



Reuters file

Vatican doctrinal expert Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger declared this week that Catholics enjoyed "fuller" access to salvation than other Christians. The message, which irked Protestants and Orthodox Christians, was directed at liberal Catholics the Vatican considers deficient for their openness to other faiths.

## Mother church scolds the family

**Declaring members of other faiths lesser Christians, Vatican steps into the past**

By Martin E. Marty  
SPECIAL TO MSNBC.COM

CHICAGO, Sept. 6 — The Vatican offended — it intended to offend — many people this week. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and behind them Pope John Paul II, issued a declaration that put non-Catholic Christians and adherents of all other religions in their place. They are, the statement said, “in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the [Roman Catholic] church, have the fullness of the means of salvation.”



**YOUR OPINION** [E-mail Martin E. Marty](#)

**BBS** [Post a Letter to the Editor on this BBS](#)

ADVERTISING ON MSNBC

**FIND**  
books in the news on **BARNES & NOBLE**

<p>ready for your next <b>READING</b> adventure? Start here...</p>	Reading Material
	<p><b>books</b></p>
	<p><b>magazines</b></p>
	<p><b>more...</b></p>
	<p><b>Shop@MSNBC</b></p>

	<p><b>NEW</b> MSNBC.com Personal Update for Microsoft Outlook® 2000</p>
	<p><b>Free Download</b></p>

Don't expect the interfaith dialogue to cease as a result of the Vatican's declaration that all faiths are not created equal. But some people are offended.

NO SURPRISES THERE. In its most friendly moments and gestures, as with two formal documents issued during the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), Roman Catholicism never suggested that "one religion is as good as another" - the theme that Tuesday's declaration attacked. Never did it suggest that Catholicism possessed anything but "the fullness of the means of salvation." No deluded Orthodox Christian of the East, no Protestant of the West, no Anglican, ever entered ecumenical conversation unaware of Rome's claims. Tit-for-tat: never did they regard their own truth, goodness, or fullness as inferior to Catholicism.

### AN UNFORTUNATE METAPHOR

Still, Christians across the boundaries of their churches, and non-Christians across higher barriers, found and will find it profitable and, yes, God-pleasing, to keep the conversations going. Will their tone change? The headlines mention the "anger" of non-Catholics. Was Cardinal Ratzinger out to rap their knuckles and wash out their mouths?

#### Faith matters

#### Join the conversation

- [Religion & Ethics discussion board](#)

No. The declaration was mainly aimed at Catholics who Rome regards as half-faithful. Catholic theologians and lay

• Read the news: Vatican rejects equality of faiths

people are the relativists the Vatican is targeting. In following the “principle of tolerance and respect for

freedom” they “manipulate” Vatican II reform ideas and in effect are guilty of giving the store away. The document chastens them, and many of them will react.

What, then, about the angered outsiders? Don’t expect the 1 billion non-Catholics to march on Rome, the center of the 1 billion Catholics. Don’t even expect them to break off conversation. But if their efforts to realize Christian unity are to prosper, we have to listen to why they are offended over not-new claims by Rome.

### **FROM BRETHERN TO DAUGHTERS**

Here the document scandalizes chiefly because of an unfortunate choice of a metaphor and a phrase. The Vatican council document, official teaching approved by the bishops, almost a score of times spoke of non-Catholic Christians as “brethren,” as in “separated brethren” - today they would say “brothers and sisters.” Cardinal Ratzinger’s declaration deprives them of that status and wants them to be thought of as “daughters.”

Are we seeing some memory loss, the result of distraction occasioned by the Congregation’s desire to set the Roman Catholic house in order at the expense of what it has since November, 1964 been saying? Note: the “Decree on Ecumenism” of that date stressed “the restoration of unity among all Christians,” not, as here, the “return” of daughters to mother. Yes, that document talked of “the entire fullness of the means of salvation” stewarded by Rome. But it did not talk about all other Christians being in a “gravely deficient” situation.

In their eagerness to oppose the “religious relativism” that Rome hears among too many of its theologians and lay people, the drafters forget most of the very positive things the Church has said about the means of salvation and pursuit of truth among the other Christians.

