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# Contextualizing Roman Catholicism

Jerry L. Sandidge

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*This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society and Association of Evangelical Professors of Missions last year at Philadelphia College of Bible. Though some may not agree with all the insights of the paper, it makes a good supplement to the Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism produced by the Task Force of the WEF Theological Commission and published in these pages in an earlier issue.*

Editor

John said to him, 'Master, we saw a man driving out devils in your name, and as he was not one of us, we tried to stop him.' Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; no one who does a work of divine power in my name will be able the next moment to speak evil of me. For he who is not against us is on our side. I tell you this: if anyone gives you a cup of water to drink because you are followers of the Messiah, that man assuredly will not go unrewarded' ([Mark 9:38–41](#), NEB).<sup>1</sup>

The history of Pentecostal and Evangelical mission work in predominantly Roman Catholic countries has been in the tradition of Joshua ([Num. 11:29](#)) and John ([Mk. 9:38](#)). Joshua wanted to silence Eldad and Medad. They were a part of the Seventy but were not with Moses in the tabernacle at the time the Spirit was conferred upon them. Nonetheless, the Lord moved upon Eldad and Medad 'in the camp' even though they were not with the others 'round the tent'. One commentary from an Evangelical publisher calls Joshua's jealousy for [p. 158](#) Moses' authority and leadership a 'sanctuary clericalism'.<sup>2</sup> John tries to stop a man from casting out devils because 'he was not one of us ...' John wanted to defend his Lord by denying someone outside the circle of the Twelve the right to do the works of God.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a similar passage in the Old Testament. In [Numbers 11:16–30](#) is the account of God directing Moses to call 70 elders to the 'Tent of the Presence'. God said: 'I will take back part of that same spirit which has been conferred on you and confer it on them....' The account goes on to say that 'as the spirit alighted on them, they fell into a prophetic ecstasy....' But two men, Eldad and Medad, continued to be in ecstasy (or to prophesy). Joshua, upon hearing them, went to Moses and pleaded: 'My lord Moses, stop them!' Moses refused, saying: 'I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would confer his spirit on them all!'

<sup>2</sup> Philip J. Budd, *Word Biblical Commentary*. Numbers, Vol. 5 (Waco: Word Books, 1984), p. 130.

Both Joshua and John approached the situation with sincerity, but from the wrong perspective. Each assumed too much and was over zealous in his defence of the lord (Joshua) and Lord (John).

Dummelow's one-volume commentary has an interesting comment on both events. 'The fact that Eldad and Medad also received the spirit shows that the spirit of God is not limited to certain places or individuals, and that he is no respecter of persons.' The meaning of the Mark (and [Luke 9:49, 50](#)) passage is: 'The man, though without your apostolic commission, was doing, and doing successfully, the very same benevolent work that you were doing. You ought, therefore, to have esteemed him a friend and a helper, not an enemy. A jealous and exclusive spirit is unworthy of the ministers of Christ.'<sup>3</sup>

From my observation, it seems that the missiological approach used within Pentecostal/Evangelical churches working in a Roman Catholic context has differed little (if any) from strategies used among animists, atheists, Muslims, Hindus, and other non-(or un-) Christian peoples of the world. For the most part, we have placed the Roman Catholic Church outside 'the Tent of Presence' and the circle of Jesus' disciples.<sup>4</sup> This missiological position is being challenged today. The caricature of Rome as 'the whore of Babylon' or as the 'scarlet woman' of Revelation, the pope as 'the antichrist' and Catholicism as 'the apostate church' must be dropped. The question can be simply asked: 'Is the Roman Catholic Church, in any way, a valid expression of Christian faith? Does the 'Body of Christ' include the Roman Catholic Church in the same sense that it might include the Nazarene Church, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the Free Methodist Church, or the Assemblies of God?'

The Pentecostal/Evangelical mission boards of the twentieth century seem to have answered 'No!' to these questions. It is the thesis of this paper to challenge that tradition and urge that we reconsider such a [p. 159](#) position. This is not to deny the many questions we have about Roman Catholic theology and practice. This is not to imply that evangelization within Roman Catholic countries must cease. Rather, it is a plea for an updated contextualization of the Latin Church in the final decade of this century. There are several reasons why I believe it is past time to take a more healthy and irenic look at the Church of Rome.

First, there is the impact of *Vatican II*. My experience as a missionary for over ten years in a Roman Catholic country was that Pentecostal and Evangelical pastors and leaders did not consider anything that happened at the Vatican Council as of any consequence. The attitude has been expressed that the Roman Catholic Church is *semper eadem* ('always the same'); that its position was *Roma locuta est, causa finita est* ('Rome has spoken, the case is closed').

