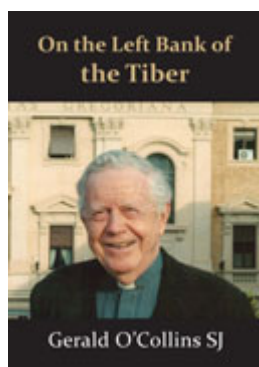


A look back on Dupuis' skirmish with the Vatican

Gerald O'Collins | Feb. 22, 2014



Editor's note: Gerald O'Collins was born in Australia in 1931, joined the Society of Jesus in

*1950, and began teaching systematic and fundamental theology in 1968. He has authored or co-authored 62 books -- notably *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus Christ* (1995) and *Jesus: A Portrait* (2008) -- and more book chapters and journal entries than can be easily counted. He has taught, it seems, at every major Catholic theological institution on four continents, but for three decades beginning in 1974, he called the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome home. On the Left Bank of the Tiber, the second volume of O'Collins' memoirs, celebrates that home and his vocation as a Catholic academic and theologian.*

In the preface to this book, O'Collins writes that many who don't live in Rome have the impression that an academic who does live there is either captive in a "clerical ghetto" or is "looking fearfully over his shoulder all the time [with] the Vatican's truth police menacingly bearing down on him." Though the chapter excerpt below recounts an episode of what O'Collins calls "the shadow side of the Vatican and its officials," he writes in his preface, "I found Rome to be at least as free and happy an environment for teaching as any I have experienced in North America, the British Isles, Australia, and other parts of the world."

I first met Belgian [Jesuit] theologian Jacques Dupuis (1923-2004) early in 1971 when I spent time with him at a Jesuit theological college (St. Mary's, Kurseong) in north India near Darjeeling, where he had been teaching theology since 1959. A strong friendship had been forged with "Jim," as I have always called him. Dupuis came to the Gregorian for a few weeks as a visiting professor. He seemed to enjoy the experience and in 1984 he joined our theology faculty. Dupuis quickly made his mark as a first-rate teacher. For 10 years (1985-95) he acted as an official consultant on the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, and played a key role in drafting a document jointly produced with the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, "Dialogue and Mission" (May 1991). This document broke new ground by reflecting on the relationship between dialogue with other religions and the Christian mission to proclaim Jesus Christ.

[His] 447-page *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* appeared more or less simultaneously in English, French and Italian at the end of 1997 and in Portuguese (1999) and Spanish (2000). Numerous reviews were appearing in English, French and Italian -- the first, a very positive review, in the Nov. 22, 1997, issue of *Avvenire*, which is owned by the bishops of Italy.

At Easter 1998, a tiny cloud appeared -- in the shape of a very negative article published by *Avvenire* in its issue

for April 14. Dupuis later learned that someone in the Vatican had commissioned that article. The [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith] had gone into action; strong criticisms were leveled against the book [at the doctrinal congregation on March 30 and April 4]. A CDF meeting on June 10, 1998, included a number of cardinals, one of whom afterward admitted that he had never read Dupuis' book. They voted in favor of taking action against the book, a step that would involve securing the pope's permission, which was forthcoming a week later. But Dupuis knew none of this at the time.

[On Oct. 2, 1998] Dupuis [was] stunned by a communication that had reached him [via the Jesuit superior general, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach]. A nine-page, single-spaced document developed 14 theses challenging *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*. A covering page explained that the CDF found in this work by Dupuis "serious errors or doctrinal ambiguities on doctrines of divine and Catholic faith concerning revelation, soteriology [teaching on salvation], Christology and the Trinity." The page ended by naming several "dangerous affirmations" that "cannot be safely taught," such as the application of "Mother" to the first person of the Trinity. Dupuis was given three months to reply. Dupuis began by spending two weeks in hospital. As a chronically sick man, this may have been inevitable. But the stress he experienced under the quite unexpected onslaught from the CDF unquestionably played its part.

At the time, I was a visiting professor at Marquette University in Milwaukee. On Dupuis' behalf, the dean of theology phoned me with the bad news, asking me to act as the one adviser the CDF allowed Dupuis. I was particularly astonished and scandalized at the poor quality of much of the 14 theses prepared by the CDF, which repeatedly attributed to him views that he had not only never expressed in the book but also had in several passages explicitly rejected: for example, the bizarre notion of different heavens for the followers of different religious traditions. Thesis one attacked him for interpreting the Bible along the very lines recommended by the Pontifical Biblical Commission's "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (1993), the document for which [CDF head] Cardinal [Joseph] Ratzinger had himself written the preface!

