

Pluscarden Pentecost Lectures for 2004

THE EVANGELICAL CHALLENGE: THREAT OR GRACE?

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The Evangelical Challenge to the Catholic Church

Threat or Grace?

The title of these lectures has deliberately emphasized the aspect of challenge, but it includes the question “Threat or Grace?”. The simple answer to this question depends on whether or not the challenges are confronted and constructively addressed. If the challenges are not faced, then these movements are experienced simply as threat. If however, the challenges are accepted in a spirit of asking what the Holy Spirit is saying to us through these unexpected developments, then they can be experienced as a grace.

But are these movements simply grace? They are grace in every respect in which they are the work of the Holy Spirit. They are not wholly and simply a work of the Holy Spirit, but I suggest that in their deepest and original thrust, that is as movements for revival and renewal through a fresh focus on the basics, they are a grace. However, every grace is ultimately a grace for the Church. Whenever revival streams regard themselves as the sole bearers of Christian truth, as the only form of authentic Christianity or even as “the Church” in dismissing the historic Churches as apostate, moribund or irrelevant, then they distort their essential character and are no longer grace but become something less healthy and quite ambiguous.

To discover the grace therefore means discerning the real challenge of the Holy Spirit through these movements. So we will in turn look at the challenge from the Evangelicals, from the Pentecostals, from the charismatics, particularly the independent charismatics, and from the Messianic Jews, seeking in each case to identify the work of the Holy Spirit that represents the grace, that is grace for the Church.

The Challenges from the Evangelicals

I pick out three particular challenges from the Evangelicals to the Catholic Church. The first is to take the Bible seriously as the inspired and authoritative Word of God. We need to take the Word of God as the foundation for our prayer and worship, for our theology, and for all catechesis and formation. In fact, since Vatican Two, the teaching of the Catholic Church has been becoming much more biblical, as we can see in the Catechism and in many encyclicals (the initial biblical reflection in *Splendor Veritatis* and the reflection on the story of Cain in *Evangelium Vitae*)¹.

The second challenge from the Evangelicals is to an evangelism as proclamation of the basic Gospel that produces conversion. Catholics often argue that what matters most is the witness of Christian lives, implying that a spoken testimony is really quite secondary. But in his apostolic letter *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI emphasized the need for both life witness and explicit proclamation. The third challenge which follows directly from the second is that we preach the death and resurrection of Christ, “who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4: 25). What I see is that a clear preaching of Jesus’ death and resurrection produces the death and resurrection of clear-cut conversion. Where we do not preach the need for a conversion that involves a death to sin that is only possible through the saving death of Jesus on the Cross, then we do not see much clear-cut conversion. What

¹ This is also true for Catholic social teaching, which since *Gaudium et Spes* and particularly under John Paul II has become much more biblical and theological, integrating the natural law heritage with an anchoring in biblical revelation that sees the nature and destiny of man fully expressed in the person of Jesus.

often happens is an encouragement to moral improvement, that bears little fruit. A major reason why the Alpha course has had such an impact, also among Catholics, is that it does preach the basic Gospel

Here we face a paradox: the current official teaching of the Catholic Church is much better than most of current Catholic practice. With many in the Pentecostal and charismatic world, their practice is better than their theology. In relation to effective evangelization, the official Catholic teaching has made huge strides forward in the last fifty years, but the practice has yet to catch up. We can see this in the RCIA, and in the General Directory on Catechesis, in which it is clearly stated that there has to be an initial proclamation of the Gospel leading to an initial conversion before people are admitted as catechumens for systematic teaching. But in many places, RCIA is being used as the instrument to bring people to initial conversion, which is not its purpose.

The Challenges from the Pentecostals and the Charismatics

To consider the challenges coming specifically from the Pentecostals and the charismatics, I take up the four characteristics singled out as distinguishing the Pentecostals and charismatics from the older Evangelicals.

