

Dominus Deus: Vatican Retrenchment

Endtime Issues No. 54

19 September 2000

Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D.
Professor of Theology, Andrews University

Dear Members of the Endtime Issues Newsletter:

Travelling overseas can be very educational, especially if one is prepared to reflect upon what can be learned from a country past and present heritage. This was the case with my recent (September 1 to 11, 2000) trip to Greece, Italy, and England, where I was invited to present my seminars. I learned in each country far more than what I had anticipated. Thus, I decided for this newsletter to depart from the traditional Bible study format, presenting instead some theological reflections sparked by what I saw and heard in Greece, Italy, and England.

The main focus of this newsletter is on an event that occurred on Tuesday, September 5, 2000, while I was in Rome. On the evening news of the main Italian TV network, I saw Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the powerful German Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, announcing the release of the Vatican Declaration *Dominus Jesus*, which means "Lord Jesus." This controversial document reiterates the traditional teaching that the Catholic church provides the sole sure path to salvation.

Ratzinger commented on the significance of this document for Catholics and non-Catholics. I was stunned when I heard him saying that only in the unique and universal Catholic Church there can be salvation. Such a declaration contradicts the more ecumenical, inclusive policy adopted by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) toward other Christian churches and non-Christian religions.

It is not surprising that religious leaders and theologians have reacted with dismay to this latest Vatican document. Dissident Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Kung describes *Dominus Jesus* as "a mixture of medieval backwardness and Vatican megalomania." He said that it is hypocritical for the Vatican to "continually talk about dialogue while not talking about the colossal pretence of absolutism."

In view of the astounding claims of this document, and its implications for the future Vatican strategy, it behooves us to take a close look at its content. Our aim is to understand what is causing the Vatican to redefine the boundaries of its forbearance of other faiths, especially at a time when Pope John Paul II has made inter-faiths dialogue a hallmark of his 22-year papacy.

TWO TIMELY PUBLICATIONS

Before examining *Dominus Jesus* and sharing some other theological reflections sparked by the recent trip, let me alert you about two timely publications that you may wish to obtain for your library.

The first is the book ***THE MARRIAGE COVENANT: A BIBLICAL STUDY ON MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, AND REMARRIAGE***. Six of the recent ENDTIME ISSUES Newsletters were largely drawn from this book which has enriched the marriage of thousands of people in many countries. Hundreds of you have requested the expanded version of the Bible studies I excerpted from this timely book.

To make it possible for all of you to benefit from this biblical research on vital aspects of marriage, I decided to offer you **two copies of *THE MARRIAGE COVENANT* for only \$25.00, postpaid, instead of the regular price of \$40.00**. One copy is meant for your family and the other for you to donate to a family needing Biblical guidance in their marriage. To order your two copies of ***THE MARRIAGE COVENANT***, you can call us at (616) 471-2915 or email us the order form found at the end of this newsletter with your credit card information.

THE MARRIAGE COVENANT challenges Christians to reject the secularization and easy-dissolution of marriage by accepting instead the Biblical view of marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant. This important book is designed to strengthen your Christian home through a recovery of those Biblical principles established by God to ensure happy and lasting marital relationships.

Some of the significant questions examined in the book are: What guidance does the Bible offer on how to build up a strong marriage covenant relationship? What is the Biblical role of the husband and the wife? Does the Bible view the function of sex as exclusively procreational or also as relational? Are there Biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage? Is a Christian who remarries guilty of continuous adultery? Should a minister marry divorced people and should remarried people be accepted automatically into church membership? These are some of the questions examined with sound Biblical scholarship and in a style that most people can understand.

The second publication I am pleased to offer you is the latest issue of ***RESTORE***, which contains seven enlightening articles on the Sabbath. ***RESTORE*** is a colorful 44 pages magazine (8 1/2 by 11 inches) devoted to restore "the biblical Hebrew heritage to the Christian believer." The contributors to this magazine are scholars of differing religious persuasions who share the common concern to recover the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. The latest issue (Spring 2000) is devoted, as stated on the cover, to "restoring Shabbat: Time for God and the family." Three of the seven Sabbath articles are by Adventist scholars. My own article on "The Good News of the Sabbath" examines the three fundamental glad tidings which the Sabbath contains and proclaims, namely: perfect creation, complete redemption, and final restoration. This special Sabbath issue of ***RESTORE*** will enrich your understanding and experience of the Sabbath.

