
Evangelization and the Tenor of Vatican II: A Review Essay

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The focus of this book is an investigation as to why contemporary Catholics, despite encouragement from Vatican II and from Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, evidence a certain hesitation or lack of enthusiasm for evangelization and *ad gentes* missionary work. Martin argues that such evangelical lethargy is due to two causes. The first is a lack of attention to the teaching of the Council on the urgent necessity of mission, despite its teaching "about the possibility of salvation outside the visible bounds of the Church, or of Christianity" (6). The second is a "culture of universalism" or "practical universalism" in Catholicism that presumes the salvation of all humanity (196). It is in recognizing the authentic teaching of Vatican II, particularly in its key text *Lumen gentium* (LG), the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, and in unmasking what might be called a "creeping universalism" in interpreting the Council's texts that Catholics will realize the need for an "adjustment in pastoral strategy" (196). Such strategy will move away from the Council's more benign, noncondemnatory stance to one that recognizes and proclaims the danger that non-Christians and unchurched Christians face in regard to their eternal salvation. Thus, a "new evangelization" will take shape.

After an initial chapter laying out the basic problem—"the ambivalence of Catholics towards evangelization" (6)—the two arguments are developed in five subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 introduces the main text for examination, LG 16, dividing it into three parts (a, b, and c). LG 16a reflects on the relationship of Jews, Muslims, and other non-Christians to the church. LG 16b determines that all people of good will, through God's grace, can in fact be saved without explicit Christian faith. LG 16c states,

however, that "very often" (*at saepius*) people do not indeed have "good will" and so need to have the Gospel preached to them—therefore the need of "the missions." The chapter goes on to introduce some related conciliar texts, point out the rather noncontroversial character of the text in the debate on the Council floor, and list some concerns with LG 16b.

Chapter 3 situates LG 16 within the context of the entire document on the church, outlining in some detail the complex development of church teaching regarding the possibility of salvation outside of explicit faith in Christ. This chapter ends by cautioning about a "salvation optimism" proposed by many in their interpretation of LG 16b. In a crucial passage, Martin writes that for some, the *possibility* of salvation taught

by the Council quickly moves to a *probability*. And then "it is a short step from an assumed 'probability' concerning salvation to the widespread assumption now common in the culture of the Church as well as in the culture at large, that virtually everyone will be saved" (55). The reason for this, Martin argues, is that interpreters have largely ignored the additional teaching of the necessity of evangelization found in LG 16c.

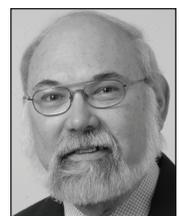
Chapter 4 then moves to examine the two scriptural passages cited by LG 16c: Romans 1:21, 25 and Mark 16:15–[16]. The bulk of the chapter not only analyzes the two verses of Romans cited in the conciliar text but also develops a wider exegesis of Romans 1:18–32 and all of Romans 2–3. The Marcan verses are examined in much less detail. At the end of the chapter, Martin summarizes his findings: "The Council, citing Romans 1:21, 25, declares that many have been deceived by the evil one and rejected the truth for a lie and are in effect idolaters. This statement of the Council and the underlying texts from Romans that support it fly in the face of a mentality that presumes that almost everybody is a 'good person' and of course will go to heaven, and that God could not really be a good God and let people go to hell" (90). Therefore, concludes Martin, "It matters whether the gospel is preached or not. It matters if people believe and are baptized or not" (91).

Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization.

By Ralph Martin. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. Pp. xvi, 316. Paperback \$24.



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Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the exposition and critique of two theories of salvation that in their basic presumption of universal salvation have been extremely influential in post-Vatican II theology and popular thinking. These are Karl Rahner's idea of the "anonymous Christian" and the contention of Hans Urs von Balthasar that Christians have a "duty to hope that all be saved" (xiii). While neither theologian formally teaches a doctrine of universal salvation, Martin contends that—contrary to the Scriptures and traditional witness—their thought comes immeasurably close to such a position.

Chapter 7, then, sketches Martin's conclusion: that the pastoral strategy of Vatican II, in its choice "to 'accentuate the positive' in its presentation of the gospel" (192), should be seen today as a wrong choice. "In retrospect it might be fair to say that it was an unwise silence, a flawed pastoral strategy, and that we are overdue for a 'rebalancing' of our message and strategy" (201–2). In the light of today's situation, it is time for the church to "recover the boldness of apostolic preaching" and proclaim "the reality of God's wrath, properly understood; and our desperate need for Christ in order for us to be reconciled with God, bringing with it an appropriate fear of the Lord" (198). On the last page of his text, Martin concludes, "We have not seen that 'biblical-thought world' [words of Pope Benedict XVI] or its 'spirit' adequately 'handed on' in the postconciliar years. The omission needs to be corrected if the urgent call for a new evangelization is to achieve its considerable promise in the traditionally Christian nations that are not in massive apostasy and in the reenergizing of primary evangelization to the unevangelized peoples of the world" (208).

