

CENTRO PRO UNIONE

N. 59 - Spring 2001
ISSN: 1122-0384



semi-annual Bulletin

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A Center conducted by the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement

Director's Desk

In this issue of the bulletin we have the pleasure of presenting five of the conferences that were held at the **Centro** during this past year. The first of these engendered a lively discussion about the Jewish-Christian dialogue. Rabbi Jack Bemporad who was a visiting scholar at the Angelicum forcefully presented the reasons for "The Necessity of a Theological Dialogue between Christians and Jews". It is our hope that we will be able to continue our discussion with Rabbi Bemporad again this Fall.

Don Bruno Forte gave the third annual Paul Wattson/Lurana White lecture. The lecture was entitled "La bellezza: una via per l'unità?" and introduced the audience to the theology of aesthetics as a possible way of moving toward unity. This year's lecturer will be Dr. Anna Marie Aagard, professor emeritus of systematic theology at the University of Aarhus, Denmark. Her lecture will be held on December 13, 2001 and is entitled: "In Defense of the Body: Writings on 'Being Church' in Ecumenical Conversation".

The Document published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Dominus Iesus", provoked much discussion in theological and ecumenical circles. It is for this reason that we decided to dedicate the month of January to treat ecclesiological questions. In the first of two lectures Dr. Richard McBrien clarified some of the major difficulties that surrounded the document's publication. One of the major difficulties was the misrepresentation and over-simplification of this document that was made by the press. After clearing the air on this issue, our speaker proceeded to analyze the ecclesiological presuppositions upon which this document rests. The general reaction that came from most of our non Catholic participants was one of gratitude for such a positive and constructive presentation of a complex document that was too often criticized without having been read.

The second ecclesiological presentation was made by the Director of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, Dr. Alan Falconer. During our annual celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Dr. Falconer presented the latest ecclesiological statement of the Faith and Order Commission "On the Nature and Purpose of the Church". This document has been sent to the Churches for their evaluation much in the same way as the Lima Document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. It is hoped that churches and theologians will respond in order that the process of revision will go forward and provide another consensus document such as the BEM document.

Lastly we include the homily that was preached by Bishop (now Cardinal) Walter Kasper during our celebration of the word. Rev. Dr. Jonathan Boardman, the Rector of the Anglican church, All Saints, presided a very well attended conference and ecumenical celebration of the Word.

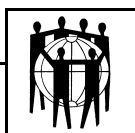
We have had some very interesting visits during the past year: an ecumenical pilgrimage of 120 persons from Walsingham, England who came to the Centro for a talk on *Dominus Iesus* and Ecumenical relations and the pastoral implications of the declaration; 30 students from the Graduate School of the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, Switzerland; we did a course for St. Olaf's College, Northfield, MN; a group of interns from the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, led by Alan Falconer; the visit of the Council for Christian Unity (Stockholm, Sweden) and a group of 15 Anglican Ecumenical Officers from various dioceses in England. We hope that we will be able to welcome more of our friends during this coming year.

Exceptionally we will not print the bibliography of the interconfessional dialogues in this Spring issue due to the fact our librarian was on maternity leave (she had a lovely daughter!) and we have been unable to prepare the material in time. The bibliography will appear in the Fall issue along with the texts of several other conferences held this year.

This periodical is indexed in the *ATLA Religion Database*, published by the American Theological Library Association, 250 S. Wacker Dr., 16th Floor., Chicago, IL 60606 (<http://www.atla.com>).

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James F. Puglisi, sa
Director





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Centro Conferences

The Necessity for Theological Dialogue between Christians and Jews

by

Jack Bemporad

Director, The Center for Interreligious Understanding-USA

(Conference given at the **Centro Pro Unione**, Thursday, 16 November 2000)

In this paper I will discuss the process of dialogue, and why such a process should lead to theological discussion. I will then review Rabbi Soloveitchik's position on theological dialogue, delineate the task of theological dialogue, and offer concluding remarks.

I. The Process of Dialogue

It is the process of dialogue that is really the most important element in inter-religious communications. The content of dialogue is secondary since it is the process, which will ultimately determine the content. The process of dialogue consists in establishing a proper atmosphere for effective dialogue. It is the attitude of the participants and the way in which they respond to one another, which sets the proper stage for discussion. Regardless of the topics to be discussed, if people are not ready to talk, or if there is a lack of trust, mutuality, or respect, then genuine dialogue cannot take place.

In his many writings and speeches, Father Remi Hoeckman has convincingly shown us that if a dialogue process is characterized by a sense of trust and care, then a whole range of issues, (including theological issues) that initially no one would even think of discussing may gradually be included.

It is important to recognize that Christians and Jews have much in common. The foundations of Christianity are in Judaism. In fact, Christians define themselves in relation to Judaism as part of their self-understanding. The Hebrew Bible is seen as the Old Testament to which the New Testament is indissolubly bound. As a result, in the new atmosphere of dialogue, there have been extensive endeavors to explore the areas of agreement or commonality.

The goal has too often been limited to searching for areas of agreement. In view of the past history of Christian representations of Jesus and Christianity as separate, alien, and Judaism as superseded, the process of reconciliation has, quite appropriately concentrated on the importance of finding common characteristics.

The fact of the matter is that we have to proceed beyond looking for areas of agreement. The goal is not simply to agree. Instead, we should try to understand one another and the only way we can do that is by being willing to say, "Look, as a Jew, this is

what I believe. This is why I believe it and this is how I live it." And I expect the Christian response to be the same. It seems to me that unless we're willing to be respectful and caring of one another, and ask the other to express his or her fundamental convictions, then we're not engaging in the kind of dialogue that produces results required for proper understanding and harmonious relationships. By investigating areas of both agreement and diversity we will not only learn to recognize one another in ways that are not subject to the all too frequent stereotyping and distortions of the past, but indeed to *re-cognize* one another, see one another in new and more accurate ways.

The great Sage Hillel enjoined us not to judge our fellow human being until you stand in his or her place. What I believe he meant is that it is not enough to just put yourself in another person's place, in that person's shoes, or experience the world through that person's categories, through their feelings, their hopes and fears. One must do something more. One must look at oneself with the eyes of the other. How do you look to him? With what eyes do you see me?

In genuine dialogue there is an openness to depths of oneself and depths of the other that neither had any real awareness or knowledge of eliciting at its initiation. I would go so far as to agree with David Lochhead who claims that dialogue "is a way of knowing truth that neither party possesses prior to the dialogue."¹

Mutual communication requires a certain trust or comfort both with myself and with the other. If I fear that my partner in dialogue will misunderstand me because he is overly concerned with presenting his point of view and not really open to my point of view, Or of I am not fully clear in my mind as to what I really believe and why. Then true understanding cannot take place and then the dialogue will, at best, be superficial and polite, but will not reach the depths of true understanding. Often tension exists between the affirmations of fundamental beliefs and the openness needed for dialogue, that is why the atmosphere of dialogue is so important.

Too often Christian-Jewish dialogue has been characterized as a process of negotiations with the intent to have the partner in

¹ D. LOCHHEAD, *The Dialogical Imperative. A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988) 51.

dialogue commit to predetermined positions. While this is important to reach agreement on specific issues it is inimical to theological understanding.

In any process of communication one must order the content of the communication in relation to the respective value framework of the participants. Generally, if something is very important and central to us, we mistakenly assume that it must also be very important and central to the other. This is not so. What may be of central importance to one person may be of little interest to the other.

Similar expressions, terms or concepts have very different associations or significance in Judaism and Christianity.

For example terms like Messiah, Salvation, Covenant have different meanings in Judaism and Christianity. But even more, the importance, significance, and centrality of these concepts vary greatly in our respective traditions. Additionally, central concepts in one religious tradition may simply be non-existent in the other.

That other religions differ from my own should make me consider the possibility that I may not have the full truth, and that the other may have something to teach me. It is presumptuous for us to maintain that the great religions of the world, which have been a source of inspiration and hope for millions of individuals with great religious teachers, have no insights to offer us.

Dialogue is needed to present a more objective and historically accurate view of one another. One cannot deny that if one were to look at Christian attitudes towards Jews and Judaism, and Jewish attitudes towards Christians and Christianity one would often see negative stereotypes and false representations. Past misunderstandings must be clarified and we must take a new direction in the way we view one another.

Thanks to the great achievements of Vatican II with the document *Nostra Aetate*, the Guidelines, Notes, Papal speeches, the *We Remember* document, the European Bishop's statements and the Israel-Vatican accord, much of the past negativity has been overcome. It is necessary to make both Jews and Christians aware of these great documents and developments. This will take a great deal of work.

However I believe that an essential element has been lacking in Christian-Jewish relations, which has tended to distort and skew the dialogue in such a way as to make it impossible to derive the full benefits of dialogue and reach its essence.

A symptom of this lack is that in all these years there have been no official statements coming from the Jewish side to clarify Jewish attitudes with respect to Christianity.

On the contrary, discussion has been limited to two main topics: Anti-Semitism and Israel. I think this was a necessary first step. The devastating destruction of six million Jews made it necessary to come to terms with that horror and deal with the role that Christian teachings may have had in regard to it. I think that the *We Remember* document as well as many of the Bishop's statements, and the Papal visit to Israel have significantly dealt with that.

Also the Fundamental Accord clearly affirms the positive relation of the Vatican to the state of Israel. As essential as these documents and activities have been to prepare the ground for

harmonious relations, nevertheless, I think that these were preliminaries to real dialogue.

For dialogue to be fully effective between Christians and Jews, a fundamental question must be asked: "How can I be true to my own faith without being false to yours?" This means that one should strive to understand the other as he or she understands one's self. One must be able to understand one's own faith without distorting or denigrating the other's faith. The question, of course, is whether this is at all possible if there are pre-conditions to dialogue that restrict its subject matter and approach.

When the Pope first met with members of the Jewish community, he asked that Jews make an effort to understand Christians and Christianity. After establishing the indissoluble connection for Christians of Judaism with Christianity, the Pope then gave full assent to the *Guidelines* prologue, which asked Christians to strive to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism. The Pope said, "They [Christians] must strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience." The Pope emphasized that as essential as it is for Christians to understand Jews and Judaism, especially in the terms with which they define themselves; it is equally necessary for Jews to understand the Church and Christians in terms that they define themselves.

Dialogue and communication is needed in order not to distort the other. The Pope said to the Jewish delegation, "You are here, I believe, to help us in our reflection on Judaism. *And I am sure that we find in you and in the communities you represent, a real and deep disposition to understand Christianity and the Catholic Church in its proper identity today so that we may work from both sides toward our common aim of overcoming every kind of prejudice and discrimination.*" (My italics.)

What the Pope effectively said is that it is not enough for Christians to understand Jews and view them the way they view themselves; it is also very important for Jews to understand Christians the way they view themselves.

Now, can Jews really understand Christianity? Can we really understand the Catholic and Protestant faiths without thinking theologically or without discussing theology? I believe that if we are to have full and mutual understanding, theological dialogue is essential.

II. Rabbi Soloveitchik's Position

If all of the above is correct, why is it that theological dialogue is still such a hurdle in our process of communications?

In 1964, the very famous (probably the most authoritative orthodox rabbi in America) Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote an article, entitled "Confrontation" in the orthodox journal *Tradition*. In that article he maintained that while it was legitimate for Jews and Christians to communicate on matters of social concern for welfare of the Jewish community he clearly rejected any dialogue of a theological nature. His justification for rejecting theological dialogue was the posture of the Christian community, which viewed itself as on a level above Judaism. A posture, which viewed Judaism as inferior and Jews as objects of conversion. In that situation Rabbi Soloveitchik says, "Non-Jewish society has

confronted us through the ages in a mood of defiance, as if we were part of the sub-human objective order. We shall resent any attempt on the part of the populous community to engage us in a peculiar encounter in which our confronter commands us to take a position beneath him while placing himself not alongside, but above us.”

What Soloveitchik was referring to, was the history of Christian-Jewish confrontations. Jews were subjected to an asymmetrical position with respect to Christianity for the simple reason that the community of the many had the power. Now, however, Rabbi Soloveitchik also said, “It is self evident that a confrontation of two faith communities is possible only if it is accomplished by a clear assurance that both parties will enjoy equal rights and full religious freedom.”

There’s no question that dialogue for the last 36 years has been in terms of two faith communities that enjoy equal rights and full religious freedom. And, therefore, I agree with what Rabbi Soloveitchik says. The point I want to make is that the situation in 2001 is a very different situation from the one about which Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote in 1964, the year before Vatican II. Would not Rabbi Soloveitchik himself today grant our situation is different given all the changes enunciated above?

We need to discuss theology because Jews cannot really understand Christianity without understanding Christian theology. Christians understand their faith theologically and a Jew who is not willing to try to grasp what Christian Theology entails is not going to accurately understand Christianity. More importantly, if we don’t discuss theology how are we going to prevent misunderstanding each other’s beliefs and doctrines?

It is not clear why the Jewish partner in the dialogue should resist theology. Since there is always the danger that unless the statements and documents of the Church have a theological underpinning, they are subject to being dismissed as simply public relations tailor-made to the post-Holocaust situation.

Furthermore, many of the problems that have arisen between Jews and Christians are due to theological representation of Jews and Judaism. These include exclusivists’ claims to salvation on the part of Christians and the theological imperative to engage in missionizing. All these are theological issues that need to be clarified. All religious traditions hold certain beliefs to be true, and have reasons for holding them to be true. When a religious tradition asks about what it believes and why it believes it, it is talking “theology”, since theology is concerned with the meaning and truth of the claims that a religious tradition makes. To affirm therefore, as some Jewish spokesmen have, either that Judaism is not theological or should not discuss theology, is to affirm either that Judaism makes no doctrinal claims, or if it does make such claims, it has no reasons of a rational character for making them. Both affirmations seem to me untrue.

It seems clear to all engaged in dialogue that there are numerous distortions and misrepresentations of each other’s religion, many of these of a theological character. All agree that these should be corrected. But how can these distortions be corrected without theological dialogue since this assumes that each side already possesses the very knowledge that only the dialogue

process can bring about.

III. Future Prospects

Where do we go from here? I believe the fundamental question for us to ask is, how can I be true to my own faith without being false to yours? I think this question should influence every single discussion on every level. I believe that question is the fundamental issue of dialogue.

It’s not enough for me to say, “Here’s what Judaism believes, now you tell me what Christianity believes.” It’s important for me to say, “I can have a sense of myself without diminishing you in any way. I can affirm my beliefs without restricting, limiting or dwarfing your beliefs. I must do it while not denigrating or distorting yours.”

Also in dialogue, move towards asking and answering the following questions: What is the place of Jews and Judaism in a Christian self-understanding, and what is the place of Christians and Christianity in a Jewish self-understanding?

If we Jews really believe that Christians are monotheists, then we have to give up the doctrine that Christians fall under the category of B’nai Noah, the sons of Noah, which was a doctrine that originally applied to pagans and is a doctrine which involves minimal monotheism. If we’re really honest and believe that Christians are monotheists, then we must have the courage to re-evaluate such a position. Then we must recognize that Christians are B’nai Abraham, they are children of Abraham, children of monotheism, and indeed are our brothers.

Also, if Jews have an irrevocable covenant with God, as Paul says in Romans, and has been repeatedly stated in numerous Church documents, then it seems to me that we have to ask, what sense does the distinction “according to the flesh and according to the spirit” make? Is the irrevocable covenant with flesh? Does that make any sense? Too often, Jews have seen this distinction as denigrating and it should be discussed.

It is necessary that each position be presented in the most intelligible and noble light, no straw men, no denigrating contrasts, but even more, there must be a common humanity, which we must appeal to in dialogue, common needs and hopes and fears.

There must be common pre-suppositions and common goals we all share as human beings prior to and independent of whatever may be our religious affirmations. Our discussion is not the same as the dialogue between science and religion nor is it the same as the discussion between religion and secularism. It is the dialogue of two historical faith communities, which share so much that, is essential and yet their interrelationships have never been historically explored in an authentic and honest manner to discover the truth that each can offer the other.

I think that we should ask ourselves the following questions. “How can our respective traditions deal with the ultimate questions we face as human beings — suffering, salvation, the nature of what it means to be a human being, the nature of God and creation, the nature of the good?” And from our own faith perspective, in trying to answer these questions, we will find that we will learn from one another, what we believe and why we

believe it. And here I think it's of utmost importance for us to recognize that we can learn from each other, that no one has cornered the market on truth.

Theology is not merely a confession of what our faith affirms, i.e., what it means, what it asserts and how it is practiced. It also claims to be true. It is also necessary to state the reasons I have for affirming it to be true. An affirmation of faith is not self-authenticating. It requires justification in terms of processes that are universally recognizable, i.e., reason and experience.

A common ground is essential to serve as a foundation for discussion. Here the common ground is itself a subject of controversy. However both of our traditions maintain that reason, our common character as human beings and our being creatures in the order of creation, as well as our being heirs of monotheism has constituted a foundation for dialogue.

Also, in both Judaism and Christianity the historical element is essential and the transcendent is connected to the historical in our affirmation of revelation as well as our affirmation of the transcendent's connection to the soul and the soul's self awareness.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is essential to remember the nature of the subject matter being discussed. When religious issues are dis-

cussed, when the deepest convictions by which individuals define their very essence and discuss beliefs upon which one's whole existence is at stake, it requires a special sensitivity and understanding which simply does not apply in other areas of discussion.

