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Catholic-Methodist-Pentecostal: A Trialogue?

BY RALPH DEL COLLE

The report of the eighth round of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council in 2006, entitled *The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church* (henceforth, *GGC*), represents the culmination of a series of dialogues in which the goal of “the restoration of Christian unity” is understood as “full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life” (*GGC*, n. 12). In the preceding years the following reports were made: *Toward an Agreed Statement on the Holy Spirit* (Honolulu Report, 1981), *Towards a Statement on the Church* (Nairobi Report, 1986), *The Apostolic Tradition* (Singapore Report, 1991), *The Word of Life - A Statement on Revelation and Faith* (Rio de Janeiro Report, 1996), and *Speaking The Truth In Love: Teaching Authority Among Catholics And Methodists* (Brighton Report, 2001). As is fairly evident the logic of these themes leads to the 2006 Report, *The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church* (I emphasize the subtitle), which really does intend a deeper examination of where Catholics and Methodists have arrived since the 1986 statement. In other words, work has been done to promote the full communion that is desired.

It is a remarkable document. There is not only mutual reassessment and a new statement on the nature of the Church, but a prospectus as well on how in light of present consensus between the two communions, which is given in detail, we may make further progress toward full communion. It pursues this within a pneumatological framework of a mutual “exchange of gifts” gleaned from Pope John Paul II’s encyclical letter of 1995, *Ut Unum Sint* (n. 28), and further parses full communion in relationship to faith, sacramental life, and mission. Before going further, one must ask in regard to this possible triologue, so to speak, whither Pentecostals?

I raise this issue early on before pursuing the particulars of the document because expectations must be considered. Clearly, the goal of the Catholic-Methodist dialogue is full communion in order to answer the

prayer of our Lord for the unity of his disciples (Jn 17:21). This has not been the case for the international Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue. As was stated in the Fourth Phase’s Report (1990-1997), *Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness*, “The goal is not structural unity, but rather the fostering of this respect and mutual understanding between the Catholic Church and classical Pentecostal groups” (n. 2). The same sentiments have been repeated in final report of the fifth phase that is soon to be published. From a Catholic perspective the dialogue with the World Methodist Council has begun to deal with those issues that must be addressed if full communion is ever to happen. I am not saying that this is some sort of stampede toward the goal, but with no pun intended it has been clearly methodical. Between the reports on the nature of the Church – the two decades from 1986 to 2006 – they have examined the themes of apostolic tradition, revelation and teaching authority, due most likely in part to the inspiration of the British Methodist ecumenist, Geoffrey Wainwright, co-chairman of the dialogue. Consensus on the nature and mission of the Church is possible only by working through these theological loci. Otherwise, whatever we attempt to say about ecclesiology and ecclesiality (what is properly church) will not be substantial enough for the full communion that is desired.

So where does this leave Pentecostals as well as Wesleyans who do not identify with mainstream Methodism and the World Methodist Council? My first observation is historical. Methodism, it could be argued, by being once removed from Anglicanism, never directly broke from the Catholic Church, and although it inherited traces of anti-Catholicism, it retained an ethos for some catholic sensibilities (lower case)

that has served it well for its not infrequent leadership in the ecumenical movement. Chapter One of *GGC* entitled, “Mutual Reassessment,” gives a good account of the progress made in the respective views of each communion vis-à-vis the other concluding with the new hermeneutical perspectives that are the fruit of an engaged ecumenism.

If I may summarize the genius of Methodism – more accurately its gift – it is its intention to hold together evangelical awakening with the means of grace. In fact, the very dilemma that confronted John Wesley with regard to the American movement leading to the consecration of Thomas Coke as superintendent, inscribed a tension within Methodism that has not been without its fruit. If that event signified that ecclesial order would always be in the service of mission, it also inscribed a memory that links Methodism to its roots in the Anglican communion, wherein Methodism’s inherent connectionalism co-exists with the anomaly that John Wesley never broke with the Church of England. Therefore, while ecclesiastical structures may vary and Methodism has been willing to yield its identity in united and uniting churches, it is also defined by its original charism – and therefore always a source of renewal – of spreading scriptural holiness, being in mission, and maintaining a connectional ecclesiology. I am not saying that Methodism has always been successful in this endeavor but the possibilities still exist for a creative synthesis of evangelicalism and sacramentalism.¹

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Wesleyan-Holiness movement as one of its tributaries and is largely "free church" in its liturgical and ecclesial sensibilities with a very diverse set of ecclesiastical polities in the movement. While Pentecostalism has not suffered some of the effects of being mainstream – I am thinking of the "broad church" tendencies in United Methodism that can militate against a truly Wesleyan renewal (which I think is inconceivable without an appreciation for the existential verities of Christian doctrine) – it also is not in a position to pursue full visible unity with other ecclesial communions. If Methodism at its best still preserves the integration of evangelical piety and sacramental practice, Pentecostalism and the Wesleyan-Holiness movements have not. This simply means that it would be difficult to conceive the type of ecumenical consensus with Catholics to emerge that we see in *GGC*. Initially then (speaking personally) I am a bit stumped. How does one get Pentecostals in on this (to me) very exciting ecumenical conversation?

