

THE OPTIMISM OF AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO ON THE SALVATION OF NON-CHRISTIANS

Hilary Ndu OKEKE^{*1}

Abstract

*The possibility of salvation outside the Church developed in various documents of the Church is inexhaustive without recourse to Augustine of Hippo. His literary journey, theological assiduity, and ecclesial leadership spanned over forty years. Within this period, he developed several doctrines that often overlap themselves. Cultured by the art of rhetoric, Christian faith and tradition, his love and classical interpretations of the Sacred Scripture were evident in his theological nuances. While struggling to promote Christian unity amidst heresy and schism, he applied the axiomatic principle of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus est* and ratified the impossibility of salvation outside the Church. But at his encounter with the African slaves in Rome as *patronus plebis*, he became optimistic that God would be merciful to those outside the Church through no fault of theirs - *sine culpa ignorantes*.*

Keywords: Augustine, Church, Inculpable Ignorance, Grace, Salvation.

1. Introduction

The Church Fathers standing as the institutional tradition provided theologians of various epochs the most indispensable paraphernalia for authoritative theological articulations. Being vanguards of Christian doctrine entrenched in the Sacred Scriptures, they enjoyed the unique privilege of articulating theologically the principal doctrines that will never betray the truth fully revealed by Christ, faithfully transmitted by the apostles, and authoritatively taught by the Magisterium. Building upon the apostolic witnesses, they provided the normative framework of the Church's ancient Magisterium. Thus, between the third and fifth centuries, they have laid the foundational discussions of most contemporary soteriological doctrines. The geographical perception of the mid-fourth and fifth centuries played a boundless role in the patristic understanding of soteriological questions. Precisely because they were convinced that the gospel of Christ had been preached in every corner of the world, and they preached that vincible ignorance of Christ's gospel is not forgivable. It is tantamount to willful rejection of salvation which alone comes from the Church as the body or bride of Christ. However, ever since the European explorers discovered vast tribes in America and other parts of the world, the question of salvation of the non-Christians became a

¹*PhD, Department of Systematic Theology, Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt, Email: ndnwokeke@yahoo.com, Tel: 08037870564.

theological and ecumenical concern. Of primary importance to us in this discuss is Augustine of Hippo's optimism about the mercy of God on non-Christians.

The Cyprianic maxim *extra ecclesiam salus non est* had since then be interpreted and reinterpreted by various scholars in the Church's history. While defining his soteriological doctrines, Augustine hacking back to the same axiom developed by his African predecessor expressed his conviction for both the impossibility and possibility of salvation for non-Christians. With that he left an indelible mark in the Church's soteriological doctrines such that Francis A. Sullivan rightly observes that Augustine merits a chapter in his book because of his massive influence on the history of Christian thought, but especially the possibility of salvation outside the Church.² Our main objective is to demonstrate Augustine's affirmative stand on *extra ecclesiam salus nulla salus*, and at the same time present his optimism that God can as well save those outside the Church but with strong qualifications.

2. Pre-Christians

The fathers addressed the bugging question of the salvation of those who lived before the coming of Christ while wrestling some ancient apologists and other schismatics. They were convinced that God wants to save humanity as a group or people as prefigured in the Old Testament People of God. Consequently, the Church was in God's plan for the salvation of mankind. The explanatory notes in Vatican II's first and second chapters of *Lumen Gentium* sustained the notion of the Church not only as a Mystery but a People.³ In establishing the old alliance between God and man *Lumen Gentium* anchored its authority on the great works the Fathers like; Clement, Cyprian, Hilary, and Augustine.

Justin the Martyr, a second-century Greek Christian apologetic was the first to strike the chord on the salvation of all the pre-Christians. In his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, he holds that those who lived before Christ came in person will be saved by their obedience of both the natural and Mosaic laws, and use pure reason. He concludes that whoever did what was universally, naturally and eternally good will be saved anywhere on earth. 'They who are obliged to obey the Law of Moses will find in it not only precepts which were occasioned by the hardness of your people's heart, but also which in themselves are good, holy, and just. They too shall be saved in the resurrection, together with their righteous forefathers such as Noah, Enoch, Jacob and others who believed in Christ, the Son of God.'⁴ Justin maintains that those who had no knowledge of the Mosaic Law such as the Gentiles but had a positive attitude to natural law will be saved because they acted according

²Cf. Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response*, (Oregon, Wipf and Stocks Pub. 2002), 28.

