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TERRENCE MERRIGAN

Religious Pluralism and Dominus Iesus

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the Church — and indeed the whole of Christianity — in our day is the challenge of religious pluralism. This paper aims to reflect on the Catholic Church's response to that challenge and, in particular, to say something about the recent document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and entitled *Dominus Iesus* (The Lord Jesus).

This paper is divided into four parts. I will begin with some thoughts on the nature of religious pluralism in our day, and on the nature of the challenge it poses to Christianity. Then I will attempt to situate the Roman document that has generated so much controversy. Third, I will say something about the way in which *Dominus Iesus* interprets Christianity in general, and the Church in particular. Finally, I will comment on the document's approach to the non-Christian religious traditions.

The Contemporary Challenge of Religious Pluralism

Is it not something of an exaggeration to describe religious pluralism as "the greatest challenge facing the Church" in our day? After all, religious pluralism is nothing new. Christianity itself came into being in a world that was bubbling with religious diversity, or "religious pluralism," as we now call it. Christianity began its days as one more religious sect in a world full of sects. It started out as a minority movement, as a small band of devotees trying to call attention to itself in a very busy religious marketplace. The early Church was acutely conscious of its minority status, and it related to the world around it with the discretion and the modesty that one expects from minorities. Of course, it inherited from Judaism the

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belief that there was only one God, one Lord. And, like Judaism, it was not prepared to compromise on this point. Eventually this "monotheistic intransigence" brought the Church into open conflict with the more "tolerant" Roman authorities, who were prepared to admit more or less all comers if they would make room in their temples for the Roman Emperor. Nevertheless, during the period that it was one among many religious movements, the Church genuinely wrestled with the question of how non-Christians might find salvation. They had no choice. Pagan authors, such as Celsus (ca. 170-80), objected to the idea that a God who wished to save humankind would take such a long time and such a convoluted path to do it. Perhaps the best known among the early Christian attempts to deal with the problem is the so-called "Logos theology" of St. Justin Martyr (ca. 165), according to which all people have some share in the divine life in view of their participation in the eternal *Logos* that became incarnate in Jesus.

Of course, as we know, the Church survived the Roman Empire, and even went on to take the empire's place as a "world power." I use the expression "world power" very deliberately. There was a time when many Christian thinkers believed that the world that they knew was indeed the whole world. That is to say, Christian theologians believed that everyone in the world had been exposed to the Church's preaching. In other words, the whole world had been given the opportunity to confess faith in the One and Triune God made known in Jesus Christ. This meant that anyone outside the Church was there as a matter of choice. Jews, heretics, "pagans," and later, Muslims – indeed more or less anyone – who were not members of the Church had no one but themselves to blame. It is especially in this context that a famous and haunting slogan was born, namely, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("outside the Church, there is no salvation"). For a person to be outside the Church could only mean one thing, namely, that the person had taken a free and deliberate decision to reject the gospel of salvation. There was no other explanation, no other excuse.

Operating on this conviction, the Church took a decidedly hard line towards all those who were not her members – and an equally hard line towards those members whose loyalty was suspect. I need not rehearse for you the tragic history of the Crusades and the Inquisition, the persecution of Jews and the wars of religion. Of course, these were

incredibly complex events, but it cannot be denied that they were, at least in part, inspired by the conviction that the truth was available to all those with eyes to see it and ears to hear it. And the truth was in the Church. Indeed, the truth was the Church. Although some theologians (including St. Thomas Aquinas) contemplated the possibility that non-Christians might indeed be saved without being actual members of the Church, the official teaching seemed to confirm the more rigorous view that non-membership meant damnation.

The conviction that the whole world had heard the gospel was shattered completely when Christopher Columbus discovered the "New World." Suddenly, the Church became aware that whole races and nations had never been exposed to the Word of life. Within Catholic theology, this realization led to the development of a variety of theories to explain how those who could not be members of the Church might nevertheless be saved. The most familiar of these theories were the idea of limbo and the possibility of "baptism by desire."

The point of all this history is twofold.

