

Editor's Note: *This issue of E Pluribus takes Roman Catholicism as a unifying theme. In the first article, Dr. Mary McCormick, a part-time faculty member in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, provides an overview of the efforts of the Roman Catholic Church in interreligious dialogue and, in the process, highlights some key documents on the subject issued by the Vatican. We thank Dr. McCormick for sharing her expertise.*

## The Roman Catholic Church's Approach to Interreligious Dialogue

Contemporary Catholic teaching on religious pluralism is marked by a creative tension among three forces that influence one another: (1) official Church teaching, (2) the pastoral practice of the pope and other ecclesiastical leaders, and (3) theological reflection of professional theologians. I will outline the elements operative in these forces as they have influenced the Roman Catholic Church's approach to interreligious dialogue, and I will suggest some areas that still need attention.

The first factor that influences contemporary Catholic teaching on interreligious dialogue is official Church teaching. For much of its history, Christianity presumed those outside its bounds excluded from salvation. However, a new attitude began to take shape in the years just before the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), commonly called Vatican II. In launching preparatory commissions for the council, Pope John XXIII asked German Cardinal Augustin Bea to prepare a statement on Christian relations with Judaism. Bea ultimately developed a statement that included the other religions of the world as well.

The first formal sign of a new attitude toward other religions was the establishment of a new department in the Roman Curia, the central administrative body of the Church. On Pentecost Sunday in 1964, Pope Paul VI instituted the Secretariat for Non-Christians, which was renamed the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1988. Several documents of the council, especially *Nostra Aetate*<sup>1</sup> (1965, *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*), signaled the Church's position on and governed the Church's development of interreligious dialogue. With the publication of *Nostra Aetate*, the primary task of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue was to promote such dialogue in accord with the declaration. Specifically, the council has the following three tasks:

1. "to promote mutual understanding, respect and collaboration between Catholics and the followers of other religious traditions
2. "to encourage the study of religions
3. "to promote the formation of persons dedicated to dialogue"<sup>2</sup>

*Nostra Aetate* signaled a new approach to world religions. Instead of focusing its work on converting pagans, the Church articulated a vision in which it holds other religious traditions with “sincere reverence” and recognizes “a ray of that Truth which enlightens all.”

Since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, the Church has produced several other documents. *The Attitude of the Church Toward the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission* (1984, called *Dialogue and Mission*) follows the impetus of *Nostra Aetate* and begins to evaluate, broaden, and consolidate the commitment of Catholicism to the task of interreligious dialogue. In 1991, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, the church published *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*.<sup>3</sup> If *Dialogue and Mission* succeeded in making dialogue part of the mission of the Church, *Dialogue and Proclamation* addressed the question of how interreligious dialogue is related to the Church’s mission to proclaim Jesus and his salvific role in human history. Specifically, the document states that dialogue and proclamation “are intimately related, but not interchangeable: true interreligious dialogue on the part of the Christian supposes the desire to make Jesus Christ better known, recognized and loved; proclaiming Jesus Christ is to be carried out in the Gospel spirit of dialogue.”<sup>4</sup>

*Dialogue and Mission* and *Dialogue and Proclamation* illustrate the tension that exists in the Church between proclaiming the saving message of Jesus and engaging in interreligious dialogue. In 2000, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued *Declaration Dominus Iesus on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, perhaps the most well-known and contentious document to address this issue.<sup>5</sup> *Dominus Iesus* repeats what has been a consistent teaching of the Church—that God, through the incarnation of Jesus and the power of the Spirit, saves all humanity. It was intended to further clarify the church’s thinking on the question about salvation in Jesus and the availability of God’s grace to all. *Dominus Iesus* teaches that the Church has

an indispensable relationship with the salvation of every human being. For those who are not formally and visibly members of the Church, “salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church, but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation.”<sup>6</sup>

In the next section, the document notes that “theologians are seeking to understand this question more fully. Their work is to be encouraged.”<sup>7</sup>

