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«Gesù Cristo, via, verità e vita» (Gv 14,6)

Per una rilettura della «Dominus Iesus»

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**CHRISTOLOGICAL AFFIRMATIONS OF
“DOMINUS IESUS” AND INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE**
Dialogue with Confucian Classics from a Christian Perspective

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“The Advent of a new millennium offers a great opportunity for inter-religious dialogue and for meetings with the leaders of the great world religions. Contact, dialogue and cooperation with the followers of other religions is a task which the Second Vatican Council bequeathed to the whole Church as a duty and a challenge” (*Ecclesia in Asia* = EA 31).

“In the practice of dialogue between the Christian faith and other religious traditions, as well as in seeking to understand its theoretical basis more deeply, new questions arise that need to be addressed through pursuing new paths of research” (*Dominus Iesus* = DI 3).

In the light of the above citations, this essay attempts to present a way of dialogue in reading a Confucian text from a Christian perspective. It is called “dialogue” because it aims at a fusion of two worlds of wisdom and mutual enrichment without detriment to the originalities of both Confucianism and Catholic faith. It endeavours to respect the sensibilities, both Christian and Confucian, while drawing out relevant meanings from a text. It is hoped that such an effort may show that the revelation of Jesus Christ can be also quite at home with at least some Chinese classics.

This essay is divided into five parts. The first part describes briefly the Christological affirmations made by DI with respect to certain erroneous positions. The second deals with the urgency of the dialogue in view of a proclamation from the missionary perspective. The third is to recall the parameter proposed by DI as to safeguard the original purpose of the dialogue and to avoid undue mingling or religious syncretism. The

fourth is to propose a Christian approach to Confucian classics as a way of dialogue. The fifth is a way of conclusion indicating the importance of openness and balance.

1. Three Christological Affirmations in DI

If by Christology one means a systematic theological treatise, then it will be more relevant to say that DI contains Christological affirmations rather than Christology, because the Declaration affirms that its purpose

“is not to treat in a systematic manner the question of the unicity and salvific universality of the mystery of Jesus Christ and the Church, nor to propose solutions to questions that are matters of free theological debate, but rather to set forth again the doctrine of the Catholic faith in these areas, pointing out some fundamental questions that remain open to further development, and refuting specific positions that are erroneous or ambiguous” (DI 3).

The Declaration is centred on three affirmations, namely, the fullness and definitiveness of the revelation of Jesus (DI 5-8); the unity of the salvific economy of the Incarnate Word and of the Holy Spirit (DI 9-12); the uniqueness and the universality of the salvific mystery of Jesus Christ (DI 13-16). These affirmations have always been part of the Church’s constant missionary proclamation¹.

The first affirmation intends to correct three positions regarding Revelation, Faith and Inspiration. The first is

“the theory of the limited, incomplete, or imperfect character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, which would be complementary to that found in other religions” (DI 6).

The second is about the inadequate distinction between *theological faith* and *belief* in the other religions:

“Thus, theological faith (the acceptance of the truth revealed by the One and Triune God) is often identified with belief in other religions, which is religious experience still in search of the absolute truth and still lacking assent to God who reveals

¹ On this point Professor Angelo Amato has made some inspiring remarks worth recalling: *L'assolutezza salvifica del Cristianesimo: prospettive sistematiche*, in *Seminarium* 33(1998) 771-809; “Dominus Iesus”. Unicità e universalità salvifica di Gesù Cristo e della Chiesa, in *Camillianum* 1 nuova serie (2001) p. 165-184; Unicidad y universalidad salvífica de Jesucristo y de la Iglesia, in *Toletana* 4 (2001) p. 9-30.

himself. This is one of the reasons why the differences between Christianity and the other religions tend to be reduced at times to the point of disappearance” (DI 7).

The third is the hypothesis of the inspired value of the Sacred Texts of other religions. Following tradition, the Church, however, reserves the designation of *inspired texts* to the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, since these are inspired by the Holy Spirit:

“These books firmly, faithfully, and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures” (DI 8).

The second affirmation intends to correct three theses which, in order to justify the religious pluralism, try to reduce the importance of the mystery of the incarnation. The first regards Jesus of Nazareth as one of the many historico-salvific incarnations of the eternal Word,

“who reveals the divine not in an exclusive way, but in a way complementary with other revelatory and salvific figures” (DI 9).

Against such a position, DI stresses the unity between the eternal Word and Jesus of Nazareth. Only Jesus is the Son and the Word of the Father (DI 10).

The second thesis, derived from the first, poses a distinction between the economy of the eternal Word and that of the incarnate Word:

“The first would have a greater universal value than the second, which is limited to Christians, though God’s presence would be more full in the second” (DI 9).

Contradicting such a distinction, DI re-affirms that

“the unicity of the salvific economy willed by the One and Triune God must be *firmly believed*, at the source and centre of which is the mystery of the incarnation of the Word, mediator of divine grace on the level of creation and redemption” (DI 11).

The third thesis advances

“the hypothesis of an economy of the Holy Spirit with a more universal breadth than that of the Incarnate Word, crucified and risen” (DI 12).

Such a position is also contrary to the Catholic faith which

“considers the salvific incarnation of the Word as a trinitarian event. In the New Testament, the mystery of Jesus, the Incarnate Word, constitutes the place of the Holy Spirit’s presence as well as the principle of the Spirit’s effusion on humanity. [...] No one, therefore, can enter into communion with God except through Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit” (DI 12).

The third affirmation contradicts the thesis that denies the uniqueness and universality of the salvific mystery of Jesus Christ. The Declaration, collecting the essential data from the Bible and Tradition, stresses that

“the truth of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Lord and only Saviour, who through the event of his incarnation, death and resurrection has brought the history of salvation to fulfilment, and which has in him its fullness and centre, must be *firmly believed* as a constant element of the Church’s faith” (DI 13).

“It must therefore be *firmly believed* as a truth of Catholic faith that the universal salvific will of the One and Triune God is offered and accomplished once for all in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God” (DI 14).

Actually the above three affirmations have already been considered obvious teaching of the Catholic faith. Why, then, should the Declaration affirm something that is already obvious? A full response to such a question would go beyond the aim of the essay, but I still would like to make two considerations.

