

Catholics and Evangelicals

Doing it the French Way

The author

Gordon Margery was brought up in England and came to France in 1969 in order to serve French evangelical churches under the auspices of Operation Mobilisation, a mission specialising in short-term learning experiences for young people. Involved in evangelism with several local churches¹, he saw at first hand what it was to start new communities, and felt called to start one in Rennes, the capital of Brittany, where he stayed for nineteen years. He was then invited to be the pastor of a larger multicultural church in Ozoir-la-Ferrière, in the Paris suburbs. Thirteen years later, as retirement approached, he became the part-time pastor of a new church further out, in Faremoutiers, where after four years he was able to hand over to a younger man.

He was for many years one of the teachers at the Geneva Bible Institute and now does two courses for the Nogent Bible Institute, near Paris. He was also for several years the president of the Association évangélique d'Églises baptistes de langue française, one of the two historic Baptist denominations in France.

Brought up in the Methodist church, he came to a decisive experience of Christ in 1966 through the witness of the Christian Union in Oxford and an evangelical Anglican church there. He was baptised as an adult believer in 1970.

He is married, has three children and six grandchildren.

An ecumenical conversion

It was in Rennes that I first became convinced that I needed to develop some kind of relationship with representatives of the Roman Catholic church. Up till then, my understanding of Catholicism had come from studying Luther as part of my German course at Oxford, from reading polemical presentations by American and Northern Irish writers, and from the anecdotes of my evangelical colleagues. Most of the people from a Catholic background I had met seemed to have no knowledge of the Bible and little desire to follow Christ personally.

The turnabout came as a result of reading yet another newspaper article that treated evangelical churches as sects. If I could be upset about the caricatures that affected me and my beliefs, I had to make sure that I was not entertaining wrong ideas about Roman Catholics. Jesus said: "Do to others as you would have them do to you²."

But in those days, many French evangelicals were extremely suspicious of the ecumenical movement. I needed some kind of relationship that would not involve committing my own local church to something many would have seen as a compromise. That relationship came about through an ecumenical Bible study group that met at the Catholic seminary, under the leadership of the librarian, who came from a Protestant family. Alternating biblical and doctrinal themes, the group enabled me to share with Catholics in a friendly environment. Then, when I came to the Paris region, I started to go to the service held during the week of prayer for Christian unity, still as a private initiative, without committing my local church.

1 Roughly speaking, in Catholic parlance, parishes

2 Luke 6:31

This cautious openness must have been noticed, for in 2007 the rather conservative Fédération évangélique de France to which our churches belonged asked me to be their representative on a team from the broader-based Evangelical Alliance meeting regularly with delegates from the Catholic bishops' conference. At that time the word "dialogue" was felt by the Evangelicals to be too official, so the meetings were called "Groupe de conversations évangéliques-catholiques", or "Evangelical-Catholic conversation group". The group's name has evolved recently, adding the word "national" to distinguish it from local initiatives and citing the partners in alphabetical order. I have co-chaired the group since 2013.

The "Groupe national de conversations catholiques-évangéliques"

The group's origins can be traced back to 1996, and to an event organised by Jean Vannier's movement *L'Arche* in favour of mentally handicapped people. It was there that Mgr Gérard Daucourt, then president of the Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity, and Daniel Rivaud, pastor in one of the charismatic denominations, discovered that they had more in common than was generally believed. They had similar views on ethical issues and on the historic doctrines of the creeds. They exchanged letters, met again, and then decided to bring more people on board.

At that time, Evangelicals as a whole were a little-known and despised minority, and they saw Catholicism as their traditional enemy. The general public thought Evangelicals were a new and dangerous sect, like the Moonies, and from a Catholic viewpoint they had no history, no theology, and no identifiable organisation. They were compared to an interstellar dust-cloud³. The Evangelicals stood in the tradition of the 16th century Reformers and accused the Catholics of taking on traditions that were not biblical, obscuring salvation by grace alone, and practising idolatry. The Vatican was compared to the ungodly persecutors of the book of Revelation.

The Episcopal commission for Christian Unity immediately agreed to the setting up of a group and appointed one bishop, four priests and one lay theologian to represent them. But on the Evangelical side things were more complicated. Daniel Rivaud recruited four people on a personal basis, making sure that the main strands of Evangelical conviction were represented: Pentecostals, Charismatics and Baptists, and very quickly the Open Brethren. One man agreed to come only on the understanding that his name would never be mentioned in public. The first meeting took place on June 16th 1998. The group's aim was to achieve better mutual understanding and to exchange on ethical issues. It became rapidly apparent that the priority should be to reach a truer appreciation of what the other side believed and practised.

