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Evangelicals and Catholics Together? Issues and Prospects for Dialogue and Common Witness in Lowland Philippines

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THERE IS TRADITIONALLY a divide between Catholics and Protestants [in the Philippines]. This has been lessened by ecumenical relations between liberal elements of both. Among Protestants of the evangelical type, Catholicism is still viewed as virtually irredeemable.¹

In Manila, the walls between Protestants and Catholics are slowly crumbling, but they must come down more rapidly. It requires a unity strong enough to engage the whole population.... If cities with their burgeoning population are to be served, the church, the Body of Christ,

Evangelicals and Catholics, must unite and bring together entire cities.²

As a young pastor and theological student in the late 1980s, struggling to make sense of my Fundamentalist Evangelical heritage, yet somehow drawn to the theological renewal in post-Vatican II Catholicism,³ one of the things that encouraged me to engage critically with the new developments in Philippine Catholicism (especially, inculturation and liberation) was the example of irenic dialogue shown by

² Lorissa Socorro Acorda de Boer, 'Creative Planning for Urban Transformation: The Experience of National Coalition for Urban Transformation' (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Southeast Asia Interdisciplinary Development Studies, Antipolo, Rizal, April 2000), 15-16.

³ I was born an evangelical. My parents were two of the first Baptist converts in our town. On my pilgrimage as an evangelical, see Gener, 'Reimaging Conversion in Lowland Philippine Setting: The Perspective of Gospel Re-rooting', in *Journal of Asian Mission* 3/1 (2001), 53-56.

¹ Lorenzo Bautista, 'The Church in the Philippines' in Saphir Athyal (ed.), *The Church in Asia Today* (Singapore: Asia Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1996), 198.

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the Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission (ERCDOM) spearheaded by John Stott.⁴ The Evangelical movement was not monolithic, after all, in its assessment of Roman Catholicism.⁵ I could go beyond the prevailing stereotypical, rejectionist stance toward Catholicism. Dialogue was also a worthy option to take. While in the Philippines the general mood among Evangelicals was one of suspicion and judgmentalism toward the Catholic Church, it was refreshing to see in the ERCDOM an impetus for genuine dialogue and cooperation between the two churches. Within such a framework, church unity negotiations were not the goal, but rather mutual understanding and common ground in pursuit of obedience to Jesus Christ and his mission in the world.⁶

In this paper, I will revisit the relationship between Philippine Evangelicals and Roman Catholics with a view toward deeper dialogue and understanding. Here I make use of the term 'Evangelical' primarily in an institutional sense of referring to Protestant

groups in the Philippines that identify themselves as such, but especially focusing on the churches that belong to the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches. I hope to go beyond the lingering impasse between Filipino Roman Catholics and Evangelicals. In the spirit of ERCDOM, I will aim for dialogue understood here as having a threefold agenda: (1) *witnessing to* others and pointing them to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour of the world (2) *cooperating with* them for the health and transformation of society, and (3) *learning from* them on issues of public life and spiritual matters.⁷ Note, however, that included in such dialogical posture is a missional perspective which in reality is an evangelical commitment—witnessing to Christ—that could revitalize institutional Evangelicalism.⁸

To redirect evangelical attitudes on dialogue vis-à-vis Catholicism, I will begin with a retelling of the history of the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches (PCEC) through the eyes of Agustin Vencer Jr., formerly PCEC General Secretary and World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF, now World Evangelical Alliance) International Director. This will form the bulk of the first section.⁹ In the succeeding section, I will enumerate the major issues Evangelicals raise against Roman Catholicism. Finally, I will employ a

⁴ Cf. Basil Meeking and John Stott, *Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission* (1977-1984) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). The document is also available in W. G. Rusch and J. Gros (eds.), *Deepening Communion: International Documents with Roman Catholic Participation* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), 425-78. According to Timothy Dudley-Smith, aside from Stott, there were two others who conceptualized the ERCDOM: Msgr. Basil Meeking and David Hubbard [John Stott: *A Global Ministry* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 207].

⁵ Note that I use the qualifiers 'Philippine' and 'Filipino' interchangeably.

⁶ W. Rusch and J. Gros (eds.), *Deepening Communion*, 429-30.

⁷ See my 'What Evangelicals Can Learn from Folk Catholicism: *The El Shaddai* as a Test Case', in E. Acoba et al, *Naming the Unknown God* (Mandaluyong: OMF Literature 2006).

⁸ On this point, see the Conclusion.

⁹ I have preferred to use Vencer's account because it highlights the challenges of Christian unity in PCEC life and history.

recent typology of Evangelical attitudes toward Catholicism to uncover the range of contemporary responses that may be found.

I Philippine Evangelicals

As a religious group, Evangelical Christians are generally known through the banner of the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches (PCEC).¹⁰ According to its National Director, Bishop Efraim Tendaro: 'The Council is the largest network of Evangelicals in the country with 65 denominations, 130 missions organizations, and more than 20,000 local churches.'¹¹ While the Roman Catholic Church remains the dominant religion in the country, in a country of about 90 million people, recent estimates show Evangelicals numbering about 10% of the total population.¹²

¹⁰ The Mainline Protestants have a separate council formed in 1963 known as the National Council of Churches of the Philippines.

¹¹ 'Evangelical churches urge vigilance in May 2007 elections,' *The Manila Bulletin* Friday, March 23, 2007. Available online <http://www.mb.com.ph/issues/2007/03/23/MAIN2007032390272.html> (accessed 23 March 2007). According to the National Statistics Office, however, based on the official May 2000 census of the Philippines, while Roman Catholics number about 81.04% of the population, Evangelicals and Protestants constitute a combined total of 6.5%. See Manfred Kohl, *The Church in the Philippines, A Research Project with Special Emphasis on Theological Education* (Mandaluyong City: OMF Literature, 2005), 12.

¹² The Philippines was Spain's colony for three hundred and fifty years, followed by forty five years under American rule, and three ravaging years under the Japanese Military occupation.

