

# **News...but not necessarily new: evangelical reflections on Pope Benedict XVI's June 2007 affirmation on the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church**

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**William D. Taylor, Global Ambassador, World Evangelical Alliance**

Almost two months have now passed since the Vatican's most recent and important statement on the nature of the Roman Church, published June 29, 2007 with the approval of Pope Benedict XVI by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). The document re-affirms the historic position on the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church and articulates its relationship to the Eastern Orthodox churches as well as those coming out of the Protestant Reformation (including Anglicans). These weeks have given time for the dust to settle, time for the secular media to criticize and move on, time for Catholic leaders and priests to explain the implications of the statement, and time for Orthodox, Protestant and Evangelical reflections to emerge. And these different voices are emerging. In this essay I will attempt to articulate a global evangelical response out of the voices of World Evangelical Alliance<sup>1</sup> leadership from different continents and contexts. We will review the affirmation from diverse perspectives; identify and hear from representatives of our WEA constituency; and close by suggesting some future paths we might walk together. It is my desire to faithfully speak on behalf of our global WEA families in 128 nations, representing 420 million evangelicals; and I invite thoughtful responses and comments from our global readers.

## **First, observations on the statement and its diverse reactions**

On the one hand, this declaration generated "news", i.e., it gave something relatively "new" to read, and it certainly agitated some of the international waters. The media had its heyday, slamming the "narrowness" of a Pope who does not fear them. The statement came as a dismaying surprise to others and was disconcerting to some. Yet for many careful evangelical observers it was not "new news".

The Vatican's relatively brief statement is succinct in its intent to clarify historic Catholic doctrine:

The consequent duty of theologians to expound with greater clarity the diverse aspects of ecclesiology has resulted in a flowering of writing in this field. In fact it has become evident that this theme is a most fruitful one which, however, has also at times required clarification by way of precise definition and correction, for instance in the declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973), the Letter addressed to the Bishops of the Catholic Church *Communio in notio* (1992), and the declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000), all published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The vastness of the subject matter and the novelty of many of the themes involved continue to provoke theological reflection. Among the many new contributions to the field, some are not immune from erroneous interpretation which in turn give rise to confusion and doubt. A number of these interpretations have been referred to the attention of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Given the universality of Catholic doctrine on the Church, the Congregation wishes to respond to these questions by clarifying the authentic meaning of some ecclesiological expressions used by the Magisterium which are open to misunderstanding in the theological debate.<sup>2</sup>

The statement was released in eight different languages, revealing the prime populations important to Rome and identifying the bulk of its global membership. Significantly, the Vatican now has posted an additional and helpful commentary following the initial statement.<sup>3</sup>

The original document is a brief summary presented in dialogical form, responding to five questions, thus serving as a catechesis. However, it is saturated with coded language that primarily Catholic theologians and leaders understand, such as “subsistence”, “particular” churches, “oriental churches”, “elements of truth”, “...perduring, historical continuity and the permanence of all the elements instituted by Christ in the Catholic Church...”, “separated churches and Communities”, “texts of the Council and those of the Magisterium”. The first two paragraphs alone reference eight official Vatican documents, such as “Lumen gentium” and “Dominus Iesus”, and the full document contains twenty footnotes.

For some insightful observers, such a declaration appears ironic in the context of Rome’s commitment to ecumenicity and Benedict’s recent book, “Jesus of Nazareth”. Many of us were encouraged, even surprised, by the thoughtful review found in **The Economist**.<sup>4</sup> Benedict delineates essential, orthodox truths of Jesus. Two other of his recent books focus on the challenge of being fully Christian (Catholic) in Europe, and this Pontiff is not afraid of a down-sized European church in his call for a faithful yet radical minority of true believers in this spiritually “burned-over”, secular continent.

Expected responses came from different press sources.<sup>5</sup> For some secular media, this was fodder for their mill, news to sell, to get readers—many of them with a short memory and a snide attitude. Some were glad to have another whack at Benedict XVI, and they were delighted to attack the Pontiff months after his earlier radical and bold statements on Islam. They cannot tolerate Benedict XVI’s “theological conservatism”. Behind some attacks one finds Euro-secularism, a “faith system” with its own priorities and absolute truths. At the same time, media correctly note that this new Pope is already imprinting his convictions on his Church. His statements are also warning shots across the bow of some Catholic scholars who may want to dilute Roman distinctives in the interests of boundless ecumenism and theological liberalism.

