

# Contemporary Catholicism

## Lesson One—A Challenge to Unity

### *Fellowship in the Catholic Church*

In the introduction to the Smalcald Articles, Luther's strong position regarding the Catholic Church provokes a discussion of fellowship principles. Luther was arguing for a clear confession and a clear separation from falsehood. Most of us are familiar with our synod's teaching on fellowship. But where does the Roman Catholic Church stand on that issue? Using the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1997), we will let the Catholic Church speak for itself.

#### **Who belongs to the Catholic Church?**

**836** "All men are called to this catholic unity of the People of God. . . . And to it, in different ways, belong or are ordered: the Catholic faithful, others who believe in Christ, and finally all mankind, called by God's grace to salvation." [*Lumen gentium* 13]

**837** "Fully incorporated into the society of the Church are those who, possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept all the means of salvation given to the Church together with her entire organization, and who—by the bonds constituted by the profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesiastical government, and communion—are joined in the visible structure of the Church of Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops. Even though incorporated into the Church, one who does not however persevere in charity is not saved. He remains indeed in the bosom of the Church, but 'in body' not 'in heart.'" [*Lumen gentium* 14]

**838** "The Church knows that she is joined in many ways to the baptized who are honored by the name of Christian, but do not profess the Catholic faith in its entirety or have not preserved unity or communion under the successor of Peter." [*Lumen gentium* 15] Those "who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in a certain, although imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church." [*Unitatis redintegratio* 3] *With the Orthodox Churches*, this communion is so profound "that it lacks little to attain the fullness that would permit a common celebration of the Lord's Eucharist." [Paul VI, Discourse, cf. *Unitatis redintegratio* 13-18]

1. What three categories of people does the Roman Catholic Church recognize?
2. What do you think it means that all three "in different ways, belong or are ordered" to the Catholic Church?
3. What is the difference, in the view of the Catholic Church, between a Catholic and a Lutheran?

**816** "The sole Church of Christ [is that] which our Savior, after his Resurrection, entrusted to Peter's pastoral care, commissioning him and the other apostles to extend and rule it. . . . This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in (*subsistit in*) the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him." [*Lumen gentium* 8§2]

The Second Vatican Council's *Decree on Ecumenism* explains: "For it is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help toward salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained. It was to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, that we believe that our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant, in order to establish on earth the one Body of Christ into which all those should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the People of God." [*Unitatis redintegratio* 3§5]

4. How many Christian churches does the Catholic Church recognize?

**832** "The Church of Christ is really present in all legitimately organized local groups of the faithful, which, in so far as they are united to their pastors, are also quite appropriately called Churches in the New Testament. . . . In them the faithful are gathered together through the preaching of the Gospel of Christ, and the mystery of the Lord's Supper is celebrated. . . . In these communities, though they may often be small and poor, or existing in the diaspora, Christ is present, through whose power and influence the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church is constituted." [*Lumen gentium* 26]

**834** Particular Churches are fully catholic through their communion with one of them, the Church of Rome "which presides in charity." [St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Romanii* 1:1; cf. *Lumen gentium* 13] "For with this church, by reason of its pre-eminence, the whole Church, that is the faithful everywhere, must necessarily be in accord." [St. Irenaeus *Adv. haeres.* 3,3,2 . . . ] Indeed, "from the incarnate Word's descent to us, all Christian churches everywhere have held and hold the great Church that is here [at Rome] to be their only basis and foundation since, according to the Savior's promise, the gates of hell have never prevailed against her." [St. Maximus the Confessor, *Opuscula theo.*]

5. What two things are necessary for the Church of Christ to be really present according to these paragraphs?

**817** In fact, "in this one and only Church of God from its very beginnings there arose certain rifts, which the Apostle strongly censures as damnable. But in subsequent centuries much more serious dissensions appeared and large communities became separated from full communion with the Catholic Church—for which, often enough, men of both sides were to blame." [*Unitatis redintegratio* 3§1] The ruptures that wound the unity of Christ's Body—here we must distinguish heresy, apostasy, and schism [cf. *Codex Iuris Canonici*, canon 751]—do not occur without human sin.

**818** "However, one cannot charge with the sin of the separation those who at present are born into these communities [that resulted from such separation] and in them are brought up in the faith of Christ, and the Catholic Church accepts them with respect and affection as brothers. . . . All who have been justified by faith in Baptism are incorporated into Christ; they therefore have a right to be called Christians, and with good reason are accepted as brothers in the Lord by the children of the Catholic Church." [*Unitatis redintegratio* 3§1]

**819** "Furthermore, many elements of sanctification and of truth" [*Lumen gentium* 8§2] are found outside the visible confines of the Catholic Church: "the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope, and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as visible elements." [*Unitatis redintegratio* 3§2] Christ's Spirit uses these Churches and ecclesial communities as means of salvation, whose power derives from the fullness of grace and truth that Christ has entrusted to

the Catholic Church. All these blessings come from Christ and lead to him, [Cf. *Unitatis redintegratio* 3] and are in themselves calls to “Catholic unity.” [Cf. *Lumen gentium* 8]

6. What is the source of separation from the Catholic Church, according to these paragraphs?
  
7. What special allowance does the Catholic Church make for non-Catholics today?
  
8. The catechism does teach that other churches can be means of salvation. Where does their “power” to be means of salvation come from, according to these paragraphs?

**1400** Ecclesial communities derived from the Reformation and separated from the Catholic Church, “have not preserved the proper reality of the Eucharistic mystery in its fullness, especially because of the absence of the sacrament of Holy Orders.” [*Unitatis redintegratio* 22§3] It is for this reason that, for the Catholic Church, Eucharistic intercommunion with these communities is not possible. However these ecclesial communities, “when they commemorate the Lord’s death and resurrection in the Holy Supper . . . profess that it signifies life in communion with Christ and await his coming in glory.” [*Unitatis redintegratio* 22§3]

9. What limitations does the Catholic Church see to its union with Protestant and Lutheran churches?

**846** How are we to understand this affirmation, often repeated by the Church Fathers? Re-formulated positively, it means that all salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is his Body:

Basing itself on Scripture and Tradition, the Council teaches that the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church. He himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and Baptism, and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through Baptism as through a door. Hence they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or to remain in it. [*Lumen gentium* 14; Cf. Mark 16:6; John 3:5]

**847** This affirmation is not aimed at those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his Church:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation. [*Lumen gentium* 16]

**848** “Although in ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel, to that faith without which it is impossible to please him, the Church still has

the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize all men.” [*Ad gentes* 7; Cf. Hebrews 11:6; 1 Corinthians 9:16]

10. According to the catechism, what happens to people who refuse to join the Catholic Church or who leave?

11. What special exception does the catechism make?

12. According to the catechism, what mission does the Catholic Church still have?