Established in July 1965 through a National Assembly of 73 delegates from different Protestant churches, the original name of PCEC was Philippine Council of *Fundamental Evangelical Churches* (PCFEC). The starting member-churches were pioneered just after the Japanese occupation (1942-45), mainly by 'faith missions' from North America and thus, forming younger Protestant denominations. One can say that the formation of this council of churches paralleled the earlier establishment of the National Association of Evangelicals in the United States.¹³

The joining of the qualifiers 'Fundamental' and 'Evangelical' in PCFEC was part of an effort to unify Fundamentalists and Evangelicals together into one Christian body. 'The members were aware of the historic and theological differences but they prudently avoided the issues that would have divided them, and explored the areas that would unite the group.' It was an experiment that would last only very briefly. In the Second PCFEC General Assembly held on 1 May 1968, a schism took place precisely on the issue of dropping either 'Fundamental' or 'Evangelical' in the name of the Council. Here is how Vencer described the event:

Rev. Fred Magbanua, then president of the Philippine Council of Fundamental Evangelical Churches (PCFEC), described the issues in a question: 'Will PCFEC be a

¹³ The National Association of Evangelicals in the United States was established in 1942. A brief history of the NAE is available online: URL <http://www.nae.net/index.cfm?FUSEACTION=nae.history>.

Fundamentalist separatist Council of an Evangelical ecumenicity?'....In his address to the General Assembly on May 1, 1968, Rev. Magbanua made clear the position of the Evangelical camp when he said, 'We are seeking for a "oneness" that will enable its member bodies to more effectively proclaim the Gospel message.' It was not just oneness in proclamation but also in social ministries. It could be that the 1966 Wheaton Congress of the Church's Worldwide Mission influenced the outcome. Many of the delegates were related to the Denominations and Mission Organizations that met in Wheaton. The Congress also reaffirmed the call for confessional cooperation, commitment to evangelism and mission, and recognition of social concerns as a biblical ministry. The Assembly voted unanimously to retain the term 'Evangelical'.¹⁴

Thus, the label 'Fundamental' was dropped, setting the stage for a more open evangelicalism: away from being a 'separatist Council' to one of 'Evangelical ecumenicity'.¹⁵

1 Versus Separatism and Liberalism

It might be useful at the outset to recall the separatism and liberalism that PCEC rejected at its beginnings. Aside

from identifying the particular newness of Philippine Evangelicalism vis-à-vis Fundamentalism and Liberalism, this proffers a window for dialogue especially with Roman Catholics.

Separatism was a stance that could not tolerate differences in doctrine, even in the non-essentials of the faith. For instance, while Evangelicals would find Billy Graham as a worthy representative, Fundamentalists find his views objectionable. For, according to them,

[Billy Graham] has been a catalyst in bringing together Liberals [by 'Liberals' are included members of the National council of Churches and Roman Catholics] and Evangelicals... [And these] alliances and fellowships [are] essentially unscriptural and dishonouring to God.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, because of such rigid separatism, Fundamentalists find it hard uniting even among themselves.¹⁷

In terms of its outlook on socio-cultural issues, the Fundamentalist lost interest in, and even became suspicious of, global and ecumenical efforts toward unity and peace (e.g., United Nations, improvement of labour relations, or the solving of cultural/ethnic conflicts). A silence concerning social injustice among Fundamentalists is noticeable. They often stress the vertical relationship of man-to-God to the neglect of the horizontal relationship

¹⁴ Agustin Vencer, 'The Evangelicals in the Philippines: A Brief History of the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches' Part II, in *Evangelicals Today & Asia Ministries Digest*, Vol. 2 No. 9 (September 1994), 17.

¹⁵ Vencer, 'The Evangelicals'.

¹⁶ Rev. Fred Magbanua used these distinctions, Vencer, 'The Evangelicals'.

¹⁷ Bautista, 'The Church in the Philippines', 198.

of humankind, especially in relation to social transformation.¹⁸

Philippine Evangelicals rejected separatism early on. They have also stood against liberalism perceived to be prevalent within the mainline churches. Indeed, Vencer sees the formation of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) and its membership in the World Council of Churches (WCC) as a crucial background to the development of Evangelicalism in the Philippines.

Liberalism happens when the church blends in or accommodates (uncritically) to values and practices of culture and society, even though they are unbiblical. The church may then simply mirror already existing cultural beliefs and practices, without challenging them biblically. We can cite two examples of the kind of liberalism that evangelical Christians (including Philippine Evangelicals) often reject. One group of Christians, often from among mainline churches, would tend toward reducing the gospel to a moral program of social betterment and brotherhood with its centre in the example of the man Jesus, rather than the proclamation of the earth-shaking fact that God has come in the person of Jesus Christ ushering in the new creation. For other churches, the uncritical synthesis happens when tradition or reason becomes the supreme authority rather than the Bible. Philippine Evangelicals often criticize traditional Roman Catholicism precisely on this point. For the Roman Church, tradition has become a source that has been made equal to the Bible. The teachings of the Roman Church are defended and justified even if they are not found in the Scriptures. The unbib-

lical emphases on the assumption of Mary into heaven and the Immaculate Conception remain long-standing inflexible dogmas existing alongside their admission that these are not taught in Scripture. Church tradition overpowers the witness of the Bible.¹⁹

In sum, while Philippine Evangelicals were committed to the proclamation and embodiment of the gospel, they were critical of prevailing practices and theologies which lead to separatism and liberalism. These excesses are rejected but an exclusivist stance on salvation through Christ alone remains as a primary distinctive. Vencer puts it this way: 'The Evangelicals rejected the Catholic concept of salvation by good work, the Liberal's social gospel and the Fundamentalists' sectarianism. They also took issue with the Dispensationalist's position that the world is going to get worse and therefore a Christian's sole duty is to preach the Gospel.'²⁰ It remains to be seen if PCEC will move toward greater emphasis on holistic mission and evangelical ecumenicity. The perception remains that PCEC is more evangelistic than holistic and ecumenical in its thrusts.²¹ Be that as it

18 Bautista, 'The Church in the Philippines,' 198.

19 Cf. Adonis Gorospe, 'Towards an Evangelical Protestant Mariology', *Phronesis* 11 (2) 2004: 68-78.

20 Vencer, 'The Evangelicals in the Philippines' Part III, *Evangelicals Today & Asia Ministry Digest*, October 1994, 27. For an introduction to Dispensationalism, see Michael Vlach, 'What is Dispensationalism?' Available online <http://www.theologicalstudies.org/dispen.html> (accessed 30 May 2007).

may, its history shows the way from a separatist outlook towards an openness to mission in unity.

