

DOMINUS JESUS AND VATICAN RETRENCHMENT

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The Vatican declaration, *Dominus Jesus* released on Tuesday, September 5, 2000, reaffirms the traditional Catholic view expressed by Pope Boniface VIII in his Bull, “*Unam Sanctam*” (A. D. 1302): “There is one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and that outside this Church there is neither salvation nor remission of sins.” This view was substantially modified at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) which formulated the concept, especially in the Constitution of the Church, that salvation is found not only inside the Catholic Church but also outside its fold, by all who live according to their conscience.

This broader view of various avenues to salvation fostered a policy of benign tolerance toward non-Catholics. Protestants, for example, were rehabilitated from heretics, to “separate brethren,” and to brothers and sisters in Christ. Similarly, members of world religions are now treated with openness and respect.

In the thinking of Vatican conservatives, the policy of benign tolerance toward non-Catholics inaugurated by Vatican II, may have gone too far. It may have weakened the alleged unicity and primacy of the Catholic Church. This concern is expressed in an official four page “note” by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the powerful Prefect of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The “Note,” approved by Pope John Paul II on June 9, explains that “when the expression ‘sister churches’ is used in the proper sense, the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Universal Church is not [meant to be] sister but ‘mother’ of all particular churches. This is not merely a question of terminology, but above all of respecting a basic truth of the Catholic faith: that of the unicity of the Church of Jesus Christ. In fact, there is a single Church.”

In other words, it is a fundamental Roman Catholic belief that there is only one true church that possesses the means of salvation and such a church is the Roman Catholic Church. Any salvation obtainable through other churches, ultimately derives from “the fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church.”

This fundamental truth is reiterated more fully in the 16-page declaration *Dominus Jesus*, which is largely a reprimand to liberal Catholic theologians who “have argued that all religions may be equally valid ways of salvation.” Contrary to the thinking of some people, the Catholic Church is not a monolithic organization, where all of its theologians uphold the fundamental Catholic dogmas. There is much dissent within the Catholic Church. Some of my Jesuit professors at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, Italy, openly questioned in class such important dogmas as papal infallibility and transubstantiation.

The declaration is concerned about “the rapid spread of the relativistic and pluralistic mentality” among liberal Catholic theologians, who believe that “one religion is as good as another.” To

remedy this problem, the declaration reiterates that “Catholic faithful are required to profess that there is a historic continuity – rooted in the apostolic succession – between the Church founded by Christ and the Catholic Church. . . . There exists a single Church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him.”

The declaration makes a distinction between the Orthodox churches, which retain “apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist,” and the Protestant “ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery.” The former are viewed as part of “the Church of Christ” because of their close bonds with the Catholic Church, while the latter “are not churches in the proper sense; however, those baptized in these communities are, by baptism, incorporated in Christ and thus are in a certain communion, albeit imperfect, with Christ.”

Both documents pointedly avoid using the word “church” when referring to Protestants, adopting instead the elusive term “ecclesial communities.” These Protestant communities may have elements of truth, but, according to the declaration, “they derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church.”

What all of this means is that the churches born of the Protestant Reformation are reduced by the Vatican declaration *Dominus Jesus* to a lower level, being excluded from the list of “sister churches.” Protestants do not possess the means of salvation within their communities, but are dependant for salvation upon “the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church.”

EVALUATION OF DOMINUS JESUS

The absolutistic Vatican declaration that salvation for any persons is ultimately possible only through the channels of grace entrusted to the Catholic Church, stands in stark contrast with the interfaith dialogue fostered by Vatican II and the ceaseless efforts of Pope John Paul II to become the undisputed spiritual leader of mankind by reaching out to people of all faiths.

One wonders, What has caused this Vatican *retrenchment*? What is the theological and biblical justification for the Vatican absolutistic claim to possess the monopoly of salvation? It is unfortunate that the extensive media coverage of the Vatican declaration makes no attempt to understand and explain the subtle way in which *Dominus Jesus* justifies the Catholic claim to possess the sole means of salvation. This analysis attempts to fill this gap, by looking briefly at the theological presuppositions of such a claim.

