



In June 2007 the Roman Catholic Church issued a document restating a controversial 2000 document [*Dominus Iesus*] about what is and is not the “one true Church.” What is Anglicanism’s position on this, and why did the Vatican do this again when in 2000 it made so many other Christians angry and hurt ecumenical relations?

It has been said that the phrasing of the question is as important as the answer. In this case, I believe, that is absolutely correct. In this statement issued in June 2007—as well as in the original document, *Dominus Iesus*, issued in 2000—the Vatican is talking about “true Church” not as “God’s one chosen people” from which every other individual is excluded but rather as defining the elements necessary in order to have a full (“true,” complete) branch of the one Catholic Church.

There are many good and valuable Christian organizations such as prayer groups, Bible study groups, missionary societies, devotional sodalities, and religious orders which would never claim to have all the necessary elements to be in themselves full or complete branches of the one Catholic Church.

A familiar example is the saintly brothers and very “high church” Anglican Priests, John and Charles Wesley, who when they began an evangelization and renewal ministry in 18th century England specifically called its local branches “Methodist [i.e. having a Catholic “rule of life”] *societies*.” They refused to celebrate the Sacraments or to have any society meetings on Sunday mornings because they wanted all their members active in their own local parish churches worshipping and receiving the Sacraments according to the Catholic liturgy of the Anglican Church. The “Methodist Church”—never the intention of the Wesley’s both of whom died Priests in good standing of the Church of England—only came into being when the elitist Deist Anglican hierarchy forced the Methodist societies’ members out of the Church of England because they considered the Methodist emotional (“from the heart”) approach to Christian spirituality to be low-brow, offensive, and an unacceptable presence and influence in the Church.

The Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Old Catholic, and Oriental Churches are in full agreement that Jesus Christ founded the Catholic Church on earth as a sacramental body empowered to continue His ministry until He comes again at the end of the age. They all agree that there is—in the words of the Nicene Creed—only One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. The question is, what are the minimum elements required in order for an ecclesial body to be a full, complete (“true”) branch of the Catholic Church.

Based on Our Lord’s specific teaching about the Church He was establishing, Anglicanism since 1888 has officially held that in order to be a true branch of the one Catholic Church, a religious body must at least (1) accept both the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God; (2) accept both the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds as binding statements of doctrine (the former) and dogma (the latter); (3) validly celebrate the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist; and (4) have validly consecrated Bishops in the Apostolic Succession.

The Roman Catholic and the Anglican Churches are in complete agreement that these four elements are necessary in order to have an authentic branch of the Catholic Church. However, since the 1870 First Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church has in addition dogmatically taught – based on their under-

standing of Our Lord's command—that an ecclesial body must also be both in Full Communion with the Bishop of Rome and under his absolute authority as the Universal Primate in order to be a complete (“true”) branch of the one Catholic Church.

It is important to understand that this teaching of both Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism concerns ecclesial bodies, not individual Christians. Both Churches teach that every person who has validly received the Sacrament of Holy Baptism is a member of the one Catholic Church regardless of where it was administered. Both the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches recognize as valid Baptism administered in all mainstream Christian bodies. Those Baptised persons who are not part of one of the authentic branches of the Catholic Church, however, are not yet in Full Communion with the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

This is not a relevant question for the vast majority of Protestants because they believe the Reformation doctrine that the “visible” Church is a human sociological institution (for fellowship, inspiration, and education). They do not accept the historic Apostolic and Catholic teaching that the Church is the divine Body of Christ here on earth until His coming again at the end of the age, the foundational Sacrament which authoritatively continues Christ's ministry and actually conveys salvific grace. Thus what is required to be a “true” branch of the Catholic Church is no more relevant for most Protestant theology than what is required to have a “valid” Catholic Sacrament.

My “inside sources” tell me that the document issued in June 2007 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the Vatican “theology department”) was an in-house statement addressed to some official Roman Catholic theologians principally in German universities who were illicitly teaching things contrary to the official theology of their Church, the very thing for which they were specifically appointed and being paid to represent. (I personally believe that every Church has both a right and an obligation to insist that its official spokespersons accurately present the positions of the body for whom they are authoritatively speaking. As has been said, “With authority comes responsibility.” To act otherwise, I believe, is simply dishonest.)

While this document was never intended as an ecumenical statement—and indeed, I am told, was never intended to be made public—nevertheless I believe that it does point to something vital in our ecumenical relations: the importance of dialogue with other Christian bodies being rooted in honesty about our own theology and beliefs. Too often, I am afraid, there has been a tendency among some well-meaning but sentimental Christians in ecumenical relations to gloss over what are very real, substantive theological differences. This, I believe, is not only being dishonest and even condescending with brothers and sisters in Christ but in the end inevitably hinders, never advances, our growing together. As the Primate, Archbishops, and diocesan Bishops of the Anglican Communion world-wide said at the 1988 Lambeth Conference, “While all true religion touches emotions, theology is the foundation upon which everything else is built.”

The Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church—working through the official Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC)—have achieved impressive agreement in most areas of faith and practice since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The only two theological issues which remain to be resolved are the Anglican question of the nature of the ministry and authority of the Bishop of Rome and the Roman Catholic question of the sacramental continuity of the Apostolic Succession in Anglican Holy Orders.