

"Do this and you will live," says the Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 10:28). If we follow the commandments we will have eternal life through the grace of Christ; the way to life eternal is through love.

This seems so very simple, and yet we know how very difficult it can be. We get stuck in our pride and while we love ourselves and our own desires we neglect to love our neighbor as ourself, much less the Lord God.

How, then, are you - and I - to "love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27)? We do so when we follow the teachings of Holy Mother Church which Christ Jesus established as the means to salvation.

This past Tuesday, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith released a document entitled, "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church." This document answers five basic questions about the nature of the Church and clarifies the teaching of the Second Vatican Council which has been called into question, distorted and falsified.

You might have seen the Associated Press article titled "Other Christians" in the *Effingham Daily News* Tuesday night. This brief article has caused a great deal of hurt in the area because of its false claims and poor journalistic standards. To be blunt, the article is filled with half-truths and lies. It is a piece of anti-Catholic slander, the last acceptable prejudice in America.

The document issued on Tuesday by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith seeks to correct false beliefs about the nature of the Church and to clarify authentic Catholic teaching.

In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, the Council Fathers declared that:

Christ ... established and continually sustains here on earth His holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as an entity with visible delineation (9\*) through which He communicated truth and grace to all.<sup>1</sup>

Put more simply, this means that Jesus Christ established the Church on earth in order to give his grace to all people in

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<sup>1</sup> *Lumen gentium* 8.

every place and time. Christ established the Church with a visible hierarchy to achieve this end. The Council Fathers continued:

But, the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element.(10\*)<sup>2</sup>

The Church, then, is one reality, not several.

Christ did not establish a series of Churches, but one universal Church. The spiritual elements of the Church cannot be distinguished from the visible form of the Church. For this reason we often speak of three parts, as it were: the Church triumphant (the Saints in heaven); the Church suffering (the poor souls being purged of their sins in Purgatory); and the Church militant (those of us here fighting the good fight who run the race so as to win the prize [see II Timothy 4:7]). These three are all part of the Mystical Body of Christ with Christ himself as our Head.

For this reason ... [the Church] is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature inseparably united to Him, serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a similar way, does the visible social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ, who vivifies it, in the building up of the body.(73) (11\*)<sup>3</sup>

In other words, the hierarchical and physical structure of the Church is not separate from Christ Jesus but intimately connected to him. Christ uses the Church as his instrument to dispense his grace to the world. The physical Church builds up the Mystical Body of Christ.

This is the one Church of Christ which in the Creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic, (12\*) which our Saviour, after His Resurrection, commissioned Peter to shepherd,(74) and him and the other apostles to extend and direct with authority,(75) which He erected for all ages as "the pillar and mainstay of the truth".(76)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Christ Jesus founded the Church on the Apostle Peter with the rest of the Twelve. This foundation upon the Apostles is essential to the nature of the Church for it is through the apostolic succession that the mandate of missionary activity is handed on through the ages in every place. It is through the apostolic succession that the faith of the Church is handed on through the apostolic tradition in the Church.

This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him, (13\*) although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity.<sup>5</sup>

With this passage we come to the difficulty of the past many years. It is this passage which many who claimed to teach in the name of the Church wrongly interpreted. It is these false interpretations that the document issued on Tuesday seeks to remedy and clarify.

What does this passage mean? It means that everything that is necessary for salvation is found within the Catholic Church; within the Church nothing is lacking. What are these means to salvation? The Scriptures; prayer; the Sacraments, especially the valid Eucharist; the apostolic succession; union with the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, who shepherds the Church in the name of Christ.

The many Protestant denominations are not "Churches" in the proper sense because they do not have the apostolic succession or a valid Eucharist, neither are they in union with the Pope. Because of this we refer to them not as Churches but as "ecclesial communities," as Church-like communities.

The Protestant denominations have some of the means to salvation: the Scriptures, prayer, and Baptism; and the Holy Spirit is indeed active within them. Nevertheless, they have neither a valid Eucharist nor Apostolic Succession and they are not in union with the Successor of Peter.

Contrary to what the article in the *Effingham Daily News* claimed, it is possible to come to salvation within a Protestant

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

denomination, if one has not rejected the truth of the Catholic Church. Indeed, the document in question quoted the Decree of the Second Vatican, *Unitatis redintegratio*, which said:

It follows that these separated churches and Communities, though we believe they suffer from defects, are deprived neither of significance nor importance in the mystery of salvation. In fact the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as instruments of salvation, whose value derives from that fullness of grace and of truth which has been entrusted to the Catholic Church.<sup>6</sup>

Even so, whatever graces are received within the ecclesial communities flows from the pierced side of Christ through the Catholic Church.

Concluding, the document issued Tuesday further clarified the Catholic understanding of these ecclesial communities:

According to Catholic doctrine, these Communities do not enjoy apostolic succession in the sacrament of Orders, and are, therefore, deprived of a constitutive element of the Church. These ecclesial Communities which, specifically because of the absence of the sacramental priesthood, have not preserved the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic Mystery cannot, according to Catholic doctrine, be called "Churches" in the proper sense.<sup>7</sup>

This is, in brief, what the document said; it is nothing new. As Pope Paul VI said when he promulgated *Lumen gentium*:

There is no better comment to make than to say that this promulgation really changes nothing of the traditional doctrine. What Christ willed, we also will. What was, still is. What the Church has taught down through the centuries, we also teach. In simple terms that which was assumed, is now explicit; that which was uncertain, is now clarified; that which was meditated upon, discussed and sometimes argued over, is not put together in one clear formulation.<sup>8</sup>

The same is true of the document issued this past Tuesday.

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<sup>6</sup> *Unitatis redintegratio*, 3.4.

<sup>7</sup> "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church," Response to Question Five.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Paul VI, Address of 21 November 1964.

The Catholic Church is the only sure way to salvation for to her Jesus Christ has entrusted the Sacraments and the Tradition of the Apostles, and it is within her that Christ nourishes us with his Body and Blood. Within the fold of the one Church of Christ we can indeed love the Lord our God with our whole heart, being, strength and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves.