
Coverage of Complex Theoretical Content The Case of 'Dominus Iesus'

Diego Contreras

Facoltà di Comunicazione Sociale Istituzionale
Pontificia Università della Santa Croce, Roma

Keywords: News Values, Religion and News, Relativism

Abstract

The Declaration 'Dominus Iesus' (2000) is one of the Vatican documents to have provoked most journalistic controversy in recent years. We may ask ourselves why a topic of apparently little journalistic interest, such as a theological document, raised so much furore. The analysis of this case can help to reveal how the mainstream press deal with religion; and may be useful for verifying some inherent features of journalistic formats, such as news values and the mechanisms of journalistic interpretation. From the analysis of the journalistic reception of the Declaration, one may draw certain conclusions about the possible influence that the 'language' and internal dynamics of the mass media exert on the journalistic presentation of complex content, such as that of a doctrinal Declaration. For this study, we have examined 150 journalistic texts from 68 newspapers and magazines from 15 countries.

The Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on 5 September 2000, is one of the Holy See documents that has given rise to most journalistic controversy over the last few years. Despite the profoundly theological nature of the text - as is clear from its title: 'On the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church' - reactions to its contents occupied many column inches on newspapers all over the world.

During the controversy that followed the speech pronounced by Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg, in September of 2006, some commentators recalled the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, accusing the Catholic Church of proclaiming in that document its superiority with respect to other religions. According to them, the speech of Regensburg confirmed this point of view (in that case about Islam). It is not the only occasion on which the *Dominus Iesus* has been the object of the press attention, even years after its publication.

numerous stories and newspaper profiles recalled that the new Pope, Benedict XVI, had been the main author of the controversial document. For example, on the day following his election *The New York Times* (20 April 2005) mentioned the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* in a negative light in three separate articles. The allusions are brief phrases that purport to sum up the contents of the document: 'Pope Benedict's well-known stands include the assertion that Catholicism is 'true' and other religions are 'deficient''; 'in 2000 wrote the contentious Vatican document 'Dominus Iesus', asserting truth of the Catholic belief over others'; 'his Congregation's 2000 declaration 'Dominus Iesus' -Lord Jesus- said other religions could not offer salvation, and were 'gravely deficient'. An uproar from other religious leaders followed, but John Paul publicly defended the document'; in a document issued in 2000, 'Dominus Iesus', the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that Cardinal Ratzinger headed said the Catholic Church was the only true path to salvation and called other faiths 'gravely deficient'.

How was it that such a theologically complex document came to be summarised in such abrupt sentences? A study of this case may reveal certain characteristics of the way in which the mainstream press deal with religious issues. Analysis of the texts can demonstrate the effects that the language, format and dynamics of the communications media have in conditioning their view of complex subjects, such as doctrinal documents. To this end, we have examined a representative number of the news items, features and editorials that the international press dedicated to the document in the four months that followed its publication¹.

Before presenting these reflections, we felt it appropriate to present a synopsis of the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*. And the difficulty we encountered in drawing up a brief, comprehensive and clear summary provided an early indication of the complexity of the document for journalistic treatment. Having recalled the contents of the document, we go on to refer to various factors that may help to understand how it was received among journalists, and the influence thereon of the limits imposed by journalistic genres and by news values such as *conflict* and *negativity*. These observations lead us to propose a number of suggestions for facing up to the problem of the various readings (specialised and general) that arise with doctrinal documents that are widely disseminated. We conclude by indicating that an effort to improve the communicability of complex questions does not necessarily mean eliminating conflict or journalistic controversy. In the final analysis, the reception of such documents shows, in some way, the values present in society, or at least in the elite of the communications media.

Contents and Presentation

When Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was elected as successor to John Paul II, According to its authors, the key point of the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*

(hereinafter, DDI) is contained in the phrase 'Jesus is the Lord', a brief formula that appears the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians and that sums up the central theme: the salvific mediation of Christ and the Church for all humanity².

During the presentation of the document, Cardinal Ratzinger identified the context and the significance of the DDI in the challenge to Christian faith presented by certain forms of the so-called 'theology of religious pluralism'. Such tendencies affirm that all religions are, in themselves and for their followers, ways to salvation, and as a consequence missionary activity becomes entirely superfluous. The cardinal said that to accept such theories is to suggest that Christian revelation cannot be considered complete, and this leads even to casting doubt upon the divinity of Jesus Christ.

He observed that in the climate of relativism that characterises our times, raising the idea that a universal truth exists, a truth fulfilled in the figure of Jesus Christ and transmitted by the faith of the Church, is considered to be an expression of fundamentalism. Indeed, such affirmations do tend to be seen as an attack against the modern spirit, and a threat to tolerance and freedom. The essence of this relativist 'dogma' is the 'ideology of dialogue', a concept presented as being contrary to 'conversion' and 'mission'. Thus understood, the principle of tolerance is transformed into indifference to truth, and leads to a belief that all religions are the same.

It is understandable, Cardinal Ratzinger added, that as the world grows ever closer together religions should maintain mutual relations and have an increasing interest in one another. However, he also stressed the fact that this does not limit the Church's conviction that the completeness, universality and fulfilment of God's revelation are present only in the Christian faith, and that the missionary mandate retains all its validity.

