

# **Pope, WCC leader reaffirm unity quest: Both to ignore strains caused by *Dominus Iesus***

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Putting behind them a controversial document, Pope Benedict XVI met with leaders of the World Council of Churches June 16 and reaffirmed the Catholic Church's "irreversible" commitment to the search for Christian unity.

Both the pope and Samuel Kobia, secretary general of the WCC, indicated that they will ignore the strains caused by *Dominus Iesus* (Lord Jesus), which asserted that only Catholics are assured of salvation. The document was issued in 2000 by Benedict, who was then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Vatican's top authority on church doctrine.

Since his election as pope on April 19, however, Benedict has repeatedly stressed the need for ecumenical dialogue to "rebuild the full and visible unity of all Christ's followers." The Catholic commitment "to the search for Christian unity is irreversible," Benedict told the WCC delegates. He urged "concrete gestures" toward this goal.

Kobia said he wanted to work with the Roman church on responding to issues such as the decline of Christianity in Europe and its growth in Africa. "We could seek together a stable place of moral clarity and confidence amid today's turbulent human landscape of shifting values, uncertain hopes and crumbling commitments," Kobia said at the papal audience, according to a prepared text of his address released by the WCC.

At a news conference in Rome afterward, Kobia said the WCC was willing to help improve relations between the Vatican and Eastern Orthodox churches, which have been strained in recent years. Orthodox churches have accused the Catholic Church of "proselytizing" in traditionally Orthodox areas, especially in Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union.

But Kobia said recent discussions in the WCC had helped the church grouping address concerns raised by its Orthodox members. "We have therefore gained a very deep knowledge about Orthodoxy," noted Kobia.

Kobia invited the pope to visit the council's headquarters in Geneva as his predecessors, Paul VI and John Paul II, had done. This, he said, would be "one more concrete step in our long journey toward visible unity."

The Catholic Church does not belong to the WCC, a union of 330 Orthodox and Protestant churches, but it formed a Joint Working Group with the council in 1965 to maintain contact and cooperation.

Kobia told Benedict that one area for further cooperation should be dialogue on the "fundamental" question of whether Christian churches can "recognize each other's baptism" and discussion of "their ability or inability to recognize one another as churches."

*Dominus Iesus* stated that with the exception of the Orthodox churches, other Christian faiths "suffer from defects" and therefore are "ecclesial communities" and not "churches in the proper sense."

Kobia told reporters he regarded "mutual recognition of churches as churches" to be "very important" and intended to make what Benedict has said since he became pope, rather than *Dominus Iesus*, the "point of departure" on the issue. -*Religion News Service, Ecumenical News international*