

“Response to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church”

Archpriest John W. Morris

From the WORD Magazine October Issue

The recently published Vatican document, “Response to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church,” has caused a fire storm of controversy. In the form of a set of questions and answers, the treatise, published with the blessing of Pope Benedict XVI, attempts to clarify the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on the nature of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. In the document, Rome declares that the Second Vatican Council that brought so many changes to Roman Catholicism did not change traditional Roman Catholic doctrine, especially the doctrine concerning the nature of the Church. For this reason, the document declares that the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church “subsists” in the Roman Catholic Church alone. Although William Cardinal Levada, the author of the document, recognizes that Christians outside of the Roman Church may be saved, he considers all other Christian groups defective. However, he makes a distinction between Protestants and “oriental Churches,” including the Eastern Orthodox Church. He recognizes the sacraments and Apostolic Succession of the Orthodox Church, but states that the Orthodox Churches “lack something in their condition as particular churches” because of their separation from Rome. Because they lack valid Apostolic Succession and valid Sacraments, the documents call Protestant groups “communities” rather than churches.¹

As can be expected, Protestants and other non-Catholics found this document highly offensive. The Rev. Dr. Setri Nyomi of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches issued a statement declaring that Rome has gone “against the spirit of our Christian calling toward oneness in Christ.” Dr. Gerald B. Kieschnick, the President of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod said, “Martin Luther said, ‘Popes and councils can err.’ Apparently that is still true today.”² The Rev. Dr. David Philips, General Secretary of the Church Society in the United Kingdom, was more blunt. He said, “Nothing new is said, but it does clarify the way in which the Vatican has torn apart Christianity because of its lust for power.”³ Pope Shenouda III, the leader of the Coptic Church remarked, “The man (Pope Benedict) makes enemies every time.”⁴

Others, however, were surprised by the hostile response of some Christians because they found nothing new in the declaration. Dr. R. Albert Mohler, a leading Southern Baptist theologian, said, “No one familiar with the statements of the Roman Catholic Magisterium should be surprised by this development,”⁵ Metropolitan Kirill, of Smolensk and Kaliningrad of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations, said that it is “an honest statement [...] much better than the so-called ‘Church diplomacy.’ It shows how close or, on the contrary, how divided we are.” In response to the document, he added, “The Orthodox Church is, according to Apostolic Succession, successor and heir to the old, undivided Church. Which is why everything contained in the Catholic document rightfully applies to the Orthodox Church.”⁶ The Council of Bishops of

the United Methodist Church issued a statement declaring that they “find nothing new or radically different from classical Roman Catholic ecclesiology” in the document.⁷ It is really rather amazing that anyone is surprised that Pope Benedict is a Catholic and teaches traditional Roman Catholic doctrine.

Despite the angry response of some Protestants, the document is rather mild in comparison to other papal statements. In 1302, Pope Boniface VIII issued “Unam Sanctam,” perhaps the most famous summary of papal claims made during the Middle Ages. Boniface not only demanded spiritual obedience to the Bishop of Rome as the head of the Church, but claimed authority over all secular governments. Boniface wrote, “We declare, state, define and pronounce that it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pontiff.”⁸ In the centuries that followed, the Popes successfully defeated every effort to limit their growing power and emerged supreme, beyond the authority of any earthly power, including an ecumenical council. The expansion of papal authority reached its climax in 1870 at the First Vatican Council, which proclaimed the doctrine of papal infallibility and anathematized, that is, cast out of the Church, all who refused to recognize papal supremacy.⁹ By recognizing that salvation is possible for those who reject the authority of Rome, the new document is much more tolerant than previous statements by the Vatican.

Unfortunately, the discussions caused by this document have degenerated down to arguments about the recognition of particular Churches. Despite the anger of the Protestants, the real issue is not whether or not the Pope or anyone else recognizes their groups as part of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. The real issue is what it means to be a Church. Protestants, Roman Catholics and Orthodox have three different understandings of what makes a community of believers’ part of the Church. To take this disagreement as a personal insult only obscures the real issue and prevents a serious and honest discussion between Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants of what they mean when they speak of the Church.

