

# Msgr Bruno Forte

## Declaration *Dominus Iesus*

### (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith)

### Interview<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. What are the reasons that justify the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*?

For a long time now there has been much discussion in the area of the Christian theology of religions about the value these have in comparison to the Christian proclamation. On the one hand there are those who, wanting to promote the various world religions, speak of a kind of relativist pluralism, by virtue of which Christ would not be the Father's only full revelation, but one of the ways for reaching the Mystery of God. On the other there are those who, firmly declaring that Christ alone is the Way to the Truth and the Life, say that the only way to reach the Mystery of God is through Christ himself. Theological reflection and the Church's Magisterium already tried to express a dual rejection of these two extreme positions in *Redemptoris Missio*. On the one hand a rejection of every form of relativism, on the other a rejection of every form of exclusivism that prevents real respectful dialogue with other religions. In reality of the two positions indicated, it is above all the relativistic one that seems to have done considerable harm to the Christian conscience. Some, following the idea that there are many ways of reaching the Mystery of God and that Christ, therefore, is not the necessary door, have in fact weakened the missionary thrust of faith. This does incalculable harm where mission is concerned. Confirming the unicity of salvation in Jesus Christ is not a blind pretension; it is the simple statement of truth related to the Gospel. It is precisely this declaration of truth that does not prevent us from recognising in the signs of the Spirit the Father's one plan also outside the full, explicit Christian revelation and always starting from it.

#### 2. Do these reasons correspond to real situations or only to fears and worries?

From what I have just said it seems obvious that the reasons for the *Dominus Iesus* come from real situations, from problems which are felt above all in the missionary field. I am thinking of the lack of motivation one finds in some missionary consciences; I am also thinking of a misguided dialogue that leads some missionaries to neglect the urgency of the proclamation of the Gospel for the sake of respecting the *Seeds of Truth* present everywhere. I believe that this situation is a real challenge above all *in* continents like Asia, which in reality are open fields for the great missionary activity of the Gospel. The great cultures of Asia, as well as the great religions present in Asia, must certainly be respected and their value must be recognised with all its depth and seriousness. But if this respect meant renouncing the Gospel proclamation, it would be a form of betrayal of that missionary urgency that Jesus himself entrusted to his disciples.

#### 3. The document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith confirms the fullness and finality of Christ's revelation, but doesn't this deprive other religious faiths of their meaning and value? Can't they too be considered, at least for some contents and aspects, the fruit of God's enlightenment, as they often claim?

Affirming the unicity of Jesus Christ, his singularity with regard to the revelation of salvation does not mean that we refuse to admit that there may be ways of divine self-communication also in other religious experiences. In reality it means we are professing faith in the Holy Spirit and his action. The Spirit blows where he wills, and this is already openness to possible recognition of the Gospel seeds of truth present in other religions. Furthermore the profession of God's universal plan of salvation cannot exclude a presence of salvific mediation in other religions. But we declare all this

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starting from Christian revelation, from that fullness of God's gift in Christ that makes us at the same time profess the universality of the Father's plan, the unicity of Christ's death and redeeming resurrection and the action of the Spirit. Therefore proclamation and dialogue are not in opposition; recognition of the value of other religious beliefs and the affirmation of the unicity of Christ must go together, I venture to say, they stand or fall together.

**4. If Christ is the one universal saviour, what value can be attributed to the beliefs and practices of non-Christian religions that have formed many peoples and individuals of great virtue and profound spirituality?**

The value is that of a *praeparatio evangelica*, to be understood in the highest and deepest sense, namely, in the sense of the Spirit of God acting in these beliefs and religious practices, of a saving plan that embraces them, but also of a profound need for discernment that requires a criterion. And this criterion cannot but be the revelation accomplished in Christ and the Gospel of his Love, which helps us to discern in non-Christian beliefs and religious practices all those positive values that can contribute to the growth of a real spiritual experience. At the same time, however, we cannot exclude, nor should we exclude, the fact that this discernment in the light of the Christ-criterion may also lead to a denunciation of the forms of dehumanisation or even of resistance to the Spirit that may be found in some religious experiences.

**5. What exactly is the relationship between the eternal Word and the incarnate Word with regard to salvation both before and after the Incarnation?**

*Dominus Iesus* is very clear on this point, at the end of n. 10, where it says: "*The theory which would attribute, after the incarnation as well, a salvific activity to the Logos as such in his divinity, exercised 'in addition to' or 'beyond' the humanity of Christ, is not compatible with the Catholic faith*". In other words what it says is that the eternal Word and the incarnate Word are one and the same person, namely, the Word Jesus Christ. To separate them or even put them in opposition, as some would like to do in order to see the eternal Logos as something more than the person of Christ, is simply false and misleading. Christ is the historical revelation of God, the eternal Son who takes on human flesh, the only divine Person who, through the Incarnation, is at one and the same time truly man. Christ is the criterion, the one mediator between God and the world in whose light it is possible to recognise all the *Semina Verbi*, all possible preparations for any revelation there may be in other religions.

