

*Evangelicals and Catholics: do they share a common future?* This is the title of a recently published book which looks into the state of the current relationship between Catholics and Evangelicals throughout the world. The title well reflects the attitude observed in many circles. There is a feeling which is spreading: the past has been characterised by the doctrinal and ecclesiastic separation but the present is different.

For several decades now, historical Protestant churches have moved on the ecumenical path along with Rome. Many viewed the 1999 signing of the “Joint Declaration between Lutherans and Catholics” concerning the doctrine of justification as an indication that the long division had been overcome. In a different context, for many observers the growth of the Catholic charismatic movement is a sign of the changes within the church of Rome and the decline of the historical reasons for the division.

In evangelical circles, especially so in USA but in Europe too, an increasing number of Evangelicals are convinced that, in the light of the challenges of the secular trends in society, what unites them to Catholics is more important than what separates them.

We are therefore witnessing a transition of great proportions in the perception of Catholicism. What was once taken for granted is no longer taken so. Yet, Evangelicals do have instruments which spell out very clearly an evaluation of Catholicism. An important document is the 1986 ‘Singapore Declaration’ sponsored by the World Evangelical Alliance; another is the 1999 ‘Padua Declaration’ sponsored by the Italian Evangelical Alliance. These are valuable tools for interpreting Roman Catholicism from an evangelical perspective.

Thus, do Evangelicals and Catholics have a common future? To answer I should like to refer to a Biblical quotation which can help detect the difference between Catholicism and the evangelical faith. A

passage in 2 Corinthians leads to perceiving what is truly at stake. Here are the verses (2 Corinthians 1:12–20)

Now this is our boast: our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God’s grace. For we do not write to you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Because I was confident of this, I planned to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. I planned to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea. When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say Yes, yes and No, no?

But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not Yes and No, but in Him has always been Yes. For no matter how many promises God has made, they are Yes in Christ. And so through him the Amen is spoken by us to the glory of God.

The context of the passage we have just read could be thus summarised: in the course of performing Paul’s service, there was a change in the plans for the apostolic itinerary. The reasons for this change will be explained later on in the letter (cf. 1:23 – 2:4) but we do know that the change had caused some perplexity within the Church of Corinth. In this passage Paul confronts the criticisms that had been addressed to him concerning his alleged superficial attitude in planning his journey.

Now, the questions of the changes in his itinerary

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are the opportunity which Paul uses to deal with a more profound issue. Paul appears to be aware of the fact that criticisms were not raised simply to question his ability to plan his activities but had a much deeper intent: that is to undermine the very basis of the apostolic service, discredit his preaching, disown Paul's apostolic authority. What is at stake here is not so much the apostolic programme but the apostolic message, not so much the stages of Paul's journey, but the preaching of Paul's gospel. The question is much more serious than that. To the accusations of instability and unreliability, Paul replies by going back to the distinctive traits of his gospel preaching: "our word toward you was not 'yes' and 'no'" he says at verse 18. The message had not been ambiguous and contradictory as the accusations would lead to believe. Later Paul takes a further step in vindicating the coherence of the Gospel and its roots in God's promises, fulfilled by Christ. The message was coherent in that at verse 19 it says "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us, was not yea and nay, but in him was yea". What was preached was not a 'yes' and a 'no' because Christ himself is the 'yes' of God's promises. In this way, the apostolic preaching was "the Amen, unto the glory of God" (20), the obedient 'yes' of faith to the 'yes' of the promises fulfilled by Christ.

Now what does this passage tell us about Catholicism? Borrowing the language of 2 Corinthians we could say that Catholicism is the religion of the 'yes' and 'no' to God's truth at the same time, of the assertion and denial of the biblical message, of the coexistence of submission and rejection of God's Word. It cannot be denied that the 'yes' is totally missing from Catholicism; the problem stems from the fact that it is not a 'yes, yes' but that it is a 'yes and no' at the same time. The 'yes' is juxtaposed to the 'no' so as to produce a invalidating effect of the 'yes'; it is not 'yes' nor is it

'no' but it is 'yes' and 'no' at the same time. How does this come about?

For example, Christ is told 'yes' but also 'no' because, in the Catholic view the prerogatives of the church end up by arrogating what belongs exclusively to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. As to grace, it is told 'yes' but also 'no' because, in line with Catholicism, nature holds in itself the capacity to be elevated in spite of sin. Faith is told 'yes' but also 'no' because, according to Catholicism, in order to receive God's grace there's the need for the sacramental instrumentality of the church which makes faith insufficient. The Word of God is told 'yes' but also 'no' in as much as the Scriptures are sided by the tradition of the Catholic church and its teaching, which end up by prevailing on the Bible. The church worship rendered to God is told 'yes' but also 'no' because the veneration of Mary is encouraged as well as that of a host of other side figures which detract from the worship of the one and only God.

