

FRANCISCO SUÁREZ AND THE NON-BELIEVERS*

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ABSTRACT: The discovery of the «New World» led many theologians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to discuss the possibility of salvation for non-believers. Among these was the Jesuit, Francisco Suárez (1548-1617). This article shows how Suárez distinguished between three orders of infidels (*tres ordines infidelium*): 1) those to whom the faith was proposed to believe in a sufficient manner but who refused to believe; 2) those who never heard anything about the faith; 3) those who heard something of the faith but in an insufficient manner. Although Suárez believes the infidels of the first order cannot be saved, he does believe those in the second and third orders can be saved if: a) they are not culpable for rejecting the faith; b) they are not guilty for sins against the natural law; c) they are seeking the truth; and d) they have a desire to belong to the Church at least in desire and longing. The article concludes by showing how the view of Suárez led to theological development in the Catholic Church leading to the teaching of Vatican II in *Lumen gentium*, 16.

KEY WORDS: Suárez, salvation; infidels (non-believers); *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*; invincible ignorance; God's universal salvific will.

Francisco Suárez y los no creyentes

RESUMEN: El descubrimiento del «Nuevo Mundo» llevó a muchos teólogos en los siglos XVI y XVII a discutir la posibilidad de salvación para los no creyentes. Entre estos se encontraba el jesuita Francisco Suárez (1548-1617). Este artículo muestra cómo Suárez distinguió entre tres órdenes de infieles (*tres ordines infidelium*): 1) aquellos a quienes se les propuso creer de manera suficiente pero que se negaron a creer; 2) aquellos que nunca escucharon nada acerca de la fe; 3) aquellos que escucharon algo de la fe, pero de manera insuficiente. Aunque Suárez cree que los infieles de la primera orden no pueden salvarse, sí cree que aquellos en la segunda y tercera orden se pueden salvar si: a) no son culpables de rechazar la fe; b) no son culpables de los pecados contra la ley natural; c) buscan la verdad; y d) tienen un deseo de pertenecer a la Iglesia, al menos en el deseo y el anhelo. El artículo concluye mostrando cómo la visión de Suárez condujo al desarrollo teológico en la Iglesia Católica que condujo a la enseñanza del Vaticano II en *Lumen gentium*, 16.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Suárez; salvación, infieles (no creyentes), *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, ignorancia invencible, voluntad salvífica universal de Dios.

INTRODUCTION

The Jesuit philosopher and theologian, Francisco Suárez (1548-1617), lived during a period of lively discussions over the possibility of salvation for those who were outside the visible Catholic Church under the Roman Pontiff. The discovery of «the New World» at the end of the 15th century raised new questions for Christian thinkers. As Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., writes:

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Now Christian thinkers had to ask themselves: How can we continue to judge all pagans guilty of sinful unbelief, when we know that countless people have been living without the knowledge of the gospel, through no fault of their own? And how can we reconcile our belief in the universality of God's salvific will with the fact that he apparently has left all those people without any possibility of becoming members of the church, outside of which they could not be saved?¹.

The discovery of the Americas forced Catholic thinkers in Europe to pay more attention to the question of whether those outside the visible Catholic Church are culpable for their condition.

During the Middle Ages, it was assumed that Jews and Muslims were culpable for their rejection of the Christian faith and, therefore, they could not be saved². The medieval Church remained clear about the necessity of membership in the Church for salvation. Thus, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) stated: «There is indeed one universal Church of the faithful outside which no one at all is saved»³. St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1224-1274) began to develop the concept of implicit faith in Christ (based on Hebrews 11:6) and the concept of implicit desire for baptism and the Eucharist⁴. Pope Boniface VIII, however, in his bull *Unam Sanctam* of 1302 declared that outside of the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church «there is neither salvation nor the remission of sins»⁵. He also went on to assert: «we declare, state and define that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of all human creatures that they submit to the Roman pontiff»⁶. In the late Middle Ages, this teaching was reaffirmed by the *Decree for the Jacobites/ Copts* promulgated by the Council of Florence in 1442:

