

Position of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches on:

“Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church” of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

Whatever the reasons may be – just as it was with its 2000 declaration *Dominus Iesus* – the Holy See has again sought to bolster the position of the Roman Catholic Church. It has done so by, firstly, emphasizing its full identity with the one true Church of Christ; secondly, by advancing its solidarity with Orthodox and Eastern churches; and thirdly, by explaining in very few words why, according to a Roman Catholic understanding, the title “Church” cannot be used “with regard to those Christian Communities born out of the Reformation of the sixteenth century.”

In times of religious pluralism and global uncertainty, one need not oppose attempts to assert the identity of one’s own faith community, even if this could entail further demarcation from other communities. The short text could also be left without response as its main purpose seems to be the avoidance of inner-Catholic pluralism and since it in fact contains nothing new. As Reformed churches, we are not obliged to respond. We are not dependent on Rome to affirm our identity as churches – even as we feel the impact of such a lack of recognition. For Protestant Christians, the true Church forever remains a creature of the proclaimed Gospel. A church’s character must be measured with regard to Holy Scripture.

And yet, these formal repudiations of the declaration do not address its implicit ecumenical ramifications. With brotherly and sisterly concern, we have come to the understanding that the Roman Catholic Church, through its retreat inward, has excluded itself from the worldwide community of churches that confess their membership in the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” It was with great disconcertment that we must conclude that this casts doubt on the basis of the successful Protestant-Roman Catholic ecumenical dialogue, which goes back some forty years. It is most striking that, in this attempt to distance itself from other churches, the Roman Catholic has made use of a section of *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) of the Second Vatican Council, which had originally been a ground-breaking attempt to establish a positive relationship with other churches, and not only to distance itself from them. In 1964, after long debate, the Council decided to avoid a completely *exclusive* equation of the Roman Catholic Church with the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church” of the Nicene Creed, by replacing the verb *est* (“is”) with *subsistit* (“subsists in”). This was done in order to correspond better with the statement that “many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside” the Roman Catholic Church. Such wordings led both Catholics and Protestants to believe, for good reason, that after centuries of condemnation the Roman Catholic Church had begun to view other Christian communities as churches of Jesus Christ. If this ecumenical opening, which was received enthusiastically throughout all Christendom, had been a mere deception, the ecumenical world would not have been able to gain so much momentum beginning in 1965. We look back fondly at how, at the time, Christian confessions began an entirely new relationship with each other, leading to a new atmosphere of brotherly and sisterly cooperation among churches both here in Switzerland and throughout the world. Just as previously in the declaration *Dominus Iesus*, this understanding suffers a rebuff in the “Responses.” The text offers a very questionable interpretation that views the Church of Jesus Christ as subsisting exclusively in the Roman Catholic Church, as an historical continuance of the church initiated by Christ. It excludes the possibility that the Church of Jesus Christ can also subsist in other churches, which would be fully thinkable considering the ancient meaning of the verb “subsist” itself. We need only think of Trinitarian doctrine, in which God subsists not in

one, but in three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)¹. This also contradicts the Protestant understanding that the one Church of Jesus Christ subsists in a community of churches (without becoming completely absorbed by these churches), which “on the basis of the consensus they have reached in their understanding of the Gospel ... accord each other fellowship in word and sacrament” (Leuenberg Agreement of 1973, Article 29). According to Rome, the churches of the Reformation are only churches in the “many elements of sanctification and truth”, which, as a matter of principle, derive from the Roman Catholic Church. These so-called “church communities” are therefore only “churches” insofar as they are illuminated by the light of the Roman Catholic Church.