I am not denying that other areas also require sensitivity and understanding; I am affirming that the emotional intensity and significance of inter-religious dialogue has a place of its own and needs special means of dealing with it. There is also the sense of grandeur and nobility of the religious quest that must be taken into consideration. We are dealing with the holy, the transcendent and highest manifestation of all that is and there is an intrinsic humility with which the human mind must manifest in the presence of discussions dealing with the Divine.

Ultimately, both traditions recognize that what is at stake in dialogue is the trusteeship that human beings have in the created order. Both traditions must recognize that what we do counts for good or ill and that an issue of the greatest significance is at stake in our joint witness in our respective ways of the God who enables us to share in his grace and exercise his will.

It is my hope and prayer that authentic, meaningful, theological dialogue, keeping in mind our mutual covenant with God, will result in a covenant between Judaism and the Church.



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Centro Conferenze

La bellezza: una via per l'unità?

Conferenza annuale in onore di Padre Paolo Wattson e Madre Lurana White

Bruno Forte

Ordinario di teologia dogmatica nella Pontificia Facoltà Teologica dell'Italia Meridionale

(Conferenza tenuta al **Centro Pro Unione**, giovedì, 14 dicembre 2000)

1. Fra lontananza e prossimità: il Tutto nel frammento

È Hans Urs Von Balthasar il pensatore che più di ogni altro ha avvertito l'epocale attualità del bello come via per il recupero del vero e del bene in un'epoca tentata dalla debolezza rinunciataria, chiusa agli orizzonti di fondazione e di senso. La passione tutta cristiana dell'annuncio è in lui motivo di intensa concentrazione sul bello:

“La nostra parola iniziale — scrive inaugurando la sua opera maggiore — si chiama bellezza. La bellezza è l'ultima parola che l'intelletto pensante può osare di pronunciare, perché essa non fa altro che incoronare, quale aureola di splendore inafferrabile, il duplice astro del vero e del bene e il loro indissolubile rapporto. Essa è la bellezza disinteressata senza la quale il vecchio mondo era incapace di intendersi, ma che ha preso congedo in punta di piedi dal moderno mondo degli interessi, per abbandonarlo alla sua cupidità e alla sua tristezza”¹.

La conseguenza drammatica di questo esilio della bellezza sta nella inevitabile perdita del senso del vero e del bene: “In un mondo senza bellezza... anche il bene ha perduto la sua forza di attrazione, l'evidenza del suo dover-essere-adempiuto... In un mondo che non si crede più capace di affermare il bello, gli argomenti in favore della verità hanno esaurito la loro forza di conclusione logica”².

Ciò di cui allora v'è urgente bisogno al compimento della parabola dell'epoca moderna è per von Balthasar un cristianesimo che recuperi rigorosamente la centralità e la rilevanza del trascendente del bello: non basta più testimoniare l'alterità di Dio rispetto al mondo, compito pur necessario e prezioso in tante epoche. Ad un'umanità che tanto intensamente ha scoperto la mondanità del mondo e ha rincorso il progetto di emanciparsi da

ogni dipendenza estranea all'orizzonte terreno, è necessario più che mai proporre il Dio in forma umana, lo scandalo al tempo stesso attraente e inquietante dell'umanità di Dio: e questo vuol dire riscoprire la chiave estetica di tutto il messaggio cristiano. “Soltanto chi ama la rivelazione dell'infinito nella forma finita è non soltanto un ‘mistico’, ma anche un ‘stetico’”³; e soltanto chi ha il senso della bellezza — e dunque dell'avvento paradossale del Tutto nel frammento — può anche veramente annunciare un Dio significativo per l'umanità resa ormai consapevole della piena dignità di tutto ciò che è storico e mondano.

Solo l'esplicita ed argomentata consapevolezza dell'offrirsi dell'infinito nel finito, della lontananza nella prossimità, e dunque solo la comprensione estetica della rivelazione e della fede, potrà essere in grado di parlare efficacemente al mondo umano, “troppo umano”, che è il nostro mondo. Lo esprime questo testo drammatico dello stesso von Balthasar:

“Quel Logos, in cui tutto nel cielo e sulla terra è raccolto e possiede la sua verità, cade lui stesso nel buio, nell'angoscia ... in un nascondimento, che è proprio l'opposto dello svelamento della verità dell'essere... L'indicativo è perduto, l'interrogativo è rimasto l'unico modo di parlare. La fine della domanda è il forte grido. È la parola che non è più parola... Anche il Logos, che ha accettato la forma a lui adatta, deve essere privato della sua figura... La parola di Dio nel mondo è diventata muta, nella notte essa non chiede più di Dio; essa giace sepolta nella terra. La notte che la copre non è una notte di stelle, ma notte di desolazione profonda e di alienazione mortale. Non è un silenzio pieno di mille segreti d'amore, che scaturiscono dalla avvertita presenza dell'amato; ma silenzio di assenza, di distacco, di vuoto abbandono, che arriva dietro tutti gli strappi dell'addio”⁴.

¹ H.U. von BALTHASAR, *Gloria: una estetica teologica. 1: La percezione della forma* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1975) 10. Su von Balthasar cf. E. GUERRIERO, *Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cinisello Balsamo: Paoline, 1991) con bibliografia.

² *Gloria*...., *op.cit.*, 1, 11.

³ *Gloria. 2. Stili Ecclesiastici: Ireneo, Agostino, Dionigi, Anselmo, Bonaventura* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1978) 98: su Agostino.

⁴ H.U. von Balthasar, *Il tutto nel frammento* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1972) 223. 226.

L'estetica teologica – intesa come percezione del Tutto nel frammento, educata alla scuola della kenosi del Verbo crocifisso e abbandonato — è al tempo stesso la via per glorificare l'Eterno nel miracolo della sua autocomunicazione nel finito e per annunciare al mondo la gioia della salvezza che nel “*Verbum abbreviatum*” gli è stata donata. Rivisitare i linguaggi della bellezza nella memoria teologica dell'Occidente sarà pertanto la via per rispondere alla domanda decisiva su dove e come sarà possibile al pensiero moderno e ai suoi naufragi di riappropriarsi della via salutare del bello, riconoscendovi anche una singolare via verso l'unità per cui Cristo ha pregato. È quanto tenteremo di fare — sia pur in maniera appena evocativa — nelle riflessioni che seguono...

2. I “numeri del cielo”: la Bellezza come forma

Quale rapporto c'è fra la bellezza e Dio?

L'intera esistenza di Agostino risponde a questa domanda: si potrebbe dire che tutta la sua riflessione è stata dominata dai temi, che egli considerava fra loro intimamente connessi, di Dio Trinità e del bello⁵. L'interesse per questo secondo tema è predominante nel tempo che precede l'ora decisiva della conversione. È lo stesso Agostino a riconoscerlo nella struggente esclamazione delle *Confessioni*, in cui il Tu dell'invocazione è rivolto a Colui che è la bellezza: “Tardi Ti amai, bellezza tanto antica e tanto nuova, tardi Ti amai!”⁶. Agostino ammette che proprio la bellezza delle creature lo aveva tenuto lontano dal Creatore e confessa che Questi lo ha raggiunto con la Sua bellezza per quella stessa via dei sensi, attraverso cui noi percepiamo il bello in ogni suo apparire:

“Ecco, Tu eri dentro di me, io stavo al di fuori: qui Ti cercavo e, deforme qual ero, mi buttavo sulle cose belle che Tu hai fatto. Tu eri con me, io non ero con Te. Mi tenevano lontano da Te quelle cose che, se non fossero in Te, non sarebbero. Chiamasti, gridasti, vincesti la mia sordità; sfolgorasti, splendesti e fugasti la mia cecità; esalasti il tuo profumo, lo aspirai e anelo a Te; Ti gustai e ora ho fame e sete di Te; mi toccasti e bruciai del desiderio della Tua pace”⁷.

Udito, vista, olfatto, gusto, tatto sono raggiunti e presi dalla bellezza: in un primo tempo da quella delle cose create; quindi, dalla Bellezza ultima, autrice di ogni altra bellezza. L'intero itinerario di Agostino appare così come un cammino dalla

bellezza alla Bellezza, dal penultimo all'Ultimo, per poter poi ritrovare il senso e la misura della bellezza di tutto ciò che esiste nella luce del fondamento di ogni bellezza.

Ciò che unifica in modo pregnante il tema di Dio e quello della bellezza è per Agostino il motivo dell'amore: in realtà, la bellezza può tanto su di noi perché ci attrae a sé con vincoli d'amore. Nella concezione di Agostino alla forza del richiamo del bello corrisponde il movimento unificante dell'amore: è per questo che la teologia si occupa della bellezza, perché ha a che fare originariamente e costitutivamente con la rivelazione dell'amore e con ciò che essa significa per noi. È ancora nelle *Confessioni* che si trova questa considerazione: “Allora... amavo le bellezze inferiori, correvo verso l'abisso e dicevo ai miei amici: Non è forse vero che noi non amiamo che il bello?”⁸. Resterà convinzione costante di Agostino che non è possibile amare se non ciò che è bello: “*Non possumus amare nisi pulchra*”⁹. Fra rapimento e corrispondenza, il movimento della bellezza non è che il movimento dell'amore: “*ordo amoris*” è il mondo della bellezza...¹⁰

Da dove scaturisce la forza di attrazione della bellezza? Perché ciò che è bello attira l'amore? Agostino pone con estremo rigore queste domande, certamente riflettendo sul proprio cammino: “Che cosa è bello? e che cosa è la bellezza? Che cosa ci avvince e ci attrae nelle cose, che amiamo? poiché se in esse non ci fosse decoro e bellezza, non ci attirerebbero per nulla a sé”¹¹. Due diverse risposte possono qui offrirsi: secondo la prima, la ragione formale della bellezza è nelle cose stesse che ci appaiono belle; secondo l'altra, la ragione del bello è nel soggetto, che ne prova piacere. Detto altrimenti: è bello ciò che è bello o è bello ciò che piace? È la bellezza che attrae o è la stessa attrazione, e dunque il piacere che gusta, l'origine del fascino della bellezza? “Anzitutto chiederò se le cose sono belle perché piacciono o se piacciono perché sono belle”¹². Per chi, come Agostino, è giunto al forte senso dell'oggettività del vero, che illumina fin dal profondo il mondo del soggetto, non c'è alcun dubbio né esitazione nella scelta fra le due possibilità:

“All'uomo, che è in possesso di un occhio interiore e che vede nell'invisibile, non cesserò di ricordare perché queste cose piacciono, in modo che sia capace di giudicare lo stesso diletto umano... In proposito, di certo, egli mi

⁵ Cf. la documentata ricerca di J. TSCHOLL, *Dio e il bello in sant'Agostino* (Milano: Ares, 1996) [originale tedesco: Leuven 1967].

⁶ *Conf.*, X, 27, 38: “*Sero te amavi, pulchritudo tam antiqua et tam nova, sero te amavi!*”.

⁷ *Ibid.*, “*Et ecce intus eras et ego foris et ibi te quaerebam et in ista formosa, quae fecisti, deformis inruebam. Mecum eras, et tecum non eram. Ea me tenebant longe a te, quae si in te non essent, non essent. Vocasti et clamasti et rupisti surditatem meam, coruscasti, splenduisti et fugasti caecitatem meam, fragrasti, et duxi spiritum et anhele tibi, gustavi et esurio et sitio, tetigisti me, et exarsi in pacem tuam*”.

⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, 13, 20: “*Tunc... amabam pulchra inferiora et ibam in profundum et dicebam amicis meis: “num amamus aliquid nisi pulchrum?”*”.

⁹ *De musica*, VI, 13, 38.

¹⁰ Cf. R. BODEI, *Ordo amoris. Conflitti terreni e felicità celeste*, Intersezione, 8 (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1991).

¹¹ *Conf.*, IV, 13, 20: “*Quid est ergo pulchrum? et quid est pulchritudo? quid est quod nos allicit et conciliat rebus, quas amamus? nisi enim esset in eis decus et species, nullo modo ad se moverent*”.

¹² *De vera religione* 32,59: “*Et prius quaeram utrum ideo pulchra sint, quia delectant; an ideo delectent, quia pulchra sunt*”.

risponderà che le cose piacciono perché sono belle¹³.

La bellezza di ciò che è bello non dipende dal gusto del soggetto, ma è inscritta nelle cose, possiede una forza oggettiva. In che consiste questa struttura originaria? È ancora Agostino a rispondere: “Gli chiederò poi perché sono belle e, se mostrerà qualche esitazione, gli suggerirò che forse sono tali perché le parti sono tra loro simili e, per una sorta di intimo legame, danno luogo ad un insieme conveniente”¹⁴.

Bello è dunque ciò che presenta un’intima, organica “convenientia” delle parti che lo compongono, un “con-venire” che emerge dal profondo: “Chiediti che cosa ti attrae nel piacere fisico e troverai che non è niente altro che l’armonia: infatti, mentre ciò che è in contrasto produce dolore, ciò che è in armonia produce piacere”¹⁵. Agostino sviluppa quest’idea cogliendo la bellezza come l’affacciarsi dell’unità totale nelle parti del frammento, fra loro convenientemente disposte e relazionate nel loro insieme all’altro da sé: “Osservavo e vedevo che negli esseri corporei altro è il tutto e perciò il bello, altro ciò che conviene perché ben si adatta ad un’altra cosa, come una parte del corpo al suo universo o una calzatura al piede”¹⁶. La bellezza consiste dunque nell’affacciarsi del tutto nel frammento per via di una precisa corrispondenza delle parti che lo compongono, di una forma che riproduce l’armonica composizione degli elementi nell’unità ed in cui appare l’essenza (o *species*) della cosa: “Non a caso nel lodare si usa tanto il termine *speciosissimum* (che ha l’essenza in sommo grado) quanto il termine *formosissimum* (che ha la forma in sommo grado)”¹⁷.

3. Il crocefisso Amore: lo splendore del Bello

Nella storia della teologia cristiana il rapporto fra teologia e bellezza, oltre ed accanto alla tradizione agostiniana, erede del mondo greco, è pensato secondo un’altra grande possibilità, quella dell’estetica propriamente cristologica, quale Tommaso d’Aquino l’ha sviluppata, assumendola nella potenza del suo genio creatore pur senza trascurare l’altra. Questa via può essere riassunta nella formula semplice e densa, che esprime la bellezza

come “crocefisso amore”. La chiave interpretativa del momento estetico non è qui l’abisso, l’indicibile ulteriorità, la trascendenza misteriosa e raccolta. Qui la bellezza abita in un luogo, in un frammento: qui essa si nasconde “*sub contraria specie*” nel volto di Colui davanti al quale ci si copre la faccia, e che pure è il volto del più bello dei figli degli uomini (cf. Is 53,3 e Sal 44,3). È la via cristologica, la via della meditazione sulla bellezza costruita a partire dal frammento che è la Croce, vero “*verbum abbreviatum*” dell’intera rivelazione di Dio. È la via che ispira in maniera grandiosa la ricerca di Tommaso d’Aquino, nel movimento dall’apocalisse di una bellezza estatica, concentrata sull’eros dell’amore divino come rapimento verso l’a-di-sopra-di-tutto e l’al-di-fuori-di-tutto, alla tragicità del “*mysterium paschale*”, dove la morte è morte, nel mondo come in Dio, perché la vita sia vita.

Tommaso riconosce il luogo proprio e caratterizzante della bellezza nel Verbo incarnato. Scrive nella *Pars I* della *Summa Theologiae*¹⁸: “*Pulchritudo habet similitudinem cum proprii Filii*” — “La bellezza ha a che fare con ciò che è proprio del Figlio”. Ed aggiunge a spiegazione di quest’affermazione netta, decisa, che perché ci sia bellezza occorrono tre cose, l’*integritas*, la *proportio* e la *claritas*: “*Nam ad pulchritudinem tria requiruntur. Primo quidem, integritas sive perfectio... Et debita proportio sive consonantia. Et iterum claritas*” — “Tre cose richiede dunque la bellezza: integrità o perfezione... debita proporzione o armonia. E luminosità”. Tommaso riconosce la presenza di questi tre aspetti esattamente nel Figlio inviato dal Padre, nel Verbo incarnato e crocefisso. La bellezza ha anzitutto a che fare con l’*integritas*, con quella *perfectio* che è realizzazione compiuta della cosa: “*Perfectio est forma totius, quae ex integritate partium consurgit*” — “La bellezza è la forma del tutto, che sorge dall’integrità delle parti”¹⁹. Nella bellezza è il tutto che si affaccia: “L’integrità dell’opera appare solo a chi sappia vedere il tutto nell’atto di animare le parti, di costruirsele e reclamarle e ordinarle”²⁰. Così, nel Verbo incarnato è la totalità del mistero divino che si rivela, è la natura divina che si rende accessibile nella persona del Figlio, che ha assunto la natura umana: “*Quantum igitur ad primum, similitudinem habet cum proprio Filii, in quantum est Filius habens in se vere et perfecte naturam Patris*” — “Riguardo all’integrità, essa riguarda ciò che è proprio del Figlio, in quanto il Figlio ha in sé in maniera vera e perfetta la natura del Padre”. Tommaso è troppo profondamente discepolo dell’eredità classica per non percepire questo elemento di verità che la cultura greca ha consegnato anche alla fede cristiana: quando si ha a che fare col bello non ci si accontenta dell’interruzione, del frammento. La bellezza è rapsodia

¹³ *Ibid.*, “*At ego virum intrinsecus oculatum, et invisibiliter videntem non desinam commonere cur ista placeant, ut iudex esse audeat ipsius delectationis humanae... Hic mihi sine dubitatione respondebitur, ideo delectare quia pulchra sunt*”.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, “*Quaeram ergo deinceps, quare sint pulchra; et si titubabitur, subiciam, utrum ideo quia similes sibi partes sunt, et aliqua copulatione ad unam convenientiam rediguntur*”.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 39,72: “*Quaere in corporis voluptate quid teneat, nihil aliud invenies quam convenientiam: nam si resistentia pariant dolorem, convenientia pariunt voluptatem*”.