[The Church] firmly believes, professes and preaches that «none of those who are outside of the Catholic Church, not only pagans», but also Jews, heretics and schismatics can become sharers of eternal life, but they will go into the eternal fire «which was prepared for the Devil and his angels» [Mt 25:41], unless, before the end of their life, they are joined to her (*nisi ante finem vitae eidem fuerint aggregati*). And the unity of the Church's body is of such great importance that the Church's sacraments are beneficial towards salvation only for those who remain within her, and [only for them] do fasts, almsgiving and other acts of piety and exercises of Christian discipline bring forth eternal rewards. «No one can be saved, no matter how many alms he has

¹ SULLIVAN, F. A., S.J. *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 69.

² *Ibid.*, 67.

³ DENZINGER, H. and HÜNERMANN, P. (eds.), *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals* 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012) [henceforth D-H], n. 802.,

⁴ See SULLIVAN, 49 and St. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 1 a. 7.

⁵ D-H, 870.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 875.

given, and even if he sheds his blood for the name of Christ, unless he remains in the bosom and unity of the Catholic Church»⁷.

On the surface, this teaching of Florence might seem to allow little room for the possibility of salvation for Non-Christians (or even non-Catholic Christians). A small opening, though, is found in the phrase «unless, before the end of their life, they are joined to her [i.e. the Church]». This phrase allows room for development on two points: 1) there might be people who are outside of the Church through no fault of their own, and God, in his justice, would take this into consideration; and 2) For those who are outside of the visible Church through no fault of their own, perhaps there are ways of being joined or aggregated to the Church other than visible membership. These possible exceptions to the principle, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, allowed Suárez and other theologians of his time to investigate further the possibility of salvation for those outside of the visible Catholic Church.

1. APOSTASY DISTINGUISHED FROM INFIDELITY AND HERESY

Suárez's treatise, *De fide, spe et charitate*, was published in 1622, five years after his death⁸. In this treatise, he distinguishes between apostasy, infidelity, and heresy. Apostasy requires that the faith already received be deserted⁹. Apostasy, therefore, would occur if someone were to abandon Christianity for Judaism or paganism¹⁰. Apostasy, however, is not a species of infidelity or of heresy (*dico talem apostasiam non esse speciem infidelitatis, neque heresis*)¹¹. Suárez admits that apostasy can include a type of infidelity¹², but in itself it is not a species of infidelity¹³. Apostasy also is not the same as heresy since, following the common opinion of the Fathers, a heretic retains the Christian confession but in a corrupted form¹⁴.

2. THE THREE ORDERS OF INFIDELS

Having distinguished apostasy from infidelity and heresy, Suárez turns to infidelity itself. Here he takes up the question whether those who lack the faith

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1351.

⁸ PEREIRA, J., *Suárez: Between Scholasticism and Modernity* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2007), 59.

⁹ SUÁREZ, F., *De Fide theologica*, tract. I disp. XVI, sect. V n. 3 in SUÁREZ, *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII (Paris: Ludovicus Vivès, Paris, 1856-1861), p. 420.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.* tract. I disp. XVI, sect. V n. 8; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 422.

¹² Here he refers to St. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae* II-II. q. 12, a. 1.

¹³ See *De Fide theologica*, tract. I disp. XVI, sect. V n. 8-10; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, pp. 422-424..

¹⁴ *Ibid.* tract. I disp. XVI, sect. V n. 8; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 422.

are excused from sin. Suárez notes that ignorance might make the rejection of the faith involuntary and, therefore, free from fault¹⁵. He also appeals to the common axiom: *Facienti quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam* (God does not deny grace to the one who does what is within his power)¹⁶. Suárez believes that even those who have not received a supernatural illumination still reflect the «true light, which enlightens everyone» (John 1:9)¹⁷. This happens when a person «through the natural light and the good use of freedom does what can and should be done» (*per lumen naturae et bonum usum libertatis facit quod potest et debet*)¹⁸. If, though, a person does not do what lies within his power and places an impediment to divine illumination and inspiration (*ponit impedimentum divinae illuminationi et inspirationi*), he would not be excused from the fault of infidelity (*ergo jam non excusabitur a culpa infidelitatis*)¹⁹.