³Cf. L G 1-18

⁴Justin, *Dial.* 43. 1, PTS 47, 123.

to pure reason which he describes as the *Logos*. ‘We have been taught that Christ is the first-begotten of God, and we have declared him to be the *Logos* of which all mankind partakes.’⁵ With his seminal word or *logos spermatikos*, he concludes that Christ is present in every member of the human race. Therefore, constituted by the seminal logos, the human reason can attain a knowledge of God’s existence and universal moral law. Consequently, those who lived then or living now and do what is good, holy, and just according to reason are Christians. They should be confident of salvation through Christ.

Another great second-century apologist Irenaeus while tackling Gnosticism, composed the theory of salvation by divine providence. Since, God is God for all ages, he asserts that salvation is not only for those living now but for those who lived at the ancient times. ‘Christ did not come only for those who lived at the time of Emperor Tiberius, nor does the Father exercise his providence only for those who are living now. Rather, he has provided for those who from the beginning have lived virtuously in their generation, and feared, and loved God, and treated their neighbour with justice and kindness, and have longed to see Christ and to hear his voice.’⁶ Like Justin, Irenaeus saw the possibility of salvation for the virtuous in every generation.

In the third-century Clement a teacher of the school of Alexandria assuredly promoted the doctrine that God has offered all who were predestined the grace of salvation no matter where and when they existed. This offer can come in different forms provided they lead to the same direction. For him, ‘there is only one way of truth but different paths from different places join it just like tributaries flowing into a perennial river.’⁷ Therefore, since all human beings came from one source but are found in different places in the world, God cares for all. ‘God has cared for all human beings since he is the Lord of all. And he is the Saviour of all, it cannot be said that he is Saviour of these, and not of others. As each one was disposed to receive it, God distributed his blessings both to the Greek and barbarians and in their own time those were called who were predestined to be among the faithful elect.’⁸ God interacts with people in a diverse manner over the ages and also offers them one history of salvation which is rooted in Christ.

Since the various divine offers of salvation are each rooted in and oriented towards Christ, Clement holds that while the Greeks, Christians and Jews believe in one God, God is known to them differently.⁹ The one Lord educates each community

⁵Justin, *Apol*, 1. 46. PTS 38, 97

⁶Irenaeus, *Adv. her.* 4:22, 2 PG 11, 1035-38

⁷Clement, *Strom*, 1. 5.29.1, PG 9, 312.

⁸Clement, *Strom*, 7. 2. PG 9. 409-10

⁹Cf. Clement, *Strom*, 6. 5. 14. 7, GCS 52/15, 452-53.

using a different testament. In order that the Jews be saved, he sent them the prophets, and to the Greeks, he raised the more illustrious men among them as prophets in their language. Whether one is an adherent of Judaism, Greek philosophers, or Christians, it is important to understand that all are on the road to righteousness and these different ways will be led to the master road and master gate, Jesus Christ (Jn 10: 1-3).¹⁰ Therefore, all the salvific current flow towards and come together in Christ.

3. The True Religion

Augustine of Hippo's theological influence began in the fourth century and throughout his episcopal ministry, he maintains that salvation is only possible in the *vera religio*. He teaches that this *vera religio* - true religion is synonymous the *ecclesia Catholica*,¹¹ which predates the historical Christianity. The *vera religio* existed among the ancients, and was never lacking in anyone worthy of it.¹² Therefore, from the beginning of the world, the Church was already prefigured in the people of God and Noah's ark.

The perplexing questions about the pagans who died before the coming of Christ brought to his Deogratias, led the bishop of Hippo to affirm the possibility of salvation for those righteous men and women who died before the birth of the Church. Augustine asserts that 'all those from the beginning of the human race believed in Christ and understood him somehow, and lived pious and just lives according to these commandments, whenever and wherever they lived, were undoubtedly saved through him.'¹³ The key to understanding Augustine at this point is that salvation is possible by a remote faith in Christ. Similarly, the revelation of the true religion has never been denied to anyone worthy of it in any age or time. It might come in an unclear or obscured manner which is known to God alone. 'It was not only among the Hebrew people to the holy patriarchs and prophets that he used to reveal himself. There are also examples to be found in other nations since the humble mediator never failed any people who sought him humbly, he was the only one who reconciled to the Father, who alone could most truly say- nobody comes to the Father except through me (Jn. 14. 6).'¹⁴

In effect, Augustine assumes that in some way there are some forms of obscured revelation that could ignite undefined faith in Christ. He indicates that the revelations were very clear for the Jews through the law. The law was given to

¹⁰ Cf. Clement, *Strom.* 1. 7. 38. 6 PG 9, 315.

