Declaración sobre el Concilio de Roma y la Relación con las Religiones no Cristianas (Nostra Aetate)

Declaración sobre la Libertad Religiosa (Dignitatis Humanae)

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We saw in our discussion of ecumenism that the bishops went into the council fairly naïve about Pope John’s initial hope that the Council would lead the way toward Christian reunification. As they began to discuss the topic they realized that they were opening a can of worms. They ultimately decided to write four distinct statements: 1) relations among all the Catholic rites (East and West), 2) ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox churches and Reformation Protestants, 3) relations with Jews and other non-Christian Religions, and 4) freedom of conscience in regard to religion (as an underlying principle that justifies the other three). Although they are four distinct topics, they need to be read and understood together for two reasons: to see how these four fit together; and to see how the Council was setting the direction for the Catholic Church to build a broader foundation for dealing with any and all historical instances of division and enmity.

We discuss Non-Christian Religions and Religious Liberty here.

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Most of the bishops were from Europe and the Americas; they had all lived through World War II. Along with many other political, religious, psychological and sociological leaders, they were chagrined that the Nazi Holocaust could be perpetrated by a “Christian” nation, so they were intent on addressing the long, sad heritage of anti-Semitism endemic in the Western Christian worldview. Many bishops, especially plus of places where there was a significant Jewish population, felt strongly that the Church had to state a reconciling and corrective teaching about the Jews: as the religion that gave birth to Christianity, and how the Jews should be implicated in the death of Christ, and the appropriate relationship that should exist among Christians and Jews in the modern world.

But the discussion was highly charged by the political reality of the new State of Israel that had been formed in 1948, generating (an understandable, but apparently unforeseen) consequence of a simmering state of rage among all the Arab peoples in the Middle East. The Eastern Rite bishops (many of whom are of Arabic descent and live among majority Arab populations) insisted that the Catholic Church could not proclaim a teaching that would appear to justify and support the creation of the state of Israel, which had resulted in the forced relocation of thousands of Palestinians, many of whom were still living in “temporary” refugee camps 15 years later. (These bishops would have been unbelievably saddened if some prophet had come into St. Peter’s, announcing that these same refugee camps would still be teeming with angry Palestinians in the year 2013 – 65 years later!)

Rather than write a decree specifically about Christian/Jewish relations, the bishops decided to take a broader “historical” approach to religious inclusivity in a Declaration about the Catholic Church’s relationships with all the world’s great religions, with an emphasis on Islam, and a special consideration of the Jewish faith at the climax.

#1 The declaration begins with the fact that “in our age” the human family is being brought much closer together than ever before in history. The Catholic church stands ready to be a reconciling agent, looking for what people across the world have in common, and what can tend to bring them together. The declaration then lists several existential questions that puzzle (and sometimes burden) people everywhere, which all the world religions try to grapple with: the meaning of human life, suffering, goodness and sin, death, etc.

#2 This paragraph briefly summarizes useful beliefs and practices found in Hinduism and Buddhism.

#3 Muslims share our belief in the One God, a faith heritage with Abraham, recognition of Jesus and Mary as special persons in the plan of God. The Church admits “dissensions and enmities between Christian and Muslims, but this synod urges all parties to move toward mutual understanding and cooperation in social justice and moral values.”

#4.1-2 This longest section deals with the “descendents of Abraham” without mentioning the Jews by name until the last sentence in the second paragraph: “The Church believes that Christ our peace reconciled Jews and gentiles and made us both one in himself through the cross.” [This enigmatic statement is clarified in #4.8]

#4.3 The apostles and disciples were Jewish people. Even though “Jerusalem did not know the time of its visitation” (Lk 19:44), the Jews still remain very dear to God, whose gift and call are “without repentance.” [Repentance on God’s part (!) This is an oblique statement that God’s covenant with the Chosen People was not “canceled” by the “New” Covenant in Christ. This is a new insight, but based on St. Paul’s understanding.]
#4.5 Since the spiritual heritage between Christians and Jews is so great, we promote mutual knowledge and esteem between us, especially through friendly dialogue in biblical and theological studies.

