

Grace for the Day

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Catholics and Evangelical Christians

By Rev. Peter Eng

On July 10, the Vatican issued a statement that has drawn condemnation from many sectors, and if not condemnation, a least a rolling of the eyes that the new pope (Benedict XVI) should endorse such views. How could he say that the Orthodox Churches are sister churches but Protestant Churches are not real churches!

If we start and stop at media hype, we will learn nothing and know nothing except what the media wants us to know. This article addresses two issues:

1. *What is the Vatican statement really saying?*
2. *How should Evangelical Christians regard Catholics?*

Vatican statement of July 10

On July 10, 2007, the Vatican released a statement titled "*Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church.*" This statement has attracted much negative publicity from the secular media, and mixed responses from Christians, most of which have also been negative.

The statement of July 10 sets out to explain the assertion that the Church of Jesus Christ "subsists in the Catholic Church." The first point of the statement affirms this: "The Second Vatican Council neither changed nor intended to change this doctrine (concerning the Church),

rather it developed, deepened and more fully explained it."

The first point we need to understand is that the statement sets out to clarify the meaning of an earlier statement (Vatican II). It is not primarily a new statement of a new papacy.

The second point we need to note is that the Catholic Church does *not* regard Scripture as the only, or supreme authority for faith and practice. Instead, they refer to a "deposit of faith" (*depositum fidei*) as their source of authority. The deposit of faith comprises "sacred oral tradition" and the Bible.

On account of the Catholic assertion that oral tradition is authoritative, they need to uphold previous assertions (Vatican II). This is somewhat similar to the way in which a judge avoids saying that the decision of another judge is wrong. He adds to, modifies, explains, or reinterprets it. I suppose some are hopeful that the new pope will direct a more liberal reading, but are disappointed.

Third, we go to the explanation itself. The statement that the church of Jesus Christ *subsists in* the Catholic Church stands in contrast to the past Catholic assertion, that the Church of Jesus Christ *is* the Catholic Church.

The term "subsists in" tries to do two things: it asserts that the Catholic Church is the only true church, but it concedes that

salvation is also found outside of the Catholic Church. Orthodox Churches are regarded as sister churches but all others are considered Christian communities, not real churches. This is what upsets so many.

Fourth, we should know this view is neither new to the Catholic Church nor to Benedict XVI. Benedict affirmed the same thing when he was Cardinal Ratzinger! (See: *Declaration "Dominus Iesus" on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, June 16, 2000.)

Since the statement of July 10 merely repeats or restates an existing position of Vatican II, and of Benedict, why is there so much consternation? I have not found anything in it that suggests the new pope has a different theology *on this point*. He is exactly where he was.

Why the consternation? That, my dear reader, I leave for you to deliberate.

Let us step away from this issue of reacting to the Vatican statement and ask how we, as Evangelical Christians, ought to relate to Catholics.

How should Evangelicals regard Catholics?

Active not reactive. Following the Vatican statement, many mainline denominations that hope to be accepted by Rome on an equal footing are disappointed. Evangelical Christians are consistently unperturbed with the Vatican's disapproval. We do not agree with many key areas of Catholic theology though we can affirm that from the time of the Reformation they have made vast improvements.

We have grown so much that we no longer need to take an adversarial position against the Vatican. We will affirm right and wrong without the hidden motivation of either seeking reconciliation with the Vatican or using the Vatican as our *raison d'être* (*reason for existing*).

We are well positioned to take a non-reactive position towards the Vatican, but more importantly, towards Catholics who are real people we know and love. We will relate as the Bible directs.

There are Catholics we can love as members of the same spiritual family. There are Catholics we can love as those who still do not know Christ. And there are Catholics we can love despite their belligerence.

How can we be disciples of Jesus? By proving we are more right than the other denomination? Truth is important, but truth finds no convert if not presented in love. Jesus said, "By this all men will know you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

If we cannot show love to those bearing the name of Christ, to whom will we show love? While official Catholic theology remains a real problem, it is clear that the Catholic Church today is not without the light of salvation. And it is equally clear that there are many Catholics we can embrace as brothers. (By the same token, there are Evangelicals who behave so badly we want to keep our distance!)

If we will not accept a Catholic because the Vatican issues a condescending statement towards Evangelical Christians, how can we ever hope to love our enemies?