¹¹ Cf. Augustine, *ep.* 185, 11, 50; CSEL, 57/4, 67.

¹² Mary Inez Bogan, (trans.) *Fathers of the Church*, (Washington D C Catholic University Press, 1968), 52.

¹³ Augustine, *ep.* 102. 12, CSEL 34/2, 554.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Tract c Pag.* 37. In Dolbeau, "Nouveau Sermons d'Augustin IV", 118

them so that sin might abound but unaided no one could ever accomplish the precepts of the law or do so without sin.¹⁵ The laws were then the shadow of events that have been fulfilled in Christ. The era of Christ is the beginning of the new era, the era of grace -*sub gratia*.¹⁶

Augustine concludes that since all revelations point to Christ, both the law and other signs find their fulfilment in Christ. Therefore, the *vera religio* appeared in a certain primordial form which pre-existed the revelation of the Gospel. Their hidden meaning was suppressed but not abolished. 'All these things happened as a preparation and figure of the new and perfect covenant which was to be ratified in Christ, and of the fuller revelation which was to be given through the Word of God made flesh.'¹⁷ It was at the appointed time that the *vera religio* found its fulfilment in Christ and was given its rightful name; Christianity.

4. *Ecclesia ab Abel*

The doctrine of *Ecclesia ab Abel* which is linked to St Peter's speech of the righteous in every age in Acts of the Apostles 10: 35 was first developed in the ecclesiastical history by the bishop of Hippo. With this notion, he encapsulates a universal ecclesiology beyond time and race. With the Church of Abel, Augustine housed all the just who lived and longed for Christ in every generation. By implication, he extends the history of salvation beyond the present institutional and hierarchical Church with the four symbolic characters; One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. The Church does not start with all the baptized after the incarnation but with the holy people that pre-existed her in history. Therefore, all who have truly obeyed the commandments of God through the dictates of their consciences anywhere in the world, from Africa to Asia, Europe to America and Australia to New Zealand are members of the Church. In his 1971 apologia 'Why I Am Still in the Church,' Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), emphasizing the universality of the Church notes that the first Vatican Council described the Church as a *signum levatum in nationes*, that is, the great eschatological banner that was visible from afar and called and united men, the Church has universally been a visible sign that every man unequivocally could recognize in history as the authentic means of salvation.¹⁸

With the concept of *Ecclesia ab Abel*, Augustine continues to affirm that the Church has been present in the world as long as there are people who could be

¹⁵ Cf. Augustine, *c. du. ep. Pelag.* 3. 4. 7 CSEL 60, 492-94.

¹⁶ Cf. Augustine, *doctr. chr.* 3. 8. 12. CCL 32, 85.

¹⁷ L G 9

¹⁸ Cf. Maximilian Heinrich Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger, Life in the Church and Living Theology: Fundamentals of Ecclesiology with Reference to Lumen Gentium* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2007), 420

called holy. 'As long as men beget and are begotten, whoever lived justly in this life, whether before, now or in the next generation belong to the one body of Christ and are individually his members.'¹⁹ These people will be saved by their faith in Christ. Yves Maria Congar believes that Thomas Aquinas is in agreement with Augustine when he acknowledged that the Church does not consist of only the visible or societal communion but of a divinizing communion with God in the life of grace.²⁰ And grace is the seed of glory, the grace of Christ even in an unconscious manner remains universally so long as people obey the dictates of their consciences in doing what is holy and good. The membership *Ecclesia ab Abel* is not limited to any people or generation. In the beginning, it was small and existed only in Abel, Enoch, Noah and his family, Abraham, Lot and his household and among Moses and the holy ones of Israel.²¹ Later, it expanded to include all the humans in every generation.²² On account of his faith, Abraham was a member of the Church.²³ This is the same remote faith which Augustine see in those who are not yet baptized but in reality could be called Christians. The people that constitute the *Ecclesia ab Abel*, he says, have the grace of the Holy Spirit.²⁴