Turning now to consider the actual contents of the DDI, we present a summary of each of its six chapters:

Chapter 1 states that in the face of a growing relativistic mentality which, in the final instance, holds that the truth does not exist, it is necessary to reassert that the revelation of Jesus Christ is definitive and complete. Consequently, the theory of the limited, incomplete, or imperfect character of Christian revelation which makes it complementary to that found in other religions, is contrary to the faith.

Chapter 2 highlights the fact that Jesus of Nazareth, Son of Mary, is the One incarnate Word, the Logos, and rejects the idea that Jesus is only one of the many faces which the Logos has assumed in the course of history. This chapter also

reaffirms the doctrine of the faith on the unicity of salvation, the source and centre of which is the incarnation and redeeming sacrifice of the Son of God.

Chapter 3 recalls that the first Christians, since the beginning of their history, recognised that Jesus Christ has a significance and a value for the human race and its history, which are unique and singular. Consequently, the fear of using such terms as ‘unicity’, ‘universality’ and ‘absoluteness’, etc., is unjustifiable. And although the salvific will of God was accomplished once and for all in Jesus Christ, theologians are invited to explore if and in what way the historical figures and positive elements of other religions may fall within the divine plan of salvation.

Chapter 4 highlights how Jesus did not establish a simple community of disciples but constituted the Church as a means of salvation. There is an historical continuity - rooted in the apostolic succession - between the Church founded by Christ and the Catholic Church. Vatican Council II used the expression *subsistit in*. This means that the Church of Christ, despite its divisions, continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church, but at the same time, outside of her structure, many elements of sanctity and truth can be found.

Churches that are not in perfect communion with the Catholic Church, but that remain united to her by means of very close bonds such as apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist, are true particular Churches [a reference to the Orthodox Churches]. Ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery are not Churches in the proper sense. However, those who have received Baptism have been incorporated in Christ and are, consequently, in a certain communion, albeit imperfect, with the Catholic Church [a reference to the Protestant confessions].

The Church, this chapter continues, is not merely the sum of Churches and ecclesial communities, nor is it the case that the Church of Christ nowhere really exists. The elements do exist, fully in the Catholic Church and, without this fullness, in other communities.

Chapter 5 makes it clear that although there is an inseparable relationship between the Church and the Kingdom of God, this Kingdom - even if considered in its historical phase - is not identified with the Church in her visible and social reality.

Finally, *Chapter 6* emphasises that the pilgrim Church is necessary for salvation. Theology is studying the manner in which grace comes to non-Christians, however it would be contrary to the faith to consider the Church as one way of salvation among many others. This does prevent the Church from considering other religions of the world with sincere respect but, objectively speaking, non-Christians are, from this point of view, in a gravely deficient situation. Equality, the document

adds, which is a presupposition for dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties and not to doctrinal content.

The text concludes with an indication to the effect that John Paul II, at the audience of 16 June 2000, ‘with sure knowledge and by his apostolic authority’, ratified and confirmed this Declaration and ordered its publication. The document is 37 pages long (10,700 words, including notes, in the English version).

As for the doctrinal value and the authority of the DDI, it was specified that the document did not enjoy the status of infallibility as it had been produced by a body inferior to the Pope and the college of bishops in communion with the Pope. Nonetheless, the teaching it contains requires definitive and irrevocable assent from the faithful and has been presented infallibly by the Magisterium in previous acts and documents.

A Polemical Welcome

The overall tone with which the press presented and judged the DDI was extremely critical: the Declaration was largely seen as an act of arrogance by which Catholics sought to establish the superiority of their own faith and claim the exclusivity of salvation. The document was interpreted as being a backwards step for the Catholic Church in the ecumenical dialogue so tenaciously pursued by John Paul II, and in no small number of instances it was suggested that it represented a kind of ‘slap in the face by the conservative wing of the Curia’. In other cases what was discussed was not so much the content of the Declaration as the occasion and of its publication and its tone - considered to be, respectively, inappropriate and authoritarian. The following headlines give some idea of this frosty welcome:

VATICAN DECLARES CATHOLICISM SOLE PATH TO SALVATION
(*Los Angeles Times*, 6 September 2000)

Documento del Vaticano condena ‘teorías relativistas’
[*Vatican document condemns ‘relativistic theories’*]
IGLESIA CATÓLICA SE PROCLAMA ÚNICA FE VERDADERA
[THE CATHOLIC CHURCH PROCLAIMS HERSELF THE ONLY TRUE FAITH]
(*El Universal*, 6 September 2000)

VATICAN CLAIMS CHURCH MONOPOLY ON SALVATION
(*The Washington Post*, 6 September 2000)

VATICAN DOCUMENT ON SALVATION LATEST SALVO FROM CONSERVATIVES
(*Associated Press*, 8 September 2000)

VATICAN DICTUM HURTS EFFORT TO BRIDGE FAITHS
Leaders Assail New Document as Divisive
(*International Herald Tribune*, 7 September 2000)

Media coverage of the DDI was not limited to the presentation of the document and the immediate reactions it elicited. Between September and December 2000, a further three episodes put the spotlight back on *Dominus Iesus* and contributed to consolidating the restricted frame in which it was interpreted (a frame that appeared once again with the election of Benedict XVI and the Regensburg controversy).