### 1. The catholicity of Catholicism

On the wake of the conclusion of Vatican II, in 1967 the Italian protestant theologian Vittorio Subilia published a book in which the approved documents were examined and in which the author provided an interesting interpretation of Catholicism as it emerged from the council. The title of the book *The New Catholicity of Catholicism* captures the keyword: catholicity. Certainly, it is not the only feature to be borne in mind in dealing with such a complex issue; nevertheless, catholicity is a required interpretative paradigm to confront the design of Catholicism. The Catholicism which surfaced from Vatican II disrobed itself of the theocratic vestments inherited from the long centuries of its history and invested massively in the implementation of its catholicity. It can no longer think of dominating the world

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absolutely and thus tries to infiltrate the world in order to modify it from inside. It no longer hurls anathema against all that is modern but it strives to penetrate it and elevate it. No more can it enforce its power with coercive measures but tries to exercise it in a more polished way. The Catholic church no longer enjoys a popular following when speaking of doctrine and morals, but it does strive to maintain its ability to influence, to condition, to direct society. It can no more afford the antithesis of confronting the world face to face in order not to be relegated to a corner and accepts modern society so as to permeate it from its interior. To use a military metaphor, we could say that the tactic of catholicity is no longer that of a frontal clash but the folding in of its wings. The aim is no more that of annihilating the antagonist but to absorb it. The aim is no longer the conquest but a consensual annexing through the expansion of its catholicity boundaries. Catholicity does not express itself exclusively in Catholic doctrine but in all aspects of the church is involved. Its borders are as many as the dimensions of reality. All becomes part of the jurisdiction of catholicity and the Catholic church tries to invest in the growth of catholicity.

The catholicity of Catholicism is its skill to ingest on a global scale divergent ideas, diverse values, heterogeneous movements, holding tensions and integrate them within the framework of a system. As we have seen, if the evangelical faith chooses (*Scripture alone, Christ alone, Grace alone, Faith alone*) Catholicism adds Scripture and tradition, Christ and church, grace and merits, faith and works; if the evangelical faith is expressed with “yes, yes,” and “no, no” (according to the words of 2 Cor.1:17–18) the Catholic’s opts for “yes” and “no” at the same time. Catholicism does indeed possess a platform of thought so wide that it accommodates everything, a thesis, its antithesis, a claim and a disclaimer, one element and another, all integrated in a system which is dynamic.

In the Catholic vision of the world, nature is coupled to grace, Scriptures to traditions, Christ to the church, grace to the sacraments, faith to works, Christian life to folk religion, evangelical godliness to pagan folklore, natural philosophy to beliefs based on superstition; ecclesiastical centralism to a universal scope. In short, *et-et*, and-and, both-and, one thing and the other too. There are no choices which are patently limp, clear, exclusive or inspired by an integrity of thought able to choose in a coherent manner. On the contrary, the receptive ability of the Catholic church makes Roman Catholicism a system ever opened to new integrations in view of the progressive expansion of the system itself.

The basic criterion of Catholicism is no evangelical purity or Christian authenticity, but the integration of the particulars which is put in a universal horizon serving the institution that holds the reins of the whole project. The only “no” which Catholicism is able to utter addresses what threatens its purposes. When this pivot is left undisturbed, all else can be integrated and catholicised. Catholicism’s talent for integration, its absorbent resources, are indeed extraordinary. For this reason it is necessary to be aware of the system of Catholicism and analyse it in accordance with a systemic approach.

A few examples of how Catholicism operates are in place as far as ecumenism is concerned. Ecumenism is a standpoint to look at the catholicity of Catholicism. In respect of Catholic ecumenism, there is a significant feature to be recorded. Before the Vatican II council, non-catholic Christians – and in particular Protestants – were considered “heretics”. Excommunications and “anathema” decreed by the Council of Trent against Protestants made the Protestant Reformation to be seen equal to a heresy and Evangelicals branded with the name of heretics. Now, in countries of catholic majority, this designation has heavily conditioned the evangelical message and often fostered strong

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discrimination against Evangelicals. With respect to such disparaging label, Vatican II has introduced a significant change in the estimation which Catholicism has of other Christians; in the Council papers these are no longer termed heretics but rather 'separated brethren'. They are acknowledged as brothers even if the "separation" persists because it stems from the fact that other Christians have no place in the Catholic church, which holds the fullness of the means of divine grace. Nevertheless, they are 'brethren' and from heresy to brotherhood, the step is an important one indeed. No more aversion but empathy, no more distance but proximity. After Vatican II, the Catholic church has joined with full entitlement the ecumenical movement, becoming one of its most energetic and active members. Indeed, during the last few years there has been a further step. In the 1995 encyclical on ecumenism *Ut unum sint*, the pope refers to non-catholic Christians as "retrieved brethren" as a demonstration of the progress in Catholic ecumenism at the service of catholicity.

