

## **Notification about the book *Jesus Symbol of God* by Fr. Roger Haight, S.J.**

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The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, after a careful study, has judged that the book *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999) by Fr. Roger Haight S.J. contains grave doctrinal errors with respect to certain fundamental truths of the faith. It was therefore decided to publish in its regard the present notification, which concludes the relevant procedure of examination.

After an initial evaluation by experts, it was decided to entrust the case directly to the author's Ordinary. On Feb. 14, 2000, a series of *Observations* was transmitted to Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, inviting him to make the author aware of the errors present in the book, and asking him to submit the necessary clarifications and corrects to the judgment of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (see *Regolamento per l'esame delle dottrine*, chapter II).

The response of Fr. Roger Haight, S.J., presented June 28, 2000, neither clarified nor corrected the errors indicated. For that reason, and taking account of the fact that book was widely diffused, it was decided to proceed to a doctrinal examination (see *Regolamento per l'esame delle dottrine*, chapter III), devoting special attention to the author's theological method.

After the evaluation by the theological consultants of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Ordinary Session of February 13, 2002, confirmed that *Jesus Symbol of God* contained erroneous affirmations, the diffusion of which was of grave harm to the faithful. It was therefore decided to follow the "urgent procedure" (see *Regolamento per l'esame delle dottrine*, chapter IV).

In this regard, in conformity with article 26 of the *Regolamento per l'esame delle dottrine*, on July 22, 2002, a list of erroneous affirmations and a general evaluation of the hermeneutic vision of the book was transmitted to the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, asking him to invite Fr. Roger Haight S.J. to send, within two working months, a clarification of his methodology and a correction, in fidelity to the teaching of the Church, of the errors contained in his book.

The response of the author, sent March 31, 2003, was examined by the Ordinary Session of the Congregation on October 8, 2003. Its literary form was such as to raise doubts about its authenticity, whether it really was a personal response of Fr. Roger Haight S.J.; thus a signed response was requested.

That signed response arrived on January 4, 2004. The Ordinary Session of the Congregation took it under examination of May 5, 2004, and confirmed the fact that the book *Jesus Symbol of God* contains affirmations contrary to the truth of the divine and Catholic faith belonging to the first section of the Creed, regarding the preexistence of the Word, the divinity of Jesus, the Trinity, the salvific value of the death of Jesus, and the unity and universality of the salvific mediation of Jesus and of the Church, and the resurrection of Jesus. The negative evaluation also regarded the use of an inappropriate theological method. It was retained necessary, therefore, the publication of a Notification in its regard.

## I. Theological Method

In the preface to his book, *Jesus Symbol of God*, the author affirms that today theology should be realized in dialogue with the postmodern world, but should also “remain faithful to the original revelation and to the constant tradition” (p. xii), in the sense that the data of the faith constitute the norm and the criterion for theological hermeneutics. He also affirms that a “critical correlation” has to be established between these data and the forms and the qualities of postmodern thought, characterized in part by a radical historicity and a pluralistic consciousness (see pp. 24, 330-334): “Tradition must be critically received in the situation of today” (p. 46).

This “critical correlation,” however, is translated, *di fatto*, into a subordination of the contents of the faith to their plausibility and intelligibility in postmodern culture (see pp. 49-50, 127, 195, 241, 249, 273-74, 278-82). It’s affirmed, for example, that because of today’s pluralistic consciousness, “it’s not still possible to continue to affirm ... that Christianity is the superior religion, or that Christ is the absolute center around which all the other historic mediations are relative. ... In postmodern culture it’s impossible to think ... that one religion can insist on being the center to which all the others must be brought back.”

Regarding in particular the value of dogmatic formulae, especially Christological formulae, in the cultural and linguistic context of postmodernity, which is different from the context in which they were elaborated, the author affirms that they can’t be neglected, but neither can they be repeated acritically because “in our culture they don’t have the same meaning as when they were elaborated. ... Therefore, one has to make reference to the classic councils and also interpret them explicitly for our present” (p. 16). In fact, however, this interpretation is not concretized in doctrinal proposals that transmit the immutable sense of the dogmas as understood by the faith of the Church, nor does it clarify them, enriching comprehension. The interpretation of the author instead results in a reading not only different from, but opposed to, the true meaning of the dogmas.

