How Does The Catholic Church Define Itself?
By Jim Seghers

Frequently, Protestants attempt to define the Catholic Church from the perspective of the polemics that originated in the Reformation. Unfortunately, this leads to more confusion than clarity. Much of this inadequacy stems from the fact that few Protestants, even scholars, have read anything about the Catholic Church that was produced by its teaching office. Yet, clear statements can be found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. These sources are readily available to anyone who cares to read them. What follows is a brief summary of how the Catholic Church defines itself.

The Catholic Church defines itself as Christ's Mystical Body (Jn 15:1-5; Eph 1:23; Col 1:18; 1 Cor 12:12-31). This stupendous mystery underscores God's marvelous family plan (1 Jn 3:1). The loving Father sent the Son to recreate us through the rebirth of Baptism (Mt 28:18-20; Jn 3:405, 22: Acts 2:37-39), which transforms us to "share in the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4). The Holy Spirit's indwelling presence (1 Cor 3:16; 6:15, 19) is the life force of the Church, its soul. *Sacred Tradition* is the living memory of all that Jesus taught kept alive and true by the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 2:13; 2 Thess 2:15; Jn 14:15-17; 25-26).

Jesus established a visible Church as his earthly family. He appointed Peter as his prime minister (Mt 16:18-19; Is 22:15-22). The apostles, together with the bishops and priests, who succeeded them, share in the Father's paternity. The *Magisterium* is the appointed guardian and servant of the Word of God entrusted to the Church. The *sacraments* are the visible instruments Jesus established to communicate his love and life.

In *Baptism* Christians are "born again" into God's family (Mt 28:18-20; Jn 3:405, 22: Acts 2:37-39) by removing sin and effecting a marvelous internal transformation (1 Cor 6:11; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 4:23; 2 Pet 1:4). *Confirmation* matures God's children in the Holy Spirit so they can be faithful witnesses (Lk 12:12; Jn 14:16; Heb 6:2; Acts 8:4ff). *Penance* heals souls from the malady of sin (Mt 16:18-19; 18:18-19; Jn 20:22-23; 3 Cor 5:18-20), while the *Sacrament of the Sick* brings to God's family healing of body and soul (Jas 5:14-15). Christ's members are fed supernaturally in the *Eucharist*, which is truly the body of Christ (Mt 26:26028; Mk 14:22-24; Lk 24:19-20; Jn 6:22-69; 1 Cor 10: 16-17; 11:23-30). *Holy Orders* extends Christ's priesthood thereby fulfilling the command, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:25). *Matrimony* raises the covenant of marriage to a supernatural level imaging Christ's love for the Church (Eph 5:23). In their loving fidelity to one another, husbands and wives raise godly children and, thus, people heaven.

The participation of God's Fatherhood in the sacrament of marriage underscores the Church's teaching regarding human sexuality. *Abortion* destroys the *fruit* of fatherhood. *Homosexuality* destroys the *act* of fatherhood. *Contraception* destroys the *possibility* of fatherhood and makes a *lie* out of marital self-giving. *Fornication* destroys the

commitment of fatherhood. *Adultery*, *divorce and remarriage* destroy the *faithfulness* of fatherhood.

Catholics honor *Mary* in a special way because God has done "great things" for her.[1] She is the mother of God (Lk 1:43). We love her because she is also our spiritual mother (Rev 12:17). We ask the *saints* to pray for us because they are our heroes who reside with Jesus in paradise. We pray for the souls in purgatory because they are not yet in heaven and are in need. The Catholic Church cherishes, guards and preserves the *Bible* as its priceless family history and the revealed Word of God.

Finally, Catholics are urged to embrace a life of holiness that was so wonderfully exemplified and proclaimed by Pope John Paul II. He never wavered from declaring the truth by word and example. The magnetism that drew the world to him was the love for Jesus that overflowed from him to all men and women without consideration of their religious affiliations or condition.

His powerful example prompted D. Stephen Long to write: "There are also two positive reasons Protestants need the papacy: for the sake of unity of the church, and for the sake of truth grounded in love."[2] Expanding on the theme of unity he continued: "The papacy offers an impressive visible manifestation of the church's unity. Christians must seek the unity of Christ's body in a visible way through the church. Both scripture and tradition so clearly bear witness to this claim that I need not argue for it here. When it comes to visible unity, it is time for us Protestants to admit that we have failed. We are disunified beyond repair and cannot solve our divisions through our traditional Protestant resources."[3]

Professor Long ended his essay with the following remarkable affirmation. "At one point in history, to be a Protestant was explicitly or tacitly to will an end to the papacy. I think many Protestants can now confess that was a mistaken view. Both the church and the world would sorely lack a necessary witness if there were no papacy. If being a Protestant means willing the end to the papacy, then I find myself no longer capable of willing such an act."[4] The Second Vatican Council directs all Catholics to renew themselves. "The faithful should remember that they promote union among Christians better…when they try to live holier lives according to the Gospel. For the closer their union with the Father, the Word, and the Spirit, the more deeply and easily will they be able to grow in mutual brotherly love."[5]

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[1] Lk 1:49.
[2] "In Need of a Pope?" *Christian Century*, May 17, 2005. Professor Long teaches at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., # 7.