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Pope says church must be critical of religion

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Synod of Bishops 2012

It may seem a surprising thing for any pope to say, but Benedict XVI today insisted that Christianity must take a "critical stance toward religion, both internally and externally," meaning both with the other religions of the world and inside its own house.

Christians, the pope said, constantly should be alert for the various ways in which religions, including their own, can become "sick" and "distorted."

Benedict's comments came in a new preface to a collection of his writings on the Second Vatican Council, timed to coincide with tomorrow's 50th anniversary of the council's opening in 1962. The 1,800-word preface was published today by *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper.

The pope's comments on the need to be critical of religion came in a paragraph of the new preface devoted to *Nostra Aetate*, the Vatican II document on the church's relationship with non-Christian religions. It was one of two conciliar texts singled out by the pope as especially important for equipping Catholics to engage "the great themes of the modern epoch."

Benedict praised *Nostra Aetate* for outlining the importance of "dialogue and collaboration with the religions, whose spiritual, moral, and socio-cultural values were to be respected, protected and encouraged."

Yet the pope also flagged what he sees as a "weakness of this otherwise extraordinary text," which he describes as follows: "It speaks of religion solely in a positive way and it disregards the sick and distorted forms of religion."

The reality that religion can be pathological as well as uplifting, according to Benedict, is the reason why "the Christian faith, from the outset, adopted a critical stance towards religion, both internally and externally."

The other document touted by Benedict in the new preface is *Dignitatis Humanae*, Vatican II's declaration on religious freedom ? which, as the pope writes, "was urgently requested, and also drafted, by the American Bishops in particular."

Benedict said that document accented a conviction which has become steadily more important in the last fifty years.

"At stake was the freedom to choose and practise religion and the freedom to change it, as fundamental human rights and freedoms," he writes.

With the election of Pope John Paul II in 1978, a pope from a Marxist state in which religious freedom was denied, Benedict says that "the inner orientation of the faith towards the theme of freedom, and especially freedom of religion and worship, became visible once more."

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As he has on several other occasions, Benedict XVI rejects a "a hermeneutic of rupture" for understanding Vatican II, meaning that it much be read in the context of earlier layers of church tradition, not as a repudiation of that tradition. He describes a reading based on rupture as "absurd."

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"The Council Fathers ? neither could nor wished to create a different faith or a new Church," the pope writes, "but rather to understand these more deeply and hence truly to renew them."

Benedict XVI took part in Vatican II as a theological advisor to Cardinal Josef Frings of Cologne, Germany. In his new preface, Benedict describes Frings as a "'Father' who lived the spirit of the Council in an exemplary way."

"He was a man of great openness and breadth, but he also knew that faith alone leads us out into the open, into that space which remains barred to the positivist spirit," the pope writes.

Treating Vatican II's famous "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," *Gaudium et Spes* , the pope repeats a reaction he's voiced in other venues over the years: Despite "many important elements," *Gaudium et Spes* "failed to offer substantial clarification" on the exact nature, including both shadows and light, of the "world" which it called upon the church to engage.

The full collection of the pope's writings on Vatican II is set for released by the German publishing house Herder, and is edited by Archbishop Gerhard Ludwig Müller, the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Benedict XVI opens his preface by describing Oct. 11, 1962, as a "splendid day," calling the site of bishops from all over the world in the opening procession "an image of the church of Jesus Christ which embraces the whole world, in which the peoples of the earth know they are united in his peace."

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