

Understanding the **Catholic** Church – Is the Pope a Catholic?

In Australia we have a saying we use when someone asks you something blindingly obvious. We reply, “Is the Pope a Catholic?” The assumption being, of course he is!

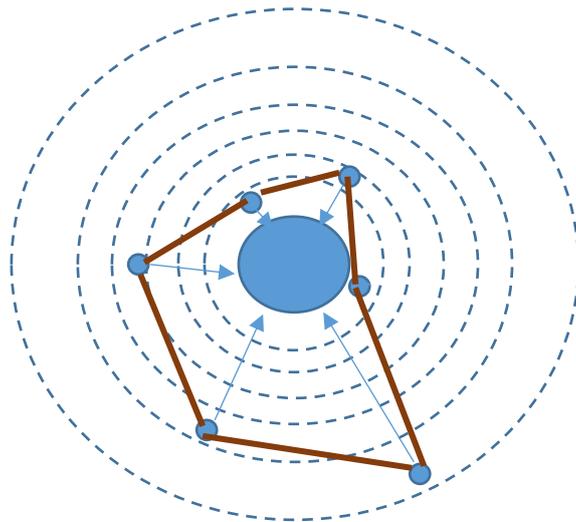
On 31 October this year Pope Francis (Jorge Bergoglio) will take part in an ecumenical service with the World Federation of Lutheran Churches to mark a year of celebrations to commemorate 500 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the castle church at Wittenberg. When commenting about this event, Pope Francis said this to reporters;

“And today Lutherans and Catholics, Protestants, all of us agree on the doctrine of justification.”

When he makes comments like this he is showing himself to be entirely Catholic, which is after all what you would expect.

Let me explain what I mean. The word Catholic comes from a Greek word which means “according to the whole”. In short, the Catholic Church means the unified church. **Unity is the most important thing for the Catholic church because it is Catholic.**

Which brings us to the important question – How does the Catholic church understand unity?



The Catholic Church sees itself as a **sacrament of unity** for the world. By this they mean that they are a visible and effective sign of unity. Visible because they are seen to be at the centre of unity, and effective in that they unite various religions and philosophies with God.

In the above diagram the large blue dot represents the Catholic Church which, according to Catholic understanding, has the fullness of unity with God. They understand unity as; unity in succession from Peter and the apostles, unity in creed – the ancient Nicene Creed, and unity in liturgy – by which they mean the Mass.

The other blue dots represent other religions and philosophies. Those closer in represent religions such as the Orthodox Churches, the Anglican Church and other Christian churches. Those further out represent other monotheistic religions like Judaism and Islam, polytheistic religions, and even atheistic beliefs and philosophies. They are all varying distances from Catholicism but are linked to Catholicism.

The arrows represent the links between different religions and Catholicism. The Catholic Church, has been working very hard over the last 50 years to document what these various religions have in common with the Catholic Church. They call this process ecumenism. Notice however that **there is no sense that the Catholic church will change** to become closer to other religions. No, it is entirely about identifying what other religions and philosophies have in common with Roman Catholicism. This process is important for Catholics because they believe unity with the Catholic Church is the only way these religions can be united to God – because the Catholic Church is the sacrament of unity for the world.

Because these statements of unity are based on the objective of demonstrating agreement, they unfortunately tend to obscure or even avoid any differences in order to have a document that both groups can agree on. This tends to be at the cost of clarity. The [1999 Joint declaration on Justification between the Catholics and some Lutherans](#) is a good example of this.

The end result of this process is Francis making statements like,

[“And today Lutherans and Catholics, Protestants, all of us agree on the doctrine of justification.”](#) However, the truth is Catholics and most Protestants are in profound disagreement on the doctrine of Justification! (see previous article – *The Reformation is definitely NOT over*)

Another example of the Catholic Church promoting their agenda of unity is the way in which they encourage the rapidly growing number of Evangelical leaders engaging in public displays of unity with the Pope.



(COURTESY OF GEOFF TUNNICLIFFE)
Geoff Tunnicliffe, former general secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance, met with Pope Francis on Friday, June 10, 2016, for a gathering with prominent evangelical and Pentecostal leaders in Rome, Italy.

These public displays of unity between Evangelicals and Catholics only serve to promote the Catholic agenda to be the sacrament (visible and effective sign) of unity with God for the world.

So what is wrong with this view of unity? Unity is very important to God, but it is not the sort of “obscuring the differences” type of institutional unity the Catholic church and sadly some protestants are promoting through documents like the [Joint declaration on Justification](#). True unity is unity based on truth because it is unity with God himself (John 17.11). Not a sacramental unity through an earthly institution but unity in the Spirit who knows no bounds with the Father through

Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:30-5.2). It is unity with God who has unity as a characteristic of his very being – Father, Son and Spirit. **If you are a Christian, you are already united to God by adoption into his family and therefore you are already united with every other Christian as their brother or sister.**

Because unity with the Catholic Church is important for Catholics and unity in God is important for us, why not **invite your Catholic friends and neighbours to be united to you and your church family** by inviting them to belong to your Church, your Mother's group, your Play group, your Bible Study group, your prayer group, your Youth group. Here they can clearly hear from God directly through the Bible and by trusting him be truly united to Him and you for eternity.

Your brother in Christ through the Spirit,

Mark Gilbert