In the first place, history makes clear that the Church has always been most sensitive to the problem of religious pluralism, and most creative in dealing with it when it recognizes that it is not the only player on the religious stage, so to speak. Second, the situation in which we find ourselves today bears more resemblance to the situation in which the early Church found itself than it does to almost any other period in the past fifteen hundred years.

Once we acknowledge this, we might even think about drawing two conclusions. The first is that now, too, there is a need for theological creativity. The second is that the experience of the early Church might provide more inspiration than the experience of the medieval or post-Tridentine Church. I cannot develop these points here, but they certainly deserve further consideration. And they would be interesting questions to pose with regard to *Dominus Iesus*.

For the moment, however, I would like to highlight the fact that the contemporary experience of religious pluralism is more reminiscent of the ancient past than of the recent past. And that is precisely because Christianity is no longer self-evident. It has become one option amidst a whole range of options, one way to give meaning to life amidst a multitude of such ways. Moreover, these other ways are

not simply "available." They clamor for our attention. They are sensitive to market trends. They employ shrewd and even aggressive marketing techniques. And they often look like more "fun" than Christianity. Other religions and other religious and non-religious movements are here to stay.

Moreover, and this is perhaps the most important point of all, the practitioners of these other ways are familiar to us. We live beside them, we work with them, we know them personally – and they are fine, upstanding citizens, men and women of integrity, who are as idealistic and as spiritually sensitive as most of the Catholics we know. In other words, what our everyday experience makes clear to us is not simply the fact that there are other options available to us. It also makes clear that these other options can bear fruit, including the fruits of virtuous living and spiritual depth. This realization often comes to expression in two questions: First, does it make a difference if I am a Christian? Second, is it not pretentious for Christians to claim that they alone possess the truth? We can reformulate these two questions in more theological terms. Then they sound like this: (1) What is distinctive about Christianity as a world religion? (2) What is the relationship of Christianity to other world religions? In what follows, I will address both these issues. First, however, let us look at the document as a whole.

The Content of Dominus Iesus

Dominus Iesus was promulgated on August 6, 2000. The document is "signed" by Cardinal Ratzinger, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It concludes by noting that the Holy Father had "ratified and confirmed" the declaration. We are therefore dealing with a document that enjoys a very high degree of official sanction. The document has generated considerable controversy. I will not deal with the comments of any specific authors, however. Rather, I will attempt to explain the basic thinking underlying the document.

It is clear from the document that its main purpose is "theological." This means that it is especially interested in issues of doctrine. Of course, doctrine is part and parcel of Christianity, and impinges on every other aspect of that life. But it is still only one

dimension of Christianity. I think that Christianity can best be described as a reality that involves three fundamental dimensions. These are (1) a particular story; (2) a distinctive spirituality; and (3) a specific ethic. To live an integral Christian life is to engage with all three dimensions. A Christian must seek to know and understand the Christian story. This is the cognitive dimension of Christianity. It is above all a matter of the intellect. The Christian must also seek to develop a spirituality that is oriented to the Christian God. This is the affective dimension of Christianity. It is above all a matter of the heart. And third, the Christian must seek to live a Christian life. This is the domain of Christian praxis or ethics. It is above all a matter of the will. We can distinguish these three domains, but we must never divide them. Nevertheless, we can treat them separately at the theoretical level.²

Dominus Iesus is primarily a document about the doctrinal or cognitive dimension of Christianity. So, for example, in paragraph three we read that it aims "to set forth again the doctrine of the Catholic faith" regarding the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and his role as universal savior (i.e., as savior of the world).³ The concern is "to recall to Bishops, theologians, and all the Catholic faithful, certain indispensable elements of Christian doctrine," "certain truths that are part of the Church's faith." The hope is that this might "help theological reflection" to address contemporary problems.

However, it is clear from the outset that the document is concerned, above all, with one major problem. That problem is the perceived threat to the Church's mission to evangelize. It is good to be aware of this, because it can be lost sight of as one delves more deeply into the document. What is at stake is the Church's willingness to proclaim the gospel to the whole world. More fundamentally, what is at stake is the conviction that the gospel needs to be proclaimed to the whole world.⁴ To put it rather crudely, the question is, "Does it make any difference whether people throughout the world are exposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ?" At this point, the link with the contemporary experience of religious pluralism becomes clear. That experience would seem to indicate that it does not make any real difference, that it is not, strictly speaking, essential that the gospel be preached to all men and women. After all, we know from experience that non-Christians are as virtuous as Christians, and that they are the

inheritors of impressive religious systems, some of which are much older than Christianity. They do not need our ways of conceiving the world and of relating to God.