2 Evangelicals as Fundamentalists? Clarifying a Misunderstanding

While in the 1980s ERCDOM opened new doors for mutual respect and understanding between the two churches, during that same period, Philippine Roman Catholicism was on the offensive against Fundamentalist Protestants. Unfortunately, this has affected recent Roman Catholic views on Evangelicalism as a whole.

The publication of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), *Guidelines on Fundamentalism* in 1989 sent shockwaves to the Evangelical front.²² It opened the door to greater suspicion and even persecution of evangelical Christians (in some Catholic schools and universities).²³ While as a rule the *Guidelines* did not equate Fundamentalists with Evangelical Christians and even noted some PCEC individuals initiating conversations with Roman Catholic leaders on a

semi-official basis, it stated quite explicitly that 'several members of the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches (PCEC) are either fundamentalist or strongly leaning towards Fundamentalism'.²⁴ It went on to lump together Youth for Christ, Campus Crusade for Christ, Inter-Varsity, Teen Challenge and the Navigators as fundamentalist youth organizations that were deceiving Catholic young people to convert to a fundamentalist faith.²⁵

It is true that there are PCEC member-churches which are either fundamentalist or strongly leaning towards Fundamentalism. But as we have seen through its history, PCEC stood its ground against radical fundamentalists who are rigid separatists and likewise dissociated itself from churches that have catapulted to theological liberalism. Regrettably, while the *Guidelines* were quick to point out the presence of fundamentalist-leaning churches within PCEC, it was weak in acknowledging evangelical diversity within the Council. The diversity within Evangelicalism was never explored, much less identified in the *Guidelines*. One could argue, indeed, that even within PCEC and the wider evangelical movement in the country, there are other kinds of Evangelicals aside from Fundamentalist-Evangelicals.²⁶ These other groups would be wary of being labelled Funda-

21 Personal Conversation with Bishop Cesar Punzalan, PCEC Vice Chairman, 12 June 2007.

22 Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, *Catholic Guidelines on Fundamentalism* (Manila: CBCP, 1989).

23 In the early 1990s, many 'born-again evangelical' students were not allowed to enroll in Roman Catholic universities in Metro Manila because they had openly declared their religious affiliation as Evangelicals. In a recent conversation, I was told by a colleague in the Seminary (Dr. George Capaque) that up to now many Catholic universities abide by these *Guidelines* in dealing with evangelical youth organizations.

24 *Catholic Guidelines*, 15.

25 *Catholic Guidelines*, 16.

26 Note too that even within Fundamentalist Evangelicalism, there are both separatist and open groups of fundamentalists. See Rodrigo Tano, *This Complicated and Risky Task: Selected Essays on Doing Contextual Theology from a Filipino Evangelical Perspective*, Romel Regalado Bagares (ed.) (Quezon City, Philippines: Central Books, 2006), 266.

mentalists: Justice and Peace Evangelicals, New (Progressive) Evangelicals and Ecumenical Evangelicals.²⁷ The unsatisfactory portrayal of evangelical diversity in CBCP's *Guidelines* can be seen further in its somewhat careless labelling of key evangelical youth organizations as Fundamentalists. Most, if not all, of these youth organizations do not identify themselves as such.

Interestingly, a close reading of the celebrated 1997 *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* (CFC) shows that the Catholic misunderstandings about Filipino Evangelicals remain unchecked. The CFC frequently uses the term 'Fundamentalist' and its cognates instead of Evangelical. The Glossary does not even contain entries for terms such as 'Born Again,' 'Charismatic' or 'Evangelical.'²⁸ If ever the Roman Catholic Church would initiate formal dialogue with Philippine Evangelicals, this misunderstanding must be addressed and rectified by its leadership.

²⁷ I have adopted these varieties of evangelicalism from Gabriel Fackre, *Ecumenical Faith in Evangelical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 22-23. For instance, the Institute for Christian Studies (ISACC) is a PCEC member-body strongly oriented to justice and peace advocacies. On the list of various PCEC member-bodies, see *Evangelicals Today*. Special Centennial Issue. Vol. 25 (4) August-September 1998, 84-100. For a related typology of contemporary evangelicalism drawn from Robert Webber, see Rodrigo Tano, *This Complicated and Risky Task*, 264-67.

²⁸ Ernest Manges, 'Using *The Catechism for Filipino Catholics* in the Evangelical Seminary Classroom,' in E. Acoba et al., *Doing Theology in the Philippines* (Mandaluyong City: OMF Literature, 2005), 215.

II Evangelical Issues with Roman Catholicism

The disagreements are mainly theological or doctrinal, and they can be traced back to the Protestant Reformers' assessment of Roman Catholicism.²⁹ (As we will see, however, they seem to go deeper than the theological because of the imposing presence of the Roman Catholic Church in the country.) They are:

- Of equal authority: the Bible and tradition. In Roman Catholicism the Bible and tradition have equal weight as sources of revelation. While Evangelicals do not deny the existence or value of tradition, they do not view the two as equal sources of revelation. For them, when the Scriptures and tradition come into conflict, the authority of the Scriptures is given pre-eminence. An example here is the doctrine of the purgatory.
- Good works as the means of salvation. Evangelicals claimed that while the Reformers insisted on salvation by grace through faith in Christ Jesus, salvation for the Roman Catholic continues to be through the Church and Sacraments. Baptism is still the means of entrance to the Church. The practice of indulgences is still a church-sanctioned system.
- Papal Infallibility. On the basis of Jesus' words to Peter in Matthew 16:18, Roman Catholicism has

²⁹ The doctrinal points that follow are drawn mainly from Vencer's 'The Evangelicals in the Philippines' Part II, *Evangelicals Today & Asia Ministry Digest*, September 1994, 15-16.

made Peter the first Bishop of Rome and from him, the authority was passed on to the other bishops in a hierarchical manner. Rome then became the geographical centre of the faith and the Roman See could utter judgments infallibly while sitting on the chair of St. Peter.

