

Observations on the Common Response to the Ravenna Document.

The North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation met in October 2009 and published a “Common Response to the Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue Between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church Regarding the Ravenna Document: “Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority.” “The Ravenna Document” was issued in 2007 by the Joint International Commission chaired by Cardinal Walter Kasper and Orthodox Metropolitan Ioannis Zizioulas of Pergamon.

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The Common Response praises many aspects of the Ravenna Document but what makes it more interesting than usual is the kind of criticism it makes of a document from a Joint International Commission co-chaired by the President of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity. At one point the Common Response faults the lone footnote in the “Ravenna Document” where it is written:

“Orthodox participants felt it important to emphasize that the use of the terms ‘the Church’, ‘the universal Church’ and ‘the Body of Christ’ in this document and in similar documents produced by the Joint Commission in no way undermines the self-understanding of the Orthodox Church as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, of which the Nicene Creed speaks. From the Catholic point of view, the same self-awareness applies: the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church ‘subsists in the Catholic Church’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 8); this does not exclude acknowledgment that elements of the true Church are present outside the Catholic communion.”

The Common Response goes so far as to say that what is stated here about the self-awareness of the Catholic point of view is a “misrepresentation” of “Catholic ecclesiology.” The authors of the Common Response argue:

We find this footnote inaccurate. First, we think that its two assertions do not adequately represent the ecclesiology of either the Orthodox or the Catholic Church. The Orthodox Church’s self-understanding as the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church is not understood by all Orthodox in exclusivist terms. Throughout the centuries, significant currents within Orthodox ecclesiology have recognized the presence of the Church’s reality outside the canonical, visible boundaries of the Orthodox Church. Also, to assert that “from the Catholic point of view the same self-awareness applies” misrepresents

Catholic ecclesiology at and since the Second Vatican Council, in spite of the Ravenna document's reference to *Lumen Gentium* 8. Because of apostolic succession and the Eucharist, Vatican II did not hesitate to recognize that the Orthodox constitute "Churches," (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 14) that they are "sister Churches," and to assert that in their celebration of the Eucharist, the Church of God is being built up and growing. To our Consultation, these two points of view point to the fact that the ecclesiological issues regarding mutual recognition raised at Bari still require resolution.

Let's examine the substance of this criticism of the Ravenna Document by the Common Response. The authors seem to think that the footnote in the Ravenna Document somehow denies the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that Orthodox faith communities constitute "Churches" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 14), that they are sister Churches and that their celebration of the Eucharist contributes to the building and growing of the Church of God. Why does the Ravenna Document allegedly deny these things? Apparently, the offending part of the document is the affirmation about the acknowledgment of "elements of the true Church being present outside the Catholic communion." It seems for the authors of the Common Response that speaking of "elements of the true Church would mean that the faith communities of the Orthodox cannot be called "churches." Is this true?

On the contrary, what the Ravenna Documents states about elements of the true church being present outside the Catholic communion does not exclude speaking of Orthodox churches. Elements of the true Church can be understood to be so strong as to include particular churches. In fact this understanding matches that given by the Theological Commission at the Second Vatican Council.

Let us recall that *Lumen gentium*, 8 after stating the one Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church, teaches that "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." Let it also be recalled that *Lumen gentium*, 15 in speaking of non-Catholics says of their sacraments that they are received "in their churches or communities." When the Theological Commission at Vatican II defended the use of the term "churches" for some groups of separated Christians, it also said something important about the *elementa* found outside the Catholic Church. The Commission said that it was right to speak of "churches" because the *elementa* that the Catholic Church recognizes as possessed by separated Christians "not only regard individuals but also communities" and that "pontifical documents speak generally of separated Eastern 'churches.'"¹ Thus it seems that for the Commission speaking of elements would not mean another group cannot be called a church. More recently, the encyclical *Ut unum sint* speaks of "the elements of sanctification and truth present in the other Christian Communities in a degree which varies from one to the other, constitute the objective basis of the

