

## **The Lord Jesus - Absolute and Definitive Revelation - One, Only, and Universal Saviour**

Last month on the Epiphany we reflected on the Magi, representing all nations, receiving the Revelation of Christ the One Saviour. In light of that we looked at how various positive elements exist in the non-Christian religions – seeds of the Word planted by the Holy Spirit and finding fulfilment in Christ. Today, celebrating the Presentation, we reflect on a similar theme of Christ, the Light of the World, proclaimed in the words of Simeon: ‘My eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.’ (*Lk* 2:30-32)

This year is the 25th anniversary of the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* (‘The Lord Jesus’), promulgated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. It is subtitled, ‘On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.’ Replete with quotations from Scripture and the Ecumenical Councils, it was formally endorsed by St John Paul II in unusually strong terms, with the words, ‘with sure knowledge and by his apostolic authority’. Against a mistaken “equality of religions”, he wanted for the Jubilee a resounding proclamation of Christ as the world’s only Saviour.

It proved a highly controversial document, which really showed how necessary it was. People were shocked to be reminded that the Catholic Church does not believe that all religions are equal. We can see in the controversy a reflection of the prophecy of Simeon, ‘Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against.’ (*Lk* 2:34) The claims of Jesus Christ bring people to a choice, for or against.

Critics of *Dominus Iesus* were blaming Cardinal Ratzinger, then-Prefect of the Congregation, so Pope John Paul took the unusual step of devoting an Angelus Address (1/10/2000) to “claiming ownership” of the text, affirming: ‘[it was] approved by me in a special way at the height of the Jubilee Year’. ‘I hope that this Declaration’, he said, ‘which is close to my heart, can, after so many erroneous interpretations, finally fulfil its function both of clarification and of openness.’

It is good to be open about what we really believe, not hiding it by a cloak of diplomacy. In Pope Francis’ words: ‘True openness involves remaining steadfast in one’s deepest convictions, clear and joyful in one’s own identity, while at the same time being “open to understanding those of the other party” and “knowing that dialogue can enrich each side” (John Paul II). What is not helpful is a diplomatic openness which says “yes” to everything in order to avoid problems, for this would be a way of deceiving others and denying them the good which we have been given to share generously with others. Evangelisation and interreligious dialogue, far from being opposed, mutually support and nourish one another.’ (*Evangelii Gaudium* 251)

The Declaration has six main sections: 1. The Fullness and Definitiveness of the Revelation of Jesus Christ; 2. The Incarnate Logos and the Holy Spirit in the Work of Salvation; 3. Unicity and Universality of the Salvific Mystery of Jesus Christ; 4. Unicity and Unity of the Church; 5. The Church: Kingdom of God and Kingdom of Christ; 6. The Church and the Other Religions in Relation to Salvation. Today we will look at the first three.

*Dominus Iesus* opens with the words: ‘The *Lord Jesus*, before ascending into heaven, commanded his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world and to baptise all nations...’ (1; cf. *Mt* 28:18-20; *Mk* 16:15-16; *Lk* 24:46-48; *Jn* 17:18, 20, 21; *Acts* 1:8) After setting forth the Nicene

Creed, it states the Declaration's motivation: 'The Church's constant missionary proclamation', it says, 'is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism... The roots of these problems are to be found in certain presuppositions... the conviction of the elusiveness and inexpressibility of divine truth, even by Christian revelation; relativistic attitudes toward truth itself, according to which what is true for some would not be true for others...' (4)

'As a remedy for this relativistic mentality, which is becoming ever more common, it is necessary above all to reassert the definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ. In fact, it must be *firmly believed* that, in the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (*Jn* 14:6), the full revelation of divine truth is given...' (5) 'The theory of the limited, incomplete, or imperfect character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, which would be complementary to that found in other religions, is contrary to the Church's faith.' (6) By this expression '*firmly believed*' that it italicises, used seven times in the document, *Dominus Iesus* indicates a first-level teaching of divine faith that it would be heresy to deny or deliberately doubt.

One other doctrine, it asserts 'must be *firmly held*' (indicating thereby a definitive second-level teaching): the doctrine of 'the distinction between *theological faith*' in Christ's revelation 'and *belief*, in the other religions'. Faith 'is a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed.' (7)

The Declaration goes on to affirm: 'The doctrine of faith must be *firmly believed* which proclaims that Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary, and he alone, is the Son and the Word of the Father.' (10) This is to rule out theories that there might be other incarnations or 'Christ figures' besides Jesus and parallel to him. (These are the sorts of ideas that theologians sometimes come up with.)

Not only definitive *revelation* but also *salvation* through Christ alone, it declares, 'must be *firmly believed*'. (11; 13; 14) 'In him God reconciled us to himself and to one another, freeing us from the bondage of the devil and of sin...' (10, quoting Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* 22) '...Jesus Christ is the mediator and the universal redeemer... This salvific mediation implies also the unicity of the *redemptive sacrifice* of Christ, eternal high priest.' (11) So: all salvation flows from the Cross.

*Dominus Iesus* rules out a theory that the Holy Spirit sometimes works beyond the "economy of salvation" centred on Christ. In the words of John Paul II, it declares: 'Whatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures and religions, serves as a preparation for the Gospel and can only be understood in reference to Christ...' (12, quoting *Redemptoris Missio* 29) '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 for all in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God.' (14)

Again, it cites Vatican II: 'The Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and civilisation, the centre of mankind, the joy of all hearts, and the fulfilment of all aspirations...' (15, quoting *Gaudium et spes* 45) (Here, the Declaration also answers in passing the question "What exactly is the Saviour saving us *from*?" with the words of St Irenaeus: 'he saves from hell all those who follow him...' (fn. 45))

And to a common objection that we 'should avoid the use of terms like "unicity", "universality", and "absoluteness",' because these supposedly 'give the impression of excessive emphasis [on Christ] in relation to other religions', (15) *Dominus Iesus* responds that the ideas expressed by these terms simply flow from revealed truth. So it reaffirms: (*ibid.*) 'One can and must say that Jesus Christ has a significance and a value for the human race and its history, which are unique and singular, proper to him alone, exclusive, universal, and absolute.'