First, a few days after the DDI was made public, came the words addressed by John Paul II to members of the Joint International Commission for Dialogue between Catholics and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. ‘The commitment of the Catholic Church to ecumenical dialogue is irrevocable’ the Pope told them in his brief address during their audience (*L’Osservatore Romano*, 18 September 2000). Some observers saw this as an effort to tranquillise those who considered the DDI as a step backwards in ecumenical dialogue.

There were even some who maintained that this ‘Ratzinger document’ did not reflect the Pope’s own ideas, but supporters of this view received an abrupt response on Sunday 1 October 2000, during a speech given following the canonisation of 120 Chinese martyrs and three religious. The Holy Father expressed his complete support for the document ‘approved by me in a special way’, referring to the ‘many erroneous interpretations’ it had received and highlighting how, with *Dominus Iesus*, he ‘desired to invite all Christians to renew their fidelity to Christ’.

The Pope added that confessing faith in Jesus Christ ‘is not arrogance which disdains other religions’. In accordance with the teaching of Vatican Council II, he went on, the Declaration does not mean that salvation is denied to non-Christians, but that Christ is the ultimate source of that salvation. John Paul II also expressed the hope that the DDI, ‘which means so much to me’, may help to make matters clearer. ‘The document clarifies the essential Christian characteristics which do not hinder dialogue, rather they reveal its foundations, because dialogue without foundations would be destined to degenerate into an empty exchange of words’ (*L’Osservatore Romano*, 2-3 October 2000).

Three months later he would return to the subject, though against his will. During the general audience of 6 December, John Paul II suggested that the gates of heaven were open to all men and women who seek God with a sincere heart (*L’Osservatore Romano*, 7 December 2000). One news agency presented the Pope’s

affirmation as conflicting with what was written in the DDI, and this interpretation led to some of the information media giving the news that the Pope had corrected Ratzinger, as the following example shows:

Nuovo intervento del Papa sulla salvezza, a correzione del recente documento di Ratzinger

[New statement of the Pope on salvation, correcting the last Ratzinger document.]

IN PARADISO TUTTI I GIUSTI ANCHE I NON CRISTIANI

[IN PARADISE ALL THE JUST, THE NON-CHRISTIANS ALSO]

(*La Repubblica*, 7 December 2000)

The Holy See Press Office Director found himself having to nip the rumours in the bud, highlighting that what the Pope said is actually contained in the DDI itself, and attributing the ‘hurried news item’ to insufficient knowledge of the Declaration³.

Identifying the Conflict

There can be no doubt that *Dominus Iesus* was a difficult document for its authors to present, and difficult for the press to deal with. Journalists had three hours to read and summarise the text prior to its public presentation although, as we are seeing, the media echo was not just limited to the presentation.

In order to facilitate our analysis, we may summarise the contents of the DDI under six broad headings:

- On religious relativism and the need for mission
- The mediation of Christ in the salvation of all mankind
- The Church of Christ subsists fully in the Catholic Church
- The position of other Churches and Christian confessions
- Other religions
- Degree of assent to the document and the question of infallibility

An analysis of the newspaper texts reveals that the point that gave rise to the greatest deliberation concerned other Churches and Christian confessions. More than three quarters of the total makes some allusion to this aspect, as is evident from Table 1 (below) which shows in decreasing order the percentage of texts that included each of the six broad themes into which we have condensed the document.

Faced with the question of why such an essentially theological text should have excited such a large degree of journalistic interest, it could be answered that what

was really reported was, to a large extent, a *conflict*, in concrete terms the conflict of the Catholic Church with other Christian confessions, and - by way of background - what was interpreted as the conflict between a curt affirmation on the one hand, and the pluralistic spirit of society on the other.

Table 1: Main points of the document, and their presence in the texts examined (each text was judged on the basis of the themes it included, ranging from one to six)

| | |
|--|---------|
| Other Churches and Christian confessions | 75, 8 % |
| Religious relativism / the need for mission | 47, 2 % |
| The role of the Catholic Church | 32, 9 % |
| The mediation of Christ | 30, 7 % |
| Other religions | 26, 3 % |
| Degree of assent / question of infallibility | 12 % |

Two circumstances served to ensure that journalists' attention would fix on the confrontation between the Catholic Church and the other Churches and Christian confessions:

1) The publication of the DDI was preceded by critical comments from leaders of other Christian confessions. Some idea of this atmosphere is evident in these two headlines, which appeared in two British dailies even before the DDI was presented. They refer to a press communiqué released by the Anglican Primate Dr. Carey:

CAREY DISMISSES VATICAN ATTACK ON 'DEFICIENT' FAITHS
(*Daily Telegraph*, 5 September 2000)

CAREY REBUKES VATICAN OVER 'IMPROPER' SLUR
(*The Times*, 5 September 2000)

From this information it may be inferred that Vatican did not limit itself to sending the text only to the Catholic episcopate, but that advance copies were also sent to representatives of other religious confessions. These early reactions would end up by concentrating media attention on what the document said about other Christian confessions, and on their 'response' to the Vatican. From the first, the contents of the document were inevitably interpreted in the light of these criticisms and in a controversial manner.

