

'Church' document gives opportunity to evangelize

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Great attention (most of it negative) has been paid to a document issued about the Catholic Church by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on July 10. The document, entitled "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church," has been the source of articles, letters, posts on Web sites, and editorials. Within this controversy, there is great opportunity for Catholics to witness to the truth — to evangelize.

The Vatican wrote this document to theologians, in order to answer precise theological questions that have arisen in the years since Vatican II. Therefore, since the Vatican was not intending any controversy, they did not attach an explanation of the document, as they did a few days prior, with the release of the document that allows for a wider use of the 1962 Missal (Tridentine Rite).

Consequently, without a formal explanation of the document, many major media outlets and various non-Catholic Christians found a source of "controversy" when they read the statement about Protestant communities in the document. It says that Protestant denominations cannot "be called 'Churches' in the proper sense."

What followed were the eye-catching headlines many of us read — "Pope: Other Christian Denominations Not True Churches" (Associated Press), "Vatican: Non-Catholics 'wounded' by not recognizing pope" (Reuters) and "If it isn't Roman Catholic then it's not a proper Church, Pope tells Christians" (Times Online).

This "controversy" lies in the misunderstanding that the Catholic

not, according to Catholic doctrine, be called 'churches' in the proper sense."

Because Protestant denominations do not have apostolic succession, the sacramental priesthood, or the Eucharist, they are not "church" in the strict definition the document is using. This is exactly what was taught in Vatican II. Nothing has changed, and it is important to note that the Catholic Church does not question any

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Church is teaching something new about itself and other Christians, which is inaccurate. The document says this about Protestant denominations: "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 can-

not, according to Catholic doctrine, be called 'churches' in the proper sense." Nor does the document say that grace is not present in other Christian communities. Rather, it is merely answering a theological question — what does it mean to be a "church"?

Some commentators have said that such a statement is divisive to ecumenical efforts (the search for Christian unity). In reality, ecumenism cannot move forward if any group denies what they teach to be true, because truth cannot be sacrificed for the sake of

unity. Therefore, the Catholic Church can do nothing better than to clearly teach what it believes to be true about itself. This is not a disservice to other Christians at all, but rather it helps us all to clarify where we differ in belief. Straight talk in theological dialogue is necessary, not optional, as long as it is done in charity.

For my part, I get excited when these controversies arise. Why? Because a controversy with this measure of publicity gives each of us an opportunity to share the truth with others — the opportunity to evangelize. With this controversy, we have the occasion to clarify what the Catholic Church teaches and to do so in love. When the truth is presented in a calm, loving, and informed manner, it is attractive.

For example, when a Protestant minister wrote a letter to the editor of our local newspaper complaining about this document, I was able, in a corresponding letter, to answer his concerns and also ask him to lunch to discuss the issue. He has not responded yet, but he knows I am willing to talk about it. Now, other readers of the paper also know that Catholics are certainly interested in Christian unity, truth and sharing it with others.

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