The responses from other branches of Christianity were also diverse. The dismayed ones were those highly committed to dialogue, ecumenicity and the ultimate union of all Christian churches. Shortly before the June 29<sup>th</sup> release, some 400 Christians from scores of denominations met in Ohio, USA, to further the ecumenical dialogue.

Theologians and religious leaders from the Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Orthodox, Protestant, Evangelical and other Christian communities are holding a July 19-23 ecumenical conference at Oberlin College in Ohio, where they will gather under the banner ‘On Being Christian Together’. The meeting marks the 50th anniversary of the first gathering of the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC) – a network of 35 various faith groups that constitute 45 million members across the nation – and will celebrate the work of Christian communities that have made efforts to strengthen the unity of the Church through dialogue and research on theological differences. The Faith and Order Commission was established to affirm the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ and keep to the Gospel call to visible unity.

Ecumenical spokespersons worked hard to reword and re-affirm their own personal commitments, thus minimizing the essential differences. The NCC’s associate general

secretary for Faith and Order, Dr. Ann Riggs, said the Vatican statement affords them “an opportunity for more dialogue and more insight.”<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, however, Coptic Pope Shenouda III, Egyptian leader of some ten million Coptic Christians, was very blunt as quoted in an article in christianpost.com. “The man (Pope Benedict) makes enemies every time,” said Shenouda III, according to the state-run daily Al-Ahram. “In his first statements a few months back, he lost all the Muslims,” referring to the Pope’s speech in Germany last year when he associated Islam with violence. “And now this time, he lost a lot of the Christian denominations because he has begun to err against Christians themselves. Other Christian communities are either defective or not true churches and Catholicism provides the only true path to salvation. We’re not opposed to Catholics having pride in their church, but that doesn’t mean that every church that doesn’t join them isn’t a church,” he said.<sup>7</sup>

Israel Batista, General Secretary of CLAI (the World Council of Churches related Latin America body), wrote a recent letter in Spanish to some of his colleagues (sent to me by a WEA friend from Venezuela, and translated for this article).

Between the surprise and the expected: The declarations surprise me because I always believe in conversion. But it was something expected, because from the structures of power, incapable of reading the ‘signs of the times’, openness is difficult. I’m not sure that it’s important to respond to this document which is not new, but it is lamentable. I have doubts that from these positions we will be able to contribute to the road to unity. It pains me that we continue tied to a ‘dogmatic fundamentalism’ resisting the freshness of the Spirit. I believe it is important for our brother Roman Catholic Church that it learn the lessons of the new ecclesial reality we live. But...., whoever wishes to learn, may that person learn; whoever has ears to hear, let him hear to listen. But, for the love of God let’s define the integrity of what is ecumenical.

Evangelicals acknowledge a vast spectrum within Christian circles related to issues of conversation, dialogue and the pursuit of ultimate Christian unity. While some of them are concerned about Christian orthodoxy, the fact is that others in those circles are religious relativists, where ultimate truth is found in biblical revisionism, contemporary culture, in “getting along” and tolerating each other. Some ecumenical dreamers envision a world where all religions converge in a sea of contented pan-faith utopian spiritualities.

However, another significant group with its own particular concerns comprises the more recent converts from Protestantism’s various denominations to Roman Catholicism—many found in North America. Some are quite happy to see the ways that their new Church has affirmed its own uniqueness as The Prime Church; the converts were right after all! Others however, are somewhat chagrined, because they had hoped for a bit more of an open game; that is, they converted to Rome but wanted to sustain community, prayer and worship in their former evangelical groups.

It is important to realize that Rome’s self-understanding, as well as the interpretation of some of its doctrines and practices swing on a long-term time pendulum—from the Council of Trent to the Second Vatican Council, and now the post and post-post-Council realities. Each Pope has the desire, the right and the will to exert his influence to shape the church. For that reason he is the supreme Pontiff.

Leaders and most of the media rooted in other religions tend to see all of Christianity as one, and hence are not tuned into the significant differences, much less the nuances. Islam is concerned with its own internal divisions of Sunni, Shi'a, Sufi, Kharijite, and the multiple subdivisions of Salafism, Wahhabism and the various "liberal progressive". Radical Hindus indiscriminately persecute Christians across the spectrum in India, and Buddhists do the same in Sri Lanka.

