

“CULTURE, CONTEXTUALIZATION, AND CONVERSION”:  
MISSIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS  
FROM THE CATHOLIC-PENTECOSTAL DIALOGUE (1990-1997)

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen

1. Introduction: Gospel and Culture

It is one of the established canons of modern missiology that the gospel should be contextualized in given context. Now for several decades, missiologists have, on the one hand, criticized their predecessors for an alleged lack of attention paid to local cultures and, on the other hand, have devised ingenious ways to implement “contextualization.” Yet, the term contextualization has become so much used that sometimes one is left wondering whether there is a universally accepted definition.

The intensive debate about contextualization in recent decades has helped us see more clearly the integral relationship between the Christian message and the context in which those who hear and live it out find themselves. For example, conversion happens both in a human heart and a socio-cultural context.

Catholic theology, because of a long tradition of Thomistic view according to which grace fulfills what is lacking in (human) nature, has been keener to the influence of the context to the Christian message.<sup>1</sup> For

---

*Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Ph.D., vm\_karkkainen@hotmail.com), a Finnish Pentecostal, is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, U.S.A., and Docent of Ecumenics at the University of Helsinki, Finland. He is former Vice-Principal of Full Gospel Bible College in Bangkok, Thailand. He has recently published two monographs on Roman Catholic-Pentecostal dialogue and his articles have appeared in numerous international journals in several languages.*

<sup>1</sup> For a brief statement of the classical position, still foundational for much of Catholic theology and missiology, see Miikka Ruokanen, *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions According to the Second Vatican Council* (Leiden/New York/Köln: E. J. Brill, 1992), pp. 13-20, 117-19.

Protestant missiology in general and to Evangelical and especially Pentecostal-Charismatic missiology in particular, it has been a much longer process to come to grips with this foundational insight. Protestants have tended to emphasize the opposition between what grace is and does and everything related to the human person and his/her activities.

In a historic ecumenical exercise between currently the two biggest Christian churches, namely the Roman Catholic Church and Pentecostal churches, as part of discussions about mission and evangelization, the topic of culture has come to surface. Corollary concerns, such as conversion, community, and secularization have also been touched on.

In this essay I want to offer some reflections from this significant dialogue. Even though the dialogue did not focus particularly on Asian context – as a former missionary to Thailand and regular visitor to some countries of the area (incidentally, I happen to write this article on the way to Malaysia) – I think the dialogue outcomes offer fruitful seed for thought on the Asian mission context. As is well known, in Asia the relationship between culture and religion is even more integral than in many other mission contexts.

## 2. The Emergence and Themes of the Roman Catholic-Pentecostals Dialogue on Mission

In 1972, the two largest Christian communities, the Roman Catholic Church and Pentecostal churches, began a mutual dialogue at the international level.<sup>2</sup> Although this historic dialogue has escaped the notice of even ecumenical professionals, its significance can hardly be over-

---

<sup>2</sup> For academic treatments of the Dialogue, see the following dissertations: Arnold Bittlinger, *Papst und Pfingstler: Der römische katholische-pfingstliche Dialogue und seine ökumenische Relevanz* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1972); Jerry L. Sandidge, *Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue (1977-1982): A Study in Developing Ecumenism*, vols. 1 & 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987); Paul D. Lee, "Pneumatological Ecclesiology in the Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue. A Catholic Reading of the Third Quinquennium (1985-1989)" (Diss., University of St. Thomas, Rome, 1994). Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Spiritus ubi vult spirat: Pneumatology in Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue (1972-1989)* (Helsinki: Luther Agricola-Society, 1998). My post-doctoral *Habilitationsschrift* focused on the latest phase of the dialogue, the topic of which was evangelization, proselytism, and common witness. V.-M. Kärkkäinen, *Ad ultimum terrae: Evangelization, Proselytism, and Common Witness in the Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue 1990-1997*, Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity 117 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999).

estimated. With regard to sheer numbers of Christians, the significance of the Catholic-Pentecostal dialogue is immense; together these two Christian families represent at least two-thirds of world Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

The latest phase of these talks has been concentrated on the most delicate topic, namely mission,<sup>4</sup> proselytism, and common witness. After almost a quarter of a century of mutual exchange of ideas and spirituality, the dialogue teams have dared to take up issues which really make a difference between these two giants.