These preliminary considerations lead Suárez to distinguish three orders of infidels (*tres ordines infidelium*)²⁰. The first order consists of those to whom the faith was sufficiently announced and proposed but who refused to believe (*quibus fides sufficienter annuntiata et proposita est, et credere noluerunt*)²¹. According to Suárez, there is no question here of the culpability of these infidels for «they have no excuse» (*nullam enim habent excusationem*)²².

The second group of infidels consists of those who have heard nothing of the faith «neither sufficiently, nor insufficiently, neither by preaching, nor by rumor or report» (*nec sufficienter, nec insufficienter, nec per predicationem, neque per rumorem aut famam*)²³. Regarding the culpability of these there seems to have been some controversy among the ancient Fathers²⁴.

The third group of infidels consists of those who have heard something of the Christian faith (*de christiana fide aliquid audierunt*)—either by report or rumor or by some preaching (*aliqualem praedicationem*)—but not in a sufficient manner (*non tamen sufficientem*)²⁵. Among those who might be in this third group of infidels, Suárez mentions Turks, Saracens, and those in the provinces of India²⁶.

By these three orders of infidels, Suárez «provides a new and broader characterization of negative infidelity» than that «drawn by St. Thomas in the

¹⁵ *Ibid.* tract. I disp. XVII, sect. I n. 1; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 424.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* tract. I disp. XVII, sect. I n. 3; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 424

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* tract. I disp. XVII, sect. I n. 6; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 425.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Middle Ages»²⁷. As Ilaria Morali notes, «Suárez had, after all, read Francisco de Vitoria's *Relectio de Indis*, and concurs with him on the need for persuasive preaching, preaching that does not violate the will of the *Indios*»²⁸. Suárez, therefore, is aware that some infidels might be without guilt because the Gospel had never been preached to them in a manner sufficient to oblige them to accept it. He finds support for this conclusion from John 15: 22 where Jesus says: «If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin»²⁹. He also appeals to Rom 10: 14: «How can they believe without someone preaching (*quomodo credent sine praedicante*)?»

For those who have never heard of the faith, Suárez invokes «the common principle of inculpable ignorance» (*communia principia de ignorantia inculpabili*)³⁰. For those who have heard something of the true faith but remain in their infidelity, much will depend on whether they heard the faith in a sufficient manner. If they heard the faith in an insufficient manner, they very often can be excused from guilt. On this point, Suárez finds support in the writings of the Dominicans, Francisco de Vitoria (c. 1486-1546) and Cajetan/Tommaso de Vio (1469-1534)³¹.

What, though, would be required of these non-believers if they are not culpable for rejecting the faith? According to Suárez, those who have heard nothing of the faith, must follow the natural law and avoid any sins that place an obstacle to divine illumination³². Even though they incur no sin for acting against the faith because of «invincible ignorance» (*ignorantiam invincibilem*), they still can incur guilt if they act against the natural law³³. They also should pray in their own way to God. Even if true prayer requires faith, these non-believers can be prompted by some type of divine motion to call upon God³⁴.

Those who have heard something of the true faith are required to pray to God for divine illumination and abstain from sin³⁵. They also should make a diligent search for the truth and consider whether the truth they heard (albeit in an insufficient manner) might be necessary for salvation³⁶. This search might lead them to question some of their current beliefs and hope for a teacher to come who could explain the truth to them more clearly³⁷. For Suárez, it's always important to keep in mind the principle that God does not deny grace

²⁷ MORALI, I., «The Early Modern Period (1453-1650)» in *Catholic Engagement with World Religions* eds. Karl J. Becker & Ilaria Morali (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010), 81.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *De Fide theologica*, tract. I disp. XVII, sect. I n. 7; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 425.