One aspect that made *Dominus Iesus* contentious was its reception by the media. Headlines focused on the discord prompted by the document. The headline of *Ecumenical News International* on 12 September 2000, for instance, read “*Dominus Iesus*: A ‘Public Relations Disaster’ for Ecumenism.” A month after the release of *Dominus Iesus*, an article filed by Reuters news service was titled “Dismay, Disdain Over Vatican Document.” Catholic News Service reporting from England printed an article titled “British Christians Express Disappointment at Vatican Document.”<sup>8</sup>

A second aspect that made *Dominus Iesus* contentious is the language it used in some sections. Truth be told, there are phrases in the document that hinder rather than foster dialogue. For example: “If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that *objectively speaking* they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison

with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation.”<sup>9</sup> Another passage in the same section reads: “Rituals [of other religions], insofar as they depend on superstitions or other errors, constitute an obstacle to salvation.”<sup>10</sup> Because most Catholics do not read the full text of Church documents, what they know of them comes from the media. Cardinal Walter Kasper, defending the teaching of *Dominus Iesus* in light of its reception, wrote:

*Dominus Iesus* does not state that everybody needs to become a Catholic in order to be saved by God. On the contrary, it declares that God’s grace, which is the grace of Jesus Christ according to our faith, is available to all. . . . *Dominus Iesus* is not the end of dialogue but a challenge for a further and even more intensive dialogue. We need this dialogue for our own identity and for the sake of the world.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, Church teaching regarding interreligious dialogue is still developing.

The second factor that influences contemporary Catholic teaching on interreligious dialogue is the pastoral practice of the pope and other ecclesiastical leaders. Vatican II and the papacies of John XXIII and Paul VI inaugurated a new worldview for interreligious dialogue in Catholic teaching. Pope John Paul II brought the mission of interreligious dialogue to a new level with his pastoral practice: he reached out to people across the globe regardless of their religious affiliations. He also initiated an interreligious day of prayer for peace in Assisi, Italy, in October 1986. Since then, several other interreligious prayer gatherings have assembled at Assisi, one in 1999 on the eve of the new millennium and another in 2002. Always the focus of prayer was peace. John Paul II’s charismatic personality and the appeal of Assisi as a place of prayer for peace made these events for interreligious activity historically significant. To date, Pope Benedict XVI’s pastoral practice has been mixed: in September 2006, he touched off a firestorm when, while addressing an academic group at the University of Regensburg in Germany, he quoted a medieval document by Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus that stated that what Muhammad, the prophet who established the religion of Islam, brought new was “only evil and inhuman.”<sup>12</sup> Benedict XVI’s November 2006 pastoral trip to Turkey, a country that has a predominantly Muslim population, sought to mend the rift with Islamic leaders and to resume positive dialogue. In this effort, the pope was largely successful.

The third factor that influences Catholic teaching on interreligious dialogue is the work of academic theologians, who tend to subscribe to one of three positions on the issue. First is an ecclesiocentrist perspective, which holds that one must have an explicit knowledge of Jesus and be a member of the Church. Second is a Christocentric perspective, which contends that Christ is the universal savior, but salvation is possible outside of the boundaries of the Church. Third is inclusive pluralism, a view proposed by the late Jesuit theologian Jacques Dupuis, who articulates a position that affirms the saving mission of Jesus through the Church for all humanity while acknowledging the rightful place of world religions. Though Dupuis made significant contributions to a Catholic theology of interreligious dialogue, his work received “notification” from the Vatican for “ambiguities” in his theology, though there was no mention in the notification of doctrinal error.<sup>13</sup> The notification indicates that Dupuis’s work is in tension with the magisterium, the teaching authority of the Catholic Church. One of the achievements of Vatican II was a more positive relationship between the magisterium and the work of professional theologians. Before Vatican II, the task of theologians was to explicate the teachings of the magisterium. Since the council, both the magisterium and theologians presume that their

work is at the service of the word of God for articulation of the truth. Nevertheless, tensions occasionally arise as theologians work to articulate a reasonable position in light of the teachings of the Church and the contemporary situation in which we live.

These three forces exist in creative tension with one another. The official ecclesiastical documents provide a road map for interreligious dialogue and assert Catholic teaching. The pastoral practice of ecclesiastical leaders mostly furthers the work of interreligious dialogue. The work of academic theologians, though sometimes viewed with suspicion by Vatican officials, promotes the agenda set by *Nostra Aetate* and the other official documents.

