

Rome reasserts Protestant 'defects'

Protestant groups are "Christian communities": Protestant groups are "Christian communities"

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While mainline Protestants and some other non-Catholics are upset over a Vatican statement asserting that the Catholic Church is the only valid church, a number of ecumenical leaders mostly shrugged, saying the papal-endorsed words are nothing new.

The statement, "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church," reasserts the position that only Catholics constitute the true church, while Protestant groups are merely "Christian communities" and not churches "in the proper sense."

The statement issued on July 10 had softer words for Orthodox churches, saying they are "wounded" but closer to Rome because they share a common historic line of ordained clergy and bishops.

"To be surprised by that is surprising," said Leonid Kishkovsky, a bishop in the Orthodox Church of America, who is actively involved in ecumenical talks. "It does no more than [restate what] I know to be at the core of the Catholic understanding."

Indeed, the Catholic Church made an almost identical statement just seven years ago in *Dominus Iesus*, written by then-cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI. That statement caused a stir among ecumenists in 2000.

Protestant denominations, the new statement argues, can be "instruments of salvation" but "suffer from defects" insofar as they depart from Catholicism. "Because of the absence of the sacramental priesthood," Protestant denominations "have not preserved the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic Mystery,"

and are therefore to be termed “Christian communities.”

“An exclusive claim that identifies the Roman Catholic Church as the one church of Jesus Christ . . . goes against the spirit of our Christian calling toward oneness in Christ,” wrote Setri Nyomi, the Geneva-based general secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

Nyomi said the statement “takes us back to the kind of thinking and atmosphere that was prevalent prior to the Second Vatican Council” in the 1960s, when Catholic leaders opened themselves to dialogue with other Christians.

Clifton Kirkpatrick, the top executive of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), expressed dismay after noting decades of serious Catholic- Reformed dialogue in the U.S. and internationally. “While honesty is always important in ecumenical dialogue,” he said, the new Vatican statement “calls into question the important theological progress in our bilateral dialogues, the recent ecumenical agreements on justification, and practical relationships that have been established.”

Likewise, Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, said the Vatican’s “exclusive claims” are “troubling,” adding that “what may have been meant to clarify has caused pain.”

The Vatican statement came a week before the National Council of Churches’ Faith and Order Commission hosted a long-planned conference in Oberlin, Ohio, to mark the 50th anniversary of a founding conference.

According to R. M. Keelan Downton, a staff member at the NCC’s Faith and Order Commission, the Vatican statement lays bare—in an honest way—divisions that still exist. “It can be taken as a reminder that theological disagreements can’t be resolved by tricks of language,” Downton said. “The ecumenical task is not to hide or ignore those differences but to seek the unity for which Christ prayed in the midst of them.”

Episcopalians, meanwhile, say they are willing to agree to disagree.

“We believe that our orders [of ordination] are valid and that we are a church in every sense of the word,” said Christopher Epting, a bishop who is deputy for ecumenical and interfaith relations. “None of these disagreements, however, will lessen our commitment to remain in international and national ecumenical dialogue

with the Roman Catholic Church.”

Hanson, who also serves as president of the Lutheran World Federation, which signed a landmark agreement with the Vatican in 1999 that bridged age-old divisions over salvation, also appeared undeterred.

“Although our witness is wounded by the division that exists among Christians,” he said, “the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America recognizes no deficiency in our self-understanding as ‘church.’”

Cardinal Walter Kasper, the Vatican’s top official for Christian unity, has rejected Protestant criticism.

The document, said Kasper, “does not say that Protestant churches are not churches but that they are not churches in the proper sense; i.e., they are not churches in the sense in which the Catholic Church understands itself as church.”

He added: “For anyone even partly informed, this is purely self-evident. The Protestant churches do not want to be a church at all in the sense of the Catholic Church; they speak strongly of having another understanding of church and ministry.” -*Religion News Service*