

The one true Church welcomes all people, honours all truth and goodness

Last month we saw how the proclamation of the true faith by the Catholic Church shows the path of genuine freedom and unity for human beings, and is the path of a truly humble and servant Church – sharing the precious gift entrusted to us, not hoarding it. Today we look at how this is also the path of true inclusivity, gathering all people, and all that is good, into the heart of God's family.

The Holy Spirit has scattered seeds of truth and goodness – foreshadowings of Christ – even outside the Church's visible boundaries, for example in the non-Christian religions. The Second Vatican Council explained: 'The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (*Jn* 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2 *Cor* 5:18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life.' (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* 2)

Regarding non-Christian religions, we must avoid two extremes. On the one hand, there can be an unthinking rejection of all aspects, neglecting the elements of truth planted by the Holy Spirit that await their fulfilment in Christ. On the other hand, there can be an uncritical affirmation of everything – even if it contradicts Christ's teaching. Here the Church cautions: 'It cannot be overlooked that other rituals, insofar as they depend on superstitions or other errors (cf. *1 Cor* 10:20-21), constitute an obstacle to salvation.' (*Dominus Iesus* 21 (2000))

Linked to an uncritical affirmation of all aspects is the false idea that all religions are equal. We do rightly hold that all *human beings* are equal. Yet if the ideal of equality is taken to unbalanced extremes it leads us astray. Thus, people sometimes jump to the conclusion that everyone's *ideas* should be treated as equal. This is a major factor in the relativism so common today, which the Church has spoken against. Relativism holds that there is no universal truth that is true for all people – especially in religion and morality. So a relativist might say, 'I have my opinion, you have your opinion – but who really knows?' On this approach, everything is supposedly relative to one's particular culture, background, and so forth.

As with all errors, relativism has seeds of truth. Often people's different perspectives, coming from their various backgrounds, are genuine windows onto reality that are complementary, not contradictory. And so human beings can learn from each other. (cf. St John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* 3) But even so, if two positions do actually contradict, they cannot both be true. They are not equal in value: there is the true, and the false.

Against a mistaken 'equality of religions', St John Paul II wanted for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 a resounding proclamation of Christ as the world's only Saviour. So the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, which the Pope endorsed in unusually strong form 'with sure knowledge and by his apostolic authority'. Among many teachings, it stated this:

'*Equality*, which is a presupposition of inter-religious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to 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. Indeed, the Church, guided by charity and respect for freedom, 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.’ (22)

So: there are the man-made religions on the one hand, but on the other hand there is the religion God himself has given, that purifies and fulfils them all. Jesus is the one way to the Father (*Jn* 14:6); there is to be only one Flock under one Shepherd (*Jn* 10:16). But unlike an exclusive club, all people are equally invited to be *included* in this one Flock by receiving Baptism and believing the true Faith: all are equally welcome. So the uniqueness of the one Flock and one Shepherd does not exclude any person. It is God’s gift offered to all humanity to humbly accept (and not our own doing, as though we who *have* accepted it could boast about it).

Neither does it exclude any of the rich diversity God has created: every race, culture, nation and individual is not only to be included, welcomed and preserved in its integrity, but finds its highest fulfilment by being united with God in Christ. Only the distorted ‘diversity’ of sin and error (that actually damages human beings) is purged away, the more deeply we enter into this union of the one Flock under one Shepherd.

Very often, non-Christians have not yet had any real way of knowing Christ. They can still receive his salvation if by grace they follow God’s will as they understand it. Even so, we owe it to them to share the precious gift of knowing, even in this life, their true Shepherd and all he offers.

We are links in a chain, and dare not refuse to pass along to others what has previously been passed to us: as our equals, they have an equal right to the truth. At the same time, in understanding and honouring the gifts already possessed by those with whom we are sharing, we are ourselves led to a deeper awareness of facets of Christ’s fullness we had not yet fully understood. Dialogue isn’t a one-way street.

In summary, there is nothing ‘exclusionary’, ‘arrogant’ or ‘elitist’ about Jesus’ teaching of there being only one Flock and one Shepherd – one Saviour, one true Church, one true Faith. Any diffidence about this beautiful teaching of the unity in diversity to which the Good Shepherd invites all people in his one Catholic Church is misplaced – a residue of the relativism we have absorbed from the surrounding culture.

In this cultural climate the teaching can be misconstrued, so we keep that in mind when thinking how best to share our faith with others. But in our own minds there should be no confusion: in this unique divine communion of faith and of charity, we live to the full the way, not only of unity and truth, but of love, inclusivity, welcoming, equality, humility, respect for rightful diversity and freedom. In short, the way modelled for us by the Good Shepherd himself.