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Pentecostals and Catholics: On Learning to Read the Fathers Together

Introduction by Dale M. Coulter

The most recent final report of the International bilateral dialogue between Pentecostals and Catholics marks the fifth phase in a series of meetings that began with initial talks in 1970. Needless to say, the dialogue has advanced considerably from the attempt simply to understand one another's confessional traditions (First Phase, 1972-1976) to learning how to read the Fathers together in light of those traditions (Fifth Phase, 1998-2003). The primary aim of the international dialogue remains mutual understanding and appreciation, but the most recent report sets a different tone by utilizing Patristic resources as a common hermeneutical lense through which to view one another.

Pentecostalism emerged from the holiness movement of the late 19th century. With its emphasis on the sanctifying and charismatic activity of the Spirit, Pentecostalism has much in common with Catholic spirituality in its medieval (The Victorines, Bernard of Clairvaux) and early modern representatives (Frances de Sales, Frances Fenelon). It is the subterranean streams of this spirituality, and their slow discovery, that has continued to generate positive results in each phase the bilateral dialogue.

At the recent Pentecostal/Catholic dialogue hosted by the Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS), Teresa Rossi of the Centro Pro Unione and Glen Menzies of North Central University offer some theological reflections on the final report, *On Becoming a Christian: Insights from Scripture and the Patristic Writings*. The dialogue took place during the SPS annual meeting at Eugene Bible College, Eugene, Oregon.

In their own way, the reactions to the final report by the two presenters reveal just how far the international dialogue has come. Reading these reflections causes one to consider Teresa Rossi's claim that Pentecostal and Catholic participants have moved beyond mutual understanding, or as Glen Menzies puts it "an emerging convergence of perspectives," and call their respective communions to do the same. While barriers remain, as these respondents suggest, *On Becoming a Christian* marks an important turning point in the conversation.

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On Becoming a Christian: Reflections and Insights

By Teresa Francesca Rossi

Praise to God that “this dialogue is the oldest and most continuous bilateral dialogue.”¹ I joyfully agree with this affirmation (n.260) of the *Report of the Fifth Phase of the Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Some Classical Pentecostals*, because, to me, it is one of the most interesting bilateral dialogues in which the Catholic Church is involved – “improbable”² – but courageous and fresh both in contents and in methodologies.

It is a remarkable document, convergent in some common important statements, as well as honest in assessing differences and disagreements, which call for further dialogue; it is also a meaningful and inspiring text for every Christian, not only for professional theologians. The methodology used is rich and promising as well, the presence of two sources of reflection (the Bible and the Fathers) well represent the “exchange of gifts” in this dialogue. While the comprehensive common reference and authority remains the Bible, the quotations from the Fathers – though, as the text points out several times, have been meant in a very different way, and in no way are authoritative for Pentecostals – are quite interesting.

My own Reading of the Report

The document entitled, *On Becoming a Christian: Insights from Scripture and the Patristic Writings with Some Contemporary Reflections*, offers reflections on: 1) conversion, 2) faith, 3) formation/discipleship, 4) experience, 5) Baptism in the Spirit and Christian Initiation. I will follow this “sequence” in my reflection, taking conversion as the red thread, a *ductus*, that crosses through the whole essay to its single parts.

1) Conversion

Is conversion an event or a process? This is the first problematic aspect the *Report* surveys. The *Report* concludes (n.57) that it is both and attempts to sketch out a sort of “pattern for becoming a Christian,” which functions as a “pattern for conversion,” by gathering up and ordering the elements implied in the stories of conversion: the proclamation of the message about Jesus, its acceptance in faith, baptism, the laying on of hands, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the entrance into the community (n.70). The question still remains open, however, as to what is primary in conversion and the consequences that are drawn from these statements.

2) Conversion and Faith

There is a circular hermeneutics between faith and conversion, since faith implies conversion but faith is also the approach to

conversion. The term *metanoia*, in fact, in its original sense of “adopting another view” or “later knowledge” (from the Greek term *metanoeo* - “to note after, later”)³ points toward this circularity because faith is precisely that reality which structures the mindset in a different way, thus allowing us to “convert;” faith opens up the possibility of grasping reality under a different perspective. For this reason, the reference to the Fathers of the Church is very appropriate since they played a relevant role in articulating the faith in a way that offers interesting links with the contemporary scene; the Fathers of the Church, in fact, may only appear to look distant from modern sensibilities, since, I think, their times mirror very closely our times in important respects (cf. nn. 264, 266, 269). Thus, from the Fathers’ reflection, three main directions seem particularly relevant to me for our times:

a. The Christological centrality of the content of faith (*fides quae*, mentioned in the text, n.79 and n.84), as the Fathers were the first ones to attempt – and succeed – at engaging themselves, and Christian faith, with human reasoning in relation to the credibility of revelation. While reaffirming the existential character of Symbols of faith as expression of a vital belief, nevertheless, I still want to emphasize the need for the “rational” or “cognitive” dimensions of them.

b. The new and special character of knowledge that faith involves and implies. After the tragic experience of the 20th century, which posed faith outside the universal grasp of reason, some philosophers and scholars reacted by evaluating faith as a fundamental act for the exercise of human conscience, which constitutes the basis for the exercise of reason and critical knowledge, rather than being alien to it.

c. The apologetical aspect of faith, which was meant to fight heresy at the time of the Fathers, could be recognized today too in the necessity to single out and fight those attitudes of “practical” heresy, which spring from the “choice” of what is important and what is not important, what is necessary for salvation and what is not, which part of the Christian message to live while leaving aside other parts.

As we are called today to re-articulate our faith in a very different way from the last century, conversion might be considered as one “function” of faith, going back to its original meaning of *metanoeo*: changing our mind in order to have a different view of faith and reason.

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Ecumenical Trends

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As we are called today to re-articulate our faith in a very different way from the last century, conversion might be considered as one “function” of faith, going back to its original meaning of metaneo: changing our mind in order to have a different view of faith and reason.

3) Conversion and Discipleship

The fascinating description of discipleship as the very fact of “being with Jesus,” “staying with him,” and witnessing what is seen (nn.100-105) is linked with the idea of Christian formation as the realization of the talents received in and for the community (n.111). It is an important approach that should be emphasized. Rather than the customary contemporary emphasis on the individual aspect of faith, the biblical witness shows just the opposite journey, from the collective call of the people by God to the collective response performed by someone in charge of the community and all the way to the individual response of the person who belongs to the people and is, therefore, embodied in the call. An interesting line of reflection here is given by the stories of the first martyrs: martyrdom points toward the very essence of Christianity and the greatness of the Fathers is also due to the fact that their theological work was often sealed by martyrdom. Martyrdom shows the reality of a Christianity that preaches a message of contradiction to the ways of the world and that distinguishes Christians: this very basic component of Christian identity was much more present in the Fathers’ writings and the people’s mind in ancient times, especially in the “pride” involved in bearing the name of “Christian” as clearly shown by the *Acta Martyrum*, which report of many episodes of martyrdom due to the very proclamation of the Christian name.

4) Conversion and Experience

It is in our experience that all we believe and practice finds its cradle, its starting and ending point, in conversion. Even though the term “experience” is a polysemic one, and is very different in the two traditions (n.188) – Catholic experience being informed by sacramental symbolism, devotional imagery and expressions, contemplation and silence, while Pentecostal experience is shaped by praise gatherings, biblical preaching, signs, wonders, and charismatic manifestations – such a difference could also be seen as a powerful image of complementarity of the two traditions, which may be turned into a mutually enriching sharing.

It may be significant to highlight some common experiences that may occur to any faithful person and that may relate conversion to these diverse notions of experience. When it comes down to conversion, I think that we should distinguish between two different conditions under which the faithful could be found: 1) the

conversion occurring at the very moment of embracing Christianity and 2) that revision of life that is constantly asked for by the Christian message. In fact, there seems to be two different movements, so to speak, in the two processes. In the conversion from either atheism or another religion occurring at the initial embrace of Christianity, there is contact with the *kerygma*, then an act of the will orienting itself to God, and then a change of life that involves also distancing oneself from the forms of the culture in which one was previously rooted. In the second process there is already a strong sense of belonging to the community, and what is needed is to recognize what in the actual behavior and forms of life is not in accordance with the purity of the *kerygma*. In both movements and experiences there is a strong link with “time”, though in a different way: in the first experience, the *kerygma* is linked to time in the “gospel” of the Kingdom of God realized here, that is, already begun, and yet as *eschaton*, to be realized. This “good news” determines all the rest, namely, the change of one’s mind, lifestyle, and belonging to a community (*kerygma*- lifestyle revision-community). In the second experience, time still has a key-role in the perception of the believer, insofar as one realizes how little time there actually is to convert more and more and to receive the message with the freshness and the breaking force it had when one joined the faith. In the second sense of conversion, the movement is the opposite: from the community in which one is rooted to the *kerygma* through the judgement of our deeds (community – lifestyle revision – *kerygma*).

