

Two Christological Documents on Their Approaching 25th Anniversary: *Dominus Iesus* (2000) and Chapter Two of *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001)—Comparing and Contrasting Their Tone and Content

Hector Scerri

University of Malta, Msida, Malta

Within the span of five months during the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the Catholic Church published two documents focused on Jesus Christ: *Dominus Iesus* and *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (with emphasis in this article on its second chapter). Although in various instances, both documents converge and deal with the same subject, one can observe how the perspectives and attitudes expressed in both differ in various ways. Their aim is different because *Dominus Iesus* was issued to oppose certain erroneous positions in the context of theories of religious pluralism, while *Novo Millennio Ineunte* is a pastoral reflection on the fruits of the Jubilee and the state of the community of Christ's faithful at the turn of the last century. This article seeks to address the content of the two documents, while highlighting the differences in their style and approach.

Keywords: *Dominus Iesus*, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Jesus Christ, salvation, Pope John Paul II, the mystery of Christ

Introduction

It is the custom of the Roman Catholic Church to celebrate, every 25 years, what are called *Holy Years* or *Jubilees*. This longstanding tradition which dates back to the 14th century is accompanied by spiritual practices, focused mainly on pilgrimage, penance, and conversion. The Great Jubilee of the year 2000 commemorated the second millennium since the birth of Jesus Christ. The approaching jubilee is scheduled for the year 2025; its theme, chosen by Pope Francis, is “Pilgrims of Hope”. This article seeks to retrieve and evaluate the tone and content of two Christological documents published in the context of the Holy Year and Great Jubilee of the year 2000. This exercise is deemed to be useful and will also serve as an appraisal of two documents, published nearly 25 years ago, which may have been forgotten not only by the Catholic faithful in general, but also by some of those in Catholic academic circles.

The Unicity and Universality of the Mystery of Christ

In his first Encyclical Letter, *The Redeemer of Humanity* (*Redemptor Hominis*), Pope John Paul II commenced this document by stating the all-important iconic assertion: “The Redeemer of man, Jesus Christ, is

Hector Scerri, rev. prof., Faculty of Theology, Department of Fundamental & Dogmatic Theology, University of Malta, Msida, Malta. President, Doctrinal Commission, Maltese Episcopal Conference. Consultor, Dicastery for the Promotion of Christian Unity, Vatican.

the centre of the universe and of history” (n.1). This is an appropriate starting-point to this current study. It is precisely through this perspective of the “unicity and universality” of the mystery of Jesus Christ that we can compare and contrast the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, published by the then Congregation (now, *Dicastery*) for the Doctrine of the Faith on 6 August 2000, and the second chapter of Pope John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* of 6 January 2001.

The Motivation for the Publication of the Two Documents

In the first place, it is important to take note of the different contexts when these two documents were written, and the consequent approaches that they adopted. *Dominus Iesus* (hereafter, *DI*) was basically issued to counter certain erroneous positions held by unnamed theologians, in particular the theology of religious pluralism which states that other religions can offer complementary doctrine to the teachings of Christianity. Thus, this Declaration was published with the aim of affirming the full and definitive revelation made by Jesus Christ. In fact, the Declaration fails to propose anything new, but it only reaffirms and restates the doctrine of the Catholic faith which is clearly demonstrated through the frequent use of the phrase “it must be firmly believed that ...”, and the vast number of quotations from previous documents of the Catholic Magisterium.

On the other hand, Pope John Paul II wrote *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (hereafter, *NMI*) as “a reflection on the fruits of the Great Jubilee.” He exhorts all the baptised faithful to “reach out into the deep” (*duc in altum*) by “remembering the past with gratitude, living the present with enthusiasm and looking forward to the future with confidence.” Therefore, the approach of this Apostolic Letter is much more pastoral in nature—it is the approach of a father who is addressing and encouraging his “children”. Consequently, it is through this perspective that one can consider Pope John Paul II’s invitation—in particular in its second chapter—to firmly set one’s gaze on the face of Christ and contemplate it. Jesus is presented as he whom the world desires to see in the very life of the Church itself (cfr *NMI* 16).

The Unique Role of Jesus Christ

Contrary to the pluralistic view that Christ’s revelation is incomplete—in the sense that Christianity cannot claim to possess the absolute truth about God, and so Christ’s revelation of God needs to be complemented by *other revelations*—*DI* stresses that in Jesus Christ, the full revelation of divine truth is given. In Jesus Christ, God has made himself known to humanity in the fullest possible way, and this fullness of truth is found in the Gospel which the Church is duty-bound to proclaim. This means that although non-Christian texts could serve as instruments of nourishment in one’s relationship with God, they receive the elements of goodness and grace which they contain from the mystery of Christ.

“Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary, is *the* Son and *the* Word of the Father.” Therefore, the view which considers Jesus as simply “one of the many faces which the Logos has assumed in the course of time to communicate with humanity in a salvific way” (proposing that founders or historical figures of other religions could also be instances of this Logos) is incorrect. Only Jesus is the Incarnate Word, a single and indivisible person. In this light, in *NMI*, John Paul II highlights the solid historical foundation upon which the evangelists, enlightened by the Spirit, sought to present the figure of the Incarnate Word: “one person in two natures.” He warns that:

if today, because of the rationalism found in so much of contemporary culture, it is above all faith in the divinity of Christ that has become problematic, in other historical and cultural contexts there was a tendency to diminish and so away with the historical concreteness of Jesus’ humanity. (*NMI* 22)

One History of Salvation and One Saviour

This unity of the human and divine nature in the one person of Jesus Christ implies that he is “the mediator and the universal redeemer.” At this point, *DI* reaffirms that there is one history of salvation which is revealed and fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This contradicts the erroneous view that there is a distinction between *special* salvation history and *universal* salvation history. (This theory holds that *universal salvation history* has its beginning in the creation of mankind and in it the Holy Spirit is active, whereas *special salvation history*, which takes place in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, starts with Abraham and in it Christ is active.) Against the idea that Jesus is one of the many faces assumed by the Logos, and that there is a double economy of salvation: (i) that of the Eternal Word, which is also applicable outside the Church and is unrelated to her, and (ii) that of the Incarnate Word, which is limited to Christians, Christian faith affirms the personal unity between the Eternal Word and Jesus of Nazareth, whereby with Incarnation all the salvific actions of the Word of God are done in unity with the human nature he assumed. Jesus Christ alone is the focus of history and “no one can come into communion with God except through Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit” (*DI* 12). In this light, Pope John Paul II perceives Christ as “the new man who calls redeemed humanity to share in his divine life.” (*NMI* 23).

Accordingly, *DI* rejects the view that there are other mediators of salvation apart from Jesus Christ. Jesus is “the key, the centre and the purpose” of the whole history of salvation. Both documents—*DI* and *NMI*—affirm this truth by pointing to Sacred Scripture. “In the New Testament, the universal salvific will of God is closely connected to the sole mediation of Christ” (*DI* 13). God

desires that all men be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all. (1 Tim 2:4-6)

Besides, Catholic doctrine refutes the theory that there is also an economy of the Holy Spirit with a greater universal value than that of the Incarnate Word, affirming that there is only one salvific economy of the One Triune God, realised in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, actualised with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit (whose action is not outside or parallel to the action of Christ), and extended in its salvific value to all humanity and to the entire universe.

NMI stresses that although Jesus’ human condition made him grow “in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man” (Lk 2:52), Jesus was aware of his unique mission and identity as the Son of God, which progressed to its fullest expression in his glorified humanity (cfr *NMI* 24). In fact, more than once, Jesus explicitly referred to his unique relation to the Father, especially in the Gospel according to John. It is *only* because the Son of God truly became man, that man—in him and through him—can truly become a child of God.

Jesus Christ: The Way, the Truth, and the Life

At this point, *DI* warns that by refraining from using “excessive” terms (such as *unicity*, *universality*, and *absoluteness*) to refer to Jesus’ unique and singular salvation—out of respect to other religions—one would only be unfaithful to the truth of revelation itself. In fact, Jesus himself said: “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6)—He did not say “I am one of the ways”, or “I am a glimpse of the truth”; but he strongly asserted that he is “the way, the truth, and the life.” It is precisely through this perspective that one is invited to approach the mystery of Christ. While being aware that other religions “not rarely reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens

all human beings” (Vatican II, Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, 28 October 1965, n.2), the Church is constantly reminded that her own mission drives her to be at the service of and proclaim this very Truth, who is “the same yesterday and today and for ever” (Heb 13:8).

Bearing Witness to Christ

The second chapter of *NMI* commences by underlining the importance of bearing witness to Christ, and of the “contemplation of his face” as a necessary step for such testimony to be indeed fruitful. The contemplation of the face of Christ finds its inspiration in Sacred Scripture, especially in the Gospels which are both historical and theological works, composed on the basis of trustworthy witnesses and while being open to divine inspiration. Faith is highlighted as the main key for entering the mystery of Christ’s face. Human beings cannot attain the fullness of contemplation of this mystery merely through their own efforts, but primarily through grace, whereby only the experience of silence and prayer can usher them to an ever deeper knowledge of the mystery of Christ. The dogmatic formula affirming the union of the two natures (divine and human) in the person of Christ (the hypostatic union) enables us to gaze into the depths of the mystery.

The history of the Church narrates instances when attempts were made to undermine either Christ’s full divinity or his full humanity. Yet, belief in the mystery of “the Word made flesh” (Jn 1:14) remains essential to the Church’s faith, which mystery reveals the self-emptying of the Son of God that eventually led to his full glorification, even in his humanity (cfr Phil 2:9-11). This abasement of the Son of God enabled our sharing in his divine life and becoming sons and daughters of God, whereby the Incarnation paved the way for an anthropology oriented towards divinisation.

