

## Evangelicals and Roman Catholic Dialogue (Luke 9.49f & 11.20-23)

*In the last twenty years, representatives of the Roman Catholic church and of the evangelical community have inaugurated new avenues of dialogue, after centuries of mutual distrust and ignorance. Some evangelicals have been strongly suspicious of this new phenomenon while others, at the opposite end of the spectrum, have championed a kind of cross-fertilization of both traditions. One may not minimize the stakes involved. This seminar will try to elucidate the meaning of "dialogue," dig for foundations and search for criteria; it will sketch the historical relationship of Catholics and evangelicals, and also the changes and present diversity in Roman Catholicism (mainly: theological). This seminar will also attempt to weigh elements of convergence (raising the problem of the degree of systematicity) and identify problematic areas, both in "classical" and "modernized" versions.*

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Famous theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg is reported to have foretold that, within a few decades, there would only be two kinds of Christians left, Roman Catholics and evangelicals. Whatever one may think of the predictive value of the statement, the two groups referred to constitute major parts of present Christendom. The Roman Catholic church, the largest of all Christian bodies, claims more than a billion under her care; she has recently shown the power she can wield with the grandiose ceremonies if this last April – not only the crowds, not only the media coverage, but prestigious Chiefs of States modestly attending and kneeling before the Pope. Counting evangelicals is a precarious endeavour; some would go up to half a billion (with 400 million Pentecostals), but this may well embrace heretic and syncretistic groups that have very little in common with historic evangelicals; many churches in rapid growth areas can mushroom and quickly disappear... My "conservative" guess would be around 200 million, with the World Evangelical Alliance as probably the most representative international institution or agency. Undoubtedly, evangelicals have known the greatest increase in numbers for the last decades. The weight of the two "families" renders the beginnings of a dialogue between them worth considering.

### I A Sketch of historical relations

1. An old memory of conflict. Evangelical identity was born in protest against the Roman system, and for centuries relations were rather strained, and stained by the bloodshed of the religious wars. Even the XVIIth century pioneers of ecumenism, Moïse Amyraut, Georg Calixtus, Philipp Spener, excluded Roman Catholics from the reunion they called for. The friendship and correspondence of Zinzendorf with Antoine Cardinal de Noailles was an exception.

2. Opposition still stiffer. The XIXth century, which was important in the shaping of our present evangelical identity, saw no progress toward dialogue; on the contrary, positions hardened.

Evangelicals and liberals met in the same hostility to “popery”, and Pius IX (whose pontificate was the longest ever) did everything, with the condemnations of his Syllabus, to arouse and to confirm it. The reader of Spurgeon's sermons, for instance, is struck by the frequency of his attacks. The young Evangelical Alliance invested much energy, quite effectively, in protestations against persecutions affecting Protestants in Roman Catholic countries.

3. The birth of the Ecumenical Movement. A new factor was introduced, in the wake of the Oxford Movement, with modern High Church Anglicans concerned about relationships with Rome. The decisive step was made when the leaders of the powerful youth movements, S.C.M., Y.M.C.A., which had been evangelical since their foundation – with John Mott as a key figure – decided to ally themselves with these Anglicans. (This was concomitant with a relaxation of doctrinal standards.) Highly symbolic was the decision not to accept in the Edinburgh Conference on Missions (1910) missionary agencies working in Christian countries – it made possible modern ecumenism.

4. Evangelicals apart and ignored. As the Ecumenical Movement was growing, evangelicals tended to withdraw from it (e.g. the China Inland Mission) and those remaining exercised no influence on its orientations. The Roman Church, at first, condemned the movement (Pius X in 1928, *Mortalium animos*). When she reversed her attitude, at the Vatican II Council, evangelicals were not even considered as possible partners; the few who had a dim awareness of their existence tended to view them as fundamentalistic sects; and most evangelicals were not far from identifying the church of Rome with Revelation's Great Babylon.

5. Dialogue, at last. In the last three decades, a remarkable change has occurred. Conversations, though not on a very large scale, have started. One factor was the major policy choice that was made in the early 1970s: the Roman Church would not enter the World Council of Churches, but rather pursue several bi-lateral dialogues; maybe some disappointment was already felt in the practice of mainline ecumenism. The second factor was the growth of the evangelical constituency and the new perception Roman Catholics were able to get from it; Pentecostalism began to draw much attention, and the ministry of Billy Graham, with the world congresses he gathered (Lausanne 1974) gave visibility, and some degree of respectability, to evangelicalism. The first important talks were led, on the evangelical side, by John Stott: the Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue On Mission. Later, the only (to date) institutional conversations between evangelicals as such and Catholics were organised: an international task-force appointed by the World Evangelical Fellowship (now Alliance) met several times with a delegation of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Shortly afterwards, two influential individuals, Chuck Colson and John Neuhaus, started an American dialogue, evangelicals & Catholics Together. In addition, one may mention, since almost all Pentecostals are evangelicals, the Pentecostal-Roman Catholic Dialogue, and in countries (like France) where all Baptists are evangelicals too, the Baptist-Roman Catholic one.

## II A description of procedures followed

1. Getting to know one another. The expressed aim of the conversations has been, first, to promote better mutual knowledge, correcting prejudices and false stereotypes. To this end, participants have lived together for about a week each time (at least for ERCDOM and

WEF/PCPCU), in a climate both friendly and spiritual. Sessions, after meditation and prayer together, would involve reading and discussing papers – in order to map out agreements and disagreements – and the drafting of possible statements. A sign of the serious interest Roman authorities put into this dialogue: two of our partners in the WEF/PCPCU talks were later created cardinals (Meijia & Dulles).