It should be added that on no small number of occasions, newspaper articles used the criticisms themselves as a filter for the contents of the DDI. In other words,

they reported the content as it was presented by its critics. Thus we find that the text was expounded in various forms, which differed depending upon whether emphasis was laid on what the document said, on what the criticism said, or on the content as seen through the eyes of the critics. Table 2 shows the percentage of texts ascribable to each of these different camps.

Table 2: How the DDI was presented in the texts examined

| | |
|---|---------|
| Only content presented (with or without the author's critical comments) | 17, 2 % |
| Content presented, followed by critical reactions | 12, 6 % |
| Content presented <i>via</i> the criticism thereof | 15, 2 % |
| Only critical reactions presented | 27, 5 % |
| Content re-presented (specification of details, denials, etc.) | 27, 5 % |

As this data makes clear, in the first instance a large proportion of readers received only the critical reactions, or they learned about the contents only through critical interpretations thereof. This was a view also shared by certain non-Catholic commentators. 'I feel the media have exaggerated by converting this matter into a controversy, rather than explaining what the document really says', wrote the chancellor of the Orthodox diocese of Pittsburgh, Rev. John G. Panagiotou (*Post-Gazette*, 7 September 2000). This initial confusion goes some way to explain the large number of texts dedicated to re-presenting the contents of the original document.

2) A second circumstance that may help to understand the context in which the document was received is that a number of weeks before the publication of the DDI the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith sent a 'note on the expression *sister Churches*' to presidents of episcopal conferences. It is a brief text, highly technical in content, defining the use of that particular expression in order to avoid - the note explains - possible misunderstandings, such as the idea that the Church of Christ will not exist until the Catholic and Orthodox 'sister Churches' unite.

At first this 'note', which is dated 30 June, was not made public; however it was eventually leaked to the press, creating a climate in which its contents came to be considered almost as 'secret orders' to bishops (the 'note' was finally published in *L'Osservatore Romano* nearly four months later, on 28 October 2000). A considerable number of the texts that reported on the DDI made explicit mention of the 'note' (around 20% of the texts). Sometimes the contents of the two documents were even brought together, as was the case on another British daily, which highlighted

the Vatican's 'insistence' on this point. The news item concerned the publication next day of the DDI.

OTHER CHURCHES ARE NO SISTERS OF OURS, THE VATICAN INSISTS
(*The Independent*, 4 September 2000)

The press echo surrounding the publication of the 'note' - in truth a limited echo, but one pervaded by suspicion and negativity - also had an affect on the critical reception of the DDI.

Journalistic Formats

The Declaration *Dominus Iesus* is written using precise theological and technical vocabulary in which shades of meaning and the exact significance of words have great importance. It follows, then, that to bring all these characteristics together into a brief, interesting and clear piece of journalistic writings constitutes a considerable professional challenge.

The information supplied by journalists aims to report those aspects of current affairs that the professionals who deal with them consider could be of interest to their readership. Journalistic writing consists, to put it briefly, in adapting the event (actions, declarations, etc.) into a special format. In purely informative texts, this format requires that the title and the first paragraph (the 'lead') must make it clear where the interest and importance lies; in essence what its news value is.

From an analysis of the texts we are studying it is clear that, in journalistic terms, it is easier to deal with conflict than with theological niceties. This becomes even clearer when one compares the headlines with the content of their respective texts - there is a marked tendency to use headlines that are more negative and more conflictive, with respect to the Catholic Church, than the information or the articles they announce.

If we evaluate the headlines and the overall content of the texts separately, we see a significant increase in the negativity of the headlines, as illustrated in Table 3. Indeed, it is clear that negative evaluation increases in the titles - as compared to the body of the text - by 8.5%, at the same time as positive evaluation diminishes by 11.8% with respect to the body of the text. Overall, this difference in evaluation affects 20% of cases, a considerable percentage.

Table 3: Comparison between headline and body text evaluations

| <i>Evaluation</i> | <i>Headlines</i> | <i>Body text</i> |
|--------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Negative | 47, 1 % | 38, 6 % |
| Positive | 25, 2 % | 37 % |
| Unclear or difficult to define | 27, 7 % | 24, 4 % |

This observation should not, in any case, come as a surprise as it can be associated with the fact that *negativity* is one of the most common news values in the information media in general. What is strange is that there are cases in which negative headlines introduce clearly positive evaluations. One example taken from the Italian press is given below:

La svolta del Vaticano
[U turn by the Vatican]
Il documento ‘Dominus Iesus’ rivendica la supremazia dei cattolici sulle altre confessioni
[The document ‘Dominus Iesus’ claims the supremacy of Catholics over other confessions]
WOJTYLA SCARICA LE ‘CHIESE SORELLE’
[WOJTYLA DUMPS THE ‘SISTER CHURCHES’]
‘Solo in Cristo si raggiunge la salvezza’
[‘Only in Christ can salvation be achieved’]
(*La Nazione*, 6 September 2000)

This multiple title highlights various elements: a supposed U turn by the Vatican, the claim to Catholic ‘supremacy’, and the interpretation that the Pope is in some way *getting rid of* the ‘sister Churches’. However, these affirmations contrast with what is written in the text that follows. The final subtitle better reflects the content of the information given in the article, but it is a phrase that has in any event less journalistic impact (‘Only in Christ can salvation be achieved’).