The Roman Catholic Church understanding of the Church can be defined as papal or institutional. Roman Catholics believe that Christ built His Church on the person of St. Peter. Thus, Roman Catholics believe that all Christians owe obedience to his successor, the Bishop of Rome. Roman Catholics consider the Pope the Vicar of Christ and supreme Head of the Church. The official *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor to the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered.”¹⁰ Thus, to be part of the true Church, a group of Christians must accept the supreme authority of the Pope. For this reason, the document states that the Catholic Church “subsists” in the Church of Rome. According to Roman Catholic doctrine, those communities of Christians outside of communion with Rome are either defective like the Orthodox, or like the Protestants lack the attributes of a Church.

The Orthodox Church cannot accept the papal for institutional concept of the Church, for many reasons. Orthodoxy strives to remain faithful to the beliefs and practices of the ancient undivided Church. As can be seen from a study of the

decisions of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, the Bishop of Rome did not exercise anything close to the kind of power now claimed by the Popes during this crucial period of Church history. In addition to defining the doctrine of the ancient undivided Church, the councils adopted canons, or rules, to regulate the administration of the Church. Canon VI of the First Ecumenical Council, Nicea I in 325, only granted the Bishop of Rome authority over Churches in the West and affirmed the independence of the Churches of Alexandria and Antioch. In time, the Churches of Constantinople and Jerusalem joined the list of independent or autocephalous Churches. Thus, instead of a centralized Church built on the person of the Pope, the canons of the Ecumenical Councils treat the Church as a federation of autocephalous or independent local Churches. The First Ecumenical Council also mandated that bishops should be elected locally, not appointed by the Bishop of Rome, as in modern Roman Catholic practice, at least in America. As described by the canons, the bishop of each province governed the affairs of his province, led by the chief bishop, or Metropolitan, of the capital of the province. However, the Metropolitans did not have unlimited authority like the modern Pope, but were required to submit to the authority of a council of all the bishops of the province. The canons further stipulated that the council of bishops, now called a Holy Synod, must meet at least twice a year.¹¹ The Third Ecumenical Council, the Council of Ephesus, established the principle that when a local Church reaches maturity, it should receive its independence and the right to govern its own affairs, by recognizing the independence of the Church of Cyprus in 431.¹²

Eventually, the regional Metropolitans became Patriarchs, who presided over the Churches of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. As outlined by the canons of the Ecumenical Councils, the Bishop of Rome held a primacy of honor as the first among equals, but had no actual authority outside of his own Patriarchate. Significantly, the Council of Chalcedon, the Fourth Ecumenical Council in 451, granted Constantinople equal status with Rome, because of its status as the new capital of the Empire.¹³

Despite modern Roman Catholic teaching that Ecumenical Councils have no authority over the Pope, the Ecumenical Councils assumed authority over all bishops, including the Bishop of Rome. The Councils also knew nothing of papal infallibility. The Sixth Ecumenical Council, the Third Council of Constantinople in 680, went so far as to declare Pope Honorius guilty of false teaching.¹⁴ Thus, modern Roman Catholic doctrine, which gives all power to the Bishop of Rome, cannot be reconciled with the canons of the Ecumenical Councils. Commenting on the Vatican document, Bishop Hilarion of Vienna, the representative of the Patriarchate of Moscow to the European Union said:

*The Orthodox Church does not recognize the Bishop of Rome as the “pontifex maximus” of the Universal Church. In case of restoration of the Eucharistic communion, the Orthodox Church will recognize the Bishop of Rome as the first among equals (primus inter pares) in the family of primates of the local Churches. The primacy of the Bishop of Rome is, for the Orthodox, that of honor, not of jurisdiction.*¹⁵

However, the Orthodox Church cannot accept the Protestant concept of the Church either. Protestants believe in the “invisible church,” which consists of all who profess faith in Jesus Christ. The Westminster Confession, the classic statement of Presbyterian doctrine, states, “The Catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect.¹⁶ because many Protestants consider the Sacraments symbolic and incidental to salvation, they treat the Church as a voluntary fellowship of Christians that plays no role in salvation. Because they reject the doctrine of Apostolic Succession, any person who can gather a group of people who recognize his or her spiritual authority can legitimately claim to be a minister of the Gospel. Even those Protestant churches with a more organized structure began where self-proclaimed leaders like Luther, Calvin or the followers of Wesley broke from the Roman Catholic Church or another body of Christians.

