

# Imperial claims? The Vatican's catechism on the church: The Vatican reasserts its view of the church

by [Kilian McDonnell osb](#) in the [October 18, 2000](#) issue

The Protestant responses to the “Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church” recently issued by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s Office for the Doctrine of the Faith (ODF) have been mostly pained surprise, sometimes anger. Leaders in other world religions had a similar reaction. Even Catholics were taken aback by what seemed like a regressive document.

The declaration is a reaffirmation of the Catholic Church’s teaching that there is only One Mediator between God and humankind, Jesus Christ. The unique mediation of Christ continues in his body, the church that he founded, which “subsists” in the Catholic Church governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. Nothing ambiguous here. But why would the Vatican make such claims after three decades of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue? Here I do not give a critique, but attempt to explain why the Vatican issued such a document.

The declaration does not make for casual reading. It is a 44-page (double-spaced) rather technical academic exposition of the central Catholic teaching on mediation and church. The text, biblically based, admits that it is not a full systematic presentation of the themes. This means that there is more to be said on the topic, and there are areas which Catholic scholars are still free to explore. This is openness. But the text has neither the hopefulness nor the graciousness of the ecumenical texts of Vatican II. The reason for this no-nonsense approach: the declaration is like a doctrinal decree, clear, stripped down, academic, unwavering as it sets forth the faith of the church. In ecumenical documents there is a more negotiated language, such as “Catholics tend to understand the matter this way, while Lutherans (Methodists, Presbyterians, etc.) in another manner.” One does not find this language here because this is not an ecumenical document but a dogmatic statement.

One of the reasons for the strong reactions to the declaration is that many understood it as Rome's lecture to leaders of world religions and Christian leaders on the basics of the Christian faith. To some extent, the fault lies with the document itself. One almost needs to be trained in the reading of Roman documents to perceive that this is a Catholic document, meant principally for Catholic eyes. It is a Catholic catechism for Catholics. Rome is not scolding Protestants. In the longest sections on One Mediator, the primary, though not exclusive, addressee is the Catholic academic community in India and the East which the ODF thought was compromising the church's teaching on the Unique Mediator in its conversations with world religions. In addressing an academic community, the ODF has used academic instead of ecumenical vocabulary. Rather than lecturing down to Protestants, the ODF is authoritatively setting forth for Catholics the faith of the Catholic Church on the topics of mediation and church. The ODF, however, knows full well that the text will be widely read by non-Catholics.

Some Jews have already reacted negatively to the declaration's teaching on Jesus Christ as the Unique Mediator for the whole of humanity. Muslims and Hindus (I have no information on Buddhists) have also taken issue with the exclusive absolute salvific role of Christ. The claims made about the unique mediation of Christ continuing in the unique church of Christ subsisting in the Catholic church will not be acceptable to Protestant friends, and indeed may anger them.

The key to the document are the terms "unique," "universal" and "absolute" placed in opposition to relativism in its many forms. One form of relativism lies in the conviction that divine truth is so elusive, so transcendent, it is inexpressible even by Christian revelation. In the face of this kind of Christian agnosticism, one cannot speak of absolute divine truths, because no divine truths exist, only opinions.

Another form of relativism is the supposition that reason is the only source of knowledge, thereby undercutting revelation. In an atmosphere of relativism it is difficult to use words like "unique," "universal" and "absolute," which have their proper place when explaining Christian truths. Relativism, the declaration claims, makes a major methodological mistake when it transfers to matters of revelation the egalitarian leveling proper to democratic procedures, academic conversations and the meeting of one culture with another.

To give one example: the defense of religious pluralism in principle. The ODF has no problem recognizing the de facto existence of a number of world religions. What it

opposes is the assumption that this is the way it should be. To relativism's defense of world religions in principle the declaration asserts that the revelation of Christ is not limited, so that, in addition to the biblical revelation of Jesus Christ, there are parallel revelations of other salvific figures. Scholars are still free to contemplate the possibility of other salvific figures sharing in the mediation of Christ the One Mediator (somewhat analogous to the common priesthood, by virtue of which each Christian shares in the one Priesthood of Christ; there are not many priesthoods, only one).

Whatever one says about other salvific figures, the ODF contends that one cannot present them as complementing the revelation in Jesus Christ, as though one could add something not revealed in the Word made flesh. Those who oppose the ODF's position think that, on the contrary, there are salvific figures in other religions who are complementary to Christ. They argue that the transcendent truth of God can neither be grasped nor manifested in its totality by any one historical person or religion—not even by Jesus Christ or Christianity.