The conviction that there are a variety of equally legitimate ways of relating to God is at the heart of the so-called pluralist theology of religions. Defenders of this view of things generally appeal to three major arguments to defend their position. The first is the so-called historical-cultural argument, namely, that all our knowledge, including our knowledge of God, is relative. This means that it is dependent on a particular and limited point of view, a particular and limited culture, and a particular and limited set of ideas. The second argument is the so-called theological-mystical argument, that given the mysterious character of God, the fact is that God will always be more than we can say about him. The third argument is the so-called ethical-practical argument, namely, that the urgent need to address the problem of injustice in the world takes precedence over any dispute about doctrinal claims.⁵ We can summarize these arguments as (1) relativity, (2) mystery, and (3) justice.

Individual pluralist theologians tend to rely mainly on one or another of these arguments. However, they are all united in their insistence that every religion must take them seriously. Concretely, this means three things. First, every religion has a limited idea of God, and must therefore supplement its knowledge by the knowledge found elsewhere. Second, no religion can claim to say everything that can be said about God. Third, all religions should set aside doctrinal disputes and concentrate on promoting justice and the well-being of humanity. The way forward, for all religions, is to practice cooperation and to abandon any exclusivist claims.

In *Dominus Iesus*, this whole movement is described as relativism (§22). In paragraph four, it is said that today "relativistic theories . . . seek to justify religious pluralism" not simply as a fact of history, but as a necessary and inevitable consequence of our human situation — "religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de jure* (or in principle)."⁶ This is the heart of the issue, and it explains why *Dominus Iesus* begins by focusing on the Church's missionary calling. If the many religions of the world are part of God's plan to save all humankind, then they exist, as it were, by divine right (*de jure*), and it is difficult to see why there should be any concern to convert to

Christianity those who belong to them. The most that one can do is engage non-Christians in dialogue, in the hope that Christians and non-Christians might learn from one another. This explains why *Dominus Iesus* insists that interreligious dialogue can never be separated from proclamation, or evangelization (§2).

I mentioned that pluralist theology relies on three major arguments to build its case. *Dominus Iesus* refers to all three of them, without ever naming an individual author. It does not refer to these arguments in a systematic way. Instead, it returns to them on various occasions throughout the document. Whenever the document protests or condemns, the object of its protest can be subsumed under one of the categories I mentioned above, namely, relativity, mystery, or justice. This will become clearer as we consider the positive claims contained in the document. As I have indicated, I will treat these claims under two headings, the document's understanding of the nature of Christianity, and its approach to the relationship between Christianity and the world religions.

Let us turn to the presentation of Christianity in *Dominus Iesus*.

Christianity as a Religion of Salvation in Dominus Iesus

Dominus Iesus is clearly inspired by the thinking of Vatican II. It is important to say this, since one of the most commonly voiced objections to the document is the charge that it represents a return to pre-Vatican II theology. This is simply not the case. The document draws heavily on the theology of the Council, and especially on Pope John Paul II, but its contents are incomprehensible without the Council. It is true that it does not go much further than the Council. But it certainly does not go back beyond it.

The positive content of the document (as opposed to its criticisms of other positions) is built upon two fundamental pillars. These are, first, the unity of God's work of salvation (what theologians call the "economy of salvation"), and second, the incarnational character of that work. Each of these pillars has a crown, so to speak; that is, each of them involves another, very specific claim. The idea of a single economy of salvation implies a trinitarian God, in other words, a God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. The idea of the incarnational character of that economy implies the Church, namely, a concrete body that

continues Christ's work in history. Let us treat these separately.