First, the outcome of the so-called erroneous positions does certainly endanger the Catholic faith. The Church has to re-state the obvious: Jesus as the Unique and Universal Saviour of the world. He is the way, the truth, and the life. However such preaching of the “obvious” is often considered “offensive” because it entails a certain denial of the saving values of other religions. As a result there arise relativistic tendencies to mitigate the offensiveness of such preaching to the degree of attempting to regard the revelation of Jesus as something merely culture-bound, not as something definitive and quintessential to the Catholic faith. To distinguish the revelation as something unchanged from the preaching of it as something culture-bound is no easy task. However to present Jesus to the people of other religious traditions has all to do with culture. How to reconcile the standard “obviousness” of Christian proclamation with the possible “offensiveness” against the culture still remains a challenge pretty alive in the inter-religious dialogue.

Second, the Declaration admits also that the reality of Jesus Christ still remains an unfathomable mystery. One should not forget that the Lord Jesus Himself set good examples in preaching the Kingdom of God to the people. He dialogued, respected and invited them to believe. He did this to such an extent as to have bravely embraced extreme sufferings

and violent death. It is, after all, the heroic witness that counts and provokes faith in people. As a matter of fact, in China, there has recently developed quite a good relationship among the believers of different religions under the communist regime. Forty years of religious persecution have created solidarity among them. Many religious people suffered together and were often tortured in the same concentration camp. The problem of suffering became an issue very much acute and alive among the believers of different religions. In one way or another they have had to carry out a dialogue to throw light upon the meaning of life. The Catholics in China have certainly made a very relevant point with their commitment to Jesus by suffering.

2. The Urgency of Proclamation and Inter-religious Dialogue

Dialogue is no easy task. What will the dialogue be like if the two interlocutors are not ready to give and take? Will it be reduced to simple declaration without communication? There also comes the question of what to give and what to take without running the risk of impoverishing both. It is beyond the aim of this essay to cope with such questions. Undoubtedly, Vatican II has opened a new horizon for inter-religious dialogue.

“The Church learned early in its history to express the Christian message in the concepts and languages of different peoples and tried to clarify it in the light of the wisdom of their philosophers: it was an attempt to adapt the Gospel to the understanding of all people and the requirements of the learned, insofar as this could be done. Indeed, this kind of adaptation and preaching of the revealed Word must ever be the law of all Evangelization. In this way it is possible to create in every country the possibility of expressing the message of Christ in suitable terms and to foster vital contact and exchange between the Church and different cultures”(GS 44).

In a huge continent like Asia, where Christians constitute only a small minority among very diverse cultural and religious realities, dialogue becomes essential to a peaceful co-existence. However, more than this, dialogue for an evangelizing Church aims at enhancing the proclamation.

“[...] The Synod Fathers stressed many times the need to evangelize in a way that appeals to the sensibilities of Asian peoples, and they suggested images of Jesus which would be intelligible to Asian minds and cultures and, at the same time, faith-

ful to Sacred Scripture and Tradition. Among them were Jesus Christ as the Teacher of Wisdom, the Healer, the Liberator, the Spiritual Guide, the Enlightened One, the Compassionate Friend of the Poor, the Good Samaritan, the Good Shepherd, the Obedient One” (EA 21)

From the Christian point of view, inter-religious dialogue is more than a way of fostering mutual knowledge and enrichment; it is a part of the Church’s evangelizing mission, an expression of the mission *ad gentes* (*Redemptoris Missio*=RM 55, EA 31).

2.1. Proclamation

Following Christian tradition, EA asserts the primacy of proclamation of Jesus Christ in all types of evangelizing work (EA 19). There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* = EN 22). By *proclamation* we mean the communication of the Gospel message, the mystery of salvation realized by God for all in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit.

It has a twofold purpose. The first is to promote a more humanizing culture with the Gospel values. It is important not only to make known the Gospel but also seek the consent of the society of these values insofar as they are good for the building up of the society². The second, of a higher level though not unrelated to the first, aims at an invitation to a commitment of faith in Jesus Christ and to the entry through baptism into the community of believers, which form the Church. If the proclamation aims at the promotion of culture, then it will often appear less “offensive” or less aggressive. If the proclamation is for the commitment of faith, then it turns out to be more “obvious” and demanding.

In any case the proclamation can be solemn and public, as for instance on the day of Pentecost, or a simple private conversation. It leads naturally to catechesis which aims at deepening this faith. Proclamation is the foundation, centre, and summit of evangelization³.

² EN 20: “Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them”.

³ Cf. *Dialogue and Proclamation* (=DP) by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and for the Evangelization of Peoples, May 19, 1991.

2.2. Inter-religious Dialogue from a Missionary Perspective

Only Christians, who are deeply immersed in the mystery of Christ and who are happy in their faith community, can, without undue risk and with hope of positive fruit, engage in inter-religious dialogue (RM 56; EA 31). Such a directive has a simple aim not to damage or sacrifice faith just for the sake of dialogue. During the dialogue what to take is friendship and understanding; what not to give up is faith.

Dialogue can be understood as reciprocal communication, leading to a common goal. It can be taken as an attitude of respect and friendship, which should permeate all those activities constituting the evangelizing mission of the Church. In the context of religious plurality, dialogue means all positive and constructive inter-religious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment, in obedience to truth and respect for freedom. It includes both the witness and exploration of respective religious convictions (cf *Dialogue and Proclamation* = DP10).

The Synod Fathers speak of the need for a dialogue of life and heart. The followers of Christ must have the gentle and humble heart of their Master, never proud, never condescending, as they meet their partners in dialogue (EA 31).

3. The Parameter Set by DI

DI does not intend to prevent Christian believers from practising dialogue. It simply signals the rise of certain erroneous positions that endanger the orthodoxy of Catholic faith while being involved in the inter-religious dialogue. That is why the DI aims also at setting forth again the doctrine of the Catholic faith in these areas, pointing out some fundamental questions that remain open to further development, and refuting specific positions that are erroneous or ambiguous (DI 3).

3.1. Positions to be Taken

DI shows a great concern that the Church's missionary proclamation might be endangered by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de iure*. For this reason DI right from the outset re-affirms the following positions:

- the definitive character of the revelation of Jesus Christ,
- the personal unity between the Eternal Word and Jesus of Nazareth, the unity of the economy of the Incarnate Word and the Holy Spirit,
- the unicity of universality of the mystery of Jesus Christ,
- the universal salvific mediation of the Church,
- the inseparability of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Christ, and the Church,
- and the subsistence of the one Church of Christ in the Catholic Church.