The difficulty of encapsulating the significance of the document in one phrase was particularly noticeable in the explanatory comments contained in the texts analysed. We are referring to those brief descriptive phrases by which the writer seeks to offer (or remind) readers a summary of the content or significance of the DDI. Given below are various illustrative examples providing a sample of the tone of the information. It is interesting to note that all these quotes come from news items (in other words, texts that do not, in theory, express an explicit opinion) and that they are attributable to the compiler of the information (i.e., they do not reproduce the opinions of other people):

- In a highly controversial document published on Tuesday, the Roman Catholic Church reaffirmed its belief that it is the only true one, and that other Christian communities such as Protestants are not Churches in the proper sense of the word (*BBCnews.com*, 5 September 2000)
- *The Declaration effectively says ... buddisti, ortodossi, anglicani, ebrei, protestanti ed evangelici, le vostre religioni non vi portano alla salvezza eterna, prerogativa dei cattolici [...Buddhists, Orthodox, Anglicans, Jews, Protestants and Evangelicals, your religions do not carry you to eternal salvation, the prerogative of Catholics]* (*Il Messaggero*, 6 September 2000)
- *The Vatican ... instructed Roman Catholics to uphold the dogma that their church is the sole path to salvation for all humanity* (*Los Angeles Times*, 6 September 2000)
- *Une vigoureuse réaffirmation de la supériorité de la doctrine catholique’ [‘A vigorous reaffirmation of the superiority of Catholic doctrine]* (*Le Monde*, 6 September 2000)
- *A Vatican document that rejects the concept that others religions can be considered equal to Roman Catholicism* (*International Herald Tribune*, 7 September 2000)
- *This is a document ... con il quale il cardinale Joseph Ratzinger ribadisce con forza che solo nella chiesa cattolica c’è la salvezza eterna dell’uomo [...with which Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger reaffirms with force that only in the Catholic Church is there eternal salvation for man]*(*La Repubblica*, 7 September 2000)
- *This is a Declaration ... en la que se proclama que la Iglesia católica es la única verdadera [...in which it is proclaimed that the Catholic Church is the only true one]* (*El Mundo*, 10 October 2000)
- *This document affirms that the ‘Catholic Church was the only legitimate church of Christ’* (*The Irish News*, 15 September 2000)
- *This is a Declaration ... ‘que afirma que ‘solo la Iglesia católica salva’ [...that affirms that ‘only the Catholic Church saves’]* (*Clarín*, 7 September 2000)
- *Vatican reaffirmation of the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church. ... Described as the guiding light for spiritual salvation for all humanity* (*Associated Press*, 8 September 2000)
- *Statement from the Vatican concerning who is, and who is not, a ‘proper’ Christian* (*Star-Telegram*, 15 September 2000)

From a reading of the chosen phrases we may conclude that adapting the complexity of the DDI to the simplicity of a lead or a journalistic summary proved somewhat problematic. In most instances attention was focussed on what was interpreted as a proclamation of Catholic superiority over other confessions and religions. Thus the document was conferred with an arrogant tone, with affirmations that, in reality, do not appear as such in the text.

A large part of the information avoided presenting what the DDI actually says, or reduced it to a minimum, and instead concentrated on more controversial elements, which took less effort to explain and summarise and had greater *journalistic impact* because they were more charged with conflict and antagonism. This simplification was, in some cases, facilitated by professional conditioning: that of moulding complex content to fit easily into a journalistic format.

At the same time, the fact cannot be overlooked that such choices involve a deliberate interpretative element. It could be maintained that, in the end, a large part of the journalistic texts expressed the view of the Catholic Church held by their authors. For example, the idea that it is an institution holding itself to be in possession of the truth and superior to other institutions. And we are referring not only to opinion articles, where the personal point of view is more evident, but also to texts that would be classifiable as informative.

Choice of point of view, vocabulary, dramatisation, etc. are not neutral options. One proof of this is the fact that other authors, though far less numerous, reformulated the contents of the DDI in other ways. The following examples show evident attempts to rise above the controversy and to get to the heart of the meaning of the document:

Il documento prende di punta la questione più vitale della Chiesa d'oggi. Se anche i non cristiani vanno in paradiso, a che serve evangelizzare? Se tutte le religioni si equivalgono ai fini della salvezza, che ne è di Gesù Cristo come unico Salvatore? [‘The document approaches the more vital issue for today’s Church. If non-Christians go to Heaven too, what is evangelisation for? If all religions are equivalent for purposes of salvation, what happens to Jesus Christ as the sole Saviour?] (*L’Espresso*, 5 September 2000)

A declaration on salvation through Christ alone that contained an awkwardly written passage on Orthodox and Protestant churches. Its language was so obscure that the press corps, and many Protestants, misinterpreted it to mean that only Catholics would go to heaven (*Post-Gazette*, 17 September 2000)

Si Cristo es un profeta más y todas las religiones son iguales, entonces ¿qué sentido tienen el evangelio y la Iglesia? En respuesta a esta pregunta... [If Christ is just another prophet and all religions are equal, then what sense has the Gospel and the Church? In answer to this question...] (*Alfa y Omega*, 28 September 2000)