Orthodox theologians cannot accept the Protestant doctrine of the “invisible church” because it destroys the reality of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church identified by the Creed. Protestants replace the One Holy Catholic Church with a multitude of conflicting groups with contradictory beliefs. As Patriarch Ignatius IV of Antioch wrote, the Protestant doctrine of the Church “means that idea of the Church, which was determined by the Creator, has not been realized in time, that its founder, Jesus Christ, failed, and that the gates of hell have prevailed against it and uprooted it from the earth.”¹⁷

In contrast to both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, the Orthodox Church teaches what can be called a Sacramental or Mystical view of the Church, which Orthodox theologians treat as a Eucharistic assembly. When Orthodox Christians gather for the Divine Liturgy, they unite as one body to receive the life-giving Body and Blood of Christ. St. Paul wrote, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”¹⁸ Thus, the Church is not invisible but is seen at every celebration of the Eucharist. The local Churches form the worldwide One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church by their communion with each other. This Eucharistic fellowship is not an abstract theory like that unity envisioned according to the Protestant doctrine of the invisible church, but is real and visible.

According to Orthodox belief, the unity of the Church beyond the local level is created by the communion of the local bishop with the other bishops of the Church. The office of bishop is important because someone must preside over the defining moment of the Church, the celebration of the Eucharist at the Divine Liturgy. At the beginning of the second century, St. Ignatius, the third bishop of Antioch, wrote, “Let no man do anything connected to the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it.”¹⁹ Even when an Orthodox priest presides over the Eucharist he does so with the blessing of the bishop, symbolized by the *antimision*, the cloth signed by the local bishop, which is unfolded on the Holy Table during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. St. Ignatius was the first theologian to use the term “Catholic,” which means *full* or *whole* in Greek, to describe the Church. The third Bishop of Antioch wrote, “Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be;

even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”²⁰ Thus, to be truly Catholic, a local Church must operate under the leadership of a duly constituted bishop who is in communion with the other bishops of the Church.

The bishops manifest another important characteristic of the Church. The Church is Apostolic. St. Paul declared that Church is “built upon the foundation of the apostles ...”²¹ Orthodox Christians believe that the apostolic office did not end with the death of the original twelve apostles, but that their office still exists through the ministry of bishops. By choosing St. Barnabas to replace Judas Iscariot, the Apostles showed their intention that the Apostolic office should be continued.²² At the end of the first century, St. Clement, the third bishop of Rome, wrote that the apostles chose the first bishops to “succeed them in their ministry.”²³ In the middle of the second century, St. Irenaeus of Lyons wrote:

*It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Church and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times ...*²⁴

The office of bishop is so important to Orthodox Christians that the Council of Jerusalem declared in 1672 that “the dignity of the Bishop is so necessary in the Church that, without him, neither Church nor Christian could either be or be spoken of.”²⁵ For this reason Bishop Hilarion wrote:

*The Orthodox also believe that apostolic succession and the sacraments are essential marks of the Church. This is why the Orthodox will agree that those ecclesial communities which do not enjoy apostolic succession and have not preserved the genuine understanding of the Eucharist and other sacraments cannot be called “churches” in the proper sense.*²⁶

However, Apostolic Succession is not merely an historical pedigree, but also requires Apostolic Faith. This is because Apostolic Succession is not the private possession of a bishop, but is the attribute of a local Church. A bishop who goes in schism or is cast out of office due to heresy does not take his Apostolic Succession with him as a private possession. To be authentic, a bishop must teach Apostolic Faith and must be in communion with the other bishops of the Church. St. Cyprian of Carthage taught that any bishop who breaks away from the unity of the Church loses his claim to Apostolic Office. He wrote, “Whoever is separated from the Church is joined to an adulteress, is separated from the promises of the Church; ... He who does not hold this unity does not hold God’s law, does not hold the faith of the Father and the Son, does not hold life and salvation.”²⁷

Although it may be offensive to Catholics and Protestants, the Orthodox position is intellectually honest. If an Orthodox Christian believed that either the Roman Catholic Church or a Protestant group were a more authentic Church than the Orthodox Church, it would be hypocritical to remain within the Orthodox Church and not become a part of whatever group he or she believes is a more authentic Church.

