

In The School of Mary

(Papal documents condensed by Deacon William Wagner)

First Published in the St. Bartholomew Bulletin: November 02, 2003

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

Declaration “*Dominus Jesus*”: On the Uniqueness and Universality of Salvation in Jesus Christ and the Church

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith sees that the Church’s missionary proclamation is being endangered today by certain relativistic theories, which seek to justify religious pluralism. Among the critical truths being called into question are for example the completeness of the revelation of Christ, the personal unity of the Eternal Word (Second Person of the Trinity) and Jesus of Nazareth, the uniqueness and universality (i.e. touching everyone) of the salvation of Christ, the universal mediation of the Church and the subsistence of the one Church of Christ in the Catholic Church.

The roots of these problems are grounded in, among others, certain relativistic attitudes toward truth itself (i.e. my truth doesn’t necessarily have to be your truth), a subjective attitude which allows for reason to be the only source of knowledge, an uncritical absorption and gathering together of philosophical and theological ideas without regard for consistency, coherence or compatibility with Christian truth. A final problem that surely looms large is the tendency to read and to interpret Sacred Scripture outside the Tradition (apostolic truths handed down) and Magisterium (teaching office) of the Church.

It is towards these concerns that the Congregation will now direct its attention while I, for my part, will attempt to condense its arguments.

Chpt. I, Fullness and Definitiveness of the Revelation of Jesus Christ

The first issue to be confronted concerns the complete and definitive nature of the revelation of Jesus Christ. As *Dominus Jesus* proclaims, “It must be firmly believed that in the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, ...the full revelation of the divine truth is given. ...For in Christ the whole fullness of the divinity dwells in bodily form.” It is in the very life, death, and resurrection of Christ himself, that his work of revelation is completed, perfected and confirmed with divine testimony.

The Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* as well asks once again that the Church assume its proper task of announcing the Gospel as the fullness of truth. The Church must hold that in Christ God has fully revealed himself and as a result it cannot do other than proclaim the Gospel as such.

It is therefore contrary to the Faith to maintain that the revelation given by Christ is in some way limited, incomplete and imperfect; and that his work of revelation would, in effect, be merely complementary to the revelation found in other faiths. We cannot disavow nor ignore the fact that the limited, historical nature of Jesus is conjoined to the divinity in the Person of the Incarnate Word. He is “true God and true man.” Again as the Congregation states, “The truth about God is not abolished or reduced because it is spoken in human language; rather it is unique, full, and complete, *because he who speaks and acts is the Incarnate Son of God.*”

As St. Paul tells us in various of his letters, the proper response to God’s revelation is the obedience of faith. Faith, first of all a gift of God’s grace, is a personal adherence to “the God who reveals” and to “the truth which he reveals.” We do this because of the trust we have in him who speaks. Hence we must believe in no one but God: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“For this reason,” *Dominus Jesus* maintains that, “the distinction between *theological faith* and *belief* in other religions must be firmly held.” Christian theological faith is a grace allowing us to penetrate the mystery so that it may be understood in a way that it makes sense. Belief, held within other religions, is the sum of human wisdom acted upon in relationship to God. Keeping this distinction in mind, the Congregation reminds us that belief within other religions, over and against theological faith, is “religious experience still in search of the absolute truth and still lacking assent to God who reveals himself.”

And finally, the Church has held since apostolic times those writings that it has designated as *inspired texts* (i.e. inspired by the Holy Spirit). It is these books that as our document states, “firmly, faithfully, and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures.” None the less, since God wishes to call all peoples to himself in Christ, the Second Vatican Council did recognize that in the

customs, precepts, and teachings of the other religions there is reflected “that ray of truth which enlightens all men” and is a derived source of spiritual nourishment in the mystery of Christ.

Chpt. II, The Incarnate Logos and the Holy Spirit in the Work of Salvation

It is essential to the faith that we believe in the oneness of the economy of salvation willed by the One and Triune God. At the level of creation and redemption is the Incarnate Word, the mediator of divine grace. This mystery of Christ is already present in the eternal choice of God; and from thence even unto the parousia (the second coming). Paul, the Apostle, will say, “He (the Father) chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.” (Eph 1:4) Jesus Christ is the mediator and universal redeemer whose redemptive sacrifice is an integral part of his work of salvation.

Salvation must always be understood as an action of the Trinity. The Second Vatican Council closely linked the mystery of Christ from the beginning with that of the Spirit. The building up of the Church over the centuries is an action of Christ in communion with his Spirit.

Further, the work of salvation effected by Christ with and through his Spirit extends beyond the visible boundaries of the Church to all humanity. There is a clear connection between the Incarnate Word and the Spirit who makes effective this work of salvation in all peoples called by God to a single goal. In the Spirit, the Son is the giver of life to all.

The Magisterium of the Church firmly and clearly teaches the oneness of the economy of salvation. The Risen Christ through the strength of his Spirit is even now at work in human hearts. The Spirit is therefore not an alternative to Christ. Whatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts in the history and culture of peoples is in effect a preparation for the Gospel. *Dominus Jesus* clearly reaffirms in concluding this chapter, “No one, therefore, can enter into communion with God except through Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit.”

