

What the Church Is New Vatican Document Clarifies Misunderstandings

by Fr. Raymond J. De Souza

VATICAN CITY — Reaching out to one group can look like reaching away from another. In substance as well as timing, a new Vatican document can be understood as being of a piece with the motu proprio apostolic letter *Summorum Pontificum* (Of the Supreme Pontiffs), which normalized the use of the old Latin Mass. Like the Latin Mass document, the new question-and-answer document was signed on June 29 and released July 10. It's called "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church," and it was signed by Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The document is meant to clarify Catholic doctrine on the Church. But soon after its publication, it was accused of damaging ecumenical relations. The document restates how Orthodox and Protestant Christians lack essential elements of what Christ willed for his Church. Yet that reaction is beside the main point, in that the document was aimed not at ecumenical relations with the Church's traditional partners, but at fostering unity with traditionalist Catholics who broke away after the Second Vatican Council. The document answers five questions.

The first three deal with how Catholics understand the Catholic Church: Did the Second Vatican Council change the Catholic doctrine on the Church? What is the meaning of the affirmation that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church? Why was the expression "subsists in" adopted instead of the simple word "is"? The fourth and fifth questions, respectively, ask why the Catholic Church uses the word "church" for the Orthodox Churches, but not the "Christian communities" that emerged from the Protestant Reformation. The main point of the document is that the Catholic Church is the one, true Church, lacking nothing that Christ Jesus willed for his Church to be. That is what is meant by "the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church."

At the same time, elements of "sanctification and truth" can be found in other Christian denominations and communities, even if they lack all that Christ willed for his Church. That is why the phrase "the Church of Christ is the Catholic Church" was not used — to recognize that the grace of Christ is not absent from other Christians. Because the Orthodox lack the communion with Peter that Christ willed, they do lack something "constitutive" of the Church. Yet because they have maintained apostolic succession and maintain valid ordinations, sacraments and the Eucharist, they are properly called "churches."

The Protestants, on the other hand, cannot be called "churches," as they lack apostolic succession, valid ordinations and, consequently, the Eucharist. Such clarifications of authentic Catholic doctrine can be painful for other Christians to hear, but are essential for ecumenical dialogue to proceed on a solid basis. The recent document only restates the principal points of Vatican II. "The Church is not backtracking on its ecumenical commitment," Dominican Father Augustine Di Noia, undersecretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, told Vatican Radio. "But ... it is fundamental to any kind of dialogue that the participants are clear about their own identity." Yet the unity and uniqueness of the Catholic Church were clarified just seven years ago in *Dominus Iesus* (The Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church), a Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith document on the Church, signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. At the time, it raised such howls of protest that Pope John Paul II took the extraordinary step of defending the document in an Angelus address. So why return to this now?

The key is the first question: "Did the Second Vatican Council change the Catholic doctrine on the Church?" That is not a question urgently put by either Orthodox or Protestant theologians. Yet it is of principal importance to those who follow the path of the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who believe that the Church did in fact change her teaching at Vatican II. "The Second Vatican Council neither changed nor intended to change this doctrine, rather it developed, deepened and more fully explained it," *Dominus Iesus* begins. "This was exactly what John XXIII said at the beginning of the council. Paul VI affirmed it and commented in the act of promulgating the constitution *Lumen Gentium*: '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.'"

To hammer the point home, the document does something unusual. In an extensive footnote, it not only quotes from the council documents, but cites several of the debates at the council and earlier drafts. The document takes pains to show that not even the intention or spirit, let alone the letter, of conciliar teaching attempted to change the traditional doctrine on the Church. The clear audience for such arguments are the Lefebvrists; for everybody else the Congregation for the Doctrine for the Faith responses merely restated what was already well known. For years, Lefebvrists have complained that the Catholic Church's ecumenical outreach was more vigorously pursued for those farther from the Church than it was for them. There are reasons for that, but to the extent that it was true, it has been partially corrected by this document. The message is plain enough: If you are concerned that Vatican II changed Catholic doctrine on the Church, be assured that it didn't. The same teaching that was, still is.

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Father Raymond De Souza is the Register's former Rome correspondent

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