RESTORE regularly retails for \$8.00 per copy, but I am able to mail you **two copies of this SPECIAL SABBATH ISSUE for only \$10.00, postage paid**. We can fill only 100 orders because I was able to obtain from the publisher only 200 copies. To order your two copies for \$10.00, postpaid, you can call us at (616) 471-2915 or email us the order form found at the end of this newsletter with your credit card information.

A NOTE OF CLARIFICATION

Few readers have complained that I use this newsletter to market my books. May I respond by mentioning that the research presented in the ENDTIME ISSUES Newsletters is free to the readers, but very expensive for me to produce, because nobody pays for my time and efforts. For example, I spent about 40 hours examining the Vatican Declaration *Dominus Deus*, which are about to read. At the modest rate of \$25.00 per hour, I invested about \$1000.00 to offer you this service. But I do not receive a cent for this service, because I do not charge a subscription fee, though many of you have encouraged me to do so.

This newsletter is like the evening news or any TV program. You receive them free because the cost is recovered through the advertisements. In my case I support my ministry through the promotion and distribution of my research.

On July 1, 2000 I took an early retirement after 36 years of teachings overseas and at Andrews University. The reason is my desire to be able to devote myself more fully to research, write, publish, and proclaim through my itinerant ministry, those Biblical truths which are relevant to our times. Since I am only 62 years of age, for the next three years I will not receive any retirement benefits from the Social Security or our denominational. It is only the support I receive from people who order my books, that makes it possible for me to continue this ministry of research into Biblical truths relevant to our times. I hope that this clarification will help to place my advertising in the proper perspective.

ATHENS : WHERE THE PAST MEETS THE PRESENT

The first stop of my recent trip was in Athens, Greece, where I spoke at our Seventh-day Adventist Church on Friday evening September 1 and on Saturday morning/afternoon, September 2. My visit to Athens was largely the result of the persistent appeal by Kostantinos Mouroutis, a dedicated Adventist Greek young man, currently working in Germany. For the past three years he has urged me to come to Athens to speak to his people. He contributed \$500.00 out of his meager funds toward the cost of the airfare.

Like in the parable of the persistent widow, I felt that I could no longer ignore the passionate appeal of Kostantinos. I went to Athens as a missionary venture, expecting to speak to a small gathering of 70/80 believers, since our total Adventist membership in Greece is only about 210 members. What a surprise to see our church in Athens packed with over 250 people, many of whom relatives and friends of our church members.

Much of the credit for the unusual attendance goes to Konstantinos himself, because he went in person to Athens two weeks before my arrival to promote this special weekend. He also translated very fluently most of my presentations.

Contrary to my expectations, the congregation was made up mostly of your adults, who are successful professional. I was introduced to two beautiful ladies who recently earned a degree in Theology from the University of Athens. They all showed a keen interest for deepening their understanding and experience of Biblical truths. This is evidenced by the fact that in spite of the oppressive 95” degrees heat, they all listen attentively to the three presentations for a total of over 7 hours.

The Lord blessed our ministry. I was told that several accepted the Sabbath, including Kostantinos’ brother-in-law. He is married to his sister—a lovely young lady who recently earned a degree in Theology at Athens’ university. Her husband told her that the lectures convinced him of the validity and value of the Sabbath and now he wants to join our Adventist church.

I sensed that a new day has dawn for our Adventist work in Greece. The new President, Pastor Apostolos Maglis, a Greek who spent several years in Australia, is a man of vision, committed to plant new churches in Greece. He told me that twelve new groups have been established in Greece during the last three years and 75 new members have been baptized. Let us remember our Greek fellow believers in our prayers. They face unusual challenges in reaching out to a population made up mostly of Greek Orthodox who are very committed to their religious heritage.

THE VISIT TO THE ACROPOLIS

On Sunday morning, September 3, 2000, Kostantinos and two other church members took me to the Acropolis—the heart of ancient Athens located on one of the highest hills overlooking the city. On the Acropolis one can see the ruins of many ancient pagan temples, including the magnificent Parthenon, which was completed on 438 B. C., and dedicated to the Greek goddess Athena Parthenos, “the virgin.” The Parthenon is a breathtaking pagan temple which was later dedicated to the “Virgin Mary Mother of God” in A. D. 662 and transformed into a Mosque in 1458 when the Turks captured the city. This impressive monument, which has withstood the ravages of time for 25 centuries, is fast deteriorating and crumbling today largely due to acid rain.