¹⁶ *Conf.*, IV, 13, 20: “*Et animadvertendam et videbam in ipsis corporibus aliud esse quasi totum et ideo pulchrum, aliud autem, quod ideo deceret, quoniam apte accommodaretur alicui, sicut pars corporis ad universum suum aut calciamentum ad pedem*”.

¹⁷ *De vera religione* 18,35: “*Neque enim frustra tam speciosissimum, quam etiam formosissimum in laude ponitur*”.

¹⁸ *Summa Theologica* I q. 39 a. 8 c. Sull’estetica di San Tommaso cf. U. ECO, *Il problema estetico in Tommaso d’Aquino* (Milano: Bompiani, 1982²), dove l’Autore riprende e valuta a distanza di anni la sua tesi di laurea, pubblicata nel 1956. Sull’estetica medievale resta prezioso E. de BRUYNE, *Études d’esthétique médiévale* (Paris: A. Michel, 1998²) 3 voll..

¹⁹ *Summa Theologica*, I q. 73 a. 1c.

²⁰ L. PAREYSON, *Estetica: teoria della formatività* (Torino: Edizioni di “Filosofia”, 1954) 284.

evocatrice di totalità. Il senso dell'*integritas*, della *perfectio*, il fascino che il πᾶν esercita sull'anima greca, continua a vivere nell'ethos dell'Occidente. Tommaso lo sa bene, e non ha difficoltà a riconoscere nel Verbo fatto carne la totalità, sapendo tuttavia che questo riconoscimento apporta una fondamentale modifica all'idea stessa del tutto: non si tratta più della totalità chiusa di un'indicibile alterità; ciò con cui si ha invece a che fare è la totalità aperta, ospitale, è il tutto che accoglie ciò che è altro da sé.

Questo tutto "aperto" si manifesta come tale venendo ad affacciarsi nella storia secondo due vie, che Tommaso riconosce proprie della "re-velatio": la via della *proportio* e quella della *claritas*. Attraverso l'approfondimento di questi due aspetti viene a delinearsi l'idea della bellezza secondo Tommaso d'Aquino: si potrebbe dire che il bello è il "Tutto nel frammento" — "*das Ganze im Fragment*" (Hans Urs von Balthasar). Non il Tutt'altro, separato e straniero rispetto al frammento, né il frammento isolato e caduco rispetto al Tutto, ma questa assente presenza, questa presenza assente che l'ossimoro segnala. Come può il Tutto abitare nel frammento? Anche qui Tommaso attinge ai due mondi, che sono le due anime della sua vita: l'appartenenza alla cultura dell'Occidente greco-latino e la fedele testimonianza del messaggio biblico, ebraico-cristiano. Ecco allora le parole chiave: *proportio* e *claritas*. *Proportio*: il Tutto è presente nel frammento quando il frammento riproduce nell'armonia delle parti, nella proporzione e consonanza di esse, l'armonia del Tutto. È la via per la quale la bellezza è "forma", e quindi armonia di rapporti, tanto che il latino chiama anche "*formosus*" ciò che è bello: è la via agostiniana, erede anche dell'anima greca. Bello è il frammento che mantiene in sé il rapporto delle parti del Tutto, analogamente riproducendolo, forma da forma, misura da misura: "L'aspetto costitutivo della bellezza per Tommaso... consiste essenzialmente in una condizione di organicità"²¹. Così è bello il Figlio fatto carne, "*Verbum abbreviatum*" del "*Verbum aeternum*", icona dell'invisibile, Parola che trasmette nelle nostre parole un'eco fedele dell'eterno dirsi del divino Silenzio: la *proportio* "*convenit cum proprio Filii, in quantum est imago expressa Patris. Unde videmus quod aliqua imago dicitur esse pulchra, si perfecte repraesentat rem*" — la proporzione "corrisponde a ciò che è proprio del Figlio, in quanto egli è l'immagine espressa del Padre. Di qui si desume che qualunque immagine può dirsi bella, se perfettamente ripresenta/rappresenta l'oggetto". La "*re-praesentatio*" del Tutto nella forma del frammento si compie cioè nel duplice senso di "ri-presentarne" le proporzioni, pur nell'assenza della compiuta Presenza, e di "rappresentarne" l'armonia, in quanto presenza di una comunque irrapresentabile Assenza.

L'altra via per cui il Tutto viene ad abitare nel frammento, producendo l'evento della bellezza, è per Tommaso la *claritas*: qui non si tratta più della totalità che si affaccia nell'armonia delle parti, ma di un'irruzione di essa. È come un risplendere, un brillare nella notte, un trapassare il frammento fatto trasparenza di luce: il Tutto non si offre più solo come proporzione riflessa, ma anche come irradiazione, abisso che si schiude e che trapassa,

silenzio donde viene la parola e a cui essa apre. È il bello come *splendor*: splendido è il bello. È il bello come irruzione: fulgente, irradiante, sfolgorante è il bello. Questa bellezza Tommaso la riconosce attuata nell'evento dell'amore del Figlio incarnato, dove la luce splende nelle tenebre: la *claritas* "*convenit cum proprio Filii, in quantum est Verbum, quod quidem lux est, et splendor intellectus*" — la luminosità "corrisponde a ciò che è proprio del Figlio, in quanto egli è il Verbo, luce e splendore dell'intelligenza". Il Tutto si fa presente nel Verbo incarnato come "splendore" della gloria del Padre, in una circolarità piena — tipica peraltro del pensiero medioevale — fra "momento estetico" e "momento teofanico"²².

La meditazione di Tommaso sulla bellezza ha unito dunque l'anima greca, con la sua ansia di coniugare il molteplice all'ordinata presenza dell'Uno, e l'anima ebraico-cristiana, con la sua fede nel Dio della storia, in quel Dio vivente, che irrompe nel tempo come fuoco divorante e parla le parole degli uomini e stringe alleanza con loro, fedele alle Sue promesse fino al farsi carne del Figlio, in Lui autodestinandosi per sempre alla creatura consapevole e libera, chiamata a rispondere al patto col patto. "*Ad rationem pulchri... concurrunt et claritas et debita proportio*" — "A definire il bello concorrono sia la luminosità che la proporzione dovuta"²³. La forma da sola non basta, perché può scadere in estetismo, vuota idolatria del frammento isolato dal tutto: ma anche lo splendore da solo è insufficiente, perché è solo attraversando una forma e trasfigurandola dal di dentro che il Tutto fa irruzione nel tempo, e il frammento diventa finestra sul mistero più grande, terreno d'avvento dell'eternità. Si potrà perfino schematizzare nel gioco dello splendore e della forma l'intera storia dell'estetica, e non solo dell'estetica teologica:

"L'apparizione, come rivelazione della profondità, è indissolubilmente e allo stesso tempo presenza reale della profondità, del tutto, e rimando reale, al di là di se stessa, a questa profondità. È possibile che, nelle diverse epoche della storia dello spirito, si sottolinei una volta il primo ed un'altra volta il secondo aspetto, una volta il compimento classico (della forma che afferra la profondità) ed un'altra volta l'infinità romantica (della forma che trascende verso la profondità). Sia l'uno che l'altra sono tuttavia inseparabili ed assieme costituiscono la figura fondamentale dell'essere. Noi 'scorgiamo' la forma, ma quando la scorgiamo realmente, non solo come forma disciolta, bensì come profondità che si manifesta in essa, allora la vediamo come splendore e gloria dell'essere. Guardando questa profondità veniamo 'incantati' da essa e in essa 'rapiti', ma (fin quando si tratta del bello) giammai in modo tale da lasciare dietro di noi la forma (orizzontale) per immergerci (verticalmente) nella nuda profondità"²⁴.

²² Cf. *Ibid.*, 29.

²³ II II^{ae} q. 145 a. 2 c. Cf. pure II II^{ae} q. 180 a. 3 ad 3^{um}.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

²¹ U. ECO, *Il problema estetico...*, op. cit., 116.

4. La luce taborica: trasfigurazioni della Bellezza

Un altro approccio teologico alla bellezza è quello dell'Oriente cristiano: esso è caratterizzato dalla nostalgia struggente delle cose ultime, anticipate e promesse nella rivelazione del Signore crocifisso. In questo senso si può dire che è la luce "taborica" a guidare la contemplazione teologica della grande tradizione cristiana orientale, quella luce che risplende dal Tabor della trasfigurazione, dove l'oscurità del cammino del tempo è rischiarata dagli splendori della bellezza che irraggia dall'alto ed è riconoscibile solo per l'occhio della fede. In questo tipo di conoscenza teologica la contemplazione precede e nutre la via speculativa, l'esperienza mistica è fondamento dell'attività intellettuale, la dossologia pervade e plasma l'esercizio del "logos": "Non è la conoscenza che illumina il mistero, è il mistero che illumina la conoscenza. Noi possiamo conoscere solo grazie alle cose che non conosceremo mai"²⁵. La tenebra luminosa, caratteristica del mistero rivelato, bacia della sua luce tutte le cose: in essa ci è dato raggiungere la profondità nascosta di tutto ciò che esiste.

La luce, che si irradia dal profondo della creazione originaria e sempre in atto e risplende in pienezza nella redenzione, unifica l'inizio e il compimento, come la trama nascosta che custodisce nell'essere tutto ciò che esiste. Emergono così le linee di una "metafisica della luce", in cui tutto acquista il suo posto originario e destinale:

"Il primo giorno della creazione... non è il primo, ma l'uno, l'unico, fuori serie. È l'*alfa* che già porta e chiama il suo *omega*, l'ottavo giorno dell'accordo finale, il Pleroma. Questo primo giorno è il canto gioioso del Cantico dei Cantici di Dio stesso, lo sprizzare folgorante del 'sia la Luce!'... La Luce iniziale, 'all'inizio' nel senso assoluto, *in-principio*, è la rivelazione più sconvolgente del Volto di Dio. 'Sia la Luce' significa per il mondo in potenza: sia la Rivelazione e dunque il Rivelatore, *venga lo Spirito Santo!* Il Padre pronuncia la sua Parola e lo Spirito la manifesta, egli è la *Luce della Parola*"²⁶.

La luce dell'inizio e dell'ottavo giorno non è altro che la partecipazione misteriosa alla vita della Trinità divina, grembo e custodia di tutto ciò che esiste:

"La potenza dell'amore divino contiene l'Universo e del caos fa il Cosmo, la Bellezza. Normalmente, ogni vivente è teso verso il Sole della Bellezza divina... Nella sua essenza l'uomo è creato con la sete del bello, è egli stesso questa sete perché 'immagine di Dio'"²⁷.

²⁵ P. EVDOKÍMOV, *La donna e la salvezza del mondo*, Già e non ancora, 61 (Milano: Jaca Book, 1980) 13.

²⁶ Id., *La teologia della bellezza. Il senso della bellezza e l'icona* (Roma: Paoline, 1971) 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

Alla sua origine e nella sua struttura più profonda l'uomo è sete di bellezza, suscitata e nutrita dalla "luce della Parola", che è lo Spirito: "Il proprio dello Spirito è di essere lo Spirito della Bellezza, la forma delle forme; è nello Spirito che noi partecipiamo alla Bellezza della natura divina"²⁸. Non sapremmo, tuttavia, riconoscere la chiamata della creatura al bello e l'opera che in essa svolge il Consolatore, se non ci fosse stata offerta nel Cristo l'immagine dell'uomo nuovo:

"La figura del Cristo è il volto umano di Dio, lo Spirito Santo riposa su di lui e ci rivela la Bellezza assoluta, divino-umana, che nessun'arte può mai rendere adeguatamente, che l'icona soltanto può suggerire mediante la luce taborica"²⁹.

In questa antropologia della luce Dio è e resta il primo, anche quando si offre come l'amico e il redentore dell'uomo:

"Il mondo è... *relativo*; Dio è... *assoluto*. Essere relativo è esistere in rapporto a ciò che non lo è. È unicamente in questa relazione iconografica all'Assoluto che il mondo trova la sua propria realtà: essere icona, similitudine e somiglianza. L'uomo non potrebbe mai inventare Dio, perché non si può andare verso Dio che partendo da Dio. Se l'uomo pensa Dio, è che si trova già all'interno del pensiero divino, è che già Dio si pensa in lui. L'uomo non potrebbe mai inventare l'icona. Se l'uomo aspira alla Bellezza, è che è già bagnato dalla sua luce, è che egli, nella sua stessa essenza, è sete della Bellezza e sua immagine"³⁰.

La verità sull'uomo non nasce dall'uomo: questi è radicale recettività, accoglienza di un amore che lo ha creato e continuamente lo rinnova nell'atto del dono d'esistere. È l'esatto rovesciamento della prospettiva orgogliosa della modernità occidentale: il protagonismo del soggetto è vinto dallo splendore della luce che sola lo riscatta a se stesso. E la luce viene verso l'uomo, si irradia su di lui, non da lui, come mostra la singolare prospettiva dell'icona:

"Nell'iconografia, spesso la prospettiva è rovesciata. Le linee si dirigono in senso inverso: il punto di prospettiva non è dietro il quadro ma davanti. È il commento iconografico della *metanoia* evangelica. Il suo effetto è impressionante perché ha il suo punto di partenza in colui che contempla l'icona e allora le linee si avvicinano allo spettatore e danno l'impressione che i personaggi vanno a incontrarsi. Il mondo dell'icona è rivolto *verso l'uomo*. Al posto della visione duale degli occhi carnali, secondo il 'punto di fuga' dello spazio decaduto dove tutto si perde in lontananza, è la visione, percepita dall'occhio del cuore,

²⁸ *Ivi.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 274.

dello spazio riscattato che si dilata nell'infinito e dove tutto si ritrova. Il punto di fuga rinchioda, il punto che riavvicina dilata e apre³¹.

L'autosufficienza distrugge l'uomo: la recettività umile e grata della luce, lo esalta e gli consente di raggiungere la bellezza, a cui il suo essere più profondo è proiettato...

In questa economia della luce divina partecipata all'uomo in Cristo, icona del Padre, acquista dunque tutto il suo significato l'*icona*: essa è il frammento ospitale dell'Avvento, il minimo disponibile all'irruzione dell'infinito, la cifra dell'impossibile possibilità, che Dio viene a compiere nel mondo. "L'icona, punto materiale di questo mondo, apre una breccia; il Trascendente vi fa irruzione e le ondate successive della sua presenza trascendono ogni limite e riempiono l'universo"³². Perciò, da una parte, l'icona è canto, lode di gloria che muove verso il divino: "Dossologia è l'icona: essa sfavilla di gioia e canta coi suoi propri mezzi la gloria di Dio. La vera bellezza non ha bisogno di prove. L'icona non dimostra niente, essa mostra: evidenza folgorante"³³. Dall'altra, l'icona è trasparenza di luce, strumento dell'irruzione dell'Altro e del suo splendore taborico: "Sulle icone non c'è mai una sorgente di luce, perché la luce è il loro soggetto: non s'illumina il sole... La contemplazione della Trasfigurazione insegna ad ogni iconografo a dipingere più con la luce che coi colori"³⁴. Così, "l'icona è la visione delle cose che non si vedono. Ancor di più, essa suscita ed attesta la presenza del trascendente, è il luogo teofanico, ma la sua strada ha attraversato il cammino della croce e della morte"³⁵. All'inizio e al compimento di tutte le vie di Dio sta la bellezza dell'amore trinitario, risplendente di luce: di questa luce, che trasfigura il cuore e la storia, l'icona è densa presenza, che invade e rapisce, abitando i giorni feriali con lo splendore della festa. In essa — frammento pervaso dal Tutto, minimo in cui irrompe l'Infinito — si offre l'alba del Regno che viene...

5. Mortale, salvifica Bellezza: una via verso l'unità?

La bellezza è rischio, inseparabilmente salvifica e mortale: fragile è il bello e vive della sua morte, del suo trasgredirsi senza fine. Il Tutto che si offre nel frammento ne rivela col suo "peso" l'inesorabile finitezza: il bello denuncia la fragilità del bello. La bellezza è come la morte, minacciosa nella sua imminenza: è questa la ragione profonda per la quale l'esperienza della bellezza è impastata di malinconia. Il bello ricorda agli abitanti del tempo la caducità della loro dimora, che appare fasciata dal silenzio del nulla. E poiché è sulla vertigine del nulla che si affaccia l'angoscia, si comprende quanto angosciosa possa rivelarsi la bellezza: sospeso sugli abissali silenzi della morte, il cuore umano, sovrastato dal bello, si fa inquieto riguardo al suo destino. Si

³¹ *Ibid.*, 261s.

³² *Ibid.*, 233.

³³ *Ibid.*, 217.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 221.

