

Family divide: Who is my sister?

From the Editors in the [October 11, 2000](#) issue

Compared to the usual formalities of ecumenical conversations, which include carefully worded assurances of mutual regard, the statement last month from the Vatican on the proper use of the term “sister churches” was exceedingly blunt. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in a statement approved by John Paul II, told Roman Catholics that they should not call Protestant churches “sister churches” since that phrase implies equality. The Catholic position is that there is only one true church of Jesus Christ, and its bishop is in Rome. Protestant churches, Ratzinger reminded his flock, are “ecclesial communities,” not “churches in the proper sense.”

Doubtless, Ratzinger was much more concerned about setting Catholics straight on their own doctrine than he was about offending Protestants—hence the blunt language. Perhaps what’s most significant here is that there are enough Catholics who take another view of the matter to prompt Ratzinger to take action.

Nevertheless, the statement highlights what to Protestants has looked like a halfhearted approach to ecumenism. While the Roman Catholic Church has declared itself “irrevocably” committed to ecumenical dialogue, as the pope recently reaffirmed, it has maintained that the fullness of the faith is already realized in the Roman Catholic Church. This seems a prejudgment of the ecumenical conversation, a way of saying, “We can walk together on the ecumenical road, as long as you understand that the journey will end in Rome.” While acknowledging that many elements of the church can be found outside the Roman church—and even granting, in the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (“That They May Be One”), that “certain features of the Christian mystery have at times been more effectively emphasized” outside the Roman Catholic Church—Rome cannot countenance the notion that it might in any fundamental way be less than wholly and sufficiently identical with the body of Christ on earth. This stance has presented a major point of ecumenical debate.

It would be a mistake to think that the fundamental problem is Rome’s arrogance, however unfortunate Ratzinger’s style may be. The deeper ecumenical problem is the existence of intractably different understandings of the nature of the church.

Catholics think it crucial to the gospel message that there be a visible, historically embodied structure, sacramental in nature and organically linked to the authority of the apostle Peter, to which one can point and say: there is the true church. This being the case, they naturally regard the Roman Catholic Church as that church. Protestants, on the other hand (allowing for many variations within the Protestant world), reject the Catholic understanding of the primacy of the bishop of Rome and attribute less significance to the institutional element of church life as crucial to the gospel message. What's more, they tend to think of the true church primarily as an invisible church, known only to God. Insofar as the church is visible for Protestants, it is less fixed in time and space—it occurs when and where the gospel is proclaimed, the sacraments are administered, and the fellowship of believers gathers in worship, witness and mission.

These different views as to the nature of the church represent the most challenging subject in ecumenical discussion. Perhaps, in the providence of God, the Vatican's blunt words will not just offend the conversation partners, but reenergize the conversation.