Recognition of the Group by the evangelical community came about gradually. One early member came as a purely personal commitment in order to speak for classical Evangelicalism. His local church then accepted and recognised what he was doing, followed by his denomination and finally in 2006 the French Evangelical Alliance, a total process of eight years.

2006 was a landmark. The Group produced a document presenting the history, beliefs and organisation of the evangelical movement to a Catholic audience. The starting point for the different topics was generally a draft text provided by the Evangelicals and then thoroughly revised by the whole group. Certain things needed to be better explained for a Catholic readership. Any polemical accents were eliminated. The Catholics refrained from commenting on evangelical doctrines. The result was a remarkably balanced and irenic text published by a very official Catholic publisher, the "Documents épiscopats" which aims at providing resources for Catholic leaders. The title was: *Regard sur le protestantisme évangélique en France* or *Looking at Evangelical Protestantism in France*, in magazine format of 48 pages. Many discovered through this document that Evangelicals

3 "Une nébuleuse"

have a history, a coherent corpus of doctrine, and a form of organisation, which, though not structured hierarchically, can nonetheless be identified and appreciated.

The publication of *Regard sur le protestantisme évangélique en France* induced the French Evangelical Alliance to define its own position. They took on responsibility for the group, thus giving it more formal recognition. Then, when the National Council of French Evangelicals⁴ took on the Evangelical Alliance's missions in 2010, the Conversation Group became part of the CNEF's remit.

The CNEF differs from many national Evangelical Alliances in that the members can only be denominations comprising at least five local churches. They are organised in four poles, so as to represent in a balanced way the Assemblies of God, the other pentecostal and charismatic churches, the non-charismatic evangelical denominations, and those denominations that are at the same time members of the Fédération Protestante de France, the Protestant Federation of France. A fifth pole allows evangelical voluntary organisations to be represented. This formal structure gives the CNEF a voice that is truly representative.

The Conversation Group meets three times a year, twice for one day in Paris, and once for two days in the provinces. The longer meeting enables us to share with local leaders and to develop friendship within the Group. We alternate between Catholic and evangelical venues.

Every meeting begins with prayer. In a Catholic setting, we follow the Catholic tradition and use the office of lauds. In an evangelical setting, one person chooses a Bible reading and comments on it, before introducing a time of extempore prayer. Prayer, which should unite, can be divisive. We are careful to pray in such a way that all round the table can say amen.

Évangéliser aujourd'hui (Evangelising Today)

After 2006, it took a little while to decide on a new project for the Group. In view of the massive secularisation of French society, many thought that it was vital for Catholics and Evangelicals to unite in evangelism. The Catholic team were strongly motivated by this theme, but the Evangelicals were divided. Some were enthusiastic, some convinced that their constituency would never accept the idea that we should preach the Gospel together. Finally it was agreed that we should explore four themes that have a bearing on the idea of joint evangelism, without going so far as to promote it formally. *Évangéliser ensemble (Evangelising Together)*, with or without a question mark, became *Évangéliser aujourd'hui (Evangelising Today)*.

The four topics chosen were evangelism, conversion, salvation and baptism. Each topic was prepared by a Catholic-Evangelical tandem, then debated and amended by the whole group.

Evangelism was a theme that revealed a wide consensus. We dealt with the history of missions seen from our double perspective and reproduced significant extracts from official Catholic documents and from the Lausanne committee. Evangelicals, we thought, would be surprised and pleased by what they read about the Catholic outlook on evangelism, and vice versa.

Within a broad consensus, our use of terms differs. For Evangelicals, evangelism is preaching the basic facts of the Gospel, supporting the proclamation with apologetics, and calling on all people to repent of sin and turn to Christ. After that, Evangelicals would speak about discipleship training for those who respond positively to the message and would not call that evangelism. In Jesus' command to the apostles, making disciples among all the nations is followed by baptism and further instruction in Christ's teaching, and Evangelicals adhere to that, so we

4 Conseil national des évangéliques de France, often referred to as the CNEF.

cannot say that the church is absent from their philosophy of evangelism. But it is not to the forefront.

The Catholic vocabulary concerning evangelism is more wide-reaching. It includes the initial kerygma, but embraces everything that could be seen as bringing people, the church and society more into line with the teaching of the Gospel. They have no difficulty in using the apostle Paul's language, when he wrote that he wanted to evangelise the Christians of Rome (Romans 1:15).