There are still issues that need attention relative to interreligious dialogue:

1. The Church needs to continue to attend to the agenda of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Formation programs for those preparing for ministry and seminaries should encourage participants to study the world's religions and should promote dedication to dialogue. Moreover, professional Catholic theologians need encouragement and support to continue the work of theology in dialogue with leaders from other religions.
2. Official Church documents are often written densely, which can lead to miscommunication. For example, the Church writes documents, like *Dominus Iesus*, that have a particular rubric of interpretation within Catholic theology usually known only by those trained in this field. At the same time, these documents are widely available to anyone because of the websites maintained by the Vatican and bishops' conferences, and many readers do not have the necessary theological training to understand the documents properly. Consequently, misunderstanding and misinterpretation are bound to occur. Writing the documents in a style more generally accessible to the public might be advisable.
3. The media and the Church have an ambivalent relationship. On the one hand, the media love the spectacle of Catholicism: processions, throngs of people praying in candlelight vigils, and charismatic leaders make for good television. On the other hand, the media are fueled by controversy and look for sound bites that will make headlines in print and will broadcast for several news cycles. This is aggravating to Church officials, who develop their positions in a complex, nuanced theology that relies on scripture, history, and tradition.

There is much to be proud of in the Church's practice of interreligious dialogue, and there have been many accomplishments in the past forty years, but the work needs to continue. Only if the religions of the world can dialogue is there hope that governments and citizens can dialogue for the sake of the world.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Nostra Aetate" refers to the first two words in the original Latin text and translates to "in our time." The full text of *Nostra Aetate* may be found at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html).

<sup>2</sup> *The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*, section A, “Nature and Goals of PCID.” The full text of this document may be found at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_pro\\_20051996\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_pro_20051996_en.html).

<sup>3</sup> The full text of this document may be found at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_doc\\_19051991\\_dialogue-and-proclamatio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html).

<sup>4</sup> *Dialogue and Proclamation*, section 77, “The Church’s mission.”

<sup>5</sup> The Latin *Dominus Iesus* translates to “Lord Jesus.” The full text of *Dominus Iesus* may be found at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html).

<sup>6</sup> *Dominus Iesus*, subsection 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Dominus Iesus*, subsection 21.

<sup>8</sup> The full text of these and other statements from media outlets and religious leaders on *Dominus Iesus* can be found at [www.cadeio.org/dominus.html](http://www.cadeio.org/dominus.html).

<sup>9</sup> *Dominus Iesus*, subsection 22, emphasis in the original.

<sup>10</sup> *Dominus Iesus*, subsection 21.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Kasper, “The Good Olive Tree,” *America* (17 September 2001), [http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article\\_id=1034](http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=1034).

<sup>12</sup> The full text of Pope Benedict XVI’s September 2006 speech delivered at the University of Regensburg is available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html).

<sup>13</sup> The Vatican notification was issued on 24 January 2001 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and signed by then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI. The notification states that Dupuis’s book *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* “could lead a reader to erroneous or harmful opinions.” The notification articulates the Church’s teaching on the topics deemed ambiguous in the book. A copy of the notification can be found at <http://www.zenit.org/article-715?l=english>.

## Reflections on My Faith

Editor’s Note: *This article is the third in a continuing series in which members of the YSU community share their personal faith experiences. The goal of the series is to be inclusive of as many faith traditions as are represented on the YSU campus. Contributors have been asked to communicate the importance of the religious practices in their lives, not to proselytize on the validity of any particular belief system. Submissions to the series are welcome. In this article, Kathy Barreca, a YSU graduate student who also completed a bachelor’s degree in religious studies at YSU, talks about her Catholic faith and how it influenced her educational decisions and her general outlook on life. We thank Ms. Barreca for sharing her experiences.*

I was born into a Roman Catholic Italian family, one as traditional as they come. In fact, I have an aunt that was sent to a convent at the age of eleven. In the old days, a good Roman Catholic Italian family always had a son or daughter enter a religious vocation. I have come to wonder whether this is really in the blood, for all my known ancestors have been Catholic Italians. For me, it is just a way of life.

