

The Only Saving Church?

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The Vatican recently ruffled ecumenical feathers with its Declaration "*Dominus Jesus*," which asserted that the Roman Catholic Church is the one true church and that adherence to this church is necessary for salvation: "There exists a single Church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him." The Roman Church regards dialogue with other churches and religions as part of its evangelizing mission to lead them to acceptance of the full truth which it alone possesses.

On the one hand, we can say that there are many good statements in this declaration since it rejects universalism, pluralism, and syncretism.

As a remedy for this relativistic mentality, which is becoming ever more common, it is necessary above all to reassert the definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ. In fact, it must be firmly believed that, in the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6), the full revelation of divine truth is given (Par. 5). Therefore, the theory of the limited, incomplete, or imperfect character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, which would be complementary to that found in other religions, is contrary to the Church's faith (Par. 6).

However, it soon becomes clear that the faith that Rome speaks of is not the faith called for by Scripture, namely, trust in the merits of Christ alone for forgiveness of sins. The faith Rome calls for is assent to all the teachings of the Church and willing obedience to God.

The proper response to God's revelation is the obedience of faith (Rom 16:26; cf. Rom 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5-6) by which man freely entrusts his entire self to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals and freely assenting to the revelation given by him. Faith is a gift of grace: in order to have faith, the grace of God must come first and give assistance; there must also be the interior helps of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God, who opens the eyes of the mind and gives to everyone joy and ease in assenting to and believing in the truth.

The obedience of faith implies acceptance of the truth of Christ's revelation, guaranteed by God, who is Truth itself: Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed. Faith, therefore, as a gift of God and as a supernatural virtue infused by him involves a dual adherence: to God who reveals and to the truth which he reveals, out of the trust which one has in him who speaks (Par. 7).

Such faith in its fullness is possible only in the Roman Church.

The Lord Jesus, the only Savior, did not only establish a simple community of disciples, but constituted the Church as a salvific mystery: he himself is in the Church and the Church is in him (cf. Jn 15:1ff.; Gal 3:28; Eph 4:15-16; Acts 9:5). Therefore, the fullness of Christ's salvific mystery belongs also to the Church, inseparably united to her Lord.... Therefore, in connection with the unicity and universality of the salvific mediation of Jesus Christ, the unicity of the Church founded by him must be firmly believed as a truth of Catholic faith. Just as there is one Christ, so there exists a single body of Christ, a single Bride of Christ: a single Catholic and apostolic Church....

The Catholic faithful are required to profess that there is an historical continuity—rooted in the apostolic succession—between the Church founded by Christ and the Catholic Church: This is the single Church of Christ... which our Savior, after his resurrection, entrusted to Peter's pastoral care (cf. Jn 21:17), commissioning him and the other Apostles to extend and rule her (cf. Mt 28:18ff.), erected for all ages as

"the pillar and mainstay of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15). This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him. (Par. 16)

Yet faith is not totally absent from members of other churches:

With the expression *subsistit in*, the Second Vatican Council sought to harmonize two doctrinal statements: on the one hand, that the Church of Christ, despite the divisions which exist among Christians, continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church, and on the other hand, that outside of her structure, many elements can be found of sanctification and truth, that is, in those Churches and ecclesial communities which are not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church. But with respect to these, it needs to be stated that they derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church.

One must differentiate between the Roman Church, other churches which preserve apostolic succession, and "churches" or "ecclesial communities" which do not.

Therefore, there exists a single Church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him. The Churches which, 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, are true particular Churches. Therefore, the Church of Christ is present and operative also in these Churches, even though they lack full communion with the Catholic Church, since they do not accept the Catholic doctrine of the Primacy, which, according to the will of God, the Bishop of Rome objectively has and exercises over the entire Church.

On the other hand, the ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery, are not Churches in the proper sense; however, those who are baptized in these communities are, by Baptism, incorporated in Christ and thus are in a certain communion, albeit imperfect, with the Church. Baptism in fact tends per se toward the full development of life in Christ, through the integral profession of faith, the Eucharist, and full communion in the Church.... Therefore, these separated Churches and communities as such, though we believe they suffer from defects, have by no means been deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church (Par 17).

There is nothing new here, of course, but it must nevertheless come as a slap in the face to churches like the ELCA that have entered ecumenical agreements with Rome to be reminded of the fact that they do not even rate the name "church" with Rome. They can, however, still work their way up from the status of "ecclesial community" to the status of a "separated church" if they successfully implement their agreement with the Episcopal church to establish apostolic succession. In either status, they rate not as true dialogue partners with Rome but as "evangelism prospects."

The Declaration quickly establishes that Rome's teachings incorporates "the worst of both worlds" since, while it on the one hand denies the full validity of other churches, it nevertheless holds open the possibility of salvation for the heathen.

Above all else, it must be firmly believed that the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church. He himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and baptism (cf. Mk 16:16; In 3:5), and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through baptism as through a door. This doctrine must not be set against the universal salvific will of God (cf. 1 Tim 2:4). It is necessary to keep these two truths together, namely, the real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind and the necessity of the Church for this salvation. (Par. 20)

With respect to the way in which the salvific grace of God—which is always given by means of Christ in the Spirit and has a mysterious relationship to the Church—comes to individual non-Christians, the

Second Vatican Council limited itself to the statement that God bestows it "in ways known to himself." Theologians are seeking to understand this question more fully. (Par. 21) If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation. (Par.22)

First the qualifications and "explanations" coming out of Rome on the justification statement, then the promulgation of indulgences on the eve of the ceremonial ratification of the justification statement, now the reminder that they are not a real church—how many more embarrassments do ecumenical Lutheran churches have to receive before they realize the hazards and the folly of dealing with Rome.