To those who feel hurt or alienated by the Vatican, I call to mind a little four-line verse:

*He drew a circle that shut me out —
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!*

Edwin Markham

Look but overlook. There is a foolish ignorant love. It is the love that pretends all is well when all is not. It is like a person infatuated, and quite out of his senses. This romanticism cannot endure

the light of truth. We will never learn to love like Jesus until we are willing to love another person despite his faults.

Jesus knew Peter was going to deny him (Matt 26:34). But that did not keep Jesus from loving him and restoring him (John 21:15-19). It may also be useful to note that John's gospel, the last to be written, chooses not to recount Peter's denial but only his restoration.

We have the same love of Jesus demonstrated towards Judas during the last supper. Jesus knew Judas was about to betray him, and he would soon return to the Father (John 13:2-3). "So he got up from the meal" and proceeded to wash his disciples' feet" (John 13:4-5). When Peter protested, Jesus said, "Unless I wash you, you have no part in me" (13:8). Peter replied, suggesting in that case, Jesus should also wash his head. To which Jesus made the cryptic remark, that only his feet needed washing. But Jesus explained himself, "And you are clean, though not every one of you" (13:10)

Many miss out this key point. *Jesus was talking about and reaching out to Judas!* He was telling Judas, "I know you are not clean. You need to be cleansed."

Jesus said to the eleven, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (13:15). Returning to Judas, he said, "I am not referring to all of you ... He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me" (13:18). And finally he said it plainly, "One of you is going to betray me" (13:21).

Jesus then dipped a piece of bread and gave it to Judas to indicate who would betray him (13:26). When Judas took that bread with ill intention, Satan entered him. And Jesus sent him off to complete his evil intention (13:27).

We can be so caught up with the foot-washing that we forget why John recounts this for us. "Jesus knew that the time had

come for him to leave this world and to go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, *he now showed them the full extent of his love*" (13:1).

At the last supper John saw and understood the love of Jesus that continued reaching out to Judas to the last hour, even the last moment.

Know and still love. Love based on a false or romantic idea of our object of love is delusional love. It cannot long endure.

Our daily experiences teach us as much. We love our spouses because of who they are. But if we do not also learn to love them in spite of what they are, our marriage can quickly fail.

When ignorance is bliss, is it foolishness ... to think that bliss will last. Love that is enduring and embracing is clear-sighted and hard-headed.

Nothing to prove. I see a Ferrari cruising along when a little car comes alongside, revs its engine, and challenges this muscle car to a race. The Ferrari has nothing to prove and carries on at a leisurely pace. There are some happy times in life when we have nothing to prove.

Evangelical Christians are certainly far from perfect. Any large group will have less than exemplary characters. But evangelical Christians have been spared the systemic abuses and cover-ups within the Catholic Church which claims to be the only true church of Jesus Christ. The recent award of \$660 million by the American court to victims abused in the Catholic Church system is just one of many cover-ups by the Catholic Church.

Evangelical Christians do not share the bloody past of the Catholic Church which shed the blood of pagans and Christians alike. This is no longer true of the Catholic Church, but the reality remains that they have never repented of their past. They only seek to hide it.

The relatively clean record of Evangelical Christians is by the mercy of God. We have nothing to boast. By the same token, we have nothing to prove when the Catholic Church with its appalling record thinks we do not qualify to be classified as a church.

In numerical terms Evangelical Christians also have nothing to prove to the Catholic Church. Catholic countries like Brazil and the Philippines now have strong and growing evangelical communities. This is because Evangelical Christianity has a much clearer presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (The recent percentage increase of Catholics in America is due primarily to immigration, not conversion.)

Evangelical Christians are people who seek a genuine faith in Jesus Christ. They are found in Evangelical Churches and in mainline denominations. But today, we are pleasantly surprised to find Catholics who live by the Bible rather than by the "deposit of faith," who confess their sins to God rather than to a priest, who pray to God and not to Mary, who are in all ways Evangelical Christians except in name.

In America, Evangelical Christians make up only 25% of the population, but they are at the forefront of growth and of social influence. China's house churches are clearly evangelical in character, and God has blessed them with some 70-100 million converts.

The center of Christian influence has long shifted from Catholic-prominent Europe to Protestant-prominent America. China's Christians are not socially influential at this point, but their sheer numbers will mean something in the coming generation. The whole of Asia is more Protestant-prominent than Catholic-prominent.

The Vatican's loving condescension may annoy or sting a little. But when God has blessed Evangelical Christians with such

progress, surely we can absorb a slight as small as this.

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.