- The role of the Virgin Mary. For Evangelicals, the veneration of Mary becomes her deification in the teachings and practices of Roman Catholicism. Mary is known as the Mediatrix. She was viewed as sinless—she was immaculately conceived. She also did not die. Instead she had a bodily assumption. While Protestants insist on honouring Mary as the mother of Jesus and as a model for discipleship, they reject the deification of Mary in the Roman Catholic Church.

In all of the above theological issues, a standard reference often used by evangelical leaders and pastors is the work of Anthony Pezzotta, a former Salesian priest turned evangelical who still works in the country as a Baptist missionary.³⁰ It is good to have a handy, accessible reference such as Pezzotta's—one that clearly defends Evangelical faith vis-à-vis RC—but in a way, this reveals a major weakness within PCEC. With its more than forty years of existence, and equipped with its own Theological Commission, PCEC has not really gone deeper to re-

examine Roman Catholicism in light of the changes brought about by Vatican II. It has not taken stock also of the gains of the many intra-Christian dialogues between Protestant (Mainline, Evangelicals, Pentecostals) and the RC in the last thirty years.³¹

Yet the problem does not lie simply on the theological or doctrinal plane. Evangelical disagreements with Roman Catholicism become coloured with the religio-political because of the position of dominance and institutional privilege enjoyed by Roman Catholicism over any other religion in the country. Here is how this plays out in everyday practices. This is from my personal experience.

Every waking hour, before six o'clock, I can hear the voice of the liturgist or the priest from the nearby Roman Catholic chapel even if the chapel is about five hundred metres away from our house. Why so? Because the church employs two loudspeakers to publicly broadcast every liturgical celebration of the Mass. This is an acceptable

³¹ This has been confirmed to me by Bishop Cesar Punzalan, Vice Chairman of the PCEC Board of Trustees. Personal Conversation with the Author, 12 June 2007. As an introduction to new developments in Evangelical-Roman Catholic dialogue, I find most helpful John A. Radano's 'International Dialogue Between Catholics and Evangelicals Since the Second Vatican Council,' in *That the Word May Believe*, M. W. Goheen and M. O'Gara (eds.) (Lanham, MD: UPA, 2006), 173-85. See also the relevant documents in W.G. Rusch and J. Gros (eds.), *Deepening Communion: International Ecumenical Documents with Roman Catholic Participation* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1998) and Noll and Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Over?*

³⁰ *Truth Encounter: Catholicism and the Holy Scriptures*. 2nd Edition, with a foreword by Agustin Vencer Jr. (Makati City: Foreign Mission Board, SBC), 1999.

practice throughout the country and to complain about it would only irk the local officials, who are mostly Roman Catholics. I feel powerless that I could not change such practice. But I feel all the more for my sister-in-law and her family who live just across the road from the chapel itself!

Thus, the suspicion that the Roman Catholic Church would simply exert its power and dominance, and not really listen to the voices of the 'other' (in this case, Evangelicals and Pentecostals) is not unwarranted. Such imposing, even domineering, presence could be felt in the inaccurate labelling of evangelical youth groups as Fundamentalists, which could lead to their potential exclusion from Catholic schools and universities. Or this un-dialogical posture can be felt in a recent complaint by an Evangelical against the labelling of Evangelicals as Fundamentalists: 'When I discussed this with the faculty [of a Catholic Seminary], they were quite surprised that evangelicals would object to being called "Fundamentalist"'.³²

III From Antagonism to Partnership

What are the prospects for dialogue if Evangelicals generally view Catholicism as 'virtually irredeemable' and if traditional Catholics see Evangelicalism as tantamount to Fundamentalism?³³ At first glance, the gap seems

unbridgeable. But there are fresh initiatives on the ground, which chart new paths for rapprochement. I will explore these initiatives through the use of Noll and Nystrom's recent typology. While Noll and Nystrom developed this with specifically the U.S. churches in mind, the typology helps us to identify actual Evangelical attitudes to Catholicism 'on the ground'. It uncovers ecumenical impulses 'from below' beyond the basic strategy of the more formal (doctrinal) dialogues. In this way, too, we hope to refocus the encounter beyond doctrinal differences toward building up Christian ecumenical *practices* of dialogue, mutuality, and common witness.

According to Noll and Nystrom, evangelical responses to the Catholic church vary from antagonism to moderate criticism to partnership and, finally, to one of conversion.³⁴ The *first* attitude (antagonism) is one of total rejection of Catholicism, exemplified by, among others, Jack Chick of the infamous *Alberto* comics. The *second* reaction is that of moderate criticism, represented by critics of the 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together' (ECT I) document published in 1994.³⁵ This stance reckons with the (positive) changes in Roman Catholic since Vatican II but remains sceptical about engagement with Catholics. The *third* approach, though aware of theological differences, moves beyond being a critic toward partnering with Roman

Catholics on several fronts: socio-political advocacies (also known as 'co-belligerency' or 'ecumenism of the trenches'), advancing orthodoxy or 'mere Christianity', ecclesial continuity with pre-Reformation Christian roots, ministry and mission, and spiritual formation. This is represented by the signers of the ECT I document, which included Charles Colson and Bill Bright. The *final* attitude is one of conversion, of Evangelicals making the next big step of converting to Roman Catholicism. Scott Mcknight has chronicled this contemporary development in U.S. Evangelicalism.³⁶ Noll and Nystrom's typology provides the impetus for the succeeding survey of reactions to Catholicism.

