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Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism

This is the revised version of a paper given by Mr Lane, who is a Lecturer in London Bible College, at the conference of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians in Altenkirchen, W. Germany, in August 1988.

Introduction

Thirty years ago the Roman Catholic Church appeared to be a rigid unchanging monolith—*semper eadem*. But on 28 October, 1958 Angelo Roncalli became pope John XXIII and proclaimed the need for *aggiornamento* or modernization of the Roman Catholic Church. The prime outcome of this process was the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). How should evangelicals respond to these developments within the Roman Catholic Church? As would be expected, there has been a wide range of responses, from a naive optimism which imagines that no significant differences remain to a blind scepticism which pretends that nothing has changed. There are remarkable parallels with the situation in the Soviet Union since the rise of Gorbachev and with the varied western responses to this. In both instances it is important to respond in a measured way which is ready to acknowledge and welcome genuine change while avoiding naive over-optimism.¹

¹ Three recent documents should be noted: *Thailand Report—Christian Witness to Nominal Christians Among Roman Catholics* (Wheaton: Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 10, 1980), from the June 1980 Pattaya Consultation on World Evangelization; B. Meeking and J. Stott (eds), *The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission, 1977-1984. A Report* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986) seeks to set out clearly and honestly points of convergence and points of divergence; 'An Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 10, 1986, 342-364 and 11, 1987, 78-94 is a WEF document which arose out of the concern of some at increasingly close relationships between some evangelicals and Roman Catholics.

Changes in Rome

Can the leopard change his spots (Jeremiah 13:23)? No, but God can make dry bones live (Ezekiel 37:1-10). Great changes have taken place in the Roman Catholic Church during the last thirty years. In examining these it is important to pay attention both to words and to deeds. It is also important to bear in mind that Roman Catholicism varies considerably from one part of the globe to another. There seem, in particular, to be differences between the latin catholic countries and those northern European and north American countries where the Roman Catholic Church is in a minority.² However, real change has taken place *everywhere*.

First, whereas the Roman Catholic Church used to appear unchanging and monolithic it now presents a bewildering array of different facets. Within the Roman fold one can see liberalism and traditionalism, superstition and rationalistic scepticism, political radicalism and conservatism, charismatic renewal, return to the Bible and many other trends. In short there is almost as much variety today within Roman Catholicism as within protestantism and most of the major trends found within protestantism are paralleled within the Roman Catholic Church. It is noteworthy that many of the deepest theological divides today cut across the confessional divide. In many parts of the world conservative protestants and catholics often feel more at home with one another than with their liberal co-religionists.³ Evangelicals in the larger, 'mixed' denominations often find that they have more in common with many Roman Catholics than with some others in their own denomination.

Protestants who are suspicious of the recent developments within Roman Catholicism often point out that the Council of Trent has not been disowned. Indeed it has not, but it is naive to suggest that it might have been and equally naive to suggest that it needs to be for genuine change to take place. The significant change brought about by Vatican II was not, of course, that Trent was disowned, but that it was put in an entirely different context. After Trent itself, all earlier Roman Catholic teachings were read through Tridentine eyes and interpreted in line with Trent. Trent effectively became *the* norm for Roman Catholic teaching. Since

² On the extent of protestant influence on U.S. catholicism, cf. *Christianity Today* 7 November 1986, 30; 4 September 1987, 58f.; 11 December 1987, 54f.

³ Note how it was decided to publish the Vatican's *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation* in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 10, 1986, 115-128 and 228-238.

Vatican II, Trent has lost that status and to a limited sense the council has itself become the new filter through which all earlier teaching is viewed.⁴

