

COMMENTARY ON *EVANGELIZATION, PROSELYTISM AND COMMON WITNESS*

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I

Among the bilateral dialogues which the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity [PCPCU] co-sponsors are those with a cluster of partners who are within the broad spectrum of identifiable Protestant Evangelicals, whether of a denomination (the Baptists) or of transdenominational groups (Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization; the World Evangelical Fellowship). Among Evangelicals most Pentecostals place themselves.

In four phases during 25 years, the PCPCU has co-sponsored international conversations with Pentecostals.¹ This is a "dialogue extraordinary", even prophetic.

Already in the late 1960s the then called Secretariat PCU broadened its ecumenical tent to include serious contacts with a few Pentecostal leaders, principally with David du Plessis, who had been among the invited guests to Vatican Council II.² In 1969 Du Plessis suggested that he could gather together "a team of friends" for a structured dialogue with the SPCU. The joint group met in 1972.

In 1969 most observers of the Christian scene were still judging the Pentecostals a fringe movement among "the gullible and marginalized", members of bothersome, sporadic "sects" of "tambourines or alleluias". Pentecostals called the historic churches "apostate", "devil-ridden". For many, the pope was the perennial Anti-Christ. Thirty years later, the Pentecostal movement is burgeoning everywhere. Among the fastest growing churches, together they form the largest Protestant family. Many of these churches now call themselves "classical Pentecostal".

And some of their leaders met the Pope. In June 1997, the Joint International Dialogue Commission between Pentecostals and Roman Catholics commemorated its 25 years of activities in Rome. Pope

¹ Three previous reports have been published: "Final Report of the Dialogue Between the Secretariat For Promoting Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church and Leaders of some Pentecostal Churches and Participants in the Charismatic Movement Within Protestant And Anglican Churches: 1972-1976", Pontifical Council For Promoting Christian Unity, Vatican City, *Information Service* [IS] 32 (1976) 32-37; "Final Report of the Dialogue Between the Secretariat For Promoting Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church And Some Classical Pentecostals 1977-82", *IS* 55 (1984) 72-80; "Perspectives on Koinonia: The Report From the Third Quinquennium of the Dialogue between The Pontifical Council For Promoting Christian Unity and some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders 1985-1989", *IS* 75 (1990) 179-191.

² A few on the Unity Secretariat staff had read Pentecostal scholar Walter Hollenweger's monumental study (then only in German), *The Pentecostals*. He concluded that vital for the ecumenical movement is to "understand Pentecostalism as an expression of New Testament forms of religious belief and practice which might be following a very independent line, but could not be ruled out on *a priori* theological grounds".

John Paul II received the group in a private audience. The Pentecostal co-chairman, Dr. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. (Assemblies of God), addressed the Pope: "Some had predicted these talks would not last. Others have yet to fathom their significance. Some had even worked to put a stop to these talks altogether. It is, therefore, a testimony to Christ's grace and faithfulness, as well as the trust which has developed between us, that gives this meeting special meaning".

II

The PCPCU and the Pentecostals were most flexible in finding the amenable way of formal dialogue. Whereas most PCPCU bilateral dialogues are authorized by their respective authorities to search for full ecclesial communion between the Roman Catholic Church [RCC] and the partner, e.g. the Orthodox Church, the Anglican, and the Lutheran Communions, the goal of the RCC/Pentecostal discussions is not "structural unity" but solely the development of "a climate of mutual respect and understanding in matters of faith and practice" (2).³

Readers of this Report of the fourth phase of dialogue (1990-97) should keep in mind the *asymmetries* of the *partners* and of the *methodology* in trying to understand the Others as they understand themselves and in experiencing "the shocks of gaps" (130) and similarities.

Unlike the evangelical Baptists through the Baptist World Alliance, no international organization represents the Pentecostals in this dialogue. Whereas the PCPCU officially appoints the Catholic participants, the Pentecostals are unofficial individuals, albeit leaders, in "some classical Pentecostal denominations" (1). They nevertheless try to articulate "as a single voice" what they believe to be "a common consensus held by the vast majority of Pentecostals worldwide" (3).

