

"Dear Francis"

A Response to the Vatican news releases

Community members and friends have been inquiring about my thoughts about the news releases pertaining to the Roman Catholic Church over the past two weeks. The following is an "*imagined letter*" to a Catholic friend I call "*Francis*." Through this means I'm seeking to understand the recent news reports regarding the Vatican's statements (with Pope Benedict's full approval) about the Latin Mass and "*The Church*" and what they might mean for ecumenical dialogue.

Dear Francis –

After reading and rereading the news from the Vatican this week, it was good to speak with you over a cup of coffee at The Roasterie this morning. I'm grateful for the time and for your care and reassurances. A squall of consternation has darkened the skies of ecumenical dialogue in recent days, and the prospects for the kind of conversation that takes place among those who speak as equals has been dimmed. But I'm glad for your openness and am actually encouraged by what you described as your "*disappointment*" over the Vatican's recent actions and the Pope's endorsements of them. Your comments were not unlike those of John and Sue, Catholic friends in a parish different from yours with whom I shared lunch yesterday. Still I'm not yet persuaded by your assertions that most American Catholics are similarly disappointed (and perhaps embarrassed).

And thanks for the piece by Dr. Ann Riggs, Associate General Secretary for Faith and Order from the National Council of Churches. I have read with great interest her commentary about the Pope's release of "*Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church*." But Riggs' statements, as well as clarifications from such open-minded Catholics as yourself and John and Sue, are not very reassuring. They would make

more overall sense and feel more comforting if a person of some significant level of authority within the Roman Catholic Church itself would state outright "*Protestants are completely legitimate members of Christ's Body. Yes, we understand the folks in your churches to be Christians.*" To call us "*ecclesial communities*" is not really very encouraging. And to refer to "*defects*" within the Orthodox Church is hardly conciliatory. I recall Thom Savage, on numerous occasions on our weekly Sunday morning radio talk -show, "Religion on the Line," stating that the Catholic Church regarded Protestants as "*fully Christian*." That kind of declaration was and remains truly reassuring for ecumenical relations.

I should say again what you heard me say this morning: Protestants neither need nor require statements such as Thom Savage's to authenticate our faith. But such statements would help to quell dismaying news reports and would serve as springboards for greater ecumenical cooperation on some of the world's truly pressing issues like poverty and hunger.

It was interesting to imagine with you those audience(s) to which the Pope might be sending indirect messages. To some, I'm sure, both the reinvigoration of the Latin Mass and the commentary about what and who constitute the "*Church*" are like manna from heaven. For the followers of LeFebvre and other similar groups – those whom you long ago described as "*schismatics*" and not in the mainstream of Roman Catholicism – I'm sure

this will hearten their hopes of a return to a pre-Vatican II kind of Catholicism. If the documents were meant mostly for internal restraining purposes, i.e. to reign in wayward Roman Catholic theologians, why release the documents publicly?

For American Catholics, I can imagine a small minority welcoming the Vatican's recent pronouncements. But a significant portion of the American Catholic population may feel even further alienated and distanced. I know some who are now seeking out Protestant alternatives and are not in any way intimidated from doing so. In fact, the Vatican's recent severity in highlighting the differences among people in the Judeo-Christian heritage may even spur on the departure of disaffected Catholics. I also know countless Catholics who had thought their branch of the Church had come a long way toward mending relations with Jews but are now wondering if a woefully backward step has been taken.

I suppose the main sore point for Protestants could be this: the statements coming out of the Vatican these days, which some commentators say are really intended for Catholic audiences, carry with them more than a hint of presumption. The presumption? That any final assessment of faith matters – regarding the search for truth, authenticity, and closeness to God's heart of love – rests with papal authority. As you can imagine, such a presumption is overheard by many Protestants as insulting condescension. On the other hand, on the other side of the aisle among mainline Protestants – who, as you well know, are the primary partners in ecumenical and interfaith conversations – there is a baseline and in some cases historic acceptance of Catholics as full-

fledged members of the Body of Christ. You were exactly on target to remind me that there are certain fundamentalists and conservative evangelical Christians who will use the latest releases from Rome as fuel for their condemning bonfires of anti-Catholicism. And I believe I was right to remind us that they may hide such condemnation within the cozy caveat of "*Oh, we don't condemn them, the Bible does....*" Regarding the overall theological tug-of-war between Protestants and Catholics, I believe it's helpful (maybe even healing) to remember that John 3:16 says "*God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...*" and not "*God so loved the Church that He gave His only Son....*"

Regardless of the impact of the Pope's comments within the Roman Catholic church, Protestants, as we have for nearly 500 years, take our authenticating charge and authorizing mandate from a "*magisterium*" far larger, far grander, far more dynamic than any institutional expression of religion. Thus I will proceed with care and prayer to see how we at Community can do our part to stimulate better ecumenical dialogue and more compassionate service to a world much in need. Instead of driving us apart, this momentary contretemps just might be a stimulation for closer relations. Such is my hope.

Best Regards,

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"*Se hace camino al andar.*" - Antonio Machado
(We make the road by walking.)