

WORLD & NATION

Document receives mixed reviews

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — A new Vatican document emphasizing the "exclusive, universal and absolute" value of Jesus Christ prompted mostly cautious approval from Catholic dialogue experts and disappointment among representatives of other churches.

Taking aim at the notion that "one religion is as good as another," the document warned against concessions to religious pluralism in the church.

The 36-page declaration, "Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church," was signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and was published Sept. 5.

While acknowledging that non-Christians can be saved through a special grace that comes from Christ, the document said the church can never be considered merely as "one way of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions."

Regarding ecumenical dialogue, it said that despite a certain level of communion with other Christian churches, the "church of Christ ... continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church."

In a letter to the world's bishops, Cardinal Ratzinger said Pope John Paul II had approved the document and wanted its contents to be accepted by the entire church. Cardinal Ratzinger said the document was drafted in response to "the growing presence of confused or erroneous ideas or opinions" that cast doubt upon Christianity's universal mission.

The text said there was a tendency among modern Christians to be silent about Christ, to consider him as just one historical manifestation of God, to elevate other religions as pathways to salvation, to downplay Scripture and to undervalue the

church as an institution. It warned that these ideas are "contrary to Catholic faith" and listed a series of truths it said must be "firmly held" by all Catholics.

"The church's constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism," it said.

The document struck an ecumenical nerve in stating that ecclesial communities that have not preserved the valid episcopate through apostolic succession and the valid Eucharist "are not churches in the proper sense."

Speaking at a press conference, Cardinal Ratzinger criticized what he called an "ideology of dialogue" that attempts to replace mission and conversion in the church with a "false sense of religious tolerance."

The cardinal said that while the church teaches that good things can exist in other religions, "one cannot close one's eyes to the errors and illusions that are also present" in those religions.

Although the impact of the document was expected to be highest in the church's dialogue with non-Christian faiths, most initial reaction came from Catholic representatives and other Christian churches.

Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza of Galveston-Houston, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the declaration provides "a valuable service in summarizing and clarifying the teaching of the church." He said the Catholic belief in the unique salvific role of Jesus Christ and his church "in no way diminishes the sincere respect we have for the religions of the human family or our conviction that their followers can receive divine grace."

Cardinal William H. Keeler of Baltimore, a leader in dialogue with Jews and Orthodox churches, said he did not expect the document to create problems for dialogue experts. Most dialogue partners ex-

pect the Catholic participants to be true to their faith, which is what the Vatican declaration insists upon, he said.

The World Council of Churches warned of potential damage to ecumenical dialogue, however.

"What a tragedy" if the witness of joint Christian cooperation "were obscured by the churches' dialogues about their relative authority and status — however important they may be," the WCC said.

The WCC said it would have hoped for "an acknowledgment of the many positive developments" in ecumenical dialogue and cooperation over the past 100 years.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches wrote to Vatican ecumenical officials of "disappointment and dismay" over the document, which it said was "made without ecumenical sensitivity" and "seems to go against the spirit of Vatican II."

Christian leaders in Britain also expressed disappointment at the Vatican document, but said their commitment to ecumenical efforts remains unchanged.

Anglican Archbishop George Carey of Canterbury, head of the worldwide Anglican Communion, said the document "breaks no new ground" but fails to reflect ecumenical understanding achieved in 30 years of dialogue and cooperation.

"The idea that Anglican and other churches are not 'proper churches' seems to question the considerable ecumenical gains we have made," the archbishop said.

In Asia, retired Bishop Francisco Claver of Malaybalay, Philippines, said the text seemed out of synch with what most Asian bishops said at the 1998 Synod of Bishops for Asia.

"It seems to resuscitate something that we associate with the pre-Vatican II church and that we have tried to avoid in our preaching: a triumphalism that we thought was a thing of the past," the bishop wrote.

Rochester-area leaders express initial reaction

In the Rochester Diocese, religious leaders expressed concern about the new Vatican statement on religions.

Sister Beth LeValley, SSJ, president of the Greater Rochester Community of Churches, was surprised by the document's release and had already had a couple of inquiries about it.

"I haven't had a chance to look at it," she said, adding that she planned to study it while on retreat.

Deacon Brian McNulty, a GRCC board member, said, "From my experience, this would be misunderstood very easily. It is a difficult kind of statement to make in the face of ecumenical relationships that have grown ... It will take a great deal of explanation on the congregation's part to make people understand it."

Msgr. William H. Shannon immediately began to study the document, but said that it would take more time.

"The document to me is a disappointment — and a scandal," he said, reserving further comment.

The Rev. Ralph Anderson, pastor of Rochester's Lutheran Church of the Incarnate Word, celebrated with the diocese the 1999 Catholic-Lutheran "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith." He is an ecumenical officer for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

"It sounds like what was issued is a reentrenchment, if I understand what the content was, to declare the Roman Catholic Church is really only the true place where Christians can be redeemed," he said. "If it turns out what it appears to be, it will be extremely disappointing to the rest of Christianity."

—Kathleen Schwarz



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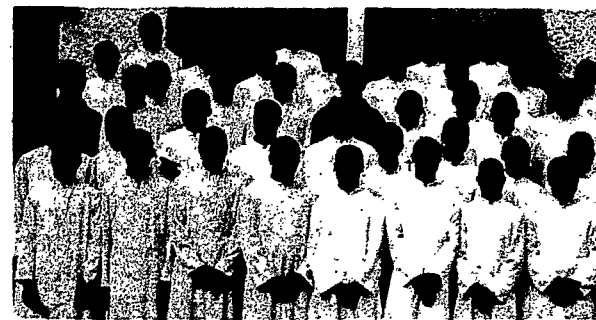
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