Protestants who wish to deny that Rome has changed point out that traditional Roman Catholic doctrines far from being disowned have in recent years been reaffirmed. This is of course largely true, but to some extent misses the point. It has always been the Roman Catholic way to introduce changes while protesting that doctrine has not changed. *Semper eadem* is a counter-reformation catholic myth which is now maintained most vigorously by certain anti-Roman protestants!⁵ Perhaps the most dramatic example is to be found in the history of the slogan *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. From the time of Cyprian, the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church has been that there is no salvation outside the visible body of the one institutional Catholic Church. However, in more recent times this has become qualified. In 1854 pope Pius IX reaffirmed the traditional belief, but with the significant exception that those who are invincibly (i.e. through no fault of their own) ignorant are not excluded from salvation.⁶ In 1949 Father Feeney, a fiery Roman Catholic preacher in Boston, insisted on the traditional interpretation that only Roman Catholics are saved. After some years of controversy, Feeney was excommunicated by Rome as an obstinate rigorist. Rome stated that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* remains part of unchanging catholic doctrine, but that it is not open to private interpretation.⁷ Thus the church excommunicated a priest for holding to a traditional doctrine while all along insisting that catholic doctrine is *semper eadem*. This shows how superficial it is simply to state that Rome reaffirms its past doctrines and acknowledges no changes. That is precisely the Roman way of introducing change! Vatican II states that salvation is 'not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way' (*Gaudium et spes* 1:22), the basis for Karl Rahner's doctrine of 'anonymous Christianity'. Evangelicals are rightly concerned at trends towards universalism in Roman Catholicism.⁸ But one thing that cannot reasonably be denied is

⁴ Cf. G. Alberigo, 'The Council of Trent: New Views on the Occasion of its Fourth Centenary', *Concilium* 7/1, 1965, 35-48.

⁵ Cf. D. F. Wells, *Revolution in Rome* (London: Tyndale, 1973) ch. 1.

⁶ H. Denzinger/A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Freiburg: Herder, 1967 [34th edition]) *2865-2867.

⁷ *Ibid.*, *3866-3873. G. C. Berkouwer, *The Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 144-148 discusses Pius IX and Feeney.

⁸ B. Meeking and J. Stott (eds), *op. cit.*, 35, 45f. shows evangelical concern at the inroads of universalistic thought into Roman Catholicism.

that Rome has changed. *Aggiornamento*, like *perestroika*, is a reality. Of course, it does not follow that all of the change is for the better—but neither can it all be assumed to be for the worse.

Another clear major change is in the Roman Catholic attitude to the Bible. Vatican II urged that all the faithful should have easy access to the Scriptures and encouraged joint translation with 'the separated brethren'. The importance of Bible study is stressed, with a quotation from Jerome to the effect that 'ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ' (*Dei verbum* ch. 6). Subsequent history has shown that these are not empty words and that there is a profound new openness to the Bible in the Roman Catholic Church. Of course Vatican II reaffirms that 'the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the church' (*Dei verbum* 2:10). But experience has shown that this qualification has done little to prevent the free development of Roman Catholic biblical studies. The Vatican has been hard put to curb the liberalism of Küng and Schillebeeckx and the exuberance of the liberation theologians. If evangelicals have anything to fear in this area, it is more that the *magisterium* is proving ineffective in curbing the inroads of liberalism.

An equally radical change has taken place in Roman Catholic worship—in the actual reality of it, whatever the theory may be. For centuries the Roman mass had been performed in Latin by a priest facing away from the people towards a high altar and offering a sacrifice to God. Then all of a sudden this is changed into a fellowship meal at which clergy and people face one another round a table and share a service in the common language with lay participation. 'One can attend masses which outwardly differ very little from evangelical services'.⁹ Of course the traditional doctrines of the mass are reaffirmed.¹⁰ But this should not blind us to the glaringly obvious fact that in actual reality a profound and massive change has taken place. Reading and listening to the protests of conservative Roman Catholics, who feel that there has been a sellout to protestantism, can help us to grasp more clearly the enormity of the change.¹¹ But it must

⁹ 'An Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism', 86.

¹⁰ E.g. Paul VI, *Encyclical Letter Mysterium Fidei concerning the Doctrine and Worship of the Holy Eucharist* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1965); *Letter of the Supreme Pontiff Pope John Paul II to all Bishops of the Church on the Mystery and Worship of the Holy Eucharist* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1980), both of which reaffirm traditional teaching.