Regarding Christology in particular, the author affirms that in order to overcome a “ingenuous positivism about revelation” (p. 173, n. 65), it should be seen in the context of a “general theory of the religions in terms of religious epistemology” (p. 188). A fundamental element of this theory would be the symbol, a concrete historical instrument; a created reality (for example, a person, an object or an event) that makes known and renders present another reality, which at the same time is within the symbol but distinct from it, like the transcendent reality of God, to which the symbol refers (see pages 196-198). Symbolic language, structurally poetic, imaginative and figurative (see pp. 177, 256), would express and produce a determined experience of God (see p. 11), but would not furnish objective information about God himself (see p. 9, 210, 282, 471).

These methodological positions lead to a gravely reduced and misleading interpretation of the doctrines of the faith, giving rise to erroneous affirmations. In particular, the epistemological option of the theory of the symbol, as it is understood by the author, undermines the basis of Christological dogma that, beginning with the New Testament, proclaims that Jesus of Nazareth is the person of the divine Son/Word made human. (1)

## II. The Preexistence of the Word

The hermeneutical system with which he begins leads the author, first of all, to not recognize in the New Testament the basis for doctrine of the preexistence of the Word, even in the prologue of the Gospel of John (see pp. 155-178), where, in his words, the Logos should be understood in a purely metaphorical sense (see p. 177). Moreover, he reads in the pronouncement of the Council of Nicea only the intention to affirm “that nothing less than God was and is present and at work in Jesus” (p. 284; see p. 438), retaining that the recourse to the symbol “Logos” is to be considered simply a presupposition (2), and therefore not an object of definition, and finally implausible in postmodern culture (see p. 281; 485). The Council of Nicea, the author affirms, “utilized scripture in a way that today is unacceptable, that is, like a source of information directly representative of facts or objective data about transcendent reality” (p. 279). The dogma of Nicea would not teach, therefore, that the eternally preexistent Son or Logos is consubstantial with the Father and generated by him. The author proposes “a Christology of the Incarnation, in which the created human being, or the person of Jesus of Nazareth, is the concrete symbol that expressed the presence of God in history as Logos” (p. 439).

This interpretation is not in conformity with the dogma of Nicea, which intentionally affirms, over against the cultural horizon of the time, the real preexistence of the Son/Logos of the Father, incarnated into history for our salvation (3).

### **III. The Divinity of Jesus**

The erroneous position of the author on the preexistence of the Son/Logos of God has as a consequence an equally erroneous understanding of the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus. In truth, he uses such phrases as: Jesus “must be considered divine” (p. 283) and “Jesus Christ ... must be truly God.” (p. 284). It’s a question, however, of affirmations that have to be understood in the light of his position on Jesus as a symbolic “mediation” (or “medium”). Jesus would be “a finite person” (p. 205), “a human person” (p. 296), and “a human being like us” (p. 205; 428). The “true God and true man” should be reinterpreted, according to the author, in the sense “true man” would mean that Jesus is “a human being like all the rest” (p. 259), “a human being and a finite creature” (p. 262); meanwhile “true God” would mean that the human being Jesus, in the guise of a concrete symbol, is, or mediates, the salvific presence of God in history (see pp 262; 295): only in this sense could he be considered as “truly divine or consubstantial with God” (p. 295). The “postmodern situation in Christology,” the author adds, “requires a change of interpretation that goes beyond the problematic of Chalcedon” (p. 290), precisely in the sense that the hypostatic union, or “enipostatic,” should be understood as “the union of nothing less than God as Word with the human being Jesus” (p. 442).

