

## Chapter 1

### Benedict's Startling Announcement

On July 10, 2007, the Vatican published a document that got the attention of the religious world - at least, the Christian religious world. The document, titled "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church," stated: "Christ Established here on earth' only one Church and instituted it as a Visible and spiritual community,' that from its beginning and throughout the centuries has always existed and will always exist

. This Church, constituted and organized in this world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the successor of Peter."<sup>1</sup> The document went on to specifically point out that when it says that the church of Christ "subsists in" the Catholic Church, it uses those words to indicate "the full identity of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church."

Further, the document clearly stated that Protestant churches, born of the sixteenth-century Reformation, cannot ... be "called 'Churches' in the proper sense" - although the document does admit that Christ's Spirit "has not refrained from using them as instruments of salvation."

In short, this document, issued in the name of Pope Benedict XVI, reaffirms the Roman Catholic Church's claim to be the only true, genuine church of Jesus Christ.

Predictably, the reaction by non-Catholic Christians to Pope Benedict's document was immediate and largely negative. Churches, from the Anglicans to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, from Presbyterians to Egypt's Coptic Christian Church, went public with their dismay and objections to the pope's statement.

Although he didn't write the document himself,<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI clearly took most of the heat for its publication - and appropriately so. The document notes that Benedict "ratified and confirmed these Responses ... and ordered their publication."

But why all the fuss? Benedict's statement should hardly come as a surprise to anyone who's even minimally familiar with Roman Catholicism's theology of the church. The claim that the Roman Catholic Church is the only true church goes back hundreds of years. A related claim - that salvation is available only through the Catholic Church - is also very ancient and is alluded to in the document by Pope

## CHALLENGES TO THE REMNANT

Benedict. As noted above, the document admits that Christ's Spirit has used non-Catholic churches as "instruments of salvation," but it goes on to say that this is possible only through the "fullness of grace and truth which has been entrusted to the Catholic Church."

An even clearer statement regarding salvation was made by Pope Boniface VIII in 1302. In *Unam Sanctam* he declared, "Outside of her [the Catholic Church] there is neither salvation nor the remission of sins," and "we declare, we proclaim, we define that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff."<sup>3</sup> In 1864 Pope Pius IX declared that "the religion of the Catholic Church is the only true religion" and it is a most serious error to believe that "Protestantism is nothing more than another form of the same true Christian religion, in which form it is given to please God equally as in the Catholic Church."<sup>4</sup> In his encyclical "On Religious Unity," issued on January 6, 1928, Pius XI quoted the following statement: "The Catholic Church is alone in keeping the true worship. This [the Catholic Church] is the fount of truth, this the house of Faith, this the temple of God."<sup>5</sup>

### Examining the evidence

Catholics give several reasons why they are the only "true church." One of these is "apostolic succession" - the claim that in Matthew 16:18, Jesus designated Peter as the first pope and that since that time, the line of popes has continued unbroken until the present day. His "Eucharistic mystery" - changing the bread and wine of the Communion service into the actual body and blood of Christ - is another reason for the Catholic claim to be the only true church. Let's look at these claims.

Was Peter the first pope? In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." The name Peter comes from the Greek word *petra*, which means "rock." Using the Greek words in the place of both Peter and rock, the verse reads, "You are *Petros*, and on this *petra* I will build my church." According to Catholic theology, Jesus meant that He would build His church on Peter, thus designating him as the first pope.

However, in a text that uses the same word, *petra*, the apostle Paul clearly designated Jesus as the Rock. Speaking of the manna and the water that God provided the Israelites in the wilderness, Paul said,

## CHALLENGES TO THE REMNANT

“They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock [petra] that accompanied them, and that rock [petra] was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:3, 4). Paul also said that “no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11, emphasis added).

Using the same figure of speech but a different Greek word for “rock” (lithos), Jesus said,

“Have you never read in the Scriptures:

“The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?” (Matthew 21:42).

Here Jesus clearly referred to Himself as the “ “stone [lithos] the builders rejected.” ‘ ” And in Ephesians 2:20 Paul spoke of Christian church members as having been “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.”

Thus, when we look at the “rock” and “stone” metaphor of Jesus’ statement to Peter (Matthew 16:18) in the light of the entire New Testament witness on this subject, it becomes abundantly clear that the Rock is Jesus, not Peter.

