

DOMINUS JESUS AND THE CHRISTIAN PRIESTHOOD

Romanus Cessario, O.P.

The New Testament never exhibits tentativeness when it communicates divine truth. Take for example, Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. "Let those who have wives live as though they had none...and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away" (1Cor. 7: 29-31). Saint Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians makes it plain that the mysteries of Jesus Christ introduce a definitive moment into the history of the world, compelling everyone to consider in a fresh light even so commonplace and natural an institution as marriage.

Saint Paul urges his audience, which by divine design includes us, to impose a Christian perspective on every aspect of human life. The spiritual masters of yesteryear captured Saint Paul's meaning when they counseled Christians to regard everything that transpired in their lives "sub specie aeternitatis," that is, from the perspective of eternity. Today one might prefer another way of expressing the same outlook. The important thing to remember, however, is that whatever your vocation in the Church--priest, consecrated person, parent or child--St Paul's inspired admonition still applies to your circumstance: "The form of this world is passing away." What is more, since the Holy Spirit inspires not only texts but also hearts to grasp their meaning, each of us should find himself caught up in the urgency that this address communicates.

The same pressing spirit that stirred St Paul continues to motivate the Church. We behold it clearly in Pope John Paul II, a man filled with a sense of the immediacy that attaches to the full and complete revelation of the salvific mystery of God in Jesus Christ. Though enthusiastically open to discovering every aspect of human experience, the Pope steadfastly proclaims the definitiveness of the revelation of Jesus Christ. He knows that the mystery of Christ possesses its own intrinsic unity, stretching from the eternal choice that God made to save us in Christ to the parousia when Christ once again returns all things to the Father. In the

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meantime, all human beings are meant to dwell in the one Church of Christ, where an imperilled people, prefigured by those in Noah's ark, escape that primordial "Woe," which remains the unique existential alternative to finding Christian beatitude. Nothing is more pressing than attaining salvation, and so John Paul II never tires of repeating, "Open your doors to Christ!"

In his statement welcoming the "Declaration," Dominus Iesus, Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston summarized the central message of the document released by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on 5 September 2000: "the truth of ... divine and Catholic faith can in no way be reduced to merely one message among others or as a culturally conditioned partial expression of truth among many other similar and equally valid ones." He couldn't have put it more clearly. Moreover, as every commentator on the document, whether friendly or critical, has agreed, this assertion breaks no new ground.

There is nothing startling in the recent "Declaration." The Church never has taught that the Incarnate Son of God enacted only half-measures for the salvation of those whom he has redeemed by his blood. Do the Gospel beatitudes, for example, "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20), provide only provisional guidelines for a good life? Did Jesus really mean to teach, "Blest are you poor, the reign of God *may* be yours?" On the other hand, do the woes that Christ counterpoises with his announcement of Christian happiness, for example, "But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation" (Lk 6:24), signal only a probable warning against self-satisfaction? As if Christ really meant to teach, "Woe now to you rich, but wait, things may change" It would be preposterous to interpret the Gospel as a provisional and probable expression of divine truth. Dominus Iesus now clarifies for us that the definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ comes as God's gift to the Church, and that the divine truthfulness itself forms the basis for the creature's trust that what Christian revelation promises will be fulfilled.

There are many reasons for everyone to welcome Dominus Iesus. Its message will help those involved in interreligious dialogue to renew their efforts as an integral part of the Church's mission to the nations (missio ad gentes). Christ himself imposes on every Christian believer the obligation to proclaim the salvation that he himself has won for every member of the human race. "The Church cannot fail to proclaim that Jesus came to reveal the face of God and to merit salvation for all mankind by his Cross and Resurrection" (Redemptoris missio 11). Respect for the beliefs of non-Christians and tolerance of their religious practices follows upon this fundamental Christian truth. That is why Pope John Paul II envisions no conflict between an unwavering promotion of Christ and his Church and a legitimate respect for human liberty. "On her part, the Church addresses people with full respect for their freedom. Her mission does not restrict freedom but rather promotes it. The Church proposes; she imposes nothing" (ibid. 39). The "Declaration" will also energize and re-direct friendly exchanges with other Christian Churches, which do not accept the Catholic doctrine of the Primacy of the Bishop of Rome, and ecclesial communities, which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery. In God's providence, these persons will be drawn to recognize the true and full divine plan for our salvation. So there is much to be grateful for in this official reminder from the Holy See about the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church. Without it, Catholics could have been led to accept the de facto divisions among Christians and the plurality of religious beliefs as a situation willed by God instead of one He has promised to remedy in Jesus Christ.

