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Editorial

During the last two decades evangelicals have had several fruitful dialogues with responsive Roman Catholic theologians. Recognizing the need to give guidance to its national member bodies, the WEF sponsored its own consultation 'A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism'. The report was presented to the WEF 1986 General Assembly. Catholics felt that a number of fundamental issues were inadequately treated. This led to brief meetings between WEF theologians and representatives of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity in 1988 (Jerusalem) and in 1990 (Budapest). A more carefully prepared consultation was held at Venice in 1993 and the revised papers of this consultation are reproduced in this issue of ERT. The Catholic view of the Word of God as Scripture and Tradition, the extent of the Fall, Justification, the Unity of the Church were key issues that surfaced in the Consultation. Points of agreement and of misunderstanding were clarified. The mistreatment of evangelicals by Catholic bishops as 'sects' was carefully noted. The next joint consultation will be held near Jerusalem in October 1997. Additional articles in this issue deal with the divergence at the Reformation on the doctrine and practice of ministry, the weakness of evangelicalism today and the Roman Catholic stance on the centrality of Rome.

The two major contributors to Christian mission in the developing 'third world' are evangelicals and Roman Catholics. It is imperative we understand each other better and critically evaluate our stereotype images of each other. May Christ be Lord in the Church and in our suffering and lost world. [p. 101](#)

Introduction

Paul G. Schrottenboer

This issue contains the papers delivered at a consultation in Venice, Italy, in October 1993 between the World Evangelical Fellowship and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. The occasion for the consultation was the appearance in 1986 of the WEF 'A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism'. Prior to the consultation two brief meetings were held between representatives of the WEF and the Pontifical Council, first in Jerusalem in 1988 and then in Budapest in 1990. These meetings were far too brief for extensive discussion but they were helpful in pinpointing the differences between the two communions. Therefore it was proposed that a well-prepared consultation be arranged at a later date. This took place in the Casa Cardinala Piazza in Venice.

A concern from the RCC was that the most fundamental issues between them and evangelicals are not dealt with adequately in the Perspective. The 'fundamental issues', they said, are Scripture, tradition and the nature of the church. We conceded that these issues are indeed very important topics but observed that in evangelical perspective all the topics contained in the WEF statement are significant. A consensus emerged that some of the topics might serve to lead on to the discussion of other topics, and in that sense are more important than others. These were seen to be Scripture, tradition (the development of doctrine) and the nature of the church as communion.

When Pierre Duprey invited us to meet with Representatives of the Council in the Casa Cardinale, the WEF Executive Committee were pleased to accept the invitation. The accommodation at the Casa proved to be fully adequate and the atmosphere was congenial throughout. The Casa staff were considerate and helpful, especially to me because of my health problem which made walking difficult.

As the preparations for the consultation in Venice progressed, it became clear that we could not ignore the doctrine of justification. This topic arose in the earlier discussion when the RCC representatives [p. 102](#) commented that evangelicals make the doctrine of justification by faith the key to the interpretation of Scripture. The Evangelicals' reply was that this is not the case, at least not with all Evangelicals. A more useful and biblically attuned 'key' is the person and work of Christ. When the discussion on the topic for the consultation was finished it was decided that the papers should centre on Scripture, Justification, and Tradition.

In the general discussion that followed the presentation of the papers in Venice a number of issues surfaced of which we will give a brief summary.

1. All participants recognized that there is a difference in assessment of men and women in their natural state. This difference did not seem as great to the Catholics as it did to the Evangelicals. The Catholic view does not seem to take entirely seriously the biblical statement that we are dead in trespasses and sins prior to rebirth.

According to most recent papal encyclicals human nature has remained basically intact. We agreed that all people have a knowledge of God ([Rom. 1:21](#)) but argued that it should be affirmed also that the response of the unregenerate to this knowledge is to hold down the truth in unrighteousness ([Rom. 1:18](#)).