¹¹ Cf. J. Eppstein, *Has the Catholic Church Gone Mad?* (London, Tom Stacey, 1971) chh. 5–7, where the protestantizing of catholic worship is lamented.

also be acknowledged that not all of the changes are necessarily for the good. One of the aims of those who revised the liturgy of the mass was to eliminate so-called 'negative themes'. 'These turn out to be allusion to sin, human frailty, human dependence upon God, divine disapprobation, the presence of evil in the world, conversion, penitence, mortification, prayer, meditation, moralizing and polemic. Such a wide-ranging concept obviously embraces much of sacred scripture itself.'¹² However, before we start casting stones it might be worthwhile to consider some of the ways in which evangelical worship has also changed over the last twenty years, which might indicate that a similar process has taken place in our own midst.

Specific Doctrines

It is undeniable that the Roman Catholic Church has changed dramatically. But where does that leave those doctrines which have most concerned evangelicals? Three such will be briefly considered here: justification by faith, mariology and the infallibility of the church.

Justification by faith has always been seen as a key Reformation doctrine. In 1541 Roman Catholic and protestant teams at the Colloquy of Regensburg reached a common agreement concerning justification by faith. This agreement was, however, disowned by Rome and at the Council of Trent the catholic doctrine was restated in a way specifically designed to exclude the protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone. At least that is how the matter has traditionally been seen. Hans Küng, however, in 1957 argued in his doctoral thesis that the tridentine doctrine of justification is compatible with that of Karl Barth.¹³ By no means all would agree that Küng has actually achieved all that he claims.¹⁴ But even if Küng's historical case is weak, the fact remains that his book has helped to bring about a remarkable change among Roman Catholics today. Putting it very simply, there is a widespread feeling among Roman Catholics that

¹² R. H. Richens, 'The Close of the Gregorian Era', *Ampleforth Journal* 76, 1971, 55-65 (especially p. 59).

¹³ H. Küng, *Justification* (London: Burns and Oates, 1964). For further ecumenical contributions, cf. H. G. Anderson et al. (eds), *Justification by Faith. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985); *Salvation and the Church. ARCIC II* (London: Church House and Catholic Truth Society, 1987).

¹⁴ Cf. A. McGrath, 'Justification: Barth, Trent and Küng', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34, 1981, 517-529.

justification by faith alone is a wholesome doctrine and one that the Roman Catholic Church has in the past neglected. Now it may be true that this is an inconsistent position in the light of Trent. It may be true that those who affirm justification by faith alone are unwilling to accept a number of implications which to evangelicals appear to follow from the doctrine. This may all be true, but the fact remains that a remarkable change has taken place. One little illustration will suffice. In a recent article, a catholic writer examines patristic views on faith and works in justification. He shows how their teaching was not in line with Reformation thinking on the subject. But what is his conclusion? That the Reformers were wrong in departing from catholic tradition? No. Instead he points out the deficiencies of the patristic teaching and suggests how it needs to be corrected.¹⁵ This simple example shows how Roman Catholic attitudes have changed. That remains a fact, regardless of the historical merits or demerits of K ung's thesis.

Roman Catholic attitudes to justification by faith have undoubtedly changed radically. But does this mean that they are now willing to accept the *implications* of this doctrine? At least to *some* extent they are. Two specific issues will be considered. First, purgatory. The traditional Roman doctrine has to do with the paying off of temporal punishment. Baptism washes away all sin. But what of sin committed after baptism? From the time of Tertullian and Cyprian there emerged the distinction between the eternal and the temporal punishment due to sin. When the christian repents, he is forgiven and the eternal punishment (hell) is waived. But to sin against God as a christian is to dishonour his name and the christian must face a temporal punishment as a way of restoring God's honour. This temporal punishment is paid off by fasting, almsgiving, good works, etc. If when we die we have not paid off all that is owing, we spend a time in purgatory in which the torments of hell are endured for as long as is necessary. Thus the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory, which emerged in the early middle ages, concerns suffering after death as a temporal punishment for sins committed after baptism. One way in which we can shorten the length of someone's stay in purgatory is by saying masses for their soul. Another is by the purchase of indulgences, which practice served to provoke the Reformation. But what of Rome today? There is still talk of purgatory, but far less than before. More

¹⁵ R. B. Eno, 'Some Patristic Views on the Relationship of Faith and Works in Justification', *Recherches Augustiniennes* 19, 1984, 3-27.

significantly, it is often reinterpreted as a time of *purification* after death, rather than a place of punishment. This change completely alters the doctrine, despite the continued use of the same word. It is significant that it is common today to say one mass only for the soul of the departed. If the old doctrine was still believed this would be an act of cynical cruelty, since withholding further masses would simply serve to prolong the period to prolong the period of torment and punishment.