³⁵ *Id.*, *La donna...*, op. cit., 133.

comprende allora perché la bellezza turbi e venga spesso esorcizzata: si fugge dalla bellezza come si fugge dal pensiero della morte. Il bello viene trasformato in spettacolo, ridotto a bene di consumo, in modo che ne sia esorcizzata la sfida dolorosa e gli uomini siano aiutati a non pensare più, a fuggire la fatica e la passione del vero, per abbandonarsi all'immediatamente fruibile, calcolabile col solo interesse della consumazione immediata.

Ma da principio non fu così: né fu così nel nuovo inizio del mondo, nell'ora di Cristo. Se la bellezza può essere intesa come amore rivelato e nascosto, "crocefisso amore", totalità del Mistero divino rivelata e nascosta nell'evento dell'Abbandono del Figlio eterno, Luce che splende nelle tenebre, è proprio essa l'evento simbolico che tiene insieme lo splendore e la kenosi. La vera bellezza vive dell'analogia cristologica fra l'ultimo e il penultimo, della proporzionalità e della partecipazione pensate a partire dalla discesa kenotica di Dio fin nelle tenebre del Venerdì Santo. È proprio qui che si dischiude il senso più profondo della meditazione teologica sulla bellezza, incontro dei due polmoni del cristianesimo, l'Oriente e l'Occidente. Nel Verbo fatto carne ci è data visibilmente l'irruzione dell'Altro, l'affacciarsi del Silenzio nella Parola fatta carne fino al supremo grido dell'ora nona, l'estasi del Dio vivente innamorato della Sua creatura. Quando l'Altro irrompe nel frammento, infrange l'identità della creatura chiusa in se stessa, che è sempre "cattiva", imprigionante identità, e proprio così la libera e la salva per la vita eterna. Bellezza è allora inseparabilmente lotta e riposo, rottura e "agape". La tradizione cristiana nel suo complesso ci insegna l'inseparabilità di questi momenti, di queste anime: e lo fa alla scuola del Verbo incarnato, il Signore Gesù, dove — una volta per sempre, in pienezza — il Tutto ha abitato il frammento, trapassandolo da parte a parte, verso l'abisso della divinità e verso le opere e i giorni degli uomini. Sulla fragile soglia del crocefisso Amore si scopre lo "sfiorarsi d'ombre" che unisce la morte alla vita, l'eternità al tempo: il Tutto rivela la fragilità del frammento, ma anche la sua infinita dignità.

È così che la bellezza-salvifica, mortale, quale è stata accostata dalla meditazione teologica nella varietà dei suoi momenti e delle sue espressioni — può offrirsi come una via verso l'unità. In quanto nel frammento lascia cogliere ed incontrare il Tutto, la bellezza raccoglie, semplifica, riconduce al centro e al cuore. In questo senso, essa ha una funzione purificatrice ed esercita un'attrazione misteriosa che unifica ciò che è disperso in un movimento di concentrazione sull'essenziale: la contemplazione della bellezza aiuta a distinguere il necessario dal contingente, la Tradizione dalle tradizioni, la Verità dalle opinioni. Questo però non sarebbe ancora sufficiente a parlare della bellezza come possibile via verso l'unità se non ci fosse un duplice dato evangelico, che induce a scoprire nel bello una sfida inquietante per andare oltre le divisioni. Il primo dato consiste nel fatto che il Pastore unico, che dovrà ricondurre tutte le pecore all'unità del Suo gregge, è presentato nel Vangelo come il bel Pastore: ὁ ποιμὴν ὁ καλός (cf. Gv 10,11). L'ora pasquale rivelerà il volto di questa bellezza nell'Uomo dei dolori che si consegna alla morte per amore nostro:

“Due flauti suonano in modo diverso — scrive Agostino —, ma uno stesso Spirito vi soffia dentro. Dice il primo: ‘Egli è il più bello tra i figli degli uomini’ (Sal 45,3); e il secondo, con Isaia, dice: ‘Lo abbiamo visto: non aveva più né bellezza, né decoro’ (Is 53,2). I due flauti sono suonati da un unico Spirito: essi dunque non discordano nel suono. Non devi rinunciare a sentirli, ma cercare di capirli. Interrogiamo l’apostolo Paolo per sentire come ci spiega la perfetta armonia dei due flauti. Suoni il primo: ‘Il più bello tra i figli degli uomini’; ‘benché avesse la forma di Dio, non considerò un tesoro geloso la sua uguaglianza con Dio’ (Fil 2,6). Ecco in che cosa sorpassa in bellezza i figli degli uomini. Suoni anche il secondo flauto: ‘Lo abbiamo visto: non aveva più né bellezza, né decoro’: questo perché ‘spogliò se stesso, assumendo la condizione di servo e divenendo simile agli uomini; apparso in forma umana’ (Fil 2,7). ‘Egli non aveva bellezza né decoro’ per dare a te bellezza e decoro. Quale bellezza? Quale decoro? L’amore della carità, affinché tu possa correre amando e amare correndo... Guarda a Colui dal quale sei stato fatto bello”³⁶.

È l’amore con cui ci ha amati che trasfigura “l’uomo dei dolori davanti a cui ci si copre la faccia” (Is 53,3) nel “più bello dei figli degli uomini”: il crocefisso amore è la bellezza che salva. Se la via dell’unità è anzitutto quella della conversione rinnovata di tutti i credenti a Cristo, allora la bellezza del Suo amore crocefisso è per eccellenza via di unità: nel crocefisso amore i discepoli incontrano l’Amato e si lasciano raccogliere da Lui nell’unità di un solo gregge e di un solo Pastore. L’ecumenismo spirituale — fondato sulla permanente conversione al Signore e Maestro Gesù — trova nella bellezza della Sua carità di Crocefisso il cammino su cui avanzare, il misterioso richiamo cui sempre di nuovo corrispondere.

C’è però anche un altro dato evangelico che aiuta a riconoscere nella bellezza una via verso l’unità: a notarlo è Pavel Florenskij, il “Leonardo da Vinci russo”, genio della scienza e del pensiero teologico e filosofico, sacerdote di Cristo, morto martire della barbarie staliniana. Commentando Mt 5,16 — “Così risplenda la vostra luce davanti agli uomini, perché vedano le vostre opere buone e rendano gloria al vostro Padre che è nei cieli” — egli osserva che

“i vostri atti buoni” non vuole affatto dire ‘atti buoni’ in senso filantropico e moralistico: ὑμῶν τὰ καλὰ ἔργα vuol dire ‘atti belli’, rivelazioni luminose e armoniose della personalità spirituale — soprattutto un volto luminoso, bello, d’una bellezza per cui si espande all’esterno ‘l’interna luce’ dell’uomo, e allora, vinti dall’irresistibilità di questa luce, ‘gli uomini’ lodano il Padre celeste, la cui immagine sulla terra così sfolgora”³⁷.

³⁶ Sant’ AGOSTINO, *In Io. Ep.*, IX, 9.

³⁷ P.A. FLORENSKIJ, *Le porte regali. Saggio sull’icona*, Piccola biblioteca Adepfi, 40 (Milano: Adelphi, 1999⁷) 50.

Se la testimonianza comune è via preziosa per l’unità, essa è inseparabile dallo sfolgorio della bellezza degli atti del discepolo interiormente trasfigurato dallo Spirito: dove la carità si irradia, lì s’affaccia la bellezza che salva, lì è resa lode al Padre celeste, lì cresce l’unità dei discepoli dell’Amato, uniti a Lui come discepoli del Suo amore crocefisso e risorto.

È lo stesso Florenskij a indicare la via della bellezza come luogo del misterioso incontro del tempo e dell’eternità, grazie a cui si costruisce l’unità voluta dal Signore. Ricordando una delle sue celebrazioni nella Chiesa sulla collina Makovec, rivolta verso il grande Monastero (la “Lavra”) di Sergiev Possad, cuore del cristianesimo russo, così descrive la paradossale bellezza della liturgia, simbolo dei simboli del mondo, in cui il cielo dimora sulla terra e l’eternità mette le sue tende nel tempo, trasformando lo spazio nel “tempio santo, misterioso, che brilla di una bellezza celeste”:

“Il Signore misericordioso mi concesse di stare presso il suo trono. Scendeva la sera. I raggi dorati danzavano esultanti, il sole appariva come un inno solenne all’Eden. L’occidente impallidiva rassegnato, e verso di esso era rivolto l’altare, posto sulla sommità della collina. Una catena di nuvole si stendeva sulla Lavra come un filo di perle. Dalla finestra sopra l’altare erano visibili le nitide lontananze e la Lavra dominava come una Gerusalemme celeste. Al Vespero il canto ‘Luce di pace’ sigillava il tramonto. Il sole morente si abbassava sontuoso. Si intrecciavano e si scioglievano le melodie antiche come il mondo; si intrecciavano e si scioglievano i nastri d’incenso azzurro. La lettura del canone pulsava ritmicamente. Qualcosa nella penombra tornava alla mente, qualcosa che ricordava il Paradiso, e la tristezza per la sua perdita veniva trasformata misteriosamente dalla gioia del ritorno. E al canto ‘Gloria a Te che ci hai mostrato la luce’ accadeva significativamente che la tenebra esterna, pure essa luce, calava, ed allora la Stella della Sera brillava attraverso la finestra dell’altare e nel cuore di nuovo sorgeva la gioia che non svanisce, quella gioia del crepuscolo della grotta. Il mistero della sera si univa con il mistero del mattino ed entrambi erano una cosa sola”³⁸.

Tentare di pensare “questa” Bellezza — la Bellezza che salva, sperimentata lì dove l’eternità mette le sue tende nel tempo — e di portarla al centro dell’attenzione di tutti coloro cui sta a cuore il cammino dell’unità voluta dal Signore, è stato lo scopo delle riflessioni proposte: solo un inizio, certo, e tuttavia — forse — una sfida e una promessa per tutti...

³⁸ P.A. FLORENSKIJ, “Sulla collina Makovec” (20. 5. 1913) in Id., *Il cuore cherubico. Scritti teologici e mistici*, L’anima del mondo, 25 (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1999) 260s.



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Centro Conferences

Dominus Iesus: An Ecclesiological Critique

by

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(Lecture given at the **Centro Pro Unione**, Thursday, 11 January 2001)

I. Introduction

It is a particular honor for me to be lecturing this evening in such an historic place. I am told that this hall functioned in the 16th and 17th centuries as a music room for the Doria Pamphilj family, and that the great Antonio Vivaldi performed his celebrated and still extraordinarily popular “The Four Seasons” here. It was the Pamphilj family that gave us Pope Innocent X. Four days ago the Pamphiljs would have marked the anniversary of Innocent’s death, on January 7, 1655. He had been Bishop of Rome for just over a decade. Innocent’s body remained in the sacristy of the Quirinale Palace for a few days after his death because his sister-in-law, Donna Olimpia Maidalchini, refused to pay the funeral expenses. She was a strong-willed woman who had been known around the city as “la popessa” (an epithet that anticipated by three centuries the label given Pius XII’s confidant, Mother Pasqualina). Olimpia was also maliciously referred to as “Olim pia”—her name divided into two Latin words meaning “formerly pious”.

Innocent X was eventually buried in St. Peter’s with simple ceremonies, but his remains were transferred in 1730 by a distant nephew, Cardinal Camillo Pamphilj, to the Pamphilj family crypt in Sant’Agnese in Agone, here on the Piazza Navona.

Cardinal Giovanni Battista Pamphilj’s election as Bishop of Rome had something in common with the recently protracted presidential election in the United States. Pamphilj was elected on September 15, 1644, at age seventy, in a conclave that lasted thirty-seven days because of the torrid Roman heat and the outbreak of malaria among the cardinals. Cardinal Pamphilj took the name Innocent in honor of his uncle, Cardinal Innocenzo del Bufalo.

It may also be a matter of some interest that Innocent succeeded Urban VIII, a Barberini and the ninth-longest reigning pope in history, who was in office for almost twenty-one years to the day. This succession was yet one more instance where a pope who had a relatively long reign was followed by someone very different from himself, contrary to the conventional wisdom that such popes are succeeded by photocopies of themselves because they had appointed so many of the cardinal-electors. In 1644, the cardinal-electors wanted someone less pro-French than Urban VIII had been. Although Pamphilj’s election was opposed by the French crown, Cardinal Jules Mazarin’s veto arrived too late.

Alas, there was no Federal Express, or modems, or fax machines, or telephones in those days. In yet another parallel with the current pontificate, Innocent X proclaimed a Jubilee Year, in 1650, that proved to be a great success.

This room acquired more recent significance during the Second Vatican Council, as the place where the council’s *periti*, or theological experts, met on a regular basis with the Protestant, Anglican, and Orthodox observers. Many conferences were held here as well as substantive discussions of theological issues related to the various conciliar documents. Cardinal Jan Willebrands, president emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, has said that the concept of a hierarchy of truths, referred to in article 11 of the council’s Decree on Ecumenism, emerged from discussions in this very place. My hope is that, even if this evening’s lecture should lack the grace and staying-power of Vivaldi’s masterpiece, it will at least honor the ecumenical commitments of those who labored so long and so successfully here during the historic days of Vatican II.

II. Brief Overview

My presentation this evening is on the topic of the recent Vatican declaration on Jesus Christ, the Church, and salvation. I shall first summarize the principal elements of the declaration “*Dominus Iesus*”: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church,” issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on September 5. In order not to prejudice the subsequent ecclesiological evaluation, I shall rely mainly on the Congregation’s own synthesis of its document. Then I shall review a representative sample of the reactions to the document, both within and outside the Catholic Church. In the third, and major, part of the paper I shall offer an ecclesiological critique of the document, indicating some of its strengths as well as its more problematical aspects, and suggesting how the document might have avoided some of the severest criticisms it has received. Finally, I shall offer an estimation of the document’s shelf-life, and indicate in the most schematic of fashions where the ecumenical and interreligious dialogues should move in the aftermath of *Dominus Iesus*.

III. *Dominus Iesus*: A Synthesis

Although the declaration *Dominus Iesus* is structured in six

sections, it can be divided, for purposes of analysis, into two principal parts. The first pertains to the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions; the second, to the relationship between the Catholic Church and other Christian churches and so-called ecclesial communities (a distinction to which I shall return in due course).

In the first part the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is concerned, according to its own synthesis, with a perceived tendency on the part of some unnamed Catholic theologians to argue that “all religions may be equally valid ways of salvation”¹. The declaration refers to such theories as “relativistic” and “pluralistic” because, among other things, those theories question “the definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus,...the inseparable personal unity between the eternal Word and Jesus of Nazareth,” the universality of Christ’s redemptive work on behalf of the human community, “the universal salvific mission of the Church, the inseparability—while recognizing the distinction—of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Christ and the Church, and the subsistence of the one Church of Christ in the Catholic Church”. The document asserts that such theories have become “quite common” in our day, but without offering any specific examples. The declaration’s stated intention is “to reiterate and clarify certain truths of the faith in the face of problematic and even erroneous propositions”.

Thus, “against the theory of the limited, incomplete or imperfect character of the revelation of Jesus Christ,” the declaration insists that “since Jesus is true God and true man, his words and deeds manifest the totality and definitiveness of the revelation of the mystery of God, even if the depth of that mystery remains in itself transcendent and inexhaustible”.

“Against the thesis of a twofold salvific economy, that of the eternal Word, which would be universal and valid also outside the Church, and that of the incarnate Word, which would be limited to Christians, the declaration reasserts the unicity of the salvific economy of the one incarnate Word, Jesus Christ” and insists that his paschal mystery is “the sole and universal source of salvation for all humanity”. Moreover, the salvific work of the Holy Spirit cannot be separated from that of the risen Christ, because there is “a single Trinitarian economy, willed by the Father and realized in the mystery of Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit”.

Against the view that Christ can be separated from his Church, the document insists that there is “a historical continuity between the Church founded by Christ and the Catholic Church”. Following the council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 8, the declaration reaffirms the teaching that the one Church of Christ “subsists in” in the Catholic Church. Whatever “efficacy” non-Catholic churches and ecclesial communities may have is derived “from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church” (Decree on Ecumenism, n. 3). According to the declaration, to be regarded as a church “in the proper sense” rather than as an ecclesial community, a non-Catholic body must possess a “valid episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the eucharistic mystery...”. Such churches are “in a certain commu-

nion, albeit imperfect, with the Catholic Church”.

While recognizing that the kingdom of God cannot simply be identified with the Church in its visible and social reality, the declaration insists upon “the intimate connection” between them. But modern theories, the declaration asserts, tend to divorce the two realms in order to create an area outside of, and even independently of, the Church where God’s saving activity is at work on behalf of non-Christians. While not denying the universal salvific will of God, the declaration argues that such a truth must be maintained together with the equally important truth that “the one Christ is the mediator and way of salvation” for all. We do not know how the salvific grace of God comes to individual non-Christians. The Second Vatican Council limited itself to the statement that God bestows salvation “in ways known to himself” (*Ad Gentes*, n. 7). “At the same time, however, it is clear that it would be contrary to the Catholic faith to consider the Church as a way of salvation alongside those constituted by other religions”. Accordingly, “one cannot attribute to these [other religions]...a divine origin or an *ex opere operato* salvific efficacy, which is proper to the Christian sacraments. Furthermore, it cannot be overlooked that other rituals, insofar as they follow from superstitions or other errors constitute an obstacle to salvation”.

Therefore, “with the coming of Christ, God has willed that the Church founded by him be the instrument of salvation for all humanity. This truth does not lessen the sincere respect which the Church has for the religions of the world, but at the same time it rules out in a radical way that mentality of indifferentism” which holds that one religion is as good as another. On the contrary, as the council’s Declaration on Religious Liberty proclaimed, “We believe that this one true religion continues to exist in the catholic and apostolic Church, to which the Lord entrusted the task of spreading it among all people” (n. 1).