## **Second, reflections from the global World Evangelical Alliance constituency**

The WEA constituency lives and works out its faith today in at least five contexts that interact with Roman Catholics in various ways. One context is in nations where either Roman Catholicism or Orthodoxy have had historic hegemony. This is certainly the case in all of Latin America, though the spiritual terrain is changing radically due to the growth of evangelical churches as well as the increasing manifestation of a spirituality rooted in animism—from subtle evil supernaturalism to the openly demonic. In many countries of Europe, evangelicals have to exist and grow alongside the Orthodox churches, which do not have a pleasant history of playing on an even religious pitch. And to be true to history, Protestantism has its own conflicted history of marginalizing and persecuting Catholics.

Second, our constituency is strong where non-Christian faiths have hegemony, be it Islam (The Lebanon and Egypt, Nigeria and Chad, Indonesia and Malaysia, to mention only three regions); Hinduism (India) or Buddhism (Sri Lanka).

Third, our families are found where secular materialism has had hegemony, such as the former Eastern Europe, the old Soviet Empire, Cuba, China and Viet Nam. Fourth, we have strong representation in nations where the dominant sub-strata world view is animist, as found in much of Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America.

A final arena is where the religious/spiritual/ecclesial playing field has been historically leveled. This is certainly true of northern Europe, the UK, North America and other countries where the long-term values of Christian religious pluralism and freedom have been daily realities and are encoded in laws.

Across all these contexts one finds countless former Catholics who have come to faith in Jesus and identified themselves as vital and transformed members of evangelical churches. Yet in other cases we find evangelicals converting either to Roman Catholic or Orthodoxy, particularly in North America.

We have been asked many times the question, "What is been WEA's experience of conversations with Roman Catholic leadership?" The answers reflect the context in which the conversations take place and the context of the historic experience with Catholicism. Conversations and dialogues with Roman Catholics are long-term, diverse and take place on at least four different levels.

First, on a top leadership level, the WEA International Director is a member of a non-formal group called the Secretaries of World Christian Communions that meets annually. It includes, amongst others, leaders of Pentecostal, Lutheran, Anglican, Baptist, Mennonite, Presbyterian, Salvation Army, Roman Catholic and Orthodox groups. Former WEA International Director, Dr. David Howard, explained what this annual gathering meant to him. Convened in different nations of the world, it provides opportunity to meet the highest leaders of different communions, such as the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury and Orthodox leaders.

The purposes were threefold: to provide an updated report from each group on the status of each communion; to listen to a major paper from one of the leaders on the historical and theological roots of that group; and to discuss some of the major issues facing churches at the time. One historic case in point came with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Howard said, "I found it a great opportunity to speak for the evangelical church in general and to keep them aware of who we are, as well as to learn from them."

Second, and on a theological level, for decades the WEA Theological Commission through a special Task Force has carried on thoughtful and frank conversations with the *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (formerly Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity)*<sup>8</sup> These encounters have generated thoughtful and provocative position papers and publications which have been released both in the WEA Theological Commission journal, "The Evangelical Review of Theology," and in book form edited by Paul G. Schrottenboer.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to clarify that the primarily North American venture known as "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" is a separate series of dialogues. These conversations need to be evaluated within their own distinctive context and do not necessarily represent the experience and conviction of many evangelicals in areas of traditional Catholic hegemony.

Third, Evangelicals and Catholics converse at the national level with WEA alliances (now 128 of them in WEA's global constituency). Sam Olson, Caracas local pastor and also head of the Venezuelan Evangelical Alliance, wrote with his own grass-roots perspective.

Just recently, the Main Rabbi of Venezuela, I as the President of Evangelical Alliance, and the Roman Catholic Cardinal came together to honor the Cardinal. The audience was relatively elite, and the mass media was quite present. These are all affirmations of the fact of the reality and existence of the Evangelical Church, whether or not the RC's definition of "church" would encompass us. That really does not matter.

What does matter, however, is that due to these relationships and conversations, many issues can be dealt with, common activities can be developed, and at times we can call upon each other to resolve conflicts. For instance, I, as the head of an Alliance, have been able to call the monsignor's attention to destructive and unnecessary statements made by his priests. And as a result, they realize that we cannot be maligning each other. The issues are dealt with in a quiet manner without going into unnecessary reactive moods. In fact, it is high time that we evangelicals go public and state that we are also the "church", that our distinctives are also foundational to all those who would define themselves as evangelicals. This is a proper role of the WEA as it goes public. The people DO NOT KNOW what the evangelical church is.