Heretics, separated brethren, brethren retrieved: three stages which mark a surprising inversion trend which cannot but make us reflect upon it. Now, we may well ask if this opening has its place in a wider perspective and what could be the strategy of Catholic ecumenism. Evidently there is need to understand the new ecumenical order of things in the light of the wider project of catholicity. The pressing encouragement towards a more ample fulfilment of catholicity must flow in the attempted integration, above all else, of all Christianity into Catholicism. All historical and confessional forms of Christianity can be led back to the inner folds of the catholic system.

At what price? The catholic vision is summarised by two significant expressions: "cum Petro" and "sub Petro". First of all, "cum Petro", with Peter, with the Catholic church, together with the Catholic

church, in communion with the Catholic church but also and concurrently "sub Petro", under his jurisdiction, ascribing him a leading role, attributing to him a primary position. The dimension of the communion with Rome and that of the submission to Rome are inseparable features of Catholicism's ecumenical vision. None can stand without the other. Not by chance, *catholicism* is universal, but remains *Roman*, papal and of the Vatican to its very core. Ecumenical overtures of Catholicism are therefore tailored for the assimilation, the integration, the catholic embrace of the whole Christianity. It is the catholic system which calls for it and it is the catholic system that has the resources to accomplish it.

The discussion on Catholic ecumenism could also be extended to the relationship with other religions. In effect, the Catholic tradition used to operate according to the principle "extra ecclesia nulla salus", outside of the church there is no salvation. According to a rigid interpretation of Cyprianus which took hold in the Medieval church, belonging to the Catholic church was the condition for salvation. It is clear that followers of other religions were excluded from the chance of being saved as a result of being outside the Roman institution. Here too, the profound transformation emerged from the Vatican II council should be underscored. In fact, the council documents deal with the change in status of non-Christian believers, just as non-Christian religions are seen in a new light. People who follow other religions, even if far away from Christianity, are not considered away from Christ. They are instead in some measure 'related' to Christ (LG 16) whether they wish it or not, whether they know it or not. If we take into account the fact that, again according to the council, Catholics enjoy a privileged relationship with Christ being "incorporated" with him (LG 11,14,31), Catholicism is seen as a completion, the achievement

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of aspirations existing in non-Christian religions. The grace of God is already present in the nature of religions and the church, because of its special prerogatives, is the place where they can be exalted to their accomplishment. Here too the universalism of salvation is combined to the character of the church. Clearly, the catholicity of Catholicism transcends the rather narrow boundaries of Christianity and addresses the world of religions proffering the catholic church as the place where the legitimate claims of religions find their fulfilment. Christianity, religions, culture, society, the whole world: these are the borders of the catholicity of Catholicism.

Examples could be many more. The fact remains that in Catholicism we are witnessing a deep rooted ambiguity between the statement of the Gospel “yes” and the “no” of the motives of pagan origin which are engrossed within the system. Here the coexistence of biblical and non-biblical motives is settled. As the great Welsh preacher of last century, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, said in Catholicism “it is not so much a denial of the truth that comes to pass as the addition to the truth which becomes a departure from it”. The scheme thus engineered is incessantly oscillating. The system of Catholicism is continuously expanding because it is not ruled by a “yes” or by a “no” which act as binding criteria, but rather by a simultaneous “yes” and “no” which opens the way to which is against biblical integrity.

## 2. The evangelical alternative to Catholicism

Already, by a cursory look, we have come to the realization that when we confront Catholicism, we find ourselves facing a system which is solid and dynamic, unitarian and pluralist, with a fenced nucleus but with open borders. What is to be said of the evangelical faith?

