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Letter “Placuit Deo” to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of Christian salvation

CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

**Letter *Placuit Deo*
To the Bishops of the Catholic Church
On Certain Aspects of Christian Salvation**

I. Introduction

1. “In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (cf. Eph 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (cf. Eph 2:18; 2 Pt 1:4). The deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation”.^[1] The teaching on salvation in Christ must always be deepened. Holding fast to the gaze of the Lord Jesus, the Church turns toward all persons with a maternal love, to announce to them the plan of the Covenant of the Father, mediated by the Holy Spirit, “to sum up all things in Christ, the one head” (Eph 1:10). The present Letter is intended, in light of the greater tradition of the faith and with particular reference to the teachings of Pope Francis, to demonstrate certain aspects of Christian salvation that can be difficult to understand today because of recent cultural changes.

II. The effect of current cultural changes on the meaning of Christian salvation

2. The contemporary world perceives not without difficulty the confession of the Christian faith, which proclaims Jesus as the only Savior of the whole human person and of all humanity (cf. Acts 4:12; Rom 3:23-24; 1 Tm 2:4-5; Tit 2:11-15).^[2] On one hand, individualism centered on the autonomous subject tends to see the human person as a being whose sole fulfilment depends only on his or her own strength.^[3] In this vision, the figure of Christ appears as a model that inspires generous actions with his words and his gestures, rather than as He who transforms the human condition by incorporating us into a new existence, reconciling us with the Father and dwelling among us in the Spirit (cf. 2 Cor 5:19; Eph 2:18). On the other hand, a merely interior vision of salvation

is becoming common, a vision which, marked by a strong personal conviction or feeling of being united to God, does not take into account the need to accept, heal and renew our relationships with others and with the created world. In this perspective, it becomes difficult to understand the meaning of the Incarnation of the Word, by which He was made a member of the human family, assuming our flesh and our history, for us and for our salvation.

3. Pope Francis, in his ordinary magisterium, often has made reference to the two tendencies described above, that resemble certain aspects of two ancient heresies, Pelagianism and Gnosticism.[4] A new form of Pelagianism is spreading in our days, one in which the individual, understood to be radically autonomous, presumes to save oneself, without recognizing that, at the deepest level of being, he or she derives from God and from others. According to this way of thinking, salvation depends on the strength of the individual or on purely human structures, which are incapable of welcoming the newness of the Spirit of God.[5] On the other hand, a new form of Gnosticism puts forward a model of salvation that is merely interior, closed off in its own subjectivism.[6] In this model, salvation consists of improving oneself, of being “intellectually capable of rising above the flesh of Jesus towards the mysteries of the unknown divinity.” [7] It presumes to liberate the human person from the body and from the material universe, in which traces of the provident hand of the Creator are no longer found, but only a reality deprived of meaning, foreign to the fundamental identity of the person, and easily manipulated by the interests of man.[8] Clearly, the comparison with the Pelagian and Gnostic heresies intends only to recall general common features, without entering into judgments on the exact nature of the ancient errors. There is a great difference between modern, secularized society and the social context of early Christianity, in which these two heresies were born.[9] However, insofar as Gnosticism and Pelagianism represent perennial dangers for misunderstanding Biblical faith, it is possible to find similarities between the ancient heresies and the modern tendencies just described.

4. Both neo-Pelagian individualism and the neo-Gnostic disregard of the body deface the confession of faith in Christ, the one, universal Savior. How would Christ be able to mediate the Covenant of the entire human family, if human persons were isolated individuals, who fulfil themselves by their own efforts, as proposed by neo-Pelagianism? Also, how could it be possible for the salvation mediated by the Incarnation of Jesus, his life, death and Resurrection in his true body, to come to us, if the only thing that mattered were liberating the inner reality of the human person from the limits of the body and the material, as described by the neo-Gnostic vision? In the face of these two trends, the present Letter wants to reaffirm that salvation consists in our union with Christ, who, by his Incarnation, death and Resurrection has brought about a new kind of relationship with the Father and among human persons, and has introduced us into these relationships, thanks to the gift of the Spirit, so that we are able to unite ourselves to the Father as sons in the Son, and become one body in the “firstborn among many brothers” (Rom 8:29).

III. The human desire for salvation

5. Man perceives himself, directly or indirectly, as a mystery: ‘Who am I? I exist, and yet do not have the principle of my existence within myself.’ Every person, in his or her own way, searches for happiness and attempts to obtain it by making recourse to the resources one has available. However, this universal aspiration is not necessarily expressed or declared; rather, it is often more secret and hidden than it may appear, and is ready to reveal itself in the face of particular crises. Often it coincides with a hope for physical health; sometimes it takes the form of worrying about greater economic well-being; it expresses itself widely as the need for interior peace and for a peaceful coexistence with one’s neighbour. On the other hand, while the question of salvation presents itself as dedicated toward a higher good, it also maintains the character of endurance and of overcoming pain. Together with the struggle to attain the good comes the fight to ward off evil: ignorance and error, fragility and weakness, sickness and death.