5. Bond of Communion

Augustine like Cyprian preached the impossibility of salvation outside Church which is solely the body or bride of Christ with his concept of the *totus Christus*. After the incarnation and foundation of the Church, the *vera religio* became a Christian religion. This union of Christ and the Church as amplified by St. Paul brings out the insoluble framework of nuptiality prefigured in Genesis 2: 24. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to the woman, and they shall become one flesh.' Pope Benedict XVI also observes that 'the Church is the Body of Christ in the way in which the woman is one body or rather one flesh with the man... the Church is the Body, not by an identity without distinction, but rather using the pneumatic-real act of spousal love.'²⁵ Precisely because, Augustine understands this new form of existence between Christ and the Church, he preaches the impossibility of salvation outside the Church, the bride and body of Christ. One must remain of unity if one must be saved. This bond of unity is dependent on two factors; physical and spiritual communion which is either through baptism by water or martyrdom. After the foundation of the Church, Augustine maintains that a

¹⁹ Augustine, s. 341. 9. 11 PL 39, 1499-50, *en Ps.* 128. 2 CCL 40, 1882

²⁰ Cf. Yves M. Congar, *L' Eglise de S Augustin à l' époque moderne*, (Paris, Cerf, 1970), 232.

²¹ Cf. Augustine, *en Ps.* 128. 2 CCL 40, 1882.

²² Cf. Augustine, s. 20. 1. CCL 40, 1729-30.

²³ Cf. Augustine, s. 4. 11 CCL 41, 27-8.

²⁴ Cf. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church, A Critical Assessment of the Church in All Its Aspects*, (New York, Doubleday, 1974), 47.

²⁵ Benedict XVI, *Called to Communion*, (San Francisco, Ignatius 1996), 39.

person is saved if he lives a good life and remains within the bond of ecclesial communion. He does not believe like Cyprian that someone who left the Church, the body of Christ will be saved since disconnecting oneself from the head, is disconnecting oneself from life. Therefore, 'whosoever severed himself from the unity of Christ, no matter how estimable his life might be, shall not have life but the wrath of God rests upon him.'²⁶

The bishop of Hippo holds that the grace of salvation is received only in the Church through the Holy Spirit as the love of the Father is given with this bond of unity. 'A person does not have the love of God who does not love the unity of the Church or bond of communion, and from this one rightly understands that the Holy Spirit is not received anywhere but in the *Catholica*.'²⁷ Exegeting Mark 16:16,²⁸ Augustine asserts that those who have heard the message of Christ or refused to hear it, and remained outside the bond of communion will be condemned. He accused them of sinful rejection of the Christian faith where grace is found. Thus, Augustine concludes that outside the Church, he can have everything but salvation. He can 'have honour, the sacraments, the gospel, sing alleluia and respond with Amen, he can hold and preach the faith in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but nowhere else than the Catholic Church can he find salvation.'²⁹ Outside of the *ecclesia Catholica* one will be cut off from the Holy Spirit even if they speak in tongues because he does not have the love of God which is poured in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5. 5).

6. Salvific Grace

Augustine's understanding of grace and mediation influenced most of his soteriological doctrines. In all he sees Christ as the God-man and uniquely the mediator.³⁰ 'Man is not mediator without divinity, nor is God mediator without humanity, between the one divinity and one humanity the human divinity and divine humanity of Christ is mediator.'³¹ He admits that the mediator must be in the middle between the two extremes to be united. He is joined to them but distinct from them; between the just and immortal God and the unjust and mortal men there must be one who is just and moral just like God, mortal like men.³² Augustine argues that no one can be liberated without a mediator. He does not attribute salvific good to any other source than Christ and his grace abundant in the

²⁶ Augustine, *ep.* 141. 5 CSEL 44, 238.

²⁷ Augustine, *bapt.* 3. 16. 2. CSEL 51, 212

²⁸ whosoever believes and is baptized will be saved, whosoever does not will be condemned.

²⁹ Augustine, *s. ad. Caes.* 6. CSEL 53, 174-5.

³⁰ Cf. Augustine, *conf.* 10, 43, 68 CCL, 47, 304.

³¹ Augustine *s.* 47, 12. 21. CCL 41, 582.

³² Cf. Augustine, *trin* 4. 3. 6, CCL 50, 167-68.

