

"The Smallest Peg"

"There can be no more fatal mistake than to soften, liberalize, or latitudinize this terrible dogma, 'Out of the Church there is no salvation'...If we wish to convert Protestants and infidels we must preach in all its rigor the naked dogma. Give them the smallest peg, or what appears so, not to you, but to them; - the smallest peg on which to hang a hope of salvation without being in or actually reconciled to the Church by the sacrament of penance, and all the arguments you can address to them to prove the necessity of being in the Church in order to be saved will have no more effect on them than rain on a duck's back."

Orestes Brownson¹

I can imagine there must have been some panic in chanceries around the world when *Dominus Jesus*, the declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was first released. I can see the bishops and their aids racing through this some 20 page document in growing alarm, until finally heaving a sigh of relief. At almost the very end, they found what they were looking for – "the smallest peg." Here it is: "For those who are not formally and visibly members of the Church, 'salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church, but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. The grace comes from Christ; it is the result of his sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit.'⁸¹ It has a relationship with the Church, which 'according to the plan of the Father, has her origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit'⁸²." ²

The various dioceses then released their own somewhat pompous statements congratulating Rome on a fine document: It is good and proper to remind ourselves, they said, that the Catholic Church is indeed necessary for salvation, but of course this does not mean that Protestants and Jews must become Catholics in order to be saved. Then follows a paraphrase on the "smallest peg." An unsigned editorial in the *The Pilot*, the official journal of the Boston Archdiocese, showed their initial fear and horror of the Declaration, in a vicious smear job on Father Feeney entitled, "**Shades of Father Feeney??**", which reads: "If misread and misunderstood the latest theological position paper from Rome will be falsely portrayed as confirmation that the late Father Leonard Feeney was right - his anti-Protestant and anti-Semitic ravings on Boston common accurately reflected the teachings of the Church." ³

Father Feeney's "anti-Protestant ravings" on Boston Common were identical to those

of Orestes Brownson one hundred years previously, which I have cited above. Brownson's "anti-Protestant ravings" were submitted to and approved by Bishop Fitzpatrick, they were endorsed by all the bishops in attendance at the Seventh Provincial Council of Baltimore, and when Bishop Fitzpatrick presented Pope Pius IX, now Bl. Pius IX, with several issues of his *Review*, the Holy Father sent Brownson a warm letter of thanks and encouragement for his defense of the Church and the Holy See. Father Feeney's "anti-Semitic ravings" were his Irish reaction to scurrilous statements from the *Talmud* shouted by hecklers, mostly gangs of young Harvard Jews, on Boston Common. "He's a bastard!" "He's a *mamser*!." A "mamser" is the child of a prostitute! I suppose the *Pilot* editor would make defending Our Lord and Our Lady from the obscenities of the *Talmud* anti-Semitic. I am sure the Jews would if they could. *The Pilot* continues:

"Feeney insisted that when we get to heaven, the only ones there will be Catholics with valid baptismal certificates, properly signed and sealed by their local pastor. Everybody else will be... elsewhere." ⁴ The truth couldn't be more opposite. During the last ten or fifteen years of his life, Father Feeney lived in Still River, Massachusetts, which, when we first moved there, was a small farming community. Father Feeney quickly made friends with our new Yankee neighbors. He used to visit them regularly and take them out for little excursions in his car. The only thing he had on his mind with everyone he met was to make him or her a Catholic. His approach was always the same; he would teach them to say the Hail Mary, and from then on it was only a matter of time before they came into the Church. Most of these old Yankees were baptized, but there were a few Unitarians who were baptized at the kitchen sink. Because Father Feeney knew what a problem this would be for their families and friends, they were buried from the local "Congo" or "Uni" church, and Father Feeney would say a private Mass of the Dead for them in our own chapel.

Believe it or not, the citation from Orestes Brownson, "Answer to Objections" with which I began this paper, was also a response to another unnamed editor of the *Boston Pilot* who had criticized Brownson for his strictly literal interpretation of *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. Wouldn't you love to hear Brownson's reaction to this current lightweight!

But it wasn't just Boston that thought, **Father Feeney!**, but Rome as well. Here is the official footnote for the passage I am calling "the smallest peg":

"(82) SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree *Ad gentes*, 2. The famous formula *extra Ecclesiam nullus omnino salvatur* is to be interpreted in this sense (cf. *FOURTH LATERAN COUNCIL*, Cap. 1. *De fide catholica*: DS 802. Cf. Also the *Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston*: DS 3866-3872." ⁵

This *de fide definita* Decree from the Fourth Lateran Council reads: "Indeed, there is but one universal Church of the faithful outside of which no one at all is saved." Imagine telling the Fathers of the Fourth Lateran Council that this crystal clear affirmation, and also St. Cyprian's "no salvation outside the Church," is to be "interpreted" in the sense of the

"smallest peg": "For those who are not formally and visibly members of the Church, ' salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church, but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation.'" This is an affront to common sense, and is against reason. Imagine the Church having gotten it wrong for all those centuries, and finally getting it right in our own day! It is also completely against St. Vincent of Lerin' s famous rule for determining what is of the faith, and what is not: *Quod ubique, quod semper, et quod ab omnibus*. : "Moreover in the Church itself, every possible care must be taken to hold fast to that faith which has been believed, *everywhere, always, and by everyone.*"⁶

The *Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston* condemning Father Feeney mentioned above states:

"12. The same in its own degree must be asserted of the Church, in so far as she is the general help to salvation. Therefore, that one may obtain eternal salvation, it is not always required that he be incorporated into the Church actually as a member, but it is necessary that at least he be united to her by desire and longing.

"13. However, this desire need not always be explicit, as it is in catechumens; but when a person is involved in invincible ignorance, God accepts also an implicit desire, so called because it is included in that good disposition of soul whereby a person wishes his will to be conformed to the will of God."

This statement condemning Father Feeney would also have condemned Orestes Brownson, because their positions on "no salvation outside the Church" are identical. Again imagine telling the Fathers of the Fourth Lateran and St. Cyprian, that this statement is an "interpretation" of their beautiful confessions of the Faith! Again imagine the Church having gotten it wrong all these centuries through Orestes Brownson' s time, and finally getting it right in Father Feeney' s day!

The addition of "the smallest peg" to *Dominus Jesus* guarantees that the ecumenical movement which is supposed to bring Protestants and Jews into the Church, "will have no more effect on them than rain on a duck' s back."

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References

1 "Answer to Objections," *Brownso' s Quarterly Review* (July 1874), pp.413,414.

- 2 Declaration "*Dominus Jesus*" On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/arc_con_ffaith_doc_20000806_dominus-jesus_en.htm 9/7/00, p.12.
- 3 *The Pilot*, September 8, 2000, p.12.
- 4 *The Pilot*, p.12.
- 5 *Dominus Jesus*, p.18.
- 6 St. Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitoria*, PL 50:637.