

I was at the State Prison a couple of weeks ago and one of the inmates came up to me before the start of our Bible Study and said, “Hey, can you help me?” “Sure,” I replied, “I hope I can.” He takes my arm, lowers his voice, and says, “I need some ammunition.” Seeing the look on my face, he quickly corrects himself, “No, not that kind of ammunition! I need to learn how to defend my faith! I need to call out these dudes who are dissing my Catholic faith! I need some ammo, man.”

We hear today an outrageous claim by Jesus, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him...” Further on in John, Chapter 14, he doubles down: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” These words are strong and true, but alas, they have been used by many in Church history as justification for intolerance and persecution against non-Christians. That’s right, today’s readings can be viewed as Christian ammunition.

In past centuries, the Church’s theology with respect to other religions was about as black and white as you could get. You were either a Catholic or you were bound for hell. Even if you converted to Christianity, there was suspicion. Did you really convert, or was it just to avoid persecution? Talk about a Catch-22! Although we tend to think about the Spanish Inquisition as a movement against heretics; in reality, most of the victims were actually converts from Judaism. You were damned if you did and damned if you didn’t. Nothing changed after the Protestant Reformation – we Catholics condemned the Lutherans and the Calvinists and they returned the favor.

This unhelpful standoff remained for the next 450 years. Depending on what side you were on, heaven was either full of Catholics or full of Protestants. We won’t mention Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, or atheists – they were apparently unredeemable. But the Holy Spirit was moving nevertheless, and slowly the tide began to turn. As inter-religious dialogue continued, and the horror of the Holocaust weighed on the minds of good Catholics in the 20th century, it became abundantly clear that the Church’s interpretation of scripture like the one we hear today was seriously flawed. Note the wording carefully: No one can come to me unless the Father sends them...no one comes to the Father except through me. Jesus positions himself as the perfect conduit between God and humankind. No issues here, right? The problem is that early theologians substituted the words Catholic Church for Christ. Hear the difference – no one comes to the Father except through *the Catholic Church*. This presupposes that the Catholic Church

perfectly images Christ. We wish it did – we know it does not. Even the Church admits that we are both fully in Christ and not yet there. The fullness only arrives at the end of time. This reality, as humbling as it is, must be acknowledged, and that acknowledgement came at Vatican II.

So what changed? Let's start with what didn't change. The Church continues to teach that salvation is only possible through Jesus Christ. The gospel message is clear, just as we heard it today. But what if you have never heard that gospel message? What if your whole life has been marked by adherence to the principles of Buddhism or Hinduism or Shinto? *Lumen Gentium* from Vatican II states unequivocally that sincere seekers of God, who through no fault of their own have not heard the gospel, can receive the help necessary for salvation. Christ's love cannot be boxed so easily. Likewise, both Jews and Muslims, who can trace their ancestry back to our father in faith Abraham, are included in the plan of salvation if they sincerely seek God.

Perhaps the easiest way to envision this argument is as a hierarchy of truth, a pyramid of revelation so to speak. At the top of the pyramid exist the People of God, who have access to the fullest expression of God's revelation, namely the mystery of Jesus Christ. The Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches are present and operative here. Other Christian denominations are in the next level, as they are in a certain communion with the Roman Catholic Church, although imperfectly. Note that every Protestant sect starts with Roman Catholic teaching and then subtracts away certain teachings they find objectionable. This is what it means to be in "imperfect union". The pyramid image continues with Jews and Muslims, who each share considerable scriptural and theological sources with Catholics, but do not acknowledge the primacy of Christ. Further down are non-Christian groups who, although sincere, share little in common with Christian religions.

Be very careful not to see this diagram as ammunition! Quoting Vatican II: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and teachings, which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men."

If all of this gives you a headache, picture a crowd of a hundred people, each of a different religion, all pointing earnestly heavenward to God. You'd think they would all be smiling with delight and excitement. But no, they aren't – they're all frowning! Why? Because they are focusing their attention on everyone else's fingers!

So what did I say to my erstwhile friend in the prison who needed some ammunition? I know that inter-religious dialogue in the prison often leads to shouting matches and Bible jousting. Just like it is out here, it is very important to be seen as backing the right team, to be a part of the right gang. I told him that respectful dialogue, especially with other Christians, would reveal considerable overlap in beliefs. Focus here, start here, emphasize the shared reality of Christ in your lives. But if words and quotes and concepts were hard to recall in a pinch, there was one area that always works. What is that, he asked? The best ammo, I told him, is the life that he leads.

It's simple really. Love never fails.