5) Baptism in the Spirit and Christian Initiation

The agreed, foundational statement that “in order to become Christian, one is called to be baptized” (n.75), is to some extent reduced in its impact by the affirmation about “disagreements which still divide concerning the nature, timing, stages and communal dimensions of becoming Christian” (n.89), which include also the necessity of “water baptism as the *primary* basis for entry into the Christian life” (n.27, cf. n.281). It is a substantial difference that calls for further dialogue on the different reading and hermeneutics of Scripture in this regard. I think that also the reflection on some elements from the wider contemporary ecumenical dialogue might offer stimulating thoughts for Roman Catholic-Pentecostal RC/P dialogue.⁴ The recent Joint Working Group (JWG) Document on Baptism reaffirms the sacramental character of Baptism, thus putting it in the wider framework of a life-long process: Christian initiation is a process of “decisive moments, in which significant stages of life in Christ are first realized and manifested. These moments taken together can be called Christian initiation. They are moments of faith and conversion, of ritual celebrations and of entry into the life of the Church. Baptism is at the heart of the process, both as decisive moment and as model of the entire process.”⁵ The JWG Document goes even further when it uses the concept of a “pattern of baptismal initiation,”⁶ which is a three-fold pattern: formation in faith, baptism in water, and participation in the life of the community. These three elements are also present, though in different ways, in the rite of water Baptism itself. The concept of Baptismal initiation as a “pattern” that might be articulated in a variety of ways, though maintaining the essential elements,⁷ could be a useful insight for further RC/P discussion. Conversely, the RC/P reflection on the relationship between conversion, faith, and

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discipleship as primary elements in Baptism, could be enriching for the wider ecumenical milieu.

On Becoming a Christian calls both for continuing conversion and a faith expressed concretely in everyday life. Throughout the whole *Fifth Report* the need for authentic Christian acting, a new ethical orientation has been emphasized several times: as an aspect of conversion, faith, baptism of repentance, and holiness (nn.44, 62, 77, 170). The ethical commitment of Christians is strictly related to Baptism, as has been emphasized in an important ecumenical document.⁸ The *Ditchingham Report* reflects upon the “ethical economy” of Baptism in a way which, I believe, is perfectly parallel to what has been described as requirements for an authentic Christian witness to the world in the *Fifth Report*, which posed to me the question: what kind of echo might this text have for a Pentecostal reflection on Baptism? On the other hand, the same *Ditchingham Report* states: “Baptismal ethics affirms the pneumatological character of Christian life (n.55). . . . [T]he Spirit imparts itself with gifts of holiness and virtue (n.57). . . . The vows of baptism point to the ethical task of making this world free from evil so that ‘the Spirit may abound’ and may be known all the more” (n.64).⁹ This statement calls for a deeper pneumatological reflection that the Ecumenical Movement should engage in, and, in this regard, the common reflection of the RC/P dialogue, particularly the Pentecostal approach, would be an inestimable gift.¹⁰

On Becoming a Christian calls both for continuing conversion and a faith expressed concretely in everyday life.

Conclusion


Let me conclude by sketching out an overall evaluation of the *Fifth Report*, as well as some remarks about future dialogue. “The goal of this dialogue is to foster this respect and understanding between the Catholic Church and the Classical Pentecostal Churches rather than to seek structural unity” (n.3). While this statement certainly remains true, the overall consideration of the RC/P *Final Reports*, from 1977 up to now, gives room to consider whether what has been accomplished is more than simply respect and understanding.

An outstanding achievement reached by the *Report* is that it presents a variety of ways in which the faithful and the community receive the Holy Spirit and His gifts, witnessed in the biblical passages as well as in patristic sources (respectively nn.201-207, 208-217); the *Report* also recognizes and accepts that in the process of “becoming Christian” both the sacramental and experiential approach could be seen as complementary (e.g., n.172 and n.233).¹¹

A further important result is that the *Fifth Report* introduces – I would say for the first time, at least in such a clear way in RC/P dialogue – the idea of “the faith of the Church through the ages”¹² as a point of reference for ecumenical dialogue and Church renewal, an area of common ecumenical reflection that may be continued.

The old motto about the specularity of the *lex orandi, lex credendi* and *lex agendi* sounds an invitation to RC/P dialogue to articulate in a more interactive way the different streams of their common reflection: important steps have been achieved on the level of the faith we share (*Third* and *Fifth Report*), as well as on the concern for a Christian-oriented action in the world (*Fourth Report*), but with respect to common investigation about ways of sharing the spiritual resources, the *lex orandi* might still be an issue in the future *agenda* of the dialogue (cf. n.113). A “hermeneutics of liturgy” (liturgical symbols, signs, and gestures used in the celebration of Baptism) could constitute a rich space for dialogue as it links sacramental theology and liturgy (fundamental for Catholics) with the need of “sensing the presence of the Lord” (n.166), through an experiential impact that is visible and sensory which Pentecostals feel to be an important aspect of religious experience (cf. nn.161, 166, 186).

Ongoing reflection on the gifts of the Spirit has been grounded by and large in the underpinning principle of the *variety* of such manifestations given to each faithful person, individually. As the *Fifth Report* emphasizes, the key role of the community in conversion, faith, discipleship, experience, and Christian initiation, future RC/P reflection on the subject could take as a starting point the *unity* of these gifts and manifestations.¹³

The *Fifth Report* is a source of hope and inspiration. My wish for each one of us is that, as we are part of those “generations of Christians” (n.185) who have lived and witnessed faith, by our “becoming Christians” more authentically, we may grow in joy and happiness. 

Notes:

1. International Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Some Classical Pentecostals, *On Becoming a Christian: Insights from Scripture and the Patristic Writings with Some Contemporary Reflections*. Report of the Fifth Phase of the International Dialogue between Some Classical Pentecostal Leaders and the Catholic Church (1998-2006), in “Information Service” (2008) III, n.129, pp.162-215.
2. Cf. K. McDonnell, “Classical Pentecostal/Roman Catholic Official Dialogue: Improbable Conversations,” *One in Christ* 1/2 (1995): 20-31, 110-121.
3. The meaning of “subsequent emendation” and therefore of “to change one’s mind”, “to repent”, “to convert” as it is used in the New Testament is a derived meaning.
4. Cf. the Commission on Faith and Order Faverges and the Ditchingham Consultations (1997-2000), the WCC and the RC/WC Joint Working Group (JWG), and the Document *Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of the Common Baptism* (2006).
5. Joint Working Group between the RCC and the WCC, *Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of a Common Baptism*, in ID., *Eight Report*, Geneva, n.34.
6. *Ibid.*, n.52.
7. “In the current ecumenical discussion three dimensions of the common pattern of baptism are noted – three distinct ways to understand the scope of this pattern. First of all, in the most basic sense, baptism refers to the liturgical water rite and the pattern for its celebration. Second, baptism may also refer to a wider pattern of Christian initiation, one that includes several components in addition to the specific liturgical rite of baptism. In a third sense, we may see that baptism points towards ongoing formation and responsible discipleship, where the pattern of our baptismal calling is worked out over a whole life”, *Ibid.*, n.18.

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A Pentecostal Response to *On Becoming a Christian*

By Glen W. Menzies

On *Becoming a Christian: Insights from Scripture and the Patristic Writings* appeared in October of 2007. This report is the result of the fifth phase of the International Pentecostal-Catholic Dialogue, which was conducted between 1998 and 2006. The report is detailed and substantial, running over 100 pages in length.