Another area where the implications of justification by faith can be explored is the place of the church and the sacraments. For many evangelicals Roman Catholic teaching on the church and the sacraments as means of grace is clear evidence that justification by faith is not being taken seriously. But is this so? Many evangelicals see the sacraments as *merely* signs and symbols by which we affirm our faith. This approach is both unbiblical and contrary to the teaching of the majority of the Reformers.¹⁶ Much of evangelicalism is dominated by an individualism which sees salvation in terms of individual relationship with God. Belonging to the visible church is portrayed as desirable or perhaps even demanded, but not essential. It is noteworthy how most of the evangelical bases of faith make no reference to the visible church (or to the sacraments).¹⁷ Before evangelicals rush to accuse Roman Catholics of failure to grasp the implications of justification by faith, we ought perhaps to address ourselves to our own failure to take seriously enough the doctrines of the church and sacraments. Roman Catholics start from a high corporate view of church and sacraments and are today struggling to incorporate into that biblical doctrine of justification by faith; evangelicals start from a strongly individualistic understanding of justification by faith and are (or ought to be!) struggling to incorporate into that a more biblical understanding of the church and sacraments.¹⁸ Perhaps this is an area in which both sides need to devote more attention to the logs in their own eyes (Matthew 7:3-5).

Mary is a major stumbling block between evangelicals and Rome. Here the situation has worsened considerably since the

¹⁶ 'An Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism', 84-88 helpfully compares the approaches to the sacraments as 'signs' and 'causes'. However, it at least implies that the 'cause' approach is to be rejected. The major reformers opposed Zwingli for taking this line. There is no space in this paper to argue the biblical case, but cf. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973).

¹⁷ E.g. the IFES and FEET bases of faith.

¹⁸ I am indebted for this point to Rogelio Prieto-Duran, who also made other helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Reformation. The last 150 years have seen a growth in marian devotion and doctrinal developments which have widened the gap.¹⁹ With the coming of *aggiornamento* there have been those within the Roman Catholic Church who have wished to curb excesses but there are others who wish to see further mariological developments.²⁰ The present pope is known for his devotion to Mary.²¹ This is an area where the potential for ecumenical progress is slender—because the doctrines concerned have so little biblical basis, because they are so alien to protestant piety and because they are so clearly proclaimed by ‘infallible’ papal pronouncements. Yet it is perhaps worth noting that there is a further reason for the wideness of the gap. It has been claimed that evangelicals have a ‘high regard’ for Mary.²² Whoever these evangelicals with a high regard for Mary may be, I have never met any of them. It is closer to the truth to say that there is virtually a conspiracy of silence about Mary among evangelicals, that there is a sense of embarrassment as if somehow Jesus’ mother had been a Roman Catholic!²³ Perhaps it is necessary for evangelicals to rediscover the place of Mary in the New Testament before they will be able to react sensitively to (not agree with) the Roman Catholic marian doctrines. Until we take the biblical Mary more seriously, we cannot expect Roman Catholics to hear our warnings about the dangers of mariology.²⁴

The *infallibility of the church* is the most fundamental issue between evangelicals and Rome. It underlies the other issues and is more basic than them. Even if full agreement were to be reached on other outstanding issues (such as justification by faith) the issue of authority would remain. At the Reformation there was a fundamental divide over this point. The Reformers said of Rome: ‘you are not the true church because you do not teach the gospel’; Roman Catholics replied: ‘you do not teach the gospel because you have left the true church’. The issue is simple: does the gospel define the church or vice versa? In an ideal world we would not be faced with such a choice. The level of abuse, doctrinal as well as practical, in the late medieval church forced

¹⁹ The most authoritative recent statement is to be found in ch. 8 of Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium*.