#4.6 “Although the Jewish authorities with their followers pressed for the death of Christ, still those things which were perpetrated during his passion cannot be ascribed indiscriminately to all the Jews living at that time nor to the Jews of today. … The Jews should not be represented as rejected by God or accursed, as if that follows from Holy scripture.” All religious instruction and preaching should have nothing of this sort.

#4.7 Mindful of our common heritage, “motivated not by political considerations, but by religious charity of the gospel, the church condemns all persecution against anyone, and deplores feelings of hatred, persecutions and demonstrations of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at whatever time and by whomsoever.”

#4.8 “Christ, as the church has always maintained, went willingly with immense love to his passion and death because of the sins of all people so that all may obtain salvation. [propter = because of, on account of, or it can mean to stand nearby] Christ is the sign of God’s universal love and the source of all grace.” [This statement adds a uniquely Catholic nuance to the Christian theory of “satisfaction,” not restricted to those who accept Jesus as their savior and are baptized; nor is it a “purchase agreement” in exchange for a due punishment.]

#5.1 We cannot call God the “Father of all” if we do not behave as brothers and sisters. “Whoever does not love does not know God.”

#5.2 “Therefore the basis is taken away from any theory or practice that draws distinctions between people … with reference to human dignity and the rights flowing therefrom.”

#5.3 “The church condemns as foreign to the mind of Christ any kind of discrimination whatsoever between people, or harassment of them, done by reason of race or color, religion or class [“condicionis” = class, rank, condition, situation, stipulation, marital status]. … at peace with all people, so that they may really be children of the Father who is in heaven.” (Mat 5:45) [This is the Council’s “Inclusive Statement.”]

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**Declaration on Religious Freedom (Dignitatis Humanae)**

This declaration was crafted mainly by John Courtney Murray, SJ, and strongly supported by the American, Canadian and European bishops. They had come to the conclusion that the notion of a legal “Catholic State,” imposing itself on the civil government, insisting on the exclusive right of the Catholic Church, was a thing of the past and doing more harm than good. Nevertheless, there was a strong tradition lasting more than a millennium that “error has no rights,” so the declaration had to be very subtle and make careful distinctions. The topic at hand is religious freedom; but what is said about how humans come to know truth, and how they need to be free in forming their conscience applies to every field of human activity. The Church in the Modern World was being drafted simultaneously, and that Pastoral Constitution employs arguments made in this declaration.

#1.1 “The dignity of the human person is a concern of which people of our time are becoming increasingly aware, and in growing numbers they demand that they should enjoy the use of their own responsible judgment and freedom, and decide on their actions on grounds of duty and conscience, without external pressure or coercion.” [This first sentence declares the fundamental right and responsibility of the human conscience, and it is justified by statements of Pius XII (Christmas radio message, 1944) and John XXIII (Pacem in Terris).] Then the specific application is made to the innate freedom to practice one’s religion publicly. [This is in response to the atheistic Marxist philosophy growing in many parts of the world, with totalitarian governments outlawing religion.]

#1.2 Since this is a statement about what we Catholics believe, as in the document on ecumenism, it is stated clearly: “We believe that this one and only true religion subsists in the catholic and apostolic church, to which the Lord Jesus entrusted the task of spreading it to all people. … All people are bound to seek for the truth, especially about God and his church, and when they have found it to embrace and keep it.”

#1.3 Leaving intact the traditional Catholic teaching on the moral obligation to embrace the one Church of Christ, “this synod proclaims that these obligations touch and bind the human conscience, and the truth imposes itself solely by the force of its own truth as it enters the mind.” “…the synod intends to develop the teaching of more recent popes on the inviolable rights of the human person…”

**Chapter I**

#2.1 The human person has a right to religious freedom, and “immunity from coercion by individuals, or by any human power, that no one should be forced to act against his conscience in religious matters, nor prevented from acting according to his conscience… within due limits.” “The right to religious freedom is firmly based on the dignity of the human person as this is known from the revealed word of God and from reason itself.”

