

Dominus Iesus and Ecumenism

By Jim Seghers

Dominus Iesus is a Declaration published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: "On the Unicity and Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church." In a separate but related Letter to the Presidents of all Episcopal Conferences, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, explained the purpose of *Dominus Iesus*. The objective was to reaffirm truths that require "irrevocable assent by the Catholic faithful." In addition, the document "refutes errors, clarifies some ambiguities and points out important questions that remain open to theological investigation and debate."

It is not surprising to discover that *Dominus Iesus* expounds no new doctrine. Indeed, it draws heavily from the documents of the Second Vatican Council¹ and Pope John Paul II's 1990 encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio* and his 1995 encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*. Therefore, if a serious reader desires to understand the Declaration, it must be studied along with these documents and the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#).

Pope John Paul II proclaims that ecumenism is drawn from the Church's mission of evangelization. "The missionary thrust therefore belongs to the very nature of the Christian life, and is also the inspiration behind ecumenism: 'that they may all be one ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me' (Jn 17:21)."² Ecumenism, then, is a logical extension of the church's missionary spirit.

The negative emotional response to *Dominus Iesus* that emanated from some Catholic quarters reflects a superficial understanding of the Church's mission and the meaning of true ecumenism. One example of this shallow response was the hysterical editorial in *America*, which decried "communication disasters like *Dominus Iesus*."³

The Holy Father clarified the meaning of authentic ecumenism. "It is not a question of altering the deposit of faith, changing the meaning of dogmas, eliminating essential words from them, accommodating truth to the preferences of a particular age, or suppressing certain articles of the Creed under the false pretext that they are no longer understood today. The unity willed by God can be attained only by the adherence of all to the content of the revealed faith in its entirety. In matters of faith, compromise is in contradiction with God who is Truth. In the body of Christ, 'the way, the truth, and the light (Jn 14:6), who could consider legitimate a reconciliation brought about at the expense of truth?'"⁴

In contrast to *America*, the respected evangelical journal, *Christianity Today*⁵, disclosed an astute understanding of the significance of *Dominus Iesus*. It declared that "the Vatican's recent statement on the nature of the church is a step forward, not backward, for Christian unity."⁶ The article also noted the Declaration affirmed that Protestants are real Christians and that Protestant churches are "ecclesial communities." The editorial's analysis of the critics of *Dominus Iesus* was particularly insightful. It stated: "so many left-of-center ecumenists have responded with outrage only highlights the need for a statement like *Dominus Iesus* ... real unity comes via an ecumenism of conviction, not an ecumenism of accommodation."⁷

February 21, 2001

¹ Of particular relevance are the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, and the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, [Lumen Gentium](#).

² *Redemptoris Missio*, 1.

³ *America*, 183:13, 10-28-2000, p.3.

⁴ [Ut Unum Sint](#), 18.

⁵ *Christianity Today*, Vol. 44, # 12, 10/23/2000, pp. 28-29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*