

**The one and only Church: subsisting in the Catholic Church and necessary for salvation**

Last month we looked at the first half of the Declaration *Dominus Iesus [DI]*, promulgated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under St John Paul II 25 years ago this year. It reaffirmed that Jesus Christ, and he alone, is the Incarnate Word, definitive and complete Revelation, the one and universal Saviour of the world.

The second half of the Declaration focuses on the uniqueness of *the Church* – a theme we have already looked at in recent times, but that *Dominus Iesus* treats in its own way. It affirms: ‘The Lord Jesus, the only Saviour, did not only establish a simple community of disciples, but constituted the Church as a *salvific mystery*: he himself is in the Church and the Church is in him...’

‘Therefore, in connection with the unicity and universality of the salvific mediation of Jesus Christ, the unicity of the Church founded by him must be *firmly believed* as a truth of Catholic faith. 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”. (DS 48. Cf. Boniface VIII, *Unam Sanctam* (DS 870-72); Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (1964) 8 (DS 4118-21).)’ (DI 16)

It declares: ‘The promises of the Lord that he would not abandon his Church (cf. *Mt* 16:18; 28:20) and that he would guide her by his Spirit (cf. *Jn* 16:13) mean, according to Catholic faith, that the unicity and the unity of the Church – like everything that belongs to the Church’s integrity – will never be lacking.’ (DI 16)

Here *Dominus Iesus* refers to the passage in Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism in which we find the stirring proclamation: ‘When the obstacles to perfect ecclesiastical communion have been gradually overcome, all Christians will at last, in a common celebration of the Eucharist, be gathered into the one and only Church in that unity which Christ bestowed on His Church from the beginning. We believe that this unity subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time.’ (*Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964) 4)

The Church’s greatness is God’s doing, not ours, so it is neither necessary nor right to downplay her divine aspects out of some supposed ‘humility’. The *Catechism* quotes Christians of the first centuries in saying that ‘The world was created for the sake of the Church... The Church is the goal of all things... Just as God’s will is creation and is called “the world,” so his intention is the salvation of men, and it is called “the Church.”’ (n. 760) So to sideline the Church runs counter to the very meaning of creation and the divine destiny of humanity.

Catholics, *Dominus Iesus* continues, ‘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’. (DI 16) It explains the teaching of Vatican II that Christ’s one and only Church ‘subsists in’ the Catholic Church. (*Lumen Gentium* 8) That is, the Church of Christ continues to exist *fully* only in the Catholic Church, although many *elements* of sanctification and truth can still be found (without this fullness) in the non-Catholic Churches and ecclesial communities. But ‘it needs to be stated that [these derive their power] “from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church”.’ (DI 16, quoting Vatican II, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* 3)

*Dominus Iesus* next speaks of the necessary relationship between the Church and the Kingdom. ‘The mission of the Church is “to proclaim and establish among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and she is on earth, the seed and the beginning of that kingdom”.’ (DI 18, quoting

*Lumen Gentium* 5) True, Christ and the Holy Spirit act beyond the Church's boundaries. The kingdom of God, it affirms, even in its phase in the present world, is not *identified* 'with the Church in her visible and social reality'. Yet neither can the kingdom of God be *detached* from Christ or the Church. Theories that 'deny the unicity of the relationship which Christ and the Church have with the kingdom of God', *Dominus Iesus* asserts, are 'contrary to Catholic faith'. (DI 19)

The final chapter of *Dominus Iesus* concerns 'the Church and the other religions in relation to salvation' (a theme we have looked at previously). The Declaration affirms: 'Above all else, it must be *firmly believed* that "the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation".' (DI 20, quoting Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 14)

But it also quotes St John Paul II that: 'it is necessary to keep these two truths together, namely, the real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind and the necessity of the Church for this salvation'. (*Redemptoris missio* 9) The Church, it says, 'has, in God's plan, an indispensable relationship with the salvation of every human being.' (DI 20) 'It would be contrary to the faith to consider the Church as *one way* of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions...' (DI 21)

True, 'the various religious traditions contain and offer religious elements which come from God... part of what the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures, and religions.' Some prayers and rituals of other religions, the Declaration says, may be a 'preparation for the Gospel' – occasions when 'the human heart is prompted to be open to the action of God.' (DI 21)

But it also states, 'it cannot be overlooked that other rituals, insofar as they depend on superstitions or other errors, constitute an obstacle to salvation.' (DI 21) Here it references the words of St Paul: 'What pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons.' (1 Cor 10:20) So: we see how in the various religions there exist opposite aspects – both good and evil. This world is a battleground.

*Dominus Iesus* warns: 'If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation.' (DI 22, referring to Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis* (DS 3821))

To be genuine, inter-religious dialogue presupposes a certain equality between the dialogue partners. But as *Dominus Iesus* explains, this refers to the equal *personal dignity* of the participants, not to equality of doctrinal content, 'nor even less to the position of Jesus Christ – who is God himself made man – in relation to the founders of the other religions.' (DI 22)

Dialogue is a necessary aspect of the Church's mission. Even so, the Declaration affirms, the Church must be *primarily* committed 'to proclaiming to all people the truth definitively revealed by the Lord, and to announcing the necessity of conversion to Jesus Christ and of adherence to the Church through Baptism and the other sacraments, in order to participate fully in communion with God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.' (DI 22)

In its Conclusion, *Dominus Iesus* refers again to Vatican II, stating: 'In treating the question of the true religion, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council taught: "We believe that this one true religion continues to exist [*subsistere*] in the Catholic and Apostolic Church, to which the Lord Jesus entrusted the task of spreading it among all people...Especially in those things that concern God and his Church, all persons are required to seek the truth, and when they come to know it, to embrace it and hold fast to it". (Declaration on Religious Liberty *Dignitatis Humanae* 1)' (DI 23)