²⁰ Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) ch.8 on the struggle between the ‘maximalists’ and the ‘minimalists’ at the council.

²¹ Cf. K. McNamara, *The Teaching of Pope John Paul II: Mary, the Mother of God* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1982).

²² ‘An Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism’, 355.

²³ I am indebted to Nigel Cameron for this thought.

²⁴ Cf. B. Meeking and J. Stott (eds), *op. cit.*, 48–52.

the issue. It remains the most fundamental point of division today. Mariology reveals it with a stark clarity. For the evangelical it is clear that many of the Roman mariological doctrines are not only not found in Scripture but actually contrary to Scripture. Even evangelicals who recognize that doctrine develops over the ages cannot see how some of the mariological doctrines can possibly be regarded as healthy developments. On the other hand, Roman Catholics are committed to the definitions of 1854 and 1950 in particular since these are the clearest examples ever of the exercise of papal infallibility. It is hard to see how this gap can be bridged, though it is possible for it to become narrower. As the Roman Catholic Church begins to admit that it has made mistakes in the past and as it becomes more open to the Bible there is room for a narrowing of the gap, though the fundamental issue of *final authority remains*.

Roman Catholic Attitudes to Protestants

Roman Catholic attitudes to those of other faiths have changed dramatically. Thirty years ago stories of Roman Catholic intolerance and persecution around the world were common and these reflected official policy. Since the council the situation is radically different. Religious liberty has become a reality in catholic countries. In many cases this has come about as a direct result of the changed attitude of the Roman Catholic Church and not as a result of the triumph of liberal political ideals in the face of catholic opposition. In Spain the Franco era saw the active persecution of protestants. Yet in 1975 the present writer had the experience of arranging an evangelistic meeting in Salamanca where local catholics organized the meeting and provided most of the audience, without laying down any conditions about the content of the message. When Operation Mobilization began its work in Spain, before the council, they were told that it was impossible. A few years later some Spanish priests were from the pulpits urging their flock to purchase the Bibles being sold by OM teams.

How does Rome regard protestants in this new era of toleration? At the First Vatican Council protestantism was described as a 'godless pestilence'²⁵ and it was only under Prussian pressure that this phrase was removed from the final decrees of the council. It was believed that protestants were damned. By the time of the Second Vatican Council the situation

²⁵ I have been unable to trace this quotation.

had changed beyond all recognition. Protestants were now seen as 'separated brethren'. They were no longer excluded from salvation. Perhaps most remarkably of all, even protestant churches (as opposed to individual protestants) are seen as having saving significance. This is an immense change from the traditional view, dating from Cyprian and earlier, that the Catholic Church is the one true church, to be equated with the body of Christ. It is worth quoting substantially from chapter 3 of the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*) where this teaching is to be found:

In subsequent centuries more widespread disagreements appeared and quite large Communities became separated from full communion with the Catholic Church—developments for which, at times, men of both sides were to blame. However, one cannot impute the sin of separation to those who at present are born into these Communities and are instilled therein with Christ's faith. The Catholic Church accepts them with respect and affection as brothers. For men who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are brought into a certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church. . . . All those justified by faith through baptism are incorporated into Christ. They therefore have a right to be honoured by the title of Christian, and are properly regarded as brothers in the Lord by the sons of the Catholic Church. Moreover some, even very many, of the most significant elements or endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church herself can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church. . . . It follows that these separated Churches and Communities, though we believe they suffer from defects already mentioned, have by no means been deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church.²⁵

It has been objected by some that this teaching effectively turns protestants into 'anonymous catholics'. That is true, but it is important to see this fact in perspective. What higher praise could the catholic give to the protestant than to see him in this way? What could, from a Roman Catholic perspective, be a more positive assessment of protestantism? It should also be noted that since the council Roman Catholics increasingly view their church as a denomination among others, albeit a very special one (with 'the very fullness of grace and truth').