The One Economy of Salvation and the Triune God

Dominus Iesus insists that "There is only one salvific economy of the One and Triune God, realized in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, actualized with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, and extended in its salvific value to all humanity and to the entire universe" (§12). This theme is hammered home in sections two to four (§5-15) of the document, which are expressly concerned with Jesus Christ.⁷ The document cannot stress enough that the salvific work of Jesus Christ represents the working out of a plan of salvation that has its origin and its goal in the Triune God. In other words, Jesus is what God had in mind from the very beginning. In the words of the document: "The mystery of Christ has its own intrinsic unity, which extends from the eternal choice in God to the *Parousia*" (§11).

Jesus Christ is not simply the expression of God's will to save us. He is also the concrete realization of that will in history. In other words, the factual life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are an essential and constitutive element of God's saving activity. The appearance of Christ in history represents the working out of an eternal plan or program of salvation, so to speak.

The whole point of God's eternal plan is made clear in Jesus Christ. But this, of course, raises once again the question asked by Celsus in the second century. If salvation is made so dependent on the history of Jesus, what are we to say of all those who lived before and after Jesus and never heard of him, let alone those who have heard of him but have never come to faith in him? As I mentioned earlier, various attempts have been made to deal with this problem. The most radical is, of course, the pluralist proposal of separate and more or less equal salvific systems. But there is a more moderate Catholic proposal, one that can broadly be described as a trinitarian approach to the religions. In line with this approach, some theologians have appealed to the activity of the Holy Spirit or even of the *Logos*, the eternal Word of God that became incarnate in Jesus, as the active principle in the salvation of those who do not confess Jesus. *Dominus Iesus* rejects any division of God's work of salvation into distinctive spheres of

influence, so to speak, each under the operation of one or another person of the Trinity. In the same way, it rejects any distinction between the incarnate Word (*Logos ensarkos*) and the eternal Word (*Logos asarkos*). The reason for this is clear, namely, the threat that it poses to the unity of God himself.

It is clear from the document that whatever God does for humanity's salvation, he does as the one God of the Bible. This does not mean that there is no salvation outside the explicit confession of Christ. However, it does mean that wherever salvation is found, it is somehow related to the incarnation of the divine Son.⁸ In reasserting this essentially classical claim, *Dominus Iesus* does not seem to be taking aim at pluralist theology as such. Rather, its target would seem to be those Catholic theologians who propose a more trinitarian approach to the other religions, but whose proposals seem to imply the sort of division under consideration here.⁹

What makes the matter rather confusing, however, is that *Dominus Iesus* juxtaposes criticism of such trinitarian proposals with criticism of the expressly pluralist position. So, for example, in paragraph 9, it criticizes both those who would distinguish the *Logos ensarkos* and the *Logos asarkos*, and those who would reduce Jesus to one manifestation of the mystery of God alongside others. This is unfortunate, because the former do not doubt either the unity of God's salvific plan or the essentially trinitarian character of God, while the latter are concerned with neither.

What the document asserts is undeniable, namely, that Christian tradition has always insisted on the unity of God, the unity of the salvific economy, and the fact that salvation is a trinitarian event, the Father sending the Son who is the occasion for the operation of the Spirit. What the document condemns, however, is not as clear-cut as it suggests. It is essential that a distinction be made between pluralist denials of the unity of the salvific economy in Christ (which inevitably imply a denial of the Trinity), and attempts to reconceive the theology of religions in trinitarian terms. By not doing this, *Dominus Iesus* seems to contradict its own call for theologians to address "new questions" by "pursuing new paths of research, [and] advancing proposals" (§3), and "to explore" the way in which "historical figures and positive elements" from other religious traditions "may fall within the divine plan of salvation" (§14).¹⁰

The Incarnation and the Church

One feature of *Dominus Iesus* that has generated some comment is its combination of the theology of religions with a discussion of the relationship between Catholicism and other Christian churches. There is no discontinuity here, however. The point of departure is the same in both cases, namely, the universal salvific will of God and its concrete realization in human history. The concern with "concreteness" is the hallmark of Catholic thinking. This is what is meant by the claim that Catholicism is a "sacramental" system, namely, that it tends to focus on the way in which the divine presence is "mediated." The strongest expression of this sacramental orientation is, of course, the doctrine of the incarnation, the assertion that the second person of the Trinity became human in the cause of human salvation. Catholic thought cannot conceive of the divine presence without linking it to some sacramental expression. This is why Christ is sometimes called the foundational sacrament, the first and ultimate sacrament of God's presence to humankind. In Catholic theology, the Church exists to perpetuate Christ's sacramental presence, especially through its own sacramental life (and the eucharist in particular). To affirm the saving presence of God in history is to affirm his ongoing presence in a sacramental form.