**6. With regard to the relationship between the incarnate Word and the Holy Spirit in the work of salvation, while affirming the unity of the saving economy, isn't it possible that there could be a diversity of roles and horizons of action that are more suited to different ages and religious cultures?**

There has always been a tendency in the Church to separate Christology and pneumatology, the incarnate Word and the Holy Spirit. We can say that a certain disregard for the action of the Holy Spirit has encouraged what Fr Congar called — "Western Christomonism". On the other hand, however, where the value of the incarnate Word is forgotten and the action of the Spirit exalted, there is a danger of falling into forms of Pentecostal spiritualism which are no less misleading with regard to the Christian norm and measure. This is why we need to keep Christ and the Spirit together; it is only by keeping them together that we can explain the role of both of them. Christ is the only mediator among us human beings, he is the fullness of divine revelation; the Spirit is the one who actualises the *praesentia Christi* in time, he is the actualising memory of God, he is, as the theologian Walter Kasper says, the historical dimension of the Mystery. It is thanks to the Spirit, the Spirit of truth and therefore of divine fidelity, that Christ is alive and present for us today. Therefore the role of Christ and the Spirit, although distinct, can never be opposed. Indeed we could say that the Spirit is totally at the service of the economy of Christ and that Christ is totally oriented to the economy of the Spirit. This is why, keeping this dual and unique profession together, it is possible also to recognise where the Spirit works in the light of the criterion for this recognition which is Christ.

**7. Going on to the ecclesiological content of the Declaration, it seems to give an interpretation of the famous “subsistit in”, which is too restrictive and does not take into account the ecumenical progress made after the Council. Hasn’t the agreement and convergence that has gradually been reached in the theological field between the various Churches or groups of Churches changed the situation a little?**

To me it doesn't seem that the interpretation of *subsistit in*, of *Lumen Gentium*, n. 8, is strained in the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*. In reality it means going back to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, as the text does, which affirmed very clearly that the fullness of the means of grace is in the Catholic Church and that other Churches and ecclesial Communities, to varying degrees, share this fullness. Consequently the Council elaborated the Doctrine of degrees of communion, the one by which, with the language of the Council, it affirms on the one hand the presence of the Church in fullness in the Catholic Church and it recognises the notion of Church for example with regard to the Orthodox Eastern Churches, which have kept the ordained ministry and the Eucharist. Instead it speaks of ecclesial Communities when speaking of Churches that were the outcome of the Reformation. In my opinion the misrepresentation that some have made of these passages from *Dominus Iesus*, almost as if they wanted to deny the conquests of the Council, is absolutely unfounded. If we read the text on this point it is very clear and precise. It confirms what Vatican II said and what has been, moreover, the basis of the ecumenical endeavour of all these years. Therefore wanting to find an anti-ecumenical spirit in this Council renewal seems rather paradoxical to me. On the other hand the fact of speaking of degrees of communion, of recognising Eastern Churches with the full status of Churches and Communities born from the Reformation as ecclesial communities, does not mean diminishing the dignity or the value of the faith of their members or their experience of the Word of God. It simply means that it affirms the truth of a fullness of means of grace which God has entrusted to the Catholic Church. Naturally this does not automatically mean that Catholics are holier. Indeed this Jubilee has taught us to recognise clearly the faults of the Church's sons and daughters, but these do not remove the objective holiness of the Church, which consists of the reality of the means of salvation entrusted to her.

**8. Doesn't affirming the necessity of the Church for salvation deny in facts, despite contrary affirmations, the real possibility of salvation offered to everyone? And doesn't it go back to the now abandoned axiom, “outside the Church there is no salvation”?**

I think that even on this point it is necessary to give some explanations. If Christ is necessary for salvation, the Church, the sacramental presence of Christ in the Spirit, is no less so. But this does not mean, as I have already said, that outside the visible confines of the Church the Father's universal saving plan does not exist or that there is no action of the Spirit. Therefore on the one hand it is obvious that outside the Church there is no salvation if this expression is to be understood in the sense of living and working *extra Christum in Ecclesia*. But this expression must not have the meaning of an ecclesiological exclusivism of the kind that would lead us to underrate any value of mediation of salvation in other religions. Briefly, declaring the necessity of the Church motivates her missionary thrust and also motivates her joy and enthusiasm for the proclamation, but it does not exclude respectful recognition of the presence of Grace that the action of the Spirit in the Father's plan can accomplish outside the visible confines of the Church.