Furthermore, the Catholic team enjoys the support of the RCC through the PCPCU; its members are "protected" from those Catholics who may oppose such dialogue (68). But the Pentecostal team is far more vulnerable. These recognized leaders indeed are committed to their churches and their members, "to the unity of the Church" (3), and to conversations with Catholics who also are their sisters and brothers in Christ. But a few Pentecostals in this Dialogue had to justify their position with their church authorities before continuing their work in the conversations. For a number of Pentecostals are still anti-"ecumeni-

³Numbers in parentheses refer to the numbered paragraphs of the Report *Evangelisation, Proselytism and Common Witness*.

cal ”, and specifically anti-RCC; Catholics as Catholics are objects of their mission. Although the Report will submit its “ findings to our respective churches for review, evaluation, correction and reception ”(4), one can expect that some Pentecostal churches or groups will reject it.

Nevertheless, one should not slight the gradual process in which some major Pentecostal denominations are re-evaluating their negative attitudes to the Dialogue and thereby to some degree, their understandings of, and attitudes towards the RCC. Over 25 years the list of Pentecostal participants has become more representative. I doubt if the Dialogue could have lasted if the dynamics of Pentecostal reception would be the reverse.

The second asymmetry is methodology (3). The RCC enjoys official teaching in various authoritative texts,⁴ and I would add, since Vatican Council II a new tradition of reflective experience and shared vocabulary with other Christian Communions. The Pentecostals possess no such resource of a “ comparable body of teaching ” (3), and a very feeble ecumenical tradition with non-Evangelicals. Most of the Catholic partners are academic theologians, while the Pentecostals include mostly pastor-leaders and some theologians. One easily detects the difference of approach in the two presentations on evangelization and social justice (the Pentecostal, 38-48; the Catholic, 49-54).

Furthermore, among the Pentecostals of the Dialogue since its beginning, Jerry Sandidge (who died in 1992) noted its being “ tilted in favour of the RC approach to theology, i.e., discursive, scientific, and intellectual. The group gives little place to oral or narrative theology, personal testimony, spiritual experience validating truth, and the exercise of spiritual gifts as a context for theological exchange ”.⁵ This approach is a kind of biblical theology of reflective experience, with an intricate system of symbols. It requires a different kind of attentive “ listening. And those scholars who seriously reflect on these experiences use different categories of evaluation, such as one finds in the publication *Pneuma* and in the writings of the Society for Pentecostal Studies.

Perhaps the best example of structured asymmetry is a Bishops' Synod in Rome and a Pentecostal world conference. The Synod brings together, every two or three years, representatives of the National Episcopal Conferences to deliberate on a theme, such as evangelisation (1974) or on the church in an area of the world, such as North and South Americas (1997) and Asia (1998). The Pentecostal conference, held every three years, is a celebratory experi-

ence of more than 4,000 delegates from over forty countries. It centres on worship, personal testimonies, bible-sharing, and inspirational preaching. Intentionally the conference offers no forum for debate and decision-making.

Finally, I offer three points to keep in mind for this Report. Two are from Pope John Paul's 1995 encyclical “ on the commitment to ecumenism (*Ut Unum Sint*).

1. “ Certain features of the Christian Mystery have at times been more effectively emphasized ” in communities other than the RCC (n. 14);

2. In the common quest “ to discover the unfathomable riches of the truth ”, ecumenical dialogue, “ which prompts the parties involved to question each other, to understand each other, and to explain their positions to each other, makes surprising discoveries possible ” (n. 38).

The third point is based on the ecumenical interpretation of “ the hierarchy of truths ” by the WCC/RCC Joint Working Group (1990).⁶ The organic nature of faith-in-practice points to a centre — the person and mystery of Jesus Christ. Differences about the ordering of truths and values as expressed in the actual life experience of a Christian community are among the reasons for divisions, either by not recognizing the legitimate diversity of these faith-expressions and pieties, or by recognizing basic differences concerning what is divinely revealed and transmitted over the centuries.