3.2. The Roots of the Errors

The roots of the errors are found in certain presuppositions of both a philosophical and theological nature, which hinder the understanding and acceptance of the revealed truth. Some of these can be mentioned:

- the conviction of the elusiveness and inexpressibility of divine truth, even by Christian revelation;
- relativistic attitudes toward truth itself, according to which what is true for some would not be true for others;
- the radical opposition posited between the logical mentality of the West and the symbolic mentality of the East;
- the subjectivism which, by regarding reason as the only source of knowledge, becomes incapable of raising its “gaze to the heights, not daring to rise to the truth of being”;
- the difficulty in understanding and accepting the presence of definitive and eschatological events in history;
- the metaphysical emptying of the historical incarnation of the Eternal Logos, reduced to a mere appearing of God in history;
- the eclecticism of those who, in theological research, uncritically absorb ideas from a variety of philosophical and theological contexts without regard for consistency, systematic connection or compatibility with Christian truth;
- finally, the tendency to read and to interpret Sacred Scripture outside the Tradition and Magisterium of the Church (cf DI 4).

4. Dialogue between a Christian Reader and Confucian Texts

Dialogue usually involves person-to-person talk. In this part, attention will be drawn to the interaction between a Christian reader and a

Confucian text. The reasons are simple. First, such an interaction can also be considered a form of dialogue or at least an initial phase of a proper interlocution. Secondly, ever since Vatican II person-to-person talks *viva voce* between the Catholics and the Confucians on matters of religious belief have been too few to achieve certain attention. Thirdly, Confucianism has a long-standing tradition and is full of practical wisdom that is definitely worth hearing.

Dialogue, on the part of Christian, should ultimately aim at the invitation of others to the commitment of faith in Jesus Christ. However before achieving this aim, one should not lose sight of inviting others to the consent of the Gospel values. Just like Christianity, Confucianism certainly has considerable contributions to the making of a humanizing culture, because of the values commonly consented by both. The transition from enabling the Gospel to permeate through a culture to an invitation to a commitment of faith in Jesus is well expressed in the words of Matteo Ricci:

“I make every effort to turn our way the ideas of the leader of the sect of the *literati*, Confucius, by interpreting in our favour things which he left ambiguous in his writings”⁴.

Interpretation is not meant to be a purely intellectual exercise without a definite purpose, but a dialogue “in our favour”, namely, to bring people closer to the teaching of Christ. There are “ambiguous things” in the Confucian texts. Christians have the right to interpret them “in our favour” so as to make Christ more attuned to the Confucian ears.

What a Christian reader does is to create, as it were, an imaginary Confucian interlocutor with whom the Christian can think aloud through a text. In our case the Christian perspective of “in our favour” that the reader assumes is to promote the consent to the Gospel values and further to invite others to the commitment of faith in Jesus Christ.

Such is the attitude assumed by the early Jesuit interpretation of Confucianism. Obviously, the expression “in our favour”, *prima facie*, makes the interpretation look biased. Such a “bias” is not only inevitable but almost intended as well to show the seriousness and sincerity of the

⁴ *Fonti Ricciane*, N709, II, 296, quoted from the translation of RULE Paul A., *K'ung-tzu or Confucius? The Jesuit Interpretation of Confucianism* (Allen & Unwin Sydney 1986) 1.

interlocutor in question on the matters of religious faith. DI precisely asserts that it should be the attitude of the Church:

[...] as a requirement of her love for all people, the Church “proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (cf. 2 Cor 5:18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life”. In inter-religious dialogue as well, the mission *ad gentes* “today as always retains its full force and necessity” (DI 21-22)

It is true that a Christian, if committed to Jesus, will try hard to remain faithful to Him and His teaching, but a Christian interlocutor involved in a serious dialogue has to face, at least in theory, a possible risk of change by the counterpart. If the change is a question of being enriched in certain aspects or being enlightened in some blind spots without touching the substance of faith, then the interlocutor remains faithful as before. If it touches the substance of faith, then the so-called Christian interlocutor will cease to be “Christian”. This is precisely the sense of the parameter set by DI, namely, setting a bottom line below which the Christian identity may be obscured. If we take this document seriously, then the attitude “in our favour” becomes not only appropriate but also relevant to the inter-religious dialogue at least as perceived from the Christian side.

After the foregoing discussion on a Christian attitude towards the Chinese Classics, we come to consider a methodological approach to the tackling of a Confucian text from the Christian perspective⁵.

The dialogue here indicates an intelligent reading of a Confucian text that points to a fusion of two horizons: a text with its cultural context and a reader with Christian faith. The degree of fusion varies from an initial consonance to common consent, and even further to a harmonious convergence, with due respect given to both parties.

We would now like to focus more on how Christian readers with adequate Confucian sensibilities approach the Chinese Classics so as to draw meanings in consonance with the Bible.

⁵ The structure of this part is more or less taken from: *Methodology: Asian Christian Theology. Doing Theology in Asia Today. A Document of the Office of Theological Concerns of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*, in *FABC Papers* no. 96, 2000.

4.1. The Bible and the Confucian Classics

It should be borne in mind, as DI points out, that the Bible enjoys the privilege of being inspired by God while the Confucian classics do not. However, theoretically both the Bible and the Confucian classics have ultimately come from God, each in its own way. In fact, there is a great deal of consonance between the two regarding the truths about life.

4.1.1. *The Process of Canonization of the Books*

Much of the life of Confucius was spent in the attempt to advise the rulers of his day to return to the ways of the ancient sage kings (esp. Yao 堯 and Sun 舜 in the Chou 周 dynasty), namely, to follow the way of Heaven and to cultivate virtues in oneself. There were books that formed the record of the words and deeds of the sages. While these books served as the literary tradition, the sages themselves were the source of it.

The sage kings were called *sheng* 聖. The word *sheng* means *tung* 通 “penetrate” or “pass through”. It suggests that the sage is one who thoroughly understands the Way of Heaven and on basis of this knowledge is able to rule wisely. Etymologically the character *sheng* is composed of two parts: one is *erb* 耳 meaning “ear” and another is *ch’eng* 呈 meaning “manifest”. A sage is one who hears (the Heaven) and manifests it in daily life. That is why the written records of the sage kings in the ancient time are of paramount importance⁶.