The Human Body. The post-Enlightenment secular-scientific world-view that has subverted much of Western Christianity has produced a very cerebral faith, producing people much more highly developed in their intelligence than in their emotions. Traditional British Evangelicalism perhaps represented the acme of “stiff upper-lip” Christianity in a worship with Word and no body. But in the Catholic Church, though we have a profound theology of the body expressed in the liturgy, we have also been affected by the Enlightenment. So we have a Christian public for whom a hand-shake at the Pax may disturb their interiority, and for whom the possibility of worshipful dance is beyond the realms of their imagination. The reality is that we are not fully at home in our bodies before God. The challenge is learning how to worship God with our whole beings: in effect, an obedience to the commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (Mark 12: 30).

It is very interesting being in Jerusalem for a major Jewish feast, or indeed for any Jewish celebration. The Jews, especially Hasidic Jews, know how to worship and celebrate. On 11th September, 2001, I found myself in Jerusalem staying in a Jewish quarter. That evening, after hours of watching on TV the rubble and the carnage in New York City, I went out into the neighbourhood, whence were coming – incongruously it seemed – sounds of rejoicing and merriment. The local synagogue was welcoming the arrival of a new Torah scroll with full-blooded celebration, with dancing, procession, and singing. This is the revolution that the Pentecostal and charismatic movements have unleashed in the Third World, where the people have not learned about the stiff upper lip. Learning to worship the Lord with our whole beings is really at the heart of liturgical renewal.

The Centrality of Praise. The body point leads right into the question of praise. The issue is not whether or not it is good to raise one’s hands in worship in charismatic fashion. It is learning how to worship God with our whole beings. In the words of Psalm 103: “Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name.” (v. 1). From my Jewish example a moment ago, it will not surprise you perhaps when I say that the Messianic Jews take very naturally to bodily expressions of praise and worship. They dance more than any other Pentecostals and charismatics, at least in the Western world, in two distinct ways: one, the widespread charismatic hop, skip and jump, the other a form of Jewish folk dancing introduced by the Messianics into their worship.

The Pentecostal and charismatic movements here have been perhaps more of a challenge to the very cerebral patterns of worship prevailing in Evangelical Protestantism, with what has been called the “hymn sandwich” leading up to the climax in the Word, normally a rather long sermon prepared over days in the minister’s study. Styles of education and styles of

preaching are closely connected. For Catholics, the challenge is to rediscover what has always been at the heart of the liturgy, and expressed in every eucharist, whether in the Gloria (“We worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory”), or in the eucharistic prayers, as, for example: “Father, you are holy indeed, and all creation rightly gives you praise.”² The challenge is for all of us to enter into the Church’s praise of the Lord, together with “the choirs of angels and all the powers of heaven”, and not just be listeners and spectators.

The Rediscovery of Spirit. The weakness of post-Enlightenment white Western Christianity in this area has been cruelly exposed in the Third World, especially in Africa. The tragic story of Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo is an eloquent commentary on this blind spot. I can remember some years ago hearing the late Archbishop Gabriel Ganaka of Jos, Nigeria, say virtually the same things as Mgr Milingo had been saying, but without the disturbance of a healing exorcistic ministry. The Africans, he said, live in a three-tier world: God at the top, us at the bottom, and the spirit-world in between. Jesus has opened the way between us and God through overcoming the spiritual powers in the middle. This is in fact the cosmology of Paul in the letter to the Ephesians. “He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.” (Eph. 4: 10)³. The post-Enlightenment abolition of the spiritual world in what some are now calling the “excluded middle” has severely weakened the Christian message, and rendered it virtually powerless in the face of diabolical oppression.

We should not think this is just a problem for the Church in Africa. The problem of the spirits is a major pastoral problem in Europe and in Britain today. We need only visit any regular bookshop to see that more shelves are reserved for occult literature than for Christian books. Our failure to understand this in the Catholic community is linked to our failure to evangelize. For wherever the preaching of the Gospel is having an impact on the world outside the church door, the need for ministries of deliverance and exorcism becomes quickly apparent.

