

Last week an Associated Press article was published in the Courier & Press, and used by many newspapers and broadcasters throughout the United States.

The article stated that Pope Benedict had released a document declaring that the only way to salvation was through the Catholic Church. The article was misleading and made false statements, and has caused a great deal of anger and grief among Catholics and their families and friends of other faith traditions.

Contrary to what was reported, the document says that because of the elements of truth and sanctification that are present in other churches and ecclesial communities they are indeed used by Christ as instruments of salvation for their members.

At least one Catholic pastor in Evansville has excoriated the Courier & Press from the pulpit because of that poorly written and misleading article. Such public criticism is another unfortunate but understandable result of the misleading article.

The AP reporter may have been working from a bad summary. There seems to be no other way the article could have made such a mistake. It is irresponsible to take a complex theological debate and simplify it into a short news story, especially when it is obvious that there was no accurate understanding of the original document that was evident in the short story.

The story stated bluntly and incorrectly that the Catholic document said there was no salvation outside the Catholic Church.

If the reporter had read the document, or tried to understand it, the reporter would have found these words and reported them, that Catholic doctrine clearly finds “numerous elements of sanctification and of truth” which are outside of the Catholic Church structure.

Although Catholic doctrine holds that the other churches and communities are not “Church” in the way Catholics define the word “Church,” the document states that “these separated churches and Communities . . . are deprived neither of significance nor importance in the mystery of salvation. In fact the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as instruments of salvation”

That language in the document refers in part to the churches defining themselves during the Reformation, that they are in fact “instruments of salvation.” The AP article was clearly wrong, and the headline that was generated from it hurt many people.

In regard to the Orthodox Churches or “eastern churches” -- those who do not accept the primacy of the pope -- the document also stated “these Churches, although separated, have true sacraments and above all – because of the apostolic succession – the priesthood and the Eucharist”

As Christians of many traditions, we have divisions and disagreements, and the recent Catholic document seeks to bring clarity to this situation with very precise definitions. An objective reading of the document will find that these differences are directly stated, and could be perceived as harsh and offensive, but they were given in the context that we have more that unites than divides us.

I am writing as Director of Communications for the Catholic Diocese of Evansville, and as spokesman for the Catholic Church in this part of southwestern Indiana, to ask you to help correct the mistake that was made. It was not your mistake, but you distributed it. The article that was published cannot be recalled or taken back, but good may yet come of it as you continue to seek the truth and publish it.

The document was prepared at the Vatican by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and is entitled, "Responses to Some Questions regarding Certain aspects of the doctrine on the Church." It may be found at many websites, most easily at www.vatican.va.

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