I am an alumna of St. Rose School, a Catholic elementary school in Girard, Ohio, having attended when the nuns wore long black habits and had wooden rosary beads hanging from their sides. I can still remember the sound of those beads as Sr. Marie DeLourdes, the principal, made her daily rounds at lunch. She could not have been more than ninety pounds soaking wet,

yet the sound of those beads put the fear of God into all of us. In the second grade, we received the sacraments of Reconciliation and Communion for the first time. Afterward, we had to attend Mass and go to confession once a week. At seven or eight years old, what possible sins could we have committed that required us to enter a dark confessional and receive penance from a priest? We used to trade sins because we were afraid to go into the confessional without a good sin to be forgiven, so we would trade talking back to mom for hitting our brother or sister. These sorts of neuroses from Catholic school live on for a lifetime.

By the time I was ready to enter high school, I had had enough of nuns, priests, and woolen uniforms in both winter and summer. I wanted my freedom! I decided to attend Girard High School, a public school. I even remember Msgr. Kelly, the then pastor of St. Rose Church, calling the house to try to convince me to attend Ursuline High School. I held my ground, and I have come to believe that my experiences during high school made me who I am today. I was a good Catholic girl, and I attended CCD (a form of Catholic religious education) every Sunday morning that I did not get caught trying to sneak into Isaly's deli and ice cream shop on the corner.

My time in college was short-lived, work came next, and, then, as all good Italian Catholic girls do, I got married—and yes, he was Italian and Catholic. Here, my story shifts and changes. It was the 1970s, I was a newlywed, and we thought that we knew all about everything. Going to church seemed inconvenient, to say the least. After a night of partying with friends, who wanted to get up (assuming we had gone to bed) and go to church? These were the days before Saturday Mass. I had not lost my faith, but I had begun to question the hierarchy and was saddened at the lack of quality answers to my “unnecessary” questions. I wanted to know about the childhood of Jesus. I wanted to know the ins and outs of my religion. I wanted to know about other religions, and I was told very matter-of-factly that the Catholic Church was the only church I needed to be concerned with. Nothing mattered: you were either Catholic or non-Catholic. It was during this point in my life when I did what many of my friends had done: I walked away from St. Rose Church.

Life went on, and I eventually divorced, which countered Church doctrine. I was told that I could never get married in St. Rose again unless I received an annulment, and I considered doing so until I found out what was involved in the process. I was very opposed to telling a priest the most intimate parts of my life, things that only my God and I had to know. At that time, priests and nuns who had taught me in school were leaving their vocations in droves, and I refused to reveal parts of myself to any man that might leave the priesthood. Although I had issues with the Church, I still had an unwavering faith in God: Nothing comes between the Creator and me—no building, no laws, and no guilt.

I would soon encounter another turning point, this one centered around a medical condition. I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1984 after having spent a year in and out of hospitals being tested for every disease known to man. At that time, there were no MRIs and no advanced technology to provide a fast diagnosis. I was subjected to test after test and passed from doctor to doctor. No one knew what was wrong with me. Even my mother questioned my sanity. Finally, a doctor at the Cleveland Clinic very bluntly told me that I had MS and that I should not plan a future. I was thirty years old and had just been given a death sentence. My brain was on overload. I was numb. I had a crippling neurological disorder for which there was

and is no cure. Any plans that I had made were now on the back burner, and I had no idea where my life was headed. I began going through what Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross calls the five stages of death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. At the time, I called it hell on earth; today, I call it my greatest blessing. My life went from fast paced to snail paced. Everything that I had taken for granted became things that I treasured. I looked at the world through a new set of lenses. My life had been slowed down, but, at the time, I was still blind as to why. On more than one occasion, I cried out to God: "What's wrong with me?" I was frightened, I was alone, and I thought that God had abandoned me. I now know that I was experiencing what St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila call the "dark night of the soul."

