

The great challenge facing the Christian churches today is how to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the men and women of our times. The task of evangelizing is not something new for the Church. We cannot speak of this challenge without also bringing into our discussions the question of ecumenism, the search for unity among Christians.

At the beginning of the present century the churches were certainly much more interested in maintaining their own separate position in the world and where possible increasing their membership, even if that meant conversion to their community from other churches and ecclesial communities. In his apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Pope John Paul II speaks about that “painful chapter of history to which the sons and daughters of the Church must return with a spirit of repentance” when acquiescence was given, “especially in certain centuries, to intolerance and even the use of violence in the service of truth.” The Inquisition is one example of this on the part of the Catholic Church, and there are similar examples on the part of other Christian churches and ecclesial communions.

But the Second Vatican council, in the Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, urged Catholics to “joyfully acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage which are to be found among other Christian communions.”

Pope John Paul II takes up this same thought in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (That They May Be One): “The Relationships which the members of the Catholic Church have established with other Christians since the Council have enabled us to discover what God is bringing about in members of other churches and ecclesial communities...”

There are many places in the world where we still find much tension between the churches. Latin America, as we all know, is certainly not free of such tension. In fact, the Catholic Churches in Latin America find themselves often in a not dissimilar situation to the Orthodox Churches in Eastern Europe. The Catholic bishops see the situation as one in which their faithful are being stolen, while those accused of this theft are convinced that they are simply bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to those who have not had the Gospel adequately preached to them.

It seems to me that there are some fundamental principles that should be taken into consideration in interchurch relations in such places as Eastern Europe or Latin America.

1. It is surely just that the church that has evangelized a country or people should be held in respect by others who come later on the scene: Newcomers should not target for their evangelizing work the active, baptized members of the church.
2. It should be taken as a fundamental principle that every person has the right to belong to one or another church or ecclesial communion according to his or her

conscience, provided of course that a decision to change is made in true freedom and for the proper motives.

3. Every church or ecclesial communion should be able to bear witness to the Gospel. Indeed it is hard to imagine a church or similar Christian body that does not have an obligation to do just that. Consequently, every church or ecclesial communion should have the right to accept into its membership those who in conscience decide that they belong there. It is, after all, much more important that a person find salvation in Christ than that he or she belong without conviction to any particular community.

The Joint Working Group between the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches on the question of proselytism stated: "Religious freedom affirms the right of all persons to pursue the truth and witness to the truth according to their conscience.

4. It is important, however, that the preaching of the Gospel be free from any taint of proselytism - by which I mean the use of unworthy means to attract members of other churches or even unchurched persons to their fold. Misrepresentation of the other, or of one's own community, is a common source of tension.

I believe that in the past Evangelicals and Catholics have a particular responsibility in this connection, looking upon each other with such suspicion, distrust, and even hostility that the very Christian authenticity of the other was questioned. At times one has been presented by the other in ways that completely distorted its identity. These misunderstandings and conflicts have left a painful heritage.

Yet Catholics and Evangelicals live side-by-side today in all of America and they will continue to do so in the coming century. Are they to do so in peace or in conflict? Are they to evangelize "one against the other" or "with one another"? How can we help to make the second of these choices the reality? For whether we wish it or not, a choice has to be made.

This does not mean, of course, that Evangelicals and Catholics have overcome all their doctrinal differences or that their understanding of the Gospel and of the Christian message has suddenly become identical. New doctrinal understandings have been forthcoming and differences have been clarified, but no one claims that we have reached the kind of unity we would like to achieve. For that reason we will surely continue to evangelize according to our beliefs. What we look forward to is rather a way of carrying out this mission with respect one for the other, according to principles similar to those I have suggested.

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*A full discussion of the above issues appears in Michael Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).