From the Acropolis we walked down few hundred yards to Mars Hill, known also as the Areopagus. It was on this lower hill, within sight of the Acropolis, that Paul was invited by the Greek philosophers of his time to explain his new teaching (Acts 17:18-22). Luke recorded for us Paul’s speech in Acts 17:22-31. The speech has been engraven on a bronze plate, which is cemented into the rock-wall of Mars Hill.

Standing on Mars Hill I could not help but think of the double challenge Paul faced in evangelizing the Greeks of his time. On the one hand he faced the rampant idolatry prevailing among the common people, so evident on the Acropolis by the ruins of so many temples. Luke tells us that Paul’s “spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16). On the other hand he faced the skepticism of the philosophers who rejected the existence of the popular gods and goddesses, and promoted instead the notion of a supreme being who can be apprehended through the mental search for truth. The two hills, within sight distance of one another, represent in a sense the two types of religion prevailing on Paul’s day: one idolatrous and superstitious, and the other intellectual and abstract.

Paul chose to meet this dual challenge, not by adopting today’s popular Willow Creek evangelistic strategy, which consists in giving people what they want. Instead, he confronted people with what they needed: the knowledge of the true God, unknown to them. He is the God who created all things and who “commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given reassurance to all men by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31).

Considering the fact that the Athenians loved to be entertained, as indicated by the existence of several impressive amphitheatres right there on mound of the Acropolis, Paul could have chosen to attract the intellectual and superstitious Athenians, by using philosophical or theatrical idioms. He could have organized with the help of his travelling companions, a singing band or a drama cast that could have performed Christian drama or rhythmic music. Instead, he chose to present to the Athenians the God whom they did not know; the God who created and redeemed them; the God who summoned them to repent before the judgment day.

Judged by the modern criteria of successful evangelism, the results of Paul’s evangelistic endeavors were poor. Few people were converted in Athens (Acts 17:33). Only Dionysius and Damaris are mentioned by name (Acts 17:33). The same was true in most of the urban centers evangelized by Paul. A careful reading of his missionaries journeys indicate that the Great Apostle to the Gentiles did not establish a single mega-church with thousands of members. What he established instead were “home churches” consisting of few believers who met in private homes. Judging by the number of home churches and the names of the converts mentioned in Paul’s letters, the total number of converts from the 15 years of his evangelistic work, may be less than 500.

Paul was not obsessed with numbers, but with confronting people with the claims of the Gospels. The few people who responded to his teaching became his spiritual children. “I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (1 Cor 4:15). He

nurtured them as children. He wrote to them, visited them, disciplined them, and sent them personal representatives like Timothy and Titus.

Contrary to prevailing misconceptions, primitive Christianity was not a mass movement. According to the WORLD CHRISTIAN ENCYCLOPEDIA by the end of the first century less than 1 per cent (0.6 per cent) of the Roman population had become Christian. In a population of 181 million people, only 1 million were Christians by A. D. 100. Yet, these few Christians turned the Roman world upside down. When Christianity became a mass movement in the fourth century, it was paganism that turned Christianity upside down.

The point I am trying to make is that we need to learn the lesson of history in planning our evangelistic strategy. Paul and the apostles did not try to convert the masses by giving them what they wanted. They labored with the few who were prepared to accept and live out the claims of the Gospel. Those who believe that the Adventist church must adopt the Willow Creek type of strategy which consists in attracting people by offering them the kind of beat music and entertaining services they want, may ultimately be establishing churches which conform more to the world, than to the mandate of the Gospel.

THE VISIT TO LONDON, ENGLAND

In recent years I have been invited to speak at several of our churches in London, England. For this latest visit, Pastor Hamilton Williams, British Union Church Ministry Director, arranged for me to speak at the Willesden SDA Church on Friday evening, September 8, and the Balham SDA Church on Saturday, September 9. He chose these two churches because they are located in parts of London where I have not spoken before. It is not easy for our believers to travel from one end of London to the other. Sometimes it can take two or three hours in the congested traffic to reach a church. In fact, Pastor Williams himself spent over two hours on Friday evening to reach the Willesden SDA Church.

