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Talk 2: The Unicity of the Church

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In this talk, I will give a Catholic reflection on the unity of the Church in the context of *Dominus Jesus*. Tomorrow in my last talk, I will ask how I see the challenges posed to us by the Pentecostal-charismatic explosion of the twentieth-century.

As is well-known, *Dominus Jesus* proceeds from the uniqueness of Christ to the uniqueness of the Church. “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’.” (para. 16). This is found in the fourth section of DJ which treats of the “Unicity and Unity of the Church”.

I am aware that this section of DJ caused great offence to many other Christians. It gave the impression that the Catholic Church had taken a step backwards in regard to its ecumenical commitment and relationships. In fact, I think there are few objective grounds for reaching such a gloomy conclusion. Apart from the interpretation of the phrase *subsistit in*, about which Padre Giovanni spoke yesterday evening, DJ is simply expressing in condensed form the current teaching of the Catholic magisterium.

Why the Pain and the Misunderstanding?

DJ is a statement of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith totally in line with its normal working and role. It is not the role of the CDF to propose new developments or to open up new horizons in theological understanding. Its function is one of watching over and protecting the integrity of Catholic doctrine. When new developments are proposed by the Vatican, they normally come in an encyclical letter from the Pope, or in a

study document from an official papal commission. An example of the former is the Pope’s invitation in *Ut Unum Sint* to leaders and theologians of other Christian bodies to join him in discussing the forms of exercise of the papal primacy. Another example is the Pope’s call for a Catholic confession of the sins of the past in the letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (1994). Examples of the latter are the document *Memory and Reconciliation* of the International Theological Commission concerning confession of the sins of the past, and the document on *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* from the Pontifical Biblical Commission.

As a document of the CDF, DJ has a lower degree of authority than a papal encyclical. So DJ in no way weakens or modifies the teaching of the encyclical on ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint* of 1995. It is fulfilling a different role.

There is obviously a communications problem here. The CDF still issues doctrinal clarifications and warnings in the same way as happened before the arrival of the mass media. In pre-mass media days, these documents were only read by bishops and theologians, for whom indeed they were intended. Today such documents will almost inevitably cause misunderstanding among people who are not familiar with the restricted focus of the CDF and the levels of authority attaching to different Vatican documents. Moreover, offence is caused particularly by the making of negative statements about other Christian denominations, when there is no attempt at a positive evaluation of the work of the Holy Spirit within these bodies.

The Unity of the Church

The direct passage from the uniqueness of Christ to the uniqueness of the Church is not problematic in itself. It is the teaching of Ephesians: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all” (Eph. 4: 4 – 6). We are all agreed that there is only one Church of Jesus Christ. The points of difference concern the relationship of the Catholic Church in communion with Rome to the one Church of Jesus Christ. It seems to me that the assertion of DJ that the Catholic Church remains in a particular sense the continuous embodiment of the one Church¹ means the same as the assertion that the papal primacy is an essential element in the constitution of the Church. Because in Catholic understanding the ministry of the Bishop of Rome is to be the focal point for the unity of the episcopate, the foundational unity continues to exist in the Catholic Church gathered around the Pope.

What then have been the effects of division on the Catholic Church? Does the affirmation that “the unicity and the unity of the Church ... will never be lacking” (DJ, para. 16) mean that the divisions have not deeply injured the Church? DJ states: “The lack of unity among Christians is certainly a *wound* for the Church; not in the sense that she is deprived of her unity, but ‘in that it hinders the complete fulfilment of her universality in history’” (para. 17). This seems to me to be a rather weak statement about the effects of division on the Church. It was better

¹ “The Christian faithful are therefore not permitted to imagine that the Church of Christ is nothing more than a collection — divided, yet in some way one — of Churches and ecclesial communities; nor are they free to hold that today the Church of Christ nowhere really exists, and must be considered only as a goal which all Churches and ecclesial communities must strive to reach”. (DJ, para. 17).

expressed in the Pope’s letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, where he said “In the course of the thousand years now drawing to a close, even more than in the first millennium, ecclesial communion has been painfully wounded....” (para. 34).

In the 19th century, the Italian priest Antonio Rosmini wrote a book entitled *The Five Wounds of Holy Church*. Rosmini made a comparison between the five wounds in the body of Jesus on the cross and the five wounds he saw in the Church of his day. The Catholic Church of Rosmini’s day was not ready for such a prophetic challenge, and his book was quickly put on the Index of Prohibited Books. However, Rosmini was a humble and holy man, the respected founder of an approved religious congregation. Another recent statement from the Congregation from the Doctrine of the Faith has reinterpreted the 19th century condemnations of Rosmini in a way that rehabilitates Rosmini, but does not admit any fault in the conduct of the Holy Office, as the CDF was called at that time.