We also state in very explicit language that it is the person of the Holy Spirit, who through revelation, inspiration, events in history, encounters, and His other activities, operations, gifts, and ministries, will bring unity to the Church. We are all quite subject to the Holy Spirit. And we must be faithful as we walk in Him, the creative, reconciling, and healing Word.

At the ultimate grass roots level, on the "Evangelical street", inter-Christian-communion conversations take place between church members and their pastors or priests, between neighbors, family and friends. This may be especially true in two very diverse situations: where there is either historic difference or recent conversion from one to the other. In some cases the

conversations can become heated, until time, graciousness and an irenic Christian spirit carry the day.

We now open the platform for some of our WEA colleagues from different nations, ministries and roles to express their own observations in light of this Vatican statement. Here are a few quotes in response to two key questions, with freedom to range more widely as desired.

1. What is the significance of Benedict XVI's statement to the global World Evangelical Alliance community?
2. What is the significance of this statement to your own personal context of ministry, your geography and evangelical constituency? Here we are looking for the impact on the evangelical churches and believers.

**First question: What is the significance of the statement to the global WEA family?**

Johan Candelin of Finland and head of WEA's Religious Liberty Commission, wrote:

It is of course up to the RC church to define its own understanding of the church of Jesus Christ. However, the RC church needs to consider the effects the statement will have for hundreds of millions of Christians in the world, including hundreds of millions evangelicals. The effects will be negative at least on two levels: First, many churches will draw the conclusion that the RC church is not honest in talking about Christian unity and that the effect on ecumenical matters will suffer from the statement. Second, many evangelicals will not be treated as equals by Catholic and state institutions dominated by the RC church, as they are not a "real church" and in many cases this will limit their religious freedom (Latin America and Mexico).

Dr. Rolf Hille, German theologian and chair of the WEA Theological Commission, has a unique vantage point, for he met Pope Benedict XVI as Joseph Ratzinger, first as a theology student in Tuebingen in the late 60's while Ratzinger was a theology professor, later as a journalist in the mid-70's while he was an archbishop, then in the early 90's when Hille was a teacher at the Bengel Haus on a study tour of Rome and Ratzinger was a cardinal in Rome. From this vantage point, Hille writes:

First of all, the statements made recently by the Pope are not new, but in fact are only the rehashing of an older understanding within Catholic ecclesiology. In my view, the only provocation of his statements is their timing. I believe he was not addressing his ecumenical partners at all when he made these statements, but rather, he was only trying to calm down very conservative Catholics to satisfy this wing of his church. I believe he will keep contact with evangelicals, etc. and will continue to promote ecumenicity. He always has to satisfy more conservative Catholics, but he needs and will go forward with ecumenical dialogue. However, this is his dilemma.

Dr. R. David Muir, Public Policy executive director of the Evangelical Alliance of the UK, was more theologically oriented:

As a reiteration of sentiments expressed in *Dominus Iesus* (2000), this is not something we should overreact over. It privileges and maintains a historical "Petrine" model of understanding both the *essence* and *form* of the Church peculiar to Catholic ecclesiology.

However, correct ecclesiology, even ones purported to be apostolically received, are not an infallible guide to define what constitutes the 'true church'. The Church *is* the 'body of Christ' (Eph. 1:22-23), 'the people of God' (1 Pet.2:10). And because it is believed to be the people among whom God is present to an unprecedented and decisive degree, the Church is 'the temple of God's Spirit (1Cor.3:16; 2 Cor.6:16)'. Biblical and pastoral wisdom teach that the Church is constituted by the work of the Holy Spirit through baptism and faith in Jesus. This work transcends history, culture and ecclesial traditions. 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in their midst'—that is the Church.

Dr. Samuel Escobar, veteran Peruvian theologian now resident in Spain, was pungent.