The topics and themes for the various phases have been the following:<sup>5</sup>

- 1) The Stage of Mutual Introduction (The First Quinquennium, 1972-1976);
- 2) The Phase of Contra-Positions (The Second Quinquennium, 1977-1982);
- 3) The Search for Common Identity (The Third Quinquennium, 1985-1989);
- 4) The Potential of Mutual Cooperation in the Christ-Given Mission (The Fourth Phase, 1990-1997).

---

<sup>3</sup> For the significance of the dialogue to ecumenical world in general and to the Catholic-Pentecostal relations in particular, see two articles by the co-initiator and Catholic co-chair of the dialogue, Fr. Kilian McDonnell, OSB, “Improbable Conversations: The International Classical Pentecostal/Roman Catholic Dialogue,” *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 17:2 (1995), pp. 163-74; “Five Defining Issues: The International Classical Pentecostal/Roman Catholic Dialogue,” *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 17:2 (1995), pp. 175-88.

<sup>4</sup> A comprehensive treatment of Pentecostal missiology is yet to appear. For some aspects, see Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), esp. pp. 288-306; see also V.-M. Kärkkäinen, “‘Truth on Fire’: Pentecostal Theology of Mission and the Challenges of a New Millennium,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 3:1 (2000), pp. 33-60; “Mission, Spirit, and Eschatology: An Outline of a Pentecostal-Charismatic Theology of Mission,” *Mission Studies* 41:1 (1999), pp. 73-94; “Pentecostal Missiology in Ecumenical Perspective: Contributions, Challenges, Controversies,” *International Review of Mission* 88 (1999), pp. 207-25; “Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness: Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue on Mission (1991-1997),” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (2000 forthcoming), 20 pp.; and “Missiology, Pentecostal and Charismatic,” in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, eds. S. M. Burgess and G. B. McGee, rev. ed. [orig. 1988] (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000, forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Lee, “Pneumatological Ecclesiology,” pp. 36-46.

The fourth phase of the dialogue (1990-1997), which is our focus in this essay, lasted for seven years. The overall topic was mission and proselytism.

Specific themes for the sessions were: The Meaning of Mission and Evangelization (1990); The Biblical and Systematic Foundation of Evangelization (1991); Evangelization and Culture (1992); Evangelization and Social Justice (1993); Evangelization/Evangelism, Common Witness, and Proselytism (1994), and Common Witness (1995).

The motive for selecting evangelization and mission as the main theme was explained in the *Final Report (1990-1997)*:<sup>6</sup> “Since many Christians have seen the last decade of the second millennium as one in which to emphasize evangelization, and since significant tensions exist between Pentecostals and Catholics on this issue, it appeared appropriate to concentrate on this topic” (# 5).

The 1992 session’s overall topic was culture and related themes, such as contextualization, inculturation, and conversion. The questions discussed during that year’s session were the following: the complex relationship between culture and gospel; the relationship between conversion and inculturation; the complicated question of secularization, and its relation to social change and the need for contextualization

I will proceed in the following way. First, I will look at the relationship between the gospel and culture. Next there will be a discussion on the relation of conversion to inculturation and contextualization. Then I will take up the issue of social change and secularization, key topics with regard to the right understanding of the influence of culture to the gospel. Before concluding reflections, there will be a section on the importance of community and *koinonia* as indispensable element of mission in today’s world.