The term most generally used to describe the literary works that record the deeds of the sages is that of *ching* 經, translated most frequently as “classic”. The character *ching* was taken from the context of weaving meaning warp as opposed to weft. The underlying sense of warp is to indicate the formation of continuity and regularity in a piece of cloth. The term *ching* has been applied to various groupings of writings at different points of history of the Confucian school. They serve as norm, canon, rule and law for the formation of persons and society.

⁶ Cf. HALL David L. and AMES Roger T., *Thinking Through Confucius* (State University of New York Press 1987) 257-260.

What both Confucius 孔子 and Mencius 孟子 felt responsible for was to study and to establish the literature that records the experience of the ancient sage kings, not so much for the sake of founding the textual authority as for finding a living contact with the virtuous sage kings. The literary sources that became known as the Classics *ching* were for Confucius and Mencius an immediate link to the age and the teachings of the sages. For them the transmission of the Classics was critical to the moral and spiritual learning and vital to the reshaping of individuals and society.

Later it was Hsün-tzu 荀子 (298-238 B.C.) who, facing the competing influence of “hundred schools”, found the necessity to establish the textual authority of the *ching* in order to preserve the learning of the sages. The textual authority was viewed as the very foundation of civilization itself as opposed to the ideas of the Taoists whom Hsün-tzu saw as anti-theoretical and inimical to the preservation of culture.

The process of handing down the Classics was not smooth. The infamous “burning of the books and burial of the scholars” carried out by the first emperor of the Ch’in 秦 dynasty (reign 221-210 B.C.) made the process of authenticating the text more difficult. It was in the dynasty of Han 漢 during the reign of Han Wu-ti 漢武帝 (140-87 B.C.) that significant steps were taken at the suggestion of Tung Chung-shu 董仲舒. The position of “Scholars of the Five Classics” (*wu-ching po-shih* 五經博士) was set up. Only those who shared the Confucian perspective were chosen. They served in the capacity of advisors to the emperor as well as teachers. Their role as teachers was enhanced by the establishment and opening on an imperial university (*t'ai hsüeh* 大學). The university was to provide a training centre for acquiring learning in the Classics and those who achieved expertise through examinations were given official positions.

This became, *grosso modo*, the civil service system throughout Chinese history. Obviously, the Confucian school became a dominant and major element of the Han 漢 period and the texts it focused upon achieved the status of revered and authoritative writings. The orthodox versions as well as interpretations of the Five Classics were produced. Together with the *Analects* the Five Classics were engraved in stone. The *Analects* was included so as to indicate the importance given to Confucius.

Later in the time of Chu Hsi 朱熹 (1130 – 1200) the new scriptural authority was found in a new collection of writings, the Four Books. The works that comprise the Four Books were not new, but the combination as well as the authority given to the collection was all new⁷.

While the Christian community did in fact have the need of recognizing officially which books are inspired, the Confucian scholars did something similar. Over the years, quite peacefully and unanimously, they have come to regard the Four Books (*Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of Mean*, *Confucian Analects*, *Mencius*) and Five Classics (*Book of Poetry*, *Book of History*, *Book of Change*, *Book of Rites*, *Book of Spring-Autumn*) as their constant points of reference. However one should bear in mind that the Holy Scriptures are inspired while the Confucian writings are not.

4.1.2. *The Surplus Meanings of a Text*

When faced with a Confucian text, any reader has the possibility to draw meanings that are beyond, yet not in contradiction with, the intention of the writer or the understanding of the “believing” community of a certain time and space. This is the so-called “surplus” meaning which, however, is not intended to distort the “literal” meaning but rather to complement it in a fuller sense.

Therefore, a Christian, whose mind is enlightened by the Bible, can draw some “surplus” meanings from a Confucian text, which a Confucian may have never thought of, without usurping the Confucian sense for purposes foreign to the text. The same is true for a reader (of the Confucian mentality) to a Biblical text.

Our main concern is not to determine whether a Confucian text is as religious as a Biblical one. Confucianism definitely is a way of life imbued with certain religious sentiments. Confucius committed himself to gather the ruling art and wisdom from the previous times so as to advise the rulers to be sage kings or *sheng* 聖. The previous exemplary rulers he found were living in a culture imbued with religious sentiments. To

⁷ Cf. TAYLOR Rodney L., *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism* (State University of New York Press 1990) 23-37.

sustain his teaching he ultimately had to resort to religion. Let us put it this way. The lasting originality and strength of the Confucian tradition are ostensibly ethic-oriented and humanistic. Its manifestation, however, could not be adequately understood, if the religious legacy inherited by Confucius is not taken into sufficient account⁸.

The approach of Matteo Ricci to Confucianism is inspiring. He obviously intended to present Christianity in Confucian language and not in Buddhist terms, because he found that Confucianism is an excellent preparation for the Chinese to embrace Christianity. It is a pure form of natural religion underpinning a social and ethical philosophy. Unlike the religious Buddhists, the Confucian scholars were apparently secular or non-religious. A statement of this kind, however, was due to a strict dichotomy between the terms “secular” and “religious” in the time of Ricci. He intuitively grasped such a dichotomy could not be applied, but he failed to indicate in what sense Confucianism could be regarded as religious. However, he by far appreciated more Confucianism than Buddhism. The former is “this-worldly” in emphasis yet more appealing to transcendent values embodied in the concept of Heaven. The latter is ostensibly “other-worldly” yet often leading people to idolatry. Ricci kept drawing attention of the Confucians to the “ambiguous things” (e.g. heaven and hell, life after death), that were left aside by Confucius, and in so doing he obviously interpreted them “in our favour”. Just like Plato and Aristotle, Confucius is somewhat a gift from divine providence for the Chinese to understand Christ⁹.

Interpretations of the Confucian texts are always permitted though we are well aware of the fact that a Christian reading of the Confucian texts is not welcomed by the mainstream of the contemporary neo-Confucianism. They argue that such an attitude is not acceptable because it necessarily leads to distortions and misinterpretations. However, the mind-set “in our favour” does not necessarily lead to violation of Confucian sensibilities or distortion of meanings. The reason for which Christians claim the right to have this mind-set is the belief that Confucianism has been prepared by God in view of the acceptance of the Gospel.

⁸ Cf. *ib.* 11.

⁹ See RULE Paul A., *K'ung-tzu or Confucius?* 29-33.