6. Regarding these aspirations, faith in Christ teaches, rejecting all claims of self-realization, that these can be fulfilled completely only if God himself makes it possible, by drawing us toward Himself. The total salvation of the person does not consist of the things that the human person can obtain by himself, such as possessions, material well-being, knowledge or abilities, power or influence on others, good reputation or self-satisfaction[10]. No created thing can totally satisfy us, because God has destined us for communion with Him; our hearts will be restless until they rest in Him.[11] “The ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine”. [12] Revelation, in this

manner, does not limit itself to announcing salvation as an answer to any particular contemporary desire. “If redemption, on the contrary, were to be judged or measured according to the existential needs of human beings, how could we avoid the suspicion of having simply created a Redeemer God in the image of our own need?”[13]

7. It is also necessary to affirm that, according to biblical faith, the origin of evil is not found in the material, corporeal world experienced as a boundary or a prison from which we need to be saved. On the contrary, this faith proclaims that all the universe is good because it was created by God (cf. Gen 1:31; Wis 1:13-14; 1 Tim 4:4), and that the evil that is most damaging to man is that which comes from his heart (cf. Mt 15:18-19; Gen 3:1-19). By sinning, man abandoned the source of love, and loses himself in false forms of love that close him ever more into himself. It is this separation from God – He who is the font of communion and life – that brings about the loss of harmony among human persons, and between humanity and the world, introducing the dominion of disintegration and death (cf. Rom 5:12). As a result, the salvation that faith announces to us does not only pertain to our inner reality, but to our entire being. In fact, it is the whole person, body and soul, that was created by the love of God, in his image and likeness, and is called to live in communion with Him.

IV. Christ, Savior and Salvation

8. At no moment in history did God stop offering his salvation to the sons and daughters of Adam (cf. Gen 3:15), establishing his covenant with all of humanity in Noah (cf. Gen 9:9) and, later, with Abraham and his descendants (cf. Gen 15:18). Therefore, Divine salvation takes on the creaturely order shared by all humanity and accompanies their concrete journey in history. By choosing a people to whom He offered the means to fight against sin and to draw close to him, God prepared the coming of “a powerful Savior, in the house of David, his servant” (Lk 1:69). In the fullness of time, the Father sent to the world his Son, who proclaimed the Kingdom of God, curing every disease and illness (cf. Mt 4:23). The healings performed by Jesus, in which he makes present the providence of God, were a sign that pointed back to his own person, He who is fully revealed as Lord of life and of death in his paschal event. According to the Gospel, salvation for all people begins with welcoming Jesus: “Today salvation has come to this house” (Lk 19:9). The good news of salvation has a name and a face: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”[14]

9. The Christian faith has illustrated, throughout its centuries-long history, by means of multiple figures, this salvific work of the Son incarnate. It has done so without ever separating the healing dimension of salvation, by which Christ redeems us from sin, from the elevating dimension, by which he makes us sons and daughters of God, participants in his divine nature (cf. 2 Pt 1:4). Considering the salvific perspective in a descending manner, that is, beginning with God who comes to redeem humanity, Jesus is the illuminator and revealer, the redeemer and liberator, the One who divinizes and justifies the human person. According to an ascending vision, that is, beginning with the human person turning towards God, Christ is the High Priest of the New Covenant, offering perfect worship to the Father, in the name of all humanity: He sacrifices Himself, expiates sins, and remains forever alive to intercede on our behalf. In this manner, an incredible synergy between divine and human action appears in the life of Jesus, a synergy that shows how baseless the individualist perspective is. The descending perspective bears witness to the absolute primacy of the gratuitous acts of God; humility is essential to respond to his salvific love and is required to receive the gifts of God, prior to all of our works. At the same time, the ascending perspective recalls that, by means of the fully human action of his Son, the Father wanted to renew our actions, so that, conformed to Christ, we are able to fulfil “the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them” (Eph 2:10).

10. Moreover it is clear that the salvation that Jesus brought in his person does not occur only in an interior manner. In fact, the Son was made flesh, in order to communicate to every person the salvific communion with God (cf. Jn 1:14). By assuming flesh (cf. Rom 8:3; Heb 2:14; 1 Jn 4:2), and being born of a woman (cf. Gal 4:4), “the Son of God was made the son of man”[15] and our brother (cf. Heb 2:14). Thus, inasmuch as He became part of the human family, “he has united himself in some fashion with every man and woman”[16] and has established a new kind of relationship with God, his Father, and with all humanity; we can be incorporated in this new kind of relationship and participate in the Son of God’s own life. As a result, rather than limiting the salvific action, assuming flesh allows Christ to mediate the salvation of God for all of the sons and daughters of Adam.