### **FROM ‘SISTERS’ TO DAUGHTERS?**

We hear now that the Congregation does not want Catholics to speak of us as belonging to “sister churches,” in other words of being the separated “brethren” that Vatican II officially calls us. Such language, it will be said, contradicts the church’s identity as the “mother” of all churches.

What we have here is to some extent a case of “it’s not what you say but the way that you say it.” The “mother” image,

No deluded Orthodox Christian of the East, no Protestant of the West, no Anglican, ever entered ecumenical conversation unaware of Rome’s claims. Tit-for-tat: never did they regard their own truth, goodness, or fullness as inferior to Catholicism.

valid among many Catholics, is condescending in the eyes of those who have become used to being brothers and sisters, as they had and have still a right to be.

That “religious relativism” is out there in Catholicism and beyond is threatening. That it can undercut witness about the “fullness of salvation” is clear. The Vatican must counter it.

Will the drafters of the declaration succeed in their effort? They have cleared the air and clarified one part of the teaching as they confused another, though the scolding tone of the document is likely to be less successful than the persuasive tone we often associate with the efforts of always firm John Paul II.

## **CONTRADICTING VATICAN II**

Does the Congregation intend to break off ecumenical talk and end church-unity efforts? Of course not. It dare not, unless it wants to go beyond choosing an offensive choice of metaphor back to a direct contradiction of Vatican II and, hence, against Church teaching.

Will all this counter “religious relativism?” Ironically, it may exacerbate it in the ears of those who will once again hear less talk about Christian truth and, instead, will listen to more reactions from all the churches, none of whom think of themselves as “gravely deficient” daughters who must come home to mother.

They will hear those among the Orthodox and most Protestant groups who say that they are the original and, often, for all their faults, are the “full” bearers of salvation. Those who overhear both sides, all sides, are more likely than before to shrug shoulders and say, “Let you and them fight; I’m out of here.”

Let official Rome of today think of itself as mother. Each church has a right to define itself. But if it is to forget its own language and metaphors about brotherly and sisterly relations, and thus stimulate competition about which church is more or less deficient, more or less gifted with fullness, more or less true, relativism will be the winner. And the valid search for truth and unity, also the Vatican’s agenda, will be set back. As it dare not be, if Catholics and non-Catholics alike are faithful to their own declared mission to enhance Christian unity at the beginning of the third millennium.

**It’s unlikely the world’s 1 billion non-Catholics will march on Rome. And interfaith conversations will continue. But if efforts to realize Christian unity are to prosper, we have to listen to why people are offended.**

---

*Martin E. Marty is professor emeritus of the History of Christianity at The University of Chicago. He observed and reported on the third session of Vatican II in 1964, when the Decree on Ecumenism has passed, and has been active in ecumenical conversations ever since. For four decades he has*

*also been on the editorial staff of the ecumenical magazine, The Christian Century.*

## Write a letter to the Editor

### Voice your views on the news

Your e-mail address will not be published

Your name

Your hometown

Your e-mail address

---

### MSNBC COVERAGE TODAY'S TOP NEWS STORIES

- STORY** [Gore assails entertainment industry](#)
- STORY** [GOP ad contains subliminal message](#)
- STORY** [Hollywood hit with damning report](#)
- STORY** [Haggling over deal keeps Lee in jail](#)
- STORY** [WashPost: Powell's son cleared to vote on AOL](#)
- HOME** [MSNBC Cover Page](#)

---

### MSNBC VIEWER'S TOP 10

Would you recommend this story to other viewers?  
not at all 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 highly



MSNBC is optimized for  
• [Microsoft Internet Explorer](#)  
• [Windows Media Player](#)

• [MSNBC Terms, Conditions and Privacy](#) © 2000

[Cover](#) | [Headlines](#) | [News](#) | [Business](#) | [Sports](#) | [Local](#) | [Technology](#) | [Living & Travel](#) | [Health](#)  
[TV News](#) | [Opinions](#) | [Weather](#) | [Shop@MSNBC](#) | [MSN](#) | [Comics](#) | [Find](#) | [About MSNBC](#) | [Help](#) | [Index](#)  
[News Tools](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Write Us](#) | [Advertising on MSNBC](#) | [Terms, Conditions, and Privacy](#)



[Find](#) [Help](#) [NewsTools](#) [Write Us](#)