The Cross unveils a paradoxical aspect of Christ’s mystery. He who knew no sin took on the “face” of sin to reconcile us with God, thereby undergoing the spiritual agony of “feeling” abandoned by God. Simultaneously, by trustfully and lovingly abandoning himself into the Father’s hands, Jesus was joyfully united with the Father. Some saints have undergone an experience somewhat similar to Jesus’ own paradoxical experience of bliss and pain on the Cross, such as Catherine of Siena and Thérèse of Lisieux. The Church’s contemplation of Christ’s face does not stop at the bleeding face of the crucified one, but passes onto the glorious face of the risen one whom she seeks to proclaim to the world of the third millennium.

A Comparative Analysis

The documents, *DI* and *NMI*, differ in their approach. Drawing on a rather apologetic approach, *DI* seeks not to treat systematically the unicity and salvific universality of the mystery of Christ and the Church, nor to propose solutions to questions that are issues for theological discussion, but seemingly to “defend” certain Christian truths against the blooming relativistic theories that seek to justify religious pluralism. The expository style, the very often categorical language (“absoluteness”, “unicity”, “universal”, “exclusive”, etc), the manifold references to Scripture and Magisterial texts, as well as the overall structure of the Declaration—each chapter first presents the incorrect theories, followed by an official clear-cut doctrinal position of the Church—further stress its purpose.

On the other hand, seeking to enkindle the spiritual fervour of the faithful at the dawn of the third millennium, *NMI* tends to a more meditative approach, a *quasi*-theological aesthetic, initiating readers into what Western writers call “prayer of simple gaze”, as it sets before all the meditative programme of contemplating Christ’s face.

The mystery of Christ is central in both texts, but for seemingly different reasons. In *NMI*, contemplating the mystery is viewed as indispensable for bearing effective witness to Christ (hence, a pastoral motive), while in *DI* the uniqueness of Christ's salvific and revelatory role is stressed so as to undermine the view that one religion is as good as another (i.e. religious relativism). Both documents make reference to faith as an adequate mentor for penetrating the mystery, both discuss at length Jesus' divine-human identity, and both pause reverently on the all-transforming significance of the mystery of the incarnation—*NMI* highlighting the benefits showered on all, and *DI* indicating its importance for refuting incorrect christological approaches which uphold, say, Christ's incomplete revelation, and his separation from the Eternal Word. Something peculiar to *DI* is its striking portrayal of the Christ-Church link which is very fleetingly referred to in the second chapter of *NMI*. Statements like "Christ and the Church can neither be confused nor separated, and constitute a single 'whole Christ'" (*DI* 16), cannot but instil in the lover of Christ an equally ardent love for his Bride. Yet, *NMI* makes up for this lacuna with its unique *quasi*-mystical verses about the agonising yet blissful experience of the Crucified One which cannot but strike a cord in the heart of any true disciple of the Nazarene.

Conclusion

Although in various instances, both the Declaration *DI* and the Apostolic Letter *NMI* converge and deal with the same subject, the reader can—on reflection—observe how the perspectives and attitudes expressed in both documents differ in various ways. The documents themselves hint out the goals behind their writing, and these indications already shed light on the contrasts which one finds within them when compared together. As we have seen in this article, the Declaration points out some fundamental questions that remain open to further development and refutes specific positions that are erroneous or ambiguous. The perspective and tone of *DI* are very magisterial and the content is highly intellectual and presented in clear-cut formulas.

On the other hand, *NMI*, written in the form of a letter is addressed to all the faithful. It embraces the reflections and hope-filled vision of a Pontiff who leads the Catholic flock into a new millennium. Unlike *DI*, this sharing by Pope John Paul II is not wrapped in a dogmatic tone; rather it is transmitted in a very positive and somewhat fatherly way. If *DI* speaks to the intellect of theologians, *NMI* addresses the hearts of believers. Rather than touching upon the doctrinal and theological dimensions of faith, *NMI* flies high towards the contemplative level. Like *DI*, *NMI* invites the reader to accept Jesus Christ and his Church, but in a very different way. The process of reception of *NMI* takes place within experience. In fact, this Apostolic Letter takes its cue from experience—the Pope's reflection and feeling throughout the Great Jubilee of the year 2000. It is dynamism that urged the Pope to encourage the whole Church to delve deeper into such an experience, namely contemplating the face of Christ. This is not a question of knowing more revealed truths *about* the Father. Rather, John Paul II highlights that in contemplating the face of Jesus, believers *truly meet* the Father. They enter into a relationship with God. The tone and content of *NMI* are not about dogmas, concepts, and notions of God, not indeed about an experience of God. The emphasis is not put on faith that accepts and firmly believes dogmatic truths—although these are important—but on the biblical faith experience that has a relationship as its foundation. John Paul II does not underline the implication of a logical morality that stems out of revealed truths and commandments, but a way of life and a pastoral programme which are the necessary consequence of an experience of love. These claims are very well sustained by the Pope's mention of mysticism and the "lived theology" of the saints (n.17), as well as his thoughts on the *face of sorrow*, connecting the mystery of Jesus Christ with the daily suffering experience in the life of humanity.

References

- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration Dominus Iesus. (6 August 2000). Retrieved from https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html
- Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter Novo Millennio Ineunte. (6 January 2001). Retrieved from https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte.html