

Catholic World News *News Feature*

New Vatican document on papal primacy October 30, 1998

VATICAN (CWNews.com) -- The Vatican today released a 9-page document, signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, explaining papal primacy as a guarantee against arbitrary judgments, and an assurance of the Church's unity and "fidelity to the Word of God."

The new Vatican document picks up the theme of a theological symposium on the papacy which was held in December 1996. The proceedings of that symposium will soon be published by Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Cardinal Ratzinger explained that the document released today summarizes "the essential points of Catholic doctrine on the primacy."

The question of papal primacy has crucial implications for ecumenical progress, as Pope John Paul II acknowledged in his 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, in which he called for new reflections on how the papacy could be exercised in ways that would encourage ecumenical progress while preserving its essential role.

The Vatican document points out that the primacy of Peter can be traced directly to the Gospel, and the Christ's command. Thus "the primacy is different, in its essence and its exercise, from the roles of government in human society," the Ratzinger document explains. The Pope's role is not one of coordinating affairs, nor is it merely a place of honor. Rather, "The Successor to Peter is the rock which, against all arbitrariness and conformism, is the guarantee of a rigorous fidelity to the Word of God." The document goes on to emphasize that this fidelity must be preserved even to the point of martyrdom.

The document also reaffirms that it is only the Pope-- or the Pope with an ecumenical council-- who can make a final judgment on how the papal ministry should be exercised. On the other hand, it notes that the papal primacy is not a matter of absolute power, since the Pope, like Peter, makes his decisions in a collegial setting, after consulting with the bishops of the world. Against that background, the document suggests that all Christians should pray for a favorable resolution of the discussion on papal primacy-- a resolution that would allow Church unity and the exercise of papal primacy as Christ intended it.

Cardinal Ratzinger, the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, signed the new document along with the secretary of that dicastery, Bishop Tarcisio Bertone.

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