### 3. The Complex Relationship between the Gospel and Culture

The gospel tries to transform a culture from within: if it is successful, we speak of “inculturation,” which is not to be confused with acculturation, a simple transfer of elements of one culture to another. Societies and cultures often attempt to neutralize the gospel. When they

---

<sup>6</sup> *Final Report (1990-1997)*, # 4. (Hereafter the Final Reports will be referred to as FR I = 1972-1976, FR II = 1978-1982, FR III = 1985-1989, FR IV = 1990-1997. The sign # (followed by a number, e.g., # 1) in the text always refers to the *Final Report 1990-1997* that is the focus of this article.

succeed, we speak of “secularization.” This occurs when human dynamics (e.g., rationalism) take precedence over the gospel. One possible cause of secularization might be that a Christian group, through intellectual or moral weakness, finds itself greatly alienated from culture due to cultural (rather than the gospel) reasons.<sup>7</sup>

Catholics and Pentecostals see together that in looking at the subject of evangelism and culture, both theological issues and sociological dynamics must be examined. Often theological and social issues are intertwined.<sup>8</sup>

Catholics and Pentecostals agree that both the evangelist and the one who is evangelized need to realize that neither operates in a cultural vacuum. Evangelists act unjustly toward peoples and cultures if they import political, economic, or social ideologies alongside the gospel. Those who listen and respond to the gospel, too, must be aware of their own culture and religious history and discern how their response is faithful to the gospel as embodied in their own religious history and culture.<sup>9</sup>

Discerning this unavoidable link between the gospel and culture is, however, complicated since the relationship between culture and the gospel is extremely complex. Catholics and Pentecostals are aware of this and they acknowledge that their proclamation and their Christian lifestyle are always embodied in a specific culture. Both accept also that there is considerable good in cultures, notwithstanding the fact of humanity’s fall from grace.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most challenging question in evangelization is the relationship between conversion and inculturation.

#### 4. Evangelization, Conversion, and Inculturation

Many Pentecostals are not only suspect but even afraid of the dialogue with Catholics. Those Pentecostals entertain fears that dialoguing about mission and evangelization with Catholics might be an exercise in futility

---

<sup>7</sup> *Agreed Account* 1991, Introduction (unpublished dialogue material). The text takes as an example of the latter the perspective concerning male-female relationship: if we maintain the same perspective in the twentieth century as we did in the twelfth century, in the name of the gospel, it means alienating the gospel from the culture of this day.

<sup>8</sup> *Agreed Account* 1992, I:1.

<sup>9</sup> *FR IV*, p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> *FR IV*, p. 28. *Agreed Account*, 1991: Introduction: “The relationship between the Gospel and culture is generally complex and tense.”

because of an alleged lack of personal evangelism in Catholic theology and practice. That this is not true was attested firmly in the *Agreed Account* about the conversion:<sup>11</sup>

Pentecostals and Catholics agree that there is no genuine evangelism without the direct and explicit call to repentance and reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ. Evangelization involves conversion, that is interior change, and being taken up in a Christian community.

Quoting from one of the most significant recent Catholic statements on mission, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Catholics emphasize that evangelization has “for a basis, center and summit...a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose again, salvation is offered to all men, as a gift of grace and forgiveness.”<sup>12</sup>

The common view of conversion notwithstanding, there is, however, a distinct difference of emphasis between the Catholic and Pentecostal orientation to evangelization. Pentecostals emphasize the changing of individuals who, when formed into a body of believers, bring change into the culture from within. Catholics emphasize that culture itself in its human institution and enterprises can also be transformed by the gospel.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, Pentecostals are strong on personal evangelism,<sup>14</sup> and they emphasize a “crisis-type” of conversion.<sup>15</sup> Catholics not only see the need to evangelize persons, but also see the need to evangelize cultures, for example, through educational institutions. Furthermore, they have often evangelized through aesthetics that embody religious values.<sup>16</sup>

The Catholic emphasis on a broader orientation of evangelism than just personal evangelism does not, however, mean downplaying the

---

<sup>11</sup> *Agreed Account* 1992, I:4.