The attendance at both churches was excellent. On the Sabbath a capacity crowd of over 500 persons attended the morning and afternoon services at the Balham SDA Church. A good number of students and teachers from Newbold College attended the meetings. I was asked to present my ADVENT SEMINAR where I focus on the certainty and imminence of Christ's coming. In the afternoon we had a marathon session of almost 4 hours during which I shared the highlights of the latest book ***THE CHRISTIAN AND ROCK MUSIC***. The response surpassed my fondest expectations, as indicated by the book sale on Saturday night. In few minutes the large supply of books was sold out.

Nearly ninety per cent of the 20,000 Adventist members in Great Britain are originally from the West Indies. They are deeply committed Adventists who love and support their church. Their worship service is upbeat, but reverential. There are no rock bands leading out in the Praise Service, as is the case in some American Adventist churches. But, I was told that the American influence is beginning to be felt in some churches, as some are adopting the so-called "Christian rock" music for the worship service.

The participants appreciated especially learning about the biblical distinction between the sacred music for worship and secular music for entertainment. Entertainment music and percussion instruments like drums, tambourines, and timbrels, which were associated with dancing, were never allowed in the worship service of the Temple, synagogue, or early church, because God's House was a place of worship and not a social club for entertainment. The same principle should apply to our worship service today.

An indication of the commitment of our British fellow believers to good music, is their LONDON CHORALE choir, which consists of Adventist young people from different churches. They sing traditional sacred songs with great power and harmony. The LONDON CHORALE has won the BBC award of "Best Choir of the Year." It has performed before the Queen, at the famous Albert Hall in London, and in numerous foreign countries. I had the privilege of hearing the LONDON CHORALE in Australia at the two camp meetings where I spoke in 1998. During their Australian tour, they performed also at the Sydney Opera House before over 10,000 spectators. Their enormous success shows that Adventist singing groups can draw large crowds, without having to resort to beat music that stimulates people physically, rather than elevating them spiritually.

DOMINUS JESUS AND VATICAN RETRENCHMENT

The Vatican Declaration *Dominus Jesus*, released on Tuesday, September 5, 2000, reaffirms the traditional Catholic view expressed by Pope Boniface VIII in his Bull, "*Unam Sanctam*" (A. D. 1302): "There is one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and that outside this Church there is neither salvation nor remission of sins." This view was substantially modified at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) which formulated the concept, especially in the Constitution of the Church, that salvation is found not only inside the Catholic Church but also outside its fold, by all who live according to their conscience.

This broader view of various avenues to salvation fostered a policy of benign tolerance toward non-Catholics. Protestants, for example, were rehabilitated from heretics, to "separate brethren," and to brothers and sisters in Christ. Similarly, members of world religions are now treated with openness and respect.

In the thinking of Vatican conservatives, the policy of benign tolerance toward non-Catholics inaugurated by Vatican II, may have gone too far. It may have weakened the alleged unicity and primacy of the Catholic Church. This concern is expressed in an official four page "note" by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the powerful Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The "Note," approved by Pope John Paul II on June 9, explains that "when the expression 'sister churches' is used in the proper sense, the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Universal Church is not [meant to be] sister but 'mother' of all particular churches. This is not merely a question of terminology, but above all of respecting a basic truth of the Catholic faith: that of the unicity of the Church of Jesus Christ. In fact, there is a single Church."

In other words, it is a fundamental Roman Catholic belief that there is only one true church that possesses the means of salvation and such church is the Roman Catholic church. Any salvation obtainable through other churches, ultimately derives from "the fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church."

This fundamental truth is reiterated more fully in the 16 pages Declaration *Dominus Jesus*, which is largely a reprimand to liberal Catholic theologians who "have argued that all religions may be equally valid ways of salvation." Contrary to the thinking of some people, the Catholic Church is not a monolithic organization, where all of its theologians uphold the fundamental Catholic dogmas. There is much dissent within the Catholic Church. Some of my Jesuit professors at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, Italy, openly questioned in class such important dogmas as papal infallibility and transubstantiation.

The Declaration is concerned about "the rapid spread of the relativistic and pluralistic mentality" among liberal Catholic theologians, who believe that "one religion is as good as another." To remedy this problem, the Declaration reiterates that "Catholic faithful *are required to profess* that there is an historic continuity—rooted in the apostolic succession—between the Church founded by Christ and the Catholic Church. . . . There exists a single Church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him."

