

Does the Church of Christ Subsist in the Catholic Church?

Weylan Deaver

On June 29, 2007 the Vatican issued a document prepared by the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, bearing the stamp of approval of Pope Benedict XVI (available on the Vatican's website). The heading of the document is, "RESPONSES TO SOME QUESTIONS REGARDING CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE DOCTRINE ON THE CHURCH," and it purports to answer five specific questions.

The second question asks, "What is the meaning of the affirmation that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church?" In reply the Pope says, "It is possible, according to Catholic doctrine, to affirm correctly that the Church of Christ is present and operative in the churches and ecclesial Communities not yet fully in communion with the Catholic Church...". So, according to the Pope's answer, there is only one Church of Christ, which is the Catholic Church, but that one church can be found—at least to some degree—in religious bodies not even in full communion with the Catholic Church. This seems to say there are many Catholics out there in Protestant churches who do not even realize they are Catholics.

The third question in the pronouncement asks, "Why was the expression '*subsists in*' adopted instead of the simple word '*is*'?" In other words, if the Vatican believes it, why not come right out and say that the Church of Christ *is* the Catholic Church? Instead, they opt to say that Christ's church merely "subsists in" the Roman church. In answer, the Pope calls denominational groups "separated churches and Communities" that "suffer from defects." Nevertheless, the Pope believes "the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as instruments of salvation" because they have value which "derives from that fullness of grace and of truth which has been entrusted to the Catholic Church." In other words, if a non-Catholic church has any merit at all, it is only because it derives its merit from Catholicism.

What does this mean? It means the Pope wants it both ways. On one hand, he wants to maintain that the Catholic Church is the only true church. On the other hand, he wants to say there are saved people in other religious bodies not even in communion with the Catholic Church because the out-of-communion groups derive value somehow through the Catholic Church. The Pope wants to keep salvation connected to Catholicism, but he does not want to say that you must be a registered Catholic to go to heaven. If salvation can be found outside of communion with Catholicism, then why should the Catholic Church continue to exist? Think of it: **If you can go to heaven without being in communion with the Catholic Church, then the Catholic Church is unnecessary for anyone's salvation!** May we respectfully suggest that this entire concept of the church is a confusion.

We invite you to investigate the church of Christ. We in the churches of Christ do not believe we "subsist in" the Catholic Church. In fact, we disavow any and all connections to the Vatican. We believe God wrote a book called the New Testament, which He handed to the infant church some 2,000 years ago. We say with kindness, but firmness, that you cannot read in the New Testament about a pope, a Vatican, a Catholic hierarchy, or scores of other beliefs and practices associated with modern Catholicism. We in the churches of Christ believe the Bible is the only guide we need to get to heaven. It tells us what to believe (John 17:17), and how to respond to God in love by faithful obedience (John 14:15).

The Bible makes its own claims about how we are to approach it, including the fact that we must neither add to nor take away from it (Revelation 22:18-19), and that we must never change it in any way (Galatians 1:6-9). In the church of Christ, we believe the

Bible—specifically the New Testament—is God’s roadmap to heaven, informing us how to receive grace, and how to live as Christians. Patterning ourselves after the church described in the New Testament, we cannot be wrong. Rejecting that pattern in favor of an evolving church, we cannot be right.

We sincerely, lovingly encourage every reader to study the Bible and see for yourself what it teaches (John 8:32; 1 Thessalonians 5:21). The church of Christ is so vital that Jesus gave His own blood to obtain it (Acts 20:28). It still exists, and it is still just as important for salvation as it was when it began on earth 2,000 years ago. But it does not “subsist in” the Catholic Church. Rather, the church of Christ is the body of Christ on earth (Colossians 1:18), composed of those who have been baptized into it (Galatians 3:27) for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38).

And, when Jesus returns to claim His own, it will be the church of Christ—His spiritual body—that He saves (Ephesians 5:23). No other religious group—whether Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, etc.—has that divine promise. God loved you enough to offer His Son on the cross. Do you love God enough to become a member of the church of Christ?