³⁰ *Ibid.* tract. I disp. XVII, sect. I n. 8; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 426.

³¹ *Ibid.* tract. I disp. XVII, sect. I n. 9; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 426.

³² *Ibid.* tract. I disp. XVII, sect. I n. 11; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 427..

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.* tract. I disp. XVII, sect. I n. 10; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 427.

³⁵ *Ibid.* tract. I disp. XVII, sect. I n. 10; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 426.

³⁶ *Ibid.* tract. I disp. XVII, sect. I n. 9; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 426.

³⁷ *Ibid.* tract. I disp. XVII, sect. I n. 10; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 427.

to one who does what is within his power (*Facienti quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*)³⁸. This principle leads to the final question of the possibility of salvation for non-believers.

3. THE POSSIBLE SALVATION OF THE NON-BELIEVERS

Does Suárez believe that non-believers can be saved? The answer would seem to be no for the first order of infidels, viz., those to whom the faith was sufficiently announced and proposed but who have refused to believe. Such non-believers are culpable for their disbelief. Suárez, however, seems to believe salvation is possible for the second two orders of non-believers because they might not be culpable for their disbelief.

The possibility of salvation for the non-believers hinges on what is generally called God's universal salvific will. Suárez affirms this principle when he writes: «God wishes all people to be saved» (*Deus vult omnes homines salvos fieri*)³⁹. Because God wishes all people to be saved, he also gives every human being «sufficient proximate supernatural assistance» (*Deus dat unicuique hominum auxilium supernaturale proxime sufficiens*)⁴⁰. Suárez maintains that salvation is not possible without supernatural grace, and he cites Ephesus 2:8: «For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God»⁴¹.

The non-believers, therefore, must be saved by supernatural grace. How, though, is this possible? Suárez is aware that faith is needed for salvation, and he cites Heb 11: 6: «Without faith it is impossible to please God» (*Sine fide impossibile est placere Deo*)⁴². Suárez, however, believes faith can be either «in reality or in wish» (*aut in re, aut in voto*)⁴³. The non-believer, therefore, who does what lies within his power and is inculpably ignorant of the true faith can still be illumined by «pure grace» (*ex pura gratia*)⁴⁴. For Suárez, this illumination could be an expression of the desire for faith, i.e., faith «*in voto*»⁴⁵.

In addition to the need for supernatural grace and faith, salvation also requires membership in the Church. In this regard, Suárez cites the well-known axiom associated with St. Cyprian (d. 258): «Outside the Church there

³⁸ *Ibid.* tract. I disp. XVII, sect. I n. 11; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 427.

³⁹ SUÁREZ, *De Gratia*, lib. IV. cap. XVI, n. 18; *Opera omnia*, Vol. VIII, p. 348; the principle is grounded in 1 Tim 2:4: «God desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth».

⁴⁰ *De Gratia*, lib. IV. cap. XVI, n. 19; *Opera omnia*, Vol. VIII, p. 348;

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, lib. IV. cap. XV, n. 28; *Opera omnia*, Vol. VIII, p. 338;

⁴² *De Fide theologica*, tract. I disp. XII, sect. II n. 6; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 310.

⁴³ *Ibid.* tract. I disp. XII, sect. II n. 10; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 342. Suárez believed that baptized infants do not exercise the act of faith, but they receive the habit of faith at baptism by infusion. See SUÁREZ, *Defensio fidei*, lib. I, cap. XXIV, n. 1: *Opera omnia* Vol. XXIV, p. 117.

⁴⁴ *De Fide theologica*, tract. I disp. XII, sect. II n. 14; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 343..