1 Surveying the Field Afresh

This is an attempt to re-present ongoing initiatives and practices that call toward a de-centering of a rejectionist mindset toward Catholicism. On the one hand, this is to distinguish and to deepen a dialogical posture in contrast to a separatist mentality fostered by Fundamentalists. Even if Evangelicals insist on evangelizing nominal Catholics, this does not necessarily mean disavowal of the importance of Christian witness through unity and reconciliation. As the Lausanne II Manila Manifesto declares,

Evangelism and unity are closely related in the New Testament. Jesus prayed that his people's one-

ness might reflect his own oneness with the Father, in order that the world might believe in him, and Paul exhorted the Philippians to contend as one person for the faith of the Gospel. In contrast to this biblical vision, we are ashamed of the suspicions and rivalries, the dogmatism over non-essentials, the power-struggles and empire-building which spoil our evangelistic witness.³⁷

On the other hand, and related to the previous point, this is to recognize that separatism (here expressed in rabid anti-Catholicism) is not immune to doing the very thing it hates—behaving unbiblically and dishonouring the name of Christ.³⁸ Ecumenical openness and spirituality may actually become an antidote to the self-righteousness of rigid fundamentalists. We turn now to contemporary reactions and attitudes crucial to relaxing the antagonism between the two churches. We begin with the claim of evangelical experience of regeneration among Roman Catholics.

a) Catholic Charismatics and the rise of 'born-again Catholics'

Born-again pertains to a Pentecostal-

³² Ernest Manges, 'Using *The Catechism for Filipino Catholics*,' 215.

³³ Cf., the opening comment from Lorenzo Bautista.

³⁴ Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Over?: An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 185-208.

³⁵ See note 50 for documentation.

³⁶ Scott Mcknight, 'From Wheaton to Rome: Why Evangelicals Become Roman Catholic', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (September 2002), 451-72.

³⁷ 'Manila Manifesto', 1989, in *New Dimensions in Mission and Evangelization 1: Basic Statements 1974-1991*, James A. Scherer and Stephen Bevans (eds.) (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 292-305.

³⁸ A classic case in point is the exposé on Jack Chick's fraudulent anti-Roman Catholic *Alberto* comic book. See 'Jack Chick's Anti-Catholic *Alberto* Comic Book Is Exposed as a Fraud', *Christianity Today*, March 13, 1981, 50-53.

Evangelical experience of regeneration. It is not a common term for traditional Catholicism but it is now widely adopted by Catholic Charismatics in the Philippines. This is to say that some Catholics claim they have made a personal decision to accept Christ as Saviour and Lord and have experienced renewal through regeneration—something Evangelicals insist as crucial to Christian identity. The history behind this phenomenon goes back more than three decades. The period of the 1970s marked a surge in the growth of Charismatic fellowships in the Philippines. One could say that it is in this context of extraordinary charismatic vigour that the experience of ‘born-again Catholics’ could be understood. Pentecostal scholar, Wonsuk Ma, describes the charismatic fervour of the period in the following way:

Many house prayer groups mushroomed in the 70’s throughout Metro Manila and other major provincial cities. Considering the dominant Catholic population... enthusiastic seekers opened their homes, offices, factories, restaurants and schools for Bible Studies and prayer meetings. Unlike the Classical Pentecostals who ministered among people in lower socio-economic strata, these new seekers were business people, educated professionals, corporate executives, government employees, teachers, and army officers including many generals. They prayed regularly for healing and spiritual gifts. As small Bible studies grew rapidly, hotel ballrooms and big restaurants were rented for regular Sunday celebrations. These neutral

locations were particularly conducive for Catholic believers who did not wish to be identified with ‘born again’ people. Likewise, groups did not call themselves a ‘church’ but a ‘fellowship’.³⁹

In 1969 and 1972, two (pioneering) Roman Catholic Charismatic groups convened their prayer meetings. They were started by Brother Aquinas, FSC and Mother Marie Angela (of the Assumption Convent Sisters) respectively.⁴⁰ Both nestled themselves in the middle and upper class vicinity of Metro Manila (La Salle, Greenhills, and the Urdaneta and San Lorenzo Villages of Makati). The *Ligaya ng Panginoon* (Joy of the Lord) Community of Manila, a branch of the Word of God Community in Michigan, was also established during this period.⁴¹ A Charismatic confer-

39 Wonsuk Ma, ‘Philippines’, in *The New International Dictionary of Charismatic and Pentecostal Movements*. (revised and expanded edition), S. Burgess and E.M. van der Maas (eds.) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002, 2003), 204.

40 Ma, ‘Philippines’, 206. Brother Aquinas, FSC attended a retreat and prayer meeting in Pecos, New Mexico where he had a charismatic experience. Upon his return to the Philippines in June 1969, he began the first charismatic prayer meeting which was attended by the La Salle Brothers and a nun. This is credited as the beginning of the Catholic Charismatic Movement in the Philippines [Prospero Covar, ‘Pagkatao at Paniniwala’, *Reading Popular Culture* ed. Soledad Reyes (Quezon City, Phils: Ateneo de Manila, Office of Research Publications, 1991), 195-196].

41 Wonsuk Ma’s account does not mention the establishment of *Ligaya ng Panginoon* (Joy of the Lord) Community. Dr Leonardo Mercado asserts the prominent role of the Word of God Community in the beginning of the Charismatic Movement in the Philippines [See Mer-

ence sponsored by the World Missionary Assistance Plan (World MAP) held in 1973 brought together the *ecumenical* presence of around ‘two thousand pastors, priests, nuns, missionaries and lay leaders’. Organizationally, this conference may have been a major factor in the intensified growth of various Catholic and independent prayer and Bible study groups all over the country. By 1978 there were about 30,000 who counted themselves as Catholic Charismatics. Recent estimates of Catholic Charismatics number about 5 million, if not more.⁴²

Mariano ‘Mike’ Velarde, founder of the Catholic Charismatic indigenous movement known as the *El Shaddai*, also describes his conversion during the same period. A geodetic engineer turned prominent businessman, he was scheduled for an open-heart surgery in 1978.⁴³ While in hospital, he claimed he was visited by an angel who handed to him a small-sized *Good News Bible*.⁴⁴ This became the source of his

cado, *Christ in the Philippines* (Tacloban City, Philippines: Divine Word Publications, 1982), 71-73]. In this, he was dependent on the work of Ted Gresh, *New Ministries in the Church, A Philippine Perspective* (Manila: n.p., 1976).