In opposition to this relativism, the declaration insists that such a view stands in contradiction to the faith of the church that the full and complete revelation of God's saving mystery is found in Jesus Christ, the unique, universal, absolute Mediator. This is not to say that Christians completely understand the revelation of the Word made flesh. In the light of the Holy Spirit, Christians are called to explore and deepen the understanding of that definitive and complete manifestation. Nor does the declaration wish to rule out mutual enrichment between world religions, as though Christians had nothing to learn.

The document acknowledges that other world religions "contain and offer religious elements which come from God." Nonetheless, if these religions also contain superstitions or errors, then to this degree their prayers and rituals are obstacles to salvation. The ODF is by no means suggesting that adherents of world religions cannot attain God. Quite the contrary. They can receive divine grace and attain salvation. No person, no matter of what religious persuasion, is excluded from ultimately attaining God. But since there is only One Mediator between God and humanity, anyone who is saved is saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and this "in ways known only to God" (see "Church in the Modern World" from Vatican II).

Still, fidelity to Christian revelation forces one to say that in comparison to those living in the Body of Jesus Christ, who have the Word of God and the sacraments, the followers of other world religions are “in a gravely deficient situation.” The declaration views this not as a matter of theological opinion, much less Christian imperialism, or Catholic arrogance, but of fidelity to revelation. The bottom line: no bypassing the death and resurrection of the unique, universal, absolute Mediator. No relativism.

Another way that some relativize Christ (and his church) is by appealing to the biblical concept of the kingdom of God (of heaven, of Christ). Though one grants that these terms are not always the same in their relation to the church, whatever the explanation one cannot deny or empty out the relation between Christ, church and kingdom. Even though it is granted that the kingdom is not identical or coextensive with the church (there may be people in the kingdom who are not in the church), the bond between them must be maintained. The church is its seed, the beginning of the kingdom. Some relativize Christ by turning away from church-centered categories to a theology which is “kingdom centered.” In its turn the kingdom is God-centered rather than Jesus Christ-centered. But, contends the document, if the kingdom is separated from Jesus, it is no longer the kingdom of God. The bottom line: no bypassing Christ and the church on the way to the kingdom.

The logic of the document continues from the unique, universal, absolute Mediator to the unique, universal church Christ founded, that subsists in the Catholic Church. The word “subsists” was carefully chosen for two reasons. First, it expresses the belief that the church of Christ continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church. Second, it opens the way to recognize that outside of the visible structure of the Catholic Church many elements of sanctification and truth can be found (the Word of God, baptism, the life of grace, faith, hope, charity, the interior gifts of the Spirit). But even these elements derive their efficacy from the fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church.

But what is the link between the church which Christ founded and the Roman Catholic Church which makes it possible to make these astonishing claims? It is a matter of Catholic faith, says the declaration, that there is historical continuity between the two. In his person Christ established a salvific mystery. He is in the church and the church is in him. The unique quality and universality of the salvific mediation of Jesus Christ continues in his body, the church. That continuity is rooted in apostolic succession, by which the whole mystery of Christ is handed on through

the bishops. The bottom line: no bypassing of the bishops of the world gathered around the bishop of Rome, handing on the Mystery of Christ in the Word of God and in the life of the church, including the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharist.

This constitutes a definition of what it means to be church. Not to have a valid episcopate through apostolic succession or not to have the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharist (which is tied to the sacrament of orders) constitutes a theological, not moral, defect. In the terms of the declaration, denominations with these defects are not churches in the proper theological sense of the term. Earlier Pope John Paul II had said that the Catholic Church is not suggesting that beyond its visible boundaries there is only an “ecclesial vacuum” (see the encyclical “That They May Be One”). Communities lacking apostolic succession still possess elements of sanctification and truth, and can “truly engender a life of grace, and can be rightly described as capable of providing access to the community of salvation” (see the “Decree on Ecumenism”). The church of Christ is present in them, and they possess a certain imperfect communion with the Catholic Church.

