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Press Conference to present the Letter “Placuit Deo” of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on certain aspects of Christian salvation

Intervention by H.E. Msgr. Luis F. Ladaria Ferrer, S.J.

Intervention by H.E. Msgr. Giacomo Morandi

At 11.00 this morning, in the Holy See Press Office, a press conference was held to present the Letter *Placuit Deo* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the bishops of the Catholic Church on certain aspects of Christian salvation.

The speakers at the conference were H.E. Msgr. Luis F. Ladaria Ferrer, S.J., prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and H.E. Msgr. Giacomo Morandi, secretary of the same Congregation.

Intervention by H.E. Msgr. Luis F. Ladaria Ferrer, S.J.

Following the publication of *Dominus Iesus* (2000), various theologians asked the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to further examine certain aspects already enunciated in that Declaration, suggesting a new Document on Christian salvation. In this respect, after having carefully studied this important issue, in collaboration with the Consulters of the Congregation, the Letter *Placuit Deo* on certain aspects of Christian salvation is presented today.

The publication of this Letter, addressed to the bishops of the Catholic Church, and more generally, to all faithful, was decided in the Plenary Session of the Congregation, which took place on the days 23 to 26 January 2018, and approved on 16 February by the Holy Father who asked for it to be published as soon as possible. The Document 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” (Chapter I, no.1).

What are the cultural transformations that obscure the confession of Christian faith, proclaimed by Jesus, the only and universal Saviour? The Holy Father Francis, in his ordinary Magisterium, often makes reference to two tendencies that resemble, in certain aspects, two ancient heresies, Pelagianism and Gnosticism, although there is a great difference between today’s secularized historic context and that of the first Christian centuries.

In particular, “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” (no. 2). 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. ... 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” (no. 2).

This Letter is intended to address these reductionist tendencies which threaten Christianity today, and to reiterate that salvation, according to the plan of the Covenant of the Father, consists in our union with Christ (cf. Chapter II, nos. 2-4).

I would now like to briefly consider the anthropological and Christological part of the Letter (cf. Chapters III-IV), leaving to the Secretary the task of illustrating the ecclesiological part (cf. Chapters V-VI).

Does salvation still interest man today? Yes, our experience indeed teaches us that each man is in search of his own realization and happiness. Very often this aspiration coincides with the search for physical health, economic wellbeing, inner peace, and serene coexistence. Alongside this positive desire for good there is the struggle against every type of evil: ignorance, fragility, disease, death (cf. no. 5).

With regard to these aspirations, faith in Christ teaches us, rejecting any pretence of neo-Pelagian self-fulfilment through possession, power, science or technology, that nothing in creation can fully satisfy man, because God has destined us for communion with Him and our heart will be restless until it reposes in Him, as Saint Augustine writes (cf. no. 6). The Holy Father calls these tendencies “neo-Pelagian” because they have in common with Pelagianism the tendency to forget the work of God in us.

Furthermore, it is necessary to remember that the origin of evil is not found, as taught by the ancient Gnostic doctrines and re-offered today in a certain way, in the material and corporeal world. The “faith proclaims that all the universe is good ... and that the evil that is most damaging to man is that which comes from his heart” (no. 7). The separation from God caused by sin leads to the loss of harmony between men, and between man and the world, introducing the reign of disintegration and death. “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” (no. 7). According to Christian faith, not only the soul but also the body craves salvation.

To understand more deeply the great newness of Christ the Saviour, ignoring these tendencies briefly recalled, it is necessary to remember the way in which Jesus is Saviour: “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” (no. 11).

Jesus, the incarnate Son of the Father, is the sole Saviour. He “bears witness to the absolute primacy of the gratuitous acts of God” (no. 9), showing the groundlessness of the neo-Pelagian individualist perspective, because grace always precedes, though demanding it, any human work. At the same time, “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*)" (no.9).

Likewise it is clear that the salvation Jesus has brought does not occur solely in an inner way, in an intimist and sentimental form, as implied by the neo-Gnostic vision. Indeed, inasmuch as the Son was made flesh (cf. *Jn 1:14*), becoming part of the human family, He "has united Himself in some fashion with every man" (Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 22) and has established a new order of relations with God, His Father, and with all men. It is precisely in the relationship with God and with brothers that man finds his complete fulfilment.

It is hoped that this Letter may help the faithful to become more aware of their dignity as "God's children" (*Rom 8:16*). Salvation cannot be reduced simply to a message, a practice, or a gnosis, but rather as an inner sentiment. As Benedict XVI wrote: "Being 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" (no. 8; Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est*, no 1).

Intervention by H.E. Msgr. Giacomo Morandi

I would like to briefly present the ecclesiological part that we find in Chapters V to VI of our Letter, and which constitutes a corollary of what has previously been shown. Indeed, according to Christian faith, salvation consists in being in communion with Christ, thanks to the gift of His Spirit, to be able to unite with the Father as children of the Son and to become a single body in the "firstborn among many brothers and sisters" (*Rom 8:29*). The Lord Jesus, indeed, is "at the same time Saviour and Salvation" (no. 11).

In other words, we must ask ourselves: where and how can we receive this salvation? "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" (no. 12).

As the Vatican Council II Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* recalls, the Church is "the universal sacrament of salvation" (no. 48), and in Christ "sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (no. 1). The Church is not only and first of all a human institution. She is inseparably joined to Christ – like the Body to the Head and husband to wife. Like the new people that God convokes, she is the place where all men of all times can find the Saviour and Salvation. "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" (no. 12). In addition, given that the grace Christ gives us is not, as the neo-Gnostic vision claims, a merely inner salvation, but rather introduces us to the concrete relations that He Himself lived, it incorporates us in the Church which is a community at the same time visible and invisible, in which while we stand beside our brothers, especially those who are most in need, we truly touch the flesh of Jesus. Salvation, mediated by the Church, consists therefore "in being incorporated into a communion of persons that participates in the communion of the Trinity" (no. 12).

The neo-Pelagian individualistic vision and the merely inner neo-Gnostic vision also openly contradict the economy of the sacraments, through which God wished to save every 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, and the Eucharist is the source and the summit. 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*)" (no. 13).

The economy of the sacraments also opposes the neo-Gnostic tendencies which propose simply an inner

salvation, understood as a liberation from the body and from the concrete relations in which the person lives. On the contrary, “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. The Saviour 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” (no. 14).

Those who have found Jesus the Saviour are always missionaries and live a great hope. Therefore, the brief Conclusion of the Letter mentions the missionary and eschatological dimension of Christian life.

Sent by God to all peoples, the Church endeavours to announce the Gospel, the true Good News of Salvation, to all men. She connects this proclamation with the willingness to establish a sincere and constructive dialogue with believers of other religions, confident that God can lead towards salvation in Christ “for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way” (*Gaudium et spes*, 22).

As she dedicates herself with all her might to evangelization, the Church invokes the definitive coming of the Saviour, “for we are saved by hope” (*Rom* 8: 24). Contemplating this eschatological horizon, we know that “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 Saviour and first among the saved, we are certain that “our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we also await a Saviour, 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).
