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# Potential Land Mines in Protestant-Catholic Dialogues

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As a former long-time Roman Catholic and now a practicing Evangelical believer, with a great deal of experience interacting with individuals on both sides of the Protestant-Catholic divide, I have come to take a guarded view of many of the documents that have come out of various ecumenical discussions.

And I have a guarded sense about the document reproduced in this issue as well. That is to say, I am generally not optimistic. But the format of the document (and of the discussion itself) lends itself to perhaps some optimism.

In any event, I would urge the Evangelical participants in such discussions to be aware of some of the peculiarities of these discussions over time. In this essay, I hope to show some consistent patterns and practices of Roman Catholic dialogue methods in the distant and recent past, to point them out in the current document, and then to offer some words of caution to those Evangelicals who are in dialogue with Roman Catholics.

## I. Claiming the Very Thing That's in Question

The Reformed theologian Francis Tur-

retin wrote in the seventeenth century that the Roman Catholic Church,

(although they are anything but the true church of Christ) *still boast[s] of their having alone the name of church* and do not blush to display the standard of that which they oppose. *In this manner, hiding themselves under the specious title of the antiquity and infallibility of the Catholic church, they think they can, as with one blow, beat down and settle the controversy waged against them* concerning the various most destructive errors [they have] introduced into the heavenly doctrine.<sup>1</sup> (emphasis added)

The Roman Catholics of the seventeenth century were simply relying on the debate tactic of defining the terms of the conflict. Although at Vatican II the Catholic Church made a number of apparent changes, its doctrine of the Church underwent only minor modifications.

Officially, according to the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium*:

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, (Geneva, 1679–1685), vol. 3, pp. 2–3.

Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth His holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as an entity with visible delineation through which He communicated truth and grace to all. But, *the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities*, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather *they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element. ...*

This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, *subsists in the [Roman] Catholic Church*, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him.<sup>2</sup> (emphasis added)

This means that the one and only church,<sup>3</sup> 'structured with hierarchical organs', is uniquely joined to Christ, in an ontological sense, as 'one complex reality', and that the visible—but very real—manifestation of this one complex reality (the structure of pope and bishops) will exist 'for all ages'.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, in a more recent (2007) document issued by the Congregation for

the Doctrine of the Faith, Protestant churches are, at an official level, not considered churches at all.<sup>5</sup>

## II. The Roman Catholic Apologetic after Trent: Foster Scepticism

Most of the polemics that I have encountered between Protestants and Catholics at a popular level have their roots in, and are echoes of, the sixteenth-century polemical battles. There is a particular character to these types of discussions, and it has its roots in a form of ancient scepticism revived in the Renaissance era.

After the Council of Trent (1547–1563), and borrowing not from theological but from Renaissance writers, Roman Catholics, and especially the Jesuits, developed a strategy of employing a radical form of scepticism known as Pyrrhonism. This strategy was first attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Aenesidemus (c. 100–40 BC)<sup>6</sup>

2 Pope Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), paragraph 8, available at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

3 *Unitatis Redintegratio*, paragraph 1, available at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html).

4 Pope Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, paragraph 8.

5 According to Catholic doctrine, these Protestant 'ecclesial communities' do not enjoy apostolic succession in the sacrament of orders and are therefore deprived of a constitutive element of the Church. Due to the absence of the sacramental priesthood, they have not preserved the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic Mystery and thus cannot, according to Catholic doctrine, be called churches in the proper sense. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church*, available at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20070629\\_commento-responsa\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070629_commento-responsa_en.html).

6 Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), xviii.

and his followers, but many Counter-Reformers (and especially Jesuits) such as Francis de Sales, Robert Bellarmine, and others proposed attacking Reformation doctrines with Pyrrhonist scepticism as a way of undermining the Protestant reliance on Scripture. As Richard Popkin explained:

The attack begins with the problem of the criterion raised by the Reformation: how do we tell what is the rule of faith, the standard by which true faith can be distinguished from false faith? ...

The argument begins by asking the Calvinists, 'How do you know, gentlemen, that the books of the Old and New Testaments are Holy Scripture? The question of canonicity raises a particular difficulty. If the Calvinists hold that Scripture is the rule of faith, then how are we to judge which work is Scripture? ... But even if one could tell which book is Scripture, how could one tell what it says, and what we are supposed to believe? ...

If the Calvinists say, in their own defense, that they are reading Scripture reasonably and drawing the obvious logical inferences from what it says, then they are obviously targets for 'the machine of war'. First of all, any alleged reading is uncertain and may be mistaken, unless there is an infallible rule for interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

This response, expressing scepticism about Scripture, with the suggestion that the Protestant can find certainty only through 'an accepted, and unquestioned, faith in the Catholic

tradition',<sup>8</sup> became a stock response on the Roman Catholic side and remained so for centuries. Such an appeal to scepticism is evident even today.

