

Vatican congregation reaffirms truth, oneness of Catholic Church

VATICAN CITY - In a brief document, the Vatican's doctrinal congregation reaffirmed that the Catholic Church is the one, true church, even if elements of truth can be found in separated churches and communities.

Touching an ecumenical sore point, the document said some of the separated Christian communities, such as Protestant communities, should not properly be called "churches" according to Catholic doctrine because of major differences over the ordained priesthood and the Eucharist.

The Vatican released the text July 10. Titled "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church," it was signed by U.S. Cardinal William J. Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and approved by Pope Benedict XVI before publication.

In a cover letter, Cardinal Levada asked the world's bishops to do all they can to promote and present the document to the wider public.

The text was the latest chapter in a long-simmering discussion on what the Second Vatican Council intended when it stated that the church founded by Christ "subsists in the Catholic Church," but that elements of "sanctification and truth" are found outside the Catholic Church's visible confines.

The related discussion over the term "churches" surfaced publicly in 2000, when the doctrinal congregation - then headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict - said the term "sister churches" was being misused in ecumenical dialogue.

In a format of five questions and answers, the new document stated that Vatican II did not change Catholic doctrine on the church. It said use of the phrase "subsists in" was intended to show that all the elements instituted by Christ endure in the Catholic Church.

The sanctifying elements that exist outside the structure of the Catholic Church can be used as instruments of salvation, but their value derives from the "fullness of grace and truth which has been entrusted to the Catholic Church," it said, quoting from Vatican II's "Decree on Ecumenism."

The text said the Second Vatican Council used the term "church" in reference to

Orthodox churches because, although separated from the Catholic Church, they have preserved apostolic succession, the ordained priesthood and the Eucharist. Nevertheless, they “lack something in their condition as particular churches” because they are not in union with the pope, it said.

The Christian communities born out of the Reformation, on the other hand, do not enjoy apostolic succession – the unbroken succession of bishops going back to St. Peter – and therefore “cannot, according to Catholic doctrine, be called ‘churches’ in the proper sense,” it said.

In his cover letter, Cardinal Levada said the document came in response to critical reactions to the teaching of “Dominus Iesus,” another doctrinal congregation document of 2000, which said the Catholic Church was necessary for salvation, and to ongoing confusion over interpretations of the phrase “subsists in.”

An authoritative commentary published July 10 in the Vatican newspaper, L’Osservatore Romano, said the congregation had acted to protect the unity and uniqueness of the church. The document, the commentary said, took aim at the notion that the “church of Christ” was “the sum total of the churches or the ecclesial communities” or that it exists only as a future goal.

“If this were the case, the church of Christ would not any longer exist in history, or would exist only in some ideal form emerging either through some future convergence or through the reunification of the diverse sister churches,” it said.

What Vatican II intended was to recognize ecclesial elements in non-Catholic communities, it said.

“It does not follow that the identification of the church of Christ with the Catholic Church no longer holds, nor that outside the Catholic Church there is a complete absence of ecclesial elements, a ‘churchless void,’” it said.

The council’s wording does not signify that the Catholic Church has ceased to regard itself as the one true church of Christ but that it recognizes that true ecclesial realities exist beyond its own visible boundaries, it said.

Regarding the doctrinal congregation’s insistence that communities originating from the Reformation are not churches, the article said:

“Despite the fact that this teaching has created no little distress in the communities concerned and even among some Catholics, it is nevertheless difficult to see how the title of ‘church’ could possibly be attributed to them, given that they do not accept the theological notion of the church in the Catholic sense and that they lack

elements considered essential to the Catholic Church.”

The commentary said that, at first glance, Catholic ecumenism might seem somewhat paradoxical, because it holds that the Catholic Church has the “fullness” of the means for salvation, but recognizes the value of elements in other churches.

The Catholic Church’s teaching, it said, is that the fullness of the church “already exists, but still has to grow in the brethren who are not yet in full communion with it and also in its own members who are sinners.”

U.S. Dominican Father J. Augustine Di Noia, undersecretary of the doctrinal congregation, said the document does not call into question Pope Benedict’s pledge to work for ecumenical progress.

“The church is not backtracking on its ecumenical commitment. But ... it is fundamental to any kind of dialogue that the participants are clear about their own identity,” he told Vatican Radio.

Father Di Noia said the document touches on a very important experiential point: that when people go into a Catholic church and participate in Mass, the sacraments and everything else that goes on there, they will find “everything that Christ intended the church to be.”