The point where Catholics and Pentecostals can learn from each other is the charismatic movement. As the CCR has gained momentum, so has the ministry of deliverance come to the fore. It is significant that the leading exponent of this ministry in the Catholic Church comes from India, Fr Rufus Pereira, the founder-president of the International Association for Deliverance, founded at San Giovanni Rotondo in 1995⁴. It is also interesting that Fr Rufus has been invited to give teachings on the ministry of deliverance to some Episcopal Conferences – but not it seems in Western Europe. But in Eastern Europe, his ministry has received a much stronger welcome, including an invitation from the Czech bishops⁵.

The rediscovery of the world of the spirits is of course dangerous, unless it is happening under the Lordship of Jesus through a submission to the working of the Holy Spirit, as the seven sons of Sceva discovered in Acts 19. The first generation of Catholic exorcists and specialists in deliverance ministry like Fr Pereira were virtually self-taught, as they were taught nothing about deliverance in their seminary formation. Learning in this area needs to bring together the wisdom of the saints and the genuine wisdom of modern psychology, but it would be foolish to ignore the considerable experience of Pentecostal and Protestant charismatic ministers. In such an exchange, they can learn from the wealth of our older tradition, and we can learn from their pragmatic effectiveness. Some of the best writings in this area have come from Anglican practitioners with a more sacramental understanding and a

² Eucharistic Prayer III.

³ See also the reference to “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2: 2), and that to “the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6: 12).

⁴ This association is distinct from the International Association of Exorcists, of which Fr Pereira is also a member.

⁵ Rufus Pereira, *At Home in Rome* (Mumbai: privately published, 2003), p. 103.

more developed theology, such as Russ Parker (UK), Leanne Payne and John Sandford (both USA).

Egalitarianism. The third challenge from Pentecostalism comes from its “egalitarianism”, and from what some term “every member ministry”. Here again, there has been considerable advance in official Catholic teaching with the Vatican Two teaching on the dignity and the responsibility of the laity, that flows from sacramental baptism, not from clerical deputation. In the revised Code of Canon Law, there is recognized for the first time the right of the Catholic faithful to form associations. Church approval is not needed to associate; it is needed for an association to be publicly termed “Catholic”. The teaching of John Paul II in the post-synodal exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (1988) is very inspiring, and represents another area where practice needs to catch up with the teaching.

Perhaps the biggest challenge here is to our mentalities of control. The Catholic tradition, especially since the Protestant Reformation, has emphasized authority and obedience. The answer to all forms of danger was control by properly constituted authority, that is clerical and hierarchical control. The control-issue was particularly visible in the struggles for the emergence of a Catholic press. In the world today, with the internet and text-messages, it is more impossible than ever to control what is going on in the Church or anywhere else. But the deeper issue is that the fear that produces the desire to control diminishes one’s trust in the Holy Spirit.

The Challenge from the New Charismatic Churches

There is a challenge that comes from their strong success-orientation. It is easy to criticize this. We can rightly ask: Was the ministry of Jesus a success? His ministry led to his death on the cross. Half way through his ministry, the crowds following him began to decline. But if we substitute the words “fruit” and “victory” for “success”, then perhaps we can think more deeply about this issue. Jesus won a victory on the cross that was manifested in his resurrection. The fruit comes from a death that leads to life.

Theologically, we have to say that 100% success is eschatological. But even now we enjoy the first-fruits of the age to come, its signs and tokens. Every conversion, every act of repentance, every act of self-sacrificial love, every healing is a sign of the coming Kingdom. This means that there are visible signs of the work of the Holy Spirit. There is a challenge here concerning the visibility of grace. I remember hearing an English Catholic bishop, reputed to be one of the more theological among the bishops at that time – this would have been about 1967 – arguing that grace was totally invisible, and we could never make spiritual judgments based on appearances. This seems to me to reflect an attitude that has been very widespread in Catholic life, and it is one that is directly challenged by the Pentecostal – charismatic approach demanding visible results. At the time, the bishop’s position was contested by Fr John Coventry, SJ as being “anti-incarnational”. This comment takes us to the heart of the matter.

