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# Theological Observer

## *Dominus Iesus* and Why I Like It

Response to the papal encyclical *Dominus Iesus* has been generally negative, chiefly because the Roman bishop has again set forth the dogma that outside of the church there is no salvation. The statement would be true enough, if he had not defined the church as those who recognize him as her divinely appointed head. Overlooked is that the document does not absolutely exclude other Christians and even non-Christians from salvation. What is taken away with the right hand is returned by the left hand, a slightly revised version of the biblical mandate that one hand should not know what the other is doing. Rome makes special allowance for the Orthodox family of churches who "by apostolic succession and a valid eucharist are true particular churches." This raises the question of why Rome recognizes the apostolic succession of the Orthodox churches, but not that of the Anglican communion and some Lutheran churches. What did the Orthodox bishops do in consecrating her bishops that Anglican and Lutheran bishops failed to do? Since most Lutherans do not lay claim to apostolic succession and since those who do not make this divisive of church fellowship (at least until the ELCA alliance with the Episcopal Church), we might ask why the Orthodox and not Lutherans are given the privilege of offering their sheep "a valid eucharist." The wording offers two possibilities: Lutherans offer an invalid eucharist (whatever that might be) or they offer no eucharist at all. Lutheran baptism appears to Rome to be valid, but not our ministry and eucharist. We Lutherans can hardly be upset by Rome's halfway covenant approach towards us, since we take the same approach to the Reformed. Their baptism is valid, but not their eucharist, which is in our (but not the ELCA's) eyes no eucharist all. So perhaps we have answered our own question to Rome about "an invalid eucharist" or we have no answer to either question. The Reformed have said that bread and wine are not Christ's body and blood and we have agreed with them that these do not constitute a sacrament. They also say that the water in their baptism does not regenerate, but against their own testimony, we insist that the water in their rite does regenerate and hence is a baptism. Lutherans have a higher view of the Reformed baptism than they themselves do. Who can fail to recognize the discrepancy? Perhaps the most shattering for Lutherans is that Rome makes no allowance for our identifying the sacramental bread and wine with Christ's body and blood and we are lumped together with the Reformed in having "an invalid eucharist." The historic Lutheran-Reformed controversy does not even register on Rome's radar screen. In fact, we are treated with the same generosity extended to Baptists, which for any Lutheran must be an unkind cut. Putting aside hurt feelings, *Dominus Iesus* should be seen for what it is—Rome struggling to be Rome.

Beginning with Vatican II, Rome has made huge concessions, not only extending ecumenical hands to a wide gambit of Protestant denominations, (Episcopalians, Lutherans, Reformed, Baptists, Pentecostals) but to Jews, Moslems, other religions, and non-religionists. All are entitled to salvation not as

non-Catholics, but Catholics who do not realize that they are really Catholics. This concept lingers between the absurd and weird and, drawn to its natural conclusion, is destructive of the entire Catholic system. However, because no good work goes unrewarded, even those outside the church receive credits for theirs. (It is akin to having time served before trial used to reduce the length of imprisonment.) Beyond that, she has released her clergy from their vows and the theological departments of her universities are manned by non-Catholics. Even her own clerics are among the most radical biblical scholars who have long since discarded the virgin birth and the resurrection. In the midst of it all Mary is still *semper virgo*, belief in her assumption is required, and her aid can be summoned upon request. Francis Pieper would call this a "felicitous inconsistency," but he was not a Roman Catholic. Still he enunciated a universal principle.

