

Fortress Vaticana Thomas Sheehan

The first mistake would be to think the Vatican's recent declaration *Dominus Iesus* is primarily a theological document. It is not -- even though it advertises itself as being that, with a specific focus on (according to its subtitle) "The Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church."

No, it is first of all a political text. It fits the time-tested genre of "official" declarations that Vatican administrators typically fire off during the last days of one papal regime in an effort to influence the next. It's what Romans call a *documento di tramonto* or "sunset document," a frantic effort by the Curia (in this case, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) to lay down political markers before the next conclave. The 10,000-word text, which Ratzinger himself authored, comes with the blessings of a dying pontiff who no doubt shares its sentiments but whose ability to seriously read such a document during the few waking hours he manages per day is, to say the least, severely limited.

According to the street-maxim in Rome, "The pope is never sick -- until he's dead," but this document is a clear sign that the doctor is on the way. If I learned anything from living in Rome for nine years (which included parts of the last three papal regimes *and* the fulfillment of the Third Secret of Fatima on May 13, 1981), it is that the street value of documents like *Dominus Iesus* is infinitely greater than their alleged theological import. A lot of money is riding on exactly when Pope John Paul II will be ushered into eternal glory and who will be his successor; and a sunset document like this can shift the handicap overnight. These days the real Vaticanologists are not pouring over details in *Dominus Iesus* but placing bets in coffee bars in Trastevere, all the while keeping a sharp eye on the steady stream of Mercedes-Benz limosines, their windows darkened, that are whisking nervous cardinals in and out of the Vatican. I would have given anything to be at my favorite bar in Piazza San Callisto on August 6, the day the text was published, to watch the odds in the pope-pool go crazy.

The second mistake would be to think this document deserves much concerted attention, least of all a frontal attack. As befits a sunset document, its theological shelf-life will be very short; and given the shoddiness of its theological reasoning, it has already begun imploding under the weight of its own contradictions. No need, then, to get one's shorts in a twist refuting *Dominus Iesus* point by point. In the parlance of political campaigns, never get in the way of your opponent when he's in the process of destroying himself.

True, it is embarrassing for those of us who cherish the Catholic tradition to see this sloppy document run roughshod, and with such theological vulgarity, over intricate and complex topics that theologians like Karl Rahner long ago treated with supreme finesse and delicacy. But then again, Joseph Ratzinger is no Karl Rahner. The intellectual distance that separates this third-rate document from the brilliance of Rahner and other theologians of the Second Vatican Council is a sad measure of how far the Catholic church has fallen from its glory days in the 1960s.

Already on shaky exegetical grounds from its first paragraph, the document comes completely unglued as it makes the transition from a flat-footed reiteration of the doctrines of revelation, incarnation, and redemption (chapters 1-3) to the heavy-handed ecclesiastical politics (chapters 4-6) that are the real purpose of the text. In chapter 5 it stumbles badly over its own slipshod distinction between "kingdom of heaven," "kingdom of God," and "kingdom of Christ," and it's downhill from there on. The more it talks, the more confused it gets, taking away with one hand what it has just given with the other, not unlike the pope's recent beatification of Pope John XXIII *and* Pope Pius IX. But after all, the goal of the text never was good theology, only tough politics.

Why then be shocked at the frequently harsh tones of *Dominus Iesus*? Politics isn't about being nice but about preserving power. When Pope John XXIII once was asked how many people work in the Vatican, he replied whimsically "About half." However, Karol Wojtyla and Joseph Ratzinger have been working overtime for the last twenty years to severely contain, if not shut down, the intellectual renaissance that Catholicism famously experienced in the middle decades of last century. The undoing of that brief flowering has been this papacy's proud and hard-won achievement (a solid measure of it is the overwhelming number of conservative bishops this pope has managed to appoint). This is a gain the Vatican will not easily surrender.

The imminent passing of a pope is serious business, especially in the land that produced both Machiavelli and the Mafia. The turf wars for succession have already begun, and Ratzinger's text is a clear signal for his men to hit the mattresses or, in a perhaps more fitting metaphor, to raise the drawbridge and prepare the vats of boiling oil. *Dominus Iesus* is only the beginning of what promises to be great fun at Fortress Vaticana.

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