<sup>12</sup> John Paul II, *Evangelization in the Modern World: Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii Nuntiandi”* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1975), # 13.

<sup>13</sup> *FR IV*, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> *Agreed Account* 1992, II:2.b.

<sup>15</sup> Everett A. Wilson “A Paradigm of Latin American Pentecostalism” (An unpublished Pentecostal position paper read in Rocca di Papa, Italy, 1992, 35 pp.), pp. 10-14 gives vivid illustrations of the crisis-orientation of Pentecostal preaching and conversions in the Latin American context.

<sup>16</sup> *FR IV*, p. 33.

importance and primary role of evangelizing persons: “However, the ultimate focus of evangelization is the person.”<sup>17</sup>

In a healthy self-critical way, Catholics acknowledge shortcomings in their evangelization, such as insufficient Christian initiation and discipleship formation and failure in bringing parishioners to a personal faith commitment. These shortcomings, though, are not theologically motivated and can sometimes be due to concrete conditions of the area, like poverty, illiteracy, a shortage of ministers, and the structures of oppression.<sup>18</sup>

It is significant ecumenically that the Catholics in the dialogue process were at pains in trying to convince the dialogue partner of the importance of personal evangelization.<sup>19</sup> In Hervé Legrand’s view, “to reduce evangelization to the relationship to culture, to the ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, to the reconciliation of the competitive nationalism” would be a fatal error.<sup>20</sup> One fatal error of defining evangelization, at the expense of meeting persons, would be to identify it with, for example, political aspirations: “...there are still suspicions about the political Catholicism which existed not so long ago and which tried to use political power to enforce faith and Christian morals.”<sup>21</sup>

It seems to me that the difference of emphasis between the Catholic and Pentecostal views of relation of conversion and evangelization is a matter of different concerns rather than clear cut theological differences.<sup>22</sup> Pentecostals are concerned whether inculturation among nominal Christians and in non-Christian countries remains true to the gospel “without the direct call to repentance and reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ.”<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> *FR IV*, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> *FR IV*, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> Hervé Legrand, OP, “A Paradigm: ‘Evangelizing in Secularized Pluralistic Europe’ according to Some Bishops of the CCEE” (An unpublished Catholic position paper read in Rocca di Papa, Italy, 1992, 34 pp.), p. 6 quotes from Cardinal F. König who says that “one must not start with evangelization of institutions but with the evangelization of people.”

<sup>20</sup> Legrand, “A Paradigm,” p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> Legrand, “A Paradigm,” pp. 6-7.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Agreed Account* 1992, II:2.c. “...whereas Catholics aim for a true Christianization of a culture, Pentecostals are focused more directly on evangelizing individuals.”

<sup>23</sup> “Catholic Answer to Pentecostal Hard Question” (unpublished dialogue

For Catholics, the main concern is not to see conversion in too simplistic terms. Such an approach would see evangelization/conversion completed by the call to repentance, without due attention to inculturation, that is, “to assure the rootedness, continuity, and plausibility of the gospel message” in any given context. For Catholics, inculturation is a long process, important because a Christian is not “just a soul to be converted, but a person incarnated into a concrete culture.” Catholics challenge Pentecostals to do long term patient work in any culture to overcome prejudices, stereotypes, and feelings antithetical to the gospel message. The call to repentance and reconciliation will not have its full effect until the values, consonant with the kingdom proclaimed, can be affirmed in the culture and distortions corrected.<sup>24</sup>

One perspective which helps explain the difference between Catholic and Pentecostal approaches to evangelization is the more pessimistic view of the world among Pentecostals. Pentecostals tend to emphasize the sinfulness of the world (cf. 1 John 2:15-17). Catholics, on the other hand, stress the goodness of the world.<sup>25</sup> The more positive view of Catholicism toward the world is based, as I indicated in the beginning of the article, on the Thomistic view of nature *vs.* grace, which operates on the notion that grace elevates nature to a higher level and, on the other hand, on the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes*.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, Pentecostal emphasis on opposition to the world is felt by Catholics to be too limited, while Catholic emphasis on continuity with the world goes too far for some Pentecostals.<sup>27</sup> Both parties, though, can learn from each other’s perspectives.<sup>28</sup>

---

material, 1992), # 1.

