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1. Theological conservatism in order that we may understand, interpret, apply and live the message of the Gospel in a new light ...⁸

Note that the first thing they want to be freed from is theological conservatism. They will do everything they can to keep evangelicals from making progress. This is no time for internal fights!

In spite of all this, there are many opportunities for evangelicals in Africa today. We must not be discouraged, for our situation is similar to Paul's when he was at Ephesus: Adversaries are numerous but there is a great open door ([1 Corinthians 16:8, 9](#)).

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Is Rome Changing?: An Evangelical Assessment of Recent Catholic Theology

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When a young Augustinian monk moved out of the monastery and into our home a few years ago, the small Protestant denomination was quick to claim he was a convert. But the truth was more complex and less edifying. He had become confused in the Catholic Church; he no longer knew who or what to believe in, and he left in search of a haven of unargued certainties. He was a graphic illustration of the turmoil within the Catholic Church. If ever it were possible to think of the Catholic Church as an unchanging and monolithic institution, the events of the last fifteen years have certainly made such a view impossible. The purpose of this paper is to make some attempt at assessing these changes from an evangelical point of view. In order to get our bearings, let us try to put the present tensions in historical perspective.

That "Rome never changes" was not only the opinion of those outside the Church, but up until the end of the nineteenth century it was the proud boast of Rome herself. The Reformation had given the Church a fear of change and it was not until John Henry Newman that any serious attention was given to development. In 1845 Newman published his famous "Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine". He insisted that genuine development was not only inevitable as different people reflect on the truth, but that it was positively advantageous in order to make truth available for all peoples and times. He pointed out that the Bible itself was written on the principle of development. A primary element in his discussion was that favourite nineteenth century conception that history progresses organically. The evolution that occurs—it would seem—is not in the truth, but in our

⁸ *La Lutte Continue*, op. cit., p.14. My own free translation.

consciousness of the truth. This developing understanding, however, to Newman's mind only underlined the need for an infallible authority to discern the truth. "Some authority there must be if there is a revelation given, and other authority is there none but she. A revelation is not given if there be no authority to decide what it is that is given."¹

While those representing Newman's point of view were heard from during the first Vatican council (1870), it was not really until Vatican II (1962–1965) that Newman's ideas came to full expression in the Church. For it was the latter council that Pope John XXIII called to bring the Church "up to the present day". Indeed on the first day of the council the Pope made a point of distinguishing between truth and its formulation. As Gregory Baum comments: "A conservative outlook on the magisterium and the conservative claim that church teaching never changes simply cannot explain what happened at Vatican II. After all, at that council, the Catholic Church, formally, solemnly, and after considerable conflict, changed her mind on a number of significant issues."²

But, evangelicals wonder, are these changes really substantial or only cosmetic? This question is debated just as much within the Church as without. Hans Küng, recently relieved of his post in the Catholic faculty at Tübingen, has argued for example that a constant and permanent renewal is a necessity for the Church by reason of the time-bound character of all human formulations. Since the Church is made up of human and fallible men and women, renewal is a constant obligation.³ Avery Dulles represents a more moderate position when he insists that the new formulations of doctrine are simply bringing out the intention of previous truth. Those following this line of thinking try to show, for example, how Vatican II has simply clarified and expounded the truth that can be found in the documents of Vatican I or of Trent. Dulles avers: "The language of the council allows one to think that what tradition adds is clarity and certitude rather than substantially new knowledge."⁴

In order to assess for ourselves the nature of these changes let us examine four areas of Catholic thought and practice and take soundings of recent discussions of interest to evangelicals.

IS THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH THE ONE, INFALLIBLE CHURCH?

The idea of the unity and purity of the Church has an ancient and venerable history. In the third century Cyprian argued against the Donatists that the single source of the Church speaks of its essential unity. "Whoso stands aloof from the Church and is joined to an

¹ *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1922-1978 ed.), pp.88–9.