11. In conclusion, to respond both to the individualist reductionism of Pelagian tendency, and to the neo-Gnostic promise of a merely interior salvation, we must remember the way in which Jesus is Savior. He did not limit himself to showing us the way to encounter God, a path we can walk on our own by being obedient to his words and by imitating his example. Rather, Christ opens for us the door of freedom, and becomes, himself, the way: "I am the way" (Jn 14:6).[17] Furthermore, this path is not merely an interior journey at the margins of our relationships with others and with the created world. Rather, Jesus gave us a "new and living way that he inaugurated for us through his flesh" (Heb 10:20). Therefore, Christ is Savior in as much as he assumed the entirety of our humanity and lived a fully human life in communion with his Father and with others. Salvation, then, consists in incorporating ourselves into his life, receiving his Spirit (cf. 1 Jn 4:13). He became, "in a particular way, the origin of all grace according to his humanity." [18] He is at the same time Savior and Salvation.

V. Salvation in the Church, Body of Christ

12. The place where we receive the salvation brought by Jesus is the Church, the community of those who have been incorporated into this new kind of relationship begun by Christ (cf. Rom 8:9). Understanding this salvific mediation of the Church is an essential help in overcoming all reductionist tendencies. The salvation that God offers us is not achieved with our own individual efforts alone, as neo-Pelagianism would contend. Rather, salvation is found in the relationships that are born from the incarnate Son of God and that form the communion of the Church. Because the grace that Christ gives us is not a merely interior salvation, as the neo-Gnostic vision claims, and introduces us into concrete relationships that He himself has lived, the Church is a visible community. In her we touch the flesh of Jesus, especially in our poorest and most suffering brothers and sisters. Hence, the salvific mediation of the Church, "the universal sacrament of salvation", [19] assures us that salvation does not consist in the self-realization of the isolated individual, nor in an interior fusion of the individual with the divine. Rather, salvation consists in being incorporated into a communion of persons that participates in the communion of the Trinity.

13. Both the individualistic and the merely interior visions of salvation contradict the sacramental economy through which God wants to save the human person. The participation in the new kind of relationships begun by Jesus occurs in the Church by means of the sacraments, of which Baptism is the door, [20] and the Eucharist is the source and the summit. [21] In this, the inconsistency of the claims to self-salvation that depend on human efforts alone can be seen. Faith confesses that we are saved by means of Baptism, which seals upon us the indelible mark of belonging to Christ and to the Church. The transformation of the way of living our relationships with God, with humanity, and with creation derives from Baptism (cf. Mt 28:19). Thus, purified from original, and all other sins, we are called to a new existence conforming to Christ (cf. Rom 6:4). With the grace of the seven sacraments, believers continually grow and are spiritually renewed, especially when the journey becomes more difficult. When they abandon their love for Christ by sinning, believers can be re-introduced into the kind of relationships begun by Christ in the sacrament of Penance, allowing them to again walk as He did (cf. 1 Jn 2:6). In this way, we look with hope toward the Last Judgement, in which each person will be judged on the authenticity of one's love (cf. Rom 13:8-10), especially regarding the weakest (cf. Mt 25:31-46).

14. The salvific economy is also opposed to trends that propose a merely interior salvation. Gnosticism, indeed, associates itself with a negative view of the created order, which is understood as a limitation on the absolute freedom of the human spirit. Consequently, salvation is understood as freedom from the body and from the concrete relationships in which a person lives. In as much as we are saved "by means of offering the body of Jesus Christ" (Heb 10:10; cf. Col 1:22), true salvation, contrary to being a liberation from the body, also includes its sanctification (cf. Rom 12:1). The human body was shaped by God, who inscribed within it a language that invites the human person to recognize the gifts of the Creator and to live in communion with one's brothers and sisters. [22] The Savior re-established and renewed this original language by his Incarnation and his paschal mystery and communicated it in the economy of the sacraments. Thanks to the sacraments, Christians are able to live faithful to the flesh of Christ and, as a result, in fidelity to the kind of relationships that he gave us. This type of relationality particularly calls for the care of all suffering humanity through the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. [23]

VI. Conclusion: communicating the faith, in expectation of the Savior

15 The knowledge of the fullness of life into which Christ the Savior introduces us propels Christians onward in the mission of announcing to all the joy and light of the Gospel.[24] In this work, Christians must also be prepared to establish a sincere and constructive dialogue with believers of other religions, confident that God can lead “all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way”[25] towards salvation in Christ. While dedicating herself with all of her efforts to evangelization, the Church continues to invoke the definitive coming of the Savior, since it is “in hope that we are saved” (Rom 8:24). The salvation of men and women will be complete only when, after having conquered the last enemy, death (cf. 1 Cor 15:26), we will participate fully in the glory of the risen Jesus, who will bring our relationship with God, with our brothers and sisters, and with all of creation to fullness. Total salvation of the body and of the soul is the final destiny to which God calls all of humanity. Founded in faith, sustained by hope, and working in charity, with the example of Mary, Mother of the Savior and first among the saved, we are certain that “our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body by the power that enables him also to bring all things into subjection to himself” (Phil 3:20-21).