<sup>24</sup> “Catholic Answer to Pentecostal Hard Question,” # 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Agreed Account* 1992, II:2.a.

<sup>26</sup> *Agreed Account* 1992, II.2.a.

<sup>27</sup> *Agreed Account* 1992, II.2.a.

<sup>28</sup> *Agreed Account* 1992, II.2.a. So also *Agreed Account* 1992, II.2.c.: “Catholics would like to reaffirm proclamation. Most Pentecostals believe in active involvement in the life of the community. In recent years they have increasingly asserted themselves in society at large and have started reflecting on socio-ethical issues.”

## 5. Secularization, Social Change, and Contextualization

It was noted above that with “inculturation” missiologists usually mean a successful contextualization of the gospel whereas the term “secularization” in everyday usage of the word refers to failure to establish the values of the gospel in one’s life and in the community.

The term “secularization,” though widely used in this dialogue as well as in missiological writings elsewhere, is but an ambiguous term.<sup>29</sup> The 1985 symposium of European bishops rightly paid more attention to the empirical and historical - instead of metaphysical - notion of secularization according to which there is probably no such a thing as secularization *per se* but only varied situations which are the result of complex social compromises. In that approach, the term secularization, rather than being just an obstacle to evangelization,<sup>30</sup> was seen as a tool to help one think through the connection between religion and surrounding society. This is, of course, more in tune with a sociological definition of the term. Although the Catholic paper urges both Catholics and Pentecostals to be more precise in their usage of the term, the *Final Report (1990-1997)* as well as other documents of the dialogue seem to be accustomed to the every day/ecclesial meaning of the term: the term connotes the decline of religious/spiritual commitment in modern days.<sup>31</sup>

There is a shared concern over secularization: “Both Catholics and Pentecostals recognize that great social changes in western society result in secularization processes and consequently a decline in religious practice.”<sup>32</sup> Obviously, the term “secularization” here is used in the popular sense that refers to weakening of Christian commitment. It is something to be deplored and condemned therefore but also, more positively, to be met with a Christian message.<sup>33</sup> The tragedy of secularization is that many

---

<sup>29</sup> Legrand, “A Paradigm,” p. 10. See also the treatment of the issue of secularization from the viewpoint of sacred (*Entsakralisierung*) in Heribert Mühlh, *Entsakralisierung: Ein epochales Schlagwort in seiner Bedeutung für die Zukunft der christlichen Kirchen* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1971), who has been a long-standing dialogue member since the beginning.

<sup>30</sup> Legrand, “A Paradigm,” pp. 13-14 notes that in a wealth of Catholic literature there is still the older attitude towards the term secularization which tends to denounce it together with materialism, hedonism, individualism and so on.

<sup>31</sup> Legrand, “A Paradigm,” p. 14.

<sup>32</sup> *FR IV*, p. 34.

<sup>33</sup> *FR IV*, p. 34: “We deplore and condemn this secularization process, especially when these attitudes become part of a political agenda which promotes a

people face new challenges without guidelines in the fields of religion and ethics.<sup>34</sup> But secularization goes on inside the church, not just outside, as Christians adopt the values of materialistic culture or use the gospel for political purposes.

Both Pentecostals and Roman Catholics see disturbing expressions of “secularization” in their churches and feel the need to adopt pastoral strategies to address it effectively. As an example, Pentecostals cite the increasing tendency for church members to adopt the values of materialistic cultures. Catholics cite as an example the use of the gospel for materialistic or political purposes.<sup>35</sup>

Massive social changes have taken place and challenged the church in the postmodern “global village.” Over the past thirty years, technological and scientific innovations have radically changed the concrete conditions in which human beings are born and die, not only in the western world but also elsewhere. Progress in medicine far more than ideologies has influenced our way of seeing the beginning and end of human life.<sup>36</sup> The aging process and well as the conditions of elderly people have dramatically changed, too.<sup>37</sup> Pentecostalist Wilson highlighted the change processes in Latin America with widespread social problems, deterioration of the structures of the society, and increasing feeling of helplessness.<sup>38</sup> The same can be said in Asian context.

