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Pope Francis should tread carefully when speaking of non-Catholic religions

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

Ever since the start of the Protestant Reformation nearly 500 years ago, Protestants have been understandably dismissive of the idea that the Roman Catholic church is the only true Christian church.

And yet the leaders of the Catholic church have made that claim persistently over time in various ways.

The one that stirred up the most resentment under Pope John Paul II was contained in *Dominus Iesus*, issued in August 2000 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, then headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI.

The declaration said churches outside the Catholic church "are not Churches in the proper sense." It added: "... the Church of Christ, despite the divisions which exist among Christians, continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church."

This is not the stuff of which good ecumenical relations are born, though I know some Catholics would say this is Truth with a capital T and ecumenical relations are essentially theological froufrou.

Still, in a world so radically divided religiously, I wonder about the wisdom of intentionally offering a poke in the eye to people outside your faith tradition.

Which is why I was a bit surprised and disappointed to hear Pope Francis recently quoting Pope Paul VI when Francis spoke to and about women religious. Here's the quote: "It's an absurd dichotomy to think one can live with Jesus, but without the church, to follow Jesus outside the church, to love Jesus and not the church."

I would be shocked to learn that Paul's reference there was to all branches of Christianity and not just to the Catholic church. And if he really meant just the Catholic church, is Francis (through Paul) saying that I, as a Presbyterian, cannot follow Jesus outside of Catholicism? That's what he appears to be claiming, and I think it's a dicey position to highlight so early in his papacy.

Even if that's not exactly what he meant, he now will be obligated to explain himself more fully to the Protestant and Orthodox worlds, many members of which no doubt read the new pope's words to mean what I think they mean.

Let me be clear that I am not arguing against the concept of exclusivist religious claims. After all, every religion makes such claims. That's how we tell them apart. But, for instance, the Mormon claim that after his resurrection Jesus came to what is now America to minister to people who migrated to the New World 600 years earlier is an exclusivist claim that does not seek to denigrate the faith of others.

By contrast, the claim that this or that religion or this or that branch of a religion is the only true religion and that other faith communities are not religions "in the proper sense" will strike all other faiths as an arrogant attack on them.

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So the problem is not exclusivist claims such as "Muhammad was a prophet" or "Buddha was enlightened." Rather, the problem is claims that dismiss another's faith as irrelevant, which is exactly why Christian supersessionist attitudes about Judaism are so repugnant.

In earlier centuries, it was easier to make arrogant exclusivist religious claims because it often was unlikely anyone outside the faith from which such claims came ever would hear about them. Today, however, every word the pope or any other religious leader says in public is immediately available almost the whole world over.

By not being more aware of how his words might be taken, Benedict XVI got into trouble more than once. (A good example was his 2006 speech in Regensburg, Germany, to which Muslims took such offense.) Everyone in the church universal should have learned from that experience.

Not grasping how one's words might be understood is a hazardous road to walk. If Francis has begun to tread that path, I hope he reverses course soon.

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