How does one interpret this stance? Protestants have their own definition(s) of what constitutes church. The Catholic Church has its definition. The two definitions do not agree. Using the definition of the declaration, which is the definition enshrined in the historic documents of the Catholic Church, the ODF recognizes that there are churches in the proper theological sense, that have both authentic bishops and an authentic Eucharist, but are not in perfect communion with the Catholic Church. Among them would be a number of eastern churches. These churches lack full communion with the Catholic Church because they do not accept the doctrine of the papal primacy, which, according to the Catholic reading of the scriptures, the successor of Peter objectively has and exercises over the whole church. In a word, the Catholic Church alone has the full theological reality Christ willed for his church, many elements of which can be found in other Christian communities. Bottom line: there is no bypassing the universal communion of local communions gathered around the bishop of Rome.

These are breathtaking claims. What possessed the pope and Cardinal Ratzinger to publish such a document? It is too simple to say that both John Paul II and Joseph Ratzinger are at the end of their ministries and wanted to nail down their conservative agenda before going to God. This is not the first time they have issued a conservative document. But the force of the claims has prompted some

commentators to suspect Catholic imperialism or Vatican arrogance, proud children of papal infallibility.

Imperialism and arrogance are no strangers to Roman Catholic history. However, a look at the documents of Vatican II and also of the ecumenical accords of the past 30 years demonstrates that the declaration contains nothing new. These claims have been part of the theological conversations between churches. The shock comes from having them all gathered in one place.

Many will take issue with the ODF's reading of the scriptures, but is it really arrogance toward other world religions to make a faith claim on the basis of 1 Timothy 2:5: "There is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind"? Is being faithful to how one reads revelation the same thing as insolence? In the past Catholics may have been arrogant in their behavior toward Hindus (as they have been toward Protestants). But the fear of appearing arrogant should not make one hesitate, in a document setting forth the faith of the church, to declare that there is one absolute universal Mediator. In like manner, to assert in such a document that this Mediator continues his universal work in his unique body for the salvation of the whole of humanity in the church gathered together with the bishops around the bishop of Rome is a faith claim. Catholics see this as fidelity to revelation.

Protestants think Catholics have misread the source of revelation, but a truth claim based on the reading of revelation is not necessarily a matter of arrogance. And the claim is not an assertion of the moral superiority of Roman Catholics. Nor is it an attack on equality in interreligious or ecumenical dialogue. In these contexts, equality refers to the dignity of free persons engaged in theological conversations, not to doctrinal content. Nor does equality extend to all denominations, as in the neutralizing view that all confessions are regarded as equal.

Obviously, if the Catholic Church reads revelation as mandating sacraments, it will not be willing to accept as theologically equal a community having no sacraments. Here again, the declaration presents this position not as a matter of theological opinion, but as a reading of revelation and therefore a faith claim.

The same must be said with regard to the restriction of "church" to those communities with apostolic succession and the genuine and total eucharistic mystery. This definition of church is a faith claim, the way Catholics read revelation.

Protestants have their own definition(s) of what constitutes church. The Catholic Church has its definition. The two definitions do not agree. However, one needs to distinguish between faith claims and the conventional way of speaking. No one is suggesting that Catholics stop referring to the Anglican, Lutheran and Pentecostal churches. This is a matter of accepted usage, not of theological decision.

What about the many bilateral conversations in which the Roman Catholic Church has engaged during the past three decades? To take just one bilateral, are John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger turning their backs on the impressive body of reports on justification, ministry, papal infallibility, papal primacy issued by the national Lutheran-Catholic dialogue? By no means. In fact, the declaration is to be read in the context of the ecumenical conversations. In fact, the ODF, the Vatican office issuing this declaration, was decisive in the Catholic “reception” of these interreligious and ecumenical reports.

What about religious tolerance? Historically, the Catholic record in countries where Catholics were in the majority has not been good. Vatican Council II, by insisting that rights inhere in persons even when Catholics think they are in error, pulled the rug from under Catholic attempts to justify that intolerance. One needs to distinguish between making truth claims and toleration. Truth claims in the document are based on a reading of revelation. Toleration is based on the rights, dignity and, above all, the freedom of the persons to judge for themselves questions of truth or falsity. The present document does not reject religious tolerance. But tolerance is not a criterion for validating truth claims.

Though the declaration is not an ecumenical document, it will undoubtedly shape Roman Catholic relations with world religions and with Protestant churches. In reading it (<[www.vatican.va/rom](http://www.vatican.va/rom)>) one should recall the 1995 statement of John Paul II that the Catholic Church has committed itself “irrevocably” to ecumenism. One should also be aware there is evidence that the Pontifical Councils for Unity and Interreligious Dialogue were either not consulted on the text, or their advice was not heeded.