

Integrity of Church Doctrine and Christian Unity

July 12, 2007, by Fr. Dean McFalls, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Lathrop

Recently, Pope Benedict XVI made headlines again as he ratified a document by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. According to the Associated Press (Nicole Winfield, July 10th), he “reasserted the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church, approving a document released Tuesday that says other Christian communities are either defective or not true churches and Catholicism provides the only true path to salvation”.

Winfield continues: “The statement brought swift criticism from Protestant leaders. ‘It makes us question whether we are indeed praying together for Christian unity,’ said the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, a fellowship of 75 million Protestants in more than 100 countries. ‘It makes us question the seriousness with which the Roman Catholic Church takes its dialogues with the reformed family and other families of the church.’” The AP article, carried in papers nationwide, sites a letter by the WARC charging that the document took ecumenical dialogue back to the era before the Second Vatican Council of 1963 - ’65.

The Vatican’s document, though, only sought to clarify what the Catholic Church has always taught officially: that to be authentically “Church” in the fullest sense of the word, the fellowship of believers must share these four characteristics: “one”, “holy”, “catholic”, and “apostolic”. These qualities of the true Church founded by Jesus Christ are identified in the Nicene (or Nicene) Creed, which is shared by millions of Christians in many denominations (see “www.christianitysite.com/NiceneCreed.htm” for a simple presentation, or “catholic.com”, or “catholicconvert.com”. For official documents, see “Vatican Congregation Doctrine of the Faith”).

In its document, the Congregation quotes Pope Paul VI regarding a similar statement made in 1965: “There is no better comment to make than to say that this promulgation really changes nothing of the traditional doctrine. What Christ willed, we also will. What was, still is. What the Church has taught down through the centuries, we also teach. In simple terms that which was assumed, is now explicit; that which was uncertain, is now clarified; that which was meditated upon, discussed and sometimes argued over, is now put together in one clear formulation”.

This formulation never denied that salvation is available to non-Catholics.

Since the beginning, theologians have wondered - and argued - about the exact interpretation of the terms “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic”.

And Christians of every description have tried to adapt these terms to the circumstances of their own churches, at times stretching their meaning.

Or they’ve tried to point out how other groups lack one or more of these characteristics. Nearly every community is challenged on the first two.

The most current controversy relates to the question of whether or not a Christian church is truly “Apostolic”. Here is the conclusion of the Vatican’s official document, ratified by Pope Benedict: “Fifth Question: Why do the texts of the Council and those of the Magisterium since the Council not use the title of ‘Church’ with regard to those Christian Communities born out of the Reformation of the sixteenth century?”

“Response: According to Catholic doctrine, these Communities do not enjoy apostolic succession in the sacrament of Orders, and are, therefore, deprived of a constitutive element of the Church. These ecclesial Communities which, specifically because of the absence of the sacramental priesthood, have not preserved the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic Mystery cannot, according to Catholic doctrine, be called ‘Churches’ in the proper sense.” Here, “apostolic succession” refers to the direct, unbroken lineage of sacramental ordination from the apostles of Jesus to the bishops and priests of today:

“Thus the risen Christ, by giving the Holy Spirit to the apostles, entrusted to them his power of sanctifying: they became sacramental signs of Christ. By the power of the same Holy Spirit they entrusted this power to their successors. This ‘apostolic succession’ structures the whole liturgical life of the Church and is itself sacramental, handed on by the sacrament of Holy Orders” (par 1087, Catechism of the Catholic Church).

Benedict’s predecessor, John Paul II, was highly committed to ecumenical dialogue – that is, to the communication that seeks to bridge the gaps that have divided the Body of Christ through emphasizing what we hold in common. “However,” the Congregation warns, “if such dialogue is to be truly constructive it must involve not just the mutual openness of the participants, but also fidelity to the identity of the Catholic faith.” True dialogue does require that the parties have a clear sense of their own identity. On the other hand, one’s identity should not negate the other’s.

That's the problem. The document sounds harsh to the members of other Christian communities, as well as to many Catholics concerned with promoting greater unity and mutual respect. The reaction has been heated.

As a Christian who became Catholic at age 25, and who's never doubted the rightness of that choice since then, I appreciate what the Vatican document has tried to clarify. But as an active Christian before coming to the Catholic Church, who has no Catholics anywhere in my family, and who benefits greatly by association with pastors of other fellowships, I've been struggling with the impact of the Vatican document on ecumenism.

Words are extremely important. We have to clarify exactly where Jesus stood when he founded the Church, and exactly what he intended for his followers. As we do this, we have to hold in balance his promise that the Spirit would lead us into the fullness of truth with the urgent concern he had that his disciples be united in love, not only in the correct doctrine.

The Church has to be both compassionate Mother and disciplined Father.

How does a person defend the integrity of one's own version of the faith without questioning the integrity of other versions which may disagree?

Jesus did institute one church. Does that church "subsist" in Catholicism, in such a way that all other groups (including the Orthodox) are deficient?

Tough questions. To make things simpler, I've asked permission from my Bishop, Stephen E. Blaire, to reprint his press release. President of the Committee for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs for the Bishops of the United States, he has a special concern to keep the dialogue going.

Before reading on, you might be interested to know that the "*prefect*" overseeing the Congregation's document was William Cardinal Levada, former Archbishop of San Francisco and thus colleague of Bishop Blaire.

Cardinal Levada's responsibility is to articulate and to enforce the correct interpretation of the Catholic Faith for its more than one billion followers.

Bishop Blaire's responsibility includes the careful cultivation of dialogue and collaboration with all Christians and with people of other religions.

They represent two necessary missions in one and the same Church. For this reason, you can't understand the Church if you don't see both views.

Bishop Blaire Responds to Recent Statement from the Vatican

Jesus in his priestly prayer before his imminent death implored God, “May they be one, Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you.” The Catholic Church is deeply committed to Christian Unity and to acting on these words of Jesus. I therefore consider it important to clarify possible misconceptions about the recent statement coming from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and ratified by Pope Benedict XVI.

Let me first of all say how much we respect our Christian brothers and sisters. In the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church affirmed that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church and is also “present and operative in the churches and ecclesial communities not yet fully in communion with the Catholic Church.” While the Catholic Church believes that there may be essential elements missing in other churches and ecclesial communities, she clearly acknowledges the elements of truth and sanctification that are in them.

In reality there is nothing new in this statement which has not already been discussed in ecumenical dialogue for 40 years. It is a response to a number of questions submitted to the Congregation about certain Catholic theologians who may have gone beyond legitimate interpretations of Vatican II teaching.

The document in no way states that salvation is to be found only in the Catholic Church. Salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ. The work of Christian Unity is the work of the Holy Spirit. Let us pray for this great gift of God and recommit ourselves to walking humbly on the path to oneness in Christ.

I thank Bishop Blaire for his efforts to maintain a delicate balance between the diverse missions of the Church: Truth and Unity. May the Lord who died an outcast of his own religious community not have died in vain. Yes, he came to lead us into the fullness of truth. But he came to lead us there together. As a life-long seeker for the Truth, I hope that no one will settle for myths or a man-made religion. But as a Catholic who continues to learn much from other Christians, and who finds many saints among them, I pray that we may never give up the struggle to unite the broken Body of Christ. United in Truth, we will truly be his disciples.