The Pope's statements are not something new. They are consistent with the claims that Rome has always made and with previous statements from Ratzinger. In *Ecclesia in America* it was clearly stated that the Roman Catholic Church was the only one that could legitimately do mission. Why would the Pope feel the need to reiterate this at this point? Perhaps it was due to the political turn to the right in Europe, the crisis of leadership from the USA, the rebirth of Nazism in Germany, France and Spain, the spiritual search of a man like Blair, all symptoms of a state of mind that requires definition if the RCC is going to be politically relevant. So for me this affirmation of the Pope responds to purely political reasons. After all, that has been the temptation in which Rome fell centuries ago: the thirst for power at any cost.

Bruce Clemenger, President of the Evangelical Alliance of Canada wrote:

It should come as no surprise. I understand the current statement to be a re-articulation of *Dominus Iesus* and a clarification of the Vatican's view of the uniqueness and place of the Roman Catholic Church and the role of the Papacy. It remains a significant point of disagreement and also a defining feature of both the Catholics (who agree) and evangelical denominations (who disagree).

Dr. David Tai-Woong Lee, Korean missiologist and missionary trainer, offered different nuances:

I think the Pope is right in saying that this was always their position concerning the church. The problem is, though, that after Vatican II there was not one view concerning the church among the general public, including Catholics. Because of the mood that Vatican II created and words and actions by subsequent Popes, the general public both within and outside Catholicism have interpreted the church in their own way. From the beginning, the RC claimed that they are the nucleus and the other communities of faith form the outer shell of the nucleus; the further a group is from the center of the circle the thinner the effect.

Rose Dowsett, OMF missionary, veteran missiologist and coordinator of the WEA Mission Commission global missiology task force, expressed herself in personal and real terms.

I am sad, but not surprised, at this statement. It says nothing new, but it is unhelpful to reinforce historic divisions at a time when many Christians from different parts of the world church family are learning to work together in harmony for the welfare of their fellow-citizens and in upholding Christian values. It is also unhelpful at a time when in many parts of the world there is enormous pressure against Christians, and where solidarity is critical. In the WEA, while not minimising our doctrinal differences, we would

nonetheless wish to affirm the many beliefs and values that we share in common, and act upon them together for the greater good of humankind as well as pointing to the Triune God who inspires them.

Pastor Roberto Mazzeschi, president of the Italian Evangelical Alliance was both irenic and direct in his response.

No Christian needs to be troubled by the recent document by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. The point is not new and while it can hurt the Ecumenical movement, it does need to hurt all sincere believers and churches. The point at stake is this: no human institution has the authority to confer licenses to churches for them to be churches. This power belongs to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit on the basis of Scripture. In other words, the church is established by the Lord Jesus where two or three people are gathered in His name, where the Word is preached truthfully, the ordinances (baptism and communion) are duly administered and where discipleship is radically lived out. When this occurs, it does not matter that a human institution adds other criteria (e.g., the Catholic Eucharist and the Catholic order) for the church to be church.

**The second question: What are the implications of this statement to your personal context of ministry and evangelical constituency?**

Muir writes again in light of his nation and national alliance.

In the UK, there are many church and community projects in which evangelicals and Catholics work in common Christian witness for the common good. This good practice will, undoubtedly, continue. Although one does not believe that an infraction in relationships will be occasioned by these views, it certainly has the potential to rekindle many of the old hermeneutical suspicions about Catholic doctrine and dogma; it also has theological and political implications for meaningful or creative dialogue about 'church unity' and Anglo-Catholic relations.

Escobar is direct.

In Spain these statements only confirm the position of the Spanish Roman Catholic Church, which is fighting desperately and openly to keep its political power, even at the cost of losing the spiritual battle. The effect of the papal statement will be to harden the more anti-Roman feelings of Protestants, especially Evangelicals. Unfortunately, this may close avenues of dialogue and cooperation with sectors of Catholicism that have a more biblical attitude.

Clemenger applies the situation to Canada,

It will have no impact on the relationship between The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and the Catholic Church in Canada. We will continue to look for opportunities where we can cooperate with integrity (as we did on the Declaration on Marriage) and we will continue to welcome conversations to clarify areas of agreement and disagreement. This is an issue that will continue to be one of disagreement between evangelical churches and the Roman Catholic Church. It is a clarification of a tenet that distinguishes and separates the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian churches.

Lee writes insightfully from his Korean context,

This statement will impact our world, both Christian and non-Christian, enormously. Once it was not an advantage to have exclusive claim on anything due to the influence of post-modernity. I may be wrong but it seems as though the time has come when it is much better to be more assertive and have certain self identity. The Pope has done it well for the sake of RC in my opinion. Within our own country there have been number of articles, both in daily newspapers as well as Christian daily newspapers on this theme.