42 Ma, ‘Philippines’, 207.

43 Interestingly, 1978 was also significant for the beginning of what is touted as the largest non-Catholic Charismatic church in the Philippines, *Jesus is Lord Fellowship*, founded by Brother Eddie Villanueva [Elisabeth Farrell, ‘Paying the Price to Reach Manila’s Millions’, *Charisma*, January 1996, pp. 46-49].

44 It was ‘an angel in the guise of a nurse’. Cf. English version of the history of the *El Shaddai* available online: http://www.geocities.com/elshaddai_dwxi_ppfi/ (accessed 31 March 2007).

strength and instant healing. After this momentous experience, his aspirations and spiritual outlook in life were fundamentally changed.⁴⁵ In 1981, Velarde professed to have become a ‘born-again Catholic’. He wanted to share the miracle that happened to him as well as God’s goodness in his life so he linked up with a number of middle-class Catholics (who professed to have had a similar charismatic experience) to form the *Quezon City Catholic Charismatic Renewal Secretariat*.

One should note that the TV program *700 Club* was also a significant influence in the dramatic (Charismatic) conversions of Filipino middle and upper class Catholics. For instance, in their early years as Charismatic believers, Celso and Agnes Roxas and the group they have formed, the *Catholic Christian Community*, drew guidance from and adopted some of the teachings of Pentecostal and Charismatic television programs such as the *700 Club*, and those of Morris Cerullo as well as the writings of Kenneth Hagin.⁴⁶ Other Catholic Charismatic groups which are evangelical-like in their emphasis on regeneration and Scriptural teaching include Shalom International Charismatic Foundation led by Fr. Archie Guiriba as well as the popular Couples for Christ movement.⁴⁷

45 Velarde recounts this part of his testimony in his address at the Vatican City [*El Shaddai God Almighty Miracle Newsletter*, Vol VIII, No. 3, p. 6].

46 Cf. Personal (taped) interview with Celso and Agnes Roxas, 6 July 1999.

47 On Shalom, see http://www.geocities.com/shalom_international. Couples for Christ also has a website of its own, see <http://www.cfcglobal.org.ph/> (accessed 31 March 2007).

**b) Critical of Roman Catholicism
but there could be Christians
within the Catholic Church**

This stance is one of critical openness. Responding to a question about church membership and salvation, popular evangelical preacher Ed Lapiz has this to say about salvation within Roman Catholicism.

*Naniniwala ako na meron tayong mga kababayang nasa loob ng Roman Catholic church na saved. Baka nga hindi pa nila alam na saved sila kasi hindi conscious ang pagtuturo, eh. Yan ang pinagkaiba ng Protestant churches sa mga Catholic churches. Sa karamihan ng Protestant churches, itinuturo nang malinaw ang salvation. Hindi ko sinisiraan ang sinuman. Pero ang point ko, hindi ko nakikita sa Bible na formal, actual, and legal membership ang nagliligtas, kundi yung spiritual belongingness to the family of God. This happens when you accept Jesus into your heart as Savior and Lord, no matter what religion you belong to. Kaya lang, pag na-save na kayo at kilala na ninyo si Cristo, meron naman talagang mga religious systems na lalago kayo. Kaya mahalaga rin yung church membership—kung ligtas ka na!*⁴⁸

(I believe that there are countrymen of ours inside the Roman Catholic Church who are saved. It might even be that they do not know they are saved because they

do not teach about this consciously. This is the basic difference between Protestant churches and Catholic churches. In most Protestant churches, salvation is clearly taught. I am not criticizing anyone. But my point is this: I do not see it being taught in the Bible that formal, actual and legal membership [in a church] saves, but rather spiritual belongingness to the family of God. This happens when you accept Jesus into your heart as Savior and Lord, no matter what religion you belong to. But if you're already saved and you know Christ personally, there are indeed religious systems [we should join] where we can truly grow. That is why church membership remains important—but only after you've been saved!)

Compared to thirty years ago, many Evangelical Christians these days would more probably identify and agree with Lapiz's comments. Probably because of the changes brought about by Vatican II and also the increasing number of born-again Catholics, Evangelicals have increasingly become more accepting of the fact that salvation within Roman Catholicism may indeed be a possibility.

One might say that a precursor to the above stance is the standard mainstream Evangelical reply on conversion and church membership. When asked by Roman Catholics who have had a 'born again' experience if it is right to stay in the Catholic Church or move out and join a 'born again' fellowship instead, a common reply among conservative Evangelicals is: 'We are not suggesting that you leave

your church. But make sure that it's really teaching the Bible and it is also Christ-centred, a community where you can really grow spiritually and serve the Lord.'⁴⁹ As such, it is not really an anti-Catholic posture. It betrays an understanding that individual Catholics may still be saved within, or even in spite of the Roman Catholic belief system.⁵⁰

Echoing the voices of Philippine Evangelicals in general, Vencer's reaction towards the 1994 statement, 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium' (ECT), follows a similar (conversionist) stance toward Roman Catholicism.⁵¹ Vencer points out that the context of the ECT is too culture-specific (that is, the United States) and must not be generalized as applicable to other contexts like the church situation in the Philippines. Roman Catholic

relationships with Evangelicals vary from country to country. Vencer resists isolationism but also doctrinal compromise with Catholicism, especially in the area of salvation. United action against societal evils may indeed call for critical collaboration with other religious faiths, including Roman Catholicism. But it does not follow that Roman Catholics are exempted from being prime targets of evangelization, considering that a great percentage of Catholics in the Philippines remain nominal Christians.⁵²

**c) A 'Quiet Dialogue':
Collaboration and Partnership
with Roman Catholics**

In February 1998, the National Coalition for Urban Transformation (NCUT) was established by key Evangelical and Roman Catholic pioneers after a series of consultations with leaders from various religious, political, business and education sectors. They agreed to address a common concern: the welfare of the city of Metro Manila. Corrie Acorda de Boer, one of its pioneers describes NCUT in this way:

The NCUT is an emerging movement of Catholic and Protestant leaders and organizations who

⁴⁹ E.g., Ed Lapiz, *Isang Tanong, Isang Sagot*, 19. The English translation that follows is my translation. See also Isabelo Magalit, *Who is a Real Christian?* (Mandaluyong City: OMF Literature, 1990, 2006), 13-14. (This was originally published in 1973 by the Intervarsity Press, Philippines.)