The Declaration makes a distinction between the Orthodox churches, which retain "apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist," and the Protestant "ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery." The formers are viewed as part of "the Church of Christ" because of their close bonds with the Catholic Church, while the latter "are not Churches in the proper sense; however, those baptized in these communities are, by Baptism, incorporated in Christ and thus are in a certain communion, albeit imperfect, with Christ."

Both documents pointedly avoid using the word "church" when referring to Protestants, adopting instead the elusive term "ecclesial communities." These Protestant

communities may have elements of truth, but, according to the Declaration, “they derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church.”

What all of this means is that the churches born of the Protestant Reformation are reduced by the Vatican Declaration *Dominus Jesus* to a lower level, being excluded from the list of “sister churches.” Protestants do not possess the means of salvation within their communities, but are dependant for salvation upon “the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church.”

EVALUATION OF *DOMINUS JESUS*

The absolutistic Vatican Declaration that salvation for any persons is ultimately possible only through the channels of grace entrusted to the Catholic Church, stands in stark contrast with the interfaith dialogue fostered by Vatican II and the ceaseless efforts of Pope John Paul II to become the undisputed spiritual leader of mankind by reaching out to people of all faiths.

One wonders, What has caused this Vatican retrenchment? What is the theological and biblical justification for the Vatican absolutistic claim to possess the monopoly of salvation? It is unfortunate that the extensive media coverage of the Vatican Declaration, makes no attempt to understand and explain the subtle way in which *Dominus Jesus* justifies the Catholic claim to possess the sole means of salvation. This analysis attempts to fill this gap, by looking briefly at the theological presuppositions of such claim.

The reason for the Vatican retrenchment is the concern, mentioned earlier, that the policy of benign tolerance inaugurated by Vatican II, may have gone too far. It has encourage the spread of “religious relativism” and “the mentality of indifferentism [that] leads to the belief that one religion is as good as another.” Such a view undermines the unicity and primacy of the Catholic Church. At the news conference to present the Declaration *Dominus Jesus*, Cardinal Ratzinger, the Vatican’s Doctrinal watchdog, said that some theologians were “manipulating and going beyond the limits” of tolerance when they put all religions on the same plane.

It is evident that the Vatican is concerned about the spread of theological relativism and pluralism which is weakening the alleged unicity and primacy of the Catholic Church. To counteract this threat *Dominus Jesus* reiterates in a succinct but comprehensive way the theological foundation of the Catholic claim to possess the sole means of salvation.

The 15 pages documents is well-structured with an introduction, six parts, and a conclusion. The introduction states the problem that motivated the Declaration. “The [Catholic] Church’s constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de iure* (or *in principle*).” The result is that “the universal salvific mediation of the [Catholic] Church” is weakened and obscured.

To counteract the “relativistic mentality, which is becoming ever so common,” the first three parts of the Declaration reassert the fullness of the revelation of Jesus Christ and the unicity of the salvific mystery of Jesus Christ. “It must therefore be *firmly believed* as a truth of Catholic faith that the universal salvific will of the One and Triune God is offered and accomplished once and for all in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God.”

Evangelical Christians reading the first three parts of the document can find themselves in full agreement with the emphasis on the unique revelation and salvation provided by Jesus Christ. After all this is a fundamental Biblical concept. However, most readers may miss the reason for emphasizing the unique salvific role of Christ, which becomes apparent in the next three sections. The latters explain that the salvific mystery of Christ becomes a reality for the believer only through the Catholic Church and her sacraments.

The Declaration states: "Christ continues his presence and his work of salvation in the Church and by means of the Church." By "the Church" is meant "the Catholic Church," and not Christian churches in general. This is clearly stated in *Dominus Jesus*: "Just as there is one Christ, so there exists a single body of Christ, a single bride of Christ: a single Catholic and apostolic Church." "There exists a single Church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him."

By linking the saving work of Christ with the Catholic Church, making the latter the sole channel for dispensing "Christ's salvific mystery," the Declaration makes salvation a monopoly of the Catholic church. This means that the Catholic Church herself is a "sacrament," that is, a channel of grace to the world. "The Church is a 'sacrament'— . . . she is the sign and instrument of the kingdom."

Such a preposterous, presumptuous, and exclusivistic claim is based on the unfounded assumption that church in the New Testament is a visible, hierarchical organization, which was originally established by Christ Himself, when he made Peter the foundation rock of the Church (Matt 16:18). This is known as the "Petrine Theory," according to which Christ entrusted to Peter the government of His church. To buttress this theory, the Declaration repeatedly appeals to the "apostolic succession." By the latter is meant the existence of an unbroken succession from Peter, the first Pope, to John Paul II, the last Pope. Catholics proudly point out that no other church can make this claim of unbroken succession.