So much for the Congregation’s own synthesis of *Dominus Iesus*. We move now to a consideration of some of the reactions to the document.

IV. Reactions to the Declaration

The least accurate reactions to the declaration were shaped by some initial reports in the media that were apparently based on excerpts rather than the full text of the document or that may have been skewed by the theological limitations and/or biases of the reporters themselves or their sources. In any case, many people, inside and outside the Catholic Church, were led to believe that the Vatican had issued a document repudiating the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and reversing the course of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and cooperation that had occurred in the post-conciliar decades. Many thought that the Catholic Church was teaching once again that non-Catholics cannot be saved. Thousands of Catholics were reported to be confused, embarrassed, or angry about the declaration. Their non-Catholic counterparts were troubled at best, resentful at worst.

One of the worst instances of misrepresentation came in a column by an otherwise insightful and well-informed Catholic author, Paul Wilkes. Writing in the Sunday edition of *The Boston Globe* (9/10/00), five days after the release of the document, Wilkes declared that “the document unabashedly proclaims that

¹ The synthesis is available in *Origins* 30, 14 (September 14, 2000) 220-22.

'the Church of Christ...continues to exist only in the Catholic Church'. It not only assigns other believers, including Protestant Christian ones—second-class citizenship, but bars them from the gates of heaven, despite their most sincere intentions and good lives. As such, it sends an arrow into the hearts of those who believe that God may indeed have charted a number of paths to him"². The declaration may have many problematical aspects, but excluding non-Catholics from salvation is not one of them.

What most of the document's critics complained about—both inside and outside the Catholic Church—was its polemical tone and narrowness of vision more than its central doctrinal affirmations. The Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, conceded that "this document breaks no new ground. But neither does it reflect fully the deeper understanding that has been achieved through ecumenical dialogue and cooperation during the past thirty years". The idea that Anglican and other churches are not "proper churches," Archbishop Carey wrote, "seems to question the considerable ecumenical gains we have made". He cited the meeting of senior Anglican and Roman Catholic leaders in Toronto earlier in the year—a meeting he had chaired jointly with Cardinal Edward Cassidy, current president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Carey noted the "striking advances" made at that meeting "in acknowledging substantial agreement on a range of issues and in proposing a new Joint Unity Commission to carry things forward". "Not for one moment," the Archbishop of Canterbury concluded, does the Church of England or the world-wide Anglican Communion "accept that its orders of ministry and Eucharist are deficient in any way" or that they are not "a part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ, in whose name it serves and bears witness, here and round the world"³. In a separate, unpublished communique he made clear that ecumenism does not mean "the return of the prodigal to his former home, but the return of us all in humility and penitence to the Lord of a Church which includes us all".

There were similarly critical reactions from others outside the Catholic Church. Martin Marty, emeritus professor of church history at the University of Chicago, a Lutheran and one of America's leading ecumenists, characterized the document as "a missed opportunity". Instead of offering persuasive reasons for its positions, it relies on arguments from authority. And in taking what he calls "polemical swings" at Catholics who are trying to provide new formulations, the Congregation "has not contributed to clarity". While dialogue will continue, Dr. Marty concluded, it will do so "under the sign of regret". Indeed, "*Dominus Iesus* inspires regret, not rage, for the missed opportunity it represents"⁴.

In a letter to Cardinal Cassidy, two leading figures in the Disciples of Christ, the Rev. Robert Welsh, president of the Disciples Council on Christian Unity, and the Rev. Paul Crow,

co-moderator since 1977 of the Disciples of Christ-Roman Catholic International Commission for Dialogue, characterized the language of the declaration as "harsh" and its effect as bringing "pain" to members of their denomination. "It seems inconsistent to us," they wrote, "for the Roman Catholic Church to proclaim that ecumenism is central to the Church's life and witness...and then to issue a statement that does not reflect that basic commitment"⁵.

Setri Nyomi, general secretary of the Geneva-based World Alliance of Reformed Churches also wrote to Cardinal Cassidy on behalf of his denomination. So dismayed and disappointed was the Alliance with *Dominus Iesus* that it considered calling off a formal dialogue in Rome scheduled for September 13-19. "This declaration," Nyomi wrote, "seems to go against the spirit of Vatican II as we understand it, and the progress made in relationships and dialogues since then....Among other things, it raises questions concerning how we can continue in dialogue with integrity—trusting and respecting one another". He expressed greatest concern about the document's statement regarding what constitutes a church in the proper sense of the word, as opposed to an ecclesial community.⁶

Catholicos Aram I, head of the house of Cilicia, based in Beirut, one of the two branches of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and moderator of the central and executive committees of the World Council of Churches indicated that he had no problem with the substance of the document, but he faulted it for its unecumenical language.⁷

Similarly critical reactions were forthcoming from the Jewish community. Rabbi Leon Klenicki, director of interreligious affairs of the Anti-Defamation League in the United States, called it "a step backwards in the dialogue relationship". Rabbi Joel Berger, speaking for the German rabbinical conference, wrote that "whereas Judaism had been seen as a sister religion, it has now been thrown out of the family"⁸. The executive director of the Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations in Cambridge, Edward Kessler, also characterized the declaration as "a step backwards," accusing it of portraying non-Catholics as "inferior and unworthy". In response, Eugene Fisher, associate director of the U.S. Catholic bishops' committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, conceded that the document is "a public relations disaster of the first order"⁹.

But the negative reactions were not limited to non-Catholics. Cardinal Cassidy himself told Rome's *Corriere della Sera* that

⁵ "Disciples of Christ Leaders Criticize *Dominus Iesus*," *National Catholic Reporter* (November 17, 2000) 11 .

⁶ "Reformed Churches Official Questions Catholic Ecumenical Commitment," *Origins* 30, 16 (September 28, 2000) 255-56.

⁷ "Vatican Document Still Raising Ire," *The Gazette* (Montreal) (October 21, 2000) 17.

⁸ "Negative Reaction to *Dominus Iesus* Continues," *America* (October 7, 2000) 5.

⁹ E. KESSLER & E. FISHER, "A Dialogue of Head and Heart," *The Tablet* (November 18, 2000) 1557, 1558.

² "Only Catholics Need Apply," p. f1.

³ Public statement issued on September 5, 2000. There was a similar reaction from Robin Eames, primate of the Church of Ireland, in *The Irish Times* (December 19, 2000) 16.

⁴ "Rome & Relativism: '*Dominus Iesus*' & the CDF," *Commonweal* 27, 18 (October 20, 2000) 12-13.

“neither the time nor the language of the document were opportune”. Bishop Walter Kasper, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, said that, while he agreed with the basic principles in the document, it lacked “the necessary sensitivity.”¹⁰

Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, Archbishop of Milan, described the document as “theologically rather dense, peppered with quotations, and not easy to grasp”. He, too, faulted its tone, which “risks being rather strong”. He suggested that the document should be read in the light of “the wider and more encouraging framework” of the 1995 papal encyclical, *Ut unum sint*. Cardinal Roger Mahony, Archbishop of Los Angeles, also cited the document’s tone as a possible source of difficulty. Its tone, he wrote in his weekly column for *The Tidings*, the archdiocesan newspaper, “may not fully reflect the deeper understanding that has been achieved through ecumenical and interreligious dialogues over these last 30 years or more”—a point made earlier by the Archbishop of Canterbury and others. Cardinal Mahony also deplored the distortions of the document reflected in some of the media coverage, citing in particular a headline in the *Los Angeles Times*, “Vatican Declares Catholicism Sole Path to Salvation” (September 6, 2000).¹¹

Like Cardinal Mahony, Rembert Weakland, Archbishop of Milwaukee, complained in his own weekly column in his archdiocesan newspaper about the local press coverage. Milwaukee’s *Journal Sentinel* carried the headline, “Vatican Insists Only Faithful Catholics Can Attain Salvation”. Archbishop Weakland also agreed that the document failed to take into account “the enormous progress made after Vatican Council II in the mutual recognition of each other’s baptisms and the ecclesial significance of such recognition”. He continued: “What is disappointing about this document is that so many of our partners in ecumenical dialogues will find its tone heavy, almost arrogant and condescending. To them it is bound to seem out of keeping with the elevated and open tone of the documents of Vatican Council II. It ignores all of the ecumenical dialogues of the last 35 years, as if they did not exist. None of the agreed statements are cited. Has no progress in working toward convergence of theological thought occurred in these 35 years?” Archbishop Weakland asked.¹²

To be sure, some other leading figures in the English-speaking hierarchy provided more positive reactions to the document. Cardinal Francis George, Archbishop of Chicago, applauded its opposition to religious relativism. Cardinal Bernard Law, Archbishop of Boston, characterized the document as a reaffirma-

tion of Catholic teaching.¹³ One of its strongest defenders, Desmond Connell, Archbishop of Dublin, insisted that the document was not unecumenical nor its language ungenerous.¹⁴ Other bishops were more cautious and more nuanced in their praise. William Levada, Archbishop of San Francisco, Theodore McCarrick, the newly named Archbishop of Washington, D.C., and Alexander Brunett, Archbishop of Seattle, are cases in point.¹⁵ The Irish bishops conference also issued a generally positive, but guarded, statement.¹⁶

However, so strong and so widespread have the negative reactions to the document been that the Holy Father himself felt it necessary to respond to them. In remarks during the midday *Angelus* blessing on October 1, John Paul II emphasized that the declaration “does not deny salvation to non-Christians but points to its ultimate source in Christ, in whom man and God are united”. He said that “God gives light to all in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation, granting them salvific grace in ways known to himself”. Moreover, the Holy Father continued, “if the document, together with the Second Vatican Council, declares that ‘the single Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church,’ it does not intend thereby to express scant regard for the other churches and ecclesial communities”. On the contrary, “the Catholic Church...suffers from the fact that true particular churches and ecclesial communities with precious elements of salvation are separated from her. The document thus expresses once again the same ecumenical passion that is the basis of my encyclical *Ut unum sint*. I hope that this declaration, which is close to my heart, can, after so many erroneous interpretations, finally fulfill its function both of clarification and of openness”¹⁷.

¹³ See F. GEORGE, “Opposing Religious Relativism” and B. LAW, “What ‘Dominus Iesus’ Reaffirms,” *Origins* 30, 15 (September 21, 2000) 228, 229-31.

¹⁴ “Connell Says Document is Authentic,” *The Irish Times* (October 5, 2000) 2.

¹⁵ See W. LEVADA, “The Place of Religious Discourse in American Democracy,” T. McCARRICK, “Ways of Misunderstanding This Document,” and A. BRUNETT, “Understanding This Document’s Context and Intent,” *Origins* 30, 15 (September 21, 2000) 231-34.

¹⁶ “Statement of Episcopal Conference,” *The Irish Times* (October 12, 2000) 3.

¹⁷ JOHN PAUL II, “The Purpose of ‘Dominus Iesus,’” *Origins* 30, 19 (October 19, 2000) 299. Cardinal Ratzinger also defended the document against its many critics. In an interview published in the October 8th issue of *Osservatore Romano*, the Cardinal expressed “sadness and disappointment that public reactions, with some praiseworthy exceptions, have completely ignored the true theme of the declaration....The document is meant to be an invitation to all Christians to open themselves again to the recognition of Jesus Christ as Lord and, in that way, to give the Holy Year a profound significance”. Even if its tone and language were problematic, “the text should be explained, not despised,” he insisted. See “Ratzinger Defends *Dominus Iesus*,” *National Catholic Reporter* (October 20, 2000) 10.

¹⁰ “Negative Reaction to *Dominus Iesus* Continues,” *America* (see n. 8, above).

¹¹ “Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue Will Continue,” *The Tidings* (September 15, 2000).

¹² R. WEAKLAND, “On the Document’s Ecumenical Impact,” *Origins* 30, 17 (October 5, 2000) 267.

In an earlier letter to Cardinal Cassidy, but without explicit reference to *Dominus Iesus*, the pope expressed the hope that “the ‘spirit of Assisi’ would not be extinguished, but could spread throughout the world and inspire new witnesses of peace and dialogue”¹⁸. Then, in a speech delivered to members of a formal dialogue commission of Catholics and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, meeting in Rome in mid-September, John Paul II pointed out that, in our dialogue with one another, the call to conversion and the examination of conscience is a responsibility for both sides. Moreover, he insisted, “the commitment of the Catholic Church to ecumenical dialogue is irrevocable”¹⁹.

Unfortunately, for many the tone of *Dominus Iesus* obscures the truth and sincerity of that firm and unequivocal papal commitment. I move now to an evaluation of the document itself.

V. An Ecclesiological Critique

I should say at the outset that this critique of *Dominus Iesus* focuses primarily on its ecclesiological aspects, although it is, for all practical purposes, impossible not to make some references to issues of Christology, Trinitarian theology, and fundamental theology as it applies to the concepts of revelation and faith—all of which topics are addressed in *Dominus Iesus* itself. Given the kinds of criticisms the document has already received, inside and outside the Catholic Church, it should come as no surprise that my own critique will raise some questions about certain aspects of the declaration’s ecclesiological approach. I should like to begin, however, with a few positive comments.

A. Positive Aspects

First, for the most part the declaration does simply reiterate not only traditional Catholic teaching, but also the faith-convictions of a broad cross-section of Christian churches and so-called ecclesial communities. Many of the document’s critics, both inside and outside the Catholic Church, have pointed this out. It is the tone and the narrowness of vision that especially troubles people, and not so much its central doctrinal and biblically-grounded affirmations. Those of us in the mainstream of the Catholic theological tradition can also readily affirm, with *Dominus Iesus* (not to mention the New Testament itself), that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life—the one Redeemer and mediator between God and humankind—and that the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith are one and the same. If I may presume to quote a line from one of my own books, *Catholicism*: “No evolutionary or universal Christology is consistent with the Catholic tradition which breaks the unique and definitive connection between Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ of the cosmos” (p. 531).

Second, *Dominus Iesus* makes a commendably conscious effort to reach out to our Orthodox sisters and brothers when, in its opening article, it reproduces the text of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed without the ecumenically divisive

“*filioque*”. “I believe in the Holy Spirit,” the text reads, “the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father. [Period.] With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified”. The document also refers to the communion of Orthodox churches not only as “particular churches” but also as “true” particular churches. Heretofore, the adjective “true” has been reserved in official documents to the Catholic Church alone.

Third, for the most part if this document had been written and released on the day after the Second Vatican Council adjourned in December 1965, it would probably not have been subject to any significant criticism, except perhaps for its redundancy. *Dominus Iesus* is not simply a throwback to the pre-Vatican II era, as many have charged. It takes into explicit account some of the most ecumenically and interreligiously generous teachings of the council, even if interpreted narrowly rather than broadly, that is, without sufficient regard for the evolution of Catholic thought and pastoral practice over the past thirty-five years.

Fourth, while upholding the inseparability of the kingdom of God and the Church, *Dominus Iesus* also rejects one of the most common ecclesiological errors of the pre-Vatican II period when the declaration insists that “the kingdom of God...is not identified with the Church in her visible and social reality. In fact, ‘the action of Christ and the Spirit outside the Church’s visible boundaries’ must not be excluded” (n. 19).

B. Negative Aspects

First, although *Dominus Iesus* has at least three stated intentions—the setting forth of Catholic doctrine on the matters under consideration, “pointing out some fundamental questions that remain open to further development, and refuting specific positions that are erroneous or ambiguous”—the document ignores the second intention for all practical purposes and lays far too much stress on the third. In the end, it is not a document that invites, much less encourages, further exploration of these difficult issues, but that chooses instead to follow the well-worn path of rejection and condemnation. It is important to note, however, that the rejections and condemnations are not leveled against any individuals or religious communities outside the Catholic Church, but rather against certain unnamed theologians within it. The polemics are inner-directed, not outer-directed. The objects of criticism are not the pastoral leaders and theologians of the Anglican Communion, or of the separated churches of the East, or of the various Protestant denominations.

It almost as if the authors of this document did not expect anyone outside the Catholic Church to read it. Rather, its unnamed *adversarii* seem to be Catholic theologians such as Jacques Dupuis, Paul Knitter, Raimundo Pannikar, Hans Küng, Leonardo Boff, Tissa Balasuriya, and others like them who have been attempting over these past several years, with varying degrees of success, to reformulate a Catholic understanding of salvation outside the Church in the light of our growing consciousness and experience of pluralism, of globalization, of multiculturalism, of the persistent status of Christianity as a tiny, insignificant minority in large sections of the world, especially in Asia, and of the rapid process of de-Christianization in areas where the Church once thrived, especially in portions of Europe,

¹⁸ JOHN PAUL II, “Message to Cardinal Cassidy: Interreligious Dialogue,” *op. cit.*, 298.

¹⁹ JOHN PAUL II, “Commitment to Ecumenism Called Irrevocable,” *Origins* 30, 16 (September 28, 2000) 256.

and not just in Western Europe.