2. Dr Avery Dulles' paper was entitled 'Revelation as the Basis for Scripture and Tradition'. Commenting on the Catholic view that Scripture and Tradition together form one Word of God, including the post apostolic tradition, the Evangelical participants stressed the continuing 'over-againstness' of the scripture to the tradition of the church. The Catholics want to make tradition and scripture one inseparable whole. Dr Avery Dulles made a strong case that both Scripture and tradition flow from a single source, the revelation of God.

In the other lead paper Dr George Vandeveld spoke on 'Justification between Scripture and Tradition'. He stressed the radicality of sin and the locus of authority in Jesus Christ to whom the Scriptures bear testimony. The difference in understanding the effects on human beings, both before and after conversion, now stood in clear light.

3. In the further discussion we deprecated the fact that evangelical groups are at times called sects by Catholics. This was done, for instance in Mexico by a Catholic churchman where most of the non-Catholics referred to are Presbyterian. (The recent Encyclical 'Vita Consecrata' speaks of non-Roman Catholics as 'ecclesial communities').

The response to this was that while some bishops continue to use the term sects this is now falling into disuse. The attitude of Catholics towards other churches should be seen in the view of religious liberty adopted by Vatican II. This, said Thomas Strassmann, was a 180° change from the former position. There is no suggestion in Vatican II that Catholics have a greater right than others to civic freedom.

We received the distinct impression that our expression of hurt was not ignored. Rather we received assurance that if we would submit documented proof that Evangelicals are mistreated by Catholics, the [p. 103](#) Pontifical Council would seek to remove the offence.

4. The Evangelical Contemporary Perspective on Roman Catholicism stated that in the view of the Roman Catholic Church the path to unity in the church is for the other churches 'to come to Rome'. Monseigneur Meija said that it would be more accurate to say that 'all

should be incorporated into the Roman Catholic Church'. Stransky said that the path should lead, not to Rome as it was, nor to Rome as it is, but to Rome in the process of reformation. For reformation, he added, dialogue is needed and therefore we should no longer engage in monologues.

This was the first meeting of its kind for the WEF, perhaps for all Evangelicals. At this point, therefore, we should ask ourselves what we accomplished in the 1993 consultation in Venice. We would list the following benefits:

1. We were able to remove certain misunderstandings Catholics had concerning the evangelical position. Likewise, we heard that we should free ourselves from certain misconceptions of Catholics.

2. We highlighted certain differences in teaching concerning the church and its mission in the world. (These topics will be addressed in a consultation in October 1997).

3. We have realized more strongly that we should not again issue a statement on Catholicism without consulting with them before publication.

4. We have been confirmed in our need to accept the other participants in the dialogue on the basis of their Christian testimony even as we were accepted by Christ and by them. Together we should draw closer to him.

5. There is sufficient reason for us to continue the discussion with Roman Catholics, for the following reasons.

- Evangelicals and Catholics live and evangelize in close proximity in many areas, sometimes in amiable relationships (as in the Billy Graham Crusades) and sometimes in unhappy and even hostile relations. Since we cannot ignore Catholics, if we do not talk with them, we can only comment on them from a distance. There is merit in sitting down together to express and hopefully resolve differences.
- Much if not most of world evangelism today is done by Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. We therefore cannot avoid brushing shoulders and in some occasions entering into competition with Catholic missionaries. In addressing the lost we cannot ignore the Roman Catholic Church.
- We recognize a significant continuing difference in view between us concerning the radicality of sin both in the sinner before conversion and in the convert to Christ. The role of tradition in the church remains also in need of further joint reflection. Our experience in Venice has convinced us that we should be fully aware of the official teaching of the Catholic Church as well as important developments that occur among its theologians.

Dr Paul Schrottenboer, served as the organiser secretary for the WEF Consultation with the Roman Catholic Church. p. 104

Revelation as the Basis for Scripture and Tradition

Avery Dulles, S.J.