Ten Catholics and nineteen Classical Pentecostals participated in the discussions that led to the creation of this document. The Pentecostal Co-chair during this phase of the dialogue was the Rev. Dr. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. From 1998 through 2000 the Catholic Co-chair was the Rev. Fr. Kilian McDonnell. In 2001 Msgr. John A. Radano succeeded Fr. McDonnell in this role.

General Assessment

It is important to begin by noting what an extraordinary achievement this report is. Anyone who has experience writing reports by committee will understand the inherent difficulties. And, of course, these difficulties are compounded when the committee members hold significantly different opinions. The dialogue participants deserve great praise for producing such a substantial and helpful document.

The incorporation of extensive patristic evidence in the report also marks a very significant milestone. The citation of church fathers is unusual in Pentecostal documents and consequently extensive citation of patristic sources has not been characteristic of the past reports emanating from the International Pentecostal Catholic Dialogue. Therefore, the use of such evidence in this report is noteworthy and it marks an emerging convergence of perspectives. The explicit reference to “Patristic Writings” in the report’s subtitle signals the intention of the dialogue participants to highlight this area of convergence, as well as their awareness of this development’s significance.

Having said this, it is also important to point out the candid acknowledgment of the differing frameworks used by the two traditions in their assessment and appropriation of the various voices of the church fathers. Both traditions recognize the importance of the patristic evidence. Major disagreements appear to remain, however, concerning the degree of its authority, the unity of its testimony, and how the church fathers should be utilized in theological reflection. Explicitly noted is the tension between the Catholic perspective of an unfolding and deepening understanding of Christ’s revelation in history, on the one hand, and the Pentecostal view of the church’s spiritual decline followed by a twentieth-century restoration of the Apostolic Faith, on the other (§ 270).

Sola Scriptura or *Prima Scriptura*

Given the prominence of patristic materials in the report, it seemed somewhat surprising and inconsistent also to note the use of the Reformation slogan *sola Scriptura* in the report (§ 265). These days many Pentecostal scholars will acknowledge the misleading nature of this slogan since it is simply not the case that Pentecostals guide their belief and practice on the basis of Scripture alone.

Surely a better way to characterize the Protestant (and Pentecostal) position is with either *prima Scriptura* or *suprema Scriptura*. These slogans convey the idea that Scripture is the first and highest standard by which faith and practice are to be judged. Pentecostals also use their traditions, shared experiences, and reason to formulate theology, but always with the proviso that these constructions are subject to the ultimate authority of Scripture as God’s word to his people. Pentecostals sometimes look beyond Scripture because the Bible does not speak directly to every question that arises, including significant moral questions. At other times the thoughtful reflection of scholars from the past on biblical principles proves useful. Church tradition, the use of reasoning to extend principles taught in the Bible, and the spiritual experience of those advanced in the faith all may assist in helping the church to speak about issues on which Scripture is silent or unclear. Nevertheless, the church must always be reforming itself by comparing its teachings and practices to the standards found within Scripture and then correcting those teachings and practices whenever necessary.

Language about the Beginning of Christian Life

The report accurately notes that Pentecostals and Catholics often use different terms to describe the beginning of life in Christ, so it is not surprising that some of the terminology used seems a bit slippery. For instance, the English word “conversion” is used to mark off a complex of experiences or events involved in becoming a Christian, while the English word “repentance” is used in a narrower sense. In “repentance” one recognizes the error of his or her past life, expresses contrition for it, and reverses course (see esp. §§ 33-36). Although in other documents the words “conversion” and “repentance” are both often used to translate the same Hebrew and Greek words, *teshuvah* and *metanoia* respectively, in this report these words are generally translated with the English word “repentance”. This much is fine. However, a problem emerges from the fact that there is no specific word (e.g., *epistrophe*) that may be translated as “conversion” in the various biblical passages this report uses to explain the concept. So even though the report contains a section entitled “Biblical Perspectives on Conversion” (§§ 28-40), most of what is said about “conversion” in this section should be categorized as constructive theology not biblical exegesis.

The phrase “Christian initiation” is important in Catholic theology and it figures prominently in this report. It is not a biblical term and it is not a phrase Pentecostals normally use. Essential elements of Christian initiation are “proclamation of the Word, acceptance of the Gospel entailing conversion, profession of faith, baptism itself, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and admission to eucharistic communion” (§ 26). The “outpouring of the Holy Spirit” mentioned here is linked with the sacrament of confirmation.

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The report accurately notes that Pentecostals and Catholics often use different terms to describe the beginning of life in Christ, so it is not surprising that some of the terminology used seems a bit slippery.

Classical Pentecostals are uncomfortable with the notion that one does not fully become a Christian without external – one might even say “institutional” – rites such as baptism and confirmation. Although one’s salvation ultimately is a gift from God, according to the Catholic perspective it is mediated through the church and the rites of the church. For Pentecostals the conscious and inward experience of believing faith is immediately accompanied by God’s direct action conferring most particularly the salvific works of justification and regeneration, making one a Christian. While a public proclamation of this new life in the form of being baptized in water is both appropriate and an obedient response to a divine command, it is not an element necessary for the constitution of one’s new life in Christ, but rather announces and celebrates what God has already accomplished.

Baptism

A number of conversions described in the New Testament are discussed at length. While great care is taken to present this material honestly and fairly, this detailed treatment may obscure an obvious point: In the New Testament baptism never precedes believing faith. Some will raise the “household baptisms” as exceptions to this rule; but the evidence in these cases is too incomplete to portray these as clear exceptions. The New Testament pattern of faith preceding baptism is the foundation of the Classical Pentecostal insistence on “believer’s baptism.”

Several times the report mentions the decision of Augustine’s mother Monica not to baptize her son so that the “waves of temptation” which come with youth will not overwhelm him. Her desire was to reserve the grace of baptism for a later time when its virtue might not be so easily effaced by youthful lust. While the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* encourages infant baptism, the report suggests that Monica’s decision was not irresponsible.

What is left unstated in the report is that many in the early church delayed baptism due to fear that either no repentance, or only limited repentance, was available for sins committed after baptism. This fear likely informed Monica’s decision about her son.

Probably the most famous case of intentionally delayed baptism was that of Constantine the Great, who was baptized in 337 A.D., as he lay on his deathbed. Despite his unbaptized state, his “conversion” is usually dated to 312, when just prior to the decisive Battle of the Milvian Bridge Constantine saw a sign in the sky – probably a *chi rho* – and heard a voice say to him, “In this sign conquer.” At that moment he understood that he had been called by the

Christian God to take control of the Empire and end the persecution of Christians. These events, of course, quickly followed.

It is also worth noting that Constantine called and convened the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea while still unbaptized. Since it is God’s work to justify and regenerate, and the inward condition of Constantine’s heart seems little different in 312 from its state in 337, Pentecostals have trouble accepting that Constantine was not fully a Christian at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge or when he convened the Council of Nicaea, but rather became a Christian only as he was baptized and given communion by the Arian bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia.

Discipleship

An area the report explored profitably is the mutual concern of Catholics and Pentecostals with the problems of “nominal practice of the faith” and “cultural Christianity” (§§ 52, 55). While there was a great deal of agreement about the merits of the Catholic document *The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, with the Pentecostal participants recommending its wider use in Catholic circles, the Pentecostals were much less enthusiastic about the more common model of discipleship that begins with the baptism of infants and the catechizing of children (§ 52). There is no doubt that this method of discipleship has a long history in the church, but it may be that contemporary experience raises new questions about its efficacy.

In recent years both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have spoken about the urgent need to “re-Christianize” Europe, an implicit acknowledgment of the problem of widespread nominalism among that continent’s many self-described Christians. Similarly, every Catholic diocese in America has an “Office for Evangelization.” The primary purpose of these offices is not to turn non-Catholics into Catholics, but rather to turn those who are Christian in name only into vital Christians. Such initiatives strike Pentecostals as exceedingly positive developments, but they acknowledge a serious problem.

Since Pentecostals (as well as most Evangelicals) generally regard nominal Christians – including nominal Pentecostals – as un-regenerate, when Catholics recognize that some in their midst lack real spiritual vitality, Pentecostals resonate with their pain, and perhaps even feel it more intensely.

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A discussion of what constitutes “authentic graced experience” (or “How Christians discern that they are in the company of fellow Christians,” as Pentecostals would more likely express this idea) would be a logical follow up to the present report.

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day - 2010

By Cecil M. Robeck, Jr.

