

A young Catholic friend of mine has Jewish grandparents. His mother was a Jew who became a Catholic. His sister, who grew up Catholic, has since joined another Christian church. My friend said one day, "My sister believes if you want to be saved, you have to accept Jesus and be baptized – no exceptions." She used today's gospel as part of her argument. "Those who believe in the only Son of God will not be condemned, but those who do not believe have already been condemned, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God." My friend said, "My sister has been trying to convince our Jewish grandparents that they have to believe in Jesus or else our family will not be together in heaven." He was disturbed by this argument and wanted to know, "Does the Catholic Church teach the same thing?"

The Catholic Church today does not hold the opinion that only the baptized can be saved. One of the documents of Vatican II said this: Salvation is possible for "those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do God's will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience" (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church 15*). Baptism is our entrance into the life of sanctifying grace. That's why we encourage it for everyone, including infants. But people who are not baptized may still be saved if they try to live a good life.

At almost every mass we pray for those who do not believe. For example, in the eucharistic prayer I'll use today, we pray these words: "Welcome into your kingdom our departed brothers and sisters, and all who have left this world in your friendship." We pray first for our deceased brothers and sisters in the Christian community. Then we pray for those who have left this world in God's friendship: everyone else who tried to live a good life. In another text we pray, "Remember those who have died in the peace of Christ and all the dead whose faith is known to you alone." Our Church does not give up on those who have not been baptized.

In today's gospel, Jesus does say that those who do not believe are already condemned. But he may be saying – literally – that life without him is hell. Our impolite vernacular expression captures it quite accurately. Those who do not believe lack some of the joys of life because they do not know Christ.

On Trinity Sunday we remember that God sent the Son into the world not to condemn it, but that the world might be saved through him. God expects us to bring the gospel to as many people as we can. But if they refuse it, God can still save those who lead a good life in ways we do not fully understand.