Let us borrow an example from the Christian reading of a Jewish text. In Mt 1:23 we read, “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel”. Matthew quoted it from Is 7:14. For a Jew, neither the virgin necessarily points to Mary nor her son to Jesus Christ, as Matthew interprets it so. Matthew would not have been able to do so, had he not encountered the Risen Christ. Matthew was able to go beyond the literal meaning of Is 7:14 to the level of surplus meaning because he believed in Jesus who claimed, “that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled” (Lk 22:44). The Christian reading of a Jewish text (Old Testament) depends largely on the encounter with the Risen Christ in history. A Christian while reading the Chinese Classics should never lose sight of the fact that Christian faith comes, not from mere reasoning, but from the historical revelation of the Risen Christ, as stressed by DI.

4.1.3. *The Search for the Heavenly Way*

The concept of heaven (*t'ien* 天) could be conceived as an isolated reality, a totally transcendent, non-personal unifying force. If this were the case, no human knowledge about heaven would be possible. However, this is certainly not the emphasis of Confucianism.

It is true that Confucius has a reticence to describe *t'ien* 天. He was only careful to limit his discussion to things within the bounds of empirical experience

The subjects on which the Master did not talk were – extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings¹⁰.

Chi Lu asked about serving the spirits of the dead. The Master said, “While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve their spirits?” Chi Lu added, “I venture to ask about death?” He was answered, “While you do not know life, how can you know about death?”¹¹

¹⁰ *Analects* (=Confucian *Analects*), Book 7, Chapter 20, quoted from the translation of LEGGE James (1815-1897), *The Chinese Classics with a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes* Vol 1 (Oxford Univ. 2nd Edition, Revised 1949).

¹¹ *Analects*, Book 11, Chapter 11, from LEGGE.

His (the Master's) discourse about man's nature (*hsing*性) and the way of Heaven (*t'ien tao*天道) cannot be heard¹².

However on some occasions, Confucius feels to be connected with the heaven. At times he admitted to be known by Heaven or to understand it.

The Master said, "Alas! There is no one that knows me". Tsze-kung said "What do you mean by thus saying – that no one knows you? The Master replied, "I do not murmur against Heaven. I do not grumble against men. My studies lie low, and my penetration rises high. But there is Heaven – that knows me!"¹³

"At fifty I knew the decrees of Heaven (*t'ien ming*天命)"¹⁴.

Such a change does not mean a new shift of insight of Heaven (*t'ien*天) but rather a new perception of the relation between Heaven and human in a particular social and political setting. The rise of the new perception comes from the awareness of the interrelatedness between Heaven and human¹⁵.

The concern of Confucius has a lot to do with the rulers. He sought to teach them to establish a state genuinely reflective of human nature with an emphasized reference to the cultivation of moral virtues. Such teachings should be understood within the religious framework of the dynasty of Chou (周) in which the authentic human living is considered a potential mirror of the way of Heaven, the source of religious authority within the Confucian tradition. The word "religious" here indicates the authentic attitude of a person totally committed to that which is considered the Absolute Supreme Being. The authenticity predominantly comprises the morality of human behaviour. In this way one can say that the human morality derives its foundation ultimately from Heaven.

In the dynasty of Chou, the ruler is invested with power and ruling by the mandate of Heaven so much so that he is called the son of Heaven. If the rulers are appointed or better pre-destined by Heaven, why then there are other rulers who come to replace them? It is because when the virtue of the ruler is no longer up to the standard of Heaven, he will be

¹² *Analects*, Book 5, Chapter 12, from LEGGE.

¹³ *Analects*, Book 14, Chapter 37, from LEGGE.

¹⁴ *Analects*, Book 2, Chapter 4, from LEGGE.

¹⁵ Cf. HALL David L. and AMES Roger T., *Thinking Through Confucius*, 201-216.

replaced. In other words, the mandate of Heaven (*t'ien ming* 天命) can be influenced by the moral behaviours of people either positively or negatively.

As for the rulers, they have to govern in accordance with the principle of Heaven by themselves cultivating the moral virtue (*te* 德). In order to follow the principle of Heaven, one has to cultivate moral virtue. The quality of *te* 德 as it referred to the ancient sage kings meant primarily relation established and maintained between the ruler and Heaven. In this way the sage kings can realise with dignity the Mandate of Heaven which was Heaven's unfailing favour and support for the rulers as long as they themselves remained morally virtuous¹⁶.

In the book of *The Doctrine of the Mean*, a synthesis of the life-principle is presented right from the first few sentences:

“What the Heaven has conferred (*t'ien ming* 天命) is called the Nature (*hsing* 性); accordance with this nature is called the path (*tao* 道) of duty; the regulation of this path is called instruction”¹⁷.

While a Confucian strives to delve into the understanding of Heaven by way of moral self-cultivation, a Christian understands God through the acceptance of the revelation of Jesus Christ in history. Christ Himself revealed this by being “the way, the truth and the life”. Perhaps the meeting point between a Confucian and a Christian is Christ's concrete moral cultivation of self in front of the Cross. From this dimension of moral self-cultivation, a Confucian perhaps may get in touch with that Religious dimension, of which Confucius himself tends to remain reticent. It is over this so-called “ambiguous thing” that a dialogue has to be launched in which a Christian, enlightened by Christ, endeavours to interpret a text “in our favour”.

Let us recall the words John Paul II:

“The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a type of him who was to come, Christ the Lord. Christ, the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling” (*Redemptor Hominis* 8)

¹⁶ *Ib.*, 216 – 222;

¹⁷ *The Doctrine of the Mean*, Chapter 1, from LEGGE.

4.2. Interplay between Grace and Nature

The dialogue between a reader and a text that leads to surplus meaning imbued with certain uplifting closeness to the Christian faith points somewhat to an interplay between grace and nature. In the Church over centuries there have been different ways of searching for the spiritual meanings in the scriptural texts. One may recall that the Greek Gnostic reading of the Bible by way of allegories was adopted by the Alexandrians in the early Patristic period.

The Benedictine tradition of *lectio divina* was doing the same thing in the 12th Century. The monks in general had little access to a biblical text in its original language. Nor did they have adequate historico-critical tools for understanding the context. However, they did have some Greek-Latin training, like that of the seven liberal arts and classical authors (both pagan and Christian). In a marvellous way they did draw spiritual meanings enriching the life of the Church. St. Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* is an example of this. In the Scholastic tradition scholars did the same thing using the insight of pagan philosophers (such as Aristotle's) so as to draw the new meanings from the Bible.