If the criteria of engagement are the issues of ecclesiality that the report enunciates then the prospects are not that hopeful. It is not that Pentecostals are not beginning to develop a distinctive ecclesiology; indeed that is taking place. Rather it is more of a question of whether ecclesiology will become the point of engagement with other communions. This is not peculiar to Pentecostalism. It generally characterizes free church ecclesiology for which it is simply the case that visible unity mediated by ecclesial structures is not a priority. For the free church tradition spiritual unity in Jesus Christ, along with congregational autonomy in some cases, take precedence. My intention is not to demean such ecclesiologies but simply to suggest what types of ecumenical conversations are possible. Mutual understanding, cooperation, and the enhancement of spiritual ecumenism are worthy goals and may be sufficient in some bilateral dialogues. But this is different than "full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life" that the dialogue between the Holy See and the World Methodist Council aspires to. However, is there a theological intersection between these two approaches, specifically, in regard to Catholics, Methodists, and Pentecostals?

The first point to be made is that spiritual ecumenism is not insignificant. It is at the very heart of ecumenism. As stated in the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*:

This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and merits the name 'spiritual ecumenism.' (n. 8)

Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, in his new short book, *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism*, expands on this notion when he describes spiritual ecumenism as "a spiritual process, carried out in faithful obedience to the Father, following the will of Christ, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."²² John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint* reiterated that "the actual practice of the ecumenical journey toward unity" requires "interior conversion" (n. 15) and the primacy of prayer (n. 21) since "unity... [is]... bestowed by the Holy Spirit" (n. 9). This ecumenical journey is a movement from "partial communion... toward full communion in truth and charity" (n. 14), one that from a Catholic perspective entails "a unity constituted by the bonds of the profession of faith, the sacraments and hierarchical communion" (n. 9).

As I have reviewed, the Catholic-Methodist dialogue embraces all of these dimensions, the spiritual and the ecclesial. If full communion happens, it will indeed be a gift of the Holy Spirit. Herein lies the connection to Pentecostalism. Methodism reminds us that movements take ecclesial form. In its case, the instituted means of grace in the sacraments were never ignored even as innovative forms of pastoral care were established, therefore solidifying its break with Anglicanism. Pentecostalism

also instituted varied forms of pastoral ministry and ecclesiastical polities with a movement sensibility filled with primitivist and restorationist impulses and eschatological passion. To the extent that the dynamics of mission prevailed the ecclesial form was secondary. Methodism, on the other hand, by virtue of being mainstreamed and its proximity to Anglican separation, entered the ecumenical movement early and with a clear intentionality towards organic unity. Long story short, ecclesial communions have different ecclesial vocations that must be realized in faith and obedience.

I do not expect Pentecostalism necessarily to transition into a classic Faith & Order ecumenism that seeks full ecclesial communion. The Holy Spirit is full of surprises; I'm willing to be surprised. In the meantime I can anticipate the following configuration that can characterize Pentecostal ecumenism. First, it signifies the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in which the Church exists and on which the Church depends for the fulfillment of our Lord's prayer for unity. Second, this signification attains its authenticity in both holiness and mission. Here we reconnect with its Methodist heritage. Third, the transdenominational aspect of Pentecostal outpouring underscores the service Pentecostalism renders to the church catholic. In other words, Pentecostalism contributes to the spiritual ecumenism without which doctrinal progress in faith & order would remain soulless. Let me elaborate.

The signification of Pentecost is manifested in signs and wonders. One has to consider the providential meaning of the Pentecostal outpouring at the beginning of the last century. Largely outside the established churches – after peeling off from the

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holiness movement – one must query why this gift was given and received outside the ecclesial gates so to speak.

If the unity of Christians is indeed a gift from God requiring our prayer as much as our work, then we must have a robust doctrine of divine providence. All things working together for the good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28) applies to ecclesial communions as well as to individual believers. Although one cannot map the ways of divine providence; it surely does speak to the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. In the case of ecclesial communions, following our multiple separations and divisions, we may query how these events that generated our present ecclesial identities contribute to our future unity and to our present ecclesial praxis to attain that goal. Here again I invoke Pope John Paul II who spoke of ecumenism not simply as an addition to the work of the Church but as the way of the Church (*UUS*, n.7). So, it is quite important to discern the signs of Christian unity and proceed in co-operation with them. In the case of this trialogue, it seems to me that we must trust and hope in the multi-dimensionality of God's providence. Let me explain.

Perhaps you have picked up from my remarks thus far that I am a bit wistful about this trialogue. On the one hand, I am enthusiastic about the progress made in the Catholic-Methodist dialogue. On the other hand, I am struggling to identify the theological and ecumenical meaningfulness of Catholic-Pentecostal dialogue – one in which I participated in for nine years at the international level – not in terms of its relevance but in regard to Christian unity. I happen to think that it is very relevant but one must be honest that unity is not a proximate goal if it is even a distant one. Additionally, historic Methodism – and I am fully aware that I am in part working with an ideal ecclesial type in my head – contains and is the source of the particular strain of evangelical piety that attracts me to Pentecostalism. This can lead to a certain level of frustration if the former can proceed so far toward Christian unity while the latter in some cases is still debating the issue. Therefore, I will return to thinking this through theologically in reference to the doctrine of providence.