On June 14, 1910, some twelve hundred delegates gathered in the beautiful and blustery city of Edinburgh. They made their way to the great Assembly Hall of the United Free Church of Scotland. For the next ten days they would listen as speaker after speaker bore witness to what they had seen and what they had heard in the many strange lands where they worked. In this process of listening, sharing, and praying the delegates, drawn largely from the ranks of church and missionary society leaders and veteran missionaries, sought to discern how best to carry their message more effectively to the world. It was the message that “Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.”

Half a century later and an ocean away, the American landscape was being littered with the bodies of Civil Rights workers, victims of fear and of hatred. This handful of Civil Rights workers strove relentlessly against overwhelming odds to aid thousands of African Americans who for nearly a century had become increasingly disenfranchised as citizens in their own land. The witness that these Civil Rights workers brought to the American South was that things could change if these disenfranchised people could only register and begin to exercise their right to vote.

It had been a very long weekend in Jerusalem. Jesus had been crucified and buried. The crowds that had watched this dreadful display unfold had finally dispersed. And the disciples, now licking their wounds, had become private in their grief. Come Sunday morning, though, curious reports began to surface. His body was allegedly missing from the tomb. Some women had gone there, among them Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. But when they arrived they had found his tomb empty, his body gone. They reported that two men – or were they angels? – had met them there and told them that He had risen, just as he had promised he would.

There were those who said that they had seen him, too. Simon, for one, though we don't know the details. And Cleopas came with that rather unlikely story that he and a friend had walked with Jesus along the Emmaus Road, their minds still numb from grief – numb to the point of not really seeing the man who had joined them. They had talked, and finally invited this remarkable stranger to spend the night – just an act of ordinary hospitality from their perspective for it was getting late. Yes, there was something different about this stranger. Their hearts had burned within them as he exposed the Scriptures to them regarding the Christ.

It had taken his blessing and his breaking of bread for them finally to recognize Him. And there He was! He had been there all the time – on the road, in the discussion, and at the table! It must have been a time of real doubt, of minds that were in utter turmoil when they first recognized their guest. Their disbelief of the stranger's ignorance of recent events had been followed by disquieting intuition, and then suddenly, there was that flash of recognition! How can this be? These things don't happen in our day! Do they?

Witnesses! What good are they when no one believes them? If ever you have sat on a jury in a criminal case, you will know that witnesses play a very important role in the process of discovering

the truth. An accusation has been made. Someone has been arrested. Charges have been filed. And *you* must decide whether the evidence is sufficient to find the defendant guilty of the crime that has been charged.

Witnesses in the form of evidence may be largely intangible to the jury, like the logic that finds a motive, or fingerprints that signify a presence, or the mysteries of DNA that link a person to something else. Witnesses in the form of evidence can be more tangible if photographs have been taken, recordings made, a body has been found, or a weapon that can be linked both to the defendant and the crime are presented.

More commonly, we think of witnesses as people. They come with information and insight into the person on trial, or the person harmed, or the scene of the crime, or the events and circumstances surrounding the crime. Witnesses are critical to the truth-finding process because they contribute knowledge that cannot be obtained apart from the evidence they bring, their word – first hand knowledge that has a direct bearing on the case. So juries pay close attention to witnesses.

Sometimes witnesses do not remember things as clearly as they might. Memories are faulty. They are also subject to interpretation. Some witnesses may need to refresh their memories, or be prodded by certain questions. Sometimes, witnesses lie or at least shade the truth in order to facilitate an outcome of their liking, treating their memories like canvases on which it is still legitimate to brush more color.

Courts are aware of all of these possibilities, but they are also concerned for justice. That is why rules have been developed so that attorneys do not lead witnesses to speak in certain ways, to certain conclusions. That is why laws have been enacted to penalize witnesses who lie. The possibility of a charge of perjury can be a strong deterrent even to those who are strangers to truth. That is also why attorneys look for more than one witness to back up certain points. The trustworthiness of evidence can be destroyed if a single witness is impeached, but its value is greatly enhanced if that evidence can be corroborated by two or three witnesses. They may bring slightly different responses, like the Gospel writers did with their assortment of nuances embedded within their unique accounts of the same event. But in the mouths of these multiple witnesses, the basic narrative receives flesh and bones, their testimony becomes clear, and juries are able to make informed decisions that are consistent with the standards of justice that are sought in each case.

And then, even as the eleven and their friends listened to these accounts, Jesus joined them, inviting their scrutiny, offering them His hands and his feet as evidence that it was really He who stood among them. Although he extended His peace to them, one can imagine the tentative nature of that first meeting with the One for

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And then, even as the eleven and their friends listened to these accounts, Jesus joined them, inviting their scrutiny, offering them His hands and his feet as evidence that it was really He who stood among them.

whom they hoped, yet didn't quite dare to expect. Some may have gasped! In their initial fright and apprehension, some may have stepped back sharply as though he were a ghost, a distressed spirit, or some other apparition, while others held their ground, unsure of what to do next. Then the ice broke! There was joy and wonderment as Jesus asked for something to eat! So they gave him some broiled fish.

By the time Jesus had finished eating the fish, His friends must have begun to settle down. After all, ghosts don't eat, do they? While they may still have harbored questions or felt uneasy, at least they knew that now they were dealing with something, someone they understood. Flesh and bones. They were ready to hear Jesus speak to them, to bear witness to or explain what they were experiencing. So Jesus opened their minds.

He turned them once again to the Scriptures. He repeated the things he had told them long before he had been taken so cruelly from them. He reiterated that it was necessary for all that had been prophesied regarding Him, to be fulfilled. He reminded them again that he had predicted his suffering and resurrection, something that they still had difficulty believing. He restated, too, the message he had brought repeatedly throughout His ministry among them. It was a message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

Yes, this was the Jesus they knew! He stood now in their midst, engaging them in discussion just as He always had. As He reminded them of all that had transpired, they recognized the truth of his words. So Christ moved on from reminding them of the past and turned their attention to the future, beginning in Jerusalem. "You are witnesses to these things," He declared.

What things? Would they become witnesses to the Old Testament prophetic texts? To the place of suffering? To promises of resurrection? To the Good News of repentance required and forgiveness bestowed? To all of these things?

In the coming days they would, indeed, become compelling witnesses of "these things". Once they had received the Promise of the Father, "power from on high," they would carry the message of repentance and forgiveness to the ends of the earth. As the Apostle Peter would shortly inform the crowd on the Day of Pentecost, "Repent, and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." That message, the message of Jesus, would be proclaimed time after time by the Apostles (Cf. Acts 3:13-26; 4:10-12; 5:30-32; 10:34-43; 13:17-39).

In the years since Jesus walked the land with His disciples, the message of repentance and the forgiveness that is available only through Christ Jesus has not changed. Over the centuries, many more witnesses have joined that initial and ever billowing cloud of witnesses that urge us on to the finish line. The mandate remains the same, though those who are called upon to take the role of witnesses in our own generation have changed. The challenge is now ours!

Following the Apartheid era in South Africa, the world watched on tiptoes as the "Truth and Reconciliation" process unfolded. In that process, the quest for truth resulted in stories told of horrendous acts that had previously gone unresolved. Until they were brought to light in the court overseeing the process, these acts, like infected sores, had festered below the surface of the land, bringing violence and retribution. Mistrust, hatred, and retaliation, like angry red marks on an infected body marked the territory.

When confessions were made and repentance was obvious, grace through forgiveness was granted. This process did not deny that the horrendous acts had taken place. Nor did it attempt in any way to hide them or explain away either these acts or their consequences. What came from this reconciliation process were knowledge, understanding, and ultimately forgiveness. Losses were calculated, but in many cases guilt was pardoned. Truth was spoken, and absolution was conferred. In the end, the facts made visible through confession and repentance, helped to provide closure for those who had been suspended between hope and despair. In the end, repentance led to new possibilities for healing and true reconciliation.

In the same way, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was also a witness to the need for repentance and the fidelity of forgiveness. Africans and African Americans had experienced two hundred fifty years of slavery at the hands of other Americans, and another hundred years of prejudicial treatment and discrimination after they had been declared citizens. Dr. King bore witness not only to the evil nature of these acts, he pointed to their consequences. He warned of patience grown thin, of tempers on edge, of the potential for violence, and lost opportunities that come when repentance is refused.