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Chpt. III, Unicity and Universality of the Salvific Mystery of Jesus Christ.

The very title of this chapter presents a problem of clarity in its translation from Latin to English. In ordinary English what is being said is that we must firmly believe as a truth of the Catholic faith that “*God wills the salvation of each and every individual, past, present, and future, and that it is offered and accomplished once for all through the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son of God.*” In saying this, the Church does not deny the positive elements in other religious experiences outside Christianity. However, they are always seen as a “manifold cooperation” in this one, primary source that flows from the unique mediation of Christ. *Dominus Jesus* says that these experiences acquire their meaning and value only from Christ’s own mediation and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to his. In making such an assertion the Catholic faith is merely being faithful to revelation itself.

The New Testament speaks very clearly: “There is salvation in no one else (Christ), for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) Further in 1 Timothy we read, “God ... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is *one God*; there is *one mediator* between God and men, the man, Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a *ransom for all.*” (1 Tim 2:4-6) There are other

references, of course, too numerous to mention here. These are offered as two significant examples of God's universal will for the salvation of all and the sole mediation of Jesus Christ.

From the very earliest days of Christianity, the community of believers recognized in Jesus a salvation which he alone as Son of God received from the Father and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, bestows on all humanity and individually on every person. Remaining consistent with that Tradition our document says, "While belonging to human history, he (Christ) remains history's center and goal." For it was Jesus himself who said, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (Rev. 22:13)

Chpt. IV. Unicity and Unity of the Church

The Lord in establishing the Church, established her as a mystery of salvation in which he himself is in the Church and the Church is in him. *Dominus Jesus* says, "Just as there is one Christ, so there exists a single body of Christ, a single Bride of Christ: *a single Catholic and apostolic Church.*"

Again the document emphasizes, "The Catholic faithful *are required to profess* that there is an historical continuity, rooted in the apostolic succession, between the Church founded by Christ and the Catholic Church today. This is the single Church of Christ, which our Saviour, after his resurrection, entrusted to Peter's pastoral care."

Our document is at pains to stress that this singular Church completely *subsists in* only the Catholic Church governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him. At the same time it affirms that many elements of sanctification and truth nevertheless can be found outside her. However, these other Churches and ecclesial communities derive their effectiveness from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church. Through their Baptism members of these other communities are incorporated into Christ and as a result are in a certain, although imperfect, communion with the Church.

In consequence, the Christian faithful are not permitted to believe that the Church of Christ is nothing more than a divided yet in some way conjoined collection of Church communities. Nor may they believe that the Church founded by Christ nowhere really exists today but that we are all striving toward that oneness. *Dominus Jesus* insists that this given fullness, in fact, already exists in the Catholic Church while in some incomplete way in other ecclesial communities as well.

Chpt VI: The Church and the Other Religions in Relation to Salvation

Less we distort in the least way what *Dominus Jesus*, reiterating the words of the the Second Vatican Council, teaches in this regard, it must be stated almost without summarization what we as Catholics believe namely: that "the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation; the one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church. He himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and baptism (Mk 16:16; Jn 3:5), and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through baptism as through a door." "...It is necessary to keep these two truths together, namely, the possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind and the necessity of the Church for this salvation." (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paras. 846-847)

Mysteriously, the grace of salvation is available to every human being through Christ and his Church while yet not being formally part of the Church. This grace comes from Christ, communicated through the Holy Spirit. At the same time this grace is related to the Church which in the plan of the Father has her origin in the very mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit."

The way in which non-Christian individuals experience salvation is, in the words of Vatican II, known to the Father alone. It is for theologians to explore in ways ever more understandable how this may be. Nevertheless, it remains clear that it would be an error to assert that the Church is merely one way of salvation alongside other religions seen as complementary to the Church or substantially equivalent to her.

Certainly various religious traditions contain and offer elements which come from God. Indeed they may assume a role of preparation for the Gospel prompting the human heart to be open to God's action within. On the other hand, some superstitions or errors surely may be obstacles to salvation as well.

Dominus Jesus is very clear about certain things. It states, "With the coming of the Savior Jesus Christ, God has willed that the Church founded by him be the instrument for the salvation of all humanity." While the Church respects the various religions of the world, it does rule out a relativistic indifferentism, which says "one religion is as good as another". Notwithstanding the possibility of persons receiving grace through these other religions, nevertheless they still remain in the documents words, "gravely deficient" as opposed to the Church which has "the fullness of the means of salvation." It is to be remembered, however, that the lofty status enjoyed by members of the Church is not due to their own merit but to God's grace. In failing to respond to this "exalted condition", they thereby will be held to a more strict account.

Again, God desires all to be saved through knowledge of the truth. Equality in inter-religious dialogue refers to the dignity of individuals not to quality of doctrine; nor to the position of Jesus Christ, God himself made man, in relation to the founders of other religions. In view of this, the Church is obligated unfailingly to proclaim to all people the truth revealed by the Lord while announcing the necessity of conversion to Jesus Christ and adherence to the Church through Baptism. *Dominus Jesus* is clear as to the charge laid at the feet of the Church.