Nothing to boast of: A Reformation insight

by Gilbert Meilaender in the May 31, 2005 issue

After all the media attention to things (Roman) Catholic in recent weeks, this may be a useful moment to reflect on the continuing significance of the Reformation. On April 24 the entire hour of *Meet the Press* was devoted to a roundtable discussion among Catholics of very diverse views. One moment, in particular, caught my attention.

Tim Russert, host of the program, had ventured with the panel into a discussion of *Dominus Iesus*, a declaration on "the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church" (though Tim did not put it quite that way). This declaration was issued in 2000 by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, headed by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

The declaration received considerable notice at the time it was released because it set itself—even if in carefully nuanced ways—against a kind of religious pluralism which believes that one religion is as good as another, as if all are paths to the same goal. Citing *Redemptoris missio*, an encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II, the declaration makes clear that Christ and his Spirit are free to act "outside the Church's visible boundaries"—though we can say no more about the nature of this action than that it works "in a way known to God" (citing *Gaudium et spes*, a document of the Second Vatican Council) and that "in ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel, to that faith without which it is impossible to please him" (referring here to *Ad gentes*, another Vatican II document). But however the Spirit of Christ accomplishes this in ways known only to God, what the Spirit does is graciously enable men and women to "share, though differently, in the same mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ," who is "the way, the truth, and the life."

Although Russert has written of his upbringing in a pious Catholic home, these nuances were largely lost on him. In the moment that caught my attention, Russert

directed a comment/question to one of the panelists, Father Thomas Bohlin of Opus Dei: “But if you are, in fact, Hindu or Buddhist or Muslim or Jewish or Protestant or whatever, and you live a good and decent and honorable life, you can achieve salvation.” (It’s hard to say for sure, but I do not think there was a question mark at the end of that sentence.) The implication of this remark seemed to be that *Dominus Iesus*—and, by virtue of his responsibility for that document, the new pope—had drawn back from this clear truth.

I cannot say that Father Bohlin distinguished himself in his reply, though Joseph Bottum, another of the panelists, later took an opportunity to note that one could hardly expect the pope to say that the fullness of salvation is to be found anywhere other than in the Roman Catholic Church. But the combination of naïveté and certitude in Russert’s comment is deadly, for it is not really a request for clarification or instruction.

With a great deal of work and considerable glossing, one might have managed to bring Russert’s comment into the ambit of Catholic teaching. Thus, for example, the Second Vatican Council’s “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (*Gaudium et spes*) states of the saving work of Jesus: “All this holds true not only for Christians but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.”

Likewise, the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” (*Lumen gentium*) teaches: “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.” By tenuous threads one might try to draw Russert’s comment into alignment with such statements.

But it would be hard work. For his comment misses at least three things. It misses, first, phrases such as “in whose hearts grace is active invisibly” and “moved by grace.” That is, it drains out the words that serve to connect his sentiment precisely to the saving work of Christ. Second, it fails to see that, however it may be that the Spirit of Christ manages to accomplish this in some “men of good will,” what the Spirit does is bring them into communion with Jesus. Thus, as *Dominus Iesus* puts it: “No one, therefore, can enter into communion with God except through Christ, by

the working of the Holy Spirit."

Most important, though, is a third defect. What a comment such as Russert's does is take the words of the church, crafted to treat as best we can the deep mystery of how God in Christ may deal graciously with those who have not heard the gospel, and turn them into a general principle which seems to apply generally—even to those sitting around the table at *Meet the Press*, all of whom in fact have heard the gospel. Whatever we say about how God may deal with devout adherents of non-Christian religions, Christians themselves should know that (in St. Paul's words) they have nothing to boast of before God. They have no claim on God and no ability of their own to please him. What Russert's comment seems to forget, *Dominus Iesus* (citing *Lumen gentium* yet again) does not: "All the children of the Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results, not from their own merits, but from the grace of Christ. If they fail to respond in thought, word, and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be more severely judged."

This statement on grace suggests the continuing importance for the whole church of the Reformation of the 16th century. If there is one point the church has learned—not only, but especially—from the Reformers, it is: we have no claim on God, nothing to boast of before God. That truth remains of great significance for the entire church. How is it that one with a pious Catholic upbringing should forget this?

Well, we are all prone to forget it—indeed, eager to forget it—though it may be that the Catholic language about "men of good will" all too readily invites us to forget it. (Surely, after all, if there are such people of good will, we must be among them!)

Because we all are inclined to forget this, and because some theological formulations may accentuate that inclination, the Reformation has a continuing significance for us today. Especially in a world marked by pluralism and constant talk of "global" realities, where asserting the universal significance of a particular Jew who was crucified and raised some 2,000 years ago will seem to some narrow and to others uncharitable, that central Reformation insight—that we have no claims on God—retains an important countercultural punch. It directs our attention not so much to the fate of peoples about whom we can say little more than that "in ways known to himself" God can lead them to the faith that pleases him, but, instead, to ourselves and the presumption with which we often assume to step into the presence of the Almighty.