

Bari: Friday April 11, 2003

Talk1: The Unicity/Uniqueness of Jesus Christ

Peter Hocken

As you know, the theme for this conference arises from the document *Dominus Jesus* (DJ, 2000) and the lively debate not to say controversy that it provoked. DJ proceeds from the unicity of Jesus Christ to the unicity of the Church, and that is the order I have been asked to follow in my first two presentations. There are six sections in DJ; the first three are given over to the unicity of Jesus and the last three to the unicity and the role of the Church.

The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ in *Dominus Jesus*

What DJ says about the uniqueness of Jesus was welcomed by many Evangelicals. In fact the major Evangelical publication in the United States, *Christianity Today*, welcomed DJ as “Honest ecumenism”, the title given to their editorial on the subject¹. CT cites with approval an Evangelical scholar who says that Catholics and Evangelicals need to say these hard things to each other: “From an evangelical perspective, we must say to the church of Rome the same thing that this document says to non-Catholic Christians”².

The first three sections of DJ which treat of the unicity of Jesus are composed very largely of citations, both biblical citations from the New Testament and citations from previous documents of the magisterium. The order of treatment is perhaps more typically Catholic, beginning not with salvation but with “The Fulness and the Definitiveness of the Revelation of Jesus Christ” (Section I), emphasising that Jesus is both “the mediator and the fullness of all revelation” (para. 5). “For this reason, Jesus

perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making himself present and manifesting himself: through his words and deeds, his signs and wonders, but especially through his death and glorious resurrection from the dead and finally with the sending of the Spirit of truth, he **completed and perfected** revelation and confirmed it with divine testimony” (para. 5). That the issue of DJ has been occasioned by unsatisfactory accounts of the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions is indicated by the way in which the document insists on the fulness of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ: “Therefore, the theory of the limited, incomplete, or imperfect character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, which would be complementary to that found in other religions, is contrary to the Church’s faith.” (para. 6).

The first section moves from the uniqueness of the revelation in Christ to the uniqueness of faith (para. 7) and the uniqueness of the Bible (para. 8). “The proper response to God’s revelation is ‘the obedience of faith’”, so there is a correlation between revelation and faith. There is then a clear distinction between faith in Jesus Christ and forms of belief within non-Christian religions: “the distinction between theological faith and belief in the other religions, must be firmly held.” (para. 7). In the same way, the uniqueness of Jesus is related to the uniqueness of the Scriptures. While the Catholic Church is more open to positive elements in “sacred literature” outside the Judeo-Christian tradition than Evangelical Protestants, nonetheless DJ simply repeats the traditional Catholic teaching on the uniqueness of the Biblical texts. “The Church’s tradition, however, reserves the

¹ October 23, 2000, pp. 28 – 29.

² *Art. Cit.*, p. 29.

designation of inspired texts to the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, since these are inspired by the Holy Spirit.” (para. 8).

The second section moves towards the issue of salvation, that a Protestant treatment would almost certainly have put first, treating of “The Incarnate Logos and the Holy Spirit in the Work of Salvation”. This is a section that Evangelical Protestants can appreciate because it insists on the unique and inseparable bonds between the Incarnate Word, the Holy Spirit and the work of salvation. “Therefore, the theory which would attribute, after the incarnation as well, a salvific activity to the Logos as such in his divinity, exercised “in addition to” or “beyond” the humanity of Christ, is not compatible with the Catholic faith.” (para. 10). The relativism rejected here is very close to the position rejected two paragraphs later with regard to the work of the Holy Spirit: “There are also those who propose the hypothesis of an economy of the Holy Spirit with a more universal breadth than that of the Incarnate Word, crucified and risen. This position also is contrary to the Catholic faith, which, on the contrary, considers the salvific incarnation of the Word as a trinitarian event.” (para. 12).

This section also treats of the role of Jesus Christ as “the mediator and the universal redeemer”. The uniqueness of Jesus means the uniqueness of Calvary: “This salvific mediation implies also the unicity of the redemptive sacrifice of Christ, eternal high priest.” (para. 11).

The third section on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is entitled: “Unicity and Universality of the Salvific Mystery of Jesus Christ”. Here DJ insists that “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Lord and only Saviour” ... through ... his incarnation, death and resurrection has brought the history of salvation to fulfilment, and which has in him its fullness and centre” (para. 13). “In the New Testament, the universal salvific will of God is closely connected to the sole mediation of

Christ” (para. 13), followed by the citation of 1 Timothy 2: 4 - 6.