III

This Report of the fourth phase is entitled *Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness*. It in fact culminates the first three phases, because its focus is *mission*, especially through direct evangelism. This primary focus gathers previous themes (5): baptism in the Holy Spirit/christian initiation, faith/religious experience, scripture/tradition, holiness/charisms, and creation/kingdom of God/church (koinonia).

As with other Evangelicals, uniting the Pentecostals and directing their energies is the *mission* of the Sent-God Jesus Christ and of his sent-community of disciples who live in the Spirit. In the very origin of the Pentecostal movement at the beginning of this century, the primary question was how could the world be evangelized in “ the last days ” before the second coming of Christ? And the answer: return to, and be captured by the dynamic work of the same Holy Spirit who accompanied the first generation of post-Pentecost apostles. As simply stated by a founding father of the largest ever-expanding church, the Assemblies of God: “ When the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts, the *missionary* Spirit comes with it ”

⁴ Prior to Vatican II, the tradition of mission teachings began with Pope Benedict XV's *Maximum illud* in 1919. In explicit modern social teaching the tradition is earlier, traced to Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903), a few decades before the Pentecostals date their denominational origins. Since the 1880s over 100 papal social documents are available resources.

⁵ Jerry L. Sandidge, *Roman Catholic/Pentecostal Dialogue (1977-1982): A Study in Developing Ecumenism*, Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1987, 2 vols., I, p.123.

⁶ *The Notion of "Hierarchy of truths An Ecumenical Interpretation*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990. Faith and Order Paper n. 150.

(J. Roswell Parker). Not to be a missionary is not to be a believing Spirit-filled disciple of The Missionary.

" Pentecostals have always emphasized that all believers should evangelize, whether formally trained or not, especially by sharing their personal testimony" (18). The missionary model is based "on the recognition that all members of the community have been given the gifts or charisms of the Spirit necessary to share the full message of the Gospel" (32, cf. 38).

This Pentecostal strong emphasis on mission joins an admitted "weak" ecclesiology, and fosters a reluctance to participate in the mainstream of the ecumenical movement (86). Pentecostals perceive that talent, time, energy and money designated for " church unity work " could easily betray the primary focus — mission. They fear that the very aim of church unity inexorably and unintentionally could result in one Church which would be so organized that the free, unsolicited promptings of the Holy Spirit and the evangelical exercise of the Spirits diverse gifts throughout the grass roots would be stifled. And thus stifled would be the missionary tasks of each member in the priesthood of all true believers. The Pentecostals' working-principle: as much Spirit-freedom as is possible, and only as much structured biblical authority as is necessary.

Nevertheless, Dr. Robeck, in his 1997 address to the Pope, recognizes " the very real brokenness between Catholics and Pentecostals which stands in opposition to the message of reconciliation in Jesus Christ that we have been called to manifest . So the question ever on the horizon of this Report: what kind of "unity in diversity " of the church (14) among what kind of Christians is necessary to be Christs obedient missionaries in order that the world may believe ? Or, can " our brokenness be completely healed" (C. Robeck)?

IV

Judgements always vary on what from the prepared papers and the " agreed account " of discussions (7) should enter the final Report. Its restricted length easily lends to generalizations which smother too many socio-religious descriptions and explanations, e.g. of the Pentecostals' rapid growth in Latin America, or of more detailed tensions among Pentecostals about the ecumenical movement in general, and in particular about the RCC as such or in specific localized contexts. Furthermore, one can ask for greater clarity on some points which otherwise could be interpreted as over-simplifications. I offer a few examples.

1. "Salvation outside of..."

Since the faith-understandings of Gods initiating saving ways beyond the explicit Christian arena is very critically a dividing issue, one could wish for a longer and clearer treatment than two paragraphs (20-21).