⁵⁰ When I say mainstream or conservative Evangelicals, I am not including Fundamentalist Evangelicals who would advocate total rejection of and exodus from the RC church. Gerald Bray reports that this folk evangelical reply is also common among U.S. Evangelicals ['Evangelicals, Salvation, and Church History', in *Catholics and Evangelicals: Do They Share a Common Future?* ed. Thomas P. Rausch (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 92-93, quoted by Noll and Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Over?*, 191].

⁵¹ The ECT document is available online: <http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9405/articles/mission.html> (accessed 31 March 2007).

⁴⁸ E.g., Ed Lapiz, *Isang Tanong, Isang Sagot: Frequently Asked Questions on Doctrinal Issues and Practical Applications of the Bible* (Makati City: Kaloob, 2003), 18-19. My translation follows.

⁵² See W. Harold Fuller, *People of the Mandate: The Story of the World Evangelical Fellowship* (London and Grand Rapids: WEF in association with Paternoster Press and Baker, 1996), Appendix H. For an extended discussion of the conversionist approach in relation to nominal Catholics, see 'The Thailand Report on Roman Catholics: Christian Witness to Nominal Christians Among Roman Catholics', *Lausanne Occasional Papers*. (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1980).

envision to transform cities into Christ-centred urban centres of faith, hope and love; they are cities which uphold peace, justice, stewardship and the integrity of creation. An aggrupation of Christian leaders, churches and Christian Development organizations, NCUT endeavours to work in partnership with others, through the power of the Holy Spirit, for the transformation of our cities by proclaiming and incarnating the Gospel of the Kingdom of God.⁵³

For de Boer, ecumenical partnership with Roman Catholics is vital for planned change in renewing the city.

In Manila, the walls between Protestants and Catholics are slowly crumbling, but they must come down more rapidly. It requires a unity strong enough to engage the whole population, government, business, education, professionals, manual labourers, and those in the trade and services. If cities with their burgeoning population are to be served, the church, the Body of Christ Evangelicals and Catholics, must unite and bring together entire cities.⁵⁴

She calls this form of unity 'a quiet dialogue, characterized by cooperation'.⁵⁵ Such cooperation and collaboration go against the reigning ideology of competition as the foundation of activity. Cooperation is not fuelled by competitiveness between or among

churches, but rather, mutual ideals to bring about planned change.⁵⁶

Prior to NCUT, early ventures into social justice advocacy which featured Roman Catholic and Evangelical cooperation happened through the later work (1980s) of World Vision, originally established in the Philippines in 1957.⁵⁷ Still earlier than both NCUT and World Vision's efforts, Evangelicals cooperated with Roman Catholic and other Mainline churches in the late 1960s to produce vernacular Bibles, especially the ecumenical *Magandang Balita* (Good News Bible), under the auspices of the Philippine Bible Society. Daniel Arichea reminisces: 'Our translation teams were a miracle themselves. In those days the coming together of people from different denominations was a rarity. But as a result, today there are interconfessional translations of the Bible in eight major languages spoken in the Philippines. This represents more than 95 per cent of the population.'⁵⁸ More recent RC-Protestant-Evangelical collaboration in social justice advocacy includes *Kaalagad Katipunang Kris-*

⁵⁶ de Boer, 'Creative Planning'.

⁵⁷ de Boer, 'Creative Planning'.

⁵⁸ 'The Bible Overcomes Divisions in the Philippines,' *World Report* 352. Available online: http://www.biblesociety.org/wr_352/352_asp.htm#Bible. The official sanction to this Roman Catholic-Protestant venture in Bible translations can be traced back to the 1968 joint declaration of United Bible Societies and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity on 'Guiding Principles for Interconfessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible'. See Radano, 'International Dialogue Between Catholics and Evangelicals Since the Second Vatican Council', 174.

tiyano, formed in December 2000 as a prophetic movement against the corruption of the (former) Estrada government.⁵⁹

One could say that collaboration without doctrinal compromise was also the general reaction among Philippine Evangelicals to ECT. In Vencer's mind, however, it must be a very cautious and critical collaboration, one which strongly pushes for the role of evangelism and conversion of Roman Catholics. The reigning assumption seems to be the prevalence of nominalism within the RC Church.

A different (but perhaps complementary) approach to Vencer's—also engendering a collaborative stance—is the proposal that Roman Catholicism and Evangelicalism offer two different religious imaginations, even spiritualities—the one is iconoclastic and Word-centred (Evangelicals), the other very visual and sacramental (RC).⁶⁰ This is reflected, for instance, in their respective styles of worship. Evangelical liturgy has its high point in the sermon or the Word while in Catholicism, the Eucharist is the pinnacle of worship. One is socialized or enculturated into these imaginations by growing up in a typical Catholic or Evangelical family and being raised in their respective churches. Arguably, both orientations have grounding in Scripture and both

need continuing conversion to Christ, but they should not be viewed as oppositional, but rather complementary. Or more specifically, they can be complementary but Scripture remains primary over both orientations.⁶¹

d) Renewed doctrinal engagement from Evangelicals

Since 2005, Asian Theological Seminary (ATS) has sponsored an Annual Theological Forum which has become a venue for an academic dialogue of some sort between Evangelicals and Roman Catholic scholars. Two books have already come out from the annual forum: *Doing Theology in the Philippines* and *Naming the Unknown God*.⁶² Representative Catholic theologians contributed lectures on theological inculturation and inter-religious dialogue respectively. Both books included fresh assessments of Roman Catholic beliefs and practices from an evangelical viewpoint. In the first, a review and evaluation of the Catholic Catechism was offered, while in the succeeding volume, the readers were presented with an evangelical engagement with folk Catholicism.

Moreover, members of the ATS community have advanced new perspectives on what are often viewed as explosive theological issues between Catholics and Evangelicals. Topics

⁵⁹ Available online <http://www.gary-granada.com/Communitarian%20Democracy/CD%20Text.htm> (accessed 31 March 2007).

