

Keep the Faith!

Recent news releases from the Vatican have embarrassed many Catholics. Two *motu proprio* (“of his own accord”) letters from Pope Benedict XVI have touched nerves. A *motu proprio* document is a decision made by the pope personally. The publicized documents address the use of Latin in worship and restate the doctrine of the Catholic Church in relation to other religions and Christian bodies.

My first counsel regarding any matter reported about the Catholic Church by the general media is to be wary. The institutional Church is a complex organization with structures and various levels of communication. A *motu proprio* is not equivalent to an encyclical. Moreover, the popes often address pastoral issues pertinent to a particular group or region in the global context of their universal authority.

Expanding the limited authorization given by Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict has relaxed virtually all restrictions on the use of the pre-Vatican II Latin rites. The last edition of that heavy Roman Missal altar boys used to move from one side of the altar to the other (with a genuflection in between) was published in 1962, and therefore has the authorization of Pope John XXIII. To refer to it as the Missal of Blessed Pope John XXIII, as the *motu proprio* does, seems a bit disingenuous. It is the Missal of Pope Pius V promulgated after the Council of Trent, with emendations from subsequent pontiffs, including John XXIII (John added his baptismal patron, Saint Joseph, to the ancient Roman Canon.). Bishop Melczek wisely and pastorally addresses the issue of the Latin Mass elsewhere in this bulletin.

A more consequential issue taken up by the pope is the doctrine on the Church. Almost all of us have spouses, relatives, and friends who are not Roman Catholic. Any suggestion that they are not saved or that they are second-class Christians is offensive to us. Some media reported the pope’s teaching as a return to the old formula *extra Ecclesia, nullus salus* (“outside the Church there is no salvation.) This is not true. In 1953, Pope Pius XII excommunicated Father Joseph Feeney for promoting a rigorous interpretation of this axiom.

This pope, it seems, is concerned to clarify and assert Catholic/Christian identity in a world where other religious forces are at work. The pope recently traveled to South America, where Evangelical-style churches have made major inroads into traditionally Catholic populations. Likewise, Islam is having a tremendous impact in multi-cultural societies and on world events. A pope would be negligent to sit back and say that what human beings believe is a matter of indifference.

At the Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.), bishops defined the “marks” of the Church. The Church of Jesus is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—unity, holiness, universality, and in continuity with the apostles. Every Christian church, even our own, falls short of these marks. It is the members who must bring them to fruition by the grace of God. Meanwhile, the teaching of Vatican II remains valid: “Those who seek God with a sincere heart...may achieve salvation.”

—Father Keith