The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary points out a significant reason why Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:18 should not be understood to mean that He was making Peter the head of His church: “Had Christ made Peter chief among the disciples, they would not thereafter have been involved in repeated arguments about which of them ‘should be accounted the greatest’ ” (Luke 22:24). In fact, the Christian church for the first four hundred years failed to apply Christ’s words in Matthew 16:18 to Peter. The first pope to do so was Leo I, about a.d. 445.6

Again, citing the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, “Strange indeed it is, that if this is really what Christ meant, neither Peter nor any other of the disciples, nor other Christians for four centuries thereafter, discovered the fact! How extraordinary that no Roman bishop discovered this meaning in Christ’s words until a fifth-century bishop considered it necessary to find some Biblical support for papal primacy.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus, we have plenty of reason, both biblical and historical, to reject the Catholic claim that Jesus appointed Peter as the first pope.

Apostolic succession. Closely related to the idea that Jesus named Peter as the first pope is a claim, vigorously put forth by Catholics, that there has been an unbroken line of popes from Peter to the present.

## CHALLENGES TO THE REMNANT

Pope Benedict XVI pointed this out in his “Responses” document when he said, “According to Catholic doctrine, these Communities [Protestants] do not enjoy apostolic succession in the sacrament of Orders, and are, therefore, deprived of a constitutive element of the Church” (emphasis added). Apostolic succession is the idea that each pope has followed the previous pope in an unbroken line of popes back to Peter. For the Catholic Church, apostolic succession is an article of faith, for it is one of the primary evidences it gives to legitimize its claim to be the only true church.

We have already seen the dubious foundation for the claim that Peter was the first pope. This should be enough to dismiss the Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession. But there’s more.

One of the chief problems with the notion of apostolic succession is the difficulty of identifying Peter as the first pope in New Testament history. If Peter was indeed the first pope, he should stand out clearly in the New Testament record as the leader of the early church in the first century. However, that is not the case. Acts 15 provides the only record we have in the New Testament of a general meeting of the Christian church during the time of the apostles. This meeting was called to settle the question of whether circumcision should be required of Gentiles. And at this meeting, commonly referred to as the Jerusalem Council, the presiding officer was James, not Peter (see Acts 15:13 - 21). Following this council, “the apostles and elders, with the whole church” - not Peter - sent some chosen men along with Paul and Barnabas to relay the council’s decision to the church in Antioch. The church as a whole - presumably the entire leadership of the apostles and not just Peter - sent Barnabas to Antioch (see Acts 11:22). Several years later, it was “James, and all the elders” who recommended that Paul join four men in taking a purification vow at the temple in Jerusalem (see Acts 21:18 - 26). In none of these texts does Peter stand out as the leader of the early Christian church.

Several texts in Galatians have a significant bearing on the question of whether Peter was the first pope. Recalling a famous encounter between himself and Peter at Antioch, the apostle Paul said that he “opposed [Peter] to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong” (Galatians 2:11). Had Paul understood Peter to be the first pope, he would certainly have showed him greater deference. In a list of the “pillars” of the church in Jerusalem, Paul mentioned “James, Peter and John,” with Peter listed in second place, not first (verse 9). Finally, Paul said that the apostles in Jerusalem recognized “that I [Paul] had been

## CHALLENGES TO THE REMNANT

entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews” (verse 7). Obviously, the early church saw Peter’s field of labor as being primarily to Jewish Christians, not to all Christians.

Another difficulty with the idea of apostolic succession is that there are missing links in the so-called unbroken line of popes throughout Christian history. In 1045, the people ran Pope Benedict DC out of Rome because of his unworthiness, and Silvester III was named pope in his place. When Benedict IX returned, he sold the papal throne to Gregory VI. Yet Benedict IX refused to give up his own claim to the papacy, so three men - Silvester, Benedict, and Gregory - were each claiming simultaneously to be the legitimate pope! Finally, in 1046, German Emperor Henry III settled the problem by calling a synod that deposed all three popes and appointed a fourth - Clement II. History hardly supports an unbroken line of popes from Peter to the present!

The Eucharistic mystery. The Catholic Church also bases its claim to be the only true church on its view of the Eucharist - the Lord’s Supper, or the Holy Communion service. According to Catholic theology, Catholic priests - and only Catholic priests - are able to transform the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper into the literal body and blood of Christ. Catholics maintain that the sacrament of grace depends on this miraculous transformation, which takes place when the priest conducts Mass. Thus, grace and salvation come only through the Catholic Church. Let’s examine these claims further.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that “by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation.”<sup>8</sup>

At the Last Supper Jesus said of the bread, ” ‘this is my body,’ ” and of the wine, ” ‘This is my blood’ ” (Matthew 26:26-28). Catholics take these words in their most literal sense. However, Jesus frequently spoke in metaphors. He said, for example, that ” ‘if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into heir’ ” (Matthew 5:30). A few people throughout Christian history have taken these words literally and have cut off members of their body that they believed tempted them to sin, but no rational Catholic - popes and

## CHALLENGES TO THE REMNANT

priests included - argues that Jesus was telling us to literally maim ourselves to avoid temptation and sin.