Another striking illustration of changed attitudes to protestant-

²⁶ *Unitatis Redintegratio* 3 in W. M. Abbott (ed), *The Documents of Vatican II* (London etc.: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967) 345f.

ism is seen in Roman Catholic attitudes to the Reformers. During the course of this century Luther has changed from a wicked and debauched heretic to a sincere man who was misguided to a reformer who affirmed the biblical doctrine of justification but was tragically pushed into schism.²⁷ There is a considerable body of Roman Catholic Calvin scholarship and it is noted for its sympathetic treatment of the reformer.²⁸ In fact, so much have Roman Catholic attitudes changed that evangelicals, who once criticized catholic intolerance, now express deep concern at the inroads of relativism into Roman Catholic thought.²⁹

Evangelical Attitudes to Rome

Among evangelicals today there is found a wide range of attitudes towards Rome. The Reformers saw the papacy as Antichrist, an attitude which reflects both their negative feelings about the state of the church and their belief that the end was near. Today few evangelicals would accept this identification. At the other end of the scale there are those who speak as if union with Rome is just round the corner. This is not a realistic hope. Perhaps the analogy with Gorbachev can point us in the right direction. There used to be those who said that nothing had changed in the Soviet Union, but this view is not often heard today. Change has taken place, the cold war is over, but that does not mean that serious differences do not remain. President Reagan pays a visit to the former 'evil empire' and finds friends. He sees grounds for optimism and hope but does not forget that there are still important points of difference. It is very similar with our present topic. Since pope John XXIII we have been in the era of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. The cold war is over, creating a context in which we can talk through the differences which there are. It is vital that evangelicals do not neglect this opportunity. There is at present a great openness in the Roman Catholic Church to ideas from outside. It has been pointed out that catholic scholarship has been influenced by liberal protestantism and not sufficiently by evangelical scholarship.³⁰ The cure for this is a greater degree of

²⁷ J Atkinson, *Martin Luther Prophet to the Church Catholic* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1983) chh. 1f. traces the changes in the Roman Catholic perception of Luther this century.

²⁸ Cf. A. Ganoczy, 'Calvin in Present-day Catholic Thought', *Concilium* 4/2, 1966, 20-23.

²⁹ 'An Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism', 91f.

³⁰ 'An Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism', 361.

contact between evangelicals and Roman Catholics, both at the corporate and at the individual levels.

As has been observed, Roman Catholics have abandoned the claim that the Catholic Church is the only church and are willing to see it as a denomination alongside others, albeit in a unique position. Evangelicals can respond by recognizing the Roman Catholic Church as another denomination, while acknowledging that there remain serious theological differences with this particular denomination, greater than those between Anglicans and Baptists, say. While evangelicals would not normally claim 'the very fullness of grace and truth' for their own churches, they would generally regard evangelical churches as reflecting fairly faithfully what the church should be while other churches (like the Roman Catholic Church) are seen as more hazy approximations to the standard. This attitude to Rome would be taken by a substantial proportion of evangelicals, though there would also be a large number who would not be happy with it.³¹

What of the salvation of individual Roman Catholics? The mainstream protestant tradition has never taken the view that no Roman Catholics will be saved, but attitudes vary as to how many. In general it can be said that just as Roman Catholics today regard protestants as 'anonymous catholics', so also evangelicals hold that Roman Catholics are saved by being 'anonymous evangelicals'. I.e. there is talk of Roman Catholics who are 'converted', who have a trust in Christ similar to that being proclaimed by evangelicals, etc. But there are considerable differences in generosity or otherwise with which salvation is reckoned to be a possibility for Roman Catholics. The tension between different approaches surfaced clearly recently in *Europe's Millions*, the magazine of the European Christian Mission. The April-June 1988 issue contained a response to the question: 'Why does ECM work in Roman Catholic countries?' The answer spoke of the low percentage of church-goers in the Roman Catholic countries and stated that 'ECM's main thrust is not towards church-goers but towards those who hardly ever go near a church'. This answer caused some disquiet which led to the publication of a reader's letter in the next issue. This letter pointed out that many church-goers were lost and that 'the Catholic system is the main culprit responsible for creating spiritual lethargy in the hearts of its adherents and it still teaches

³¹ For the two sides see *Christian Witness to Nominal Roman Catholics*, 11. For a recent plea that we should regard the Roman Catholic Church as a part of the 'Body of Christ', cf. J. L. Sandidge, 'Contextualizing Roman Catholicism', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 13, 1989, 157-166.

that the works of attendance at the Mass and Confession will bring salvation'. The mission responded by denying that it had intended 'to give the impression that we regard the Roman Catholic system as being a means of acceptance with God'.³² This little incident serves to illustrate the differences that exist over the question of whether or not practising Roman Catholics should be evangelized as if they were non-Christians or treated as would be the members of another protestant denomination.

