

If someone were to ask you, who is going to heaven, how might you answer?

In our day and age, there can be two parallel realities that can be extreme with respect to religion. One can hold there is only one way, (through the Catholic Church a Catholic might say), and the other would hold that there are many paths and that one way is as good as the other. I think the former was very common years ago, and today the latter is more prevalent. But what if one tried to start from the standpoint of saying yes, my Catholic faith is rooted in Christ, for He founded my Church, but also there are people of other faiths and maybe God reaches them too.

A saint I've always had an admiration for is Charles de Foucauld, a man who lived for years and years in Africa. He came there on a windy road through his vocation, early in life being attracted to materialism, status, and making some poor moral decisions like we all do. Eventually he made his way to the desert, a lone priest in a sea of Muslims.

Earlier in life, he lost faith. This was in part to seeing religious practice in the world. He wrote in a letter: "Your faith has only been shaken, mine was

completely dead for years: for twelve years I lived without any faith: nothing seemed to me to be sufficiently proven; the equal faith with which people follow such different religions seemed to me the condemnation of them all; less than any, the religion of my childhood seemed to me admissible, with its 1=3, that I couldn't bring myself to consider...I remained twelve years without denying anything, without believing anything, in despair of the truth, not even believing in God, as no proof seemed to me evident enough.”

Interestingly, it was via Islam that Charles rebound his faith. He wrote:

“Islam produced in me a profound ‘over-turning’ - the sight of faith, of these souls living in the continual presence of God, made me catch a glimpse of something greater and more true, more real, than early occupations.” He even called it “seductive.” What Charles found in Islam was no desire to actually become a Muslim. Rather when he looked at the faith and how he saw it practiced, he was moved by the fact that people were responding to something greater, and he’d see this in the Muslim calls to prayer. In that, he saw the public witness of people to God. But for Charles, what this did was to seduce him or seize him to the reality of adoring God and losing onset. And so this caused him to say a prayer, a strange one he reflected: “My God, if You exist, make me know you.” He would later recommend that

prayer to people who struggled with excessive doubt. And his prayer was answered. He says “Immediately I knew there was a God, I realized that I could live only for God.” Charles finds the living God not in the desert, but in the living presence of Jesus, who enlightens his doubts, heals his past, and then feeds him with the living Bread of Life. His conversion continues through the sacraments of confession and communion.

And with respect to Islam, what Charles says is that there is truth there in the affirmation that “God is Great” as they chant, and the obligation to adore God, but that Islam does not go far enough. In his words, “Islam has not enough contempt for creatures to be capable of teaching a love of God worthy of God: without chastity and poverty, love and adoration remain very imperfect.” And this is a good point, for in Islam, there is no confession like we have or this notion that God comes to redeem to save us like we hold in Christ.

Charles converted or re-verted in Paris in 1886 at the age of 28. He became a Trappist monk, and went to Syria. He left the Trappists after 7 years, and became a handyman with the Poor Clares in Nazareth. In both cases he was again close to the Muslims, and was again on a search to

deepen his relationship with God. He rejoins the Trappists and is ordained and he is sent to Algeria with the intent to found a fraternity as a presence among the local Muslims. He becomes close to the Muslims, feeling called to serve them. He was alone, he had only his self-made rule, and he was absorbed in being with the people and studying the language.

French soldiers built a small hermitage for Charles, which was poor and rough made of mud bricks, palm branches and had a chapel with a small courtyard of six tiny cells. It really wasn't intended to be a monastery though, he hoped to make it a place of prayer and hospitality, a "zaouia" which is an Islamic school or monastery. He had been received in these places when he explored Morocco. And so he wanted to make this place simply one of prayer and hospitality, from which he said it would radiate piety and spread light and warmth to all the country around. There was one difference though from the Muslim monastery. Inside the chapel above the tabernacle with the sacramental 'presence', was a life-size outline drawing of Jesus with outstretched arms and a symbolic heart, done by Charles himself. The living Jesus, hidden in the tabernacle but forcefully expressed to the view of all in the painted drawing, is put at the 'center' of this 'Christian' zaouia. And the love that Jesus lived is to be the living motivation

of its members' relationships with all who come. Charles' dress and title express this same intention. He wears the Muslim gandourah, but with a red heart-and-cross roughly stitched on it. And he was called, with his approval, the 'Christian marabout', (marabout 22 being the normal title of the head of a zaouia.) He really wants to be seen as the “universal brother,” as he says “I want to accustom everyone here, Christian, Muslim, Jew or pagan, to look at me as their brother.” He respects people, whoever they are, to be of equal worth. He spoke of simply “meeting people” and living with them. It was very counter cultural as both the colonizers and the colonized in Algeria had a lot of hierarchy and vast differences.