The recent statement by the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship on 'An Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism' shows an awareness of and appreciation for the documents of Vatican II, amid some basic concerns for the purity of the Gospel.<sup>5</sup> Such a document must be read and used as a basis for contextualizing Roman Catholicism from a Pentecostal or Evangelical perspective.

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<sup>3</sup> J. R. Dummelow (ed.), *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), pp. 106, 729.

<sup>4</sup> The same comment could perhaps be applied to the various Orthodox churches of the East, the other non-Roman Catholic churches, and some forms of Reformation Protestantism.

<sup>5</sup> 'An Evangelical Perspective of Roman Catholicism', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 104 (October 1986), pp. 342-364; 11, 1 (January 1987), pp. 78-94.

Second, the Council opened the doors for Roman Catholic scholars to begin *dialogue* with those in the Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant, Pentecostal, and Evangelical churches. Non-Roman Christians are considered 'separate brethren', among whom, as the Latin text implies, each stands apart from the others. It is not simply a one-sided separation. Since 1972 there has been an international dialogue between the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and certain leaders from the Pentecostal movement worldwide.<sup>6</sup> Between 1977–1984 there were three dialogue sessions held at the international level, between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics, on the topic of mission in the world.<sup>7</sup> These are hopeful signs, not of a merger of these churches into Roman Catholicism, but of a reaching out to one another in mutual respect, understanding, and acceptance.

Third, the birth in 1967 of the *charismatic renewal* among Roman Catholics is a positive signal of their desire for greater spiritual reality p. 160 within their Church. Conservative estimates are that there are over 20 million Catholic charismatics in the world. (Some estimates are as high as 50 million!) Bishop Gabriel Gonsuam Ganaka, President of the Nigerian Conference of Roman Catholic Bishops, recently described the charismatic renewal to his fellow bishops at the Synod of Bishops meeting in Rome:

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal is an essentially lay 'movement' (for want of a better word) under the influence of the Holy Spirit, with its emphasis on total self surrender to Jesus through discipleship—which means following Jesus, knowing Jesus, loving Jesus, serving Jesus and neighbours for the sake of Jesus. The great emphasis on daily Bible reading and on weekly Bible study applied to life; the great devotion to the Holy Spirit with the moment to moment dependence on him for his gifts and direction for the building up of the Church, and on a deep sacramental life:—these and many other peculiarities of this postconciliar renewal have helped transform nominal, Sunday to Sunday Catholics into men and women who have become knowledgeable, vibrant, committed and dedicated disciples of Jesus Christ. They have made the important transition from knowing about Jesus to knowing Jesus—and that he is alive and active in the lives of believers. The weekly testimonies during prayer meetings have helped to transform men and women involved in the renewal into persons of unshakeable faith.<sup>8</sup>

Fourth, there is renewed emphasis upon *evangelization* by Roman Catholics. There are many signs that Catholic leaders are expressing a new impetus to evangelize their own people as well as unbelievers. Over a decade ago a Jesuit theologian wrote that his Church was inadequately proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ: 'There is a multitude of baptized Christians but only a limited number of Christians who really live their commitment to Christ'.<sup>9</sup> Surely this will get an 'amen' from the Pentecostal and Evangelical corners of Christianity. Fr. Tom Forrest, a leader in the charismatic renewal, has opened offices in Rome and is beginning to organize for 'Evangelization 2000', a programme (funded with a billion dollars!) designed to motivate Roman Catholics around the world to support and

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<sup>6</sup> Jerry L. Sandidge, 'Roman Catholic/Pentecostal Dialogue: A Contribution to Christian Unity', *Pneuma*, 7, 1 (Spring 1985), 41–60.

<sup>7</sup> 'Evangelical and Roman Catholics Dialogue on Mission', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 10, 1 (January 1986) pp. 1–21.

<sup>8</sup> 'Bishop Ganaka's Intervention', *International Newsletter*, 15, 1 (January–February 1988), pp. 5–6. This 'intervention' was made by Bishop Ganaka at the Synod of Bishops (250 of them!) convened in Rome in October 1987 to study the 'Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World Twenty Years after the Second Vatican Council'.

<sup>9</sup> Johannes Hofinger, *Evangelization and Catechesis* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 7.

participate in a decade of evangelization so that by the year 2000 the [p. 161](#) world will be more Christian. (See the news article on this ambitious plan in *Christianity Today* [February 6, 1988], p. 36.)