In the Incarnation, the invisible God takes on human flesh. As we say in the first Preface for Christmas, “In him we see our God made visible and so are caught up in the love of the God we cannot see.” In Christ, we see and yet we do not see. We see a sign, or the sign, but we cannot see everything, we cannot see God. In the same way, the Pentecostals and charismatics are right to say that we can see when the Holy Spirit is at work. It does not make sense to say that actions of God profoundly transforming believers are totally invisible and unconscious even to the recipients.

There is a major irony here. Pentecostals generally follow Baptists in rejecting infant baptism. They are generally insistent that nothing actually happens through the outward performance of baptism. The transformation happens not through an external rite, but at the moment of spiritual re-birth. On the other hand, we Catholics insist that something really happens when the sacrament of baptism is administered. But we never expect to see any visible evidence, even in the case of unrepeatable sacraments administered to adults.

What I think this points to is the need for an incarnational yet eschatological understanding of God's grace and its visibility. The incarnational dimension requires that there be a visibility. The eschatological dimension means that there will not be total visibility, which will only happen on the last day. The incarnational dimension means that we see the fruits, we see signs of God's invisible work. The eschatological dimension means that we never see everything. Such a "middle" position can help free Catholic pastoral ministry from a debilitating spiritual agnosticism (we can't really know anything about what is going on in people) and can provide a balancing check for the enthusiastic charismatics who may imagine that they see everything that is going on (what we see is all that there is to know).

Another major challenge from the new charismatic churches comes from their modernity. This challenges us Catholics to distinguish more sharply between fidelity to the Tradition we must pass on and attachment to the archaic. The new churches pay much attention to the formation of leaders and to the ways in which leadership is exercised. During my experience as a seminary lecturer and as a bishop's secretary, I never heard much discussion about leadership, a constant topic in new church circles. They are clear that a genuine spiritual leader is someone who really leads and whom people actually follow. The new charismatic churches produce genuine leaders, because someone who is not an effective leader is quickly out of a job.

The Challenge from the Messianic Jews

First of all, the refusal of the Messianic Jews to become normal members of our Churches, whether Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant, confronts all Christians with a question that we have not faced for over 1,500 years. Should a converted Jew have to cease being a Jew in order to believe in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of the world? This then reminds us of the fact that in the first generation the Church was totally Jewish, the church of the apostles, the Church of virgin-mother Mary, the church of the first martyr. The existence of people claiming once again to be the *ecclesia ex Judaeis* (Israel according to the Spirit) faces us with the question: what happened to the original church of the circumcision?

This challenge opens out into many more, which can be summed up in the question: what did the Church lose or in what respects was the Church weakened by the loss of a distinctively Jewish witness within the one holy catholic and apostolic Church? Perhaps the most obvious loss was the weakening in eschatological expectation for the Church and the world. Contact with Jewish believers in Jesus quickly confronts us with the Messianic consciousness of Judaism. The Jewish expectation of the Messiah orients them to future fulfilment within history and upon this earth. Not only do Messianic Jews by their very existence demonstrate the falsity of replacement teaching, as does of course the return of the Jews to the land, but they contest also the Christian tendency to replace the earthly Jerusalem with the heavenly in a way that the earthly Jerusalem has no future theological significance for Christians.

As Gentile Christians, we tend to start from the New Testament and perhaps add in citations from the Old Testament as back-up. By contrast, the Messianic Jews normally start from the Old Testament and then show that the New is a fulfilment of the Old. But as they show the Old as fulfilled in Jesus the Jew, they remind us that the new covenant is made not with a different people, but with "the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jer. 31: 31). This is a very important challenge. It is a challenge to read the Old Testament prophecies addressed to Israel as addressed to Israel, and not simply to transfer them to ourselves in a replacement way. A classic example is the prophecy concerning the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37, which charismatic Catholics regularly apply to the renewal of the Church without reference to the Jewish people. But the true meaning is in fact given in this prophecy, a verse we easily ignore: "[Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel." (Ez. 37: 11). In fact, the Messianic Jews understand this prophetic word as fulfilled in the resurrection of the Jewish

church: notice how in the closing part of this passage, several themes blend together: the return to the land, knowledge of the Lord, and the gift of the Spirit⁶.