Catholic Legrand takes up as a further example in Europe the growing secularization of women. He thinks that major factors for causing so many

---

value-free society in the name of tolerance and liberalism. To deplore and condemn are not enough. More positively, as Christians, we have to understand these new challenges and help our people to find new ways and insights to face them in light of Christian values.”

<sup>34</sup> *FR IV*, p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> *Agreed Account* 1992, I:6.

<sup>36</sup> *FR IV*, p. 35

<sup>37</sup> *FR IV*, p. 36

<sup>38</sup> Wilson, “A Paradigm of Latin American Pentecostalism,” p. 2, “Human aspiration for betterment, a legitimate concept in the western cultural legacy that in Europe and North America has played an important role in social cohesion and development, has often been frustrated in Latin America. Most people have been left to fashion for themselves, within the resources of their own experience, satisfactory responses to insecurity, rejection and injustice, often reverting atavistically to traditional beliefs and organizational structures.”

women in France and northern Europe to become estranged from the church, rather than being feminist ideas, are mostly non-ideological, including the progress of medicine and women’s paid work in the post-industrial societies. The development of medicine has enabled the control of birth and reduced infant mortality. Financial independence in many cases has been one of the outcomes of the progress as well as yearning for more equality. Legrand argues that women tend to affirm their independence from societies dominated by men, such as the church.<sup>39</sup>

What, then, is the proper reaction of churches to changing social circumstances, pluralism, and growing secularization? The dialogue members, although entertaining somewhat differing emphases, believed that intensification of evangelization and informed contextualization are the necessary means to counter these challenges.<sup>40</sup>

First of all, Cardinal Martini, the president of the Conseil des conférences épiscopales d’Europe (CCEE, European Council of Catholic Bishops) reminded that evangelizing people means loving them, for if they do not feel loved then they will not listen to the message. It also means trusting them and strengthening them in their hope for a better future.<sup>41</sup> It will also require an effort to give rise to authentic Christian communities in an urbanized and secularized culture.<sup>42</sup> Legrand notes that one can see how the European bishops, in their concern for evangelization, have evolved from the denunciation of secularization to a more positive and also more active perspective of a new inculturation of Christian life.<sup>43</sup>

The Pentecostal team referred to the context of Latin America where the principal challenge facing the church may not be how to stimulate religious interest or how to resist religious change but rather how to recognize and appropriately encourage the spiritual propensities of Latin America. As is well known, the spiritual, the transcendental and the surreal are replete in Latin American culture, nourished, apparently, by profound inner resources of patience, hope, and imagination.<sup>44</sup> This is, I think, not far from the Asian context.

---

<sup>39</sup> Legrand, “A Paradigm,” pp. 14-16.

<sup>40</sup> *Les évêques d’Europe et la nouvelle évangélisation*, ed. Hervé Legrand, Conseil des conférences épiscopales d’Europe, Coll. “Documents des Églises” (Paris: Cerf, 1991), # 13:2 (hereafter: *EEM*).

<sup>41</sup> *EEME*, # 34.

<sup>42</sup> *EEME*, # 34.

<sup>43</sup> Legrand, “A Paradigm,” p. 6; see also *EEME* # 31, 6.

<sup>44</sup> Wilson, “A Paradigm,” pp. 1-2.