The Pope is warning the RC church against secularization, but at the same time, some of the Korean Catholic leaders are worried that the general public will look upon their church as being exclusive. There is genuine concern from both the RC and Protestants that this announcement will affect the ecumenical mood of the churches. Evangelical churches have had a very little contact with Catholics in Korea thus far. Korean Catholics seem to be more open to ecumenicals and other religions, but less open to evangelicals. My prediction is that it will create an even greater barrier between RC and evangelical churches. But it will also give the RC greater self identity and cutting edge in countries like Korea where it has for the last two decades been growing in rapid speed.

Dowsett affirms directly that:

In Britain, the media, strongly secular, delights in any sign of disagreement among professing Christians. So this statement has been unhelpful, and been the grounds for discrediting Christian beliefs and values in the public domain. This is dispiriting in a context where it is increasingly hard to have a clear and open testimony to the grace of God and the response he looks for from men and women. It has not commended the Catholic Church.

We again listen to Mazzeschi, our World Evangelical Alliance colleague who lives the closest, in geographic terms, to Rome.

Evangelical churches refuse to consider themselves as B-Series churches (i.e., of an inferior category) because the Roman church says it so. Their identity stays with God, not with the Pope or with the hierarchy. This document is more 'roman' than 'catholic'. Is it not the genius of Roman Catholicism the ability to hold together Roman centralism and catholic universality swinging the balance on one side or the other? However, the Gospel invites every person and every church to continually reform itself in light of God's Word, abandoning its unhealthy equilibrium. Evidently, the Roman Catholicism of this document is more concerned to consolidate its own identity than to follow the breath of the Holy Spirit.

Readers can visit the Italian Evangelical Alliance website for a more complete response to the Vatican's statement on the primacy of the Roman Church. There is also information on the broader European Evangelical Alliance affirmations on these issues.<sup>10</sup>

### **Finally, marking some paths we might walk on as we move into the future**

In the eyes of Roman Catholic leadership and laity, evangelicals have been given a variety of names in recent centuries. We have moved from being called heretics (with no opportunity for conversation or peaceful encounter) and then to separated brethren (where all kinds of talks and relationships take place—formal, non-formal and informal). It has been challenging for evangelicals living in nations of Catholic hegemony (with harassment and even persecution) to

understand the language and attitudes of their more optimistic North American colleagues in warm dialogue with Catholics. But this too is part of the global evangelical reality.

Some evangelical leaders appreciate Benedict XVI's reaffirmation of Rome's historic position, for by so doing he has again clarified issues that affect dialogue and ecumenism. However, they would also suggest that while the Pope's position is buttressed by the voice of the Magisterium in determining Rome's position, his arguments depend more on that Magisterium than on Scripture. But this highlights Rome's dual epistemological foundation.

Where does this leave us and what are some optional paths for evangelicals to walk on as members of the global WEA constituency?

First, we need to read this Vatican statement peaceably and honestly. Rome's historic position is simply being reaffirmed here. It is healthy to know the true state of things, especially as articulated from The Top, The Chair. This is not the last document that will emerge from the See of Peter under this Pontiff.

Second, it is possible again that both Catholics and evangelicals will be led to evaluate Benedict XVI's statements in light of Scripture, perhaps with surprising outcomes. We evangelicals believe that the surprise may be greater on the Catholic side when Scripture is established as the ultimate authority. This is true even when our biblical study is illuminated by our fullest evangelical church history—not just our particular denominational stances or customs and traditions. In a sense, evangelicals have their own magisterium, albeit in lower case. However, all ecclesial histories and systems must be subjected to the critique of the written Word of God.

Third, we evangelicals need to be certain about what we believe, but we don't have to be obnoxious about it. We need to understand and appreciate the role that history and our own traditions have played in shaping our own very diverse Christian ecclesial systems, worship and theology. At the same time, evangelicals can rediscover the riches of early church history, reaching farther back beyond the events, personages and outcomes of the Protestant Reformation.

