, op. cit., p. 205 (emphasis is ours).

in revelation and in its culmination in Christ, Ratzinger manifests a radical confidence in interreligious dialogue. It is vital, certainly, that this dialogue does not renounce the search for truth and is accompanied, in each of the partners, by a healthy critical attitude towards one’s own religion; it must also be a dialogue where communication of one’s own knowledge of God to others is not abandoned.⁷³ It is in such reciprocal listening that Ratzinger identifies nothing less than a way of listening to truth itself, almost its “revealing.”⁷⁴

Conclusions

It has been shown how, although he did not develop a systematic thought within the theology of religions, Joseph Ratzinger managed to outline, in its essential features, a vision in which both the salvific universality of Christ and the necessity of the Church for the salvation of every man (and thereby the deepest meaning of being Christian) appear inseparably. He also highlights the role that Christianity, together with world religions, can play in the common search for the truth about God and man, contributing to the unity of the human family. This vision has its focal points, on the one hand, in the theological understanding of the vicarious representation of Christ (and the Church with him), and on the other hand, in the reflection on the human person and on the subjective conditions of salvation. The depth of Ratzinger’s reflection on both aspects of the question of salvation allows him to reach a clarity that is not easily found in other authors.

Rightly, Emil Anton thinks that Ratzinger’s conception can be qualified as a “restrictive inclusivism,” characterized by a “strong soteriological optimism.”⁷⁵

⁷³ These are criteria for dialogue between religions set out in J. Ratzinger, *Many Religions – One Covenant. Israel, the Church and the World*, San Francisco, CA 1999, pp. 109–113. With respect to the last criterion, i.e. the value of the Church’s *mission*, we will not dwell on the subject. We simply point out two of the reasons for the Church’s mission that Ratzinger gives elsewhere: love or good always asks to communicate itself – *bonum diffusivum suum* (cf. J. Ratzinger, *No salvation...*, op. cit., p. 159); the joy always asks to be shared (Benedetto XVI, *Che cos’è il cristianesimo...*, op. cit., p. 14).

⁷⁴ As Ratzinger explains with regard to religions and explicitly of the Christian one: “the concrete religion in which faith is lived out must continually be purified on the basis of truth, that truth which shows itself, on the one hand, in faith and, on the other hand, reveals itself anew through dialogue, allowing us to acknowledge its mystery and infinity.” (J. Ratzinger, *Many Religions – One Covenant...*, op. cit., p. 111).

⁷⁵ Cf. E. Anton, *Joseph Ratzinger’s Soteriological Inclusivism*, op. cit., pp. 189–190. “Joseph Ratzinger can be characterized as a restrictivist inclusivist, which means that he restricts

Ratzinger does not apply general solutions, such as considering religions as salvific mediations *per se*, nor does he reduce the salvific scope of Christ's work by thinking that the non-Christian is less easily capable of being saved compared to the believer who communicates in the Eucharist. The superabundance of grace that benefits the latter is also to the advantage of the former. And the former, on the other hand, is secretly called to self-transcendence, to convert from his selfishness, and to commit himself to the decision for the true good, thus encountering in love for the other, the God who is Love. Together, as men listening to God and engaging in reciprocal dialogue, they can contribute to the search for the full truth.

If it is true that, as Ratzinger observed in 1977, the Second Vatican Council intended to show that the Church's mission is the salvation of the world, that she is the sacrament of salvation for the world,⁷⁶ he contributed to illuminating this affirmation, justifying at the same time the sense of belonging to the Church, the veritable and not reduced possibility of salvation for those who do not visibly belong to it, and the positive value that religion can have both in the individual's path of salvation and in building humanity in truth and good.

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God's salvific work in followers of other religions primarily to their conscience and secondarily to the impetus given by certain positive elements in their religions, not extending it to the various religious systems *per se*" (ibid., p. 189). The author refers to the classification proposed by G. D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions. Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions*, Oxford 2009, pp. 6–7. Anton's essay rightly criticises in some aspects Ambrose Mong's analysis of Ratzinger's soteriological thought: cf. A. Mong, *Are Non-Christians Saved? Joseph Ratzinger's Thoughts on Religious Pluralism*, London 2015.

⁷⁶ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *The Church as the Sacrament of Salvation*, op. cit., pp. 48–51.

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