But the tone is not only polemical; it is authoritarian. Where it attempts to construct an argument on behalf of the Church's teaching, it does so on the basis of what some would call a proof-text approach to Sacred Scripture, the documents of the Second Vatican Council, and the pronouncements of Pope John Paul II. The declaration's appeal is almost always to authority and its demand is almost always for obedience. One has only to note the many instances in the text where words are italicized: the complete and definitive character of revelation in Christ "must be *firmly believed*" (n. 5); the proper response to revelation is "*the obedience of faith*" (n. 7); its distinction between theological faith and belief "must be *firmly held*" (n. 7); the doctrine of faith regarding the unicity of the salvific economy "must be *firmly believed*" (nn. 10 and 11); the unicity and universality of our redemption in Christ "must be *firmly believed*" (nn. 13 and 14); the same is said of our acceptance of the unicity of the Church (n. 16); the Catholic faithful "*are required to profess* that there is a historical continuity...between the Church founded by Christ and the Catholic Church" (n. 16); finally, it must be "*firmly believed*" that the Church is necessary for salvation (n. 20). Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, used similar language in his letter of July 28 to the presidents of conferences of Catholic bishops around the world: "such truths require, therefore, irrevocable assent by the Catholic faithful..."²⁰.

Eugene Kennedy, emeritus professor at Loyola University in Chicago and a prolific author, calls attention to this authoritarian, faith-on-command approach in a column published by the Religious News Service soon after the declaration appeared. "Faith, it would seem from a common sense reading of these italicized statements, is our response to a command by an authority. In this declaration, faith belongs to the imperative rather than the subjunctive mode". Kennedy continues: "One hardly needs to possess a degree in theology to conclude that the object of command is obedience rather than faith. To order belief is to diminish belief". The declaration's "presumption that humans can be commanded to believe takes it out of the realm of the believable,"²¹ Kennedy points out.

Second, by not naming names, the document also abdicates its responsibility to give specific examples of what it regards as "erroneous or ambiguous" propositions in the context of the books and articles in which those positions appear, so that others who have read the same texts can judge for themselves whether the criticisms are accurate and fair. Father Francis Clooney, S.J., a specialist on world religions at Boston College, makes the same point with regard to the document's unspecific criticisms of non-Christian religions: "It is reasonable to expect," he writes, "that if religious traditions err, they do so in ways that can be observed. It would have been useful, then, had the declaration given some examples of those gaps, insufficiencies and errors that make traditions demonstrably deficient. While it is not proper to dwell

on the defects of others, once defectiveness has been boldly asserted, we might as well identify more exactly the problems we are told to notice"²².

Third, beyond its failure to take into account the ecumenical and interreligious developments of the past thirty-five years, reflected not only in various theological writings but also and especially in the joint statements of the various national and international ecumenical consultations, *Dominus Iesus* evidently failed to consult broadly and effectively even within the Roman Curia itself. What kind of input was there from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue? It would seem clear that there was no meaningful consultation with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity or its Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. Beyond these three difficulties—its polemical and authoritarian tone, its lack of specificity regarding the objects of criticism, and its apparent lack of broad consultation—the document is problematical, in my judgment, in three ecclesiological areas. The first concerns the way the declaration understands and portrays the distinction between particular churches and ecclesial communities; the second concerns the way it understands and portrays the concept of "Church" itself; and the third problematical area concerns the way the declaration understands and portrays the relationship between the Church and non-Christian religions. I shall take up each of these three issues in sequence.

(a) Particular churches and ecclesial communities

Dominus Iesus makes an important distinction between true particular churches and ecclesial communities (nn. 16-17). True particular churches, it says, "while not existing in perfect communion with the Catholic Church, remain united to her by means of the closest bonds, that is, by apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist...". Ecclesial communities, on the other hand, "have not preserved the valid episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the eucharistic mystery," and therefore "are not churches in the proper sense...". All of the churches of the Anglican Communion and all of the Protestant churches are herein de-churchified in one fell swoop. On the other hand, the declaration reaffirms, with Vatican II, that the individual members of these ecclesial communities "are by baptism incorporated in Christ and thus are in a certain communion, albeit imperfect, with the Church" (n. 17).

Dominus Iesus does not cite a specific conciliar text in support of its own understanding and portrayal of the distinction between true particular churches and ecclesial communities because no such text exists. Indeed, the position taken by *Dominus Iesus*, namely, that the Church of Christ is present only in so-called true particular churches, is at apparent odds with John Paul II's encyclical *Ut unum sint*, which states: "To the extent that these elements [of sanctification and truth] are found in other Christian communities, the one Church of Christ is effectively present in them". One might argue that the CDF's position is also at odds with that of the council itself if one were to adopt the interpreta-

²⁰ J. RATZINGER, "Letter to Bishops' Conferences," *Origins* 30, 14 (September 14, 2000) 220.

²¹ Religious News Service, September 20, 2000.

²² "*Dominus Iesus* and the New Millennium," *America* (October 28, 2000) 17.

tion given by the council's Doctrinal Commission, namely, that these various non-Catholic Christian communities possess "ecclesiastical elements which they have preserved from our common patrimony, and which confer on them a truly ecclesial character. In these communities the one sole Church of Christ is present, albeit imperfectly..."²³.

Father John Hotchkin, executive director of the U.S. Catholic Bishops' committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, pointed out in an address to the Canon Law Society of America this past October that the term "ecclesial communities" is "something of a neologism," coined to cover a span of meanings. Thus, there is no Anglican Church as such, but a communion of churches (the Church of England, the Church of Canada, the Church of Ireland, the Episcopal Church in the USA, for example) which together constitute the Anglican Communion. The same holds true for Lutheranism and the Lutheran World Federation, for Methodism and the World Methodist Council, for the Alliance of Reformed Churches, and so forth.

Indeed, if the council wanted to de-churchify all except the Orthodox and Old Catholics, for example, why did it not refer to the others as simply "Christian" communities rather than "ecclesial" communities? Father Hotchkin cites one of Cardinal Ratzinger's predecessors in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Jérôme Hamer, O.P., who pointed out that there were three variants on the church/community terminology in successive schemata or drafts of the conciliar texts: separated churches and communities (employed in the Decree on Ecumenism, n. 3), Christian communities (used in an earlier draft of the subtitle of the third chapter of the Decree on Ecumenism, and subsequently changed to "churches and ecclesial communities"), and ecclesial communities separated from us (used in the same decree, n. 22). Hamer insisted that the council used this diverse terminology "because it did not wish to prejudge or definitively pronounce on the [validity of the] ordained ministries of those Protestant communities in which it perceived this possible deficiency or defect by stating that they were nonetheless *churches* in the full theological sense of the word. The council did not wish to pre-empt this question, but to leave it open"²⁴. Because the council did decide to leave open the question of the validity of Protestant orders, Hotchkin himself

²³ Cited by Francis A. SULLIVAN, "The Impact of *Dominus Iesus* on Ecumenism," *America* (October 20, 2000) 10-11. Archbishop Rembert Weakland also opposes the interpretation given by *Dominus Iesus*. "In my opinion," he writes, "the documents of Vatican Council II made the role of baptism much more significant [than a valid episcopate and a valid Eucharist] as entrance into the body of Christ and thus into the Church". Weakland cites the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 3, and also the Decree on Ecumenism's application of the word "churches" to characterize the Reformation communities (n. 19). See "On the Document's Ecumenical Impact," *Origins* 30, 17 (October 5, 2000) 267.

²⁴ J. HOTCHKIN, "Canon Law and Ecumenism: Giving Shape to the Future," *Origins* 30, 19 (October 19, 2000) 294-95. Hamer's article, "La terminologie ecclésiologique de Vatican II et les ministères Protestants," appeared in *Documentation catholique* 68 (July 4, 1971) 625-28.

concludes that we can "draw no hard and fast distinction between churches and ecclesial communities as we know them at this time". Unfortunately, *Dominus Iesus* makes just such a hard and fast distinction.

(b) The Church and the churches

Catholic author Paul Wilkes, to whom I referred earlier, asserted in a commentary in *The Boston Globe* that *Dominus Iesus* proclaims that "the Church of Christ...continues to exist only in the Catholic Church". Wilkes, and many others as well, had mis-read the document. *Dominus Iesus* does *not* say that the Church of Christ continues to exist "only" in the Catholic Church; it says that it is only in the Catholic Church that it continues to exist "fully" (n. 16, my emphasis). As Francis Sullivan, S.J., formerly of the Gregorian University and now on the theological faculty of Boston College, pointed out in a subsequent letter to *The Boston Globe*: "The difference between those statements is the difference between the doctrine of Pius XII and that of Vatican II"²⁵.

Indeed, it was the teaching of Pius XII, in his encyclicals *Mystici corporis* and *Humani generis*, that the Catholic Church and the Mystical Body of Christ are "one and the same" ("*unum idemque esse*").²⁶ This exclusive identification was still being asserted in the first two drafts of the council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*: "The Church of Christ is the Catholic Church". But the council replaced the copulative verb "is" with the ecclesiological and ecumenically broader "subsists in" (n. 8).

The late Aloys Grillmeier, a member of the council's Theological Commission and subsequently named a cardinal by Pope John Paul II, wrote in his commentary on the text: "This means that the Roman Church, as a local church, is only part of the whole Church, though its bishop is head of all the bishops of the Catholic Church". According to Grillmeier, "ecclesiality" does not simply coincide with the Catholic Church, because ecclesial elements of sanctification and truth can be found outside it"²⁷.

In changing the verb from "*est*" to "*subsistit in*" the council fathers clearly intended to include non-Catholic churches and ecclesial communities in the one, albeit divided, Body of Christ. Otherwise, they would have left the teaching of Pius XII in place and held to the verb "*est*". The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, however, seems to tilt in favor of the defeated minority's position, namely, that the change of verbs in article 8 of *Lumen gentium* in no way altered the earlier teaching. The CDF took this position in its condemnation, or *Notificatio*, concerning Leonardo

²⁵ September 12, 2000 (Letters to the Editor).

²⁶ See *Mystici corporis Christi*, n. 14, and *Humani generis*, n. 44. Pius XII had actually use the term "Roman" Catholic Church.

²⁷ "The Mystery of the Church," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (NY/London: Herder and Herder/Burns & Oates, 1967) 150.

Boff's book, *Church: Charism and Power*,²⁸ insisting that the reason for the change of verbs in article 8 was to emphasize that there is "only one 'subsistence' of the true Church, while outside of her visible structure there only exist *elementa Ecclesiae*, which—being elements of that same Church—tend and lead toward the Catholic Church"²⁹.

This view was being promoted so strongly and so widely in the 1980s that Cardinal Jan Willebrands, at the time president of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, felt it necessary to issue a public corrective. He did so in an address given in 1987 in both Washington, D.C. and Atlanta, Georgia. Although he was careful not to describe the change of verbs as a repudiation of *Mystici corporis* but as only a matter of "opening up somewhat" the position of the encyclical on the question of membership in the Church, Cardinal Willebrands insisted that the meaning of the "*subsistit*" language is that "whoever belongs to Christ belongs to the Church, and hence the limits of the Church are coextensive with those of belonging to Christ".

For Willebrands, the change from "*est*" to "*subsistit in*" was not only ecclesiological, but also Christological—the one inseparable from the other. The two come together in an ecclesiology of communion. "Indeed," Willebrands declared, "if the Church is fundamentally this communion with the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, we can see that on the one hand the depth of this communion determines the depth of incorporation in the Church, and on the other that it cannot be a question of all or nothing....*Subsistit in* thus appears, in an ecclesiology of communion, as an attempt to express the transcendence of grace and to give an inkling of the breadth of divine benevolence"³⁰.

The key point here is that it is not a matter of all or nothing. There are degrees of incorporation into the one, albeit divided, Church of Christ, and those degrees of incorporation or communion apply not only to individuals but to separated churches and ecclesial communities. According to Vatican II, the Church of Christ continues to exist "fully" only in the Catholic Church (because the Catholic Church alone has the Petrine ministry to the universal Church, exercised by the Bishop of Rome), but the one Church of Christ also exists, or "subsists in," these other churches and ecclesial communities.

Moreover, the term "church" does not apply only to those Christian communities with an episcopate and a Eucharist deemed "valid" by the Catholic Church. The ultimate bases for communion with the one Church of Christ are faith and baptism. In the words of the Decree on Ecumenism: "For those who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in some, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church" (n. 3). *Dominus Iesus* recognizes in principle that there are non-Catholic churches in imperfect communion with the Catholic Church.

²⁸ Trans. John Diercksmeier (NY/London: Crossroad/SCM Press, 1985).

²⁹ Cited by Francis SULLIVAN, "The Impact of *Dominus Iesus* on Ecumenism," 9.

³⁰ J. WILLEBRANDS, "Vatican II's Ecclesiology of Communion," *Origins* 17, 2 (May 28, 1987) 32.

What *Dominus Iesus* does not explicitly say is that the communion of these other churches is not simply with the Catholic Church but with the Church of Christ as a whole, in which the Catholic Church alone is "fully" incorporated. In other words, *Dominus Iesus* does not seem to do sufficient justice to the real significance of the change of verbs in article 8 of *Lumen gentium*, namely, that the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church are not coextensive. The Church of Christ is larger than the Catholic Church. It "subsists in" the Catholic Church, but is not simply identical with it.

(c) The Church and non-Christian religions

Philip Kennedy, a Dominican theologian at Oxford, has pointed out that *Dominus Iesus*, although it cites Vatican II some forty-five times, "fails conspicuously to repeat the council's single most revolutionary statement concerning divine salvation," contained in article 16 of *Lumen gentium*: "Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—these too may attain eternal salvation". Kennedy has also criticized the declaration for regarding religious pluralism only as a regrettable situation to be overcome rather than an unavoidable fact of reality because of the ineffability, hiddenness, and limitlessness of God. "The fullness of the Trinity," he writes, "is not incarnate in Jesus. Consequently, there is more to God, so to speak, than has been shown in Jesus Christ. God remains a *Deus absconditus*..."³¹.

Gerald O'Collins, S.J., of the Gregorian University, has made a similar point. In one sense, to be sure, Jesus Christ embodies and communicates the fullness of revelation, but in another sense he does not. The final vision of God is still to come, as we are reminded in 1 John 3:2 ("...what we shall be has not yet been revealed") and 1 Corinthians 13:12 ("At present we can see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face"). As for God's acting salvifically outside the Church, O'Collins cites *Dominus Iesus* itself in acknowledging that God becomes present to people through the "spiritual riches" that their religions essentially embody and express (n. 8). The "elements of religiosity" found in the diverse "religious traditions" come "from God" (n. 21). Religious pluralism, therefore, does not simply exist in fact, as the declaration insists, but also in principle.

"After rejecting one meaning of 'pluralism in principle' (that which argues for separate and equal paths of salvation)," O'Collins observes, "the declaration appears to finish up endorsing another meaning of pluralism in principle, that which maintains that God's saving initiatives can be seen not only in Christianity but also in the religions of the world"³². Father O'Collins suggests, however, that we might all do well to abandon the language of pluralism altogether. He writes: "We are better off thinking in terms of the incredible love poured out on all humanity by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit..."

³¹ "Rome & Relativism...", *art. cit.*, 15.

³² "Watch Your Language" (review of Gavin Costa's *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*), *The Tablet* (November 4, 2000) 1490.

One senses here a theological kinship with Cardinal Willebrands' appeal to an ecclesiology of communion, found also in Bishop Walter Kasper's recent address to an international missionary conference meeting here in Rome this past October. Bishop Kasper, citing John Paul II's encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, points out that "The Spirit of God is present and at work everywhere, limited by neither space nor time". The Spirit "can be at work outside the visible Church and...in diverse ways...does act in a hidden manner". Vatican II, Bishop Kasper reminds us, "rejected the old, exclusionary theory and practice, according to which, since Jesus Christ is the one and only mediator of salvation, outside of acknowledging him, i.e., 'outside the Church,' there is no salvation...".

"The most profound reason that profession of faith in the one God does not prescind from diversity but rather includes it to a certain extent," Walter Kasper points out, "lies in the Trinitarian confession of one God in three persons....It means that the one and only God is not a solitary God, but from eternity is self-giving love in which the Father communicates with the Son, and the Father and the Son with the Holy Spirit". It is this self-renunciation and selfless communication on the part of Jesus Christ that is the basis of his invitation to the other religions "to reach their own fullness and completion"³³.

Perhaps the most serious problem with *Dominus Iesus*'s approach to other religions, however, is its refusal to acknowledge the existence of true theological faith (as opposed to "belief") in these other religions. Faith and "Christian" faith are not coextensive. If one truly believes in God, who is the one and only object of faith, it is because that person has somehow received the gift of faith from God, even if it should have no explicit reference to Jesus Christ. Moreover, in making this hard and fast distinction between theological faith and belief, the declaration tends to muddy its own waters. The declaration uses the words "belief" and "believe" at last twenty-five times with reference to what Christians do. "If *belief* has multiple meanings," Francis Clooney asks, "is it possible to stipulate that *faith*, by contrast, has only a single meaning?"³⁴

"Learning from other religions," Father Clooney concludes, "does not change the timeless truths of our faith, but it certainly does enrich and deepen our way of following Jesus, driving out not only relativism and indifferentism, but also arrogance and ignorance". *Dominus Iesus*, Clooney writes, "appears oddly inarticulate when we wonder how specifically to confess the Lord Jesus...in this new millennium"³⁵.

VI. Looking Toward the Future

How could *Dominus Iesus* have been improved and thereby avoided some of the sharpest criticisms it has thus far received? First, by adopting a more positive, less adversarial, tone—something more in line with the historic address of Pope John XXIII at the opening of the Second Vatican Council in October 1962, when he pointed out that the more effective way for the Church to meet the needs of the present day is "by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations".