Fifth, in spite of certain negative forces within Roman Catholicism, there is enough positive movement to say that there now are some *common interests* which should bring Roman Catholics and Pentecostals/Evangelicals closer together. A common desire for world evangelization has already been mentioned. There is also a common desire to see the Scriptures distributed among all Christians in their native tongue. We would, for the most part, stand beside Roman Catholics on certain moral and social issues such as opposition to abortion and euthanasia, nondiscrimination among races or sexes, the rejection of homosexuality as an acceptable life-style, the use of drugs, opposition to corrupt political systems, and hatred of war and poverty. There should be a common concern to provide, in the name of Christ, jobs for the poor, education for the illiterate, health care for the sick, provisions for widows and orphans, and other such examples of Jesus' compassion for humanity.

There are some small but certain steps we can take now to convey a message that we regard the Roman Catholic faith as a legitimate part of the Family of God and members, as ourselves, of the Body of Christ. (1) We can revise our vocabulary, removing the pejorative language, and replace it with a more gentle form of discussion. (2) It is now possible to share a common Bible (recognizing, of course, the additional deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament as a point of difference) in English, French, Dutch, Malagasy, and no doubt, other languages. If we can use a common biblical text, then we have a better basis upon which to discuss our differences and share our similarities. (3) We should begin to engage in dialogue on the national and regional levels, taking into account the experiences shared and documents produced at the international level. It is time to talk *with* each other rather than talking *at* or *about* each other. (4) Creative ways could be discovered to share our trinitarian faith in common and to share in a witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ before a sceptical and unbelieving world. (5) There should be occasions when together, in prayer and humility, we experience the words of Jesus: 'May they all be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that thou didst send me' ([Jn. 17:21](#)).

Perhaps a better way to emphasize the necessity of seeing Roman Catholicism in a new context is to relate a personal experience. The following event took place in August 1987 at a session of the Roman Catholic/Pentecostal Dialogue convening in Venice. This description is adapted (with permission) from the text of a sermon by my friend and [p. 162](#) colleague on the Pentecostal side, Dr. Cecil 'Mel' Robeck, Jr., an Assemblies of God minister, Assistant Dean for Academic Programs and Associate Professor of Church History at Fuller Theological Seminary. As a participant in the same events, I found my impressions very similar to his.<sup>10</sup>

'It was a bright and clear Sunday morning in Venice, Italy. About 35 of us gathered together for breakfast, then briskly made our way through the winding sidewalks, past opening stores, and across ancient bridges toward San Marcos Square. There we were confronted by the massive cathedral, looking more eastern than western with its four bronze horses—its beautiful mosaic and its many domes. It stood guard, as it has now for nearly a thousand years, over the square where the Doges and their mistresses, the men

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<sup>10</sup> This sermon was delivered by Dr. Robeck on Sunday, August 28, 1987 at Bethany Church (Assemblies of God), Alhambra, CA. The full 14-page manuscript is available upon request to Dr. Robeck at Fuller Theological Seminary. (I have used only those portions that also truly reflect what I was experiencing at the mass in Venice.)

of means and influence, and those in the social registers of the city had long ago gathered to conduct their business and make their social contacts.

'Our little group was different, as we stood amid tourists, pigeons, and the local faithful. All of us were entering the Cathedral of San Marcos to celebrate High Mass. We were ushered up a side aisle and across the front of the cathedral to a special section of reserved seating, just to the left of where the priest would deliver the sermon. We were Pentecostal preachers and church leaders as well as Roman Catholic priests. We were theologians, historians, and exegetes. We included lay persons, pastors' wives, Catholic nuns and monks. Among us were Benedictines, Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits, and Cappuchins. There were represented the Foursquare Gospel Church, Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, Church of God, Church of God of Prophecy, the Pentecostal Brotherhood of Holland and the Assemblies of God (USA). We gathered there to worship our Lord together.

'As my eyes grew accustomed to the relatively dimly lit surroundings, I looked at the order of worship. It was recognizable, though it was largely in Italian and Latin. There were the opening welcome, readings from Scripture, hymns, prayers, the recitation of the Creed, the sermon or homily, and the celebration of the eucharist. To accommodate the hundreds of tourists, the welcome and the Scripture readings would be given in German, French, English and Italian. In some ways it was to be a Pentecost-like event. [p. 163](#)

'The service began promptly at 10:00 a.m., with a welcome in which attention was drawn to our little group in the front of this historic cathedral at the gateway between East and West. The people were informed that we were special visitors to the city. Our task was one of dialogue, in an enterprise hosted by the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity from the Vatican, and engaged in an activity intended to bring about better understanding between Roman Catholics and Pentecostals around the world. The congregation was asked to pray and to remember us throughout the week, lifting us up to the Lord, that our work might bear good fruit. We sang. We prayed. We worshipped. And we affirmed our common faith by repeating the Lord's Prayer and the Nicene Creed together.