Fourth, we must be loving and truthful with our family members and friends who seriously contemplate either "crossing the Tiber" (converting to Rome), or "crossing the Bosphorus" (converting to Orthodoxy). These decisions are watershed events and not just personal preferences. All potential converts must realize that these decisions truly change relationships and affect friends, colleagues and families deeply. It is not just "joining" another Christian denomination; for that reason it is called "conversion". At the end of the day, when one crosses either body of water, ontological and epistemological verities click in automatically. This is the essential nature and reality of "conversion".

Fifth, levels of engagement are needed between evangelicals and Catholics, whether they be substantive theological discussions, or conversations at the levels of national alliances, or with lay church and parish leadership, or priests with pastors. These encounters will flow across the spectrum from the unregulated informal to the regulated formal. They are healthy and necessary.

One reason why this convergence is imperative can be found in the language of 20<sup>th</sup> century evangelical prophet and apologist, Francis Schaeffer, that of the "co-belligerent". He used the term to speak of arenas of mutual concern where collaborative ventures can be created for the greatest good for Christians and ultimately, all humanity. In some national situations (Islamic

hegemony in Malaysia is an example), it is helpful that representatives of the other living faiths—Evangelicals, Catholics, Orthodox, Buddhists, Hindus—come together in common cause to advocate for justice in law and religious adherence.

John Langlois of the Guernsey Islands, UK, and a long-term member of the WEA International Council, in 2001 presented a paper on this concept at the New Europe Forum, held 7 – 10 June 2001 in Paris, France. He underscored the six guidelines that give co-belligerency currency and practicality: clear beliefs; clear unity; clear principles; a clear purpose; clear outcomes; and clear language.<sup>11</sup>

Here is a partial list of some themes that could bring Catholics and evangelicals together in common cause:

- Creating a public platform where with a united voice we can speak for shared values and Christian convictions out of our historic spiritual tradition.
- Responding to the challenges of persecution (by Catholics or evangelicals, as in southern Mexico), but especially in the context of monopolistic, militant non-Christian religions, such as Hinduism in India, Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Islam in too many nations. We must advocate together for the just application of existing and new laws that would protect both human and religious freedoms, including the right to convert—from any faith to any other faith.
- Providing a united voice vis-à-vis militant secularism and the newer anti-theist voices raised in the secular West.
- Addressing issues of poverty—personal and structural—and a responsible and honorable solution to the debt crisis of the poorer nations. How is it that in major contexts of Christendom (Latin America and Africa) we still face entrenched wicked systems and governments with nations wracked by structural poverty and the massive injustice of their political and legal systems?
- Articulating our dedication to “full-life” commitment related to the unborn, the elderly and the dying.
- And surely there are many other issues that might bring us together in common cause.

Sixth, conversations, encounters and dialogues of gracious but frank exchange by different Christian bodies should and will continue, at all levels as mentioned earlier—from top level down to friend, neighbors and families. Yet let us be clear-headed about the realities of our deep and historic differences. Whilst the global World Evangelical Alliance community is committed to these gatherings, we evangelicals are not dreamy-eyed ecumenicals yearning for the Great Unity of all Christian communions. Nevertheless, there is a place for truly Christian ecumenism that acknowledges our understanding of Scripture and truth, ecclesiology and spirituality.

### **As we draw to a close**

Perhaps Rose Dowsett best articulates our concerns and commitments in both missiological and pastoral terms.

I would like to think that wherever possible WEA entities will continue in discussion with representatives of the RC church, locally and globally. I'd also like to think that we continue to do that with respect, even where we differ. We also need to be able to produce clear but peaceable, gracious statements that engage with the specific claims such as that relating to apostolic succession, what makes a sacrament valid, and others. I think we need to keep persevering at finding the areas where we can join

forces as per Francis Schaeffer, and then actually getting on and doing something constructive. I think as evangelicals we need to emphasise that our calling is not to make Catholics become Protestant, but to help people everywhere come to Christ and live as committed disciples. And probably WEA needs to think about some of the manic fringe of evangelicals whose conduct and wacky beliefs bring us into disrepute.

I conclude these reflections with a statement sent to me by Dr. Geoff Tunnicliffe, World Evangelical Alliance International Director/CEO. "While we recognize that we have some significant theological differences with the Catholic Church, we will continue to pursue active collaboration with them in areas of common concern, including religious freedom, global poverty, family values and promoting a culture of life. We don't believe the release of this document will negatively impact our relationship."

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**Referenced notes:**

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