He eventually ended in the central Sahara in Tamanrasset. To be with the people here, he built a simple hut with just room enough for himself on the edge of a village. If Jesus chose to live with us, God becoming man, Charles thought he would live with the people. He wrote “Like our Lord Jesus, we should be universal friends, universal brothers and as far a possible universal saviors.” He established friendships, and people also gave back to him too. As he gave all he could to people, when locals saw he was quite ill one winter, they managed to find goats milk, and saved his life. Charles was now not just a giver, but a receiver. And this further

cements his bond with the locals, the Tuaregs, who French culture saw as infidels and barbarians, the most abandoned and furthest people from the Catholic faith you could imagine. He learned that the Tuaregs saw the French in the same way. His response though was to immerse himself even more into their culture; he studied the language, despite how hard it is for him, because it was what a friend would do. He even translated the four Gospels. He had hoped to convert people, but he was also patient. He wrote “there may well be centuries between the first digging of the earth and the harvest” and that “to preach Jesus to the Tuaregs is not I believe something Jesus wishes...(rather there is the need) is to get to know them with gentleness.” In other words its a long term project. His notion of evangelizing then is summed up as get to know the person, listen to them, proclaim the Gospel through the life you lead, banish the militant spirit, and see the other not as an enemy to be conquered but as a brother. He was inspired by the Visitation; Mary bringing Jesus hidden inside of her to her cousin. He saw a relationship of love and friendship as superior to verbal communication.

And so that is what he did. He was killed by a young member of a raiding band who likely wanted to take him as hostage. A local man wrote to

Charles' sister: 'When I heard of the death of our friend, your brother Charles, my eyes closed. There was darkness all about me. I wept and shed tears ... Charles the Marabout has died not only for all of you, he has died for us too. May God have mercy on him, and may we meet in Paradise.'

When I die, I do hope to go to heaven like we all do. And there, I will meet Charles, but I also suspect I will meet some of the people he ministered to.

Saint Charles was pretty unique in that in his time, there certainly was not a massive ecumenical movement. Since Vatican II, which also had a decree on ecumenism, we have worked hard to build bridges between our Catholic Church and others both Christian and non-Christian. The problem though is that there can be still a whole lot of confusion, and it can land in two camps.

One is that the Church is it. After all, we hold the Catholic Church, created by Jesus, is the means to salvation. Christ is it. I'd appeal to a superior homilist, namely Saint Peter. He says in our first reading. The cripple was saved in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, whom you crucified but God raised from the dead: "He is the stone rejected by you, the builders,

which has become the cornerstone. There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved.” That’s pretty direct and to the point isn’t it? So how do we reconcile that with this desire to build bridges? What do we believe about people who are of others faiths? Can they get to heaven too?

On the one hand, Saint Charles figured it out. He had Jesus at the center of his life; quite literally in the tabernacle’s presence in his zaouia, in his daily prayer, in how he offered Mass. Jesus is not equivalent to Mohammad or Plato or Buddah; Jesus is divine and human. Jesus is the very person of God. And that’s just the way it is. It’s been revealed to us in Scripture. Our catechism states that salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is his body. Or if you prefer Jesus words himself, John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me.” Elsewhere we have Luke 13:3: “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish” or John 6:54: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day.” In these, we see the importance of of course Christ Himself, but also the Church. The Church administers the sacraments, and as such we can say salvation comes through the Church. So we can say definitively that the fullness of salvation

that God offers to people is through Jesus alone. If that were not true, Jesus would be one of many teachers, all of whom can lead us completely to heaven. It might be popular to think that way today, but that's not true.