⁴⁵ Cf. *Ibid.* tract. I disp. XII, sect. II n. 10; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 342

is no salvation» (*extra Ecclesiam non est salus*)⁴⁶. Suárez accepts this principle, but he appeals to the distinction between belonging to the Church «in reality or in wish» (*in re vel in voto*). Thus, he states that «no one can be saved who does not enter this Church of Christ either in reality, or at least in desire and wish» (*nemo salvari potest, nisi hanc Christi Ecclesiam in re, vel in voto saltem et desiderio ingrediatur*)⁴⁷. He finds support for this position in Bellarmine, and he also makes it clear that the desire to enter the Church «*in voto*» is also a desire to be baptized «*in voto*» since no one can enter the Church without baptism⁴⁸.

We can see in these texts how Suárez provides a way for non-believers to be saved. First, they must not be culpable for rejecting the faith (this would include the second and third orders of infidels). Second, they must not be culpable for any sins that violate the natural moral law. Third, they must be doing what lies within their power to seek the truth which would involve the impulse of supernatural grace and a supernatural act of faith. Fourth, they must desire to belong to the Church at least in wish and desire, which would involve a type of baptism of desire. Suárez, of course, believes that «there is no true grace that is not given by reason of Christ» (*Nulla vera gratia quae non detur propter Christum*)⁴⁹. The grace of Christ, however, is capable of illuminating all human beings as John 1:9 makes clear⁵⁰.

4. CONCLUSION

In dealing with the three different types of unbelievers, Suárez shows considerable sophistication. He was living during the «age of discovery» when «it was obvious that vast multitudes of people in the newly discovered regions of the world had lived and died in complete ignorance of the Christian faith»⁵¹. Taking note of these factors, he provides a way of affirming all the truths of the faith while taking note of the subjective dispositions and limitations of people living in various circumstances. In this regard, he's quite modern.

Suárez's discussion of the possible salvation of non-Catholics and non-believers helped the Catholic Church in her doctrinal development of the issue. In his Feb. 9, 1749 Brief to Cardinal Henry, Duke of York, Pope Benedict XIV cites Suárez in support of the validity of the baptism carried out by heretics according to proper matter and form⁵². In 1854 and 1863, Pope Pius IX officially affirms the principle of «invincible ignorance» as grounds for the

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* tract. I disp. XII, sect. IV n. 22; *Opera omnia*, Vol. XII, p. 359.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ SUÁREZ, *De Gratia*, lib. IV. cap. XV, n. 30; *Opera omnia*, Vol. VIII, p. 338.

⁵⁰ SUÁREZ cites John 1:9 in *De Gratia*, lib. IV. cap. XI, n. 17; *Opera omnia*, Vol. VIII, p. 318.

⁵¹ SULLIVAN, 92.

⁵² See D-H, 2567.

non-culpability of many unbelievers⁵³. The Holy Office, in its 1949 ruling on the Father Feeney case, affirms Suárez's notion of belonging to the Church by wish or desire if not *in re*⁵⁴. In its Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, *Lumen gentium*, Vatican II speaks of the reasons for the possible salvation of non-Christians. The categories used by the Council sound as if they could have been written by Suárez himself:

Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience⁵⁵.

Suárez, of course, was not the only theologian of the 16th or 17th century to lay out the principles of non-culpable ignorance and affiliation with the Church *in voto*. Mention could also be made of Albert Pigge (1490-1542), Francisco de Vitoria, O.P. (c. 1486-1546), Domingo Soto (c. 1494-1560), St. Robert Bellarmine, S.J. (1542-1621), and Juan de Lugo (1583-1660)⁵⁶. Suárez, however, was more precise in his different categories of unbelievers, and, in this respect, his contribution was perhaps the most significant⁵⁷.

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⁵³ See D-H, 2865-2866.

⁵⁴ See D-H,, 3871.

⁵⁵ Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 16; D-H, 4140.

⁵⁶ See SULLIVAN, 78-99 and MORALI, 76-85.

⁵⁷ SULLIVAN points to the 19th century revival of the ideas of Suárez, Bellarmine, and De Lugo by Giovanni Perrone, S.J. (1794-1876) as playing a major role in the statements of Pius IX on invincible ignorance. See Sullivan, 108-117.