

Not-so-fully church: The pope's message to Protestants—and Catholics

by [Jared Wicks S.J.](#) in the [August 21, 2007](#) issue

In July the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) reaffirmed the Catholic doctrine that the church of Christ “exists fully only in the Catholic Church.” Which prompted many people to say, “What, again?” or “Why now?”

Yes, the Vatican treated the same points it discussed seven years ago in *Dominus Iesus*. That text stoutly maintained the unique saving role of Jesus Christ and insisted that when Vatican II said that the church founded by Christ and the Holy Spirit “subsists in” the Catholic Church, it meant that the church of Christ “continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church,” notwithstanding the fact that many godly elements (of word, sacrament and ministry) are at work outside the Catholic structure.

Dominus Iesus also issued a famous—for many, infamous—language rule: Orthodox and Old Catholic bodies are rightly called “churches” because they have bishops in apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist even though they are their not in communion with the pope. But bodies descended from the Reformation do not have such an episcopate, and they celebrate a flawed Eucharist; consequently, for Catholic ecclesiology, they are not churches “in the proper sense,” but are (using the Vatican II term) “ecclesial communities.”

The adjective *ecclesial* carries theological weight, however: it indicates that Christian elements are truly possessed by those bodies; though not complete, those communities are used by the Holy Spirit to bring salvation for their members.

The answer to “Why now?” is found largely in the intra-Catholic debates that have taken place over the past seven years, especially in Germany. Some German Catholic theologians protested that *Dominus Iesus* was reversing the Vatican II meaning of “subsists in,” by which the council allegedly began moving toward

recognizing that the church of Christ is concretely realized in the churches of the Reformation. They also argued that the CDF's rule that the latter are not churches in the proper sense was not supported by the documents of Vatican II. Such interventions are collected in *Dominus Iesus: Anstössige Wahrheit oder anstössige Kirche?* edited by Michael J. Rainer (2001).

The waters were also roiled by an intervention from a different direction by Alexandra von Teuffenbach. In a dissertation written at the Gregorian University in Rome in 2002 and quickly published, she argued that the phrase "subsists in" originated with Sebastian Tromp, secretary of Vatican II's Doctrinal Commission. Tromp was known in the 1950s for extensive writings on Pius XII's encyclical "Mystical Body of Christ" (1943). Pius XII maintained that there is a robust and undifferentiated identity between Christ's church and the Roman Catholic Church. So, von Teuffenbach argued, if Tromp contributed the phrase "subsists in" to Vatican II, it was meant not as an ecumenical opening to a wider recognition of ecclesial realities outside the Catholic Church but as a reaffirmation of Catholic identity along the lines of Pius XII.

Von Teuffenbach's thesis was taken up in a late 2005 *Osservatore Romano* essay by Karl J. Becker, Jesuit professor at the Gregorian University and longtime consultant to the CDF. (*Origins* published Becker's article in English in January 2006.) For Becker, Tromp's restrictive notion of "subsists in" should correct those who take this term as Vatican II's swing toward recognizing ecclesial significance in the separated communities. Also, Becker regards as a slip of the papal pen the statement by John Paul II in *Ut unum sint* (1995) that elements of the church of Christ are "present and operative" in non-Catholic communities. (Becker's article was sharply rebutted by Francis A. Sullivan in the June 2006 *Theological Studies*.)

The CDF intervention this summer (titled "Responses to Some Questions . . .") comes in the wake of this dispute over the meaning of "subsists in," and it is notably concise. It reaffirms that "subsists in" indicates "the perduring, historical continuity and the permanence of all the elements instituted by Christ in the Catholic Church, in which the Church of Christ is concretely found on this earth." But it also endorses John Paul II's word about the church of Christ being "present and operative" in churches and ecclesial communities not in communion with the Catholic Church. The perduring, historical continuity of all the elements does not absorb exhaustively these means of sanctification. Here, the CDF clearly does not follow von Teuffenbach or its own consultant, Becker.

Similarly, after affirming “the full identity of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church” the text goes on to cite Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism on the significance and importance of the other bodies in the economy of salvation, since “the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as instruments of salvation.” Whatever the language rule requires, the “ecclesial communities” are for Catholics not benevolent associations like Rotary Clubs.

The new text underscores very tersely what was said in 2000 about the use of the word *church*, denying it as a proper designation of “communities [which] do not enjoy apostolic succession in the sacrament of Orders, and are, therefore, deprived of a constitutive element of the Church.” This rule rests on Vatican II’s definition of a “particular church” as a body of believers entrusted to a bishop’s pastoral care and united in the Holy Spirit by the Gospel and the Eucharist (Decree on the Office of Bishops, no. 11). This permits naming Orthodox bodies churches in this technical sense. Since the CDF does not recognize the episcopacy and ministry of Protestant bodies, it denies them the designation *church* in the developed Catholic sense of the term. Others, beyond the Catholic pale, may well speak differently.

Still, Protestant teaching, sacramental life and ministries, albeit flawed in Catholic eyes, do fuse together qualities derived from Christ and the New Testament churches. Where the elements work to form and sanctify, there is apostolicity, as is argued in the recently published Lutheran-Catholic dialogue study, *The Apostolicity of the Church* (Lutheran University Press, 2006).

In Catholic theology, “ongoing continuity” with the church of Christ and the Holy Spirit is structural and sacramental, a continuity of the mediating elements of word, sacrament and ministry given by Christ through his apostles. From these—we have to admit—Catholics often benefit in mediocre ways. In the end the issue between Protestants and Catholics is not about living in the Lord with faith, hope and charity, but about the full complement of covenanted mediations by which God comes to form believers for discipleship.