Contact with the Messianic Jews induces Gentile Christians to confess the sins of Christian history against the Jewish people. Fellowship with them is impossible without a profound humility as Catholic or Protestant Christians. The evidence indicates that it has been the Jewish question more than anything else that has led John Paul II to make his historic call for a Catholic confession of the sins of the past. When he made this call in his letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (1994) in preparation for the Great Jubilee, he immediately set up two study commissions: one to study the treatment of the Jews by the Church through the ages, and the other on the Spanish Inquisition⁷. The Messianic Jews face us with all the wrongs inflicted on the Jews, but also with the extra issue of compelling Jewish believers in Jesus to renounce everything Jewish, a ruling that posed a cruel dilemma of conscience to many Jews who came to faith in Jesus through the Christian centuries.

The Overall Challenge

By way of conclusion, I would summarise the major challenges presented to the Catholic Church by the Evangelical Christian dynamism as follows:

First, through this and other challenges the Holy Spirit is leading the Church into a deeper understanding of what renewal of the Church really means. Renewal does not just mean theological re-thinking, nor does it just mean rearrangement. Following the Council, many Catholics, including myself, thought that renewal meant theological aggiornamento.

The Evangelical-Pentecostal-charismatic movements challenge us really to believe in the Creed we profess. It means believing in the living Lordship of Jesus, who is ever pouring out his Holy Spirit from the throne of the Father. I have been privileged to take part in weeks of prayer and fasting, where we had no program for the week and sought the leading of the Spirit day by day. Yes, we had a general sense of why we should come together, but for the actual working out of the details, we depended on the Holy Spirit. I belong to a committee that meets twice a year for three or four days, and we always allocate the first day to fasting and prayer, and only start on the business agenda on the second day. It is evident that these meetings produce more fruit than any others in which I have taken part, in many of which the agenda is determined beforehand and an opening prayer is said, without any expectation that it will change anything. As a church, we must learn to trust in the Holy Spirit, and discover that we will not be let down.

The Evangelical challenge reminds us of the biblical basis for all authentically Christian faith. But the changed perspective towards the Jewish people reminds us that an authentic understanding of the Scriptures will be based on an understanding of their Israelite-Jewish character, including the New Testament. Real renewal means a deep grounding in the Bible, and a deep understanding of the essential relationship between Israel and the Church.

Another element in authentic renewal that the Holy Spirit opens up is the need for repentance of past sin, not just individually but as a people, as church. We have lived 40 years of renewal since the Council, but it is only in the last ten years that the repentance dimension is coming to the fore. As I have just said, this challenge is coming especially from the Jewish question. But the confession of our sins against the Jews has to lead on to a confession of past sins against other Christians. In fact in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* John Paul II had specifically

⁶ “And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it, says the Lord.” (Ez. 37: 13 – 14).

⁷ The work of both study commissions led to conferences in Rome, whose papers have now been published.

mentioned sins against unity as particularly requiring our confession⁸. The following he returned to the theme of the confession of past sins in his encyclical on ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), where he expands the understanding of dialogue, saying that all ecumenical dialogue is necessarily also a corporate examination of conscience. The lack of repentance in the many ecumenical dialogues is surely one of the major causes for the slow pace of ecumenical progress⁹. All these points indicate the centrality of *spiritual ecumenism* as first formulated by the Abbé Paul Couturier, canonised by the Second Vatican Council in the Decree on Ecumenism¹⁰, and reaffirmed by John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint*.