Petrine Theory. No attempt can be made in this newsletter to expose all the fallacies of the Petrine theory and of the apostolic succession. These subjects will be examined in-depth in my forthcoming book on **POPULAR HERESIES**.

For the sake of brevity I will limit my comments to the pivotal text of Matthew 16:18 used to prove the Petrine theory. Christ tells Peter: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the power of death shall not prevail against it." The question is, Who is the "rock" upon which Christ built His church? Obviously for Catholics, the "rock" is Peter as the foundation stone upon which Christ built His church. They rightly point out that the play on words "You are *Petros* and on this *Petra*" shows that there is an unmistakable connection between the two. Thus, Peter is the *Petra* upon which Christ has built His Church.

Protestants obviously reject the Catholic interpretation, arguing instead that the "rock" is either Jesus Himself or Peter's confession of Christ. According to the former the text would read: "You are Peter and on myself as a rock I will build my church." According to the latter: "You are Peter and on the rock of Christ you have confessed, I will build my church."

The problem with both of these popular interpretation, is that they do not do justice to the play on words. In the Greek there is an unmistakable connection between "*Petros*" and "*Petra*." The question is not whether "*Petra*— the rock" refers to Peter, but in what sense Peter is "*Petra*—the rock." In my view Peter is "*Petra*—the rock," not in the Catholic sense of being the foundation stone upon which Christ built His church, but in the sense that Peter is the initial foundation of the church, which is built upon the foundation of the apostles, with Christ as the corner stone.

This interpretation rests on two major considerations. First, the New Testament pictures the church as a building, "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph 2:20; cf. 1 Pet 2:4-8; 1 Cor 3:11). The imagery of the church as a building suggests that the church does not rest on the foundation rock of Peter, but that began with Peter as the first stone. He was the first person to confess and accept Jesus of Nazareth, as the Christ, that is, the Messiah, "the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:16). Being the first convert to publicly accept Christ, Peter became in a sense "the first charter member" of the church, or the first foundation stone of the spiritual edifice which is the church.

A second important point, ignored by the Catholic Church, is that the New Testament views the church, not as a visible hierarchical organization run by the Pope with his bishops, but as an invisible community of believers who are united by the same faith in Christ. In the Bible “the church” is not a religious organization, but the “people of God.” Both the Hebrew *qahal* and the Greek *ekklesia*, translated “church,” actually refer to the “congregation” of believers, who have been called *out* from the world (Deut 7:6; Hos 11:1; 1 Peter 2:9) in order to be a light in the world (Deut 28:10; 1 Pet 2:9).

This means that when Jesus spoke about building His church, He meant, not the establishment of a hierarchical religious organization, but the building up of a community of believers who by faith would accept Him and confess Him before the world. In this context, Peter, by being the first person to confess and accept Jesus as “Christ,” which means “Messiah,” became the first living stone of the spiritual edifice consisting of a community of believers. The idea of Peter being the foundation of the church as a hierarchical organization identified with the Catholic Church, is foreign to the text and to the teachings of the New Testament.

Apostolic Succession. A fatal blow to the Catholic Petrine claim is the lack of any New Testament support for the primacy of Peter in the apostolic church. If, according to the Catholic claim, Christ appointed Peter as His vicar to govern the church, then we would expect Peter to function as the leader of the Apostolic church. But this is hardly the case.

For example, there are no indications that Peter ever served as the presiding officer of the Jerusalem church. The organizational structure of the Jerusalem Church can be characterized as collegiality with a presidency. But there are no indications that Peter ever served as the presiding officer of the church. At the Jerusalem Council, it was James, not Peter, who presided in the deliberations (Act 15:13).

Furthermore, the ultimate authority of the Jerusalem Church resided, not on Peter, but on the apostles, who were later replaced by “elders.” For example, it was “the apostles” who sent Peter to Samaria (Acts 8:14) to check on the new Christian communities. It was the “apostles” who sent Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 11:22). It was “the apostles and the elders” who sent Judas and Silas to Antioch (15:22-27). It was “James and the elders” who advised Paul to undergo a rite of purification at the Temple (Acts 21:18, 23-24).