It is this basic insight that explains the move in *Dominus Iesus* from the discussion of Christ's incarnation to the discussion of the Church. It also explains the parallel between the title of section III ("Unicity and Universality of the Salvific Mystery of Jesus Christ") and the title of section IV ("Unicity and Unity of the Church").

If one is prepared to break the link between God's will to save and the concrete realization of this will in history, one will almost certainly be dissatisfied with the line of thought developed in the concluding (ecclesiological) paragraphs of *Dominus Iesus* (§16-22). The entire argument is built on the conviction that "Jesus Christ continues his presence and his work of salvation in the Church and by means of the Church, which is his body" (§16, with references to Col. 1:24-27; 1 Cor. 12:12-13, 27; Col. 1:18).¹¹ The document repeats the claim of Vatican II that the Church of Christ "subsists in the Catholic Church" (§17), and that other Christian bodies share "church-hood," so to

speak, to a greater or lesser degree. As far as the degree of sharing is concerned, the issue is once again a matter of "mediation." A community is more or less a church depending on whether it possesses the means to mediate effectively. For Vatican II (and for *Dominus Iesus*), the most important of these "means" are apostolic succession and a valid eucharist (§17). In fact, these two are intimately related, since apostolic succession guarantees the validity of the eucharist. Indeed, we can justifiably say that, for Vatican II and for *Dominus Iesus*, church-hood, so to speak, is above all a matter of the validity of the eucharist.

It is important to distinguish the question of "church-hood" from the question of the salvific value of non-Catholic communities (something that *Dominus Iesus* does not always succeed in doing). In line with Vatican II, *Dominus Iesus* unequivocally declares that the "separated Churches and communities as such . . . 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 that derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church" (§17).

The "fullness of grace and truth" is, of course, Jesus Christ, sacramentally mediated in the Church. However, this sacramental mediation does not exhaust Christ's saving presence. Christ is clearly implicated in the life of the non-Catholic communities. Everything they do, is done in his name. However, these communities differ among themselves as regards the concrete means that they employ to mediate Christ.¹² Some have practically no sacramental life whatsoever, others have highly developed sacramental systems (the Orthodox churches), while still others tread a sort of middle path, retaining some sacramental practices but differing as regards their importance. In the final analysis, *Dominus Iesus*, like Vatican II, portrays the eucharist as the primary sacramental mediation of the saving work of Christ. Where the eucharist is celebrated, Christ the Savior is most intimately present to his people.¹³ This is not to say that his saving presence cannot be found elsewhere. It is, however, to proclaim that this presence can be located in space and time, in the Church's celebration of his life, death, and resurrection. And, as I have indicated, it is the concern with time and place that marks out Catholicism as a religious system.

It is this same preoccupation with space and time, with concrete mediation, that explains the Church's attitude to the non-Christian religions.

Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions in Dominus Iesus

In paragraph 14, *Dominus Iesus* declares that "the historical figures and positive elements" from the non-Christian religions "may fall within the divine plan of salvation." How are we to account for this reluctance to ascribe to the non-Christian traditions a real and unequivocal role in God's salvific scheme? The answer is clearly found in the absence of any identifiable link to the mediation of Jesus Christ. It may well be that God is, so to speak, "deliberately" at work through these traditions. Indeed, an official document dating from 1991 seems to say precisely this.¹⁴ And *Dominus Iesus* does acknowledge that these traditions "contain and offer religious elements which come from God, and which are part of what the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures, and religions" (§21, quoting *Redemptoris Missio*, 29; see also §8). "Indeed," the document continues, "some prayers and rituals of the other religions may assume a role of preparation for the Gospel," by preparing the heart for "the action of God" (§21). However, these beneficial elements cannot be credited with a "salvific efficacy" in and of themselves.¹⁵