There is in Pentecostal evangelization something which the Catholic Church has come to appreciate more and more, namely a strategy of evangelization of ordinary people by ordinary people. Many observers would say that this has been one of the key factors in the growth of Pentecostalism.<sup>45</sup>

While both Catholics and Pentecostals are committed to the task of contextualization, there is a certain difference of emphasis: Pentecostals tend to be more flexible to change in order to cope with new conditions while Catholics are concerned about too swift changes, since they might yield to the spirit of the times.<sup>46</sup> Wilson maintains that one of the key characteristics of Pentecostal mission in Latin America has been versatility: "The genius of Pentecost is to be free to find new methods, to adopt and adapt practices which reflect their cultural heritage."<sup>47</sup>

In Latin America the Pentecostal movement has grown not only rapidly but also differently. Springing from a variety of situations and methods, the fertile soil of contemporary crisis and change has led to a broad range of movements, including those that reflect the different aspirations of ethnic groups, those built largely on diverse regions or social classes and those that accommodate diverse doctrinal, polity, and denominational emphases. The readiness to adapt folk music styles, instead of insisting on "sacred music" in the church, is but one example of the versatile nature of the movement. Pentecostals have shown much more flexibility in recruiting women, those of other races, and persons without any or little education than most other Christian groups.<sup>48</sup> Wilson is even of the opinion that the often-criticized - especially from the Catholic viewpoint - tendency of Pentecostal groups to fragment, serves as an extremely effective means of applying a variety of different approaches to difficult problems.<sup>49</sup> The fact notwithstanding, Pentecostals would do well,

---

<sup>45</sup> The Pentecostal position paper speaks about the "exponential growth" of Pentecostalism in Latin America, largely due to evangelization encounters which take place in market places, schools, work places, homes, etc. In the social circumstances of Latin America, with uncertain employment and changing social conditions, Pentecostals are able to spread the gospel at grassroots levels and draw new adherents to their churches, even if some of the converts tend to lapse after a while. Wilson, "A Paradigm," pp. 7-13, esp. pp. 9-10.

<sup>46</sup> *Agreed Account* 1992, II:2.d.

<sup>47</sup> Wilson, "A Paradigm," p. 30; the quotation is attributed to William R. Read, without source reference.

<sup>48</sup> Wilson, "A Paradigm," pp. 31-33.

<sup>49</sup> Wilson, "A Paradigm," p. 32.

however, to address this perennial problem from a theological and ecclesiological viewpoint. That this has not been done often is an indication of the (too) pragmatic nature of the movement with the idea of “working methods” as the “right methods”.

## 6. Conversion, Community and *Koinonia*

Living in a particular culture and context does not mean living in a vacuum; human life by definition is communal. There was a helpful discussion on the role of the community and *koinonia* during various sessions of the fourth phase (1990-1997).

Theologically it is important to note that the topic of *koinonia* has played a crucial role in the dialogue both with regard to ecclesiology and missiology. *Koinonia* was the overall topic of the Third Quinquennium (1985-1989).<sup>50</sup> It was agreed that *koinonia* as lived by the early Christians (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37) had social implications. Their communities did not act from a concept of social justice. The concern they showed for the poor, widows, and strangers was not seen as an entirely separate activity but rather as an extension of their worship.<sup>51</sup> The faith community - as seen in the NT and in the modern days - evangelizes through its proclamation and through its communal life.<sup>52</sup> This is but living out the *koinonia* given to the church by the Holy Spirit.

In living out their Spirit-inspired *koinonia* at the local level, the early Pentecostals challenged current norms of inequality with regard to the treatment of minorities, women, and the poor. “Thus, mainline denominations petitioned their societies for social justice, while Pentecostals found justice in their daily relationships with the dispossessed of society.”<sup>53</sup> Pentecostalism, with its appeal to marginal groups in society, shattered the norms of middle class society. During a time when racial and

---

<sup>50</sup> “Perspectives on *Koinonia*: The Report from the Third Quinquennium of *The Dialogue* between the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church and Some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders, 1985-1989,” *Information Service* 75 (1990), pp. 179-91; *PNEUMA* 12:2 (1990), pp. 117-42. For a critical discussion, see my *Spiritus ubi vult spirat*, ch. 6.

