

Catholics and Evangelicals: Understanding Each Other

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The Catholic Church, along with Orthodox and historical Protestant churches are committed to working to restore full, visible unity in response to Christ's prayer recorded in John's Gospel: (17:21), "That they all may be one." We find however, in the United States and increasingly across the globe fellow Christians who do not share with us this common reading of the Bible. These Evangelical, Holiness and Pentecostal Christians now make up about half of all American Protestants (50 million).

2006 was a historic moment in United States church history: the coming together of a new ecumenical relationship with the creation of Christian Churches Together in the USA. This body includes five families of churches, the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox; the Ethnic, especially African American churches; and the historic churches of the Reformation. What makes the new gathering historic is the presence of two families previously absent from any United States ecumenical constellation, the Catholic Church and the Evangelical, Pentecostal and Holiness family. If this national gathering is to bear fruit in the lives of our people, we will need to deepen our understanding of one another.

In this article I would like to touch on three points: (1) Who are the Evangelicals and where do they fit in American religious history? (2) What is the common heritage that Catholics and Evangelicals share? And (3) What are the specific challenges and hopes between Catholics and Evangelicals in the American Hispanic community?

The Evangelical Churches

Those of us outside this stream of Christianity tend to lump a whole series of diverse churches under the common title: Evangelical. Yet, under this umbrella are significant differences. Baptists know that they are not Pentecostals. Nazarenes do not want themselves confused with the Churches of Christ. As we see Prot-

estant Christianity developing from the 19th and into the early 20th century we can note a parting of the ways between Christians who worked together in revivals, religious education and social betterment in the mid-nineteenth century.

The issues that led to this polarization centered on biblical interpretation and the denial, in some quarters, of classical teachings of the Christian faith that included miracles, the virgin Birth and the bodily resurrection of Jesus, as well as differing approaches to science and morality. In the early 20th century a series of booklets were published called *The Fundamentals*, giving name to this movement and a sociological category now part of common parlance.

Not all Christians who pride themselves with the name Evangelical however, are to be considered Fundamentalists. Evangelicals are characterized by a high doctrine of the Bible, a "born again" conversion experience, and a devotion to classical morality and family values. As Christianity moved into the 1920s and 30s, the wedge within American Protestantism deepened. New Evangelical institutions arose that paralleled the more traditional, liberal Protestant structures. A century ago Pentecostalism emerged, with roots in the Baptist and Holiness revivals, and then quickly separated from them. By the 1940s the Evangelist Billy Graham was given a certain respectability to the Evangelical movement. Journals like *Christianity Today*, and schools like Fuller Seminary, Wheaton and Gordon Conwell demonstrated a more scholarly and culturally engaged form of Evangelicalism.

Today the National Association of Evangelicals is the primary ecumenical agency for the movement that brings Evangelicals into common witness and dialogue. The Society for Pentecostal Studies, the Wesleyan Theological Society and the Evangelical Theological Society are structures that promote schol-

arship within these communities. The diversity within Evangelical movement is as startling and stimulating as anything we might find among Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant believers, churches or scholars.

Catholic Evangelical Relations

Outreach to Evangelical Christians who were less than enthusiastic about ecumenism was pioneered by American Catholic leadership. In the 1970s Father Thomas Stransky, C.S.P. began to build bridges to international and North American Evangelical leaders. Father Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B. was a founding member of the Society for Pentecostal Studies. Glenmary Home Missioners under the leadership of Father Frank Ruff began to work closely with Southern Baptists across the South. Already in the 1970s the Vatican and U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops began to follow these leads and established a Baptist, a Pentecostal and an Evangelical Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission. The statements from these dialogues, while not oriented toward visible unity, provide a rich resource for mutual understanding, seeking to resolve historic tensions on issues like religious liberty, proselytism, and mutual distrust.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops during the 1980s continued a dialogue with the Southern Baptists, the largest U.S. denomination and one in which much distrust of Catholics still survives; a dialogue that continued until the Southern Baptists withdrew in 2001. The personal leadership of William Cardinal Keeler, and before him Chicago's Joseph Cardinal Bernardin paved the way for Evangelicals, Pentecostals and Holiness churches to be founding members of Christian Churches Together in 2006. There had been a Catholic presence in the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) since 1983. The Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches is a venue where Catholic,

Pentecostal, Holiness and Evangelical scholars build bridges, beginning during the 1980s and 90s. The success of this Faith and Order dialogue and the link of the Bishops' Conference with the NAE for two decades enabled a formal dialogue to be initiated with the Evangelicals in the 21st century.

In many local situations, Catholics and Evangelicals share Bible study, work in service of the poor, participate in the pro-life movement, live in neighborhoods together and marry one another. Not all of the anti-Catholicism has been dispelled, nor has all of the prejudice against Evangelicals and Pentecostals been dissipated from the Catholic community; but as someone who grew up in the South, witnessed the unpleasantness the surrounded the 1960s Kennedy election and having experienced Evangelical students dropping my class because I am Catholic, I can celebrate the ecumenical progress that has occurred, and be energized by the challenge before the Church to deepen and expand its outreach to the Pentecostal, Evangelical and Holiness world.

The US Hispanic Presence

An even greater concern for the Evangelical/Pentecostal relationship is outreach to the newly arrived and his-

toric Hispanic populations in the United States by Catholic and Protestants ministers. Approximately 70 percent of Hispanics identify as Catholic, though many come from cultures where church going was not a priority and where popular, family devotion was the mainstay of their faith. Of these 30 percent of non-Catholic Hispanics, 70 percent are Pentecostal, a potential source of strain in ecumenical relations. Many newly arrived Hispanics Catholics have never met a Protestant and do not know how to distinguish an ecumenically minded Methodist or Presbyterian from an aggressively offensive Pentecostal evangelist or non-Christian Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Many Evangelical Hispanics have come from a dominant Catholic culture where they have been a minority. Values they see as central to the Gospel were not observed or recognized because of their minority status and often their families have been divided between Catholic and Protestant branches. Here there is a great deal of misunderstanding between Catholic and Evangelical Protestants. In this context ecumenical initiative, dialogue and catechesis are crucial. If the Catholic Church does not take Hispanic ecumenism, catechesis and education as a priority, one can expect the percentage of those identifying as Catholic to drop

well below the 70 percent now claimed. In places where the Catholic Church has little influence or appears resistant to ecumenism there are potential problems. For here even the historic ecumenically open Protestants are going out to minister to the sick and dying, educate the young in the faith, and provide welcoming churches for prayer and worship. If there is no outreach to Evangelical Hispanics, where there is already a fear and lack of ecumenical understanding; misunderstanding, tension and polarization will deepen.

Christ calls us to be instruments of reconciliation, across racial and ethnic lines, within the Christian communion, and in the face of a polarized and acrimonious society. Ecumenical dialogue between Evangelicals and Catholics is a first step. We need to celebrate the progress that has been made in Evangelical and Catholic reconciliation, and rejoice at the challenges the Lord has provided us in building unity among Christians.

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