² "Liberalism lives in theologians," *St. Louis Review*, 23 Oct. 1970, p.3 quoted in David F. Wells, *Revolution in Rome* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1972), p.117. Wells notes how the changes have been reflected in theology manuals written before and after Vatican II. As we will see, Baum's assessment may well be too radical but the differing responses to Vatican II point up the inherent ambiguity in the idea of development. As J. B. Mozley pointed out in reviewing Newman's *Essay* in 1847, growth can also mean corruption or excess. See Peter Toon, *The Development of Doctrine in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp.17–25.

³ *The Council Reform and Reunion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image, 1965), *passim*.

⁴ *Revelation and the Quest for Unity* (Washington: Corpus, 1968), p.57.

adulteress is cut off from the promises given to the Church; and he that leaves the Church of Christ attains not to Christ's rewards. He is an alien, an outcast, an enemy. He cannot have God for his father who has not the Church for his mother. If any one was able to escape outside of Noah's ark, then he also escapes who is outside the doors of the Church (*De Catholicae ecclesiae unitate*, 6)." This emphasis was repeated at the Council of Florence (1438–58) and at Trent (1545–1560). In 1870 the First Vatican Council insisted in a tone that left little room for dialogue: "The Church is so completely bounded and determined in her constitution that no society separated from the unity of belief or from communion with this body can in any way be called a part or member of the Church ... she is wholly self-contained in unity. (She) is a permanent and indefectible society."⁵

The Second Vatican Council, held in the presence of significant ecumenical observers, conveyed a different spirit. In his first encyclical (*Ecclesiam suam*) in 1964 Paul VI spoke of the necessity of dialogue. In the dogmatic constitution of the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) stress was placed on the Church as the "People of God" evangelizing, worshipping and reconciling before there was even mention of the clergy. The Church is pictured as living through humility and self-denial:

The Church recognizes that in many ways she is linked with those who, being baptized, are honoured with the name of Christian, though they do not profess the faith in its entirety or do not preserve unity of communion with the successor of Peter. For there are many who honour Sacred Scripture, taking it as a norm of belief and of action, and who show a true religious zeal. They lovingly believe in God the almighty and in Christ ... we can say that in some real way they are joined with us in the Holy Spirit.⁶

Clearly there is an openness and honesty here that suggests a new flexibility. Avery Dulles has developed this new spirit by speaking of alternative models of the Church.⁷ We may think of it, he proposes, as a mystical communion (lovingly united with God and each other), as a sacrament (a visible sign of the grace of Christ), as a herald (moving men to faith in Christ), as a servant (impregnating society with values characteristic of the kingdom of God) and as an institution (having a particular structure).

This new openness toward those outside and humility about the Church's mission opens up interesting potential for discussion and mutual enlightenment. But some discussions by Catholic theologians still imply ecclesiastical limits to this new attitude. Granted the Roman Catholic Church stands open to other Christians, is it ready to extend the same recognition to other churches?

As the Pope stands as the symbol and embodiment of the Church's unity and infallibility, a few comments may be offered on current conversation on the papacy. The authority of the Pope is traditionally thought to be expressive of the unity of the Church. Recently, however, progressives have abandoned the hierarchical model and attempted to understand his authority in an ascending way. This line of thinking insists that a monarchical ecclesiology dominated ideas of the papacy up until the last century and thus the question of authority was handled in a one-sided manner in Vatican I. In June of 1870 the Council declared: "The

⁵ Karl Rahner (ed.), *The Teaching of the Catholic Church contained in her documents* (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1967), paras. 363, 366.

⁶ Walter M. Abbott (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966), pp.33–4.

⁷ *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1974).

Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when discharging the office of pastor and teacher of all Christians, and defines with his supreme apostolic authority a doctrine concerning faith and morals that is to be held by the universal Church, through the divine assistance promised him in St. Peter, exercises the infallibility which the divine Redeemer wished to endow his Church for defining doctrine concerning faith and morals” (Denzinger, 3074). This definition has been the subject of much discussion (and misunderstanding) and in any case has only been invoked once (The Assumption of Mary in 1950). The view of the papacy that emerges from Vatican II ties the Pope’s authority more closely to his role as Shepherd of the Church and as representative of the authority residing in the Bishops as a whole—whether in synod or speaking individually in agreement with the truth. The Pope intervened only twice during the council and then only to direct and clarify discussion. The theological commission gave its views on papal authority in an explanatory note to the constitution on the Church: “The Roman Pontiff proceeds according to his own discretion and in view of the welfare of the Church in structuring, promoting, and endorsing any exercise of collegiality.”⁸

But the most serious attack on the idea of infallibility and thus of the uniqueness of papal authority came in Hans Küng’s bombshell of 1971.⁹ There he claimed that the very idea of infallibility is contradicted by historical errors and in fact has no basis in Scripture. Moreover, it does not take into account human conditionedness; the New Testament guarantees the indefectibility of the Church, not the infallibility of its statements. To Küng’s mind Vatican II only made things worse by apparently extending infallibility to the whole hierarchy. Debate on the issue continues to rage, though most mainline Catholic theologians—including Küng’s teacher and friend Karl Rahner—have repudiated Küng’s position. Most would probably argue that Küng demolished a common misunderstanding of Vatican I, but was not able to advance the critical understanding of infallibility, one that is compatible with current models of the Church.¹⁰

While the present Pope, John Paul II, has recently forbidden Küng from teaching in a Catholic faculty, one should not be too quick to assess his attitudes toward the role of the Pope. Interestingly, his biographers have noted the warm praise that Karol Wojtyla lavished on the new theologians—including Küng—in the 1960s and early 1970s. In a revealing address delivered in October 1975, the then Archbishop of Krakow spoke on the role of the Bishops. He began by noting that the most powerful motive for apostolic power is service that reflects Christ’s own sacrificial self-giving. As if to take the teaching of Vatican II on collegiality a step further, the Archbishop went on to note that Bishops carry out their triple office—that of prophet, priest and king—in relation to the sharing of these offices by the people themselves.¹¹ The Bishops’ specific mission, roles and charisms are all geared to arouse, form and deepen the faith of the people (267). Of all the functions of the Bishops, however, priority must be given to the proclamation of the Gospel, with the mystery of Christ at its core. The magisterium as teaching must serve this end (in which the Bishops are

⁸ Abbott (ed.), p.100.

⁹ *ET: Infallible? An Inquiry* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971).

¹⁰ See J. T. Ford, “Infallibility: A Review of recent studies,” *Theological Studies* 40 (1979), pp.273–305.

¹¹ Karol Wojtyla, “Bishops as Servants of Faith,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 43 (1976), pp.265 and others in the text.

helped by the “privilege of infallibility”). For, he concludes, it is only the Gospel that can give human life its full meaning and assure it of salvation. After all, the real human values are immanent in the Gospel (272,3). This placing of the Bishop’s (and by extension the Pope’s) authority in the context of his role as servant of God’s people and proclaimer of the Gospel strikes an evangelical note that may yet bear fruit in the pontificate of John Paul II.

Evangelicals concerned as they are with infallibility of Scripture must not be too quick to judge these debates, for the Catholic claim is made on the basis of Christ’s promise to the disciples in [John 14](#) and [15](#) that the Holy Spirit would come to lead them into all truth. Clearly both evangelicals and Catholics are here arrayed against a common enemy: powerful cultural forces which question all divine norms.¹² On the other hand, this promise and the finished work of Christ on which it is based is never a guarantee to our structures, it is rather a challenge to those who gather in his name and seek to make themselves subject to his word.¹³

SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION: TWO SOURCES OF REVELATION?

The Council of Trent gave classical expression to the idea of two sources of revelation. The Gospel of Jesus Christ comes to us “in the written books and unwritten traditions which have come down to us.”¹⁴ Recent historical study has tried to show that Trent’s formulation was really a tacit witness to the importance of Scripture which previously had often been subordinated to tradition. Be this as it may, the statement has given rise to the common understanding that there are two parallel sources of revelation.