Once again, the references to non-Christian religions indicate the primary concern of DJ. The conclusion to this section states: “one can and must say that Jesus Christ has a significance and a value for the human race and its history, which are unique and singular, proper to him alone, exclusive, universal, and absolute.” (para. 15).

Implications for Catholic – Evangelical Dialogue

It seems to me that the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ as upheld in the first half of DJ provides an excellent basis for all Catholic – Evangelical relationships. So by the word “dialogue” I want to refer to all forms of interaction between us.

The Catholic teaching on relationships with other Christians has located the foundation in baptism, more specifically in a commonly-recognised baptism³. This formulation developed in the context of relationships between churches that practice infant baptism and believe in baptismal regeneration. But it has never looked so convincing in the context of relations with Baptists, Evangelicals, Pentecostals and now – we should add – new church charismatics. What grounds the possibility of relationships between Catholics and Pentecostals is not baptism, but our common relationship to Jesus in the Holy Spirit, our confession of who Jesus is and his unique role in our salvation. This has become very clear through the charismatic movement, in which deeply changed attitudes towards each other have often resulted from recognition of a

³ “Baptism ... constitutes the sacramental bond of unity existing among all who through it are reborn.” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 22). See also UR, paras. 3 & 4; *Ecumenical Directory* (1993) para. 22; *Ut Unum Sint*, para. 13, 42, 65.

shared knowledge and confession of Jesus Christ.

I am not saying that baptism does not play a foundational role. But when I read these excellent statements in DJ about the uniqueness of Jesus, it was clear to me that the person of Jesus is the unique foundation – for the Church and for all Christian dialogue. The foundational place of baptism needs to be subordinated to the unique role of Jesus Christ.

The difficulties between us on the issue of salvation, treated in the second section of DJ, arise perhaps from two distinct causes: (1) the Catholic teaching on human cooperation in the unique mediation of Jesus; and (2) Catholic practice that appears to be and sometimes is incompatible with official Catholic teaching. DJ does have a reference at the end of this first part to human cooperation in the saving work of Jesus Christ. “The Second Vatican Council, in fact, has stated that: “the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude, but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a participation in this one source. The content of this participated mediation should be explored more deeply, but must remain always consistent with the principle of Christ's unique mediation” (para. 14)⁴.

The totally Christ-centered character of authentic Christian life is closely linked in the Catholic tradition to the renewal of the liturgy. Often it is not easy for Evangelicals and Pentecostals to understand the close link in Catholic renewal between biblical renewal and liturgical renewal, for liturgy can appear to them as being simply external formalised religion, lacking interior life. But the problem is not liturgy in itself, but liturgy enacted by

⁴ This paragraph continues: “Although participated forms of mediation of different kinds and degrees are not excluded, they acquire meaning and value only from Christ's own mediation, and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to his.”

those who have never been properly evangelised. For the liturgy is inherently Christocentric and its structure is Trinitarian.

Two leading Catholic liturgical pioneers – Lambert Beauduin of Belgium and Pius Parsch of Austria – both recognised in their experience that Catholic devotional piety not rooted in the Bible does not produce strong Christian character. They saw this weakness of devotional piety as a consequence of a sentimentalism that is not grounded in the objectivity of a biblical doctrine centred on Jesus Christ. For them, the return to a biblical teaching that is Christocentric and Trinitarian lay in a reform that made Catholic worship once again truly centred in a liturgy understood and participated in by the whole Catholic people.

A Wider Framework?

I want to suggest that we see the unicity of Jesus in the context of the oneness of God. The unicity of Jesus is rooted in the oneness of God. It is the unique God who has a Son, one Son, who uniquely “reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature” (Heb. 1: 3). The direct line from one God to one Son, that is from the one God revealed as Father to the one God revealed as Son is indicated by Paul, when he writes: “yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” (1 Cor. 8: 6). This perspective roots the unicity of Jesus more firmly in the revelation to Israel, which is not a prominent feature of DJ. Indeed, there is neither citation from nor reference to any Old Testament passage in the whole document. In the first three sections, there is only one small reference to the Jews, saying that “the first Christians encountered the Jewish people” (para. 13).