Official Catholic theology is developing since Vati-

can II. For example, the Vatican Council citation (20) could be complemented by Pope John Paul II's unambiguous statement, which the evangelical missiologist Gerald Anderson regards as " the single most significant doctrinal statement of the Catholic church for mission theology since Vatican Council II " Christ has redeemed every human person, without exception, because Christ is in a way united to every human person, without exception even if the individual may not recognize this fact. Christ, who died and was raised up for every human being and for all, can through his Spirit offer man the light and the strength to measure up to his or her supreme destiny " (his first encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, 1979).

These claims deal with the person as an individual, not as a faithful community member of " nor-Christian religions". There is an unavoidable danger of describing all others by a negative — " non-Christian". Catholic teaching indeed recognizes that the active Saving God through the Spirit of Christ is active in these faith-communities. But this generalization in the Report omits those careful qualifications that specific world faiths in themselves and in specific living communities contain "differing kinds and degrees " of " gaps, insufficiencies and errors ".

The living communities of faithful, gentle Muslims among whom I live here in the Holy Land may be far different than Muslims communities, say, in Bosnia, Indonesia, Pakistan or Los Angeles, let alone from a "syncretistic christian-tribal religion" in a Brazilian village. Much depends on what experiences one has of the Others, not faceless abstractions.

My last point here is a question: did the Dialogue ever discuss present understandings of the specific relationship of the Church to the Jews, and the workings (salvific or not?) of the Covenantal God in and through the Jewish people of *today*?

2. *Inculturation*

" Both Catholics and Pentecostals recognize the complexity of the relationship between Church and culture" (28).

" Church *and* culture " is easily misinterpreted as if the Gospel itself and the Church are disembodied forms and not in themselves always " inculturated the Gospel, the Church in cultures; cultures in the Gospel, in the Church. Nor are cultures static and self-contained. All cultures are in constant transition to unpredictable, moving targets. Everywhere cultures intertwine and remain mostly unintegrated: technological versus traditional, urban versus rural mind-sets, youth values versus the older generations', the culture of the poor versus that of the not-so-poor. And everywhere, among rich or poor, is the assault of the global culture of " consumerism " which plays an omnipresent, conspicuous role in developing certain values, patterns of behaviour, perceptions of happiness, success and fulfillment, and attitudes towards love and sex. Conflicting, clashing cultures. A bazaar of values.

Such bewilderment educes " cultures of helplessness" (Sherif Hetata). One thus can understand the

Pentecostal phenomenon in Latin America, and the growing charismatic movements within the local RC churches in that continent.

Here the aspirations and needs of the lower classes are too politically powerless and small to understand and influence changing "societal structures" (42), except in their immediate environments. They seek and need visible, available and flexible forms of association which guarantee the participation of every person and assures freely owned rights and duties; which respects each other's expressions of intense feelings; and which judge persons by their simple changes in personal moral lives rather than in perceived complicated doctrinal loyalties. Helpless before the *macro*-structures of sin, they are sinned-against but do understand that their own personal sins give rise to the immediate micro-structures which in turn reinforce their sins and widen its impact (42C). They do experience, understand and can change these societal micro-structures which influence, for example, drug addiction, alcoholism, pornography, prostitution, abortion, domestic violence and marital breakdowns (43-44). Here also enters "divine healing" (40).

The Pentecostals have a provocative point: "Catholics should take more seriously the importance of personal and communal transformation for promoting societal change" (61).

In so many paradoxical ways, one can argue, these Pentecostal communities (32) in Latin America are counter-cultures of the Cross and Resurrection. The Resurrection did not de-crucify Christ, nor eliminate daily crucified lives. But the Risen Christ not only saves but He saves here and now in our "little, immediate worlds in which we live and over which we have some control". Experience of the Spirit includes experience of the Cross.

One cannot easily transfer this spirituality to, say, all Pentecostal churches in North America. As Pentecostal astute observers note, some suburban "mega-churches" may be so carried away by a health-and-wealth gospel in the culture that they forget their original mission to the down-trodden, and are edgy towards the Afro-American Pentecostal denominations in the inner city.