*So, are we kin? Most certainly!
Sanctification and power, evangelization
and mission, all of which requires
human agency touched by and enabled
by the Spirit.*

The beginnings of both the Pentecostal and Ecumenical movements roughly coincided in the first decade of the twentieth century; 1906 for Azusa Street and 1910 for the Edinburgh conference. Both had aspirations for Christian unity, something that is not always recognized for Pentecostalism. The birth of Pentecostalism from within the Wesleyan-holiness movement certainly signified the intrinsic importance of sanctification for its identity; confirmed in my view by the “finished work” controversy that eventually split it. The passion for holiness was clearly on both sides. Additionally, one must not forget the earlier split of holiness folks from mainstream Methodism because of their judgment concerning the diminution of the doctrine of entire sanctification in the mainstream. On the other hand, this reinforced sectarian and legalistic tendencies among the “comer-outers.” Therefore, the challenge that the children and grandchildren of Methodism pose is whether or not their representation of God's work – holiness as a work of grace for Wesleyan-holiness and charismatic power in mission for Pentecostals – will benefit the church catholic, or not. This entails reception on the part of the so-called historic churches and the avoidance of sectarianism on the part of the movements. The question that remains is whether the originating charism of each takes ecclesial form with an ecumenical intentionality. Methodism has arrived at this; Pentecostalism has not.

This does not necessarily negate the signification, even an ecclesial one that shapes the identity of Pentecostalism. This signification as evidenced in signs and wonders points to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit within which the Church exists. The charismatic renewal, which was truly transdenominational, was and still is a sign of the charismata that the Church needs and God generously bestows. In other words,

it is for the sake of the Church that the Pentecostal movement exists. While this is true for mission and world evangelization, one must recognize that the Church is the agent of such mission and itself exists in mission by virtue of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Let me be clear that as a Catholic I am affirming, not denying, that what we call ecclesial elements exist in Pentecostalism, apart from their own internal debates about ecclesiology and their movement ethos. Whether Pentecostals simply signify this outpouring without an ecclesial form that moves towards full communion that Methodists seem to have accomplished I leave to Pentecostals and the providence of God. That Methodism has done so provides a worthy model for all of us, including Pentecostals and their holiness cousins, and from which even Catholics have learned as *The Grace Given You in Christ* demonstrates.


So, are we kin? Most certainly! Sanctification and power, evangelization and mission, all of which requires human agency touched by and enabled by the Spirit. A social diakonal witness is also embraced. But the threshold is the Church, its nature and mission, as the World Council of Churches' Faith & Order has labored over for more than a decade.³ For it is there that the divine-human agency of its glorious Head will enable his body to profess truth in love and grow toward full maturity by building itself up in love (Eph 3: 15-16). I say that as a member of a communion that strongly believes – and I want to say this honestly and humbly if that's possible – that unity already exists in the Church of Christ, whereby it also subsists in the Catholic Church “as something she can never lose and that we hope will continue to increase, until the end of time” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 4). Where does that leave the Catholic Church? I close with the

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words of John Paul II, and please try to catch the nuance.

The elements of this already given Church exist, found in their fullness in the Catholic Church and, without this fullness, in the other Communities, where certain features of the Christian mystery have at times been more effectively emphasized. (*Ut Unum Sint*, n. 14)

I want to stress the last clause – where at times certain features of the Christian mystery have been more effectively emphasized. I did not say – I don't think anybody has said – that ecumenism would be easy. 

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Notes:

1. See the *Study Guide & Text of By Water and the Spirit*, by Gayle Carlton Felton, (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2007), p. 4.
2. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007), p. 12.
3. See their Faith and Order Paper no. 198: *The Nature and Mission of the Church – A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*.

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of course the emergence of “centripetal” tendencies is a sign of ecumenical openness, so this topic could be engaged fruitfully.

Finally, I wonder if a result of such a dialogue might be not only contribution to existing body of literature on ecumenical relations, but could it also begin to envision new forms of ecumenical cooperation between our churches and church traditions. Could we develop some provisional ecclesial structures that would express emerging unity beyond the bounds of existing, formal agreements between churches? A “post-modern” (or, entrepreneurial?)

approach to unity? Ecumenical dialogue with the intent of forming an alliance of congregations and perhaps individuals who agree to begin “living into” ecumenical commitments, apart from (but with the knowledge of) our denominational structures? That might add an exciting element to discussions between Methodist, Pentecostal, Holiness, and Catholic churches. 

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Notes:

1. John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven By Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998); David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).
2. This is laid out in a forthcoming volume on *The Gospel in Christian Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, scheduled for publication in October 2008).

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