This dual source theory has been challenged in our own century by the growing understanding that dogma does not evolve by deduction from revealed propositions. The teaching office therefore is understood less as a process of continuing extrapolation from previous truth, than as a clarifying and elaborating of the written word. The debates and decisions of Vatican II lend support to this view. In November 1962 a schema was presented that put Scripture and tradition on an equal footing, but it was refused by a majority of the Bishops and so John XXIII withdrew it and asked for another. The Constitution on Divine Revelation (1965) that was finally approved gives quite a different impression. Through tradition:

The full canon of the sacred books becomes known to the Church and the sacred writings themselves are more profoundly understood and unceasingly made active in her; and thus God, who spoke of old uninterruptedly converses with the Bride of his beloved Son; and the Holy Spirit through whom the living voice of the gospel resounds in the Church, and through

¹² It is interesting to note the parallels between French ultramontane writer Joseph de Maistre in *Du Pape* (1817) and Dutch reformed historian G. Groen van Prinsterer in *Ongeloof en Revolutie* (1847, ET *Unbelief and Revolution* in preparation 1973ff). Both spoke against the secular anti-authoritarian spirit issuing from the French revolution, one in the name of the Pope, the other in the name of the word of God.

¹³ See the fine discussion of this in G. C. Berkouwer, *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp.206ff.

¹⁴ Rahner (ed.), par. 59.

her, in the world, leads unto all truth those who believe and makes the word of Christ dwell abundantly in them.¹⁵

Such an understanding of tradition will appear far less dangerous to evangelicals who are becoming increasingly aware of their own traditions, and the influence of these traditions on the interpretation of Scripture. Avery Dulles recalls Newman when he speaks of the mediating function of tradition. "The Church throughout the centuries has the task of meditating constantly in order to plumb the depths of the revelation already given."¹⁶ The Church brings out the truth of Scripture, he says, as the seed gives the bloom, in which the vital principle is the Holy Spirit. "The Church may be said to have a charismatic sensitivity for what God intends to communicate by the book."¹⁷ Very recently in summarizing the views of Catholics and Protestants on Scripture, Dulles has gone so far as to say of the Catholic position: "There is rather general agreement that the Bible rather than tradition is the fundamental embodiment of the word of God ... as the councils point out, the teaching of the magisterium is not itself the word of God; rather it is under the word of God which it serves."¹⁸

One of the most important practical fruits of this attitude since Vatican II has been the increased emphasis on biblical studies (or as it is called in Catholic circles "Scripture studies"). Bibles and New Testaments in modern language translations are increasingly being made available to the people. For all of this we may be thankful. But of the theological questions that remain we may mention two.

What are we to do when in fact Scripture and tradition are in conflict? We may be allowed to wonder if in fact Scripture has the last word when the Church continues to teach things foreign to Scripture. We may accept the fact that our reading of Scripture is influenced by the Church's place in history, but this does not remove the limits to what she finds there. There has been much effort given recently to showing that the doctrine of penance or the teaching about Mary, to name only two issues, are really only blooms from biblical seeds. But when, we might ask, does extrapolation become further revelation? As Berkouwer warns, these tensions serve at the least to threaten a genuine "listening to the apostolic witness in communion with the Lord of the tradition".¹⁹

Then we might inquire how the authoritative interpretation of tradition relates to modern scientific study of the Bible. After an initial hesitancy during which the Biblical Commission in Rome sought to restrain Catholic exegetes from Protestant excesses, Pius XII in 1943 defended the unhindered scientific study of the Bible. Vatican II reaffirmed the freedom of theological work in these terms: "This sacred Synod encourages the sons of the Church who are biblical scholars to continue energetically with the work they have so well begun, with a constant renewal of vigour and with loyalty to the mind of the Church."²⁰ Today Catholic scholars share fully in modern critical debates about Scripture. One is used to

¹⁵ Abbott (ed.), pp.116–17.

¹⁶ *Revelation and the Quest for Unity*, p.76.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.79.