But King did not revel in threats or grovel in appeals for repentance. He constructed an imaginary screen onto which he projected vivid images through his carefully chosen words. He shared a vision whose foundation was repentance and forgiveness, a vision in which the forgiver and the forgiven would build something new – together – one by repenting, and the other by forgiving.

It is King's vision, rooted in repentance and forgiveness that inspired those young Civil Rights workers to travel to places like Alabama, Mississippi, and elsewhere throughout the American South to see that African Americans were properly registered to vote. It was the pride of repentance refused or the conceit of repentance withheld, that led eventually to the murders of several young Civil Rights workers, and to "collateral damage" among those they tried to empower. It was the arrogance of repentance repudiated that led to the deaths of innocent children attending Sunday School in Birmingham, and through their deaths, to the witness that "we must substitute courage for caution."¹

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It was King's vision that prompted the U.S. Congress to respond with new voting laws that made it easier for those who for a century had endured a modified form of slavery when they were denied access to the ballot box. It was this vision that captivated the hearts and minds of millions of Americans when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed, "I have a Dream" and then proceeded to invite all of us to participate in that dream in a profoundly utopian vision of the future.

Dr. King made that dream viable not on the basis of might, or through a display of power, or by keeping the truth about ourselves hidden from view. He did it by demonstrating that people must take responsibility for their actions, answer for their culpability, and repent or turn away from their current trajectory of actions. King invited us into that dream, constructed not from the explosive displays of dominance. It was a dream fabricated from the much more fragile threads of humility, generosity, and ultimately forgiveness.

Dr. King made that dream viable not on the basis of might, or through a display of power, or by keeping the truth about ourselves hidden from view.

"You are witnesses of these things." Repentance and forgiveness are at the heart of Martin Luther King's legacy. Repentance and forgiveness formed the basis of the "Truth and Reconciliation" process that enabled South Africa to move through a turbulent time with minimal violence. Repentance and forgiveness are still at the heart of what the Church proclaims. That is why those who attended the 1910 Missionary Conference in Edinburgh gathered in that imposing assembly hall. That is why they listened intently to the stories told, the discussions that ensued, and the final proposals that were made.

Their most significant contribution would be the formation of a continuation committee chaired by John R. Mott to provide leadership to overcome the divisions that led some to declare that the Church had no message to offer until the message of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation among Christians was more than mere fantasy. And so that conference, which is often said to mark the emergence of the modern Ecumenical Movement, continues to summon Christians from around the world to pray and work for the unity of the Church

The task is still incomplete. Their witness has not yet found its mark. At one level, a century is not much time when placed in the balance opposite the centuries that led to the current state of division among Christians. Our memories of past snubs, sharp words, unilateral decisions, poorly shared visions, and corrupt self-serving actions are still very powerful. Our memories and accountings of our common history often do not seem to agree. Our histories developed largely in isolation from one another have produced harmful stereotypes and deep suspicion. There is no common mind among the followers of Jesus, and thus, there seems to be no common will. As a result, our rhetoric is often unchastened. Our words are more pointed than

they deserve to be. Our charges against one another are frequently unfair, given power only because we refuse to repent, to turn away from our present course, to change.

That good and holy things are done by Christians across the spectrum of the Church is not in question. That evil and unholy things have also been done by Christians, is much more difficult for us to admit. That is why the words of the Bishops in the *Decree on Ecumenism* 3, that throughout the history of the Church "serious dissensions appeared...for which, often enough, men of both sides were to blame" were so important to hear. That is why the words of his Holiness, John Paul II acknowledging the "infidelities to the Gospel committed by some of our brethren" and calling upon us to confess "our responsibilities as Christians for the evils of today" were so powerful.² It is time to take Dr. King's advice to heart and "substitute courage for caution" as we consider these things.

Several years ago I picked up a book by the mystery writer Greg Iles titled, *The Quiet Game*. It is set in Natchez, Mississippi, and it revolves around the unsolved murder of a young black man killed in 1968. Everyone *knows* who murdered him. They also presume that they all know *why* he was murdered. Yet it remains unsolved 40 years after the fact because the people in that community refuse to talk about it, hence the title, *The Quiet Game*.

As I read this book I found the following lines and I wondered whether they might not also apply to us.

This is a small town. In small towns there are sometimes truths that everyone knows but no one mentions. Open secrets, if you will. No one really wants to probe the details, because it forces us to face too many uncomfortable realities. We'd rather turn away than acknowledge the primitive forces working beneath the surface of society.³

Open secrets. Uncomfortable realities. Primitive forces.

These are the things from which enemies are created. These are the things that cry out for confession. These are also the things that make confession and repentance so difficult. Yet, these are the things about which witnesses cannot afford to maintain a wall of silence. In spite of the fact that it is so difficult to own up to such things, that was precisely the message to which Martin Luther King, Jr. bore witness as he sought justice through nonviolent means by calling a nation to repentance and forgiveness and then inviting them into his dream.

In a sense, that was the finding of the 1910 Missionary Conference, when it agreed that issues of faith and of order separated millions of Christians from one another. That was the finding of the Catholic Bishops at Vatican II when they noted that our current state of division "scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature."⁴ And that was what lay behind Pope John Paul II's invitation to join him in asking "pardon for the divisions which have occurred among Christians, for the violence some have used in the service of the truth and for the distrustful and hostile attitudes sometimes taken towards the followers of other religions."⁵

The Good News of Jesus Christ lies at the heart of it all. It is still the Good News rooted in repentance and flowering in

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Immigration Ministry: An Ecumenical Opportunity?

By John T. Ford, CSC

The axiom – “a picture is worth a thousand words” – seems particularly appropriate in the case of political cartoons which have a knack for capturing and caricaturing the core of a controversy.

During the congressional debates on immigration, a cartoon appeared in a Spanish-language newspaper: in the background, American workers were busy constructing a 12-foot high wall along the Mexican-American border; in the foreground on the Mexican side, a small hardware store was doing a brisk business selling 13 foot-high ladders. In this sample of Hispanic humor, the message is clear: the resourcefulness of determined immigrants can always out-manuever anti-immigrant laws.

The irony of this cartoon is that the United States has long prided itself as a land of opportunity welcoming immigrants. As the inscription on the Statue of Liberty eloquently states:

*“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”¹*

Another cartoon depicted the Statue of Liberty – blocking the entrance to the “golden door” and pointing her torch in the opposite direction, while admonishing a group of would-be immigrants: “Go back home you poor wretched refuse.”

The clear message of the second cartoon is that immigrants are unwelcome. Ironically, anti-immigrant sentiment is at odds with the basic American ethos of hospitality symbolized by the Statue of Liberty. Adding further irony to the immigration debate is the fact that 99% of Americans are either immigrants or immigrants’ descendants, who at most can trace their arrival back four centuries and in many cases much less. Even “Native Americans” – the other one per cent – are also descendants of immigrants who apparently arrived between fourteen and forty millennia ago.²

Motivation for Immigration

Immigrants today, like those of the past, have come to the United States for three main motives that are often interlocking: economic, political, religious.

[1] *Economic* reasons are probably the most common motivation for immigration. On the one hand, most immigrants come seeking an escape from poverty, a higher standard of living, a brighter financial future, a better way of life, than is currently available in their countries of origin. Immigration, now as in the past, is prompted by “the American dream.” Yet economics is a two-way street: immigrants come to the United States seeking employment and many employers are more than happy to hire energetic workers at minimum wages. On the other hand, while it is sometimes claimed that immigrants are taking employment-opportunities away from Americans, many of the jobs held by immigrants are low-paying jobs that few Americans would want or accept.

[2] *Political* motivation, though less common than economic motives, can be even more problematic. On the one hand, many immigrants are refugees from oppression, victims of violence, exiles seeking security, or persons displaced by war, genocide, etc. Some immigrants have been opponents of the government in their home country; their lives would be in danger if they returned to their own country; they have come to the United States in search of political freedom and legal asylum. On the other hand, some political refugees are in an anomalous situation: they have fled a country whose government has been supported by the United States.

[3] Although *religious* factors are presently a less common motivation for immigration, religious persecution still prompts some immigrants who – like the Pilgrims who came to the New World in search of religious liberty – were in jeopardy in their countries of origin, because of their religion. In recent years, for example, Christians have fled countries like Iraq and Israel; Central American church workers threatened by death squads have fled to the United States, etc.

