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WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

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Public Witness in Secular and Multi-Religious Societies: The Dialogue between the World Evangelical Alliance and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity

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I. A Fruitful but Difficult Story of Dialogues

The scene today is not very different from almost 40 years ago. In 1980, the Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance invited two bishops of the Roman Catholic Church to speak a word of greeting at the WEA general assembly meeting in Hoddeson, England. This led to a heated debate with representatives of the Italian Evangelical Alliance, which withdrew its membership from the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF), and the Spanish Evangelical Alliance, which suspended its membership.

As a result of this incident, the WEF (now WEA) Theological Commission appointed a task force, which published a document entitled 'Roman Catholicism: A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective', under the direction of Dr Paul G. Schrottenboer.

At the annual meeting of the conference of Christian World Communions (CWC) in October 1988, it was agreed that an official dialogue between theologians of the WEF and the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) should take place to promote greater mutual understanding and relationships. Five rounds of dialogue ensued, ending in 2002. This was the first time that a joint comprehensive document under the heading of *koinonia* (fellowship) between Evangelicals and Catholics was written and then published for further theological studies.

Another round of dialogue between the WEA and the PCPCU, convened by PCPCU president Walter Cardinal Kasper and me began in 2009 and was completed in 2016. We held six five-day working sessions. The resulting document, published in this volume, covers

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two main areas of theology: 'Scripture and Tradition' and 'The Church and Salvation'.

Even now, the Spanish and Italian alliances continue to oppose further rapprochement between the WEA and the Roman Church. This is particularly painful because representatives of both the Spanish and Italian alliances participated in the dialogue. In fact, when selecting Evangelical participants, the WEA was careful to have a majority of its representatives come from countries where Catholics clearly have a dominant position as a majority church, also including Brazil and the Philippines.

Overall, in this renewed dialogue process, we paid strict attention to achieving the greatest possible international representation. The sessions took place around the world—in Brazil, Italy, the US, Guatemala, Germany and Canada. In all these places, the dialogue group also met with local Evangelical and Catholic Christians to become informed about relationships between the two groups at the grass-roots level.

We also conducted two surveys. Evangelicals sent a questionnaire to all national alliances, asking how local relations with the Catholic Church are shaped. Likewise, the Catholics wrote to all national conferences of bishops about their relationship to Evangelicals.

It became clear that—internationally speaking—there are big differences. There are areas where one or the other side experiences discrimination. In other regions, ecumenical dialogue has produced a continuous friendly interaction and cooperation between Evangelicals and Catholics.

Through these methods, the dialogue group sought to avoid developing naive theories that bypass realities on the ground. (The questionnaires are not reproduced in this issue of *ERT* but appear at the end of the original document.)

Methodologically, the dialogue group has broken new ground. As we stated in paragraph 14:

The way forward was for us firstly to map out convergences, building on previous consultations, and on the basis of our respective teachings and practices; secondly, to name aspects of the other tradition which give us encouragement, where we rejoice in seeing God at work, and where we may learn from the other; ... thirdly, with the help of the dialogue partner, to formulate questions to each other in a respectful and intelligent way (hence the term 'fraternal'), thus identifying issues we were not able to resolve in this round of consultation, which still need to be addressed by our respective communities. ... With prayer and a desire to be true to our calling and our convictions, we have posed questions that are intended to stimulate further discussion between Catholics and Evangelicals that will spill over into our own respective communities where we would like to see the conversation continue.

II. Why Maintain a Continuous Dialogue with the Catholic Church?

The Roman Catholic Church, with a membership of more than a billion peo-

ple, is by far the largest and most influential church in the world. If, as Evangelicals, we want to address Catholics evangelistically and testify about our faith to them, we need a constructive relationship with one another. Every form of shared public responsibility as well as cooperation in social projects also demands mutual openness to each other.

Meanwhile, Christians today face great challenges worldwide. On one hand, we have to deal with complete secularization, especially in Western countries, where the major mainline Christian Churches traditionally live. This situation permeates all areas of culture, including the mass media, education systems and universities, as well as the arts and entertainment industry. Catholics and Evangelicals alike have the task of carrying out their mission in a new way, connected to an apologetics that addresses the arguments of modern atheism and agnosticism in an intellectually honest and sustainable way.

In addition, we experience multi-religious societies worldwide in which churches often play only a marginal role. In these contexts, Christians need to be able to engage in interfaith dialogue to witness effectively to their faith. In countries where Christians are discriminated against or even persecuted, the majority population does not ask, 'Are you a Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican or Baptist?' but merely 'Are you a Christian?'

These experiences, in both secular and multi-religious contexts, compel Christians from all churches to work together and to share common witness with the public. Any emphasis on confessional differences makes the situa-

tion of Christians of any denomination difficult. However, this willingness to listen to one another, pray together, and realize common projects in a variety of areas does not imply that any form of institutional union between Catholics and Evangelicals is sought.