While Vatican I was using the term "supernatural" to stress the superiority of Christ's revelation, and in consequence, of the Bible, Vatican II has focused on the historicity. The Christ-event is historical and has been understood, preached and written down in a historical process. Since the event in question is grace-filled and can never be imprisoned in a particular version, any sincere reader who reads the text about the grace-filled event can always grasp new meanings that have never been expressed deep enough. For this reason, Vatican II is not unaware of the fact that new avenues to truth are opened up and that

"it is possible to create in every country the possibility of expressing the message of Christ in suitable terms and to foster vital contact and exchange between the Church and different cultures" (GS 44).

It is along this line that we believe that the fusion of the Confucian and Biblical worlds through a proper approach to texts of both kinds can give rise to a new and fruitful understanding of life-truths.

All these attempts have their basis in the same conviction which was so well expressed by St. Thomas Aquinas, "*cum enim gratia non tollat*

naturam sed perficiat"¹⁸. This is to justify that a Christian has the right to explore surplus meanings in a Confucian text without, of course, doing injustice to the Confucian sensibilities.

Ricci in his studies discovered there were so many divergences between the commentaries and the basic sources of Confucianism¹⁹. It was then that he began to develop a distinctively Christian interpretation, which he based on a return to the texts themselves²⁰. His Chinese book *T'ien-chu shih-i* 天主實義 (*The True Idea of the Lord of Heaven*) was a result of this line of reflection. It was written in a form of dialogue with the Chinese scholars giving a Christian interpretation of Confucianism respecting the Confucian sensibilities. The Confucian teaching, for him, is based on very sound natural reasons, centred on a moral good life and expressed in the form of maxims which lend themselves readily to multiple interpretations.

In other words, there is left ample space for a dialogue in view of the life-truths. For example, in the first few sentences of *The Great Learning* one finds,

"What the Great Learning teaches is – to illustrate illustrious virtue; to renovate the people; and to rest in the highest excellence"²¹.

Another way of reading the text could be: the way of great learning consists in brightening up our illustrious nature, in being kind to people, in not ceasing to do so until one arrives at the supreme good.

"To illustrate illustrious virtue" means that one should make an effort to let our good virtues shine before others. It could be read as "in brightening up the illustrious nature", indicating that our nature is good right

¹⁸ *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.1, a.8 ad 2.

¹⁹ To his friend he wrote: "At the very time when, if I calculate correctly, Plato and Aristotle flourished amongst us, there also flourished amongst [the Chinese] certain literati of good life who produced books dealing with moral matters, not in a scientific way, but in the form of maxims. The chief of these wrote four books which are most highly esteemed, and read day and night. In the volume they do not exceed the size of the letters of Marcus Tullius, but the commentaries and glosses, and the commentaries on the commentaries, and further treatises and discourses upon them by this time are infinite". Translation from RULE Paul, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius?* 29.

²⁰ *Ib.*

²¹ *The Great Learning, the Text of Confucius*, from LEGGE.

at the outset but we need to remove all the possible dirt that could darken it. The two readings are not mutually exclusive though their focus varies. They both refer to the fact that every one has to take care of one's own moral growth.

This "in renovating people" starts from the self to others. On the bathing tub of an Emperor of Tang 湯 dynasty there was an epigraph which read, "If you can one day renovate yourself, do so from day to day. Yea, let there be daily renovation". The renovation should go from self to others. There is also a further interpretation of the same expression which reads "in being kind to people" and it refers to the attitude that one needs to have when treating others. These two senses can be put together to mean that one should be kind to people from the bottom one's heart and only in this way can one be in a position to renew others. This, by way of consonance, recalls the Lord's saying, "I give you a new commandment: love one another as I do to you" (Jn 15:34). Newness is intimately related to love. Only in love can one renew people.

"To rest in the highest excellence" indicates a certain static sense. But it could also be understood in a dynamic sense, that is, "in not ceasing to do so until one arrives at the Supreme Good". The Supreme Good has certainly given a sense of the Transcendent towards which everyone is to strive. The emphasis, however, is not only centred on the Transcendent but also on the journey of the Great Learning which is intended to be an unceasing effort towards the Supreme Good.

This is essential to the Chinese wisdom. Any searching for truth which does not end up in its application to daily life has not yet reached the stage of wisdom. This aspect has a lot in common with the Biblical world, especially, in the so-called Wisdom literature.

These few sentences from the Great Learning, as shown above, can be interpreted in different ways. Christian interpretation is to capture its meaning in consonance with the biblical one without violating the Confucian sensibility. From that consonance one may move to a further convergence.

4.3. Confucian Sensibilities

It would be good to describe, even without being exhaustive, some major sensibilities common to the Confucians. Through these sensibilities

the literal meaning of the text may be more securely approached and distortions avoided. These sensibilities should not be taken as a single and isolated reality, for they are so interwoven that as one is being tackled, another is bound to come into play.

4.3.1. *Sense of Morality*

Putting oneself in proper relationship with others (king and ministers, parents and children, friends) and doing what is right are essential to Confucian morality.

The Master said, "Let everyone consider virtue (*jen* 仁) as what devolves on himself. One may not yield the performance of it even to his teacher"²².

The moral norms are in some way pre-established by Heavenly Truth (*tien li* 天理) which, though innate in one's conscience, is not easily understood, well used nor articulated by the ordinary people. However, through the daily practices of what is dictated by the conscience, one can realize these norms in a more explicit way. The moral experience is the human way leading to Heaven. Truths, especially those of the Transcendent, are to be attained through moral experiences. The direction of knowing them is from bottom upwards, because what is down to earth is always within the reach of the immediate experience. If a text is worth serious reading at all, it is because it has to do with the Way of Heaven (*tien tao* 天道).

4.3.2. *The Sense of Knowing and Doing*

To separate knowing from doing or vice versa is inconceivable for an authentic Confucian. Acquisition of knowledge aims at realizing something important in one's life. Knowing gives the guideline for doing, whereas doing confirms the truth of what comes to be known. To enunciate principles for life without putting them into practice is to miss the entire sense of truth-searching. Strong interconnectedness between knowing and doing is often found in Chinese literature.

²² *Analects*, Book 15, Chapter 35, from LEGGE.

“When Tsze-lu heard anything, if he had not yet succeeded in carrying it into practice, he was only afraid lest he should hear something else”²³.

4.3.3. *Sense of the Concrete*

Ordinary people do not like building up systems of truths or spending time for abstract speculation. If a Confucian has to accept certain truths at all, it is primarily because those truths touch the concrete life.