¹⁸ "Scripture: Recent Protestant and Catholic Views," *Theology Today* 37 (1980), pp.25–6.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p.107.

²⁰ Abbott (ed.), p.126.

hearing, for example, that Jesuit Raymond Brown agrees with Protestant Ernst Kasemann that the Bible contains many and sometimes conflicting traditions. From an evangelical point of view it may be that at this point the Church is changing too rapidly! How does the freedom of these scholars relate to the teaching office of the Church? One becomes suspicious of the manoeuvres of some scholars as they forage around within dogmatic statements to justify their theological and biblical discussions. At the same time, faced with the bewildering diversity of interpretation in certain areas, Protestants themselves often feel the need for authoritative conclusions. Must we suppose the Holy Spirit only functions in the Church today by the unstable consensus of biblical scholars? Such questions suggest that Protestants need to take another look at the way traditions function in the Church and listen carefully to the newer discussions on the magisterium.

THE SACRAMENTS: DO THEY MEDIATE DIVINE GRACE?

One of the areas seeing the most far-reaching changes, and where Protestant conceptions are most often outmoded, is in the teaching about sacraments. Catholic discussions of the sacraments now are apt to admit that a mediaeval hangover has plagued the Church's teaching, a hangover that was made normative at Trent. Meanwhile other valid traditions from the Church's history were overlooked. The newer emphasis on the Church as the people of God has led to new perspectives on the roles of priest and people. No longer is the congregation seen as a passive recipient of the grace administered by the priest, but now they are viewed as full participants in the symbolic activity that we call sacraments.

An example of these trends is to be found in a recent article by distinguished Belgian theologian Piet Fransen.²¹ Sacraments, he claims, should be viewed as symbolic activity rather than objects or signs. Therefore a better model for understanding this activity is "celebration". Celebration implies a public performance—not mere merry-making—as in the Old Testament cult, where the enactment of praise and adoration was called a "service" with an important dimension of joy (and sorrow). Fransen argues that the tridentine formula of the sacrament as an efficacious cause which produces divine grace was fixed somewhat in reaction to Protestant views, which expressed other valid streams of the Church's traditions. As a result, Fransen admits, "we have more or less lost the deep sense of the evangelical and biblical message of God's gratuitous forgiveness as a sovereign act of God's mercy and love" (162).

Today we understand more about the nature of people as they worship in their social and emotional dimensions, their need for festivity, beauty, joy, freedom, and fullness. Now we are able to see the sacrament's efficacy differently: "In and through the very fact that we restively acknowledge in faith and hope God's ineffable inner Presence, we actualize and realize it at the same time under the graceful attraction of God's inner present" (167). What then is the nature of the grace that is communicated? We must not think of it as a substance, Fransen insists—and here he echoes some of the words of Karol Wojtyla we quoted earlier—rather it is a new world of meaning, a God-given aspect of reality in which we can find ourselves. "In the sacrament God is reaching toward us through Christ and his Spirit" (170).

²¹ "Sacraments as Celebration," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 43 (1976), pp.151ff and others in the text. This article was recommended to me by liturgist James Meehan, S.J., of Loyola School of Theology in Manila as representative of the best recent Catholic views on the sacrament.

While there is much to appreciate about this new approach, we might still wonder about the nature and object of the faith the congregation is expected to express. Is faith the hearty trust in the finished work of Christ, or is it more of a preconceptual intuition? In many discussions something remains of the implicit faith—a simple confidence in the Church and what she teaches—that Calvin spoke so strongly against. In the constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*) faith when it is living is characterized as having the need “to prove its fruitfulness by penetrating the believer’s entire life, including its worldly dimensions, and by activating him toward justice and love.”²² Avery Dulles defines faith as “wholehearted acceptance of something that comes upon one with the strength of revelation—something that proves capable of giving meaning and purpose to a man’s total existence.”²³ This entrusting to God is registered by taking the sacrament. Of this surrender to the overwhelming reality made present by God’s grace, Canon Mouroux says: “The saving movement of the soul, initiated by grace, can pass through formulae themselves pitifully inadequate or even glaringly false.”²⁴ Here the act threatens to take precedence over the object. Faith, as the Reformers pointed out, is assent as well as trust, both residing in the finished work of Christ’s death and resurrection. Interestingly, Karol Wojtyla strikes a stronger note when he defines faith as “the response of the whole person to the word of God—a response given to God in the community of the Church.” He shows his deep understanding of the nature of the person when he goes on to explain this: “We find here, clearly defined, the traits of an interpersonal relationship. In them, grace and freedom define the dynamics of the encounter and characterize its depth.”²⁵ Clearly, we should not be too anxious to fix Catholic thinking in old and inadequate patterns.