This interpretation of the divinity of Jesus is contrary to the faith of the Church, which believes in Jesus Christ, eternal Son of God, made human, as has been repeatedly confessed in various ecumenical councils and in the constant preaching of the Church. (4)

### **IV. The Most Holy Trinity**

As a consequence of the aforementioned interpretation of the identity of Jesus Christ, the author develops an erroneous Trinitarian doctrine. In his judgment, “the teaching of the New Testament [should] not be interpreted in light of successive doctrines of an immanent Trinity” (p. 474). This should be considered the outcome of a successive inculturation, which led to “hypostasizing,” that is, seeing as “real entities” in God the

symbols “Logos” and “Spirit” (p. 481), which insofar as they are “religious symbols” are metaphors of two different historical-salvific mediations of the one and only God: that exterior and historical mediation through *the symbol Jesus*; the other interior, dynamic, carried out through the communion of God *as Spirit* (see p. 484). A similar vision, corresponding to the theory of religious experience in general, leads the author to abandon the correct understanding of the Trinity itself, interpreted “as a description of the differentiated interior life of God” (p. 484). Consequently, “a notion of God as community, the idea of hypostasizing the differentiations in God and calling them persons, in such a way that they are in reciprocal dialogic communion, contradicts the principal point of the doctrine itself” (p. 483), and that is, “that God is one and there is no other” (p. 482).

This interpretation of Trinitarian doctrine is erroneous and contrary to the faith regarding the oneness of God in the Trinity of Persons, which the Church has proclaimed and confirmed in numerous and solemn pronouncements. (5)

## **V. The Salvific Value of the Death of Jesus**

In the book, the author asserts that “the prophetic interpretation” would best explain the death of Jesus (see p. 86, n. 105). He affirms, moreover, that it is not necessary “that Jesus would have considered himself a universal savior” (p. 211) and that the idea of the death of Jesus as “a sacrificial, expiatory or redemptive death” was only the result of a gradual interpretation by his followers in light of the Old Testament (see p. 85). It’s also affirmed that the traditional ecclesial language of “Jesus who suffers for us, who offers himself in sacrifice to God, who has accepted to suffer punishment for our sins, or to die to satisfy the justice of God, does not make sense for the world of today” (p. 241). This language is to be abandoned because “the images associated with this way of speaking offend the postmodern sensibility and create repulsion and a barrier to a positive appreciation of Jesus Christ” (p. 241).

This position of the author is in reality opposed to the doctrine of the Church, which has always recognized in Jesus a universal redemptive intentionality with regard to his death. The Church sees in the affirmations of the New Testament, which refer specifically to salvation, and in particular in the words of institution in the Eucharist, a norm of the faith about the universal salvific value of the sacrifice on the Cross. (6)

## **VI. Unicity and Universality of the Salvific Mediation of Jesus and the Church**

Regarding the universality of the salvific mission of Jesus, the author affirms that Jesus is “normative” for Christians, but “non-constitutive” for the other religious mediations (p. 403). He affirms, moreover, that “only God works salvation and the universal mediation of Jesus is not necessary (p. 405): in fact, “God acts in the life of human beings in diverse ways beyond Jesus and the reality of Christianity” (p. 412). The author insists on the necessity of passing from Christocentrism to Theocentrism, which “eliminates the necessity of connecting the salvation of God solely to Jesus of Nazareth” (p. 417). Regarding the universal mission of the Church, he retains that it is necessary to have “the capacity to recognize other religions as mediations of the salvation of God on the same level as Christianity” (p. 415). Moreover, for him “it is impossible in postmodern culture to think that ... a religion could insist on being the center to which all

the others must be brought back. These myths or meta-narrative conceptions have simply been overcome” (p. 333).

This theological position denies fundamentally the universal salvific mission of Jesus Christ (see Acts 4:12; I Timothy 2:4-6; John 14:6), and, as a consequence, the mission of the Church to announce and communicate the gift of Christ the Savior to all human beings (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15; Ephesians 3:8-11), both witnessed to with clarity in the New Testament and always proclaimed by the faith of the Church, also in recent documents. (7)