Church.³³ That is why he authoritatively established that the purpose of the incarnation is the mediation of salvific grace to mankind. He does not separate incarnation from the foundation of the Church and salvific grace, for without the incarnation, the Church will not exist because Christ came in flesh to liberate those who are in darkness. Against Pelagians who held that grace facilitates the use of natural power for moral good but does not confer that capacity upon humans, Augustine argues that precisely because Christ's death is not in vain, the sacraments are not also in vain, and are necessary for salvation. The grace the sacraments mediate are both essential and beyond the capacity of the fallen human nature.

The idea of grace as God's operation in the world and particularly in spiritual beings was the major preoccupation of Augustine's Christian life. In *The Confessions*, Augustine projects this conviction that man created in the image of God has both the intuitive grasp of realities and the capacity to participate in his life of grace. The human soul cannot find any other permanent satisfaction except in God. The elevation of the being of man takes place when the new life of grace and charity is infused into his soul in the Church and through her sacraments. The invisible effect of baptism for instance is centered in the life of grace which it confers on the recipient as a member of the mystical body of Christ. When it happens, the recipient begins to adhere to God by a most pure and holy love. Since God has given out his grace freely, it lies on the power of the human free will to accept the great offer of grace and come to him through the Church. It is upon this conviction that he made that popular statement: 'You made us for Yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.'³⁴

7. *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*

At the core of Augustine's ecclesiological and Christological doctrines is the union of the head and body or bride and bridegroom with the concept of the *totus Christus*-complete Christ. Like Cyprian who fought to restore the unity of the Church, Augustine warned those in danger of separating themselves from the Church or already separated to understand the repercussions of separation. Cyprian ad earlier invoked the Pauline epistle of Ephesians 5:32 on the separatist while asking; 'How can a man who is not with the bride of Christ and in his Church be with Christ?'³⁵ Consequently, the bishop martyr of Carthage concludes that outside the Church there will be no salvation not even with baptism of public confession of the faith under torture or shedding of the blood. Belonging to the *ecclesia Catholica* entails a life in Christ shared with all members of the Church in her visible structural, sacramental and hierarchical status. Augustine established two

³³ Cf. Augustine, *ciu.* 6. 12 CSEL 40/1, 298

³⁴ Augustine, *conf.* 1. 1. 1 CCL 27, 1.

³⁵ Cyprian, *ep.* 52. 1 CSEL 3. 2. 476-77.

fundamental aspects of belonging to the unity or *communio*; *communio catholica* and *communio sacramentorum*. While *communio catholica* is the unity of life in Christ and the visible concord of Christians, *communio sacramentorum* is the bond of peace and grace which is expressed in the sacraments. It is from these Augustinian definitions that the Middle Ages borrowed the definition of a sacrament as ‘a visible sign of an invisible grace’, which abstracts completely from the sacrament as an existential event in which this grace is not merely described or recalled but actually communicated.³⁶

It is important at this juncture to underscore that the most influential period of Augustine’s work on the Church was during his polemic with the Donatists, the African schismatic group that considered themselves true and authentic Christians.³⁷ The group laid sole claim to the true orthodoxy in faith, holiness and sacraments. They see themselves as the true Christians of African Christianity, they refused to associate with others. When his various attempts to reconcile and bring them back to unity failed, Augustine in plain languages recalled the position of an African authority they respect to make them understand the implications of their actions. As a Latin rhetorician, Augustine used ‘a sort of simple poem against the Donatists, to help all people understand that it is only through unity that our relationship with God may be truly fulfilled for all and that peace may grow in the world.’³⁸ Consequently, he invoked the axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus est*.

Augustine gave us a lucid summary of his appeal to the Donatists to return to the ecclesial unity in *Epistle 185* written to a certain Boniface, tribune and count in Africa in 417 AD. The bishop of Hippo writes: ‘Let them not seek the Holy Spirit except in the Body of Christ. They indeed have his sacrament (*sacramentum*) outside the Church, but they do not hold the reality (*rem*) of it within, for it is his sacrament.’³⁹ The Catholic Church alone is the Body of Christ. He is its head and the Saviour of his body. But the enemy of unity has no share in the divine charity. Therefore, he asserts that those who are outside the Church do not have the Holy Spirit. But ‘whoever, then, wishes to have the Holy Spirit must beware of remaining outside the Church; he must beware of pretending to come into it, or, if

³⁶ Cf. Louis Bouyer, *The Church of God; Body of Christ and Temple of the Spirit*, (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2011), 26.