'The sermon was centred upon Jesus. The text, [Matthew 14:13-21](#), depicted Jesus, exhausted from Ministry, attempting to withdraw into a place of privacy away from the press of the crowds. But he had been followed. Crowds of needy people found him, and he was forced to reach into his inner resources, to draw upon his strength reserves; and in the compassion so typical of our Lord, he did. He continued to heal the sick, and when it was observed that the people were hungry and there was no place nearby to buy food, he multiplied the five loaves and two small fish to meet their needs.

'While the text was important, the priest was a dynamic speaker who was exhorting his congregation to live out their lives in compassionate imitation of Jesus. The fact that he preached in Italian, of which I am able to understand little, left my mind somewhat free to wander. And it did, as I sensed the presence of God among us.

'With one ear I listened, but I found myself studying the familiar stories from Genesis to Revelation, marvellously preserved in the magnificent mosaics, carved wood furnishings, etched stonework, and oil paintings which covered the walls, the ceiling, and even the floors. I thanked God for those who had come before me in the faith, those who cared enough to communicate the gospel in the day when illiteracy was the norm, and when personal copies of the Scriptures were virtually non-existent. I thanked God for the years they had invested in the works which stood before me, and for the sacrificial giving which ensured that the message of the Gospel would not be lost, but preserved in these great art treasures.



'I found myself thanking God for the vision these people had held, of their infinitesimal role in the whole life of the Church. It was, indeed, bigger than they were. It went beyond their boundaries, their times, and their understanding. It made me intensely aware of the reality of what the Creed calls the "communion of the saints"—which included [p. 164](#) those faithful of the 11th century who constructed the building in which I found myself, and all those who both preceded and followed them. And I was thankful for the brothers and sisters who were asked to pray for us that morning, and all those who sat with me in this little group. But I found myself praying that we, too, might catch a vision of what it means not to look for quick solutions and easy answers, but to rest content in the slow but methodical leading of the Lord whose purpose includes both beginning and end with everything in between.

'The priest ended his sermon and prepared to celebrate the mass. He was now moving from the familiar in which we could all participate together, into a portion of the service where I was now not invited. I was a stranger. It was the event toward which every Roman Catholic worship service is focused, participation in the Lord's Supper. The priest sanctified the altar through prayer, then he circled it, swinging his pot of burning incense. Away from the crowd, far to the front of the cathedral, I watched, as he circled the altar, swinging his pot, while shafts of bright sunlight pierced the smoke. It brought to mind a number of Old Testament images of Aaron, of incense, of an altar, and of sacrifices on behalf of the people of God.

'I knew somehow, and beyond all question, that God was in our midst. Yet the reconciliation which he longs for was shattered. God waited at the table, but we were unable to get along, and so we could not all meet together there. Sin was present, power struggles, and church division. And I was grieved in my heart, as I am each time I attend a communion service and I am not allowed, because of my church affiliation, to share the cup and bread with other Christians.

'I was reminded of Jesus' prayer for unity among his disciples, so that the world might believe ([John 17](#)). I was reminded of those who do not believe; in particular, of the Ayatollah and all those who are swayed by the Muslim faith. Later that week we would be reminded and my conscience would be pricked as we read from their scriptures, the *Koran*, a passage in which Mohammed declared that Christian divisions were the curse of Allah for their sinfulness, highlighting the fact for me that our divisions serve to validate the Islamic claim even as our unity, visible before the world, could serve to validate the unique message of Jesus Christ as the One who has come from the Father.<sup>11</sup> [p. 165](#) And I was reminded of the disciples who sought to silence another because he was not, in John's words, "with them".

'Then it struck me. We want people to be "with us" more than we want them to be "for him". Many, perhaps most, of us are just like John and the other disciples. We do not trust doctrines which we have not ourselves developed. We do not trust methods which are different from our own. We do not trust the motives of people we do not fully understand. And I had to ask myself, "What is it, really, that keeps us apart? What are the real reasons we cannot accept each other and have full communion together? Why do we consistently insist that 'they' must change, must be 'with us' before we can recognize him or her as a brother or a sister? Is it pride? Is it fear? Is it power? Is it insecurity? Or, is it merely a lack of spiritual discernment?" '

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<sup>11</sup> Sûrah V, 'The Table Spread', verse [14](#), says: 'And with those who say: "Lo! we are Christians," We made a covenant, but they forgot a part of that whereof they were admonished. Therefore, we have stirred up enmity and hatred among them till the Day of Resurrection, when Allah will inform them of their handiwork.'