This is because the Christological reference, so to speak, is missing. And, as I have indicated, the heart of *Dominus Iesus* is its Christological component. Hence, if the non-Christian traditions, or elements within them, possess any salvific value, it must be attributed to Christ, the unique mediator. This is what the document calls "participated mediation."¹⁶

Dominus Iesus reiterates traditional faith in Jesus' divine Sonship, which qualifies him as the unique and universal revealer and executor of God's eternal will to save all humankind (§6, 9, 14). It also maintains that faith in this doctrine cannot be equated with the convictions that are the fruit of religious experience in general (§7). In other words, *Dominus Iesus* not only insists on the classical doctrine concerning Christ, it also insists that the acceptance of this doctrine does not bear comparison with the acceptance of the claims of other religions.

Christian faith, whether it is viewed in terms of the believing subject (*fides qua*) or of the object of faith (*fides quae*), is *sui generis*, that is to say, unique.

Where the link with Jesus is absent or obscured, there can be no unequivocal affirmation of the salvific value of any religious institution, any religious or ethical practice, or any religious or humanistic aspiration. For this reason, *Dominus Iesus* rejects the suggestion that a concern for social justice, in and of itself, is equivalent to the concern for the Kingdom of God (§18). The Kingdom cannot be "separated" from Jesus who, in turn, cannot be separated from the Church. The document acknowledges that these three – Jesus, the Kingdom, and the Church – are not identical with one another, but it categorically refuses to speak of one without the others.

It is typical of *Dominus Iesus*, and of Catholic theology in general, that it frames its argument within a complex network of relations, and that it is only within this complex network that the argument is comprehensible. So, for example, the insistence on the centrality of Christ must be linked to the recognition that the economy of salvation is a trinitarian event; the recognition that interreligious dialogue is desirable must be linked to the responsibility to proclaim the gospel (§1-2); the claim that Christ is God's "definitive and complete revelation" is juxtaposed with the recognition that "the depth of the divine mystery in itself remains transcendent and inexhaustible" (§6); the willingness to acknowledge that non-Christian religious traditions may *de facto* serve God's salvific will is immediately qualified by the insistence on the unique role of Christianity (§8, 14, 17, 21; cf. 16, 20, 22).

The hub of this complex, the point by which we orient ourselves, is the memory of Jesus and the celebration of his ongoing presence. He remains our anchor. But Jesus also and always points beyond himself – whether to the Father or to his needy brothers and sisters. He is an open invitation to us, to look beyond ourselves and to give the "other" priority in our lives. For that reason, the confession of *Dominus Iesus*, of Jesus the Lord, can never be an excuse for the refusal to approach the other – in dialogue and in service.

Notes

¹For a discussion of these notions, see Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), pp. 113, 121.

²Terrence Merrigan, "Approaching the Other in Faith: A Reply to Paul F. Knitter," *Louvain Studies* 24 (1999): 355-60.

³See also §23.

⁴See §22, 23.

⁵Paul F. Knitter, Preface to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), pp. vii-xii.

⁶The reference to those who would defend the view that pluralism could be regarded as *de jure* as well as *de facto* is very reminiscent of a passage in Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, p. 11. For an extensive discussion of Dupuis' views, see Terrence Merrigan, "Exploring the Frontiers: Jacques Dupuis and the Movement 'Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism,'" *Louvain Studies* 23 (1998): 338-59; reprinted in *East Asian Pastoral Review* 37 (2000): 5-32. See *Dominus Iesus*: "This truth of faith [that the Church is the instrument of salvation for all humanity] 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 characterized by a religious relativism which leads to the belief that 'one religion is as good as another'" (§4). The quotation is taken from Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, §36.

⁷See the following passages in *Dominus Iesus*: "Therefore, the words, deeds, and entire historical event of Jesus, though limited as human realities, have nevertheless the divine Person of the Incarnate Word, 'true God and true man' as their subject." "The truth about God is . . . unique, full, and complete, because he who speaks and acts is the Incarnate Son of God" (§6). "It is likewise contrary to the Catholic faith to introduce a separation between the salvific action of the Word as such and that of the Word made man" (§10). "Jesus Christ is the mediator and the universal redeemer" (§11). "The salvific incarnation of the Word [is] a trinitarian event." "The connection is clear between the salvific mystery of the incarnate Word and that of the Spirit . . ." "There is only one salvific economy of the One and Triune God . . ." (§12). ". . . one universal gift of salvation . . ." "The Church likewise believes that the key, the centre, and the purpose of the whole of man's history is to be found in its Lord and Master" (§13).