Unity and Structures

In the Counter-Reformation, the Catholic accent was especially placed on the outward structures of authority: the hierarchy, especially the Pope, defined doctrines and the laws of the Church. The currents of renewal of the 20th century issuing in and made its own by the Second Vatican Council were rooted in biblical and liturgical renewal. This has produced a switch from a more juridical ecclesiology to one that is more sacramental. This can be seen especially in Vatican Two’s ecclesiology of the universal church as the communion of particular or local churches in communion with the primatial see of Rome. There is still a focus on the structures, but it would be a misunderstanding to reduce it to a mere concern with authority and jurisdiction, an exterior focus uninterested in the spiritual. It is an expression of a sacramental understanding in which the outward is an instrument of the Spirit for effecting the inward that then shapes the whole. The

instrumentality of the papal primacy and of the liturgy, particularly the eucharist, in the formation and preservation of the Church's organic unity are understood as the work of the Holy Spirit. The result is that in the Catholic approach to the Church, we posit the outward bodily visible structures as the instrument of the Lord for the realisation of the spiritual. This leads us to say, where the outward structures are lacking, there is no church in the proper sense.

At this point we need to look at the quite different approaches of Catholic and Evangelical – to Church and to unity. There is a major difference of **focus**. While Catholics have long focused on the structural elements in the Church and its unity, Evangelicals have focused on the Gospel and its interior fruit. With Pentecostals and charismatics, this Evangelical focus is even more sharply on **life**.

Whereas Catholics today typically begin from the outward expression and move towards the interior reality, Evangelical Protestants typically move in the opposite direction. The focus is on Jesus and the life in the Spirit that he gives. They begin with spirit, with spiritual life. This approach begins with individual believers being converted and filled with the Spirit. The Church is then often seen as the fruit of the ministry of the Word in the gathered assembly of converted believers.

I think the first challenge of the Pentecostal and other revival streams to the Catholic understanding of Church is that we Catholics should take the spiritual component more seriously. When all the cited structural elements are in place (papal primacy, episcopate, sacraments), but there is little love of the Lord, little depth of dedication, little repentance for sin, then the outward unity is reduced to a façade. We know that the reunions between the Eastern and the Western Churches in 1274 and 1439 did not last, because the underlying mentalities of the people had not changed. The Decree on Ecumenism recognises the need for spiritual renewal: “Christ summons

the Church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that continual reformation of which she always has need, insofar as she is an institution of men here on earth.” (para. 6). One key question for the Catholic Church is this: how can this inner renewal become central to our understanding of Church? How can we avoid presenting a view of Church where the outward structures are what is absolutely essential and the spiritual dimension appears to be of lesser importance - as being highly desirable but not a *sine qua non*?

This challenge is really inseparable from the challenge posed by all the movements of spiritual revival and renewal: how can the Church truly live under the Lordship of Jesus and in the power of the Spirit?

Pointers to a Fuller More Ecumenical Catholic Ecclesiology

There has been an immense transformation in Catholic understanding since and through the Second Vatican Council. Fundamental shifts in perspective take a long time to be grasped in all their implications. I want to take a few examples of changes already acknowledged in official Catholic documents that have yet to impact fully the way Catholics speak about Church – most of these examples are important to Pentecostals.

First, only at Vatican Two did the Catholic Church accept that other Christian communions were within the mystery of the one Church, and not outside it. Yes, they are “imperfectly” within, but there is a huge difference between being imperfectly within, and not being within at all. This “imperfectly within” is the position of DJ. But maybe we Catholics have not fully realized what a revolution this change represented. So we easily speak still of “the Church” when we are speaking specifically of the Catholic Church in communion with Rome, and we are not including other Christian churches and communities. We even find this way of speaking in DJ, where it says in relation to non-Christian religions:

“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.” (para. 22). But the current Catholic theology requires us when we are speaking of the Church in communion with the see of Rome to speak of the Catholic Church, and not simply of “the Church”.

Secondly, there has been a major shift in Catholic understanding concerning the foundational place of the Word of God in the Church. At Vatican Two, there was a recognition that the proclamation of the Word, both the biblical text and the exposition of it, forms an integral element in liturgical and sacramental celebration². This necessary inter-connection of Word and sacramental action is clear in many modern Catholic documents, notably in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. DJ is at one with other Catholic documents in understanding what constitutes Church in structural terms: “governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him” (paras. 16 and 17), and “apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist” (para. 17). But in DJ, these references to the essential structures that characterise Church make no reference to the Word of God. DJ sees the ecclesial element in Protestant denominations as grounded in baptism, without any reference to the foundational role of the Word³. This is

² “The People of God is formed into one in the first place by the Word of the living God. ... The preaching of the Word is required for the sacramental ministry itself, since the sacraments are sacraments of faith, drawing their origin and nourishment from the Word.” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, para. 4), cited in CCC, para. 1122.

³ “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

because the integration of Word and sacrament is relatively new in magisterial teaching and has not yet replaced all the older Catholic reflexes⁴. The documents which make most reference to the Word of God are the liturgical and catechetical documents, such as the document on Restoring the Catechumenate for the Initiation of Adults (1972) and the General Directory on Catechesis (1997).

Third, following on from the centrality of the Word of God, there is increasing Catholic recognition that the proclamation of the gospel belongs to the heart of the Church’s calling. Paul VI said in 1975: “Evangelising is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity.”⁵ Does this focus require a more dynamic understanding of Church? Does this not imply that Protestant communities that are strongly evangelistic manifest an element of Church? What does this mean in terms of Protestant ecclesial communities that are more evangelistic than local Catholic churches? This is not simply an interior feature, as evangelisation is an outward activity.