On Jan. 16, 1999, the London *Tablet* carried a two-page article, "In Defence of Fr. Dupuis," by Cardinal Franz König, retired archbishop of Vienna, a prominent personality at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), a longtime advocate of interreligious dialogue, and someone who was reputed to have played a major role in the election of John Paul II. The archbishop of Calcutta and some other Catholic leaders had already expressed their support for Dupuis, but König's powerful advocacy could not be ignored.

Shortly after that interview appeared, *The Tablet* carried an English translation of an open letter addressed to Cardinal König and signed by Cardinal Ratzinger. Ratzinger began by expressing his "astonishment" and "sadness" about König's article, and then went on to claim that the CDF's action "had consisted simply in sending some confidential questions to Fr. Dupuis and nothing more than that." He rejected König's statement that the CDF "may well suspect him [Dupuis] of directly or indirectly violating the Church's teaching." I read these assertions with both sadness and astonishment. What Dupuis had received from the CDF included much more than "some confidential questions." It began with fierce charges about the orthodoxy of Dupuis's book; he was explicitly accused of directly violating church teaching. It made me sad that Cardinal Ratzinger (or, presumably, someone at the CDF writing in his name) could be so economical with the truth.

The letter to König repeatedly referred to the CDF's desire to "dialogue" with Dupuis and to "consult him personally." "If this is dialogue," I thought, "I would hate to see confrontation!" Cardinal Ratzinger had never met Dupuis nor contacted him personally by phone or letter, let alone asked to sit down with him for a discussion.

When Dupuis submitted his lengthy response [in December], he received no acknowledgment. Months of silence followed, and that played on Dupuis' nerves. In February 1999, he fell ill. The response came at the end of July. It began with a letter that welcomed the clarifications, but said nothing about the many places where he

had shown the CDF's theses to be mistaken. Once again, the CDF gave Dupuis three months to reply.

Dupuis' skirmish with the CDF was making me cry out for more love and more justice in the church. Primarily for love. The CDF's misgivings about his book might have been solved by a phone call or by a personal invitation to join Cardinal Ratzinger over afternoon tea for a serious, face-to-face discussion. They never met until September 2000, and they lived less than 3 miles from each other!

[In the summer of 2000] Dupuis was still waiting for any reaction to the 60-page reply (which he had submitted in November 1999) to the second document received from the CDF. In the middle of August, he contacted me with the news that the CDF had prepared a "declaration" (*Dominus Iesus*) on Christ's unique and universal impact as savior and a "notification" on his book. Cardinal Ratzinger had invited him to a meeting scheduled for 9:30 a.m. on Monday, Sept. 4, the day before *Dominus Iesus* was to be published.

On Friday, Sept. 1, Dupuis received copies of the 15-page "notification" on his book and the 32-page text of *Dominus Iesus*, both officially approved by the pope the previous June 16. We had the weekend to digest the two documents and prepare our comments. We knew that the CDF intended to publish *Dominus Iesus* on Tuesday, Sept. 5, and the "notification" against Dupuis later in the same week. When rejecting "certain" false views about Christ and other religions, *Dominus Iesus* provided no names. But following up its publication within a few days by also publishing the "notification" would indicate that Dupuis was the target or at least a major target of *Dominus Iesus*. He was to be hit twice within the same week.

The morning of the meeting in the CDF building was oppressively hot. Cardinal Ratzinger sat in the middle, with Fr. Kolvenbach, Dupuis and myself on his left and Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone (secretary of the CDF) and Angelo Amato (as a CDF consultant) on his right. Copies of Dupuis' book were spread around the table. But there were no bottles of water available, nor was any tea or coffee ever made available. When Ratzinger asked Dupuis to speak, he seemed a little surprised when Dupuis said that I would be speaking on his behalf.

The cardinal gave me nearly an hour to press home my defense of Dupuis. I illustrated my unease about the inaccurate and even false use of biblical references and quotations in the "notification." I suggested, in conclusion, that the CDF might reduce the text to the eight positive propositions that it had already listed: for instance, that Jesus Christ is the universal mediator of salvation for all human beings. "All of us here, starting from Fr. Dupuis," I said, "could happily subscribe to this list." I had typed out the eight propositions on one page, ready for everyone's signature. For good measure, I added: "We all know that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has a negative public image. To publish a set of positive formulations on which Fr. Dupuis and the congregation agree would end the affair happily, surprise the media, and do some real good."

When I finished, Cardinal Ratzinger commented: "Fr. O'Collins, I see that you share the views of Fr. Dupuis." I thought it neither the time nor the place to reply: "Eminence, a lawyer is not his client." The cardinal was obviously impressed by my protests over the misuse of Scripture: "Let's drop all the biblical references and leave the discussion to the exegetes." It was also clear that he could not go ahead and publish the "notification" as it stood.