It should be noted that the acceptance of Roman Catholics as members of a Christian denomination does not mean regarding them all as born-again, converted believers. 97% of Norwegians are members of a protestant church, although most of them rarely attend. No evangelical would imagine that all 97% were truly converted. So also there is no suggestion that all nominal, or even all practising, catholics be regarded as converted. But can it not be said that a far smaller percentage of practising catholics are converted than of practising protestants? We should be cautious before arguing along these lines, for three reasons. First, if it is true, it may be because the average catholic country has a higher proportion of practising catholics than the average protestant country does of practising protestants. In chiding catholicism for a higher percentage of nominalism we may simply be stating that protestantism has been more effective in alienating large sectors of the populace from the church and turning nominal into lapsed Christians who no longer come under 'the sound of the gospel'. Secondly, we must beware of the attitude that will acknowledge no-one as a true Christian who does not express their faith in evangelical terms. Cannot it not be that many Roman Catholics come to a living personal faith which then expresses itself through the available channels of catholic piety? Finally, this whole discussion assumes that *we* can distinguish genuine from nominal Christians, true from insincere faith. Of course we can hazard a guess, but we must remember that we cannot read hearts. It is the Lord who knows who are his (2 Timothy 2:19) and we must beware thinking that we can in this world definitively distinguish wheat and tares. In the last day I think we shall all be due for some surprises!

How then should we regard Roman Catholics? As has been said in a different context, we need warm hearts and a cool head. We must not shut ourselves off from contact with our 'separated brethren', especially at a time when they are so open to influences from outside. Nor must we be carried away and imagine that no

³² *Europe's Millions* April-June 1988, 4 and July-September 1988, 10f.

serious differences remain. There are differences and some of them are fundamental. But today, unlike the sixteenth century, we do not regard all differences as a bar to fellowship. Evangelical groups like FEET recognize that those who agree on fundamentals can work together even where there are deep divisions in other areas. Calvinists work with Arminians, baptists with paedobaptists, etc. We do not ignore our differences, but they do not prevent us from having fellowship together and to a large extent working together. The gap that separates us from Roman Catholics is wider, but there remain points on which we can be agreed. In an age where christian truth and practice is threatened by secularism, by liberal ideology and ethics and by many other threats, evangelicals can often find themselves fighting together with Roman Catholics in a common cause. This has just recently been the experience of many in the United Kingdom where many evangelicals rallied behind the Roman Catholic MP David Alton who sought to revise the abortion law. This should surely be welcomed. (It is assumed, of course, that such contact will be with honesty and integrity and will not involve compromise.) There are many benefits to be gained. As we each get to know the other better we are able to perceive where in the past we have caricatured one another. Deeper mutual understanding can only be a benefit. If as evangelicals we believe ourselves to be standing for vital aspects of biblical truth, increased contact with Roman Catholics in an attitude of trust and mutual respect will enable us more effectively to share that truth, rather than merely preserve it in its purity under a bushel. Finally, if as protestants we acknowledge that our own churches are also *semper reformanda*, always in need of reform, then contacts with Roman Catholics enable us to listen respectfully to the weaknesses that they perceive in our position.³³ Unless we hold to a position of ecclesiastical perfectionism, which is precisely the charge which we make against Roman Catholicism, there can be no grounds for refusing to face that challenge.

³³ An example of a catholic critique of evangelical weaknesses is found in T. Howard, *Evangelical Is Not Enough* (Nashville etc.: Nelson, 1984). Subsequent to writing the book, Howard became a Roman Catholic. He explains his change in a lengthy interview in *Christianity Today*.