Anti-Immigrant Policies

Although immigration has been practically continuous during the entire history of the United States, some people – like the Statue of Liberty in the cartoon – not only want to keep new immigrants out but also want to send all undocumented immigrants back home. While the rationale behind such proposals varies widely – from judicial concerns about legality and American identity, through economic interests about overpopulation and quality of life, to discriminatory attitudes rooted in prejudice and xenophobia, both proposals seem basically unrealistic.

First, in regard to stemming the tide of undocumented immigration, the U.S. border patrol – in spite of increased resources, including longer and higher walls along the border – to date, has been unsuccessful. As suggested by the cartoon of the store selling 13-foot ladders, resourceful immigrants find new ways of crossing the border.³ Unfortunately for the undocumented, the new routes for border crossing have become both more expensive – the *coyotes* (people who guide immigrants across the border) have increased their fees – and more dangerous – immigrants often risk their lives by trying to cross in remote places, such as desert areas.⁴

Second, the strategy of returning undocumented immigrants to their home countries has been minimally effective. The U.S. immigration service periodically rounds up undocumented immigrants – usually to the delight of reporters and observers – including people in the pews of many churches. However, these round-ups usually capture more headlines than people – a few dozen at a spa

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in Virginia, a hundred or so working at an airport, a thousand at meat processing plants in the mid-west, etc. But what are so few among so many?

In 2008, there were an estimated 11.6 million undocumented immigrants in the United States.⁵ In effect, a round-up of a thousand undocumented immigrants manages to capture only one undocumented immigrant out of every 11,600. Moreover, the thousand undocumented immigrants who are deported are quickly replaced by new undocumented immigrants in a single day.⁶ In addition, large round-ups are comparatively rare, because they are exorbitantly expensive – requiring considerable funds, first for planning, second for staging, third for imprisoning, and finally for processing the immigrants who have been captured. Statistically, the attempt to round up millions of undocumented immigrants is equivalent to trying to deport the entire population of the state of Ohio.⁷ Thus, measured both statistically and financially, round-ups are a grossly inefficient as well as a totally unrealistic response to the immigration problem.

Immigration: A Dilemma

The current strategy of deporting undocumented immigrants is not only minimally successful, it is also ethically questionable. With the exception of undocumented immigrants who commit crimes – and one must acknowledge the presence of criminals among the immigrant population – undocumented immigrants usually come to the United States to find employment, not to commit crime. Most undocumented immigrants are hard-working, law-abiding workers; their unique crime is their unauthorized entry into the United States. However, because of their illegal entry, the undocumented are sometimes unjustly lumped together with people who are guilty of serious crimes.

The current strategy of deporting undocumented immigrants is not only minimally successful, it is also ethically questionable.

The failure to differentiate between undocumented immigrants and criminal immigrants does not recognize that most undocumented immigrants have not come for criminal purposes, but in order to support themselves and their families. Why is it necessary to deport undocumented immigrants who are working hard to support themselves and their families? Why is it necessary to break up families by deporting undocumented parents and leaving their children without support – children who were born in the United States and so are U.S. citizens?⁸

While hoping and praying for a governmental solution – and judging from recent experience the wait may be long – people need to recognize that the United States is still a land of immigrants – as it has been since colonial times. And like the millions of immigrants in the past, most recent immigrants have come to stay. For the government, the problem is to find a just, humane way of dealing with the millions of undocumented immigrants

who already live in the United States. For churches, the challenge is to find ways of ministering to these immigrants.

Church Responses

To date, many churches at every level – local, regional, national, international – have made considerable effort to respond to the world-wide problem of immigration. The topic has been widely discussed in the media, huge amounts of statistical data have been catalogued, numerous statements and position papers have been written, enormous relief efforts have been launched, considerable funds have been expended, etc. Such efforts defy a cursory summary – they number in the hundreds of thousands.⁹ What can churches do?

First, churches should recognize that some of the proverbial people in the pews are lawmakers who will ultimately decide the governmental policies – local, state, national – that will affect the lives of millions of immigrants. Although many churches have issued statements about immigration, the churches need to make sure that politicians – especially those who are church members – are accurately informed about the ethical issues involved in the treatment of the immigrants in our midst. For example, the immigration-statements prepared by the national offices of churches need to filter down to the local level.¹⁰

In addition, it would be helpful if local churches prepared their own immigration-statements as a means of “conscientization” – making both people and politicians aware that immigration is not only a “political problem” – which the government can hopefully resolve by legislation. Immigration is also an ethical problem that touches the very core of Christianity: one is to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Thus, the pivotal question is: how can the Church minister to their immigrant neighbors?

In some local churches, this question will be divisive. Rather incongruously, there are local churches that are remarkably generous in funding missionary endeavors overseas, but adamant in their refusal to aid the immigrants in their own neighborhood: it is easier to love a neighbor whom one does not see, than a neighbor whom one would prefer to ignore. Do American Christians see immigrants as a problem to be solved? Or as neighbors to be helped? Church members need to ask themselves: “When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?” (Matthew 25:38).¹¹

Hospitality to the stranger, however, may run counter to the mono-cultural context of many churches – whose membership often includes only people of the same ethnic and economic group. While many churches in recent decades have become more culturally diverse, sometimes the actuality is more statistical than situational. For example, many churches now advertise services in more than one language; in fact, a predominately English-speaking congregation is making space available to people who worship in another language. In effect, there are two church-communities utilizing the same facility – two parallel parishes under the same roof. This type of hospitality seems more a practical case of space-sharing than really welcoming strangers into the church-community.

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Church members may need to admit that multiculturalism is here to stay for the foreseeable future. For example, ten percent of the U. S. population over age five speaks a language other than English at home – ranging from 2.3% in West Virginia to 95.3% in Puerto Rico; approximately one out of every seven people in the Washington metropolitan area speaks a language other than English at home.¹² The stranger is present everywhere, but is not always recognized, and sometimes is deliberately ignored. As long as immigration continues, there will be strangers in need of ministry.

Immigrant Ministry

Immigrants – the strangers in our midst – need many types of ministry. Although many churches now provide worship services for people who do not speak English,¹³ most parishes and congregations find it difficult to provide other types of ministry: religious education, family counseling, marriage preparation, ministries to young people, the sick, the elderly, the imprisoned, etc. Other than churches, where can immigrants find assistance to meet their needs – practical as well as spiritual?¹⁴

On the one hand, many churches, already struggling with balancing their budgets, find it financially impossible to provide an additional set of ministries for another language group. On the other hand, even when money is not a problem, there is often a lack of trained personnel fluent in a second language. The fact that immigrant ministry is language-specific and that there are many different immigrant language-groups further complicates the ministerial challenge.

Even though immigrant groups have a shared experience of immigration and some cultural commonalities, immigrant ministry is inevitably linked to a particular language, a particular culture, a particular country, and particular styles of worship. It is usually counter-productive to attempt to lump all these variables together, as if one size of “immigrant ministry” could serve all.¹⁵ Given the millions of immigrants, dozens of languages, the diversity of cultures, differences in worship-styles and limited resources, comparatively few local churches are realistically prepared to respond with a comprehensive immigrant ministry.

If individual congregations and parishes can not provide the spectrum of ministries that immigrants need, could some ministries be provided *ecumenically*? As is the case with other ecumenical endeavors, denominationalism is often a huge obstacle to an ecumenical immigrant ministry. On the one hand, many U.S. churches should be commended for establishing ministries for immigrant groups; however, these ministries are usually envisioned as increasing the membership of the sponsoring congregation or creating new congregations. Hospitality to strangers is often considered a means of denominational church growth.

On the other hand, some immigrants bring along denominational rivalries that exist in their home country. Immigrant denominationalism sometimes resembles the cautious contacts that existed between Roman Catholics and Protestants prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). In some cases, immigrant groups regard ecumenism with skepticism, suspicion and distrust; on occasion, immigrants reject ecumenism in polemical terms that have largely disappeared from mainline American Christianity.

The lack of ecumenical understanding in some immigrant communities seems rooted in both inter-denominational animosities imported from their home country and lack of participation in American ecumenical dialogues. Nonetheless, this lack of ecumenical outlook is beginning to be remedied insofar as many immigrant church leaders are now being educated in ecumenical settings.