Before adjourning the meeting, Ratzinger asked Dupuis whether he would help the CDF improve the text of the "notification." "But I have already sent you 260 pages of answers to your questions," Dupuis protested. He looked amazed when the cardinal then retorted: "You can't expect us to read and study all that material." Ratzinger then asked Dupuis: "Would you agree that your book should be understood in the light of *Dominus Iesus*?" "You are asking too much, Eminence," Dupuis replied.

With that, the meeting ended, and the "notification" was not published. A document approved for publication by the pope the previous June was quietly dropped.

The following day, as planned, the CDF published the declaration on "the uniqueness and saving universality of Jesus Christ and the Church," *Dominus Iesus*. Right from the press conference that presented it, the document with its repeatedly negative tone raised a storm of protests, especially about the relations of the Catholic church to others. Various Christians, including such leaders as the head of the Anglican Communion, Archbishop George Carey, felt that some unfortunate remarks the document included about what it called "ecclesial communities" undercut progress made through ecumenical dialogues. Muslims and others were upset by a passage about "followers of other religions" being in "a gravely deficient situation." Jews were offended by the way it glossed over their special relationship to the church. A day of dialogue in Rome between Jews and Christians scheduled for Oct. 3 was canceled. *Dominus Iesus* upset followers of world religions and Christians concerned with interreligious dialogue by distinguishing between the "faith" proper to Christians and the mere "belief" that followers of other religions profess.

[In December, Dupuis received] a new, if much shorter (only seven instead of 15 pages), version of the "notification," which the CDF sent him through Fr. Kolvenbach. The three pages of background information in the new text made no reference either to the first version or to the meeting of Sept. 4. It had been approved for publication by the pope in an audience with Cardinal Ratzinger on Nov. 24. Dupuis was asked to sign at once without any further discussion. Every scriptural reference and much else had been dropped -- in particular, some strange pages that had played down the role of the Holy Spirit in the work of human redemption. But the new version maintained the unjust style of adding after six of the positive formulations "hence it is against Catholic faith to hold" so and so -- with the (unproved) implication that Dupuis held such a false view. However, this new text, instead of speaking of "errors and serious ambiguities," had softened matters to "serious ambiguities and difficulties," while adding that, "independently of the author's intentions," the book could lead readers to adopt "erroneous or dangerous opinions." Despite his misgivings about the way the CDF would interpret his signature, in mid-December Dupuis signed this second version of the "notification."

When the CDF finally published the "notification" on Feb. 26, 2001, it turned out to be a third version, officially approved by the pope a month earlier and somewhat different from the text Dupuis had signed before Christmas. What distressed Dupuis, however, were four new lines in the document: "With his signature of the text the author has committed himself to agree with the theses set out [in the notification] and in his future theological activity and publications to follow the doctrinal contents indicated in the notification, the text of which will have to appear in reprints, new editions or translations of the book in question." After Dupuis had signed the document, it seemed an abuse to add such a passage without his knowledge.

With what he called "a sense of recovered though limited freedom," Dupuis returned to his writing and lecturing. Dupuis was back on the road, or more often in the air, to deliver lectures. Through 2003, these invitations were to take him to Belgium, France, Holland, India, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Switzerland, Thailand and the United States, as well as to various cities within Italy. A bit reluctantly, he came to recognize that "the measures taken" by the CDF, besides bringing him "to the notice of theologians the world over and eliciting much sympathy," also massively boosted the sales of *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* in five languages.

[As Dupuis celebrated his 80th birthday Dec. 5, 2003], I hoped that the sufferings that Dupuis had endured were now over. But the last year of his life turned very painful, not least because of a further challenge coming from the CDF [that Dupuis publications in 2004] undermined the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

Dupuis felt sick at heart over the renewed attack and was ready to let Fr. Kolvenbach arrange for me to meet [with the CDF] and discuss the new assault. That meeting was to take place in early 2005. Dupuis died Dec. 28, 2004, and so I never had the chance of returning to the CDF on his behalf.

The challenge Dupuis took up when he wrote his major work remains. For him and the CDF alike, the central

question is the same: how to profess faith in Jesus Christ as the one redeemer of all human beings, while simultaneously following Pope John Paul II in recognizing the Holy Spirit at work in the religions and cultures of the world. Perhaps we cannot do much more than explore the foothills of God's majestic providence for all humanity and the created cosmos.

[Jesuit Fr. Gerald O'Collins' memoir, *On the Left Bank of the Tiber*, has been published in Australia by Connor Court and in the United Kingdom by Gracewing. An American publisher is expected to announce release dates for the book soon.]

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