But does this mean then that anyone who is not a Catholic because they are outside of the Church is not saved? The best way to think about this is not in terms of saved and unsaved or black and white. If that were the case, my suspicion is Saint Charles would have moved with far greater urgency and strive to get converts to save them from hell. As Bishop Robert Barron puts it, the best way to think of this is in terms of fullness and participation.

The Church has looked at this for many years. Going back to the mid 19th century, Pope Pius IX stated that no one can be saved outside of the Church, but God would not punish people for their ignorance if it was invincible. He also said if a person was invincibly ignorant of the Christian faith, they could get to heaven thanks to the workings of grace in them. About 100 years later, Vatican II went further. It again taught the Catholic Church has the fullness, the all-embracing means to salvation. Other Christian Churches have elements of it, and God could use them as means

of salvation. And as for non-Christians, what Vatican II taught was that they were too related to the Church though not incorporated into her. God's universal salvific will means that he gives the non-Christian, even the atheist, sufficient help to be saved. If a person is seeking God and following his conscience, he's on the path to salvation. The Holy Spirit, in a way known only to God, makes it possible for each and every person to be associated with the Paschal mystery. "God, in ways known to himself, can lead those inculpably ignorant of the gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please him." The council did not indicate whether it is necessary for salvation to come to explicit Christian faith before death, but the texts give the impression that implicit faith may suffice. In a nutshell then, popes and councils speak of people seeking the truth, and it's clear that God does not turn away a person who is trying to find God and live according to his law. Perhaps Cardinal Avery Dulles put it best by writing: "Who, then, can be saved? Catholics can be saved if they believe the Word of God as taught by the Church and if they obey the commandments. Other Christians can be saved if they submit their lives to Christ and join the community where they think he wills to be found. Jews can be saved if they look forward in hope to the Messiah and try to ascertain whether God's promise has been fulfilled. Adherents of other religions can be saved if,

with the help of grace, they sincerely seek God and strive to do his will. Even atheists can be saved if they worship God under some other name and place their lives at the service of truth and justice. God's saving grace, channeled through Christ the one Mediator, leaves no one unassisted. But that same grace brings obligations to all who receive it. They must not receive the grace of God in vain. Much will be demanded of those to whom much is given." And through it all, I'd just add it the power of the Holy Spirit, guiding us and enlightening us, which continues even after we die when all will be given the full opportunity to understand the faith.

Saint Charles de Foucauld did not get many converts during his time in Africa. But he was a very patient man, and he wisely realized that being forceful with the faith would be like the seed that falls in the ground and dies quickly. Rather it has to take root, and I truly believe it did. We have come a long way, but we still have a long way to go. Indeed the reality is not as black and white as some might like it. All religions are not equal, but we also should not rush to condemn people who may not come to Mass or think that all non Catholics or non Christians are a lost cause. Our part is to evangelize, not to proselytize. Evangelization is something we call can do, though patience. Through getting to know people we want to talk about our

faith to; through setting a good example with our lives; through praying for them, both living and dead; through knowing the content of our faith and forming our minds so we can understand what it is we want to talk about, and then gently talking about our faith through discussions with people we hope one day will be an active Catholic. Like Saint Charles, we may go many years and not see the results. But God's love is so great, as is the power of grace and the Holy Spirit. Maybe our part is just to plant the seed, and we won't always see the harvest. But what we will see one day are many people in heaven whom we least expect, from the weekly Mass goer, to the C & E Catholic, to that person we may have judged as having lax morals who never spoke of God at all. And that's because the words of our second reading are so true: "see what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are." There's no asterisk next to children. Let's not put one there. Our part is to partake in the mission of the Church, the salvation of souls, by being an active worker and evangelizer. The fullness of the faith is found in our Catholic faith, but as the saying goes, God works in mysterious ways. He led a lapsed Catholic turned agnostic back home through Islam and then back to the desert where no known conversions happened. But maybe they did, because one wise priest decided to be a true evangelizer and realized that

God reaches people in many ways. His job was to help establish the connection, and leave the rest to God. Like him, may we grow in our faith, strive to lead people to it, but never forget that while to our eyes a person may be far from the Catholic Church, that very person is someone down the road we may also be face to face with in the heavenly kingdom, so lets never give up on anyone, because grace is truly amazing.