Three other comments.

What is "a dominant non-christian culture" (29), or "non-christian countries" (17) without explanation and nuances? Certainly the dominant Islamic cultures of the Middle East are qualitatively different for Christian witness than the dominant a-religious culture in Japan. Is there "a dominant Christian culture" or "Christian nation" anywhere, if one accepts the effects of "the great social changes in Western society" (34-36)? Where is there, please tell me, an intact Catholic culture "permeated by faith" (73)? Can one accept the late Bishop Lesslie Newbigin's chiding of Christians that the church is "... so domesticated in Western culture that [we] have not had the courage to challenge it"?

Secondly, the Report asserts that Pentecostal and Catholic evangelizers can act unjustly towards peoples and cultures by importations of "ideologies

alongside the Gospel" (30). The history of Christian foreign missions bear tragic examples. But does not the Gospel have political, economic and social dimensions and implications which are not "ideologies"? Especially during the past thirty-years, the same history will show that "outside" missionaries, admittedly unevenly, have conveyed those biblical implications to "the evangelized" in slowly, tactfully raising their consciousness towards the worth of the human person and his/her rights, and the equality of women in society and church, and towards anti-child abuse, anti-sexual harassment, anti-female circumcision, and towards anti-class or tribal discriminations — the list is longer.

Thirdly, how workable is the global map of a longitude/latitude configuration for the designation of "the unreached" (31)? Also evangelical missiologists raise the same question. Pope John II's mission encyclical in 1990 (*Redemptoris missio*) has a division of human communities. One calls for mission *ad gentes* or to "the unreached initial evangelization and founding local churches among" peoples, groups and socio-cultural contexts in which Christ and His gospel are unknown". And communities calling for *re-evangelization* are within areas with ancient Christian roots but the baptized have lapsed in their faith and practice, becoming either nominal church adherents or *de*-churched. But one cannot detail a world, a region or even a rural or urban area, by a map with different colours of clear boundaries between *primary*-evangelizing or *re-evangelizing* activities.

In conclusion, no culture exists which is definitively permeated by gospel values, no area of human communities where one can eschew mission *ad gentes*, to the unreached.

3. *Civil religious freedom, gospel freedom, and proselytism*

This section (68-116) is the longest, and in my opinion, it will receive the most attention, discussion and debate. The dialogue partners had debated "within themselves, and then together, the wisdom of undertaking such a discussion in the light of possible repercussions on our mutual and growing relationship". They had feared that the Dialogue itself would suffer (68). The Report is not "an abstract object of study" (68). Its honest realism both in the state of the urgent question between Catholics and Pentecostals and in forward steps together is, I submit, the best detailed presentation of the sensitive subject in any RC bilateral dialogue, at any level.

In this positive light, this section could have been better arranged so that the reader can clearly see the distinction between the civil religious right to religious freedom in legislation and the proper Christian exercise of that freedom, which is based on biblical demands and not on civil laws.

"Pentecostals and Catholics are in full agreement in the support of religious freedom... [and in the need] to stand as one in respecting and promoting this civil right for all peoples [whether Christians or not] and for one another" (99-100). But the Report

does not define this right as it is articulated and developed in statements of United Nations, as well as of the RCC. The civil right, which should be recognized in the constitutional law of a society, is a freedom *from*: each person has the right to be free from any coercion on the part of social groups or human power of any kind, so that no individual or community may be forced to act privately or publicly against conscience or to be prevented from expressing belief in teaching, worship or social action.

Such civilly protected *freedom from* gives more equitable "space" to Christians and their communities to exercise a biblically-founded *freedom for* that behaviour between themselves which respects authentic witness, rejects inauthentic proselytism, and strives for common witness, even if limited (121).