**9. In this picture what is the role of religions reduced to for the salvation of their members?**

I would not speak of a reduction. I would speak of a real possibility of saving mediation that comes within the mediation of the Spirit present with the *Semina Verbi* in these different religions. However this must not in any way eclipse the clear affirmation, basic for Christians, the article *stantis aut cadentis fidei cristianae* by virtue of which Christ, and Christ alone, is the door to the sheepfold, the Way, the Truth and the Life and no one can go to the Father without him. Without this affirmation there is no Christianity, there is no grace, there is no salvation; with it on the one hand ardour in the proclamation of missions is affirmed, on the other also the use of a clear criterion for discerning all the values present in other religions becomes possible.

**10. How can we speak of the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom before Christ's coming, when civilisations, cultures and moral systems existed irrespective of the Church and Christ. Should their present subsistence and their continual contribution to the Kingdom and its values, albeit imperfectly, not be acknowledged as an autonomous way of salvation that is being purified and growing?**

Actually this question goes back to an issue that was already much discussed in the patristic age. It is the question that Augustine summarises in the expression "*Ecclesia ab Abel*". Certainly there is a saving action on God's part that exists and which precedes Christ. This, however, according to the Christian confession, is accomplished in view of Christ. It is by extending this idea of "*Ecclesia ab Abel*" to non-Christian religions now alive and operative that it is possible to recognise in them a presence of enlightenment and participation in Christ's saving mediation that makes them effectively structures of mediation and salvation. This is not a Christian exclusivism, indeed it is an honest statement of the truth Christians believe in. It is, however, open to recognition and discernment of all spiritual values wherever they may be present and which in fact Christians can recognise fully thanks to the revelation accomplished in Christ.

**11. How can we speak of salvation for other peoples through "ways known to God alone" without attaching importance to these Ways which are non-Christian religions, adapted for centuries to the necessities of their peoples, cultures and traditions?**

Certainly the "ways known to God alone" are those that the Holy Spirit accomplishes in the hearts of men and women and in the structures of salvific mediation that other religions can have. This means that Christianity is open to an appreciation of non-Christian religions and to recognising the authentic good they have been able to give to their people, cultures and traditions for centuries. But two aspects must be taken into consideration: firstly that this mediation cannot be considered complete and perfect as is the mediation accomplished in Jesus Christ. For the Christian Christ is, and has always been, the Way to the Truth and the Life in the full sense. Therefore dialogue that strives to appreciate the values of religions cannot dispense the Christian from the urgency of proclaiming the fullness of God's gift in Christ. It would be a lack of truth, a lack of charity towards non-Christians. On the other hand it is also true that in non-Christian religions, together with values, there are forms of resistance and objective ambiguities. We are not speaking only about subjective ambiguities which are found naturally also among the Catholic Christian faithful, faults, sins, etc., but we are speaking about those objective limits that at times are opposed strongly to the dignity of the person according to God's plan. And I will explain myself here with two examples that I feel are very pertinent.

The first concerns the idea of *Person*: we know how this idea is a conquest of the Christian message and that it was gradually defined in the Christological debates of the first centuries. In fact it is a conquest that we could say was absolutely essential for humanity. Because it is precisely the idea of person, the idea of the human being as a responsible, knowing and unrepeatable subject, the idea of the uniqueness of his or her existence that lays the foundation for human rights and that therefore is the basis in history for promoting and respecting human dignity and justice in its various expressions.

The other important idea I would like to mention is that of *History* oriented towards an *Eschaton* (goal). Where this idea does not exist, as often happens in Asian cultures, human existence is seen as the return of a cycle, which in fact is repeated again and again. This underrates the uniqueness and unrepeatability of existence, and therefore the value of its subject, which is the person. History oriented to an *Eschaton* involves the human being in a meaningful and hopeful tension. Christianity gives this message to cultures, it must be, as we say, "inculturated", but it is also an extraordinary contribution which often means a radical newness in the way of understanding life and history. To go to concrete examples, think of the importance attached to the weekly feast-day that the Christian-Jewish tradition proposes and which does not exist, for example, in the majority of Asian cultures. Think of the importance attached to the unrepeatability of human life linked to the idea of

the person that leads one to safeguard the rights of the person as inalienable and sacred rights. Now Christianity has all this, it gives it, it offers it and it cannot be played down in the name of a presumed appreciation of other religious worlds which do not have these same values.

At the same time, however, precisely because of the above-mentioned beginnings of the universal action of the Spirit, of the Father's saving plan, wherever these values are present and the light of the Gospel allows us to recognise them, they must be recognised. *Dominus Jesus* does not deny this duty, it supports it, indeed it encourages it. But at the same time it calls Christians to their duty and their privilege as witnesses enamoured of Jesus Christ, God's full revelation, the only full and complete way of salvation that leads to the Father who embraces all in himself and that, thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit, also uses the authentic contributions of other religious worlds insofar as they are mediators of salvation towards God. At the same time the Declaration denounces any form of resistance or limits, helping those same religious worlds to a complete and authentic fulfilment of the human vocation in the celebration of God's glory.

Ref.: *Omnis Terra*, n. 311, November 2000.