³⁷ Cf. Keenan, M. Emily, *The Life and Time of St. Augustine as Revealed in His Letters* (Washington D C, Catholic University of America Press 1935), 135.

³⁸ Benedict XVI, *The Fathers*, (Huntington Indiana, Sunday Visitors 2008), 195.

³⁹ Parsons Wilfrid SND. (trans.) *Saint Augustine Letters IV* (Washington D. C, Catholic University of America Press 1955), 189-90.

he has made such a pretended entry, he must beware of persisting in his pretense, so that he may truly grow into the tree of life.⁴⁰

In his book *On the Unity of the Church*, Cyprian in an admonitory warning to the already baptized on the verge of drifting away from the unity established that, the spouse of Christ cannot be defiled because she is uncorrupted and chaste. She knows one home, and with chaste modesty, she guards the sanctity of one couch. She keeps us for God. She assigns the children whom she has created to the kingdom. 'Whoever is separated from the Church and is joined with an adulteress is separated from the promises of the Church, nor will he who has abandoned the Church arrive at the reward of Christ.... He cannot have God as a father who does not have the Church as a mother. If whoever was outside the ark of Noah was able to escape, he too who is outside the Church escapes.'⁴¹ With these warnings, Cyprian judged the North African Christians who preferred to remain outside the Church guilty of heresy and schism based on their stubbornness on matters concerning rebaptism.

Precisely because Augustine could not accept Donatist sectarianism, and never discarded the African ecclesiological tradition inherited from Cyprian in the third century he reinterpreted it in his way. Since Donatists also held tenaciously to the same principle of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus est*, Augustine was not in doubt that that the understood the implications of remaining outside the vessel of salvation prefigured in Noah's ark. They were convinced that the purpose of the terrestrial Church is to convey the pilgrim Church to the celestial Church. It was this unilateral conviction of the mission of the Church that led to the ex-communication and counter-excommunication in the North African Church.

The division in the North African Church had occurred not because of any profound disagreement in doctrine but because of rival claims of two groups of bishops to have lived up to the idea of the bishop's office exemplified by Cyprian. Consequently, it will be right to state that, 'the hero of both groups of African Christians – Catholics and Donatists – was a bishop: Cyprian of Carthage.'⁴² It was evident in his teaching that not only is salvation the reason for the Church's existence, but it is also the ultimate reason for our existence, our end, goal, point, purpose, hope and final cause, *summum bonum*, meaning.⁴³

⁴⁰ Parsons Wilfrid SND. (trans.) *Saint Augustine Letters* IV (Washington D. C, Catholic University of America Press, 1955), 189-90

⁴¹ Cyprian, *The Unity of the Catholic Church* 6, ACW 25. 48-49

⁴² Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo, A Biography*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2000), 198.

⁴³ Cf. Peter Kereft, & Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, (Illinois, IVP Academic, 1994), 316.

Flowing his controversy with the Donatists, Augustine of Hippo unequivocally ratified the doctrine of *extra ecclesiam salus non est* - no salvation outside the Church. With that he set a new standard for other fathers and councils. For instance Fulgentius of Rupe followed his footsteps but mentioned those who will be separated from salvation to include not only paganism but also all Jews and all heretics and schismatics who die outside the Catholic Church. 'They will go to the eternal fire that was prepared for the devil and his angels.'⁴⁴ The same was replicated at the council of Florence in 1442 with the bull *Cantate Domino*. The words of *bullae unionis* suggests that there was an outright denial of salvation for the unbaptized. It says; 'we firmly believe, professes and preach that none of those who are outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans but also Jews or heretics and schismatics can become partakers of eternal life, but they will go to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angel (Mt 25:41), unless before the end of their life, they are joined to her.'⁴⁵

The snug posture we can evoke from Augustine is that if you want to have part in the authentic Church, the person must remain in orthodoxy, and live in the sanctity of the Church. But if one is separated from the *communio*, the person must re-enter into *communio* which is unceasingly extending itself among all the nations of the earth. If one obstinately clings to one's particularism to safeguard the holiness of the true Church, the person will fall into heresy and sacrilege against the universal plan of God and the members of Christ and will remain separated from the fountain of life.⁴⁶

8. Inculpable Ignorance of the Gospel

Augustine was a *defensore civitatis* or *patronus plebis* like many other bishops of his era. They were officially charged with protecting and alleviating the suffering of the poor especially the slaves. It was the miserable condition of the slaves he encountered as *patronus plebis* that moved him to advance more for their liberty in the society.⁴⁷ He was particularly interested in cases of children who have been unlawfully pressed into servitude without any application of the often-lethal punishments to salvers as required by the legislation at that time. Since the slaves themselves do not have sufficient knowledge of the law, money and powers to seek for justice, Augustine appealed to African bishop Alypius and other legal experts to assist him in getting a rescript from the emperor.