2. Concerns about evangelisation. The first topic to be broached has been evangelisation (in ERCDOM, but not absent from the other talks): in part because it is a strong point of evangelicals; in part because both parties discerned practical stakes near to their hearts. Catholics were anxious to secure official disapproval of such a proselytism that borders on sheep-stealing (in their eyes, at least), that uses inaccurate propaganda against their church (above all in Latin America); evangelicals wished Catholics renounce the use of the word “sects” for evangelical churches and missions. ECT has also majored in common ethical concerns and resistance to culture trends (this may be part of “evangelisation” in Catholic parlance).

3. Classical controversies. The old “knots” in the relations of Catholicism and Reformation have not been forgotten. The topics of Scripture and Tradition, and of the Sacraments have been on the agenda, and have kept surfacing even when other issues were being discussed – a clear indication of their neuralgic importance. Justification (maybe because the point has been discussed at such length with Lutherans) and redemption have not been dealt with so thoroughly, so they were not ignored.

4. Areas little considered. So far, evangelical-Catholic conversations have not tackled significantly sensitive issues that concern piety more directly than theology. The place of Mary and of the marialis cultus, prayer to the saints, also the administration of indulgences, remain yet to be studied in depth. The interpretation of such revered figures as Mother Theresa has not been attempted by evangelicals and Catholics together.

5. The Question not to ask. A question has probably been on the mind of partners in dialogue, without the freedom to raise it openly: how representative the persons with whom we are talking? The obvious diversity of evangelicals and the absence of centralised authority among them make it almost impossible to answer the question on their side. But what about Catholics? Even Vatican appointment falls short of a sufficient clarification: when we confront the official pronouncements of the magisterium and what is currently published in theological reviews and taught in so many Catholic universities... It seems that those who were chosen for dialogue with evangelicals were felt to have the stronger kinship and closeness with them, and we can always wonder about others.

### III A Glimpse of results and prospects

1. Truer appreciation. The goal of a more accurate (and happier) knowledge of each other has been reached. Unpleasant caricatures have been removed. Intentions have been discerned. Probably, this profit has not been symmetrical: the situation, so unequal, had compelled evangelical theologians, prior to the beginnings of dialogue, to read Catholic writers when Catholics had rarely felt the need, and found the means, of considering evangelical authors. But personal sharing, for all, gives another perspective.

2. Partial communion. Conversations (at least with those appointed) have brought confirmation that a personal commitment to Christ and the common confession of the ancient Creeds, of the truths of Christ's person entailing the Holy Trinity, together with the recognition of Scripture as the Word of God, provide the basis for true Christian communion among us. However this communion remains partial and limited for lack of agreement on other important articles.

3. Deep divides. Conversations have shown that the Catholic and the evangelical convictions remain incompatible at critical junctures: especially the teaching authority of the church (therefore the *Sola Scriptura*) and the role of sacraments (therefore the *Sola fide*). Underlying them is the issue of the role and status of the church, whether a divinely sanctifying agency or the fruit of the action of Word and Spirit in human hearts.

4. Ambiguous diversity. Conversations have confirmed that Catholic theologians, even considered orthodox in their church, may entertain flexible views (e.g. On transubstantiation); they have not clarified the status of non-orthodox views (from a Catholic standpoint), some nearer to evangelical one, some most opposed, that seem to be tolerated among Catholic teachers.

5. Weak or strong systematicity. The scheme that distinguishes between common faith and remaining disagreements (hence partial communion) has been challenged by competent critics, especially Dr Leonardo De Chirico, who consider Roman Catholicism as a system: the systematic bond is such that a Christological confession changes meaning when it is combined, for instance, with a co-mediatorship of Mary. My assessment, while acknowledging a degree of systematicity, of reciprocal influence of each element on the others, provides more room for human inconsistencies (no one can be absolutely inconsistent, but still, quite inconsistent...), and therefore internal plurality within Catholicism.

Looking ahead? I am grateful for the work that has been made, and I would not refuse to pursue it a little further. Yet I see little promise that it will significantly go forward in the near future. Apparently – I don't know the facts for sure – some leaders at a high level of influence were reluctant even to publish the statement that came out of the WEA/PCPCU first decade of conversations. Benedict XVI when he was Joseph Ratzinger showed less interest in, and had fewer contacts with, evangelicals than Karol Wojtyla had had in his time. The first round, in dialogue, is the easiest one. My guess, therefore, is that we'll see some kind of pause in coming months and years. What will come next, I cannot tell, if the Lord tarries.

When He comes, however, I know what will happen! We will all gather around him, whatever our denominational identity, all true believers in his name, the spotless Bride of the Lamb that was slain; we shall all be bathed by the splendour of his truth and made perfectly one in the sweetness of his love.

See further: apart from the documents (Information Service of PCPCU, *Evangelical Review of Theology*), Timothy George, ed, *Pilgrims on the Sawdust Trail. Evangelical Ecumenism and the Quest for Christian Identity* (Baker, 2004); Thomas P. Rausch, ed, *Catholics and Evangelicals*.

*Do They Share a Common Future?* (InterVarsity Press, 2000). In French, Louis Schweitzer, ed, *Le Dialogue catholiques-évangéliques. Débats et documents* (Edifac/Excelsis, 2002).