The reason for the Vatican retrenchment is the concern, mentioned earlier, that the policy of benign tolerance inaugurated by Vatican II, may have gone too far. It has encourage the spread of “religious relativism” and “the mentality of indifferentism [that] leads to the belief that one religion is as good as another.” Such a view undermines the unicity and primacy of the Catholic Church. At the news conference to present the declaration *Dominus Jesus*, Cardinal Ratzinger, the Vatican’s Doctrinal watchdog, said that some theologians were “manipulating and going beyond the limits” of tolerance when they put all religions on the same plane.

It is evident that the Vatican is concerned about the spread of theological relativism and pluralism which is weakening the alleged unicity and primacy of the Catholic Church. To counteract this threat *Dominus Jesus* reiterates in a succinct but comprehensive way the theological foundation of the Catholic claim to possess the sole means of salvation.

The 16-page document is well-structured with an introduction, six parts, and a conclusion. The introduction states the problem that motivated the declaration. "The [Catholic] Church's constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de iure* (or in principle)." The result is that "the universal salvific mediation of the [Catholic] Church" is weakened and obscured.

To counteract the "relativistic mentality, which is becoming ever so common," the first three parts of the declaration reassert the fullness of the revelation of Jesus Christ and the unicity of the salvific mystery of Jesus Christ. "It must therefore be firmly believed as a truth of Catholic faith that the universal salvific will of the One and Triune God is offered and accomplished once and for all in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God."

Evangelical Christians reading the first three parts of the document can find themselves in full agreement with the emphasis on the unique revelation and salvation provided by Jesus Christ. After all, this is a fundamental biblical concept. However, most readers may miss the reason for emphasizing the unique salvific role of Christ, which becomes apparent in the next three sections. The latter explains that the salvific mystery of Christ becomes a reality for the believer only through the Catholic Church and her sacraments.

The declaration states: "Christ continues his presence and his work of salvation in the Church and by means of the Church." By "the Church" is meant "the Catholic Church," and not Christian churches in general. This is clearly stated in *Dominus Jesus*: "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." "There exists a single Church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him."

By linking the saving work of Christ with the Catholic Church, making the latter the sole channel for dispensing "Christ's salvific mystery," the declaration makes salvation a monopoly of the Catholic church. This means that the Catholic Church herself is a "sacrament," that is, a channel of grace to the world. "The Church is a 'sacrament' . . . she is the sign and instrument of the kingdom."

Such a preposterous, presumptuous, and exclusivistic claim is based on the unfounded assumption that church in the New Testament is a visible, hierarchical organization, which was originally established by Christ Himself, when he made Peter the foundation rock of the Church (Matthew 16:18). This is known as the "Petrine Theory," according to which Christ entrusted to Peter the government of His church. To buttress this theory, the declaration repeatedly appeals to the "apostolic succession." By the latter is meant the existence of an unbroken succession from Peter, the first Pope, to John Paul II, the last Pope. Catholics proudly point out that no other church can make this claim of unbroken succession.

Petrine Theory. No attempt can be made in this document to expose all the fallacies of the Petrine theory and of the apostolic succession. These subjects will be examined in-depth in my forthcoming book on *Popular Heresies*.

For the sake of brevity, I will limit my comments to the pivotal text of Matthew 16:18 used to prove the Petrine theory. Christ tells Peter: "And I tell you, are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the power of death shall not prevail against it." The question is, Who is the "rock" upon which Christ built His church? Obviously for Catholics, the "rock" is Peter as the foundation stone upon which Christ built His church. *They rightly point out that the play on words "You are Petros and on this Petra" shows that there is an unmistakable connection between the two.* Thus, Peter is the Petra upon which Christ has built His Church.

Protestants obviously reject the Catholic interpretation, arguing instead that the "rock" is either Jesus Himself or Peter's confession of Christ. According to the former the text would read: "You are Peter and on myself as a rock I will build my church." According to the latter: "You are Peter and on the rock of Christ you have confessed, I will build my church."