⁴⁴ Fulgentius, *fide ad Petrum* 38.79, PL 65, 704.

⁴⁵ Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 1351.

⁴⁶Cf. DeSimone J. Russel, "Mystery of Communion: St Augustine on the Church" in *Augustinian Series*, (vol. 10, 1978), 149.

⁴⁷ Cf. Augustine, *Regis. Carth. can* 75, CCL149, 202.

The bishop of Hippo had various cases in his tribunal where a person's legal and social status was unclear either from the position of terms of slave acquisition or tenure of services to their masters. Through his episcopal legal efforts, he was able to reduce the suffering inherent in slavery, and subsequently witness to their liberation is in line with a process of *manumissio in ecclesia*.⁴⁸ The ecclesial manumission allows each bishop to witness the declaration in which the slave owner sets free one or more slaves, and thereafter become automatically become Roman citizens. It is this ecclesial manumission that disposed him to understand that the needs of the slaves are not only socio-economic but also spiritual. He discovered as well that the freed slaves were often abandoned to poverty and starvation by their masters whom they hitherto depended upon for everything. Consequently, most of them entered the monasteries to avert such miserable conditions and eventual starvation to death.⁴⁹

Augustine was convinced that all had heard the gospel of Christ before his involvement in *manumissio ecclesia*. He taught that those who refused to become part of the Church willfully wanted to remain outside the body of Christ. So, they have deliberately denied themselves the grace of salvation which the true religion or Catholic Church alone offers as the bride of Christ. Nonetheless with the sudden discovery of some African slaves in Rome, his attitude changed. It was clear to him that there are those who do not willfully separate themselves from the Church. The idea of inculpable and invincible ignorance of Christ and the gospel among some tribes in the world became evident to him. In *Epistulae* 199, he admits that some people have not heard the gospel especially in Africa. He categorically states 'I have established by certain proofs that what Your Reverence thinks was already accomplished by the apostles is not the case. For there are among us, this is in Africa, countless barbarian nations where the gospel has not yet been preached, it is easy for us to learn every day from those who are taken captive from them and are now among the slaves of the Romans....'⁵⁰ Again, while writing to a certain bishop, Augustine drew his attention to certain areas of the world that had not been explored, and pointed out the impossibility of the gospel reaching all nations at that time. Consequently, he asserts that beyond Africa some other places in the world had not been explored and such people will not be denied the grace of salvation. 'Those who are further inland and are not under Roman power that have no contact with the Christian religion in any of their people, and yet it is by no means correct to say that God's promise does not pertain to them.'⁵¹

⁴⁸ Cf. Robert Dodaro, 'Church and State' *Augustine Through the Ages; An Encyclopedia*, Allan D. Fitzgerald (ed.), (Grand Rapids, W. B. Eerdmans 2009), 178.

⁴⁹ Cf. Augustine, s. 159. 5 ; 302. 5 ; en Ps. 36. 1. 3. 7 ; CCL 38, 385. *Op Mon.* 22. 25, en Ps. 103. 3. 16 CCL 39, 1453.

⁵⁰ Augustine, *ep.* 199. 12. 46 CSEL 57, 284 – 85.

⁵¹ Augustine, *ep.* 199. 12. 46 CSEL 57, 284 – 85

The bishop of Hippo assured his friend in their correspondence that the end of the world was not imminent, and stated at the same time that God cannot unjustly condemn those who are not baptized if they die in that state because they do not have the privilege to hear the gospel. He relaxed his earlier submissions from absolute pessimism to some form of optimism. We can deduce from his letters that the people will be saved based on inculpable ignorance but not a willful refusal to either enter or remain in the Church. Those outside the Church out of ignorance as long as they obey their consciences and do what is good, holy, and die in that state, they will be saved.