We were astonished to see that the Holy See in its “Responses” in no way took into account the inner-Catholic discussion that followed *Dominus Iesus*, which had sent more positive signals to the Protestant churches. We look back in appreciation at the statements of the current president of the Swiss Bishops’ Conference, Bishop Dr. Kurt Koch, who in his 2003 paper on the question of church unity explained that it was shorthand and therefore misleading to say with regard to church communities that they are not “actual churches” as set forth in *Dominus Iesus*. The then Cardinal Ratzinger had himself made it clear that these were not non-churches or quasi-churches but in fact “churches in an analogue sense.” Bishop Kurt Koch suggested, using a phrase coined by Cardinal Walter Kasper, that one speak of a “new type of church” or “churches of another kind”.²

The document therefore in no way offers “valuable indications for the future of ecumenical dialogue,” as it is expressed in the official commentary on “Responses”. Much to the contrary, it runs fully counter to a dialogue of equal partners, held in mutual respect, instead treating the churches of the Reformation as a *quantité négligeable*. The text exudes the sense of a great lack of relationship. The Roman Catholic Church speaks only to itself and is almost entirely satisfied with remaining within itself. The ecumenical movement can then only serve to expand on the ostensible “fullness” of the unity of the Catholic Church. It is hard to see, in view of these statements, how Protestant churches could seriously believe that the continuation of ecumenical dialogue is a priority of the Benedict XVI papacy. This would require a true willingness to take their ecumenical partners seriously, along with their self-understanding as churches – as well as a willingness to allow exegetic-historical questions to be posed concerning their own self-understanding as a church.

The theological questions involved require, from a Protestant point of view, a clear view of what being a church means to us. It is of basic importance that the church is not the truth itself or that it has the “fullness of the means of salvation,” but that it instead refers to truth in Christ in whom alone this fullness rests: “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16). The unity of the true Church of Jesus Christ lies in Christ. We believe in this unity and, in the life of our churches, we should live out this unity. This unity is everywhere and can be experienced wherever the Gospel is preached in its pure form, wherever sacraments are celebrated in accordance with the Gospel, and wherever congregations convene to witness together and to serve the world. This does not occur in only one of the churches of our time but in the many, in which the community of the one church of Jesus Christ becomes reality. From the Protestant perspective, the assertion is therefore untenable of the Church of Jesus Christ’s “complete identity” with the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church threatens to succumb to a self-understanding marked by absolutism when it believes that it alone is the one, true Church of Jesus Christ that has the “fullness of the means of salvation.” The visible,

¹ Cf. Eberhard Jüngel, *Quo vadis ecclesia? Kritische Bemerkungen zu zwei neuen Texten der römischen Kongregation für die Glaubenslehre*, in: „Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt, 15 September 2000.

² K. Koch, *Kirchengemeinschaft oder Einheit der Kirche? Zum Ringen um eine angemessene Zielvorstellung der Ökumene*, in: *Kirche in ökumenischer Perspektive. Kardinal Walter Kasper zum 70. Geburtstag*. P. Walter et al. (eds.), Freiburg 2003: 135-162; 144.

external Church can only be equated with the invisible Church of one's faith in an indirect manner, even as the Church of faith and the historical Church are closely connected. Every church with a concrete outward existence is fallible, even if the church remains in accordance with divine reality. It is also theologically untenable to discount churches of the Reformation for lacking an apostolic succession and the Eucharist as integral elements of the true Church. From a Protestant point of view, the apostolic succession is not guaranteed by a bishop's office, but by the Biblical canon. As for the Eucharist, the Roman Catholic Church's doctrine of transubstantiation and its specific manner of offering the Eucharist or communion, which do not conform with the New Testament, cannot be used as a criterion for church recognition. The only criterion for this can be whether the church in question upholds the Gospel.

As Reformed Christians, we are convinced that the achievements of the Second Vatican Council cannot be rescinded and that they will remain the future basis for a reduction in the divisive differences in our understanding of the nature of the Church – and thus as a basis for church unity. It is also our great hope that the ecumenical movement in Switzerland, grounded in individual church congregations and parishes and in a wide range of ecumenical cooperation, will not be affected by these "Responses." We are strongly determined to continue to join with Catholics, our fellow Christians, with whom we are connected in a common baptism and a common faith, in the Church of Jesus Christ – whether coming together in our towns and cities to worship, as a community to bear witness to the Gospel, or in service our fellow human beings.

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