The problem with both of these popular interpretation, is that they do not do justice to the play on words. *In the Greek there is an unmistakable connection between "Petros" and "Petra."* The question is not whether "Petra- the rock" refers to Peter, but *in what sense Peter is "Petra-the rock."* In my view Peter is "Petra-the rock," not in the Catholic sense of being the foundation stone upon which Christ built His church, but in the sense that Peter is the initial [stone] of the church base, which is built upon the foundation of the apostles, with Christ as the corner stone.

This interpretation rests on two major considerations. First, the New Testament pictures the church as a building, "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20; cf. 1 Peter 2:4-8; 1 Corinthians 3:11). The imagery of the church as a building suggests that the church does not rest on the foundation rock of Peter, but that began with Peter as the first stone. He was the first person to confess and accept Jesus of Nazareth, as the Christ, that is, the Messiah, "the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Being the first convert to publicly accept Christ, Peter became in a sense "the first charter member" of the church, or the first foundation stone of the spiritual edifice which is the church.

A second important point, ignored by the Catholic Church, is that the New Testament views the church, not as a visible hierarchical organization run by the Pope with his bishops, but as an invisible community of believers who are united by the same faith in Christ. In the Bible "the church" is not a religious organization, but the "people of God." Both the Hebrew *qahal* and the Greek *ekklesia*, translated "church," actually refer to the "congregation" of believers, who have been called out from the world (Deuteronomy 7:6; Hosea 11:1; 1 Peter 2:9) in order to be a light in the world (Deuteronomy 28:10; 1 Peter 2:9).

This means that when Jesus spoke about building His church, He meant, not the establishment of a hierarchical religious organization, but the building up of a community of believers who by faith would accept Him and confess Him before the world. In this context, Peter, being the first person to confess and accept Jesus as the "Christ" (which means "Messiah"), became the first living stone of the spiritual edifice consisting of a community of

believers. The idea of Peter being the foundation of the church as a hierarchical organization identified with the Catholic Church, is foreign to the text and to the teachings of the New Testament.

Apostolic Succession. A fatal blow to the Catholic Petrine claim is the lack of any New Testament support for the primacy of Peter in the apostolic church. If, according to the Catholic claim, Christ appointed Peter as His vicar to govern the church, then we would expect Peter to function as the leader of the Apostolic church. But this is hardly the case.

For example, there are no indications that Peter ever served as the presiding officer of the Jerusalem church. The organizational structure of the Jerusalem Church can be characterized as collegiality with a presidency. But there are no indications that Peter ever served as the presiding officer of the church. At the Jerusalem Council, it was James, not Peter, who presided in the deliberations (Acts 15:13).

Furthermore, the ultimate authority of the Jerusalem Church resided, not on Peter, but on the apostles, who were later replaced by “elders.” For example, it was “the apostles” who sent Peter to Samaria (Acts 8:14) to check on the new Christian communities. It was the “apostles” who sent Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 11:22). It was “the apostles and the elders” who sent Judas and Silas to Antioch (15:22-27). It was “James and the elders” who advised Paul to undergo a rite of purification at the Temple (Acts 21:18, 23-24).

Had Peter been appointed by Christ to serve as the Head of the Church, he would have played a significant role in the decisions mentioned above. There are no indications that Paul viewed Peter as the leader of the church. We are told that when Peter went to Antioch, Paul “opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned” (Galatians 2:11). Paul’s action hardly suggests that Peter was recognized and respected as the infallible head of the church.

Furthermore, Paul refers to the “pillars” of the Apostolic Church as being “James, Cephas, and John” (Galatians 2:9). The fact that “James,” the Lord’s brother, is mentioned first, indicates that James, rather than Peter, served as the leader of the church. Had the apostles understood that Peter had been appointed by Christ to serve as the Head of the church, they would have entrusted to him the leadership of the church. But the fact is that Peter is never seen in the New Testament as the sole leader of the Apostolic Church.

The notion that Christ invested Peter with the authority to govern the church and that such an authority has been transmitted in an unbroken succession to his successor, is a pure Catholic fabrication devoid of biblical support. It first appears in the writing of Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon (A. 175-195), who uses the argument of the apostolic succession to refute gnostic heretics. He argues that the gnostic teachings are heretical because they are rejected by those churches which can trace their apostolic pedigree (*Succession-Against the Heresies*, book 3).