“The way of the superior man may be found, in its simple elements, in the intercourse of common men and women; but in its utmost reaches, it shines brightly through heaven and earth”²⁴.

“The path is not far from man. When men try to pursue a course, which is far from the common indications of consciousness, this course cannot be considered the path”²⁵.

Images, stories, myths, parables, symbols, dialogues, rites and rituals are often concrete means to convey the principles of life.

4.3.4. *Sense of the Whole*

“Systems of truths or values” are not easily perceived. The boundaries of accommodating every type of truth become vague and flexible. Often no exclusivist position is found. Ambiguity of words is not only inevitable but almost intended as well. As a matter of fact, in the Chinese classics there is ample room and liberty for various interpretations, because words are not to be imprisoned in abstract and stagnant concepts. Words are meant to accommodate different values of life, so that one may find the Wholeness by embracing whatever is said to be true of life. Truths are in need of words for transmission, but the same truths must be freed from words for the sake of understanding the Whole. It is taken for granted that the Whole should contain both what is negative (*yin* 陰) and what is positive (*yang* 陽). Only in the fusion and complementarity of the

²³ *Analects*, Book 5, Chapter 13, from LEGGE.

²⁴ *The Doctrine of the Mean*, Chapter 12, 4, from LEGGE.

²⁵ *The Doctrine of the Mean*, Chapter 13, 1, from LEGGE.

contrasting poles can one find the safe path or the “middle way” to the Whole.

“Let the states of equilibrium and harmony exist in perfection, and a happy order will prevail throughout heaven and earth, and all things will be nourished and flourish”²⁶.

4.3.5. *Sense of Integrating One’s Subjective Feeling*

Not unaware of the fact that ambiguity could lead to mere personal feeling, a Confucian when pondering on the meaning of a text makes use of certain devices to keep oneself from falling into harmful subjectivism. The first and foremost is to measure the understanding of a text against one’s own moral conscience. Understanding is such an activity as to dig into one’s own conscience so that the real human nature common to all may be revealed. This measure is to safeguard the validity and universality of doing as taught by, for example, the Golden rule:

“Not to do unto others as you would not wish done unto yourself”²⁷.

It naturally follows that one should avoid drawing any meaning from a text which could be harmful to the “self” and “others”. The common good and one’s personal integrity must be taken into account.

4.3.6. *Sense of Awaiting Instantaneous Enlightenment*

Conscious of the fact that human learning needs time and patience, a Confucian should not rush into any hasty conclusion. As for the truths of Heaven or the Transcendent, one may not easily find sure ground. It would be better for one to keep silence and wait rather than make wild statements, which are of no avail. It doesn’t mean that one should abandon the search for the Transcendent; rather one should start from what is more basic and sure within the reach of one’s experience.

“The Master said, ‘I prefer not speaking’. Tsze-kung said, ‘If you, Master, do not speak, what we, your disciples, shall have to record?’ The Master said, ‘Does

²⁶ *The Doctrine of the Mean*, Chapter 1, 5, from LEGGE.

²⁷ *Analects*, Book 12, Chapter 2, from LEGGE.

Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?”²⁸

However, the desire for the Whole does not allow one to dismiss the search for the truth of Heaven. One day desire will be met.

“If a man in the morning hears the right way, he may die in the evening without regret”²⁹.

As for the truths of daily life one should make strenuous efforts, since they are within one’s reach. The hardship and sufferings of the world are such that we might be tempted to think that less freedom would be a worthwhile cost to pay for less pain. Yet this is not the case for an authentic Confucian. The search for truth is such that one has a cost to pay. Truth is no “free lunch” but it has to be attained through freedom. The very worth of a person consists in gaining something true, beautiful and good through one’s free choice and effort. A Confucian can never tolerate being given anything without one’s dignified consent. Patience and perseverance, among others, are the indispensable cost, as says the proverb: “If one does not get through the cold of the snow and the chill of the wind, one will not get the fragrance of the plum blossom”.

As commonly believed, it is in one’s sincere and hard search that the “fragrance” will come, and that it will happen all of a sudden with great surprise and rewards. This is the so-called instantaneous enlightenment by shock³⁰. Truth, especially, that of the Transcendent is not to be obtained by one’s own planning and program. A truth, as it were, has its own pace and times to reveal itself to the searcher. This hints that despite all human efforts and cost truth still comes as a free gift. However, for those who are to receive such a gift, Heaven knows also how to prepare them for it.

²⁸ *Analects*, Book 17, Chapter 1-3, from LEGGE.

²⁹ *Analects*, Book 4, Chapter 8, from LEGGE.

³⁰ It is true that the Zen-Buddhists speak also of the instantaneous enlightenment by shock, but they will use the self-emptying method, namely, trying not only to empty any possible content of any conception but also to extinguish any desire of learning. This is a “negative” approach. A Confucian would make use of one’s great desire of learning to acquire knowledge, but at the end the insight of thorough understanding comes only suddenly. This is a “positive” approach.

“Thus when Heaven is about to confer a great office on any man, it first exercises his mind with suffering, and his sinews and bones with toil. It exposes his body to hunger, and subjects him to extreme poverty”³¹.

5. A Way of Conclusion: Openness and Balance

Ubi Ecclesia ibi Christus. When the Church speaks, it is Christ who speaks. When Christ speaks, he does so to all and not to a preclusive group, because Christ wanted to communicate the Divine truth and life to all. God, through the medium of creatures, stirs in reason an intuition of His power and His divinity (Rm 1:20). This is to say that the human spirit has been given the capacity to go beyond its natural bounds. Actually God created everything through the Eternal Word. The presence of the Word in the creatures guarantees their trustworthiness, when they divert the human mind towards God. In this sense culture, as product of the natural human spirit, has its intrinsic capacity to receive the divine Revelation, which is on the supernatural plane.

Such capacity, however, has been much weakened and damaged by original sin so much so that one may get lost amidst the creatures and unable to return to God. In fact, the Cross, by which Christ revealed the immense love of God, has gone beyond the wisdom of the wise (1 Cor 1:20). In this sense culture, as insufficient means to salvation, needs to be strengthened, uplifted or liberated by the divine Revelation.

Christianity first encountered Greek philosophy and dialogued with its followers respecting their cultural sensibility in order to proclaim the Gospel to them. As people were converted, a new Christian-Greek culture has been shaped through the harmonious convergence of Greek and Gospel values. The same thing may take place in China.