A document ... that condemned certain 'relativistic theories' of religious pluralism (*The New York Times*, 7 September 2000)

The reasons for which the *Religion Newswriters Association* considered *Dominus Iesus* as one of the most important religious themes covered by the US press during the year 2000 follow a similar line:

Vatican, with Pope's approval, issues *Dominus Iesus*, an instruction reiterating the Catholic Church teaching that no one is saved except through Jesus Christ. The document states that the true church 'subsists' in the Roman Catholic Church and that Protestant churches lack the fullness of truth. Although it acknowledges that non-Catholics and non-Christians can be saved, the tone is criticized by some as anti-ecumenical⁴.

Different Readings

There is a technical way of using words, and a common way. The register also changes depending upon whether one is addressing an audience of specialists or of non-specialists. In this case, the aim of *Dominus Iesus*, according to the introduction of the document, is 'to recall to Bishops, theologians, and all the Catholic faithful, certain indispensable elements of Christian doctrine, which may help theological reflection in developing solutions consistent with the contents of the faith and responsive to the pressing needs of contemporary culture'. Given that the objective is that these problems should be dealt with by 'theological reflection', it obviously follows that the document privileges professional theologians.

In addressing a theologically-competent audience, the document's authors did not consider it necessary to give reasoning or explanations for the terms they used, an adequate understanding of which requires considerable background knowledge. The problem arose with the release of the contents to the general public, which gave rise to misunderstandings in the use of certain expressions. For example, if the DDI rejects the designation 'Church' to refer to the Protestant confessions, it is easy for a non-expert reader to consider this as equivalent to downgrading Protestants - or demoting them on some imaginary ranking - as the following example shows:

In this Declaration, Cardinal Ratzinger... 'annunciava che solo nella Chiesa cattolica c'era salvezza stilando per di più una graduatoria delle chiese

cristiane più o meno perfette (in testa quella cattolica, in coda i protestanti) [... announced that only in the Catholic Church was there salvation, devising in addition a ranking of more or less perfect Christian churches (on top the Catholic, at the bottom, the Protestants)] (*La Repubblica*, 7 December 2000)

The use of particular terminology is advisable in the theological field, but this does not imply any desire to prevent its ordinary non-technical usage, the usage of ordinary newspaper readers. Cardinal Ratzinger himself used the ordinary meaning of 'Church' in an interview he gave around the same time (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22 September 2000).

Furthermore, the use of the adjective 'deficient' in order to refer to the position of non-Christians (deficit of means of salvation) lends itself to a negative, sometimes almost offensive, interpretation, as may be seen in the two examples below:

The Declaration 'Dominus Iesus' is a document ... in cui viene riaffermato il primato assoluto della religione cattolica, mentre tutte le altre vengono definite 'oggettivamente e gravemente deficitarie' [...in which the absolute supremacy of the Catholic religion is affirmed, while all the others are defined as 'objectively and seriously deficient'] (*Corriere della Sera*, 25 September 2000)

'Proclaiming the primacy of the Catholic Church and effectively delegitimizing non-Catholic churches by characterizing them as 'gravely deficient' (*Jerusalem Post*, 12 September 200)

The truth is quite different. The document seeks to present as negative the speculations of 'religious pluralism', i.e., certain theological proposals that, in their attempt to examine the value of the plurality of religious traditions within God's plan of salvation, end up by annulling or casting doubt upon the Christian revelation and the mystery of Jesus Christ and the Church. However, the technical expression 'religious pluralism' has a positive ring in the ears of the man on the street. Indeed, in our society we consider anything that implies 'pluralism' as being worthy, as contrasted with 'intolerance' or 'one-party regime', etc.

The question then arises as to whether or not a theological text should renounce the precision of technical language in order not to create misunderstandings among the general public. In seeking to reply it is first necessary to mention, however briefly, certain characteristics that mark contemporary society and affect the communication of the Church's Magisterium (understood as being the body of teachings of the Pope and the bishops in communion with him, which enjoys the special favour of the Holy Spirit).

These factors are: the universal spread of culture, no longer reserved just for an elite; technological advancement, which makes it possible to transmit information almost instantaneously; and the democratic structure of social life, created by a society founded on the principle of equality⁵. One of the consequences of this is a blurring of boundaries between specialised spheres and society in general, especially when what is involved is knowledge, such as religious knowledge, that touches on the fundamental dimensions of human life. Hence the tension between, on the one hand, precise technical language (directed at an internal public) and, on the other, universally-accessible language (external public). Moreover, it must be added that these two dimensions interact, because if the document is not understood externally, this also influences its internal reception.

Returning to the question whether or not a theological text should renounce the precision of its language so as not to create misunderstandings among the general public, the answer would be that the two different linguistic registers must be maintained, both within the document itself, and in its presentation and publication. And if it seems illogical to insist that rigour be sacrificed in the interests of supposed intelligibility, it is no less true that one cannot overlook the communicative factor when writing and publishing such documents. It is necessary to ensure that these texts reach the general public, as far as possible, *re-elaborated*, and this calls for communicative skills that are by no means common. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that even the faithful themselves normally receive their first (and frequently their only) news of these doctrinal pronouncements via the communications media.