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#2.2 "In accordance with their dignity as persons, equipped with reason and free will and endowed with personal responsibility, all are impelled by their own nature and are bound by a moral obligation to seek truth, above all religions truth. They are further bound to hold to the truth once it is known, and to regulate their whole lives by its demands. But people are only able to meet this obligation in ways that accord with their own nature, when they enjoy both psychological freedom and freedom from external coercion. Thus the right to religious freedom is based on human nature itself, not on any merely personal disposition. Therefore this right to non-interference persists even in those who do not carry out their obligation of seeking the truth and standing by it; and the exercise of the right should not be curtailed, as long as due public order is preserved."

#3.1 "The supreme rule of life is the divine law itself, the eternal, objective and universal law by which God out of his wisdom and love arranges, directs and governs the whole world and the paths of the human community. God has enabled people to share in this divine law, and hence they are able under the gentle guidance of God's providence increasingly to recognize the unchanging truth. Therefore all have both the right and the duty to search for religious truth, so that they may, by the prudent use of appropriate means, form for themselves right and true moral judgments.

#3.2 "Truth, however, is to be sought in a manner befitting the dignity and social nature of the human person, namely by free inquiry assisted by teaching and instruction, and by exchange and discussion in which people explain to each other the truth as they have discovered it or as they see it, so as to assist each other in their search. Once truth is known, it should be embraced by a personal act of assent."

#3.3 "People grasp and acknowledge the precepts of the divine law by means of their own consciences, which they are bound to follow faithfully in all their activity, so as to come to God, their end."

[The notion of the “eternal law of God” has been part of Catholic theology for nearly 1,000 years. The notion that we can come to some knowledge of this law is based on Romans 1:18-23, in which Paul states that even pagans can come to some knowledge of God by observing the world that God has made. This leads St. Thomas and other scholastics to propose the notion of “natural law.” The problem is that the natural law is discerned by human reasoning, which is based on the particular experiences of the humans doing the reasoning, and distilled from many different insights of many different human persons, which more or less approximate the wonderful law of God. Despite the lofty language about “the gentle guidance of God’s providence increasingly to recognize the unchanging truth,” no human beings, even religious leaders, are ever able to completely or perfectly know God’s eternal law! Pope Benedict XVI stated this quite clearly: We know very well that truth, apart from God, does not exist as an autonomous reality. If it did, it would be an idol. The truth cannot unfold except in an otherness open to God, who wishes to reveal his own otherness in and through my human brothers and sisters. Hence it is not fitting to state in an exclusive way: “I possess the truth”. The truth is not possessed by anyone; it is always a gift which calls us to undertake a journey of ever closer assimilation to truth. Truth can only be known and experienced in freedom; for this reason we cannot impose truth on others; truth is disclosed only in an encounter of love. (Given at Beirut, Lebanon, September 14, 2012, paragraph 27.)

#3.5 Since religion and the decisions of a person’s conscience “transcend the earthly and temporal levels of reality, the state, whose proper purpose is to provide for the temporal common good, should recognize and promote the religious life of its citizens [and not] take upon itself to direct or to prevent religious activity.”

#4 All religious associations have the right to public assembly and to organize training institutes, assign and transfer ministers, etc. "Religious communities are entitled to teach and give witness to their faith publicly in speech and writing without hindrance. But in propagating their religious belief they must always abstain from any kind of action that savors of undue pressure or improper enticement, particularly in regard to the poor or uneducated. Any such course of action must be held an abuse of their own rights and an infringement of the rights of others." [This is a direct reference to aggressive evangelization going on in Mexico and the other Latin American nations, trying to convince Catholics that they are not really baptized.]

#5 Any family has the right to organize its own religious life at home under supervision of the parents. Children should not be forced to attend classes which conflict with the religious convictions of the parents, and there should not be imposed on families a single pattern of education in which all religious training is excluded.