In the document presented here, the preliminary remark 'The Status of This Report' clearly underscores that the text is not an official doctrinal document binding on either the Catholic Church or the WEA, but a study paper that the participants recommend to their constituents for thorough reading and discussion at all levels.

Some Evangelicals, as a kind of threatening backdrop, have been given the impression that the WEA could become somehow integrated into the Roman Church on a long-term basis through dialogue. That is completely outlandish. The dialogue is about understanding each other better and cooperating as much as possible. And we urgently need exactly such progress in ecumenical relations.

III. The Theological Questions Negotiated in This Round of Dialogue

My colleague, Dr Joel Elowsky, a regular participant in the dialogue process and a key contributor to the drafting of the final document, discusses in his contribution to this issue of *ERT* the progress made and the remaining difficulties with regard to the main themes of dialogue. The two main areas, as noted, were holy Scripture and church tradition, and the role of the church in the mediation of salvation.

With regard to the first topic, it became apparent that, for Catholics, tra-

dition is defined in such a way that it, in principle, should not be questioned. This applies to both the dogmas about the infallibility of the pope and the mariological teachings. For the Catholic Church, these are part of the inalienable stock of the faith. So far, there is no starting point in this respect as to how the existing differences in doctrine can be overcome.

On the other hand, the Evangelical participants have positively noted with joy a new relationship of the Catholic Church to the Bible. In particular, we spotlighted the promotion of personal Bible reading, communal Bible study in home cell groups, and intensive involvement in Bible translation as well as Bible distribution. This is not a trivial matter considering that, according to Evangelical conviction, the word of Scripture brings about the realization of the truth and also conversion.

With regard to the church's role in the process of salvation, the mediating function of the ordained priesthood, especially with regard to the administration of the sacraments, is indispensable to the Catholic Church. Therefore, this doctrinal problem requires further intensive discussions to explore possible approaches. The Evangelical side should, however, also consider self-critically the questions raised by Catholics, namely that many Evangelicals invoke a pronounced individualism and do not take seriously the visible or institutional form of the church of Jesus Christ.

These doctrinal differences indicate that our path of dialogue still has many steps ahead of it. However, the accusation, often voiced by Evangelical critics, that the Catholic Church is incapable of any reform because of its self-un-

derstanding is not true. Although the Roman Church cannot revoke any officially established doctrinal decision of the Magisterium, it can indeed gain new insights and also fix these in a magisterial way, thereby modifying earlier formulations of dogma.

This is particularly evident in dealing with the Tridentine Council. Through the Second Vatican Council, Trent's Counter-Reformation decisions appear in a new light. Those who speak with Catholic theologians can quickly see that, in practice today, priority is given to the results of the Second Vatican Council. This means that the Catholic Church, while it looks back to the past and maintains a commitment to previously formed dogma, is also open to future developments and new insights.

IV. The Chance for Common Witness with Respect to the Challenge of Protestant Liberalism

For me, the talks also revealed another important perspective beyond being ecumenically very fruitful and important. There is a chance that Evangelicals and Catholics in practical cooperation could develop a common witness both to the secular world and to the liberal traditions within Protestantism.

The churches that emerged from the Reformation of the sixteenth century experienced a profound change during the Enlightenment era of the eighteenth century. Rationalism radically challenged the credibility of the Bible. The Apostles' Creed is no longer seriously understood by many modern theologians as a salvation-historical

fact and summary of the gospel, but is accepted only in a figurative sense.

In the document that we have drawn up, Evangelicals and Catholics share a common commitment to the apostolic creed in accordance with the binding text of Scripture, and in accordance with the WEA statement of faith. This includes the conviction that Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore possesses the highest authority for all questions of life and doctrine. The document emphasizes the Christological and Trinitarian tenets of the ancient Church and the justification of the sinner by grace through faith. It continues to emphasize the mission of all Christians to proclaim the saving gospel to those who have not yet given their lives to Jesus Christ.

The same commonality applies to current ethical challenges. As the joint document states:

The redefinition of marriage to include same-sex unions is more and more common. The dignity and sanctity of human life at all stages is under attack. Euthanasia, assisted suicide, abortion, and some genetic and reproductive technologies

threaten and undermine the basic understanding of what it means to be human. This in turn has repercussions for the primary foundation of society—the family. (paragraph 8)

Such a clear statement could not be made, for example, in the context of liberal Protestantism, such as by the World Council of Churches. This fact raises the question of whether the doctrinal and denominational gap between Evangelical and liberal Protestants today is significantly greater than that between us and the Catholic Church. That is despite all the remaining dogmatic differences with the Catholic Church, which, of course, must be seriously discussed and clarified.

In many key areas, public testimony on fundamental issues of faith and morality shows a promising commonality between Evangelicals and Catholics. We should continue to develop this deeper unity. In this way, we can consolidate our convictions in critical engagements with the liberal tendencies within our own denominations and effectively counter the dissolution of Christian doctrine on questions of faith and ethics.