THE CHARISMATIC RENEWAL

One of the most vital signs of life in the Catholic Church today is the so-called charismatic renewal and the associated basic Christian community movement. Here all the problems and potentials of the Church are brought to sharp focus and stimulate the keenest interest on the part of evangelicals. The charismatic movement spread from the Protestant churches to the Catholic Church in the 1960s beginning at Duquesne and Notre Dame universities in the United States. Soon it was established at Ann Arbor, Michigan with the founding of the Word of Life community. Within five years this community and others like it have spread around the world. By 1976 there were an estimated 3,000 groups in the United States and more than 1,600 worldwide. In Manila, Philippines the large Friday evening prayer meeting reached 1,000 before it was divided into two sometime ago; smaller groups have sprung up around the city.²⁶

While forming a part of the larger renewal movement in the Catholic Church which took its impetus from Vatican II, the renewal is more concerned with the renewal of spiritual life

²² Abbott (ed.), p.219. The constitution on revelation notes that faith “entrusts the whole self freely to God”. *Ibid.*, pp.113–14.

²³ *Survival of Dogma* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image, 1973), p.15.

²⁴ Jean Mouroux, *I Believe* (London: Chapman, 1959), pp.73–4.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, p.264.

²⁶ See esp. Leon Joseph Cardinal Suehens, *A New Pentecost?* (New York: Seabury, 1974).

than of the structures of the Church. It is characterized by the appearance of charismatic gifts, tongues, healing and prophecy, and a good deal of the literature of the movement discusses the gifts of the Spirit.²⁷ Importance is given to the baptism of the Holy Spirit which is described as the powerful presence and action of the Holy Spirit. The overriding concern of the movement, however, features a lively awareness of the reality and presence of God and personal union with Christ which manifests itself in a deep hunger for Scripture and often a renewed interest in the sacraments. Practically this emphasis issues in small informal prayer meetings where there is sharing, reading of Scripture and often hilarious singing.

In general, the hierarchy has responded in a positive, if sometimes cautious, manner. Indeed up until his recent retirement, Belgian Cardinal Seunens, as well as being one of the most influential reformminded Cardinals in recent conclaves, has been the unofficial sponsor of the movement. Statements by various Bishops' conferences note that in general the movement does not feature any theological innovation, but that pastorally it has sometimes become troublesome. In any case it is recognized as a most important locale for grassroots ecumenism.

Evangelicals can hardly be indifferent to a movement with such obvious signs of God's presence. But many of the tensions we have observed above are also present in the renewal movement. David Wells notes the parallel between this personal renewal and the theological renewal. Both seek to replace an external authority with an internal and subjective one.²⁸ While the parallel is not strictly accurate—indeed in some parts of the world (e.g. Latin America) the charismatic movement explicitly rejects theological innovation as not making any contribution to the renewal of spiritual life—the question does arise in both cases: where is the final locus of authority? Is Scripture allowed to play a normative role, or does it merely accompany the experience of the Spirit?