The argument of the apostolic succession served a useful purpose in the early church when the formation of the New Testament was still in progress. Church leaders needed an objective authority to refute heretics, and they found it in churches like Antioch, Ephesus, and Alexandria, which could trace their origin to an Apostle. These churches could serve as the touchstone of orthodoxy. But to extend the concept of the apostolic succession to the whole

course of Christian history is unwarranted, because of the interruption and apostasy that these churches have experienced. The Moslem invasion of the seventh and eighth centuries wiped out completely most of the ancient Eastern churches.

The same holds true for the Bishop of Rome. Anyone familiar with the history of the papacy knows how difficult it is even for the Catholic Church to prove the unbroken succession from Peter to the present pope. There have been times when the papacy was in the hands of several corrupt Popes, who fought among themselves for the Papal throne. For example, in 1045 Pope Benedict IX was driven out of Rome by the people because of his unworthiness and Silvester II was placed on the Papal throne. Later Benedict IX returned and sold the Papal throne to a man who became Gregory VI.

During the course of events, Benedict refused to lay down his papal claims, so that there now were three Popes claiming to be the rightful pope. To resolve the problem, the German Emperor Henry II called a synod at Sutri in A. D. 1046, which deposed all three popes and elected Clement II instead. One wonders, which of the three deposed popes fits into the apostolic succession? How can the Catholic Church still legitimately defend the notion of an unbroken succession from Peter to the present pope, when some of her popes were deposed for their corruption! It is evident that there are some broken links in the chain of the Apostolic succession.

The Eucharist. The Catholic claim to possess the sole means of salvation rests not only on the alleged apostolic succession but also on the Catholic view of the Eucharist as the reenactment of Christ's atoning sacrifice. In fact, "the apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist" are mentioned together several times in the declaration *Dominus Jesus*, because they are the two pillars of the Catholic claim to be the only true church which has the power to dispense salvation.

Time will not allow us in this article to expose the fallacies of the Catholic view of the Lord's Supper, known as transubstantiation. The absurd claim that the priest has the power to transform the bread and wine into the physical and historical body of Jesus, and to offer it to the believers by means of a wafer, makes the Catholic Church a dispenser of salvation through her priesthood.

For the Catholic Church the benefits of Christ's atoning sacrifice are made available to the believer, not through the heavenly ministry of Jesus in the sanctuary but through the earthly ministry of the Catholic priests at the altar. The declaration devotes three sections to extol "the salvific mystery of Christ," because this provides the basis to justify the claim that "Christ's salvific mystery" is realized through the mystery of the Eucharist.

The Christ that most Catholics know, is the Christ they swallow at the Mass. Few devout Catholic families display a picture of Christ in their home. I dare to say that out of 100 devout Italian Catholic families, perhaps 4 or 5 of them have a picture of Christ hanging in the house. Their devotion is primarily to Mary and the saints who can intercede for them directly. As far as Christ is concerned, they know little about Him. They know mostly that "Christ's salvific ministry" is available to them through the Eucharist.

Conclusion. The foregoing reflections on the declaration *Dominus Jesus*, have served to highlight the Catholic attempt to make salvation a dispensation of the church, rather than a disposition of the believer. By claiming to be the only church that has the apostolic succession and consequently the right to dispense salvation, the Catholic church is deceiving millions of sincere people into believing that there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church (*no salus extra ecclesia*). The fact that the declaration *Dominus Jesus* goes into great length to reiterate this traditional Catholic teaching, goes to show that after all Ellen White was right when she wrote: "Rome never changes. Her principles have not altered in the least. She has not lessened the breach between herself and Protestants; they have done all the advancing. But what does this argue for the Protestantism of this day? It is the rejection of Bible truth which makes men approach to infidelity. It is a backsliding church that lessens the distance between itself and the Papacy" (*Signs of the Times*, 2/19/1894, par. 4)

Our only safeguard against deceptive teachings such as those found in the Vatican document *Dominus Jesus*, is familiarity with the teachings of the Word of God. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that the church is not a hierarchical organization that has the right to dispense salvation but a community of believers committed to "declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you [us] out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Peter 1:9).

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