The divisions among Christians shown by the discussions caused by the recent decree of the Roman Catholic Church on the nature of the Church show a

fundamental disagreement between Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox on what constitutes the Church. Those who take offense that other Christians do not share their view of the Church make it impossible to heal the division among Christians, by preventing an honest and open dialogue over our differences. Roman Catholics believe that to be fully Church a group must accept the claims of the papacy. Protestants teach that the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church is invisible and cannot be identified with any human organization. Orthodox Christians believe that the Church is manifested in all its fullness through the celebration of the Eucharist. The communion of the leader of the local Eucharistic Assembly, a bishop in Apostolic Succession, with the bishops who lead the other local Eucharistic Assemblies manifests the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church beyond the local level. The Orthodox Church also believes that, because it has all the proper attributes, the Orthodox Church is the living realization of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. Thus, the new Roman Catholic document breaks no new ground. It only highlights divisions that have existed since Rome broke from the Orthodox Church and the Protestants broke from the Roman Catholic Church.

***Father John W. Morris, Ph.D., is pastor of
St. George Church, Vicksburg, MS.***

1 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church," at Internet site http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070629_responsa-quaestiones_en.html

2 "Protestant Heads Still Committed to Dialogue Despite Vatican 'One True Church' Claim, at Internet site, http://www.christianpost.com/article/20070713/28435_Protestant_Heads_Still_Committed_to_Dialogue_Despite_Vatican's_'One_True_Church'_Claim.htm

3 "The Catholic Church's views of other faith groups: Official reactions to the Vatican's *Responses to Some Questions* . . .," on Internet site http://www.religioustolerance.org/rcc_others.htm

4 "Catholic Pride in 'One True Church' Makes Enemies, Says Coptic Pope" at Internet site http://directionstoorthodoxy.org/mod/news/view.php?article_id=685

5 Ibid.

6 "Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox Church is heir to the old, undivided Church" at Internet site: http://directionstoorthodoxy.org/mod/news/view.php?article_id=677

7 "Response of the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church to the 'Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church'" Internet site: http://www.inareaumc.org/ehum/archives/2007/2007_alerts/alert-07-18a-07.htm

8 "The Bull 'Unam Sanctam,' 1302" in Henry Bettenson & Chris Maunder, eds. *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford: The University Press, 1999), p. 127.

10 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dubuque, Iowa: Brown ROA, 1994), p. 234.

11 "I Nicea. A.D. 325" in Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, eds. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974) Second Series Vol. XIV, p. 15, p.

11; Archbishop Peter L'Huillier, *The Church of the Ancient Councils: The Disciplinary Work of the First Four Ecumenical Councils* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), p. 51; "Canon IX," "Antioch in Ecaeniis. A.D. 341" in Ibid, p. 112.

12 "Canon VIII" in "Ephesus A.D. 431," in Ibid, p. 234-325.

13 "Canon XXVIII" in "Calcedon A.D. 451" in Ibid, p. 287.

14 "Extracts from the Acts, Session I," in "III Constantinople A.D. 680-681," in Ibid, p. 327.

15 Europaica Bulletin, No. 124 (July 23, 2007) at Internet site: <http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/14/124.aspx#1>

- 16 “The Westminster Confession,” Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds. *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford: The University Press, 1999), p. 322.
- 17 Ignatius IV, *Orthodoxy & The Issues of Our Time*, trans. By Shaun O’Sullivan (Balamand: Publication of the University of Balamand, 2006), p. 77.
- 18 I Corinthians 10:17.
- 19 “Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrneans,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. I, pp. 89-90.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ephesians 2:20.
- 22 Acts 1:15-26.
- 23 “The First Epistle to Clement,” in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Translations of The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, vol. I, p. 17.
- 24 “Irenaeus Against Heresies,” in Ibid, p. 415.
- 25 J.N. W.B. Robertson, *The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Jerusalem sometimes called the Council of Bethlehem Holden under Dositheus, Patriarch of Jerusalem in 1672*, (New York: AMS Press, 1969), p. 124.
- 26 Europaica Bulletin, No. 124 (July 23, 2007) at Internet site:
<http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/12/124.aspx#1>
- 27 “The Treatises of Cyprian,” in *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, vol. V, p. 423.