However, Augustine was adamant at his stand that if God has chosen to save no one from the wretchedness of *massa damanationis*, his judgement will be just because the man had placed himself in this precarious condition.⁵² He concludes that whoever is saved is saved by the mercy of God who redeemed us by the blood of his son.⁵³ Hence, this grace of Christ without which neither infants nor adults can be saved is not given by merit, but it is a gift, for this reason, it is called grace.⁵⁴ Augustine teaches unequivocally especially in his earlier writings that God wills the salvation of all men in accordance with the patent meaning of the words of St Paul (1 Tim. 2:4). He does not uniformly interpret the classical Pauline text, and seems especially in his later years, to limit or qualify the universal salvific will expressed in it.⁵⁵

From all indications, Augustine did not completely withhold the grace of salvation to those who through no fault of theirs do not know the gospel as developed later in the documents of Vatican II's especially in *Lumen Gentium* 16.⁵⁶ It is evident from our presentation that his hitherto affirmation of the Cyprianic axiom; *salus extra ecclesiam non est* has now been greatly qualified even though he never applied the terminology inculpable ignorance in any of his works. But we have been able establish his optimistic based on the gift of grace and mercy of God which no one deserves.

9. Conclusion

The underlying factor for Augustine's optimism for the salvation of non-Christians is the mercy of God. Precisely because God alone can justifiably condemn all because none is without sin; original or self-inflicted. In Adam, the entire mass incurred the

⁵² Cf. Augustine, *De correptione et gratia*. 10. 28 PL 44, 933.

⁵³ Cf. Augustine, *s. 22. 9. 9. PL 38, 153*

⁵⁴ Augustine, *nat. et grat. 4. 5 PL 44, 249.*

⁵⁵ Cf. Stanislaus J. Grabowski, *The Church: An Introduction to the Theology of St. Augustine*, (St. Louis, B. Herder Book, 1957). p. 614.

⁵⁶ '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 conscience.'

wrath of God and deserved to be condemned to death. So, if anyone is spared, they are not just by their faith and baptism in Christ alone but by the mercy of God. Therefore, whatever God wills must necessarily happen as he wills it. It would be unjust to accuse Augustine of the absolute denial of the grace of salvation to all outside the Church after the incarnation and foundation of the Church. He believes in the efficacious grace of God which cannot be resisted, and those to whom it is given will be infallibly brought to the haven of salvation.

The *ecclesia ab Abel* answered the questions of those who pre-existed the Church and were saved by their remote faith in Christ, the eternal Word. By implication, those of them who lived virtuous and holy lives were saved through Christ. Recall that Augustine does not teach completely that all who are in the Church will be saved. He rather considered all those who are the true members of the pilgrim Church united to Christ by the life of grace, living in hope and holiness as materials for the future eschatological Church. The sinners in the Church although form members by the virtue of the profession of the same faith and the communion of the same sacraments, religious observances are like dead members in the body of Christ.⁵⁷ If they do not repent before they die, they will not be saved. The bishop of Hippo entertained zero possibility salvation for bad Christians who resent fraternal correction and repentance. Perseverance in faith and charity is key factor Augustine stressed as the necessary condition for obtaining salvation in the Church. He holds that if a person does not preserve in charity while in the Church, he is not be saved. Precisely because the person is in the bosom of the Church but only bodily and not with his heart.⁵⁸ Therefore, some people in the Church will not be saved based on their *modus operandi*. Flowing from this argument, it will be wrong to narrow Augustine position on salvation to imply that once one is a member of the *ecclesia communio* that salvation is guaranteed.

Finally, we have to admit without any fear of contradiction that Augustine position on matters of salvation is that it is by the grace and mercy of God. However, if someone intentionally finds himself outside the Church like the Donatists, the person will have himself to blame for losing the grace of salvation. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council resonating Augustine states:

This Sacred Council wishes to turn its attention firstly to the Catholic faithful. Basing itself upon Sacred Scripture and Tradition, it teaches that the Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is necessary for salvation. Christ, present to us in His Body, which is the Church, is the one Mediator and the unique way of salvation. In explicit terms He Himself affirmed the necessity of faith and baptism and thereby affirmed also the necessity of the Church, for through baptism as through a door men enter the Church. Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Cf. Augustine, *en Ps.* 61. 6 PL 36, 733.

⁵⁸ Cf. Augustine, *bapt. C. Don.* 5. 28, 39, PL 43, 197.

⁵⁹ L G 14.