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Areas for Ecumenical Cooperation

Given the lack of formal ecumenical experience in many immigrant communities, perhaps the best ecumenical strategy in immigrant ministry would be cooperation on practical projects. In other words, immigrant ecumenism might find the practical approach of “Life and Work” more congenial than the doctrinal approach of “Faith and Order.” This is not to downplay the work of Faith and Order; the doctrinal divisions and ecclesiastical differences that divide immigrant communities will eventually have to be resolved. However, the appropriate place to begin an ecumenical ministry may well be with areas of pressing need where churches and immigrants can work together.

Above all else, immigrant ministry needs to be bi-directional: if churches really want to minister to immigrants, immigrants must be empowered to minister to the members of these churches. In other words, the approach of churches to immigration needs a different perspective from that of the government, where the resolution of the so-called “immigration problem” is often framed in terms of how the government should solve the question. What is often missing from discussions about immigration is not only how recent immigrants can be incorporated into the life of this country, but how they want to contribute to, as well as participate in, the life of this country.

Accordingly, in order to foster immigrant ministry, churches should be wary of imposing their own expectations on the immigrants to whom they want to minister. Immigrant ministry must be a genuine dialogue, a two way street – church members ministering to immigrants and immigrants ministering to church members.

In order to facilitate mutual understanding, dialogue between the immigrant community and the English-speaking community needs to be at least bilingual – and preferably in the immigrants’ language. The first reason is proverbial: something is lost – or added – in translation. Second, one’s native language is usually

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where one's heart is: not only do most people prefer to worship in their mother tongue, they usually want ministry in their own language. Third, in regard to dialogue: many people can not express what they really think, feel and believe in a second language. Finally, in many cultures, it is considered impolite to disagree with one's hosts or benefactors; thus, some immigrants do not say what they really think, but what they think their hosts want to hear.¹⁶

Although ecumenical dialogue about doctrinal differences and ecclesiastical issues may need to be postponed to the future, there are ample opportunities for ecumenical cooperation with immigrant groups. Indeed, there is considerable need for a bridge-building type of ecumenism that addresses the pressing problems confronting the immigrant community – problems that immigrants face regardless of denominational affiliation or ecumenical outlook. There are at least a half-dozen areas where such ecumenical immigrant ministry seems both possible and urgently needed:

[1] *Emergency needs*: most immigrants have no safety net; many depend on a weekly paycheck; some immigrants are day laborers – like the laborers waiting to be hired to work in the vineyard – who struggle daily to survive. When disaster strikes – whether in major forms, such as a debilitating accident or a fire that destroys their home, or in more prosaic forms such as eviction from their dwelling or loss of their job – most immigrants are left without any resources, they do not have any back-up except the generosity of the community – which often consists of people who are also living at the poverty-line. In order to help immigrants victimized by emergencies, a local council of churches might establish a network of volunteers who are willing to help in specific emergencies; a council of churches might also decide to start an emergency fund to provide financial assistance to immigrants faced with emergencies.¹⁷

[2] *Housing*: Since many immigrants are at the very bottom of the economic ladder, they often live in substandard housing or even make-shift “dwellings” in woods or under bridges. Some immigrants rent space in a home or apartment – literally by the hour – those on the night shift use the beds during the day, those on the day shift use the same beds at night. In addition to the difficulty in finding affordable housing, immigrants are faced with a variety of other problems: landlords who over-charge; apartment managers who fail to make repairs; house owners who threaten to report undocumented immigrants who complain about the conditions of their housing. Local churches might jointly sponsor projects similar to habitat for humanity, which help provide housing for the needy.

[3] *Fair Employment*: Most immigrants come to the United States to seek employment; what they earn here in an hour is more than they would earn in a day in their own country. Yet many immigrants work at jobs paying the minimum wage and lacking benefits. Undocumented immigrants – especially day-workers – are at the mercy of unscrupulous employers, who do not pay the minimum wage and sometimes do not pay at all – knowing that undocumented immigrants are unlikely to complain to the police. Some church-related organizations have attempted to obtain just wages for immigrants by providing centers where bona fide employers can recruit day-workers for pre-arranged wages; some church-groups have supported the efforts of workers seeking to negotiate fair wages with employers in various service-type businesses.

[4] *Medical services*: Many immigrants lack medical insurance altogether and as a result, do not have regular health care – especially in the case of adequate pre-natal care and care for senior citizens. Many immigrants depend on “emergency room service” – where they do not always find medical personnel who can speak their language – thereby running the risk of misdiagnosis and the wrong medical treatment. Some churches have been able to fund clinics that provide free or low-cost medical service in immigrant neighborhoods; much of the medical service in such clinics is provided on a *pro bono* basis.

[5] *Educational Opportunities*: Although many immigrants would like to learn English, there are three major obstacles: first, many immigrants have only had a primary education in their own country and do not know the grammar of their native language well and so have difficulty in learning English; second, many immigrants work long hours at labor-intensive jobs; or they work more than one job; as a result, they do not have time available to attend English classes; third, many language programs are offered during “regular business hours” – thus, at times when most immigrants are working. Churches might consider offering language classes on Sundays and weekends; churches might also consider recruiting volunteer teachers who are willing to serve as tutors; churches might provide classroom space for instruction in English as a second language.

[6] *Family Counseling*: Perhaps the major motive for immigration is the search for a better life for oneself and one's family. Most immigrants want their children to get an education and many immigrants make major sacrifices for the education of their children. Yet, the fact that the children of immigrants benefit from American education and become accustomed to American culture often creates inter-generational and inter-cultural tensions within a family – the parents do not appreciate the English-speaking world of their children and the children do not really understand the culture and customs of their immigrant parents. Churches might help immigrant families resolve these inter-cultural and inter-generational tensions by providing counseling-style seminars where such differences are discussed.


Concluding Reflections

Historically speaking, immigration is an on-going dynamic in American history: the United States continues to be a “land of immigrants.” As a world-wide phenomenon in the twenty-first century, the flow of immigration tends to be from less developed countries to more developed countries. Yet, the United States, like most developed countries, has been ill-prepared to receive the millions of immigrants who have arrived unannounced and often undocumented. Recognizing the biblical mandate to welcome strangers, many churches have tried to help newly arrived immigrants by providing worship services in the immigrants' language. Yet local churches have been hard pressed to provide other ministries which immigrants need, but have difficulty in finding.

The needs of immigrants often out-pace the resources – both financial and personal – of a particular church. Yet what a single church can not do on its own, might be an ecumenical opportunity for churches to do together. The six areas of need just mentioned provide ample opportunities for ministry – not only by individual

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The six areas of need just mentioned provide ample opportunities for ministry – not only by individual churches, but also by churches working together ecumenically.

churches, but also by churches working together ecumenically. In biblical times, the arrival of a stranger was often the opportunity for hospitality; today, the arrival of immigrants can be an opportunity for new types of ecumenical ministry. In biblical times, the arrival of a stranger was often the occasion for a new message and a new blessing; today, the arrival of immigrants could be an ecumenical message to American churches that they will be blessed by joining together in welcoming immigrants. 

Notes:

1. This excerpt from “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus, which is engraved on the Statue of Liberty, is available at: www.libertystatepark.com/emma.htm.
2. See the popular description of pre-Columbian America by Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).
3. The reported decrease in the number of undocumented immigrants in the past year may be due as much to the downturn in the American economy as to increased surveillance along the border.
4. In the Southwest, some groups of border Samaritans have formed patrols to rescue stranded immigrants and have established rescue stations providing water and food.
5. This government population estimate indicated an estimated decrease of 200,000 from the previous year; if the number of undocumented immigrants continues to decrease by 200,000 per year, then in 58 years, there presumably would no longer be any new undocumented immigrants; the statistics are available at: www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publication/ois_ill_pe_2008.pdf; Jeffrey Passel and D’Vera Cohn, “Trends in Unauthorized Immigration,” estimate the undocumented population at 11.9 million; see: <http://peshispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID -94>; hereafter cited: Pew, “Trends.”
6. Pew, “Trends” estimated that 500,000 unauthorized immigrants entered the United States in 2008.
7. The 2008 population of Ohio was estimated at 11,485,910 – slightly less than the estimated number of undocumented immigrants; see: www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0004986.html.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY - 2010, from page 9

forgiveness that we carry forth in word and deed throughout the earth. As we reflect upon the living legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. and participate in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, it is also appropriate to remember the words of Jesus. “You are witnesses of these things.” 