⁶⁰ Timoteo Gener, 'The Catholic Imagination and Popular Religion in Lowland Philippines: Missiological Significance of David Tracy's Theory of Religious Imaginations', *Mission Studies*, Vol. 22, No.1 (2005), 25–57.

⁶¹ See also my 'What Evangelicals Can Learn from Folk Catholicism', 166–70.

⁶² See E. Acoba et al., *Doing Theology in the Philippines* (Mandaluyong City: Asian Theological Seminary and OMF Literature, 2005) and E. Acoba et al., *Naming the Unknown God* (Mandaluyong City: Asian Theological Seminary and OMF Literature, 2006).

⁵³ Lorissa Socorro Acorda de Boer, 'Creative Planning for Urban Transformation', 18–19.

⁵⁴ de Boer, 'Creative Planning', 15–16.

⁵⁵ de Boer, 'Creative Planning', 17.

such as the role of Mary and the saints, idolatry and the role of images, and the relationship between faith and good works were engaged afresh with biblical-theological depth and contextual sensitivity. The following offers a brief survey of the results of these studies:

- The Old Testament prohibition against the making of images was a consequence of the prohibition against idolatry, of having a god other than Yahweh, who is a spirit being. Relics, symbols, and other aesthetic forms may aid in the worship of God but they must not become objects of worship. Compared to God the Father and the Holy Spirit, only Jesus Christ had a physical manifestation. He lived as a *historical* person (not spirit) and represented Yahweh in human form. Being a historical person, representations of *Jesus* in various forms—icons, paintings, even video productions—may be warranted by an acceptance of the reality of God in creation, especially expressed in the Incarnation.⁶³
- The language of good works as opposed to faith needs re-examination from a biblical perspective. Careful exegesis of Pauline texts reveal that Paul opposes ‘works of the law’ in particular, but not necessarily ‘good works’ in the broader sense. There is no Pauline antithesis between faith and the generic phrase called ‘good works.’

⁶³ Francis Egenias, ‘What’s Wrong with the Crucifix? A Second Look at Certain Roman Catholic Practices?’ (Paper delivered at the 3rd ATS Theological Forum, Asian Theological Seminary, February 2006).

In the same vein, justification through faith in Christ is not threatened by the practice of good works. Interestingly, official Catholic teachings on the merit of good works offer fresh points of dialogue. The recent Catechism of the Catholic Church attributes the merit of good works to the grace of God.⁶⁴

- There is a need to develop an Evangelical Protestant Mariology—mature and critical, and always christocentric and biblical. An evangelical assessment of Catholic teaching on Mary must be informed by the Catholic distinctions between dogma and non-official teaching on Mary. Popular Marian devotions should also be approached as part of the phenomenon of folk Catholicism in the country. Related (local) church documents should then be consulted to fairly represent internal criticism within Catholicism itself.⁶⁵

As we can see from these studies, an evangelical concern for doctrinal orthodoxy based on the Bible remains primary. But such concern can be dealt with in a spirit of critical openness and dialogue in pursuit of God’s revealed truth in Scripture. Moreover, the dialogical posture of listening with

⁶⁴ Annelle Gumihid and Christopher Sabanal, ‘Faith and Works: Revisiting a Key Theme for Catholic-Evangelical Dialogue’, (Paper delivered at the 3rd ATS Theological Forum, Asian Theological Seminary, February 2006).

⁶⁵ Adonis Gorospe, ‘Towards an Evangelical Protestant Mariology’, *Phronesis* 11 (2) 2004:68-78.

integrity—not bearing false witness against the other (Ex. 20:16)—serves as an evangelical requisite in the exchange.

IV Conclusion

Evangelical churches in Asia must draw from the gains of ERCDOM and the continuing Catholic-Evangelical dialogues. This brief study is an effort in that direction especially focused on the Philippine context. One could say that a Filipino Evangelical rethinking of Roman Catholicism is really in order in light of the new developments within the Catholic Church. Roman Catholics claiming ‘born-again experience’ have increased in the last twenty years. Moreover, Philippine Evangelicals have already done work together with Roman Catholics in critical areas of ministry (e.g., urban transformation, Bible translation). And these have come about in spite of doctrinal differences. As we have seen, such cooperation in spite of doctrinal differences is not totally negated, considering the very history of the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches. One can be open for social cooperation without sacrificing doctrinal orthodoxy and evangelism.

In seeking to be true to the Gospel, Philippine Evangelicals (as represented by the PCEC) dissociated themselves from both rigid separatism and liberalism toward fulfilling Christ’s holistic mission in the world. To embody and fulfil such task, it seeks ‘fellowship in the gospel’ (Phil. 1:5). This holistic vision is one motivation

for re-assessing contemporary Roman Catholicism and renewing the body of Christ in the Philippines. Stott suggests that Christ’s holistic vision for the church is fourfold: Jesus’ prayer in John 17

is a prayer for the church’s *truth* (‘keep them in your name’), *holiness* (‘keep them from the evil one’), *mission* (‘sanctify them... I have sent them into the world’) and *unity* (‘that they may be one’)... Truth, holiness, mission and unity belonged together in Jesus’ prayer, and they need to be kept together in our quest for the church’s renewal today.⁶⁶

Throughout this paper, I have made ample use of the term ‘Evangelical’ in its institutional sense. In the end, however, the institutional or the establishment use of that term will not be the last word. Rather, it is Christ’s holistic vision for the church for the transformation of the world. For, indeed, to be truly ‘Evangelical’ is to be faithful and subservient to the gospel of Jesus Christ and his vision for the church in the world.⁶⁷ And to seek unity—along with truth, holiness, and mission—defines the nature of such discipleship in and for our time.

⁶⁶ John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Leicester, UK: IVP, 1992), 268-69 (emphases added).

⁶⁷ On this point, see Gener, ‘Re-visioning Local Theology: An Integral Dialogue with Practical Theology, A Filipino Evangelical Perspective’ in *Journal of Asian Mission* 6/2 (2004), 139.