

Innocent Ignorance?

August 13, 2011

A reader asks a vital question: « If a good Protestant has lived a good life but still firmly believes that the Catholic Faith is wrong, so that he does not even consider entering the Catholic Church, can he still be saved?” The question is vital (from “vita” in latin, meaning “life”), because it is a question of eternal life or death for countless souls.

By way of answer, the first thing to be said is that every soul appearing at death instantaneously before God’s judgment seat will be judged by him with a perfect justice and with a perfect mercy. God alone knows the depths of a man’s heart which a man can hide from himself, let alone from other men. Men may misjudge, but God never. Therefore the “good Protestant” will be damned by himself or saved by God, exactly as God knows that he has deserved.

Nevertheless it stands to reason that if God wants all of us to be saved (I Tim.II,4), and requires of us to believe on pain of damnation (Mk.XVI,16), he will have let us men know what we must believe and what we must do to save our souls. What then must the “good Protestant” believe?

At the very least any soul to be saved must believe that God exists and that he rewards the good and punishes the wicked (Heb.XI,6). If a “good Protestant” who has led “a good life” does not believe that, he cannot be saved. But many Catholic theologians go further and say that to be saved one must also believe in the Holy Trinity and in Christ as Redeemer. If these theologians are right, then there may be many more “good Protestants” who cannot save their souls.

And God may require of them to believe in more than just these absolute basics, depending upon how much opportunity they have had in life to learn of the Truth that comes from him. If they

are ignorant of all the rest of the Catholic Faith, have they never come across it? Possibly not. But possibly they have. I can remember my mother telling with admiration how a Catholic priest once answered all the serious questions of her “good Protestant” father, but there was no follow-up that I know of. If then “good Protestants” have even only once come across Catholic truth, why exactly did they not follow up? Unless it was badly presented, they were in effect rejecting truth. Can they have rejected it without some fault? Then did they reject it innocently or wilfully? “Good Protestants” easily consider themselves to be innocent, as do we all, but God is deceived by none of us.

However, there is also what a “good Protestant” must do to be saved. He may not know all that the Catholic Church infallibly requires of us in morals, but he does have at least the natural light of his in-born conscience. Now it may be truly difficult with original sin and with no help from the Catholic sacraments to follow that natural light of one’s conscience, but if one does seriously violate it or twist it out of true, it is easy to live and to die in mortal sin, a state in which no soul can be saved. Again, the “good Protestant” may plead ignorance of the fullness of God’s law as Catholics can know it, but is his ignorance truly “invincible,” i.e. innocent? For instance, did he really not know, or did he actually want not to know, that artificial means of birth control are seriously displeasing to God?

God knows. God judges. May he have mercy upon all “good Protestants,” and upon all of us.

Kyrie eleison.