I remained in a state of constant flux until one cold, snowy, winter night in 1996, when I had an amazing, yet indescribable, spiritual experience that proved to be the stimulus for countless personal changes. My life has never been the same. I became insatiable in my quest for knowledge, I read voraciously, and I went back to church with a newfound, childlike enthusiasm. I became so active in ministry at St. Rose that I approached the then pastor, Msgr. Susko, about entering the Lay Formation program that had just been started in the Diocese of Youngstown. He agreed, and St. Rose sent me to school. I dove in head first. I loved class time. I wanted to learn 24/7. I loved what I was learning, so much so that I went back to complete a second year and became certified in pastoral ministry/liturgy. There was something that was sticking in the back of my mind. Several times, I or others in class had asked the teacher (a priest) certain questions that went unanswered. We had asked questions about the absence of women pastoral leaders in the Catholic Church and about several other topics. When we were able to approach him after class, he told us that there are certain things that lay people are not to be told. This did not sit well with me, and I approached other priests that I knew with the same questions, and their answers were the same: there are certain areas that lay people need not be concerned with. For me, bells and whistles started going off. This is my church, my religion: Why could my questions not be answered? The final straw for me was when I told the pastor that I wanted to study about other faiths, and he told me not to bother. I will never forget him telling me that I was Catholic and that I did not need to know about anything else. Wow! What an eye-opener that was for me. That very day, I decided to go back to college and finish my bachelor's degree. When I told him what I was planning, he was not happy. He said that Youngstown State is a secular college and that I needed to go to a Catholic college. I begged to differ.

I came back to Youngstown State with eyes wide open, full of questions for which I had been told there were no good answers. I have taken religion classes that have filled me with amazement, awe, and wonder. I have laughed, and I have cried, but the most important thing that has happened to me is that I now know about those "other" religions, and in dialogue with people from many other faiths, I have learned that we are not so different. I learned that Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all People of the Book and that every faith holds the same basic tenet: love one another as you would so be loved. We are all interconnected, and we all seek our experiences with the Divine. We just do so in different ways. I was put on this earth for a reason, and that reason does not involve judging others.

I believe in the little nudges and the signs that are drawn within my hand, gently placing me exactly where I should be. I believe I am challenged to be aware, not simply of the pain, but

of why the hurting hurts. I am a spark of the Divine, and in being so, I must be a beginning for others, a singer to the songless, a storyteller to the aimless, a befriender of the friendless. I must be a beginning of hope for the despairing, an assurance for the doubting, reconciliation for the divided. I must become a beginning of freedom for the oppressed, comfort for the sorrowing, friendship for the forgotten. I must become a beginning of beauty for the forlorn, of sweetness for the soured, of gentleness for the angry, of wholeness for the broken, of peace for the frightened and the violent of this earth. I must believe in new beginnings and be a beginning so that I may not just grow old, but grow new. I am called to live each day of this wild, amazing life with passion and love. I believe in God, and in believing in God, I believe in myself and in others.

I go to Mass every week and receive the sacraments. I do not go because I have to. I go because I want to. I may not agree with the many man-made laws of this ancient rite, and I may question more than many, but I am still there connecting, not only to my God, but to the family of St. Rose Church. I have had many experiences as a Catholic woman. My Church has humbled me, humored me, challenged me, educated me, and embarrassed me. What is most important is that it has been there for me when I needed it most. For whatever karmic bond that holds this nontraditional Catholic there, I am most grateful.

—Kathy Barreca  
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## Call for Contributions

All YSU faculty, staff, students, and alumni are invited to contribute articles and announcements about religious pluralism and interfaith activities and events in the Mahoning Valley to *E Pluribus*. Pieces that treat religion more generally are also welcome. Submissions intended to proselytize will not be accepted.

In addition, we are seeking reviews of books related to religious pluralism and/or interfaith relations. We encourage members of the YSU community to submit personal narratives detailing their spiritual paths for possible inclusion in the Reflections on My Faith series. We hope that *E Pluribus* will grow to become known as a forum for the exchange of ideas related to religion.

To submit your article or suggestion to *E Pluribus*, please contact Mustansir Mir at the Center for Islamic Studies at 330-941-1625 or at [mmir@ysu.edu](mailto:mmir@ysu.edu).

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Submissions may be sent to [mmir@ysu.edu](mailto:mmir@ysu.edu) or, via campus mail, to Mustansir Mir, Center for Islamic Studies.

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