Dominus Iesus is addressed first of all to Catholics. The Holy See intends that the expositions in the "Declaration" renew every area of Catholic life: the teaching of Catholic doctrine, especially in catechetical instruction, the celebration of the sacraments, especially its accompanying liturgical practice, the instruction about human conduct, and the exercise of

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Christian spirituality. Relativism, so the "Declaration" warns us, undermines the confidence that Christ's faithful should possess in the claims that the Church makes about revealed doctrines, efficacious sacraments, true morals, and authentic prayer. Religious relativism adversely affects every Christian believer, inasmuch as relativism is a form of skepticism. One responsibility of the Bishop of Rome, as the witness of Blessed Pope Pius IX illustrates, is to protect the flock of Christ from adopting attitudes that contribute to weakening their faith. The munus petrinum, the divine gift that Christ confided to the Apostle Peter for the governance of the Church, strengthens not restricts the Church's missionary outreach. The munus petrinum protects the deposit of faith, and ensures that the gift of divine truth will be available in the whole world.

The perniciousness of religious relativism particularly threatens those who are asked to consecrate their whole lives to the proclamation of the Gospel and to the celebration of the sacraments. Dominus Iesus brings special comfort to those who are considering, preparing for, or living out a vocation to the priesthood. How many young men have been dissuaded from considering a priestly vocation because they have thought that the priesthood itself is undergoing a radical transition, that the priest no longer is "another Christ" but rather an ecclesial functionary? How many priests have become disenchanted with their ministry because they have succumbed to the view that theirs is only one of many ways to engage in professional Church work? Dominus Iesus corrects these and other false notions about the sacramental mediation of the Church.

Although no explicit mention of priestly vocations appears in the "Declaration" itself, Dominus Iesus should certainly encourage men to pursue priestly vocations. The prospective candidate for the priesthood will find special consolation in knowing that he is dedicating his life, including his celibacy, to divine truth in its fulness, not to partial and sectarian claims. It would make no sense to commit one's whole life to something less than the full and complete revelation

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of God in Jesus Christ. At the same time, the bestowal of this precious grace of divine Truth cuts like a two-edged sword. The priest is at once ennobled by the office that is confided to him, and at the same time humbled by his unworthiness to undertake it.

The iconography that one usually finds in seminaries suggests what is required and expected of a person who wishes to become a servant of God's unique and salvific truth. The stained-glass windows or wall paintings that adorn, especially older, seminaries, oftentimes display figures representing the chalice, the lily, and the Blessed Virgin Mary. These three symbols together communicate important themes for the priesthood, values which the leaders of seminary renewal in the early modern period considered indispensable for training Catholic priests. Each of the symbols points to a mystery that makes sense only because the revelation of Christ remains in human history "the true lodestar," as Pope John Paul expresses it in Fides et ratio (no. 15).

Let's consider each symbol in turn, with special attention to the icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose place in the Church derives from the unique status of her Son. The chalice of course reminds the priest that his life is consecrated both by and to the Eucharist. Just as the Church of Christ preserves apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist, so the priest, who receives his ordination from the apostles, fulfills his ministry by ensuring that the Eucharist (and all that it requires) is celebrated faithfully and regularly. There are no substitutes for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, which alone constitutes the full and complete worship of the Church. The lily symbolizes the terms for assuming so noble an office: priestly celibacy. "I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short" (1Cor 7:29). Not a single moment can be wasted. Those who are ordained to the priesthood of Christ must be about the things that only the Christian priest can do: preach the Gospel, forgive sins, eucharistize, give pastoral care to the laity. Celibacy, which is impossible without chastity of deed and affection, demonstrates to the world

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that the Church and the priest take St Paul's sense of urgency seriously. But if it were not clear that one Eucharist saves the whole world, and that one priesthood, whose exercise in the Latin Church requires celibacy, exists to celebrate it, a priest may easily surmise that his energies should be directed elsewhere.

Chalices and lilies represent the priest's identification with the one, self-sacrificing, and chaste Savior of the world. We know that the dignity of the priestly office derives from the priest's own configuration to the very person of Christ. But this high dignity is contextualized by the virtues of a woman. There is nothing odd about this provision of the divine wisdom. One needs to consider only the intimate association of Mary with her divine Son. Marian imagery in seminaries not only endorses a particular form of piety, but also imposes on the priest a special virtue that the exercise of his sacred office requires. So we frequently discover alongside the chalice and lily an intertwined "A" and "M," which stands for "Ave Maria!" Dominus Iesus helps us also discover the reason for the intimate relationship that exists between the Christian priest and the Mother of Christ, Redeemer of the world.