Second, the declaration should have taken into explicit account the ecumenical and interreligious developments of the past thirty-five years, reflected especially in the agreed statements of the various bilateral consultations and in other joint statements issued by representatives of the various Christian churches, including the Catholic Church, as well as in the growing number of statements regarding the relationship between the Church and non-Christian religions, and with Judaism in particular.

Third, the Congregation should have consulted more widely before issuing this declaration, not only with Catholic scholars and non-Catholic pastoral leaders and theologians, but also with other sections of the Roman Curia itself, and not least the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Had the Congregation taken these three procedural steps, the three areas of greatest ecclesiological concern—on the distinction between particular churches and ecclesial communities, on the relationship between the Church and the churches, and on the relationship of the Church with non-Christian religions—might have been more carefully balanced and nuanced, and therefore less open to criticism.

Predictions are easy to make, and most people forget them once they are uttered. However, it seems safe to say that this declaration is not likely to have a long shelf-life. It may continue to be studied for many years as part of the corpus of official pronouncements given in the decades immediately following Vatican II, but there is reason to question whether the declaration will serve as a practical guideline for ecumenists and those engaged in interreligious dialogue well into this new century.

However, *Dominus Iesus* will surely have served a higher and more long-term purpose if it stimulates and challenges those engaged in these dialogues to work even harder at transcending out-dated and inadequate assumptions, and in developing more pastorally and theologically compelling formulations that truly address and illuminate the new realities that confront the Church in our time. If *Dominus Iesus* should prove to have been a catalyst for such developments, it will have succeeded eminently in one of its own stated intentions, that is, to "help theological reflection in developing solutions consistent with the contents of the faith and responsive to the pressing needs of contemporary culture" (n. 3). Indeed, that is a task for all of us.

³³ W. KASPER, "Relating Christ's Universality to Interreligious Dialogue," *Origins* 30, 21 (November 2, 2000) 325, 326, 327.

³⁴ "*Dominus Iesus* and the New Millennium," 17.

³⁵ *Idem*



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Centro Conferences

The Church: God's Gift to the World —On the Nature and Purpose of the Church—

by

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(Lecture given at the **Centro Pro Unione**, Thursday, 18 January 2001)

On this day, Churches throughout the world join together for the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. For this year, the material was prepared by an international committee appointed by the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity on the basis of a draft text prepared by an ecumenical group representing several of the major Christian traditions in Romania. In prayer, we are invited and encouraged to move beyond our own situation to that of God's horizon – on the basis of God's action and promise. Janet Morley has perceptively written:

“When we come together to pray we rightly pray ‘beyond ourselves’ — placing ourselves within a vision of a different world, and so making ourselves part of the process that will bring those promises about. And we place ourselves, with our sisters, and brothers, within the hands of God — not merely in our own desperate strivings”¹.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is therefore a time for discernment, a time for recommitment to God and to each other, and a time to think beyond our particular geographical and confessional theologies to a wider and more inclusive horizon.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is an invitation to reflect on the unity and nature of the Church. In their explanation of the movement of the Order of Worship for this year's principal celebration on the theme “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” (John 14:1-6) the drafters recall us to the initial description of the Church — “the followers of the Way” (Acts 9:2). In this week, we are invited to move beyond our contemporary situation to become “the fellowship of the Way”. It seemed appropriate, therefore, that on this day we might reflect on the Church, using the recent Faith and Order draft text *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (Faith and Order Paper, 181) as a basis for our reflection and discernment.

Impulses for the Study on *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*

In the responses of the Churches to the Faith and Order study

¹ J. MORLEY, ed., *Bread of Tomorrow: Praying with the World's Poor* (London: SPCK, 1992) 5.

Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry”, many church commissions detected that there had been an implicit ecclesiology, and called for a more explicit and focused study on the Church². While BEM itself had not specifically addressed the nature, purpose or form of the Church, affirmations in each section of the statement about the Church led readers to suggest that a baptismal or eucharistic ecclesiology was an implicit framework for the text, and that the threefold ministry as evident in some Christian traditions was being proposed as a *sine qua non* of the Church.

In the light of those reactions, the Plenary Commission on Faith and Order, meeting in Budapest in 1989, proposed that the overall program of Faith and Order should focus on “The Nature and Mission of the Church — Ecumenical Perspectives of Ecclesiology”³. The Commission felt that such a study might provide a coherent comprehensive ecclesiological framework for the studies on BEM, apostolic faith, and unity and renewal being undertaken by the Commission, might respond to some of the critical comments to BEM, and could draw on the increasing ecumenical discussions on the understanding of the Church evident in a number of international bilateral dialogues⁴. The recommendation was that previous work on the topic be brought into consideration alongside that on *koinonia* which was the subject of a number of bilateral dialogues to provide basic ecumenical perspectives on ecclesiology which could serve as an impetus for the renewal and enrichment of the ecclesiologies of the different Christian traditions and thus for their convergence in the movement towards visible unity. Various themes for the development of the study were suggested — the Church as the body of Christ, the temple of the Spirit, the people of God, the Kingdom of God and the covenant. The intention was therefore

² See M. THURIAN, ed., *Churches Respond to BEM*, Vols I-VI (Geneva: WCC, 1986-1988).

³ See T. BEST, ed., *Faith and Order 1985-1989. The Commission Meeting at Budapest 1989*, Faith and Order Paper, 148 (Geneva: WCC, 1990) 202ff & 216ff.

⁴ See H. MEYER & L. VISCHER, eds., *Growth in Agreement*, Faith and Order Paper, 108 (Geneva: WCC, 1984) and J. GROS, H. MEYER & W. RUSCH, eds., *Growth in Agreement II*, Faith and Order Paper, 187 (Geneva: WCC, 2000) for the reports of the various dialogues.

not to develop a detailed ecclesiological system or even an “ecumenical ecclesiology”.

The Commission also found itself seeking to articulate for the Canberra Assembly of the World Council of Churches a statement on “The Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling”. This statement, which was adopted at the Assembly after a number of emendations, had been a response to a request from the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches. The statement begins with a reflection on the purpose of the Church, rooted in the action of the Holy Trinity. It notes that the unity of the Church to which we are called is a koinonia given and expressed in faith, worship, ministry and life, and then identifies a number of common actions which might help the churches to realize more faithfully the character and purposes of the Church⁵.

A further reflection on koinonia also emerged from a series of essays published by the Joint Working Group between the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. This was designed as an interpretative study on the Canberra text, setting it in the context of previous ecumenical statements on unity. It was also to be a contribution to the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela, August 1993⁶.

After the Canberra Assembly, the major work undertaken by the Faith and Order Commission was the organization of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order. This was the first such Conference for thirty years, and was the first to draw on the fruits of full Roman Catholic participation in the ecumenical movement. The major theme was that of koinonia, and the Conference sought to reflect on the theological and biblical understanding of koinonia, and on koinonia in faith, life and witness. A preparatory discussion paper was prepared and examined in a number of regional conferences⁷. The Conference itself explored the importance of an understanding of the Holy Trinity for an understanding of koinonia, and called for a study on the nature of the Church — a community confessing the one faith to God’s glory, sharing sacramental and ministerial life and engaging in common witness⁸.

In the light of these impulses, then, the Faith and Order Standing Commission in 1994 began a process of study and reflection on “The Nature and Purpose of the Church”

Faith and Order Reflections on the Church

The question of the nature of the Church has been on the

agenda of Faith and Order since its First World Conference at Lausanne in 1927.

In the first stage of the ecumenical movement as the churches sought to move from a situation of competition with each other, and to move towards acceptance of each other’s existence and co-existence, they adopted an approach which was at root “comparative”. Churches compared their stances on doctrinal questions with each other. Thus, in the early Faith and Order conferences a comparative approach to the Church was evident. Each tradition presented papers on its confessional understanding of the subject. In Lausanne, papers were presented by His Beatitude Chrysostom (Greece), Dr S. Parkes Cadman (Congregational — USA), Rt Rev. Dr Alexander Raffey (Lutheran — Reformed), Dr Friedrich Siegmund-Schultze (Evangelical Lutheran — Germany), Dr H.B. Workman (Methodist — UK), Prof. Fernand Ménégoz (Lutheran — France), Metropolitan Stefan (Orthodox — Bulgaria). The Second World Conference in Edinburgh in 1937 reflected on “The Church of Christ and the Word of God”, using a similar methodology⁹. The same method was also in evidence at the Third World Conference on Faith and Order in Lund 1952. Papers on “The Nature of the Church” were presented on behalf of the Church of Rome (Dr Newton Flew), and from the Greek Orthodox Church, the German and Scandinavian Lutheran Churches, the Reformed Churches in Scotland and other European Countries, the Church of England, Old Catholic Church, Baptists, Congregationalist, Society of Friends, Methodists, Churches of Christ and the Church of South India. While this was a comprehensive comparative approach, it became clear that such a methodology was no longer appropriate¹⁰. This comparative methodology, however, is at root not a method of dialogue, but one of monologue. It can be characterized as “we will accept you as long as you are the same as us, but we will reject you at the points of difference”. Edwin Muir phrased this well in his poem, “*The Solitary Place*”:

“If there is none else to ask or reply
But I and not I,
And when I stretch out my hand, my hand comes towards
me
To pull me across to me and back to me,
If my own mind, questioning, answers me,
If all that I see
Woman and man and beast and rock and sky,
Is a flat image shut behind an eye,
And only my thoughts can meet me or pass me or follow

⁵ In J. GROS *et al.*, *Growth in Agreement II, op. cit.*, 937ff.

⁶ G. GASSMANN & J. RADANO, eds., *The Unity of the Church as Koinonia. Ecumenical Perspectives on the 1991 Canberra Statement on Unity*, Faith and Order Paper, 163 (Geneva: WCC, 1993).

⁷ *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness: A Discussion Paper*, Faith and Order Paper, 161 (Geneva: WCC, 1993) and T. BEST & G. GASSMANN, eds., *Regional Consultations in Preparation for the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order: Summary of the Reports*, Faith and Order Paper, 162 (Geneva: WCC, 1993).

⁸ See T. BEST & G. GASSMANN, *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, Faith and Order Paper, 166 (Geneva: WCC, 1994).

⁹ See H.N. BATE, ed., *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference. Lausanne August 3-21, 1927* (NY: George A. Doron, 1927); L. HODGSON, ed., *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order: Edinburgh August 3-18, 1937* (NY/London: Macmillan/SCM Press, 1938).

¹⁰ R.N. FLEW, ed., *The Nature of the Church: Papers Presented to the Theological Commission Appointed by the Continuation Committee of the World Conference on Faith and Order* (London: SCM, 1952).

me,
O then I am alone
I, many and many in one
A lost player upon a hill"¹¹.

With our own perspectives as the only acceptable positions, it was possible only to affirm the status quo — “the solitary place”. The comparative method evident in doctrinal and church and society discussions in the first phase of the ecumenical movement moved interchurch relations from conflict, competition, and co-existence to comparative acceptance. However, it was evident that such a method could not effect real relationship — communion. At Lund, therefore, a different methodology was adopted. Theological discussions now proceeded on the basis of an attempt to reach consensus. The Conference, as has been noted, received a comprehensive series of confessional papers on the nature of the Church. But the Conference noted:

“We cannot build the one Church by cleverly fitting together our divided inheritances. We can grow together towards fullness and unity in Christ only by being conformed to Him who is the Head of the Body and Lord of His people”.

The statement then explored the complementarity of the various understandings, identified the one-sidedness of many approaches, and called the Church to reassert its nature as the pilgrim people:

“Those who are ever looking backward and have accumulated much previous ecclesiastical baggage will perhaps be shown that pilgrims must travel light and that, if we are to share at last in the great Supper, we must let go much that we treasure. . . . We cannot know all that shall be disclosed to us when together we look to Him who is the Head of the Body. It is easy for us in our several Churches to think of what our separated brethren need to learn. Christ’s love will make us more ready to learn what He can teach us through them”¹².

This approach to doctrinal questions was matched also by the attempt to act as churches in a co-operative and consensual manner. The Lund World Conference adopted what came to be known as the Lund Principle:

“Should not our churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other churches, and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?”¹³.

¹¹ E. MUIR, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1960) 81.

¹² O.S. TOMKINS, ed., *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order. Lund August 15th to 28th, 1952* (London: SCM, 1953) 20f.

¹³ *Ibid.*

This question addressed to the churches proposed a new relationship between the churches. It in fact became a methodology adopted in doctrinal and church and society discussions. The comparative methodology began to give way to a consensus methodology. In this, the churches sought to do theology together. They sought together out of the riches of their confessional traditions to affirm a common theology. An underlying understanding of the nature of the Church was also evident at Lund. The Church was described as the Pilgrim People of God — a community which learns from each other on the journey and seeks to discern Truth. A first stage in this new method was reached through the attempt by the Commission to agree on how to do theology together — the discussion on Scripture and Tradition at the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order in Montreal in 1963 and subsequent discussions on the interpretation of Scripture¹⁴. On the basis of this agreement on method it has been possible to reach consensus on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, on the Common Confession of the Apostolic Faith and on a wide variety of doctrinal questions evident in bilateral and multilateral dialogues. The consensus methodology pursued in doctrinal and church and society discussions has encouraged the churches to move beyond the “solitary place”.

In the period after the Montreal Faith and Order World Conference, while there was no specific study undertaken on the nature and purpose of the Church, a number of ecclesiological questions were the subject of discussion, e.g. Catholicity. As noted above, however, it became clear after the “Responses to BEM” that it was important that this subject be examined.

The Nature and Purpose of the Church

1. Its framework and method

With this background on the impulses for the study on the nature of the Church, and on the methodology of the Faith and Order Commission, the work towards a convergence text on ecclesiology began. In the course of four years, three different attempts were made to find an appropriate framework.

In the first attempt, at a consultation in Dublin in 1994, discussions focused on perceived church dividing issues, e.g. apostolicity and catholicity as elements of the life and faith of the Church as Koinonia; forms of authority and decision-making in the service of the Church as Koinonia; the place and mission of the Church as Koinonia in the saving purpose of God. These materials were then placed in a wider framework by a drafting group of the Commission at Barbados in November 1994 — the Purpose of God, the Church of the Triune God, the Nature and Mission of the Church, Word Sacrament and Ministry, Local Church and the Communion of Local Churches; Church and history, Church and Kingdom, and an attempt was made to

¹⁴ See P.C. RODGER & L. VISCHER, eds., *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order: The Report from Montreal 1963*, Faith and Order Paper, 42 (London: SCM, 1964) and E. FLESSEMAN-van LEER, ed., *The Bible: Its Authority and Interpretation in the Ecumenical Movement*, Faith and Order Paper, 99 (Geneva: WCC 1980).

identify converging understandings towards mutual recognition¹⁵. It became apparent that it was not sufficient to address specific issues on ecclesiology, since it was perceived that a number of assumptions were being made on ecclesiology which were not shared by all the traditions in Faith and Order.

In the attempt to find a wider framework for a convergence text, the drafting group of the Commission began to use the Canberra Statement on koinonia. In doing this, much of the previous work was adapted to the new framework which was to be a “scholion” — to use the term of the late Fr Jean-Marie Tillard — or memorandum and trajectory drafted on the basis of the Canberra text. This text was presented to the meeting of the Plenary Commission meeting at Moshi in August 1996¹⁶. On the basis of discussions there and in subsequent reflections in the drafting group, it was agreed that it was not appropriate to use the Canberra Statement as a basis, since it might give the impression either that the text had been adopted at Canberra on the basis of such an understanding, or that the Canberra text provided a sufficient theological outline on ecclesiology.

It was therefore decided to attempt a statement on the Church in the style of the BEM methodology viz. to produce what was felt to be a convergence text, but identifying those questions where it was felt that convergence had still to be reached (material placed in boxes). In all this struggle to find an appropriate framework, the drafters sought to draw on the agreements of international bilateral dialogues, on previous Faith and Order work, on the understanding and images of the Church in Scripture, and on the other studies being undertaken by the Commission, e.g. on hermeneutics, worship and ethics. In particular, two discrete projects were drawn on.

After the Canberra Assembly, the Faith and Order Commission and the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation stream in the World Council of Churches began an exploration of the relation between Ecclesiology and Ethics. While this was designed to bring those two streams of work in the World Council of Churches into closer relationship, the reports of the study process emphasize the rootedness of discipleship in the sacrament of baptism and the Lord’s Supper and that ethical engagement is an expression of koinonia¹⁷. The very existence of the Church is such that it is making a statement to society. The study process explored ways in which that statement about and to society is firmly and intentionally rooted in the reflection and life of the Christian community.

Secondly, in the light of the bilateral dialogues, a request was made to the Commission by the Meeting of representatives of United and Uniting Churches at Ocho Rios, Jamaica in 1995, that

a study on Episcopé and Episcopacy be undertaken¹⁸. The last such study had been published in 1979 and had made an important contribution to the discussion on ministry in BEM¹⁹. There, two distinctions had proved to be fruitful — viz. that between apostolic succession and apostolic tradition and between episcopé and episcopacy. But since that time, a number of bilateral dialogues have considered the question, a number of church unions have been effected and a number of regional ecumenical agreements between, e.g. Anglicans and Lutherans, have come into effect. The consultations on Episcopé and Episcopacy in Strasbourg, therefore, presented a comprehensive account of the state of the question and sought to move forward on the issue. While the papers and consultation reports have been published, the study on the Nature and Purpose of the Church drew on the reports for its own section on the ministry of oversight²⁰.