It is worth noting here the more recent document from the Pontifical Biblical Commission, entitled *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian*

Bible (2001). The first of the shared Jewish – Christian themes mentioned is that “God is One” (para. 24). “Israel is called to acknowledge that the God who brought it out of Egypt is the only one who liberated it from slavery.” The same paragraph understands the verse from 1 Corinthians 8 just cited as a dividing in two of the profession of Deut. 6: 4: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One Lord.”, earlier described as “the strongest affirmation of the Jewish faith”.

The formation of Israel over the centuries since the calls of Abraham, Jacob and Moses was a painful and slow education in radical monotheism. In retrospect, we can see as Christians how strong this monotheism had to become before the revelation of the only Son could become possible. The long struggle with Arianism as well as with forms of Gnosticism in the early Church shows how easily Jesus of Nazareth could be accommodated within emanationist philosophies and within forms of dualistic thought. The loss of a visible Jewish expression of the Church made this struggle more difficult. But we must note the importance of the beginning of the Nicene Creed: “We believe in **one God**, the Father Almighty ... and in Jesus Christ his only Son ... in the Holy Spirit.” It is the one God who has an only-begotten Son, who is “God from God, true God from true God”.

The uniqueness of Israel

The division of subject-matter for these talks places the Unicity of the Church in the second talk, but the Unicity of the Church is related to the Unicity of Israel. It is at least necessary here to say something about the Unicity of Israel in relation to the Unicity of Jesus, because we cannot understand Jesus properly if we do not fully situate him among his own people.

There is only one chosen people. There is clearly a connection between the chosenness of the people and the inspiration of their sacred writings. God always begins with

one. Adam, out of whom Eve is formed. The same is true of Abraham. “Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for when he was but one I called him, and I blessed him and made him many.” (Is. 51: 2). From Jacob, given the name Israel, come the twelve tribes that form the one people.

The unicity/uniqueness of Jesus cannot be defined in terms of his divinity alone. Jesus the God-man, the eternal Word made flesh, the one in whom the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily, is unique in his divinity and in his humanity. That is to say, that in the uniqueness of the Incarnation, the uniting of the divine and the human is at the same time the uniting of two unicities: one eternal and one created. It is the uniting of the one and only God as Son with the one and only Elect in history.

Thus, the uniqueness of Jesus is rooted in the uniqueness of Israel, which is itself oriented towards fulness in the Messiah. Jesus is the fulfilment of Israel. As “beloved Son, in whom the Father is well pleased” (Matt. 3: 17), Jesus perfectly fulfils the calling of Israel, who is “God’s first-born Son” (Ex. 4: 22). As Jeremiah searches the squares of Jerusalem to see if he can find “a man ... who does justice and seeks truth” but does not find one (Jer. 5: 1 – 5), so in Jesus, the Father finds the one whom Jeremiah sought, the perfect embodiment of the call of Israel.

The uniqueness of Jesus as the One who is righteous indicates that along with the move from the one to the many in the Old Testament, there is also a movement from the many back to the one. This second movement is closely linked to the biblical term **remnant**. The remnant are first the survivors of disaster, but later those who are faithful to the covenant. The remnant do not replace the whole people. As the faithful ones, they are the vehicle through which the heritage and the promises are carried forward towards fulfilment. There is a narrowing down that leads to the coming of “The Holy One of

Israel”, and a further narrowing that leads to the Cross. Jesus is ultimately the one addressed in the servant song in Isaiah 49: “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” (Is. 49: 3). Jesus is the One who is faithful. He is the remnant, through whom God will fulfil the promises to his people for the sake of all nations.

When we ignore the relationship between the uniqueness of Jesus and the uniqueness of Israel, we lose sight of some dimensions of the biblical witness concerning Jesus Christ. We fail to grasp the full significance of the term Messiah, and the orientation towards the Messianic fulfilment in the second coming of Jesus.

The uniqueness of Jesus rooted in the uniqueness of Israel provides the right framework for considering the uniqueness of the Church, the subject of the second teaching.

This document has been published on web site
StuCom, <http://home.hetnet.nl/~stucom> as
document 0101uk.

His second and third talk in Bari, April 2003 are
document 0102uk and 0103uk.

Dominus Iesus is StuCom0042uk and 0042.

An other article of P. Hocken on StuCom:
0100uk. (More articles can be published after
June 16th, 2003.)

Who is Peter Hocken? See StuCom 0104uk.

Some English documents on the Catholic-
Pentecostal dialogue: 0002uk, 0004uk, 0023uk,
0093uk, 0096uk.

Dutch documents on this dialogue: see overview
StuCom document 9003