The Sovereign Pontiff Francis, on February 16, 2018, approved this Letter, adopted in the Plenary Session of this Congregation on January 24, 2018, and ordered its publication.

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Prefect

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Titular Archbishop of Cerveteri
Secretary

[1] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, 2.

[2] Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dominus Iesus* (6 August 2000), 5-8: AAS 92 (2000), 745-749.

[3] Cf. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (24 November 2013), 67: AAS 105 (2013), 1048.

[4] Cf. Id., Encyclical Letter *Lumen fidei* (29 June 2013), 47: AAS 105 (2013), 586-587; Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 93-94: AAS (2013), 1059; *Address to the Participants in the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church* (10 November 2015), Florence: AAS 107 (2015), 1287.

[5] Cf. Id., *Address to the Participants in the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church* (10 November 2015), Florence: AAS 107 (2015), 1288

[6] Cf. Id., Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 94: AAS 105 (2013), 1059: “the attraction of gnosticism, a purely subjective faith whose only interest is a certain experience or a set of ideas and bits of information which are meant to console and enlighten, but which ultimately keep one imprisoned in his or her own thoughts and feelings”; Pontifical Council for Culture-Pontifical Council for interreligious Dialogue, *Jesus Christ, the Bearer of the water of life. A Christian reflection on the “New Age”* (January 2003), Vatican City, 2003.

[7] Francis, Encyclical Letter *Lumen fidei*, 47: AAS 105 (2013), 586-587.

[8] Cf. Id., *Address to the Participants in the Pilgrimage from the Diocese of Brescia* (22 June 2013): AAS 95 (2013), 627: “in this world where man is denied, where people prefer to take the road of Gnosticism, [...] of the “no flesh” — a God who did not take flesh [...]”

[9] According to the Pelagian heresy, developed during the fifth century around Pelagius, the man, in order to fulfil the commandments of God and to be saved, needs grace only as an external help to his freedom (like light, for example, power), not like a radical healing and regeneration of the freedom, without prior merit, until he can do good and reach the eternal life.

More complex is the gnostic movement, sprung up in the first and second centuries, which has many different forms among themselves. In general, the gnostics believed that the salvation is obtained through an esoteric

knowledge or *gnosis*. Such *gnosis* reveals to the gnostic his true essence, i.e., a spark of the divine Spirit that lives inside him, which has to be liberated from the body, external to his true humanity. Only in this manner, the gnostic returns to his original being in God from whom he has turned away due to a primordial fall.

[10] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 2.

[11] Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, I, 1: *Corpus Christianorum*, 27, 1.

[12] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et spes*, 22.

[13] International Theological Commission, *Select questions on the theology of God the Redeemer* (1995), 2.

[14] Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est* (25 December 2005), 1: AAS 98 (2006), 217; cf. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 3: AAS 105 (2013), 1020.

[15] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, III, 19, 1: *Sources Chrétiennes*, 211, 374.

[16] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et spes*, 22.

[17] Cf. Augustine, *Tractatus in Ioannem*, 13, 4: *Corpus Christianorum*, 36, 132: “I am the way and the truth and the life’ (*Jn* 14, 6). If you search for the truth, follow the way, because the way is the same as the truth. The goal you aim for and the way you must tread are the same. You cannot reach your goal following another way, for you cannot reach Christ through another way. You can reach Christ only through Christ. In what sense do you come to Christ through Christ? You reach Christ the God through Christ the man. Through the Word made flesh, you reach the Word that was in the beginning God with God.”

[18] Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestio de veritate*, q. 29, a. 5, co.

[19] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 48.

[20] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 63, a. 3.

[21] Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 11; Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum concilium*, 10.

[22] Cf. Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato si’* (24 May 2015), 155: AAS 107 (2015), 909-910.

[23] Cf. Id., Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et misera* (20 November 2016), 20: AAS 108 (2016), 1325-1326.

[24] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio* (7 December 1990), 40: AAS 83 (1991), 287-288; Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 9-13: AAS 105 (2013), 1022-1025.

[25] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et spes*, 22.