Here the problem of the nature of faith again becomes evident: Upon what does the faith experience actually rest? Evangelicals involved in the movement are quick to insist that the work of Christ often becomes central for participants of the movement. But one may be allowed to wonder why a similar experience of faith engenders such widely different attitudes toward dogma and ritual, and such indifference to theological distinctives. Some become more devoted to the Virgin; others lose interest in traditional ritual. Donald Gelpi pleads that the gifts serve to heighten faith consciousness: "Personal consciousness and community consciousness are transmuted into faith-consciousness when consciousness heightening activity is undertaken at either a personal or communal level in response to an impulse of divine grace. The gifts of the Spirit mediate such activity within the Christian community."²⁹ Doubtless such experiences can and do mediate God's presence, but they also carry the danger implicit in Catholic theology: that the proclaimed word of the gospel, the unique authoritative element in the Church, is replaced by a sacramentally mediated presence of God in our faith consciousness.

The problems and opportunities of the fiestas and pilgrimages of popular Catholicism may be mentioned in this connection. In many places of Latin America and Africa there are vigorous movements of folk-catholicism. The Bishops' Synod on Evangelization in 1974

²⁷ Such as Steve Clark, *Baptized in the Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* (Ann Arbor: Word of Life, 1976) and Francis MacNutt, *Healing* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1974).

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp.39–50.

²⁹ *Charism and Sacrament* (New York: Paulist, 1976), p.103.

especially praised these practices as quasi-natural aspirations which reveal a genuine presence of God, and which evangelism need only develop and bring to maturity. As Archbishop Eduardo Pironio reported to the Synod on October 1, 1974: In this popular religiosity “we find valid and solid elements of an authentic faith which demand to be purified, interiorized, made more mature, and brought to bear on daily life.”³⁰ As in the charismatic renewal we see here a laudable desire to bring the Christian faith into the every day life of the people. But unlike the renewal where people open themselves to a fresh work of the Spirit, here we are told to build on the natural aspirations of the people. Once again the object and nature of this faith is considered secondary, and therefore the centrality of the preaching of the Gospel and the necessity of repentance and faith in Christ is called into question.

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH?

A review of Catholic theology at the very least stimulates the evangelical to reflect on his or her own situation. For what is clear above all is that the problems facing the Catholic Church are not primarily “Catholic” problems, but tensions all Christians are called upon to wrestle with today. No one has summarized these tensions more succinctly than Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan. He notes that in the last hundred years the older classical idea of culture has been replaced with an empirical perspective. In the former, culture is normative and theology permanent. In the latter, culture develops and theology becomes a process wherein method is important.³¹ From this has grown the question of the historical and cultural nature of human statements and understanding. Allied with this are the problems of secularism and materialism spreading from the West and accompanying modernization around the world. Finally we have been forced to deal with the issues of authority and understanding in the context of the advance of critical methods of biblical study. This has all put a variety of issues on the agenda of Pope John Paul II, and the responses he makes may be instructive to other churches faced with similar problems.

At the same time it can no longer be ignored that Vatican II has introduced a substantial change of direction into the Catholic Church. The question uppermost in the minds of observers of recent papal conclaves was whether the changes of Vatican II were to be encouraged or repudiated. Despite the appearance of conservatism in some areas there can be little doubt that John Paul is committed to furthering the reforms of the Council. He has repeatedly stated his aim to “make explicit what, during the Council, was still only implied”.³² This changed spirit, put together with the complex problems we noted above, has brought the Catholic Church into a period of transition and development which cannot yet be charted. What ought to be the evangelical response to the present situation?

³⁰ Mimeographed notes circulated at Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University in Manila.

³¹ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973), p.xi.

³² See John Jay Hughes, “What’s Happening to the Church?” (Review of Gerard Noel, *The Anatomy of the Catholic Church*). *The New Review of Books and Religion*, March 1980, p.7.

First, it must be our primary responsibility to inform ourselves about the actual situation in the Church today. Older manuals of Catholic teaching³³ portraying the Church as it was before Vatican II should only be consulted for historical purposes, they can no longer be considered authoritative. Whatever may be happening, evangelicals must not be found in the anomalous position of insisting the Catholic Church holds unbiblical and traditional positions that are currently being repudiated. True there are Catholics who cling to older practices, there are many areas of the world where change has been almost unnoticed, but these instances are no more representative of the Church today than narrow fundamentalists are representative of the evangelical movement. Indeed recent consultations between evangelical and Catholic representatives indicate that Rome recognizes a genuine affinity with evangelical faith and practice. In any case it would be foolish to ignore such openness.

