

The Church and the Fullness of the Truth

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Dubium: *Does the Church possess the fullness of the Truth?*

Responsio: *Affirmative.*

Bearing in mind the words of Jesus, "I am the Way; I am Truth and Life" (Jn 14,6), as well as the words used by St Paul in his first Letter to Timothy describing the Church as "the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (3,15), as well as the well-known text by Irenaeus of Lyons which affirms that bishops have the "sure charism of truth (*charisma veritatis certum*)¹,

it can be seen, from an investigation of the recent Magisterium of the Church, that *the Church possesses the fullness of truth*:

- Referring to the separated Churches and communities, the Second Vatican Council affirms that "the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from *the very fullness of grace and truth* (*plenitudine gratiae et veritatis*) *entrusted to the Catholic Church*".² The same paragraph also states: "It is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help towards salvation, that *the fullness of the means of salvation* can be obtained".³

1. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses*, Book IV, chapter 26, para. 2. With regard to this phrase, Cardinal Yves Congar (1904-1995) comments that "the emphasis was on *the objective deposit of truth*. For St Irenaeus, the *charisma veritatis* is not a power by which the hierarchy defines doctrine, it is the doctrine itself, the precious and spiritual gift entrusted to the Church, Y. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, London 1966, 177.

2. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* (21 November 1964), 3d.

3. Ibid., 3e.

- The same words from the above-mentioned paragraph, 3d, are re-quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,⁴ and in Pope John Paul II's Encyclical on the Church's commitment to Ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), in paragraph 10c.

They re-appear in the Instruction *Dominus Iesus* (2000) by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in paragraph 16c: The "very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church" is re-affirmed.⁵

- The latter Instruction which clearly avers the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church underlines that: "The Lord Jesus, the only Saviour, did not only establish a simple community of disciples, but constituted the Church as a *salvific mystery*: he himself is in the Church and the Church is in him. Therefore, *the fullness of Christ's salvific mystery belongs also to the Church, inseparably united to her Lord*. Indeed, Jesus Christ continues his presence and his work of salvation in the Church and by means of the Church, which is his body. And thus, just as the head and members of a living body, though not identical, are inseparable, so too Christ and the Church can neither be confused nor separated, and constitute a single 'whole Christ'".⁶ The conclusions derived from this text are evident. If Jesus Christ is the Truth (cfr Jn 14,6), so also the Church, his Body, possesses the fullness of the Truth.

One may argue that members of the Church, over the centuries, have failed to bear witness to the fullness of Truth possessed by the Church. This real situation can be reflected upon while recalling the famous patristic phrase describing the Church by the oxymoron "*casta meretrix*" (chaste prostitute):⁷ namely, the Church is holy (one of its four marks or *notae*) because she is the Mystical Body of Christ and his Bride, and at the same time she is a sinner in its members.

This has been clearly asserted in the document published by the International Theological Commission, in the context of the Jubilee of the year 2000, *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*: "From a theological point of view, Vatican II distinguishes between the indefectible fidelity of the Church and the weaknesses of her members, clergy and laity, yesterday and

4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, London & Vatican City 1994, para. 819.

5. For the text of the Instruction, cfr. *Origins* 30/14 (14 September 2000), 216.

6. Instruction *Dominus Iesus*, 16a.

7. Cfr the booklet by G. Biffi, "*Casta meretrix*". *Saggio sull'ecclesiologia di sant'Ambrogio*, Casale Monferrato 1996.

today, and therefore, between the Bride of Christ ‘with neither blemish nor wrinkle ... holy and immaculate’ (Eph 5,27), and her children, pardoned sinners, called to permanent *metanoia*” (par.1.2b).⁸

Having enunciated official teaching of the Church, it is interesting to note the observations made by an Orthodox theologian, Nicholas Afanassieff on the subject of truth: “The Church has in itself the truth; for it possesses the Spirit of Truth, who was given to it at the moment when the Church came into visible existence... Revelation, under the form of Sacred Scripture and Tradition, is confided to the Church, which is its guardian and consequently ‘the pillar and ground of truth’”.⁹

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8. *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edition, 15 March 2000), Special insert, ii.

9. N. Afanassieff, L'infalibilité de l'Église du point de vue d'un théologien orthodoxe”, in *L'infalibilité de l'Église*, ed. Rousseau et al., 184-185, as quoted in P. Chirico, *Infalibility. The Crossroads of Doctrine*, London 1977, 111.