Much more recently, the Lutheran theologian Oscar Cullmann described the Roman Catholic response to his ground-breaking book *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* (1953, updated 1962). In that work, a thorough historical, exegetical and theological investigation of Peter's role in the earliest church, Cullmann concluded that Peter was the referent of 'this rock' in Matthew 16:17 and was foundational to the early church, but only for a period, until James, the brother of the Lord, assumed leadership in Jerusalem, after which Peter concentrated entirely on his missionary work.<sup>9</sup> Cullmann further concluded that there was not any evidence supporting the notion of 'apostolic succession' with respect to a 'Petrine ministry'.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, he commented later, very few Catholic writers addressed his conclusion directly. Rather, 'in most of the Catholic reviews of my book on my book on St. Peter, one argument especially is brought forward: scripture, a collection of books, is not sufficient to actualize for us the divine revelation granted to the apostles.'<sup>11</sup> His Roman Catholic interlocutors were bringing that same Pyrrhonic scepticism and

<sup>8</sup> Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 74.

<sup>9</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr: A Historical and Theological Study*, 2nd ed., trans. by Floyd Filson (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1962), 229.

<sup>10</sup> Cullmann, *Peter*, 239.

<sup>11</sup> Oscar Cullmann, 'The Early Church', foreword to Cullmann, *The Tradition*, trans. by Floyd Filson (London: SCM Press, 1956), 57.

<sup>7</sup> Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 67–69.

precisely the same argument about Scripture into the twentieth century.

### III. Vatican II and Documents with Multiple Meanings

Although the discussions since Vatican II have definitely taken on a softer flavour, they have represented only a slight giving up of formerly held ground, and in unexpected directions.

Vatican II occurred in the wake of some of the most significant infighting within the Catholic Church in centuries. A dispute over modernism in the early twentieth century led to internal conflicts between the Neo-Thomist camp, which had been at the vanguard of Church teaching and thought since the Council of Trent, and the Nouvelle Theologians, the group accused of modernism.

The Protestant theologian David Wells, in his 1972 work *Revolution in Rome*, described how this dispute played out at Vatican II:

This council actually endorsed two very different theologies and sometimes the differences could not be hidden. Neither side would accept ambiguity nor allow compromise. As a result, on some points the documents speak with two voices—one conservative and one progressive. ...<sup>12</sup>

When the Council was successful, both viewpoints were represented in one statement which obviously meant different things to different people. ...

There were times, however, when no reconciling statement could be found, and attempts to induce a surrender by one side or the other failed. In those cases, the Council would only endorse both positions with professional aplomb as if their mutual incompatibility were no longer glaringly obvious.<sup>13</sup>

In another example, a young theologian named Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) described this 'double-meaning' method regarding the so-called 'explanatory note' added to the end of the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* by Pope Paul VI. Ratzinger wrote:

The end result, which is what we are concerned with, would be the realization it did not create any substantially new situation. Without doubt the scales here were further tipped in favor of papal primacy as opposed to collegiality.

But for every statement advanced in one direction the text offers one supporting the other side, and this restores the balance, leaving interpretations open in both directions ... The consequent ambiguity is a sign that complete harmony of views was neither achieved nor even possible.<sup>14</sup>

We can see a more recent example of similar ambiguity in the discussions that have followed Pope Francis's publication of *Amoris Laetitia* and the unclarity as to whether his statement about offering communion to divorced

<sup>12</sup> David Wells, *Revolution in Rome* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 27.

<sup>13</sup> Wells, *Revolution in Rome*, 28–29.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1966), 170–71.

and remarried Catholics represents a change in policy.<sup>15</sup>

This tendency to use the same word in multiple ways extends to the very name ‘Catholic Church’. The late Richard John Neuhaus, founder and editor of the publication *First Things*, aptly titled a chapter in one of his books ‘The Church We Mean When We Say “Church”’.<sup>16</sup>

#### IV. Land Mines in Combination

These tendencies evident in Roman Catholic dialogue—making bold claims that define the terms of the debate, introducing scepticism regarding Protestant doctrines, and the use of double meanings in words and phrases—lead to yet another type of land mine: an imbalance in the dynamic that does not favour the Protestant side.

In fact, Protestant interlocutors may

<sup>15</sup> The issue at hand is whether Catholics who have been divorced and remarried without an annulment can receive the sacraments of confession and communion if they do not live in complete sexual continence (‘as brother and sister’). That was the firm rule prior to *Amoris Laetitia*. A footnote seems to give pastors some leeway to make their own individual decisions, and some national conferences of bishops are taking that view. One cardinal, at least, has suggested that this is a new development. Others are suggesting that this interpretation is not in keeping with what has always been taught. And the pope has not responded to a question from the *Dubia* seeking clarification, signalling that he intends not to clarify, but to perpetuate the ambiguity. In December 2017, the document was added to the Official Acts of the Apostolic See, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*.

<sup>16</sup> John Richard Neuhaus, *Catholic Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), chapter 1.

find themselves having tacitly accepted a particular Roman Catholic meaning, in a statement where two or more possible meanings may be inferred, without having intentionally done so.