## **VII. The Resurrection of Jesus**

The presentation that the author makes of the resurrection of Jesus is guided by his conception of Biblical and theological language as “symbolic of an experience which is historically mediated” (p. 131), and by the principle that “ordinarily it should not be supposed that something happened in the past that today would be impossible” (p. 127). Thus understood, the resurrection is presented as the affirmation that “Jesus is ontologically alive, as an individual in the sphere of God, ... the declaration of God that the life of Jesus is a true revelation of God and an authentic human existence” (p. 151; see p. 124). The resurrection is described as a “a transcendent reality that can be recognized in its true value only by an attitude of faith and hope” (p. 126). The disciples, after the death of Jesus, remembered and reflected on his life and his message, particularly on his revelation of God as good, merciful, concerned with the human person and salvation. This remembering – from the fact that “that which God has initiated in love, on account of the limitlessness of that love, continues to exist in that love, surviving the power and the definitiveness of death” (p. 147) – together with an intervention of God as Spirit, progressively caused this new faith in the resurrection to be born, and thus generated belief that Jesus was alive and exalted in the salvific potency of God. (see p. 146). Moreover, according to the interpretation of the author, “the storacity of the empty tomb and accounts of appearances are not essential to faith-hope in the resurrection” (p. 147, n. 54; see pp. 124, 134). Rather, these accounts are “ways to express and to teach the content of a faith already formed” (p. 145).

The interpretation of the author leads to a position incompatible with the doctrine of the Church. It is elaborated on the basis of erroneous presuppositions and not on the basis of the testimony of the New Testament, according to which the appearances of the Risen Christ and the empty tomb are the foundation of the faith of the disciples in the resurrection of Christ and not vice-versa.

## **Conclusion**

In making public this Notification, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith feels itself obliged to declare that the aforementioned affirmations contained in the book *Jesus Symbol of God* by Fr. Roger Haight S.J. are to be qualified as grave doctrinal errors against the divine and Catholic faith of the Church. In consequence, the author is prohibited from teaching Catholic theology until his positions are rectified so as to be in full conformity with the doctrine of the Church.

*The Supreme Pontiff John Paul II, in an audience conceded to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect, approved the present Notification, decided upon in the Ordinary Session of this Congregation, and ordered its publication.*

Rome, from the offices of Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, December 13, 2004, Feast of St. Lucy, Virgin and Martyr.

JOSEPH Card. RATZINGER

Prefect

ANGELO AMATO, S.D.B

Titular Archbishop of Sila

Secretary

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- (1) See the Council of Nicea, *Professio fidei*: DH 125; Council of Chalcedon, *Professio fidei*: DH 301, 302; Second Council of Constantinople, *Canons*: DH 424, 426.
  - (2) The author speaks of “hypostatization” and “hypostasis” of the Word and of the Spirit: he intends to say that the Biblical “metaphor” of the “Logos” and “Spirit” successively became “real entities” in the language of the Hellenistic church (p. 475).
  - (3) See the Council of Nicea, *Professio fidei*: DH 125. The Nicene confession, reconfirmed in other ecumenical councils (see the First Council of Constantinople, *Professio fidei*: DH 150; Council of Chalcedon, *Professio fidei*: DH 301, 302), constitutes the basis of the profession of faith of all the Christian confessions.
  - (4) See the Council of Nicea, *Professio fidei*: DH 125; First Council of Constantinople, *Professio fidei*: DH 150; Council of Chalcedon, *Professio fidei*: DH 301, 302.
  - (5) See the First Council of Constantinople, *Professio fidei*: DH 150; *Quicumque*: DH 75; Synod of Toledo XI, *Professio fidei*: DH 525-532; Synod of Toledo XVI, *Professio fidei*: DH 568-573; Fourth Lateran Council, *Professio fidei*: DH 803-805; Council of Florence, *Decretum pro Iacobitis*: DH 1330-1331; Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, nn. 2-4.
  - (6) See the Council of Nicea, *Professio fidei*: DH 125; the Council of Trent, *Decretum de iustificatione*: DH 1522, 1523; *De poenitentia*: DH 1690; *De Sacrificio Missae*: DH 1740; The Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, nn. 3, 5, 9; Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22; John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 12.
  - (7) See Innocent XI, Constitution *Cum occasione*, n. 5: DH 2005; Holy Office, Decree *Errores Iansenistarum*, n. 4: DH 2304; Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, n. 8; Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22; Decree *Ad gentes*, n. 3; John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, nn. 4-6; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, nn. 13-15. Regarding the universality of the mission of the Church, see

*Lumen gentium*, nn. 13,17; *Ad gentes*, n. 7; *Redemptoris missio*, nn. 9-11;  
*Dominus Iesus*, nn. 20-22.