There is reason to believe that, as Christ, who in the capacity of the Incarnate Word speaks in the Church, so it is the same Christ, who in the capacity of the eternal Word, though in a different way, speaks in the Confucian texts, to the effect that there is a basic coherence that leads to a harmonious convergence. There is need somewhere for dialogue between Christians and Confucians so as to bring about the harmonious con-

³¹ *The Works of Mencius*, Book 4, *Kao Tsze*, Part II Chapter 15, 2, from LEGGE.

vergence of the two. It is only then that a new Christian Confucian culture will have the chance to come true.

Before summing up, I would also like to cite a small episode that may trigger a certain awareness of the harmony between the human search and divine revelation.

Mencius went to see king Hui of Liang. The king said, “Venerable sir, since you have not counted it far to come here, a distance of a thousand miles, may I presume that you are provided with counsels to profit my kingdom?” Mencius replied, “Why must your Majesty use that word profit? What I am provided with are counsels to benevolence (*jen* 仁) and righteousness (*yi* 義), and these are my only topics”³².

King Hui expresses his appreciation for the effort Mencius has made to come in the hope that such effort may bring some profit. Mencius, instead, tries to offer the counsels of benevolence and righteousness.

More often than not it happens to us too that in life we give preference to profits while forgetting the virtue of benevolence and righteousness. It is not profit, but rather it is only these correlative virtues that give rise to human worth. It is not easy to find an exact translation for *jen* and *yi*. They are not far from the senses of the Hebrew *hesed* (benevolent) and *'emet* (upright).

Now Jesus Christ coming from afar (by becoming man) also wanted to have a dialogue with humankind. The truth He wanted to manifest is precisely God’s compassion and righteousness: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace (Greek: *charis*, Hebrew: *hesed*) and truth (Greek: *aletheia*, Hebrew: *'emet*)” (Jn 1:14).

The ideal of a righteous man, according to Confucianism, is conceived as someone who prefers being killed to losing *jen*, sacrificing life to letting *yi* go. Now the Gospel affirms that Jesus is the one, who fulfils the ideal of righteousness on the cross. Put in the theological language of the fourth Gospel, the incarnate Word is the personified benevolence and righteousness of God. Such a language intends to bring into convergence the Greek and Hebrew thinking and have it based on the event of Christ. Now what a Christian would do in reading a Confucian text with the mind-set “in our favour” is to look for convenient terms or some “ambiguous thing” in which Christ may speak for Himself.

³² *The Works of Mencius*, Book 1, *King Hui of Liang*, Part I Chapter 1, 1-2, from LEGGE.

In other words, if the Eternal Word has in some way spoken through the Chinese culture, then it is the Incarnate Word who has to make it explicit. The dialogue is meant to create such a space in which Christ is to speak for Himself. What threatens human worth is to place profit above *jen* and *yi*. Any serious dialogue has to deal with this. The Catholics in China under the religious persecution gave a powerful witness because of their bravery of embracing Christian righteousness. Or, put in theological terms, it is the suffering Christ who in His body – the Church – is making dialogue with people who look for the ultimate meaning of life.

Of course, openness and balance are required. Openness is not without its weakness and limit. It readily lends itself to easy fanciful and forced interpretations. A balance must be well kept in hermeneutics of this kind. Both the Confucian sensibilities and the Christian traditions should be taken into account so as to safeguard this balance. Were Confucius alive today, with his eagerness to learn all the time, he would be most open-minded to all kinds of theologies of both East and West, and at the same time with his wisdom he would know how to keep the necessary balance.

In the field of theological knowledge, the expression always falls short of the mystery. Since no expression is perfect, additional expressions are not only possible, but beneficial for a fuller understanding of the mystery. In the Confucian perception of life, where experience has priority over rational discourse, the awareness of the limit of expressions becomes more significant. The ways of experiencing any reality are as diverse as its expressions.

Theological pluralism is thus justified but ought to meet the basic standards of revelation (as lived in the Church and conveyed through Scripture and Tradition), of the *sensus fidelium*, and of the Magisterium of the Church. DI is certainly right to call attention to Jesus Christ, the unique gift of God to all persons for their salvation, which remains the central issue of Christian belief. The Church must be concerned that the responses she gives to the pressing needs of contemporary culture are consistent with the contents of faith. The role of Jesus should never be excluded in any inter-religious dialogue where Christian faith is involved.

To round up this short reflection, I would like to put into evidence some salient points. The Christological affirmations of DI put us in guard against the relativistic tendencies while being involved in the inter-religious dialogue. In the

final stance the inter-religious dialogue is to create a space in favour of stirring up the human awareness of the original harmonious convergence between the presence of the Eternal Word in a culture and the Incarnate Word in the proclaiming Church. In this sense the culture has an intrinsic capacity to receive the proclamation of the Church through an authentic dialogue. The reception points to both the consent of the Gospel values in favour of the growth of humanity and a commitment of faith in Christ.

If it is the Word who speaks, it needs to be borne in mind the style which the historical Jesus used in the dialogue, above all, the charity and witness to the point of suffering and martyrdom.

The dialogue requires a profound knowledge of the culture in question. The reading, for instance, of a Confucian text from the Christian perspective is justified, if the surplus meanings found in a text is in harmony with the Confucian sensibility. It takes a certain creative openness that allows a fusion of two horizons, Confucian and Christian, in such a way that the meanings found in the texts – Confucian classics and Bible – may be mutually enriching and enlightening. It is the same God who speaks in both texts, even if in different ways.

The openness does not preclude immunity from errors and fragility. Hence it also requires balance. Both the Confucian sensibility and the Christian tradition have to be taken into account in order to safeguard the balance. In this regard, Confucius has left us very good examples too.

Thomas of Aquinas has already pointed out that the act of faith terminates at the reality but not at the expression of it. In the field of theological knowledge, the expression, in as much as produce from a certain culture, is often found inadequate when it attempts to define the unfathomable mystery.

Since no expression is perfect, other expressions, added later, are not only possible but are also useful for a better understanding of the mystery. Theological pluralism is always legitimate in so far as it is in conformity with the fundamental norms of the revelation lived and transmitted in the Church. This has been strongly recommended by DI. Inter-religious dialogue as encounter and fusion of cultures can contribute to the enrichment of theological thinking and expression. Dialogue with Confucianism is all worth trying, though this essay does not say much about the contributions Confucianism could make to Christianity.

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