



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II TO THE MEMBERS, CONSULTORS AND STAFF OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

Friday, 28 January 2000

*Your Eminences,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,
Dear faithful Collaborators,*

1. It is a great joy for me to meet you at the end of your plenary assembly. I want to express my gratitude and appreciation for the work that your dicastery accomplishes each day in the service of the Church for the good of souls, in harmony with the Successor of Peter, the first guardian and defender of the sacred deposit of faith.

I thank Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger for the sentiments he has expressed on everyone's behalf in his address to me, and for explaining the topics that you have carefully considered during your assembly, which was especially dedicated to studying the problem of the uniqueness of Christ and to revising the norms of the so-called "graviora delicta".

2. I would now like to dwell briefly on the principal topics discussed at your meeting. Your dicastery has considered it timely and necessary to begin studying the themes of the uniqueness and salvific universality of Christ and the Church. The reaffirmation of the Church's doctrine on these themes is being proposed in order to show "*the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ*" (2 Cor 4: 4) to the world and to refute errors and serious ambiguities that have taken shape and are spreading in various circles.

In recent years a mentality has arisen in theological and ecclesial circles that tends to relativize Christ's revelation and his unique and universal mediation of salvation, as well as to diminish the need for Christ's Church as the universal sacrament of salvation.

To remedy this relativistic mentality, the definitive and complete character of Christ's revelation must first of all be emphasized. Faithful to the word of God, the Second Vatican Council teaches: "The most intimate truth which this revelation gives us about God and the salvation of man shines forth in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation" (Dogm. Const. *Dei Verbum*, n. 2).

For this reason, in the Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio* I reminded the Church of her duty to proclaim the Gospel as the fullness of truth: "In this definitive Word of his revelation, God has made himself known in the fullest possible way. He has revealed to mankind who he is. This definitive self-revelation of God is the fundamental reason why the Church is missionary by her very nature. She cannot do other than proclaim the Gospel, that is, the fullness of the truth which God has enabled us to know about himself" (n. 5).

3. The theory on the limited nature of Christ's revelation, which would find its complement in other religions, is thus contrary to the faith of the Church. The underlying reason for this assertion claims to be based on the fact that the truth about God could not be grasped and manifested in its totality and completeness by any historical religion, and so not even by Christianity or by Jesus Christ. This position, however, contradicts the affirmations of faith that the full and complete revelation of God's saving mystery is given in Jesus Christ, while the understanding of this infinite mystery is to be explored and deepened in the light of the Spirit of truth, who guides us in the era of the Church "*into all the truth*" (Jn 16: 13).

The words, works and entire historical event of Jesus, while being limited as human realities, still have the divine Person of the incarnate Word as their source and therefore contain in themselves the definitive and complete revelation of his saving ways and of the divine mystery itself. The truth about God is not abolished or diminished because it is expressed in human language. On the contrary, it remains one, full and complete, because the one who speaks and acts is the incarnate Son of God.

4. Connected with the uniqueness of Christ's salvific mediation is the uniqueness of the Church he founded. The Lord Jesus, in fact, established his Church as a saving reality: as his Body, through which he himself accomplishes salvation in history. Just as there is only one Christ, so his Body is one alone: "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church" (cf. *Symbolum fidei*, DS 48). The Second Vatican Council says in this regard: "Basing itself on Scripture and Tradition, this holy Council teaches that the Church, a pilgrim on earth, is necessary for salvation" (Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, n. 14).

It is a mistake, then, to regard the Church as a way of salvation along with those constituted by other religions, which would be complementary to the Church, even if converging with her on the eschatological kingdom of God. Therefore we must reject a certain indifferentist mentality "characterized by a religious relativism which leads to the belief that one religion is as good as another" (cf. Encyc. Let. *Redemptoris missio*, n. 36).

It is true that non-Christians - as the Second Vatican Council recalled - can "gain" eternal life "under the influence of grace", if "they seek God with a sincere heart" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 16). But in their sincere search for the truth of God, they are in fact "related" to Christ and to his Body, the Church (cf. *ibid.*). They nevertheless find themselves in an unsatisfactory situation compared to that of those in the Church who have the fullness of the means of salvation. Understandably, then, in accordance with the Lord's command (cf. Mt 28: 19-20) and as a requirement of her love for all people, the Church "proclaims, and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is "the Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14: 6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself, men find the fullness of their religious life" (Decl. *Nostra aetate*, n. 2).

5. In the Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint*, I solemnly confirmed the Catholic Church's commitment to the "restoration of unity", in continuity with the great cause of ecumenism which the Second Vatican Council had so much at heart. Together with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, you helped to reach the agreement on fundamental truths of the doctrine of justification that was signed on 31 October last year in Augsburg. Trusting in the help of divine grace, let us go forward on this journey, even if there are difficulties. Our ardent desire to reach the day of full communion with the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities cannot obscure the truth that the Church of Christ is not a utopia to be reconstructed by our human powers from the fragments we find today. The *Decree Unitatis redintegratio* spoke explicitly of the unity which "we believe subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time" (n. 4).

Dear Brothers, in the service that your Congregation offers to the Successor of Peter and to the Church's Magisterium you help to ensure that Christ's revelation continues to be in history "the true lodestar" of all humanity (cf. Encyc. Let. *Fides et ratio*, n. 15).

In congratulating you on your important and valuable ministry, I encourage you to continue with new enthusiasm in your service to the saving truth: *Christus heri, hodie et semper!*

With these sentiments I cordially give you all a special Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of my affection and gratitude.

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