The Reformed theologian Anthony N. S. Lane described this imbalance in his work *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*. He quoted a private email from a colleague:

[Because of their emphasis on salvation as participation in a diverse communion] Catholic ecumenists ... tend to be generous in their reading of the Protestant tradition: their vision of ecumenism is such that they would not want to read Protestants as simply repeating Catholic teaching, but rather as different, *and thereby enhancing the diversity of the salvific communion*—all they need to establish is that there is enough common ground for us to be able to recognize each other as Christians.

Protestants, given a conception of Christianity less interested in communion and more in conviction, are more concerned with verbal agreement.<sup>17</sup> (emphasis added)

Lane is suggesting that the Catholic participants in any agreement are capable of fitting language derived from Protestant convictions into the overall Catholic system of beliefs. In doing so, they also, in a definitional way, incorporate these Protestants into the Catholic Church.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Anthony N. S. Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 126.

<sup>18</sup> See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 836, accessible at <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p123a9p3.htm#836>.

## V. The Format of the WEA-PCPCU Document

The format of the document produced by the World Evangelical Alliance representatives is somewhat unusual, in that it contains robust sections of unanswered questions from each side. This format was agreed upon so as to encourage wide discussion of various aspects of the document. The format is applied to a series of topics: the Scriptures, apostolic tradition, the relationship between Scripture and tradition, and the gift of salvation in the church.

Paragraph 14 further elaborates this method of consultation:

We were not in the business of compromise and negotiation, but rather of respectful and frank conversation, aware that nothing other than a deep honesty, graciously articulated, would serve our communities well. When we gathered, we sought to be faithful to Jesus Christ even when we encountered disagreements. 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.

This seems to be a very laudable way

to address these different topics. But even though the document seeks to foster discussion, given that some of the more important definitions are left unstated here, this open discussion may end up leading, as Anthony Lane suggests, to a situation in which Protestants may tacitly agree to something to which they had no intention of agreeing.

## VI. Examples of Potential Land Mines within the Document

One example of these convergences may be found in the introductory paragraph of the document. The two sides agree:

Being joined to Christ through faith, each person is personally associated with Christ and becomes a member of his body. But what is the Church, and who belongs to the Church, which is his body? We take consolation in knowing that the Lord knows his own and his own know him (Jn 10:14). *Evangelicals understand that through the power of the Holy Spirit, the very moment one enters into a relationship with Christ through a personal commitment in confessing Jesus as Lord and Savior (Mt 16:16) and is baptized, one belongs to the Church, the community which he established (Mt 16:18).* (emphasis added)

Now, do the evangelical participants wish to agree, right off the bat, that evangelicals who enter a relationship with Christ through a personal commitment, confess Jesus as Lord and Savior and are baptized belong to the Church that 'subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed for all

time by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him'? The document does not clarify which 'Church' the writers are referring to. Nor does it address the fact that the Roman Catholic Church officially does not recognize evangelical churches as authentic churches—in view of which, for the Catholic participants, 'Church' can mean only the Catholic Church.

Admittedly, in a document produced by an earlier round of evangelical–Catholic dialogue in 2002, each side articulated its definition of the word 'church'. However, there is no link from this document to the earlier document, nor is there any acknowledgement of differing definitions.

The Catholic Church certainly holds that evangelicals, and all baptized Christians, in fact 'belong' to the Catholic Church.<sup>19</sup> As Anthony Lane suggested, the Roman Catholics in this discussion would be happy to have the Protestants concede that they 'belong' in the sense that various Catholic doctrines have defined. Needless to say, Protestants would not be inclined to make this concession.

Similarly, regarding the canon of Scripture, paragraph 21, again in a 'Common Ground' section of the document, notes, 'In the first centuries, the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, recognized and received from among many writings these 27 books as the canon of the New Testament'.

Do the evangelicals wish to concede here that the Church 'governed by the successor of Peter' was the one that received the New Testament? That would be consonant with what the Jesuits of the sixteenth century were suggesting, but not with an evangelical understanding of Scripture or of who has the authority to interpret it.

And again, in paragraph 54, in a 'Common Ground' section on 'Salvation and the Church', both parties again affirm, 'The Church, then, is God's gift to the world'. That paragraph goes on to state, 'The Church and its ministers are in service to this salvation wherever the marks of the true Church are found'. Do the evangelical participants really want to pledge their service to the 'true Church' as Catholic doctrine understands it?

Finally, the sceptical appeal of the sixteenth-century Jesuits appears almost word for word in paragraph 48, where the Catholic side asks, 'Without reference to a magisterium, how do Evangelicals maintain unity and guard against internal conflict in their interpretation of Sacred Scripture?'

My intention is not to disparage this document or these discussions. However, significant risk is inherent in affirming common ground on key topics where no definitions are provided—especially when one side has promulgated elsewhere a definition according to which evangelical churches are not even considered true churches at all, but only 'ecclesial communities'. In such a situation, how can it be said that genuine agreement has occurred?

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<sup>19</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 836.