#6.3 If, because of the demographics of a place, special recognition is constitutionally granted to one religion in a particular territory, religious freedom must nevertheless always be recognized for all.

#8.1, 2 Some people today are restricted from exercising their power of free decision; others are asserting such freedom as to reject all control and authority. We call for a love for genuine freedom; "that is, people who will use their own judgment to make decisions in the light of truth, plan their activities with a sense of responsibility, and freely combine their efforts with others to achieve all that is just and true. Religious freedom should serve this further purpose, that people should act with greater responsibility in fulfilling their social functions in life."
Chapter II

#9 “The statements made by this Vatican synod on the right of people to religious freedom have their basis in the dignity of the person, the demands of which have come to be more fully known to human reason from the experience of centuries. [See note by Pope Benedict XVI in #3.3.] But this teaching on freedom also has roots in divine revelation, and is for that reason to be held all the more sacred by Christians. For although revelation does not affirm the right of immunity from external coercion in religious affairs in so many words, it nevertheless makes plain the whole scope of the dignity of the human person; it manifests the respect Christ showed for the freedom of people in fulfilling their duty in believing in the word of God; and it instills in us the spirit that the followers of such a master should always have as their ideal and model. In all these ways light is thrown on the general principles on which the teaching of this declaration on religious freedom is based. First and foremost religious freedom in the social order fully corresponds with the freedom of the act of Christian faith.”

#10 A chief Catholic teaching found in the Word of God and the Fathers is that the response of faith should be voluntary. Faith by nature is voluntary. Human beings can only respond to God as he reveals himself when they give to God a free and rational allegiance of faith. “It is therefore entirely in accord with the nature of faith that every kind of human coercion should be excluded from religion. The ideal of religious freedom helps produce the conditions in which people can be openly invited to Christian faith, and can embrace it of their own accord and witness to it in action in their whole manner of life.”

#11 This section elaborates scriptural analysis using New Testament texts justifying the free assent of faith and freedom of conscience.

#12 The Church is faithful to the Gospel when it promotes the principle of religious freedom. “Throughout the centuries it has guarded and handed on the teaching received from the master and from the apostles. Although at times in the life of the people of God, as it has pursued its pilgrimage through the twists and turns of human history, there have been ways of acting hardly in tune with the spirit of the gospel, indeed contrary to it, nevertheless the church’s teaching that no one’s faith should be coerced has held firm. Thus the leaven of the gospel has long been at work in the minds of people … in the growing recognition of the dignity of the human person, and in the maturing of the conviction that in religious matters this dignity must be preserved intact in society from every kind of human coercion.”

#13 The freedom of the church is a fundamental principle in all relations between the church and both the state and the whole social order [another reference to the spreading of totalitarian atheistic governments].

#14.3 “In forming their consciences the Christian faithful should give careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the church. [Pius XII, Radio message, March 23, 1952] For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. Its charge is to announce and authentically teach that truth which is Christ, and to give authoritative confirmation of the principles of the moral order which derive from human nature itself.”

#14.4 The disciple of Christ owes to his master the serious obligation of absorbing ever more deeply the truth learnt from him, of announcing it loyally and defending it vigorously, but always without recourse to means that go against the spirit of the gospel. At the same time the love of Christ presses the disciple to deal lovingly, prudently and patiently with those who are ignorant or mistaken about the faith. [John XXIII, Pacem in Terris] So account must be taken of one’s obligations to the proclamation of Christ the life-giving Word, of the rights of the human person, and of the measure of the grace of Christ given to each by God to summon him to the free acceptance and profession of the faith.

#15 Religious freedom is being stated more clearly in many civil constitutions, yet there are some regimes in which the state tries to deter citizens from any religious allegiance. This synod urges all Catholics to reflect deeply on the present situation of the human family, urging relations of peace and harmony to be established and deepened in the human family. May the God and Father of all bring it to pass that the human family be led to “the glorious liberty of the children of God.” (Romans 8:21)

What is the impact of this document on the Catholic experience today?

How does the principle of religious freedom function within churches?