Martin's challenge to contemporary mission theology and missionary practice, endorsed on the book's cover and first pages by a host of key church leaders, should be taken seriously. He is right about a certain ambivalence in regard to explicit proclamation of the Gospel and a certain naïveté in regard to the goodness of the world and of humans. He is right about the urgency of preaching the Gospel in order to invite women and men into a church community that can shape, challenge, console, celebrate, and forgive in the life-giving, redeeming, and liberating name of Jesus Christ. He is right about cautioning Catholics against a too-facile belief that all will be saved, even though that is indeed a worthy hope. As Juan Alfaro of the Gregorian University used to say in his classes, although there is no list of people in hell, the possibility of hell remains "for you and for me."

But we wonder: Is Martin's stark interpretation of LG 16 what Vatican II "actually teaches," as Martin claims in his title? The Council in no way denies the reality of human sinfulness, as seen, for example, in *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, sections 15, 41, and 58, but it is not its predominant tone. Does such an emphasis, therefore, on human depravity and sinfulness go against the conciliatory "style" of Vatican II that sought not to condemn and anathematize but to persuade and edify? We wonder if Martin has exaggerated somewhat the influence that Romans 1 has on LG 16c. If it were so important for LG's argument, would it not have made sense for the Council to have cited the entire passage of Romans 1:18–32? In the same way, only Mark 16:15 is quoted in the passage. Interestingly, in the original Latin text on the Vatican website (not in the Latin version printed in the book), there is no mention of Mark 16:16 ("the one who does not believe will be condemned"). Could a typographical error in the English translation (both that of Abbott and Flannery, and the Vatican website translation) have influenced a too negative reading of a passage that serves as a transition to paragraph 17, on the church's mis-

sionary work? Such a negative reading would not entirely cancel out the positive tone of LG 16b, about the *possibility* of salvation for those who "sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them." It would seem strange, however, that the document spends so much time on a deeply traditional and yet, in another way, groundbreaking statement, only to undercut it as strongly as Martin suggests it does. In many ways, Martin's perspective on the depravity of women and men without explicit faith in the Gospel seems to fly in the face of our experience of wonderfully devout and holy Muslim students and colleagues, evident sincerity of worshippers in temples in Thailand and Taiwan, startling integrity of atheist friends and unchurched relatives, and sincere and honest lives of Papua New Guinea villagers.

We wonder, too, whether the pastoral strategy of Vatican II is indeed "flawed," unwise, and in need of rebalancing and readjusting (see pp. 202 and 195). Our own sense is that evangelization comes not from denouncing or scolding people, but first of all from *witnessing* to the peace, strength, purpose, and freedom that accepting Christ brings, then *showing* them a church that is not first concerned with what is wrong with people but

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with helping people live life to the full, one that is found only in a relationship with Christ, celebrated around the Eucharistic table. As a World Council of Churches meeting in 1989 put it in its final statement: "People will always believe their eyes first." At the recent Synod on the New Evangelization, Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila said it well: "The seemingly indifferent and aimless societies of our time are earnestly looking for God. The Church's humility, respectfulness and silence might reveal more clearly the face of God in Jesus. The world takes delight in a simple witness to Jesus—meek and humble of heart." And when we proclaim, we need to do it in a way that connects with people's experience. This in no way means watering down the Gospel to make it acceptable; rather, it means to preach and explain in a way that touches people's deepest yearnings, challenges their prejudices, speaks a word of consolation in their sorrow, and offers the assurance of forgiveness for their sinfulness. Evangelization and mission come from being bowled over with the love of God-in-Christ and from realizing that we have been chosen to share God's mission of healing, reconciliation, forgiveness, justice, and establishing relationships. This is the strategy of Vatican II. We believe it is still relevant and should be the starting point of the New Evangelization.

Ralph Martin's book is a powerful one, and a timely reminder in many ways of human sinfulness and the healing power of the Gospel. It is clearly, passionately, and honestly written. Positions, even when disagreed with, are fairly presented. It is a book that deserves to be read by missiologists and mission practitioners. We daresay that it is one of the most significant books on mission to appear in 2012. Nevertheless, we believe the church should continue to carry out its mission, in the words of John XXIII, with "the medicine of mercy."