The Evangelical – Pentecostal challenge points us to the importance of Catholic – Evangelical relations for future ecumenism. They remind us of the importance for unity of a context of commitment to renewal. The lack of such a commitment in “mainline ecumenism” is one of the major reasons why most Evangelicals and Pentecostals are not interested in ecumenism. Relations with Evangelicals and Pentecostals are so important because they confront us directly with God: with the immediacy of our relationship to Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Appendix

(given in answer to a question)

These challenges are not just for the future. A process of receiving them is already under way. There is evidence that they can be grace and not just threat. For the picture is not only of growing tension between Catholics and Evangelicals, but also one of increasing contacts, shared initiatives and interaction. This has been made possible by the Catholic charismatic renewal, the first time that a stream of spiritual revival has impacted both Protestants and Catholics. The new doors opened by this renewal need to be welcomed by the Church authorities more than has so far been the case. It is quite astonishing for example that the Ecumenical Directory of 1993 makes no reference to charismatic prayer groups among its recommendations for joint prayer. Just as extraordinary is the recent report from the international Catholic – Evangelical Consultation, whose preamble lists the factors enabling Evangelicals and Catholics to get to know each other, without a single reference to the charismatic renewal, which has been the major factor for change¹¹. It is hard to believe that this omission is accidental.

Almost all the break-throughs in Evangelical – Catholic relations have occurred in the context of renewal. Among the most important developments have been the formation of the Round Table in Austria, a group that gathers key leaders from the renewal movement among Catholics and Lutherans, as well as free church leaders, Pentecostal, Evangelical and new charismatic. The Round Table is a more advanced pattern of relationship than we find in Britain, where there is friendly interaction though not a lot of collaboration through the British Charismatic Leaders conference. The Austrian group has committed itself to working together, and is producing theological reflections on the common task and the mutual challenges. Cardinal Schönborn has appointed a leader in the Catholic charismatic renewal as his personal delegate to the free churches, an imaginative appointment made outside the official ecumenical structures.

⁸ “Among the sins which require a greater commitment to repentance and conversion should be counted those which have been detrimental to the unity willed by God for his People.” (para. 34).

⁹ This seems to be more a description of what ecumenical dialogue ought to be, rather than what it has been, though interestingly the one bilateral dialogue to have been begun since *Ut Unum Sint*, that between Catholics and Mennonites, has included this dimension from the outset.

¹⁰ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, paras. 6 – 8.

¹¹ “Church, Evangelization, and the Bonds of Koinonia”, *Information Service*, P. C. P. C. U., 113 (2003, II & III, p. 85).

In Italy, a group called the Consultazione Carismatica Italiana meets regularly, with an annual conference bringing together Catholics and Evangelicals. It arose out of a friendship between a Catholic charismatic lay leader and a Pentecostal pastor. One fruit is a joint Catholic-Pentecostal choir that sings at various inter-church gatherings.

The Alpha course has led to much more Evangelical – Catholic sharing, not least among its authors. Nicky Gumbel, the principal author, has been remarkably assiduous in studying Catholic teaching in order to make the course more acceptable to Catholics. Every summer Holy Trinity Brompton have a two-week holiday-cum-retreat for their workers, and last summer they invited Fr Raniero Cantalamessa, the papal preacher, to join them. They ended up focusing very profitably on the issue of Mary.

A significant initiative whose inspiration is somewhat different comes from the United States, with the initiative Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT)¹². ECT produced its original declaration in 1994 and several more theological documents since. The motivation here has clearly been the need for Catholics and Evangelicals to work together in the public arena to combat the inroads of secularism and of situation ethics. Its purpose unlike the other initiatives mentioned has been to make public statements. The consequence has been considerable opposition from the Evangelical world (two signatories of ECT were quickly forced to withdraw their support through pressure from denominational headquarters), though there was minimal Catholic reaction. A later ECT document on salvation has drawn heavy Evangelical fire.

Interestingly, a charismatic Irish group took up the US document Evangelicals and Catholics Together, and adapted it for Irish use, adding two more practical conclusions: We Pray Together and We Repent Together. In this context, there is much less Evangelical opposition.

¹² The original ECT statement and six essays by its authors are found in Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus (eds.), *Evangelicals & Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dalls, TX: Word Publishing, 1995).