Fourth, there is now a Catholic recognition of the place of charisms in the life of the Church. First mentioned in *Lumen Gentium*, John Paul II spoke on this subject at Pentecost 1998 to a large gathering of the new ecclesial movements. In this talk, the Pope said that the Second Vatican Council had restored the charismatic dimension to the life of the Church. He saw in the new ecclesial movements a strong sign of this charismatic dimension. Fr Libero Gerosa of Lugano has pointed out that in Vatican Two the Holy Spirit furnishes the Church with various gifts,

of faith, the Eucharist, and full communion in the Church.” (para. 17).

⁴ The older reflexes are indicated by the Index at the end of the Catechism, which has no entries for Bible, Evangelisation, or Word of God, and by the entry for “Conversion”, which says “see Contrition”.

⁵ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, para. 14.

both hierarchical and charismatic⁶. He says we should speak more of the constitution of the Church, a wider concept, than of the Institution, for the Constitution includes the charismatic dimension⁷. This idea also points to a more dynamic understanding of the Church. In a Pentecostal context, we should note that one distinctiveness of the Pentecostal movement was not the reappearance of the charisms (they had always been present throughout the centuries) but their reappearance as capacities available to every Christian to equip them for the work of the Church.

Fifth, the deeper liturgical-sacramental understanding of the Church coming from the renewal of biblical and patristic studies has led to a new emphasis on the eschatological character of the Church. The Church is not an established institution in this world, but is in movement towards the coming kingdom. The structures that in Catholic teaching are essential for there to be Church in the full sense belong to the “age of the Church” between Pentecost and the second coming of the Lord⁸. The fact that the structures of Church belong to the present age gives them a provisionality and a Kingdom-orientation that has not always been prominent in Catholic understanding – though it has always been clearly expressed in the liturgy and in recent years features strongly in *the Catechism of the Catholic Church*⁹.

⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, para. 4.

⁷ *Prayer for Healing* (ICCRS, 2003), pp. 156 – 57.

⁸ See CCC, para. 1076. In line with this, the Catechism sees the Lord’s prayer as “the proper prayer of ‘the end-time,’ the time of salvation that began with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and will be fulfilled with the Lord’s return” (para. 2771).

⁹ See, for example, paras. 671 – 677, 769, 1001 – 03, 1090, 1107, 1130, 1402 – 05, 2771 – 2772, 2778, 2817 – 18.

Sixth, the recognition by the Catholic Church that the covenant with Israel was not revoked, and that the Jews remain “the people of the covenant” has important implications for the unity of the Church. At and since Vatican Two, some theologians and bishops have recognised that the root division within the People of God is that between the synagogue and the Church. It is surely not a coincidence that the New Testament letter that has the teaching on one body and one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all (Eph. 4: 4 – 6) is the one with the teaching that this unity wrought by the cross is the union of Jew and Gentile. “For he is our peace who has made us both one” (Eph. 2: 14). The uniqueness of Jesus and his work of salvation, rooted in the uniqueness of Israel, produces the “one new man in place of the two” (Eph. 2: 15). The mystery of Christ is that “the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” (Eph. 3: 6). The Catholic Catechism recognises that “the full inclusion of the Jews in the Messiah’s salvation, in the wake of ‘the full number of the Gentiles’ will enable the People of God to achieve the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.” (para. 674). The restoration of an explicitly Jewish presence in the Church will surely transform all these issues that we have been discussing.

Catholics have long seen the history of the Church as quite different from the history of Israel in the Old Testament. The Old Testament was seen as a history of infidelity, reaching its climax in the rejection of Jesus as Messiah. The New Testament was seen as inaugurating the irrevocable covenant in the person of Jesus. The history of the Church is then interpreted in terms of fidelity and indefectibility in contrast to the history of Israel. The prophetic warnings of disaster for Israel were assigned to the Jews, while the prophetic promises of future blessing were appropriated by the Church.

Now that the Catholic Church recognises that God has not rejected the Jews and that the

covenant with Israel and the accompanying promises still stand, a re-think of our assumptions about Church history is needed. Clearly there is a radical newness in Jesus: the covenant is established first in Jesus himself, in his shed blood. There is a radical newness in the resurrection of Jesus and in the consequent gift of the Holy Spirit. But while the fulfilment is totally achieved in Jesus, it is not yet realised for the Church on earth. It is here, I believe, that the Spirit is showing us that the history of the Church on earth has more features in common with the history of Israel than we had imagined – in terms of the cycles of infidelity and of renewal. The Pope's call for repentance seems to be a move in this direction. The biblical emphasis is on God's faithfulness, despite our sin.

As these insights concerning the components of Church in the New Testament enter more deeply into the lived as well as the formulated Catholic ecclesiology, Catholics and Pentecostals will be able to discuss the profound issues involved in our differences in a climate of respect and mutual edification.

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His first and third talk in Bari, April 2003 are
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