This re-elaboration or ‘translation’ consists, in the first place, of re-contextualising the contents for the general public, contents that had previously been constructed within a specialised context. In this particular case, this means moving from a Declaration-type discourse (with its rigid structure, assertive tone, and unequivocal language), to a journalistic-type discourse (which, as we have seen and despite appearances, also possesses a more or less rigid structure, but using everyday language)⁶.

Perhaps one of aspect of the DDI that people failed to understand was its assertive tone. As well as re-proposing Church doctrine, the Declaration identifies certain fundamental problems that remain open, and explicitly refutes certain points of view considered by the Magisterium to be erroneous or ambiguous. To this end, the document uses a declarative-assertive tone, not open to discussion but abounding in expressions such as ‘it must be *firmly believed*’, ‘must be *firmly held*’, ‘the Catholic faithful *are required to profess*’, ‘these theses are contrary to Catholic faith’, etc.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was itself aware of this limitation. In a document published some months later and thematically linked to *Dominus Iesus*, it affirms that the style ‘is not a sign of authoritarianism or unjustified harshness, but rather is characteristic of the literary genre of magisterial pronouncements whose aim is to set out precise points of doctrine, to censure errors or ambiguities, and to indicate the degree of assent that is required of the faithful’⁷.

As for its journalistic use, this ‘translation’ must be presented above all by use of the reasoning absent from the doctrinal texts themselves, and by using interpretative frames and metaphors that encapsulate the global significance of the discourse, and can be adapted into headlines and first paragraphs where there is little room for shades of meaning. What is important is that at the least, such summaries do not betray the real contents, which can then be presented in more detail in the body of the article.

At times, one brilliant phrase is enough to create a new level of interpretation, for example: ‘affirming that all religions are true is equivalent to affirming that they are all false’. In the texts we analysed, recourse to such tactics was infrequent. Some examples are given below: the frame of interpretation of a French daily, a British daily and a Mexican magazine, and the use of metaphor in the news section of a Spanish daily:

L’EGLISE CATHOLIQUE REAFFIRME SON STATUT SINGULIER
[THE CATHOLIC CHURCH REAFFIRMS ITS SINGULAR STATUS]
(*Le Figaro*, 6 September 2000)

If we fix the frame of interpretation in the fact that what the Catholic Church is presenting through *Dominus Iesus* is her own identity, it may perhaps be possible to lay aside other frames, which, as we have seen, only pay attention to a supposed classification or ranking of Churches. No-one can be denied the right of saying who and what they are.

It is difficult to see how genuine reconciliation can be achieved by veiling what one believes (Daily Telegraph, 5 September 2000)

The *Telegraph* also highlights the importance of specifying one’s own identity, even presenting this as a foundation for ecumenical relations, without falling into the temptation of hiding what one believes out of an anxiety to maintain good relations.

es un documento que se dirige a una catolicidad desconcertada'[it is a document that is addressed to a disconcerted Catholicism] (*Proceso*, 8 October 2000)

Here too the frame of interpretation is different from the common run. The document is considered in terms of its being a guide for the Catholic faithful. Of course in this case, as the publication concerned is a monthly magazine, the author had more time for better research; nonetheless there is an evident effort at explanation that was absent from many articles published during the same period.

más que un gesto hostil a las demás religiones, el documento es una 'tarjeta roja' a los teólogos católicos contagiados de relativismo' ['more than a hostile gesture toward other religions, the document is a 'red card' to Catholic theologians infected with relativism] (*ABC*, 6 September 2000)

The 'red card' metaphor, borrowed from the world of sport, also helps to concentrate attention on the fact that the underlying problem lies in relativism within the Catholic Church. An abundance of such metaphors could have been used. It is noticeable, for example, that no emphasis was laid - at least not in journalistic terms - on the fact that, in reality, Church doctrine represents a balanced path between rigorism and relativism. The DDI deals with the subject of relativism, but the rigorist stance, as represented by Leonard Feeney, had already been condemned in the 1950s. Feeney followed a rigid interpretation of the doctrine that 'there is no salvation outside the Church', believing that all unbaptized people were not saved. On 13th of February of 1953, after a process of several years, in which the American priest refused to go to Rome to explain his point of view, Pope Pius XII signed the decree of excommunication of Feeney. (Father Feeney reconciled with the Church in 1974, several years before dying).

Seeking to ensure that doctrinal reasoning reaches the public at large must be the common concern of pastors and communication professionals. But each must enact their concern in accordance with the rules of their own trade: journalists cannot be expected to carry out the functions of catechists or preachers. The aim of journalism, as we have already said, is to take those aspects of current affairs considered by the professionals to have social relevance, and present them in an interesting manner. Good professionals tackle these questions after adequate research, treating them with honesty and presenting them without distortion or prejudice. However, their work must be made easier for them. One way to do this is to ensure that the sources journalists use for their research are not only readily available but clear, that they have sufficient communicative sensitivity and a certain understanding of the specific characteristics of journalism, one of which is precisely that of difficulty in communicating complicated subjects.

A Public Relations Error?