Evangelicals then find themselves in the position of wishing to encourage certain trends in the Church while remaining cautious about others. In all events they have much to learn from Catholic discussions today. The documents of Vatican II, for example, in addition to making such edifying reading, may enable us to point out things to our Catholic friends of which they may well be ignorant and which might encourage them toward genuine faith in Christ. Meanwhile we should be eager to press into their hands evangelical materials that will satisfy their newfound curiosity about biblical teaching. It becomes clear from fellowship with those interested in reform and renewal that we have to do here with Catholic evangelicals, and we must certainly allow for this category in our thinking and discussion. It remains true, however, that just as the Catholic Church today is no longer a monolithic institution, so we cannot insist on a single approach or attitude toward all who are in the Church. We do not betray the Reformation when we admit we have much to learn from a deeper and more serious dialogue with brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church.

Not least we have much to learn from the Catholic struggle to become a truly worldwide community, in which believers of every nation take their places of leadership in the body of Christ. In fact it is Karl Rahner's view that the fundamental theological interpretation of Vatican II lies in the fact that there a western church became a world church, and there the monumental task of facing up to the theological, hermeneutical and missiological implications of that fact have begun.³⁴ Evangelicals may ignore this shift in focus if they wish, and, in spite of the continued growth of the missionary movement, recent consultations indicate they may well be doing so—but they do so to their own peril. For as Gerard Noel says of the growing Third World church “by the turn of the century, (it) will have swept so far ahead as to leave the old church of the European-North American axis isolated and probably in decay.”³⁵

None of this is meant to suggest that no theological problems remain. We have touched on some of these in this paper and there are certainly others. We need have no hesitation to insist that Scripture be allowed to speak the final word, and that we all see our roles as

³³ Loraine Boettner's book *Roman Catholicism*, still circulated by Banner of Truth Trust, unfortunately belongs in this category.

³⁴ See “Toward a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 40 (1979), pp.716–72.

³⁵ Quoted by John Jay Hughes, *op. cit.*, p.26.

servants of God's word. For we continue to believe that only in this way is Christ allowed to be the Lord of the Church and salvation seen as God's gracious offer to all people.

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Base Ecclesial Communities in the Brazilian Catholic Church: A Study of Re-Evangelization and Growth

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Possibly the most exciting item of missiological news to come out of Latin America these days cannot be found in the journals of most Protestant mission organizations. It has to do with the *comunidades eclesiais de base*¹ or base ecclesial communities, the fastest-growing movement within the Roman Catholic Church. *Time* magazine (May 7, 1979, p.88) called it the most influential Catholic movement in Latin America, where there may be as many as 150,000 *comunidades*—80,000 of them in Brazil. A prominent sociologist, in a Smithsonian Institution symposium, states that these "grass-roots congregations" promise to change the face of Brazilian Catholicism into the nation's first truly working-class association. He goes on to liken this phenomenon to eighteenth-century Wesleyanism (IDOC 1978:78–84).

What is the nature of, this movement? What are its social and historical roots and its fundamental characteristics? And what is its significance for both Catholic and Protestant mission today? I have approached these issues with several concerns: (1) as a Christian who is deeply concerned about total human liberation; (2) as a Protestant who has been engaged in mission in Latin America for over a quarter century; (3) as an evangelical missiologist who is committed to holistic evangelization and church growth; and (4) as an inquisitive student of social and religious phenomena.

DEFINITION

The base ecclesial communities constitute a dynamic movement that defies easy definition. The 1968 Medellín Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM II) called them "the first and fundamental ecclesiastical nucleus ... the initial cell of the ecclesiastical structures and the focus of evangelization ... the most important source of human advancement and

¹ I am using the Portuguese spelling throughout; Spanish: *comunidades eclesiales de base*.