⁸See Terrence Merrigan, "'For Us and for Our Salvation': The Notion of Salvation History in the Contemporary Theology of Religions," *Irish*

Theological Quarterly 64 (1999): 339-48, especially pp. 343-46.

⁹It may well be that the work of Jacques Dupuis is being targeted here. See Merrigan "Exploring the Frontiers," pp. 348-49.

¹⁰See also §21: "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. Their work is to be encouraged, since it is certainly useful for understanding better God's salvific plan and the ways in which it is accomplished."

¹¹See also the following passages from *Dominus Iesus*: "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 . . ." (§16). "The one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church" (§20).

¹²See Francis Sullivan, "The Impact of *Dominus Iesus* on Ecumenism," *America* 183:15 (28 October 2000):

The meaning of *subsistit* that best corresponds to its meaning in classical Latin, and to its context in the passage where it occurs, is "continues to exist." I further argued [elsewhere] that in the light of the Decree on Ecumenism, one can conclude that the council meant to affirm that the church Christ founded continues to exist in the Catholic Church with a fullness of the means of grace and of unity that are not found in any other church. It is gratifying to see that this is how the term is now explained in *Dominus Iesus* (no. 16), which says: "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.'" (p. 9)

¹³See Sullivan, "The Impact of 'Dominus Iesus,'" p. 10. He points out that the Doctrinal Commission of Vatican II allowed for a more positive approach to the so-called "ecclesial communities" than *Dominus Iesus* that says bluntly that they are "not churches in the proper sense." The Doctrinal Commission said that these communities "are not merely a sum or collection

of individual Christians, but they are constituted by social 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, in a way that is somewhat like its presence in particular churches, and by means of their ecclesiastical elements, the church of Christ is in some way operative in them." Sullivan also refers to *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), where it is said that "the one church of Christ is effectively present in [the other Christian communities]." *Dominus Iesus*, he notes, gives one "the impression that the church of Christ is present and operative only in those that it calls 'true particular churches'" (p. 11).

¹⁴In a statement issued in 1991, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples acknowledged that, "concretely, it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their conscience that the members of other religions respond positively to God's invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their saviour." Commenting on this text, Jacques Dupuis observed that it "is a weighty statement, not found before in official documents of the central teaching authority, and whose theological import must not be underestimated. It means, in effect, that the members of other religions are not saved by Christ in spite of, or beside, their own tradition, but in it and in some mysterious way, 'known to God,' through it. If further elaborated theologically, this statement would be seen to imply some hidden presence — no matter how imperfect — of the mystery of Jesus Christ in these religious traditions in which salvation reaches their adherents." See Jacques Dupuis, "A Theological Commentary: Dialogue and Proclamation," in *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading 'Redemptoris Missio' and 'Dialogue and Proclamation'*, ed. W.R. Burrows (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), p. 137.

¹⁵There is a real tension here. On the one hand the document acknowledges that non-Christian religious traditions "contain and offer religious elements which come from God, and which are part of what 'the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures, and religions'" (§21, quoting *Redemptoris Missio*, 29), and that, "Indeed some prayers and rituals of the other religions may assume a role of preparation for the gospel," by preparing the heart for "the action of God" (§21). On the other hand, the document goes on to declare that "one cannot attribute to these [prayers and rituals] a divine origin or an *ex opere operato* salvific efficacy, which is proper to the Christian sacraments." Whatever one may say about the latter (i.e., *ex opere operato* efficacy), it is difficult to reconcile the former (the denial of

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divine origin") with the claim that these elements are "from God" and "the Spirit." See in this regard Francis X. Clooney, "Dominus Iesus and the New Millennium," *America* 183:13 (28 October 2000), p. 17.

¹⁰The references are to *Lumen Gentium*, no. 62, and John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 5.