For Catholic and Pentecostal experiences show that one can press for *civic* religious freedom but within that social arena, abuse gospel freedom by not respecting the ways God draws free persons to divine calls to serve God in spirit and in truth, and not respecting the Christian reality of other churches. Civil law even protects from coercion those Christian evangelizers whose attitudes are "inconsistent with the central message of the Gospel, the Great Commission (Mt 28:19-20), the Great Commandment (Mt 22:37-39, and the nature of the Church" (16). Civil religious freedom does not guarantee the absence of *counter-witness* among Christians in competitive ways and means which contradict "learning to love one another" (79, 112) "speaking the truth in love" (Eph 4:15) and (10, 107, 116) "making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:5). Or worse, some Catholics and other Christians can give *common* counter-witness among vulnerable members of churches (e.g. new immigrants or refugees from different religious cultures, or the Orthodox in Eastern Europe, the former USSR, and the Middle East).

There seems little more that the *international* Dialogue can do in fleshing out this theme. Contexts so vary that now the primary partners in dialogue are on local and national levels. Here will be different interpretations and criteria of who are "unreached" and "unchurched" (91), and who are "de-churched", "nominal", "indifferent" (5), or not a "true" believer. Here also will vary the answers to the questions: What kinds of Catholics do Pentecostals regard as *objects* of mission? What kinds as *partners in common witness*? What kinds of Pentecostals are positive evangelizers of Christian faith and practice? What kinds are negative proselytizers? Who are partners in mission?

On these levels, who are the responsible Catholics and Pentecostals who are competently open to answer these questions on the table of dialogue? Can one hope that somewhere will emerge "a code of ecclesial etiquette" (109)?

I conclude with a question for the Dialogue. I suspect that in most places the most common expressions of Catholic/Pentecostal relations are in mixed marriages and their family lives. How are the couples pastorally treated (or ill-treated!) before the marriage, at the ceremony, and afterwards?

4. *The Catholic charismatic renewal*

This Catholic reader of the Report is puzzled about the thunderous silence over the charismatic renewal movement within the RCC after Vatican Council II. True, at first the sudden outburst of then called "Pentecostal Catholics" caught too many puzzled others off-guard. Twenty-five years ago, the Catholic movement itself was still burdened with erratic infancy, but old enough to warrant church evaluations. Some judgements were more negative than positive, and vice versa. Others neither condemned nor commended, but settled for Gamaliel's sage advice: "If this enterprise, this movement of theirs, is of human origin it will break up of its own accord; but if it does in fact come from God you will not only be unable to destroy them, but you might find yourselves fighting against God" (Acts 5.38-39).

In the 1990s, a more seasoned movement is on the scene. Many Pentecostals had their first positive RC contacts with "Catholic Charismatics" who have become essential bridgebuilders, especially by the ways they are integrating their living witness within their Catholicism, and their being more than tolerated but even encouraged and responsibly guided by church authorities. One can trace in many Pentecostals an evolution: from expectations that "Pentecostal Catholics" will leave the RCC, through puzzlement as to how these "genuine Christians" can remain in an "apostate church", to reevaluations of the RCC as such, indeed of all those historic churches where the charismatic movement is finding a legitimate place, e.g. among Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, and Reformed.

More than most other Catholics, well-integrated Catholic Charismatics are very sensitive and understanding of Pentecostals, their strengths and gifts, their weaknesses and tensions. I ask, should not such qualified Catholics be specifically preferred as participants in local common witness? Should not a few of their respected leaders be among the Catholic participants in the RCC/Pentecostal Dialogue? And after 25 years, is not this the competent forum objectively to discuss the Catholic charismatic movement, with a Catholic's presentation and a Pentecostal's response?

A final suggestion

This Report makes "proposals to our churches" (4). But neither does the Report stand alone from the previous phases of the Dialogue nor is the theme one more on a continuum. In hindsight, together the four phases over the 25 years now form *the first stage* in the process. For the pedagogical reception of this one stage, there is need of a clear synthesis as a study guide, not too lengthy. This calls for more than short consecutive summaries and for a different writing style. I urge that if this suggestion be acceptable, those who are directly responsible for the Dialogue find a gifted duet who can do such a task.