

The Difference Between a Canonist and a Theologian

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 23, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The National Catholic Register has posted [an interview with Cardinal Raymond Burke](#) [1], focusing on the Pope's remarks about condoms in the new book *Light of the World*.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Register's interviewer did not inquire about the Pope's remarks concerning Fr. Maciel. But, be that as it may, this exchange caught my eye:

Q: In that discussion about unity with the Orthodox that you reference, Seewald asks, "Will Pope Benedict restructure the papacy in order to foster the unity of Christianity?" The Holy Father corrects Seewald in his interpretation of the phrase "First among equals" applying to the successor of St. Peter. He says it is not the formula we believe as Catholics and add, "the pope has specific functions and tasks." The question (for the Orthodox) is precisely whether the pope has specific tasks or not. What tasks is he speaking of?

Cardinal Burke: The pope is the principal foundation of the unity of the Church. That can't be carried out by a group of people. That is the function of Peter as the head of the apostolic college, the Prince of the Apostles. To put it very plainly, that's the first task. He is the bishop of the universal Church, and it's a difficult point for the Orthodox to accept, but one can't be faithful to Catholic teaching and say that the Roman Pontiff is simply one more patriarch. No, he has a service to unite all — all the patriarchs, all the particular churches into one. And that involves a direct and universal governance.

Funny, all this time I thought that Christ was the principal foundation of the unity of the Church. I understand the unique office of the Pope, to confirm the faithful, to feed the sheep, to keep everyone on board as it were. Still, Burke's construction seems exactly at odds with one of the central motifs of Benedict's pontificate, seen even in the changes he has made to papal liturgies, of taking the emphasis off the pontiff and put it on to Christ. That, too, was the point of the Holy Father's sermon at the public consistory on Saturday, no?

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