Had Peter been appointed by Christ to serve as the Head of the Church, he would have played a significant role in the decisions mentioned above. There are no indications that Paul viewed Peter as the leader of the church. We are told that when Peter went to Antioch, Paul “opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned” (Gal 2:11). Paul’s action hardly suggests that Peter was recognized and respected as the infallible head of the church.

Furthermore, Paul refers to the “pillars” of the Apostolic Church as being “James, Cephas, and John” (Gal 2:9). The fact that “James,” the Lord’s brother, is mentioned first, indicates that James, rather than Peter, served as the leader of the church. Had the apostles understood that Peter had been appointed by Christ to serve as the Head of the church, they would have entrusted to him the leadership of the church. But the fact is that Peter is never seen in the NT as the sole leader of the Apostolic Church.

The notion that Christ invested Peter with the authority to govern the church and that such an authority has been transmitted in an unbroken succession to his successor, is a pure Catholic fabrication devoid of biblical support. It first appears in the writing of Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon (A. 175-195), who uses the argument of the apostolic succession to refute gnostic heretics. He argues that the gnostic teachings are heretical because they are rejected by those churches which can trace their apostolic pedigree (succession—*Against the Heresies* book 3).

The argument of the apostolic succession served a useful purpose in the early church when the formation of the New Testament was still in a progress. Church leaders needed an objective authority to refute heretics, and they found it in churches like Antioch, Ephesus, and Alexandria, which could trace their origin to an Apostle. These churches could serve as the touchstone of orthodoxy. But to extend the concept of the apostolic succession to the whole course of Christian history is unwarranted, because of the interruption and apostasy that these churches have experienced. The Moslem invasion of the seventh and eighth centuries wiped out completely most of the ancient Eastern churches.

The same holds true for the Bishop of Rome. Anyone familiar with the history of the papacy, knows how difficult it is even for the Catholic church to prove the unbroken succession from Peter to the present pope. There have been times when the papacy was in the hands of several corrupt Popes, who fought among themselves for the Papal throne. For example, in 1045 Pope Benedict IX was driven out of Rome by the people because of his unworthiness and Silvester II was placed on the Papal throne. Later Benedict IX returned and sold the Papal throne to a man who became Gregory VI.

During the course of events Benedict refused to lay down his papal claims, so that there now were three Popes claiming to be the rightful pope. To resolve the problem the German Emperor Henry II called a synod at Sutri in A. D. 1046, which deposed all the three popes and elected Clement II instead. One wonders, which of the three deposed popes fits into the apostolic succession? How can the Catholic Church still legitimately defend the notion of an unbroken succession from Peter to the present pope, when some of her popes were deposed for their corruption! It is evident that there are some broken links in the chain of the Apostolic succession.

The Eucharist. The Catholic claim to possess the sole means of salvation rests not only on the alleged apostolic succession, but also on the Catholic view of the Eucharist as the reenactment of Christ's atoning sacrifice. In fact, "the apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist" are mentioned together several times in the Declaration *Dominus Jesus*, because they are the two pillars of the Catholic claim to be the only true church which has the power to dispense salvation.

Time will not allow us in this newsletter to expose the fallacies of the Catholic view of the Lord's Supper, known as transubstantiation. The absurd claim that the priest has the power to transform the bread and wine into the physical and historical body of Jesus, and to offer it to the believers by means of a wafer, makes the Catholic Church a dispenser of salvation through her priesthood.

For the Catholic Church the benefits of Christ's atoning sacrifice are made available to the believer, not through the heavenly ministry of Jesus in the sanctuary, but through the earthly ministry of the Catholic priests at the altar. The Declaration devotes three sections to extol "the salvific mystery of Christ," because this provides the basis to justify the claim that "Christ's salvific mystery" is realized through the mystery of the Eucharist.

The Christ that most Catholics know, is the Christ they swallow at the Mass. Few devout Catholic families display a picture of Christ in their home. I dare to say that out of 100 devout Italian Catholic families, perhaps 4 or 5 of them have a picture of Christ hanging in the house. Their devotion is primarily to Mary and the saints who can intercede for them directly. As far as Christ is concerned, they know little about Him. They know mostly that "Christ's salvific ministry" is available to them through the Eucharist.