It is interesting to note the larger context in which John's declaration of forbidding the stranger, and Jesus' words, 'Forbid not', appear. It is in a context in which there has been an argument among the disciples over greatness and power. Jesus had placed a child in their midst and said, 'Whoever receives this child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me receives the One who sent me' ([Lk. 9:48](#)). That is where true greatness comes in.

It does not come through self proclaimed declarations of 'I am great' with its obvious corollary, 'therefore, you are not'. It comes in accepting the other: the child, the stranger, the Roman Catholic, the mainline Protestant, the Evangelical. It comes in discerning where Jesus is at work in the other. We are called to be separate from the world. But we are called upon to make space, to provide room, to encourage access, and to affirm *Jesus* in those who claim to serve the same Lord as we do.

The Roman Catholic/Pentecostal Dialogue is but one of many places where we have an opportunity to share, proclaiming Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, as we have learned of him and experienced him. It is made the more exciting when we stop to realize that much which has enabled Pentecostals to dialogue with Roman Catholics has taken place since Vatican II (1962–1965). We have yet to reap the full harvest of this Council, with its encouragement of personal Bible Study and the pursuit of holiness, its openness to all forms of renewal from liturgical to charismatic, and its willingness to dialogue with its separated sisters and brothers.

And if we are ahead of them in any way, and if we have something to teach them, then we must accept them and love them and be patient with them and encourage them when we see them doing something right. We do not have the option to forbid them lest we find ourselves [p. 166](#) forbidden. We cannot afford to stand against those who stand 'for us'. We cannot be caught bearing false witness against them before others.

We need to be patient with them on another account as well. The Roman Catholic Church is organized quite differently from Pentecostal and Evangelical denominations. It works from the top down, rather than from the congregation up. Thus not all doctrines and policies have been fully implemented at all levels. And they will not be for years to come.

One outstanding result of our dialogue has been that Pentecostals have now been moved from the category of *sect* (by which they probably meant 'cult') to that of *church* (or, perhaps better, legitimate spiritual movement within Christianity). There are calls being made to the priests of Latin America who have at times violently persecuted Pentecostals to do it no longer. Implementations of this new edict will take time and education because feelings run deep and our past histories and hurts are real.<sup>12</sup> We are their biggest competitors in some parts of the world.

We have also seen evidence that they recognize the problem that their people have been 'sacramentalized', so to speak, but not necessarily evangelized, and we have been told that our concern for evangelization should include churched Catholics in those areas. But we have been asked not to take newly evangelized Catholics into our churches but to leave them as salt and light and leaven in their own. This can only be successful if we recognize them as being 'for him' even though they are not 'with us'. Here is a great area for dialogue; we must be willing to hear and listen as well as to speak to this issue.

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<sup>12</sup> 'Sects or New Religious Movements: Pastoral Challenge', *Information Service*, No. 61 (1986/III), 144–154. This document, we were told specifically by Msgr. Basil Meeking of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, is *not* directed at Pentecostals and Evangelicals. Rather, it is aimed at the pastoral problem of the increased activity by various religious cult groups and new religious movements.



The church world of today is not the same as it was in the 1940s when the WCC and National Councils of Churches were formed. Nor is it the same as it was in the mid-60s when Vatican II took place and the renewal of the Holy Spirit began. We, as the disciples of Jesus, may not have changed much, and we need to hear afresh near the close of this century a word to be discerned in others through reliance upon God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

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# The Church's Mission and Ministry in India

Sunand Sumithra

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*The following article is a revised version of a paper presented at a conference on The Mission and Ministry of the Church in India at the United Theological College, Bangalore, India last November. The conference met as a preliminary to the coming World Conference on Mission and Evangelism in Texas, USA, later this year, to be held under the auspice of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, and sought cooperation and dialogue among the various groups and persuasions. It discussed church's mission and ministry from an Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and 'ecumenical', as well as evangelical, point of view; this paper represented the evangelical position.*

Editor

*Change and pluralism mark the contemporary Indian scene, including the Indian Church. The global processes of secularization, modernization and liberation affect us all. The tensions these revolutions have generated are only strengthened by the stubborn fact of Indian pluralism, making harmony for survival the urgent need in the land. Religious pluralism, the nerve centre, has thus been the subject of scores of debates in the last decade. If the Church has no substantial solution to offer here, she must at least keep her house as clean as possible from such pollutions. This is the relevance of our theme: we dialogue about the Church's mission and ministry both and largely for the sake of her unity as well as for showing her usefulness in contemporary world. My modest aim here is to raise some relevant questions about the Indian Church's mission and evangelism and give some guidelines by way of answering them.* p. 168

## MISSION AND MINISTRY