On a different occasion Jesus clearly spoke of His body and blood in a metaphorical sense when He said to some of His disciples, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you\*" (John 6:53). The disciples interpreted His words literally and were offended (see verse 60), because to literally eat His flesh would be cannibalism, and Levitical law forbade the eating of blood (see Leviticus 3:17). Jesus then said, "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (John 6:63). He made it clear that His references to His flesh and blood were metaphorical. The same should be understood of His references to His body and blood at the Last Supper.

Nevertheless, Catholic theology teaches that during the Mass the priest truly transforms the bread and wine into the literal body and blood of Christ, and therefore he literally sacrifices Christ again on the altar. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that "the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice: 'The victim is one and the same: the same now offers through the ministry of priests, who then offered himself on the cross; only the manner of offering is different.' 'And since in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and offered in an unbloody manner ... this sacrifice is truly propitiatory.'"<sup>9</sup>

Since the bread and wine are understood to be Christ's literal body and blood, Catholics are encouraged to worship the emblems. Under the title "Worship of the Eucharist," the Catholic Catechism states that Catholics should worship the bread and the wine "by, among other ways, genuflecting or bowing deeply as a sign of adoration of the Lord."<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Catholics are taught that by taking the Eucharist, they receive the life of Christ and thus are cleansed from sin.

11

The Catholic Church also teaches that the believer receives Christ's saving grace through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. In other words, in order to be saved, the believer must participate in the sacraments of the Catholic Church, and, of course, only a person who is a member of the Catholic Church can do that. I will have more to say about this in chapter 10.

## CHALLENGES TO THE REMNANT

### Catholic logic

Although I disagree strongly with this Catholic theology, it has a certain logic once one accepts its basic premise that the believer receives grace through the sacraments. Because only an ordained priest can administer the sacraments, it becomes of paramount importance that a legitimate priest be available to administer them. This is particularly true of the change of the bread and wine into the literal body and blood of Christ during the Mass. Therefore, it is critically important to have a clear definition of who constitutes a true priest. And for that, the Catholic answer is apostolic succession from Peter as the first pope.

This also explains why Catholics believe that salvation can be obtained only through the Catholic Church, and it explains why Benedict XVI insists that Protestant churches, “specifically because of the absence of the sacramental priesthood [that is, a legitimate priesthood that is properly authorized to administer the sacraments], have not preserved the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic Mystery [and therefore] cannot, according to Catholic doctrine, be called ‘Churches’ in the proper sense.”<sup>12</sup>

If one accepts Benedict’s basic premise, his conclusion makes logical sense. If one accepts the basic premise. But Protestants, including Adventists, reject the Catholic view that grace comes to the believer through the sacraments administered by a legitimate priest. This is why we reject the Catholic claim to be the only true church and why we reject Benedict’s statement that Protestants and other Christian bodies “cannot... be called ‘Churches’ in the proper sense.”

But why so much fuss all of a sudden? These claims have been standard Catholic teaching for hundreds of years. Why did Protestants react so negatively to Benedict’s pronouncement? For that we need a bit of background on Benedict himself and on the history of his church during the second half of the twentieth century.

1. “Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church.” See [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20070629\\_responsa-quaestiones\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070629_responsa-quaestiones_en.html).

2. The document was written by William Cardinal Levada, the prefect (director) of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the direction of Pope Benedict XVI.

## CHALLENGES TO THE REMNANT

3. Unam Sanctum, November 18, 1302, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Bon08/B8unam.htm>.
4. Pius IX, “Syllabus of Errors,” paragraphs 21,18, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9syll.htm>.
5. Divin. Instit. Iv, 30. 11, 12, cited by Pius XI, Encyclical Letter, January 6, 1928, “On Religious Unity” (Mortalium Animos), paragraph 11, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius11/P11MORTA.HTM>.
6. See Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, 5:431.
7. Ibid.
8. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), #1376.
9. Ibid., #1367.
10. Ibid., #1378.
11. Ibid., #1392, #1393.
12. “Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church.”