The explanation and discussion, which served to help place the DDI in context, were clearly confined to the press conference at which the document was presented. Judging matters with hindsight it would seem that this prior effort at clarification was, perhaps, insufficient. Could it, then, be concluded that there was a public relations problem? Some of the newspaper texts analysed in the course of this work maintain that the error in *Dominus Iesus* lies not in its contents, which are recognised as belonging to the heritage of Catholic doctrine as confirmed by Vatican Council II, but in its inappropriateness and its authoritarian tone.

Of the texts studied, 55% give an unfavourable judgement of *Dominus Iesus* making express mention of the negative repercussions that its tone and content could have in the field of ecumenical relations. It is held that the document contradicts ecumenism, or denies it another way by proclaiming 'Catholic exclusivity'.

Even the Holy See itself lacked unity in its statements. For example, the press echoed some rather pained declarations from the president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the body charged with overseeing relations with other Christian confessions and with Judaism. He stressed that the way in which the text was presented had given rise to misunderstandings that now had to be healed, insisting that it was addressed to theologians and not to the ecumenical world and that it had to be read together with the rest of the Magisterium. He also let it be known that no-one had expected it to give rise to such violent controversy.

Yet, without denying the need to give due consideration to the communicability of documents, we feel it is too simple to conclude that the entire journalistic problem of *Dominus Iesus* had to do with language or public relations. The truth is that not all difficulties can be overcome through an adequate presentation of content; if they could, a large number of social conflicts would simply disappear.

Correct presentation does not exclude the possibility of rebuttal by those who simply do not agree with certain aspects of the content. And even if well presented, one discussion strategy lies precisely in interpreting the adversary's position from a partisan standpoint. Consequently, encountering rejection does not necessarily mean a communications failure. The view of public relations as a method to always 'end up looking good' is a stereotype that does not correspond to the view (good) PR experts have of their own field.

A large percentage of the journalistic controversy was motivated, not so much by inadequate explanations, as simply by a view of the Church contrary to the one presented in the DDI. Cardinal Ratzinger has observed how the Churches that came into being with the Reformation have declared on many occasions that they

do not identify themselves, nor wish to identify themselves, with the concept of Church as upheld by the Catholic Church. Yet it is sufficient that others make the same statement for controversy to arise (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22 September 2000). The Methodist pastor, Heinrich Bolleter, among others, expressed himself in similar terms when he said: 'I don't know why there is such excitement. We knew we had different concepts on the nature of the Church' (*Christianity Today*, 13 September 2000).

And we could go even further. Leaving aside the diversity of opinions and the shortcomings clearly attributable to the journalistic mechanisms we have already discussed, it may be said that studying the media reception of a doctrinal pronouncement, such as this one being examined here, reveals interesting information about the cultural situation of the society to which it is directed (or at least of the elite who have access to the communications media).

The truth is that part of what emerged during the controversy over *Dominus Iesus* was nothing other than a reflection of the relativist mentality that the document itself denounced. This phenomenon was noted by some of the newspaper texts we analysed: 'The media have sold this week's announcements from the Vatican as offensive to Jews, Muslims or Protestants, but it is, in reality, liberals who are most offended. The announcements restate the church's claim to be the repository of the truth and for *liberals* there is no truth. They find the very idea of a truth objectionable'⁸.

In many cases, in fact, it was argued that it is dangerous for a religion to say that it is true, because this could be a focus for intolerance. Some even went so far as to propose relativism as a philosophy for life and, from this standpoint, criticised the DDI for putting forward certainties that could affect coexistence. There is however a paradox, in that those who make such affirmations expect them to be taken as true: in other words, they cannot accept that their opinions be placed at the same level as contrasting opinions. They maintain, perhaps involuntarily, that not all opinions have the same value and therefore, following the same logic, one cannot see why all religions must have the same value; this is something that neither an Imam nor a Rabbi nor a Cardinal would accept. And not for that reason can they be accused of intolerance.

Notes

¹ We analysed 150 texts published in 68 newspapers and magazines from 15 countries. More than half were newspaper articles dealing with the official presentation of the document or recording the positions adopted by various religious leaders. The rest of the texts were divided between comments and

opinion pieces (22,6 %), interviews (9,2 %), simple news items (7,5 %), editorials (5 %), and analysis (3,3 %). The time period was September to December of the year 2000.

² Cf. the interview with Cardinal Ratzinger published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22 September 2000, and partially reproduced in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 8 October 2000.

³ Cf. *Bollettino della Sala Stampa della Santa Sede*, no. 729, 7 December 2000.

⁴ Cf. <http://rna.org/toptenresults.html> (accessed: June 2001).

⁵ On this point we follow Illanes, J. L. (2002) 'Linguaggio, comunicazione e recezione del Magistero recente'. Lecture delivered at the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas, March 2002.

⁶ Cf. Casalmiglia, H. (1997) 'Divulgar: itinerarios discursivos del saber', in *Quark*, 7, UPF, Barcelona: 9-18.

⁷ Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Notification on the book "Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism" by Father Jacques Dupuis, S.J.*, Vatican Publishing House, 2001, pp. 13-15.

⁸ Cf. De Lisle, L. (2000) 'Laying claim to the truth', *The Guardian*, September 7, p. 13.