The Church gained new and deeper appreciation for the place that Mary holds in the life of her priests during a time not unlike the period in which we live. In the decades following the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church was obliged to explain and defend her magisterium, her sacraments, and her priesthood. The sixteenth-century Reformers, variously and variously, had objected to each of these doctrines. In the renewal of the priesthood that accompanied the Catholic Reform of the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially in France, special attention was paid to the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Sainly diocesan priests recalled that priestly ordination communicates a "sacred power" which is none other than that of Christ. To ensure that Catholic priests in exercising this "sacred power" would measure themselves against the model of Christ and not of secular rulers, these same spiritual authors of the post-Tridentine

period insisted on the virtue of humility, for which the Blessed Virgin Mary provided a living model.

Even after the Second Vatican Council, the chalice, the lily, and the "Ave Maria" emblem retain their symbolic significance: the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is the perfect act of religion, chastity, and humility remain the cardinal virtues of the priest. The chalice, the lily, and our Blessed Lady serve as the priest's coat-of-arms, sustaining both his person and his mission. Just as the world cannot find true salvation in anyone else than Jesus Christ, so the Church cannot fulfill her universal mission of salvation without the exercise of true priestly authority. This explains why both the seminarian and the priest must return again and again to the icons of their special grace in the Church: the chalice, the lily, and "Ave Maria." Priests find in the graces these symbols represent the marks of their sanctity and vocation. What is more consoling, by holding fast to Jesus and living in Mary, the priest discovers the source of his own personal strength, and so learns the secret of living a Christian life that he, in turn, will teach to others.

The priestly vocation is an exalted one for the very reasons that Dominus Iesus clarifies, but the dignity of the priestly office never affords excuse for self-satisfaction, still less self-aggrandizement. Saint John Chrysostom, whose instruction on the priesthood has shaped the lives of Christian priests for the better part of the Church's two millennia impressed this message on the priests of the fourth and early fifth centuries. What he wrote still governs the life of priests today: "The Lord said clearly that concern for his flock was proof of love for him" (St John Chrysostom, *On the priesthood*, 2, 4). Pope John Paul II has given a special name to the love that the priest shows toward his people, who include by extension those in Christian ecclesial communities and even those who belong to other religions. He calls it pastoral charity. If one wanted to discover what this pastoral charity entails, then he may turn to a text from First Corinthians that most Catholics associate with married couples and their wedding ceremonies.

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Dominus Iesus, however, invites us to recognize that Saint Paul's hymn applies also to priests and the exercise of their distinctive ministries.

The scandal of particularity, as philosophical theorists refer to the Church's claim to universality, may just as well be applied to the priestly vocation. The Christian priest is unique, and yet indispensable for the salvation of the whole world. How can one Church claim to possess all the truth? How can a particular man claim to exercise a unique "sacred power?" The answer to these questions abides in the same divine wisdom which has ordained that a single man, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, procure by the blood of his cross salvation for every human being. But Christ comes among us as a humble servant, not as a dominator. Since they hold so great a treasure as the true religion in their hands, the priests of Jesus Christ must exhibit first of all the virtuous dispositions that should characterize every Christian. What does Saint Paul say about pastoral charity? "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1Cor 13: 4-7).

Love is the true challenge that Dominus Iesus issues to the members of the Church, but especially confides to her priests. If the Church makes extravagantly true claims about her mission and her Lord, it is because only Christ makes it possible for us to love. If the Church likewise makes remarkably stern demands on those who are called to announce the Good News, it is because she wants them to exercise their priestly authority with the gentleness that Christ himself exemplifies. How could the one who speaks and acts *in persona Christi*, in the very person of the Lord Jesus Christ, not himself exhibit Christ's own charity? If priests fulfill their responsibilities with the charity of Christ, then the indispensable service they render to the

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Church will bear fruit in creating a holy people. For this reason, every person in the world has something to gain from an increase of holy priests.

We are told that, in the beginning, Christians were recognized for the love that they bore one another. When love flourishes among those who bear Christ's name and shines forth from the hearts of those who serve him in the Church, then the claims of Dominus Iesus sound not so alien and out-of-touch with contemporary religious sensibilities. Instead, as happened during the first spread of the Gospel, they will appear as an invitation to welcome the full truth about Christ and his Church. The faith-inspired commitment to the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church moves us to devote our entire energies to fulfilling the mandate that Christ left to His Church: "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the world" (Mt 28: 18-20, as quoted in Dominus Iesus, no. 1).