The study paper, then on *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* employs a method similar to that used in BEM, draws on previous work undertaken by the Faith and Order Commission and the international bilateral dialogues, and incorporates the results of discrete studies on Ecclesiology and Ethics and Episcopé and Episcopacy in the quest for the visible unity of the Church.

2. *The text of the study*

The study has six chapters. The first “The Church of the Triune God” explores the Nature of the Church and God’s Purpose for the Church. In the first part, the major focus is on the Church as Creation of the Word and of the Holy Spirit (*creatura Verbi et creatura Spiritus*), thus emphasizing that the Church belongs to God, is created, nourished and sustained by God and because of God is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. This is further elaborated by an exposition of three central biblical images which refer to the Trinitarian dimension of the Church — the people of God, the body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. None of these images is exclusive, but all of them implicitly or explicitly include the other Trinitarian dimension as well.

The development of the section on God’s Purpose for the Church is rooted in Ephesians chapter I and John 17. The Church participates in God’s mission of healing, reconciliation, and anticipates the new humanity which is God’s intention for creation. An examination of this section shows that it draws on bilateral dialogues, e.g. the Reformed-Roman Catholic statement *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church* and on previous work reflecting on the Canberra Statement, and reflects the direction for a statement which the Budapest Plenary Commission meeting indicated.

¹⁵ See the *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission, 5-12 January, 1995, Aleppo, Syria* Faith and Order Paper, 170 (Geneva: WCC, 1995).

¹⁶ See A. FALCONER, ed., *Faith and Order in Moshi: The 1996 Commission Meeting*, Faith and Order Paper, 177 (Geneva: WCC, 1998) 97-114 and 232-263.

¹⁷ See T. BEST & M. ROBRA, eds., *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church* (Geneva: WCC, 1997).

¹⁸ See T. BEST, ed., *Built Together: The Present Vocation of United and Uniting Churches. The Sixth International Consultation of United and Uniting Churches*, Faith and Order Paper, 174 (Geneva: WCC, 1996).

¹⁹ *Episcopé and Episcopate in Ecumenical Perspective*, Faith and Order Paper, 102 (Geneva: WCC, 1980).

²⁰ P. BOUTENEFF & A. FALCONER, eds., *Episcopé and Episcopacy and the Quest for Visible Unity: Two Consultations*, Faith and Order Paper, 183 (Geneva: WCC, 1999).

The second, and perhaps the most contentious, chapter of the statement focuses on the Church in History. This is an attempt to explore the Church in its human dimension. The statement declares that the Church

“is exposed to change, which allows for both positive development and growth as well as for the negative possibility of decline and distortion. It is exposed to individual, cultural and historical conditioning which can contribute to a richness of insights and expressions of faith but also to relativizing tendencies or absolutizing particular views. It is exposed to the Holy Spirit’s free use of its power (John 3:8) in illuminating hearts and binding consciences. It is exposed to the power of sin”²¹.

In this carefully worded section, the Church is described as a historical reality, exposed to the ambiguity of all human history and is thus not yet the community God desires. And yet — the Church is called to be the sign and instrument of God’s design. The chapter carefully reflects the tension between that which the Church is and that which the Church is called to become and elaborates the further questions to be explored as the churches seek to move towards convergence. Of course, it is too facile to identify the different approaches as simply stances taken by different confessional traditions. The controversies surrounding the actions and words of Pope John Paul II on Reconciliation and his pleas for forgiveness particularly in the context of the Jubilee Year Celebrations (e.g. 12 March 2000) demonstrate differences of approach within the Christian communions also.

The third chapter discussed The Church as Koinonia. The rich tapestry of the scriptural understanding is presented and summed up in the following paragraph:

“The basic verbal form from which the noun koinonia derives means ‘to have something in common’, ‘to share’, ‘to participate’, ‘to have part in’, ‘to act together’ or ‘to be in a contractual relationship involving obligations of mutual accountability’²².

While most of those definitions have appeared in previous discussions on koinonia, the new definition is one which is evident in the New Testament and draws on the business world of contract and of mutual accountability. Koinonia entails and is predicated upon mutual accountability to each other in Christ. Through Christ we are bound to each other, and are involved in a dialogue with each other which invites us to give an account of our stewardship of faith, life and witness. This chapter continues by exploring the relation between unity and diversity, and the Church as a communion of local churches thus emphasizing the importance of understanding the Church as a community which exhibits diverse expressions and experiences, and a community

²¹ *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper, 181 (Geneva: WCC, 1998) 18, § 37.

²² *Ibid.*, 25 § 52.

which seeks to express koinonia in a variety of diverse cultural circumstances and geographical locations.

Life in Communion is the subject of the fourth chapter of the text. God bestows on the Church apostolic faith, baptism and eucharist as means of grace to create and sustain the koinonia, and this koinonia is furthered by structures of ministry, oversight and conciliarity. In this section, the reflections of the Commission on Apostolic Faith, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry provide the basis of the convergent text, and further questions in each area are identified for future work. The chapter seeks to draw on the convergence evident in the responses of the churches to BEM and to take discussion forward on disputed questions. Thus the discussion on Oversight, places the issue in the context of balancing the communal, personal and collegial dimensions of episcopé, and notes that in fact the ecumenical movement itself is increasingly leading to a degree of shared oversight in many parts of the world. The chapter points to the importance of conciliarity and primacy but notes that fundamental and basic work needs to be done on this before any common statements can be attempted.

The fifth chapter of the text examines Service in and for the World. For a considerable period of the drafting process, there was a move towards including this in chapter four. For some churches, the marks of the Church are that the Church is the community of Word, Sacrament and discipline (cf. the Scots Confession of 1560), where discipline refers to the core of the poor, the refugee, the health of the community and the nurture of the community through education. Thus certain issues described as ethical may be deemed “*status quaestionis*”, e.g. inclusion of all people regardless of race or gender. For many churches, however, the Church is the community of Word and Sacrament, and discipline is an explication of the community formed by the Word and nourished by the Sacrament. This chapter then explores Christian discipleship as bearing witness to God’s reconciling, healing and transforming of creation. This discipleship is based on the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

The final chapter is an encouragement to churches, communions, councils and theological institutes to examine the text and send their reflections to the Commission for a further process of drafting.

3. *The continuing process*

In 1998, the text was sent widely to churches, councils of churches, ecumenical and theological institutes for comment. The new Standing Commission identified a twofold process for the continuing work. In the first place, a series of consultations on specific themes is to be held.

While the papers and reports of these will be published separately, their results will be incorporated into a second draft of the Nature and Purpose of the Church²³. The first of these consultations was held last year in conjunction with the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in Germany on “Ecclesiology and Mission”. The papers and report will be

²³ See *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Board, 15-24 June 1999, Toronto, Canada*, Faith and Order Paper, 185 (Geneva: WCC, 1999) 87f.

published as the April 2001 edition of the *International Review of Mission*, and the results will also be discussed by the new drafting group on the Nature and Purpose of the Church. This year there will be a consultation on the theme “Does the Church have a sacramental nature?”, while in 2002 the issue will be “Ministry and Ordination in the Community of Women and Men in the Church” and in 2003 “Authority and Authoritative Teaching” will be examined²⁴. All of these subjects are topics which appear in the boxes of the 1998 statement on the way to convergence. It is hoped that by focusing on those now progress towards greater agreement will be made.

Concurrently with these consultations a drafting group will meet annually to re-draft the statement on the *Nature and Purpose of the Church* in the light of the responses received. Some fifteen responses from churches (mainly Reformed or Presbyterian), councils, theological institutes and individuals have been received, although it is known that other responses are being finalized — including one through the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. They will be seriously examined and where appropriate adjustments to the text will be made. It is also anticipated that it will be possible to discern how far the agreement does reflect a convergence and how far the material of the boxes — where a diversity of views still seems to be evident — reflects diversity and how far it identifies differences.

The Church — God’s Poem

Why engage in this theological work? Why is it important to reach an agreement on the nature and purpose of the Church, and move into a new relationship of unity? The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is a passionate call to move “beyond ourselves” to the horizon of God’s intention for the Church. Throughout the New Testament such a horizon is depicted in a variety of images. The New Testament scholar, Paul Minear, has identified some eighty-five such images²⁵. In doing so, he has missed one—tucked away in Ephesians 2:10!

Most translations of the New Testament speak of — we are God’s handiwork. The original Greek, however, simply says we are God’s *poem*. Let me emphasize already the force of “we” — the author is not saying we as individuals are God’s poem but the community of the baptized — the community of those centered “in Christ” is God’s poem.

One of the most perceptive analysts of the nature of poetry is the Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, who was awarded the Nobel prize for Literature. Throughout his life, Heaney has sought to reflect on the nature of his art, but he has brought his insights to a particular focus in recent years as is evident in his Nobel Lecture, entitled “Crediting Poetry”, and his published lectures — *The Redress of Poetry* — which he delivered as Professor of Poetry at Oxford

University²⁶. Without attempting to give a detailed analysis of his work, let me pick up a few insights on the nature of a poem which can help us to understand our text.

First of all, Seamus Heaney credits poetry with its “truth to life”. It is a form of art related to our existence as citizens of society, particular to its time and place it may also illuminate other times and other places. The poem portrays life as it is. Over the years, as I have traveled to take part in consultations in different parts of the world, I have tried to make it a practice — not always successfully — to explore a volume of collected poems (in translation!) of the country to which I am traveling. The poems reveal the issues facing the society. They celebrate the identity of the people. They convey the ethos and the atmosphere of the community. They give a glimpse of life as it is.

Secondly, the poems highlight the imbalance in a society. They point to that which needs to be corrected. The very first articulation of the abuse of power leading to a claim for human rights arises in the cry of the poets. Before any wider discussion of human rights issues by social scientists, ethicists or lawyers take place, the poet has identified an issue which dehumanizes people — an issue which shows an imbalance in society and which needs to be redressed. It is this function of the poem, which Seamus Heaney emphasizes as *The Redress of Poetry* which he defines as “setting a person, group or society upright again, raising them to an erect position — setting up, restoring, re-establishing”.

Thirdly, through this art of redress, the poet crafts a vehicle of and for harmony and unity. The poem becomes an act of integration within a context of division and contradiction. Through the poem there is a glimpsed alternative — a potential which is denied or threatened is presented.

The poem, then, portrays life as it is — in its very essence and complexity — points to the imbalance in community, and presents a glimpsed alternative to division and contradiction — becoming a vehicle of harmony. The poem presents the interconnectedness of human life and provides a statement to show the world as it really is.

There is another aspect of the nature of the poem, which is identified in a poem by the Australian poet, James McAuley. In his “An Art of Poetry”, which is written to Professor Vincent Buckley, a pioneer critic of Australian poetry, he wrote:

“Let your literal figures shine
With pure transparency:
Not in opaque but limpid walls
Lie truth and mystery. . . .
Only the simplest forms can hold
A vast complexity”²⁷.

The poem is a vehicle of transparent communication — not obscure, opaque or convoluted — but simple, obvious, easily

²⁴ See *Minutes of the Faith and Order Standing Commission, 30 September-7 October, 2000, Matanzas, Cuba*, Faith and Order Paper, 188 (Geneva: WCC, 2000).

²⁵ P. MINEAR, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

²⁶ “Crediting Poetry” in S. HEANEY *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-96* (London: Faber, 1998) 445ff. and *The Redress of Poetry* (NY: Farrar, Strass and Giroux, 1995).

²⁷ J. MCAULEY, *Collected Poems* (Melbourne: Angus and Robertson, 1971) 70f.

grasped. Indeed James McAuley invites the poem to be a contemporary expression of God's teaching in Jesus of Nazareth. The poem reflects God's communication with humankind.

The author of the Letter to the Ephesians, then, is pointing us to a very important metaphor for understanding our nature and vocation as the Church. It is important to emphasize what the writer is not saying. He is not saying that we are God's poets or poet. God is the author of the poem. The poem is the message and the messenger. It is an expression of the vulnerability of God — of the costliness of the love of God. The poem is conflictual — challenging the values of the addressees — disturbing, probing, inviting the hearer into the wider horizon of interdependence with others. The poem is likely to be tossed aside — rejected.

We are God's poem — the community of the baptized — the community "in Christ" — who reflect God's design for humankind by showing our dependence on God, by living our dependence and interdependence with each other, by acting thereby as a glimpsed alternative to contradiction and vision, and

thus exposing in our solidarity and accountability to each other the imbalances in our society and in our global village.

That is our calling — yet the divisions of the Church inhibit our being God's poem. We live and show that we are not a glimpsed alternative of the world as God intends, but rather reflect the very divisions and contradictions of the world.

As God's poem we are to live the truth to life which seeks to interpret our world and to transform it in the light of God's design.

We are God's poem created in Jesus Christ for the life
... which God designed for us.

We are God's poem —
Called to live as God's hymn of praise.

This is the call and challenge of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.



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Centro Conferences

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2001: *I am the way, and the truth, and the life John 14: 1-6*

—Homily—

by

Bishop Walter Kasper

Secretary, Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity

(Given at the **Centro Pro Unione**, Thursday, 18 January 2001)

The passage of the New Testament, which is the basis for this year's Bible meditation for the "Week of prayer for Christian Unity" begins with Our Lord's admonition to his discouraged disciples: "Do not let your hearts be troubled". I could imagine that this phrase hits the situation and the feelings of many of us this year. Even though there were many encouraging and very prophetic ecumenical signals in the last jubilee year and important signs of hope, there were also deep disappointments which troubled our hearts and diminished our expectations. The word of our Lord thus becomes all the more relevant for us as well: "Do not let your hearts be troubled".

Also important is the reason the Lord gives his disciples not to be troubled. They are worried because our Lord spoke of his farewell. What they can do without him? How they can miss his presence? So we often have the impression, that we lack the experience of our Lord's powerful presence in his Church. We feel lost and do not know where and how to go ahead. Indeed there seems to be a momentary impasse in our ecumenical work.

But what is our Lord's answer? "Do not let your hearts be troubled". Why? Because he is "the way, the truth and the life." He is the way we have to follow. It is the way through the experience of the cross and through the darkness of Calvary to the light and the new life of the resurrection. In this world we are a pilgrim Church, which cannot always be on the victory track. This is no reason to be troubled so long as we maintain the hope of our final goal. In this way, he is the way, the truth and the life - not ourselves, not our plans, our intentions good as they may be, not our work, not our merits. He is the way, the truth and the life of ecumenism.

I am convinced the main and deepest insight of the ecumenical movement is not only that Jesus Christ, the head and Lord of the Church, has initiated the ecumenical movement by the Holy Spirit, and because he is trustworthy he will lead it to its final goal, but also that he is the measure of ecumenical movement. The Church and the unity of the Church, important as they are, are not an end in themselves. The ecumenical

movement has helped us move away from the previous concept of conversion to one Church or the other; the issue is not that Catholics become more protestant or protestants more catholic. We have not to convert to each other, but we all have to convert to Jesus Christ and his gospel. In Jesus Christ and in him alone we will be one.

As Catholics, we are of the conviction that the fundamental figure of the catholic Church will be present in the Church in full communion with all other Churches and Church communities. But we know also about our weakness, we know that in the present situation, where fundamental elements of the Church of Christ are realized outside her boundaries, she cannot realize concretely the full reality of her own catholicity. So on the ecumenical way we have to learn from each other, we have to share our gifts, and deepen our insight into the inexhaustible riches of the gospel and the mystery of Christ. We have to give up all confessional arrogance, become humble and walk on the way, talking with each other like the disciples of Emmaus confident that our Lord is with us on the way, even when our eyes are kept from seeing him and we do not understand what is happening and why it is happening. He is the way, the truth and the life. "Trust in God; trust also in me" he says.

There is a second lesson from the gospel passage we heard. The words "I am the way, the truth and the life" are important even today not only because they encourage disappointed Church members but even more because they point out our mission to the world, to the new unbelievers or doubting half-believers. Here too we touch a starting point and a main concern of ecumenism. The ecumenical movement from the very beginning was motivated and inspired by a missionary concern; the separation among Christians was seen as a main obstacle and a reason for the lack of credibility of Christian mission. But in the meantime we are often too concerned with our own old problems which are perhaps of interest for theologically trained people but of no relevance for normal people, instead of taking up the very existential problems of the people, including often enough our own faithful.

What are they asking of us? The same as Jesus tells us. Within the major and all embracing changes in our world they are disturbed and disorientated. They ask us: where is the way?

In what direction we can go? What is the truth within all this flood of information and deceptive advertising? Where we can get a foothold? Where find our orientation? Finally, they ask us: where is life within all these powers of death, where is meaningful and happy life, where is eternal life? It seems more and more people, especially a growing number of young people, are asking such existential questions and seeking for religious answers. We should not disappoint or upset them with our own quarrels; we should not put them off with our separation. The world of today and the people of today need our

common witness, our common answer: "Do not let your hearts to be troubled". Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, the life you are seeking for. He is the answer to your questions, the fulfillment of the deepest desires of your hearts. Because he is the way to our Father's house where there is place for each and every one of us.

So the text of this year's Week of Prayer contains a message of encouragement and hope both for us Church people and for those who are unchurched. Because he, our Lord Jesus Christ, is our hope, we can trust in him, and rely on him. He is at the beginning of our ecumenical work, he is its center, he will lead it to the goal in ways and in the time only he knows. For he is the way, the truth and the life. Amen.