

CHRISTUS DOMINUS
Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church

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I am pleased to participate, although not in person, in this academic meeting organized by the Roman-Catholic Theological Institute of Iasi and the Faculty of Roman-Catholic Theology within the Al. I. Cuza University, and I take this opportunity to express to the rector Fr. Benone Lucaci, PhD, organizer of this symposium, to Fr. Stefan Lupu, PhD, to the fathers associate professors, seminarians, guests and to all participants, a warm welcome accompanied by a wish for heavenly blessing and for distinguished achievements in the mission to continue the analysis of the great Second Vatican Council and to share to all believers, but not only, the richness of the holy teachings developed with a true spirit of faith by the Council Fathers under the coordination of the Holy Father, Saint John XXIII and Blessed Paul VI.

It is a happy moment to relive that event and it is a real joy to have the opportunity to go back in time and rediscover the great values that the Christian people, and not only, received from the great Second Vatican Council, from the celebration of which we mark 50 years this year.

Among the documents, which remain as a true legacy in the treasure of the Church and that the Second Vatican Council had included on its agenda for particular study and deepening, a special attention was devoted to the reflection on the ministry of bishops as successors of the Apostles and Pastors of Christian people in close communion with the Holy Father, the Pope, the successor of St. Peter throughout the ages.

Taking over and continuing the same schema (*of the First Vatican Council*), the Saint Council decided to publicly confess and declare the doctrine concerning Bishops, successors of the Apostles, which together with the Successor of Peter, and Vicar of Christ and visible head of the whole Church, lead the house of the living God. And their work did not fail in bearing fruits: the second chapter of the Constitution on the Church presents completely, deeply and clearly the doctrine concerning Bishops (cf. *LG* 18).

Thus, starting off from these premises, it is necessary to emphasize the fact that the Conciliar Decree concerning *the Pastoral office of Bishops in the Church cannot be fully understood if not in the light of the Lumen Gentium Dogmatic Constitution* (18-28).

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From the conciliar method of translating the doctrinal points previously deepened into pastoral norms, this decree derives and comes into being, which we could name "*Pastoral guide for bishops and all those who in various ways and to various degrees participate and work together in a shared episcopal ministry*". And it is precisely starting from this renewed theology of the Episcopate that the Council wants to present the image of the Bishop today.

The manner in which the episcopal office can be solemnly fulfilled in the service of the universal Church remains clearly the ecumenical council. Moreover, the decree also stipulates the creation of a new structure, among all the institutions existing within the Church, which is the Synod of Bishops, established by Pope Paul VI. This new church institution is, concretely and incessantly, the visible expression of the role assumed by the meeting of Catholic Bishops for the benefit of the whole Church.

Besides this concrete expression of the theology of the episcopate, manifested in the Council, another fundamental assertion is added: the diocesan bishop normally enjoys all powers necessary for the exercise of his office, in hierarchical communion with and under the sovereign authority of the Supreme Pontiff, who may legitimately and in the name of the common good of the universal Church reserve some general interest matters.

It is good to reflect on the question: who is the diocesan bishop?

He is the Pastor of a diocese. Even before describing the image of the bishop, the conciliar text gives a wonderful definition of the diocese.

A diocese is a portion of the people of God which is entrusted to a bishop to be shepherded by him with the cooperation of the presbytery. Thus by adhering to its pastor and gathered together by him through the Gospel and the Eucharist in the Holy Spirit, it constitutes a particular church in which the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative.

Therefore, in his diocese, *the bishop is the witness of Christ before all men, the one who announces the Gospel of Christ to men*. This office takes precedence over all others, however important they may be. Among his subordinates, as well as among the religious and lay,

he is the perfecter because he leads others to perfection, being mindful of his obligation to give an example of holiness in charity, humility, and simplicity of life. He regards priests as sons and friends, and is ready to listen and support them in every way possible and in any circumstance. He looks closely to the welfare of the faithful, attentive to the condition of each one, becoming everything to everyone, especially with regard to the poor and small. He shall not hesitate to arrange his life in such a way to accommodate to the exigencies and circumstances of our times.

In accomplishing his mission, the bishop is not alone: all presbyters participate in and exercise with the bishop the one priesthood of Christ, and he also has collaborators among the lay people. For a greater apostolic efficiency, the decree provides for new structures better adapted to the ecclesiastical requirements of the present time; for example, one or more episcopal vicars can be named by the bishop, and they automatically enjoy the same authority which the common law grants the vicar general, but only for a certain part of the diocese or for a determined task, the organization of a pastoral Council, which will gather priests, religious and lay people around the bishop.