Notes:

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Eulogy for the Martyred Children,” in James M. Washington, Ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings*

8. For example, see the statements of Cardinal Francis George (18 June 2009) and Bishop John Wester (30 April 2009), available at: www.justiceforimmigrants.org.

9. A “Google search” for “immigration church statements” surfaced 366,000 items; among the statements listed were those from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the Mennonite Church, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, etc.

10. For example, one wonders how many Catholics are aware of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Immigrant People and its statement (2004), *Erga migrantes caritas Christi (The Love of Christ towards Migrants)*, available at: www.vatican.va/.../pontifical_councils/migrants/.../rc_pc_migrants_doc_20040514_erga-migrantes-caritas-christi_en.html.

11. New International Version: available at: www.biblegateway.com; see the statement (available at: www.nccusa.org/immigration/Theological_SignOn_Statement_Signed.pdf) of the National Council of Churches that emphasizes the ethical responsibility of hospitality to strangers, who were often heralds of good news.

12. *AARP Bulletin* (April 2008), 30. While the children of immigrants tend to become bilingual and in many cases primarily English-speaking, the parents often do not; since the parents will probably continue to want services in their own language, immigrant ministry is likely to be needed for decades to come.

13. For example, in addition to English and Latin, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington provides liturgical services in 19 other languages.

14. Many governmental organizations (schools, welfare agencies, hospitals, police, etc.) are usually ill-equipped to provide services in languages other than English. In part, the need of immigrants for such services and the inability of governmental agencies to provide them furnish a rationale for proponents of “English Only” as well as anti-immigrant sentiments.

15. This is a major problem in “Hispanic Ministry”: while Hispanics have a common background in culture and often in language and religion, the term “Hispanic” is an “umbrella term” – a sociological label/census category that includes people from some twenty different nations – whose national histories and cultural differences resist homogenization; although “Hispanic” have a common bond in historical roots in colonial Spain and usually but not always in the Spanish language (a sizeable number of Hispanics are not fluent in Spanish or speak an indigenous language as their mother tongue).

16. For example, most Americans are accustomed to state directly what they think; in particular, Americans are prone to indicate their negative reactions; in contrast, many immigrants are accustomed to stating their positions indirectly, for example, by telling a story, rather than list reasons; in addition, many immigrants consider disagreements as impolite and confrontational.

17. In some immigrant communities, such funds are often created on an *ad hoc* basis in response to medical emergencies, funeral expenses, etc.

and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1986), 221.

2. For the homily preached by John Paul II on March 12, 2000, the Day of Pardon during the Jubilee Year, see: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/2000/documents/hf_jp-iihom_20000312_pardon_en.html

3. Greg Iles, *The Quiet Game* (New York: Signet, 1999), 358.

4. *Decree on Ecumenism* 1.

5. Homily preached by John Paul II on March 12, 2000.

8. Cf. WCC Commission on Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, n.32.

9. Cf. WCC Commission on Faith and Order, *Becoming a Christian. Report of the Ditchingham Consultation*, §4, p.75, which recalls the following key concepts: “Baptism is ‘moral pedagogy’, ethical instruction for the people of God. Its ethic is an ethic of humility and love one for the other, a participation by grace in the divine life (n.48). . . . [W]hat we mean when we say that Christian ethics begins in baptism is that Christian ethics come into existence only after repentance and forgiveness of sins and incorporation by the Spirit into the eternal body of Christ (n.52). . . . A Christian ethics belongs to the mystery of the incarnation (§53). . . . A baptismal ethic is also an ecclesial ethic, not the ethic of the individual alone, but the fruit of the Spirit born within and through the *koinonia* of God’s people (n.54). . . . Baptism is *metanoia* (repentance) a true radical re-orientation of personal existence so that life is lived always dying to immortal life (n.58). . . . Baptismal ethics is an ethics of martyrdom (n.59). . . . An ethic of baptism is both mystical and ascetical (n.60). . . . Baptismal ethics is a movement of divine and human will, grounded and surrounded in the mystery of God’s freedom and love (n.61) The ethics of baptism is transformative (n.62). Christian ethics is fulfilled only if the church is in mission (n.65).” Cf. *Ibid.*, nn.49, 52, 54, 55, pp.90-92.

10. “This connection between baptism, ethics and the work of the Holy Spirit may seem obvious once it has been stated. But it is an insight that has been lost too much of contemporary Christian ethics. . . . Unfortunately, BEM’s strong insight into the pneumatological character of baptism has caused hardly a ripple in the pond of Christian ethics. So it is with an eye towards remedying this absence of pneumatology in Contemporary Christian ethics that I wish to discuss the baptismal origination and formation of Christian ethics.” V. Guroian, “On Baptism and the

Spirit: The Ethical significance of the marks of the Church,” in *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

11. “Most Pentecostals accept such experiences [spontaneous expressions] but stress the importance of a life of faith that is not overly dependent on them. . . . Their purpose is to bring the believer closer to God” (n.172); as well as to the statements made by Catholics that: “God’s bestowal of grace and of charismatic gifts need not to be restricted only to sacraments” (n.233).

12. “To what extent your Church can recognise in this text the Faith of the Church through the ages?”, World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982), Introduction, question n.1. The Ecumenical Movement has been trying since 1963 to articulate a more inclusive framework for Apostolicity, which could be shared by different confessional traditions. The way ahead is still a long one, but certainly a description of Apostolicity as it is described in the *BEM* document n.34 offers a larger framework where a variety of elements are recognized as building up the Apostolicity, though respecting the different confessional position which might – as it is the case of the Catholic and Orthodox Church as well as others – give special emphasis to some elements (e.g., historical succession through the imposition of hands to the bishops etc. . . .).

13. “At the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has visited the apostles as they were one community: “at pentecost the frame is a community of believers that was recognized as such: ‘followers of Jesus’, who could be labeled, had a physical visibility, were all in one place for the same reasons of faith and fear, were all endowed with gifts and all became new people and went to preach to all people”. See T. F. Rossi, “Praising the Lord for His wonderful blessings: The Azusa Street Centennial,” *Ecumenical Trends*, Vol. 35(9); 2006, p.3.


A PENTECOSTAL RESPONSE TO ON BECOMING A CHRISTIAN, from page 6

The Future Direction of the Dialogue

A list of “Proposals for Future Dialogues” (§§ 280-283) is presented near the end of the report. Included in this list are how differing perspectives on history color Catholic and Pentecostal interpretation, the nature of the sacraments/ordinances of the church, and “how the church is equipped by God to discern authentic graced experience and, by way of extension, also authentic orthodox doctrine” (§ 282). Juxtaposed to this last question is the related issue of “authority within the church.”

A discussion of what constitutes “authentic graced experience” (or “How Christians discern that they are in the company of fellow Christians,” as Pentecostals would more likely express this idea) would be a logical follow up to the present report. The report noted a difference between Catholics and Pentecostals in their perspectives on “assurance” of salvation. Pentecostals express confidence in knowledge of such assurance (§§ 167-9), while Catholics more tentatively trust that God’s grace is at work in their lives. This is an expression of the principle that “grace escapes our experience and cannot be known except by faith” (§ 178).

These contrasting perspectives on assurance produce another byproduct. As a rule Pentecostals are bolder than Catholics to identify those who likely are, and those who likely are not, fellow believers – true Christians. If a Catholic is reluctant to identify even himself or herself as a true Christian, *a fortiori* there is also a reluctance to assess the spiritual state of others. Pentecostals believe this reticence promotes nominalism. Catholics believe Pentecostal boldness in this regard produces judgmentalism.

The concluding remarks of the report lament that in the past Pentecostals and Catholics have often called each other “non-Christians” or members of a “sect.” A call is issued to both sides to examine their consciences about this. In the past individuals of both traditions have often been guilty of blanket judgments, and hopefully this is a new day in which Catholics and Pentecostals may recognize the bond they have in Christ. Nevertheless, there remains a real need to discuss how those in both traditions discern the spiritual condition of individuals – whether in their own tradition or in another – and how such judgments affect or reflect both Pentecostal and Catholic visions of the church. 

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