Conclusion. The foregoing reflections on the Declaration *Dominus Jesus*, have served to highlight the Catholic attempt to make salvation a **dispensation of the church**, rather than a **disposition of the believer**. By claiming to be the only church that has the apostolic succession and consequently the right to dispense salvation, the Catholic church is deceiving millions of sincere people into believing that there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church (no *salus extra ecclesia*). The fact that the Declaration

Dominus Jesus goes into great length to reiterate this traditional Catholic teaching, goes to show that after all Ellen White was right when she wrote: "Rome never changes. Her principles have not altered in the least. She has not lessened the breach between herself and Protestants; they have done all the advancing. But what does this argue for the Protestantism of this day? It is the rejection of Bible truth which makes men approach to infidelity. It is a backsliding church that lessens the distance between itself and the Papacy" (*Signs of the Times*, Feb. 19, 1894, par. 4)

Our only safeguard against deceptive teachings such as those found in the Vatican document *Dominus Jesus*, is familiarity with the teachings of the Word of God. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that the church is not a hierarchical organization that has the right to dispense salvation, but a community of believers committed to "declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you [us] out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Pet 1:9).

A UNIQUE SABBATH TRAIL

Washington, New Hampshire is known as the birthplace of the first Sabbathkeeping Adventist Congregation. It was established in the autumn of 1844 by William Farnsworth. The original church still exists and is used during the Summer months.

Pastor Knowles of the Washington church, in answer to prayer, was impressed to build a Sabbath Trail next to the church, that would beautifully tell the story of the Sabbath to visitors of all denominations who visit the historic church each year.

Dedicated in 1998, this unique one mile long trail is located in the woods surrounding the church with thirty-one sites where visitors can sit on benches and read attractively engraved granite markers that tell the story of the Sabbath from Creation to the New Earth.

May I encourage you to make a visit to the Sabbath Trail either in person or via the Internet at: <http://www.tagnet.org/washington/>. You will find this to be a most pleasant experience.

WEEKEND SEMINARS

As a service to our subscribers, I am listing the date and the location of my upcoming weekend SEMINARS on the Sabbath, Second Advent, and Christian Lifestyle. Each seminar consists of three presentations: Friday evening at 7:30 p. m., Sabbath morning at 11:00 a. m., and Sabbath afternoon at 5:00 p. m. Feel free to contact me at (616) 471-2915 for a special seminar in your area.

SEPTEMBER 29-30: VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Location: Westminster SDA Church

Address: 7925 -10th Avenue, Burnaby, BC V3N 2S3

For information call Pastor David Ellis at (504) 524-3838

OCTOBER 6-7: COLVILLE, WASHINGTON

Location: Auditorium Community College of Spokane

Address: 985 S. Elm Street, Colville, WA 99114

For information call Pastor Douglas Pond at (509) 684-5845 or LeeRoy Holmes at (509) 684-3362

A THANK YOU NOTE:

Thank you for taking time in your busy schedule to read this lengthy newsletter. If these Bible studies enrich your understanding and experience of Biblical truths, be sure to invite your friends to subscribe. All what they need to do is to email me a request at: <sbacchiocchi@qtm.net> As a result of your promotional endeavors over 11,000 people are already benefiting from these Bible studies.

**ORDER FORM FOR ONLINE PURCHASE WITH
YOUR CREDIT CARD**

You can use the order form below to order the followings:

___ Two copies of *THE MARRIAGE COVENANT* for only \$25.00, postpaid, instead of the regular price of \$40.00.

___ two copies of the special Sabbath issue of *RESTORE* for only \$10.00, postage paid, instead of the regular price of \$16.00.

To order by mail, send your check in US dollars to:

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES
4990 Appian Way
Berrien Springs, Michigan 49103, USA

**CREDIT CARD INFORMATION TO ORDER
DR. BACCHIOCCHI'S BOOKS**

Credit Card type: _____ (only Visa or Master Card or American Express accepted)

Credit Card number _____

Expiration date _____

Your name on the Card _____

Street address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Phone number _____

Email address _____

Total amount _____

Books ordered _____

We Guarantee To Process Your Order On The Same Day We Receive It.

Contact Information

Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D.
Professor of Theology and Church History
Andrews University
4990 Appian Way, Berrien Springs, MI 49103

Phone (616) 471-2915 Fax (616) 471-4013
E-mail: sbacchiocchi@qtm.net or sbacchiocchi@csi.com
Web site: <http://www.biblicalperspectives.com>