Other Conciliar Decrees or Statements address priestly life, religious life or the responsibility of lay people. The pages of the Decree Concerning the *Pastoral Office of Bishops* essentially treats the matter of the collaboration between all living forces within a diocese and the bishop.

A significant part from the *Christus Dominus* Decree is dedicated to diocesan clergy. It joyfully expresses the clear reference to the *presbyterium*, the true family within which the bishop is a Father. But it also emphasizes the focus on the unity of thought and action, between the bishop and his subordinate priests. Dialogue is highly recommended, but not less than the spiritual and material help of both sides.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the second chapter concludes with some observations about the relationship between the bishop and consecrated persons who carry out the works of their apostolate in the diocese. As a principle, these could be summarized as follows: the bishop must encourage religious life and respect the own purpose of each Institution; however, on the other hand, priests are subject to episcopal authority regarding the exercise of the apostolate and, in cases of emergency, may be called upon to collaborate in certain situations in the pastoral formative and educative field.

After addressing the matter of the universal collegiality and, therefore, the mission of the diocesan bishop, the *Christus Dominus* Decree also reminds the pastoral works to be carried out jointly with the other bishops. This very brief chapter is focused on the main theme of the episcopal conferences.

The theme – as historians tell – was widely discussed in the conciliar auditorium, and periodical opportunities for reflection continue to present themselves even today, on the role of episcopal conferences, which in the meantime have become a universal reality.

The Holy Father always receives the episcopal conferences on the occasion of the so-called *visita ad limina apostolorum* and addresses them messages of great pastoral and missionary importance. It is a sign of communion.

Most obviously, the mission of the episcopal conferences goes beyond the simple regular meetings, during which advice and information on certain common problems are exchanged; such meetings should turn into more frequent assemblies of bishops in order to jointly carry out their pastoral mission. This mission, in fact, does not only imply the establishment of different leadership roles in one's own diocese, which must be done by every bishop, but in a broader sense, every bishop clearly devotes his apostolic and missionary mission to all the people who share the same faith and belong to the same Catholic Church.

In other words, the Second Vatican Council is permanently present in our life and history.

In him, the challenge of a Church that participates in the life of people continues to exist, focusing on the preaching of the Gospel offered to the world. And we – all the faithful – are asked to increase the power of the word, to spread it out to the world with no adjustments or diplomatic games.

Taking a quick look at the entire decree, we can notice the continuity of the teaching of the Church on the mission and responsibility of bishops, we can discover that the teaching concerning bishops is entirely based on the other Councils and the great Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: *Lumen Gentium*.

When we speak about bishops, we speak about the eternal Pastor of the Church, the Pope and the College which embodies through the ages the College of the Apostles, and that has the mission to continue the work of Christ, the eternal pastor, throughout the ages and all over the world (cf. *ChD* 2).

“Individual bishops who have been entrusted with the care of a particular church-under the authority of the supreme pontiff – feed their sheep in the name of the Lord as their own, ordinary, and immediate pastors, performing for them the office of teaching, sanctifying, and governing.” (cf. *ChD* 11).

But the bishop is not alone. The *Christus Dominus* Decree also presents, as mentioned earlier, the assistants of the bishops, describing with details their responsibility, along with their importance as sacred ministers: diocesan priests, parish priests, vicars, religious and deacons (cf. *ChD* 25-36).

In the last part of the decree, the Council Fathers focus on the existing links between the bishops of various dioceses, as well as on the synods, councils and episcopal conferences, which can and must take place in the provinces and regions of the church, for the common good of several dioceses.

A thorough reading of the whole content and a detailed analysis of the wishes expressed by the Council Fathers in this decree, approved among the first documents concerning the members of the Church, who have a responsibility for life of churches (on October 28, 1965) and the people of God (bishops priests, deacons, religious, seminarians and lay people) represents

always an inspiring light and a foundation for the necessary contribution to be brought into the church life experience, not only for those who receive such a mission, but for every priest and member of the Church.

The document comprises an introduction (1-3) and three chapters:

- The role of the bishops in the universal church (4-10);
- Bishops and their particular churches (11-35);
- Concerning bishops cooperating for the common good of many churches (36-44).

The *Christus Dominus* Decree was approved by 2,322 Fathers on October 28, 1965, recording 2,319 votes *in favour*, 2 votes *against* and 1 vote *nulle* (*Published in Rome, St. Peter, October 28, 1965*).