<sup>51</sup> *FR IV*, p. 57.

<sup>52</sup> *Agreed Account*, 1993, A.5 (unpublished dialogue material).

<sup>53</sup> Murl O. Dirksen and Karen Carroll Mundy, “Social Justice and Evangelism: A Pentecostal Perspective” (An unpublished Pentecostal position paper, Paris, France, 1993, 42 pp.), pp. 1-2.

gender inequality was endemic, Pentecostals welcomed black and white, male and female, rich and poor.

Both Catholics and Pentecostals agree that evangelization includes calling people to conversion and membership in a local church.<sup>54</sup> The difference has to do how Catholics and Pentecostals define the relation of one local church to other local churches. Pentecostals tend to speak about “autonomous” local churches, while Catholics believe there is no such thing as a totally autonomous church.<sup>55</sup> Catholics think that a significant dimension is lacking when the fullness of visible communion with the universal church is absent because this leads in the end to an impoverishment in the confession of faith.<sup>56</sup>

### 7. Concluding Reflections

In current mission discussion there are two determinative issues, namely, the relation of Christianity to other religions (and the corollary question, that of the role of the Holy Spirit in relation to communities, religions, and people outside the *ekklesia*) and the needs and challenges of contextualization. While the former question was also touched in the Roman Catholic-Pentecostal dialogue on mission,<sup>57</sup> the latter received a lot of attention. And significantly so, especially in view of the fact that Pentecostals have been very slow to acknowledge the meaning of culture to proclamation. In their own distinctive – one could perhaps say, unthematized way – Pentecostals have reacted to culture by devising all kinds of contextual methods of evangelization and church planting; one has only to think of adoption of all sorts of popular songs in Pentecostal worship, dance and other physical manifestations, not-church-looking church buildings, etc. But this has not been a result of a sustained reflection but rather an outcome of a highly practical mission strategy.

---

<sup>54</sup> Cf. *Agreed Account* 1992, II:4.

<sup>55</sup> *Agreed Account* 1992, II:3, “Pentecostals consider calling people to personal faith in Jesus Christ and to formation in autonomous churches to be a legitimate way in which the Spirit builds the kingdom of God in pluralistic societies. Pentecostals consider it important that churches be in fellowship with one another. While Catholics appreciate the achievement of Pentecostal evangelism, they believe there is no such thing as a totally autonomous church.”

<sup>56</sup> *Agreed Account* 1992, II:3.

<sup>57</sup> For details, see Kärkkäinen, *Ad ultimum terrae*, ch. 4.

The Roman Catholic-Pentecostal dialogue is ecumenically and missiologically highly significant just because it is so unlikely as it is; not only because Catholics and Pentecostals are so different, but also because the topics selected for the dialogue have not been very popular or acute among Pentecostals (such as proselytism, common witness, conversion, inculturation). The willingness of Pentecostals to engage in the dialogue and the readiness of the Catholics to further the dialogue over almost three decades is a powerful testimony to the importance of an open, honest dialogue.

One of the outcomes of the mutual talks has been the insight that many missiological and ecumenical questions are not only questions of theology and doctrine but also those of attitude. For example, to what degree churches are open to change is, of course, also a matter of theology but also of overall attitude and history of a particular church.

I believe this insight applies to culture as much as to any other missiological topic. The issue of culture is extremely complex – a fact fittingly acknowledged by the dialogue partners. A lot of work has to be done to ascertain what are the theological and attitudinal resources of all Christian churches to take into consideration the pervasive role of culture.

Ecumenical dialogue is at its best an exchange of gifts, a mutual learning experience. Certainly, Pentecostals can learn from Catholics appreciation of culture and the need to address, not only individuals, but also structures with the powerful message of Christ's gospel. Catholics may want to learn from Pentecostals about the urgency of evangelism and importance of eschatological “haste” in fulfilling the commission of the Master.