¹ See Francisco Gil Hellín, *Lumen Gentium. Constitutio Dogmatica de Ecclesia Concilii Vaticani II Synopsis in ordinem redigens schemata cum relationibus necnon patrum orationes atque animadversiones* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), third schema at no. 15, note D: "Elementa non tantum individuos respiciunt, sed etiam communitates. ... Documenta pontificia passim de 'Ecclesiis' orientalibus separatis loquuntur."

communion, albeit imperfect, which exists between them and the Catholic Church.”² What the Ravenna Document says can be understood in the same way. Speaking of elements of the true church does not entail denying that some of these elements are particular Churches. It does, however, rule out thinking that the one Church of Christ subsists in these particular churches because there is a single subsistence of the Church of Christ which Catholics believe is found in the Catholic Church alone. This point was recently affirmed by the magisterium through the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith in 2007.³ Perhaps underneath the surface of their criticism there exists a discomfort with this point on the part of the authors of the Common Response. Is there a quiet disavowal of the single subsistence of the Church of Christ in the Catholic Church that is behind the criticism of the Ravenna Document?

What about the objection that Orthodox churches are sister Churches? If the Ravenna Document allows for Orthodox Churches then it allows for them to be called sister churches of particular Catholic Churches. But notice that because of what it affirms about the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church subsisting in the Catholic Church, the Ravenna Document is not open to saying that the universal Catholic Church is sister church to particular churches or a group of particular Orthodox churches. Why? This would be unacceptable because it would imply a plurality on the level of the one, holy catholic and apostolic Church. But again, Catholics believe that there is but one single Church, the Church of Jesus Christ which subsists and remains in full identity with the Catholic Church.

The Common Response also objects that the Ravenna Document does not appear to allow for the assertion of Vatican II in *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 14 that in the celebration of the Eucharist in Orthodox churches, the Church of God is built up and grows. Here again, simply because the Ravenna Document speaks of elements of sanctification and truth it does not mean it must exclude the existence of separated particular churches which celebrate the Eucharist and which in turn contribute in some way to the building up the Church of God. The objection does, at least implicitly, raise the question of how it is that the Eucharistic celebrations of separated churches can build up the Church of God without in some way comprising the Church of God. To answer this question goes far beyond the Common Response and the Ravenna Document but the context of an answer could be found in what the Second Vatican Council teaches about imperfect communion and as well as its teaching that “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” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3.4).

² *Ut unum sint*, 11.3 The Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith reiterated the same point in “Responses to the Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church.” See the response to the second question.

³ “The Response to the Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church” The CDF makes it very clear that there cannot be multiple subsistences of the one Church of Christ. In the response to the second question the CDF says: Nevertheless, the word “subsists” can only be attributed to the Catholic Church alone precisely because it refers to the mark of unity that we profess in the symbols of the faith (I believe... in the “one” Church); and this “one” Church subsists in the Catholic Church. Citing Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Ut unum sint* the CDF does acknowledge that the one Church of Christ is present and operative in particular churches and ecclesial communities separated from the Catholic Church.

Finally, implicit in this argument is the rather astonishing supposition that the President of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, Cardinal Walter Kasper, who is universally recognized as a first rate theologian to boot, is guilty of agreeing to a statement that “misrepresents Catholic ecclesiology at and since the Second Vatican Council!” Of course anyone can make mistakes but do the authors of the Common Response really believe that Cardinal Kasper agreed to an ecumenical document produced by an international dialogue that contains not just misrepresentations of “Catholic ecclesiology” but a misrepresentation of ecclesiology both “at and since the Second Vatican Council! We are to believe Cardinal Kasper made that kind of a mistake? Really?

Anyone who knows Cardinal Kasper’s work and has watched him guide the work of the Catholic participants in an international ecumenical dialogue knows that he is far too careful and far too competent to allow himself to sign on to an agreement that misrepresents Catholic ecclesiology.

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