Evangelical faith is, on the contrary, the faith of a “yes” which is firm, convinced, unequivocal,

exclusive, bright to God’s truth; it is the “Amen to the glory of God”, the acknowledgment, the adhesion, the conformation to it. In this, it takes form and character because of its “simplicity” and “sincerity” (12), it flees from a “carnal wisdoms” nor is it “directed by the flesh” (17) again to echo Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians. Evangelical faith, as much as concerns the foundations of the faith, chooses on the basis of faithfulness and integrity according to the Scriptures: in continuity with the biblical message and the teaching of the Protestant Reformation, evangelical faith proclaims the renowned *sola*:

*Christ alone*: the Christian faith hinges on the person, work and prerogatives of Jesus Christ. Salvation is entirely through him and leads to him alone;

*Scripture alone*: the Bible is the supreme authority for the faith and the whole life: other authorities are subjected to the Bible;

*Grace alone*: salvation comes from the undeserved and unconditional favour of God and is not entrusted to the administration of the church, nor by any priestly cast;

*Faith alone*: the means of receiving God’s grace is faith, that is the awareness of what Christ did, the sincere acceptance of his message and total trust in him;

*To God alone be the glory*: worship is to be rendered only and exclusively to the Triune God, Lord of heaven and earth, to the Creator, Provider and Saviour of the world. All forms of adoration rendered to human beings must be rejected as having a tendency towards idolatry.

Here lies the whole difference between Evangelicalism and Catholicism. Catholicism can be viewed as the haughty “carnal wisdom”, a majestic cathedral of human thought, a fascinating religiously ideological structure, ever expanding; the evangelical faith on the contrary aspires solely to remain a simple and

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sincere “amen” to the Word of God. All the “alone” of the biblical message which the Reformers have re-discovered bear witness to the integrity of evangelical faith which refuses to be contaminated by pagan motivations, to be exclusively anchored to God’s truth. The evangelical alternative is alternative because it refuses *in toto* this spurious scheme and is evangelical because it simply upholds the “yes” of God’s truth which the gospel heralds.

If the reference criterion is the gospel of Jesus Christ, revealed in his Word, it is not only possible but indeed necessary to speak in terms of *alternative* to Catholicism. In fact, one is either sucked inward the expandable and entangling confines of Catholicism or faced with a radically different proposition which casts doubts upon the Catholic system from its very roots. An alternative, in effect, is something which cannot be accommodated in a system extraneous to it and which stands as a distinct and distant way.

Now, as regards Catholicism, when speaking of an alternative we need to do so with reference to the system in its fulness. In other words, it is its ideological nucleus that should be questioned, its ambitious project and the strategy by which it is carried forward. If there is to be an alternative to Catholicism, we cannot rest content with criticism aimed at this or that point; if this is what we were to do, it would not be a question of alternative but of simply correcting one aspect of the system which, nevertheless, is capable of absorbing changes without modifying its basic structure. What is at stake is not just a question of accents, emphasis, particulars. No, it engages the foundations of the Catholic vision of the world. If we can talk of an alternative to Catholicism, we need to cast doubts on no less than the whole of the Catholic system. The Catholic worldview needs to be reshaped according to Biblical truth. One point must be made clear: unless we face up to Catholicism in the

perspective of an alternative, we have as good as abdicated in favour of it. The annexing will only be a question of time. If we are not alternative we are already Catholic. On the other hand, if we fail to face up to Catholicism in systematic terms, we cannot be alternative.

We have spoken of an alternative, a heavy word. But the gospel of Jesus Christ calls for a stand before a religious system which, on the strength of a spurious motive, sees itself as an extension of Jesus Christ’s incarnation and thus as the institution which mediates the encounter with God. In the name of faithfulness to the gospel of Christ we cannot accept all that. What needs to be of foremost importance is the gospel and for this reason it is fitting to emphasize that the alternative of which we spoke has meaning only if it is evangelical, if it embraces the criteria of the gospel, if it bows to the authority of the gospel, if it professes the gospel. What must animate criticisms of Catholicism is not anticlericalism, nor anti-authoritarianism, nor the rejection of this or that Catholic practice. This alternative can only be an evangelical alternative, upholding the gospel as its point of reference. The Evangelical alternative not only disputes the system of Catholicism but is also competent to elaborate an alternative project, a vision of the world that feeds upon the worth of God’s Word and has a bearing on whom and about whom professes it. The alternative is doctrinal but also cultural. Catholicism is a vision of the world against which the evangelical vision of the world must take its position.

Ecumenical pressure for a merging of Evangelicals and Catholics is very pressing; many Evangelicals hear the alarms with increasing force without knowing how to cope with and react to it. To answer this challenge an anti-Catholic attitude is not enough; there must be a driving force rooted in evangelical truths, in favour of evangelical unity and for a vision of life centred on the gospel.