With *Dominus Deus* Rome was trying to put on the brakes to slow down the momentum, but even the pope can hardly believe that he will stop it. As slighted as some Lutherans felt by the reassertion of the traditional doctrine of papal supremacy, Rome was chiefly concerned with staking out the claim of historical Christianity as the only truth in an environment where Christian truth is regarded as equal with other truth claims or truth claims of any type are dismissed. Buzz words for this are postmodern relativism, post-Enlightenment, postliberalism. Add some of your own. Our own scholars and theologians have pointed to the inherently anti-Christian culture in which the church delivers her message and have asked us to join in the crusade against postmodernism. I, for one, am not convinced that our age is really any different from the philosophical cynicism which was taking hold of the Greco-Roman world of the apostolic and post-apostolic ages—after all, it was a well placed ancient Roman who once said "What is truth?" Cynicism is a Greek derived word and philosophical idea and not a twenty-first century one. Even if some of us have difficulty in recognizing the postmodern enemy, we are committed to waging war against him (it). Send us in the right direction and we will do battle. Both modern and postmodern man does not like to hear what kind of wretch he is in God's eyes. That is called law. Though my contacts are not as widespread as others, I have yet to meet an honest to goodness postmodern creature who was intellectually or socially any different from someone I met forty years ago. Chalk that up to innate insensitivities.

If postmodernism is the enemy, a point which can be conceded without any hesitancy, then we should recognize in the Roman pope we have an ally whose scribes have described with literary perfection the old evil foe, now in the new guise of postmodernism. *Dominus Iesus* should be available from some web-site, so extensive quotation can be happily avoided, but here are a few gems from the papal amanuenses. First, they subscribe to the Nicene Creed, which is something which the United Church of Christ (UCC) does not do. For reminders, this did not deter the ELCA from entering into fellowship with the UCC. Secondly, Rome condemns a religious pluralism which denies the absolute uniqueness of the inspired Scriptures, the incarnation, and other Christian truths. (No mainline

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churches will go this far.) Responsible for this relativism is "the eclecticism of those who, in theological research, uncritically absorb ideas from a variety of philosophical and theological contexts without regard for consistency, systematic connection or compatibility with Christian truth." Here the pope is addressing his own priests, but these words are adequate ammunition to be fired at most engaged in the enterprise of biblical criticism. The concluding condemnation of that sentence may present a difficulty for Lutherans: "finally, the tendency to read and to interpret sacred Scriptures outside the tradition and magisterium of the church." Try this emendation: "outside the Lutheran Confessions and our tradition," and we can say hurray. "As a remedy for this relativistic mentality, which is becoming ever more common, it is necessary above all to assert the definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ." Three paragraphs restate in several ways that Jesus Christ is the only and full revelation of God and Himself the ultimate truth, claims which apply to no other religion or philosophical system. For those still suspicious of Rome's intent, the document states in no uncertain terms that only the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments can be designated "inspired texts" and that these books "'firmly, faithfully, and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures."

From Lutheran history we would want to raise our traditional critiques in regard to canon and ask for a more expansive doctrine of inerrancy, but our critique should not cloud over these fine statements and the purpose of *Dominus Deus* in Rome's providing a head-on assault on postmodernism within its own walls. Non-Catholic critiques of the document have generally failed to recognize that to exist as "Rome," the pope must claim an exclusivity which she rightfully finds threatened by her own overly productive ecumenical relations with Protestants and Orthodox. A majority of American bishops and priests may have not so secretly conceded the principle of exclusivity. Rome is bleeding. Apart from trying to secure her own survival, the real problem addressed by *Dominus Deus* is postmodern relativism. Old-fashioned Enlightenment rationalism posited an orderly world governed by natural laws which were reflected in how we human beings dealt with one another. Gravity explained why apples fell down and not up and families were held together by indissoluble marriages. The old world was predictable, or at least some thought so. In response to our current scientific and social disintegration, John Paul II has made it clear that there is such a thing as truth and that Jesus Christ and the Scriptures qualify as the best and exclusive exemplars of that truth. Identifying truth is revolutionary at a time when documents uniting Lutheran churches with others have conceded that the truth can not be identified – or at least each one can identify it as he or she sees fits or he or she does not have to identify it all. After all we do not want to put God in boxes of our own making.

David P. Scaer