In contrast, the Lausanne documents distinguish between preaching the Gospel and attempting to meet the needs of suffering humanity, but affirm that both are necessary. Social and political action flows from Christ's command to love our neighbours as ourselves. It gives credibility to what we say about Christ.

In a similar fashion, the theme of conversion demonstrated a broad consensus, but two different uses of language. The consensus is that everyone is called upon to turn from evil and turn to Christ in faith and in daily commitment. In the evangelical world the use of the term conversion is quite narrow. It refers to an initial life-changing encounter with Christ, often called the new birth. It can be a very specific event, as with the Paul's conversion on the Damascus road; it can more of a process, as it was with C.S. Lewis, and as it often is with children. What happens after that initial turning-point is not called conversion, but sanctification, or growth in grace. Salvation by grace through faith must be followed by discipleship and good works, or it could be called into doubt.

From a Catholic standpoint, conversion must be daily and it is the standard term for what evangelicals call repentance or sanctification. So churches can be called to "conversion" – which is incomprehensible from an evangelical standpoint, because conversion implies for them that people were not Christians until then.

In practice, the Roman Catholic church in France knows that old-style Christendom is long gone and that a large majority of people will not be brought up within the church. Adult baptisms are more and more common, and so the idea of conversion as a life-changing event is becoming more familiar: it can be called "initial conversion." On the other hand, the continuing development of evangelical churches means that Evangelicals must give more room to children growing into a fuller understanding of grace and discipleship, which is more in line with the Catholic experience.

Evangelicals who themselves have had a dramatic experience of turning to Christ sometimes claim that Catholics do not believe in conversion. In so doing they are confusing the use of language in two different milieux with the underlying spiritual realities. Catholics may have the impression that the evangelical view of conversion means a quasi-magical idea of salvation that does not change lives. Both caricatures need to be replaced by a recognition that, on this theme at least, Catholics and Evangelicals are pursuing the same objective.

The third topic, salvation, proved to be the most taxing. The very significant *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, produced in 1999 by the World Lutheran Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, was only a small help to the members of the Group, partly because it has not had a great impact on French evangelical churches, and partly because the Evangelical members of the group had to come to terms personally with a Catholic view on grace which was the opposite of all they had hitherto believed to be the case. Five hundred years of history seemed to say that Rome was opposed to the very foundational beliefs of protestant Christianity: salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, and is in no way dependent on human merit. Time and again the Catholic partners needed to assert that they held to these three points and that in so doing they represented the official teaching of their church. Time and again, in different ways, the question

came to the fore. If the evangelical partners accepted that what the Catholics were saying was true, they would have to revise their own thinking and be prepared to face critics accusing them of betraying their inheritance. But, in the end, everyone was able to say that the accusation of salvation by works was a hoary prejudice, and that in a similar fashion to accuse Evangelicals of believing in a salvation that produces no love, no discipleship, no obedience to Christ was utterly unfair.

It is probable that the various meanings that can be attributed to the word justification will continue to generate misunderstandings. Catholics are focussed mainly on a Christian's progress in love and his perseverance to the end. Evangelicals make a clear distinction between initial justification, or becoming reconciled to God by faith, and the outworking of God's plan as life goes on, which is called sanctification. But the debate is no longer to be conducted over those issues. If the priority of grace is now widely accepted and understood, a major question remains: how is grace received? Catholics see the church and the sacraments as playing an essential role: they are gifts of grace and mediate grace. Protestants tend to play down such mediation, and stress above all the immediacy of faith, which responds to the preaching of the Word. These are themes which the Catholic-Evangelical Conversation Group has set itself the task of addressing.

Our consensus over salvation as such left unexplored several other important areas which need to be treated separately. But it certainly is a milestone in the ongoing Catholic-Evangelical dialogue in France.

The fourth and final chapter in *Évangéliser aujourd'hui (Evangelising Today)* deals with baptism. Here, the lines were well-defined and the discussions simpler. Though there are a number of points of agreement, we have to face the fact that Catholics and Evangelicals have very different theologies and practices, especially since in France evangelical pedobaptists are thin on the ground. From a Catholic point of view, baptism effects a powerful change in the person being baptised, whether a small child or an adult, washes away original sin, brings new birth and confers on them the gift of the Holy Spirit⁵. For Protestants, on the other hand, baptism is a sign, a symbol, but is not in itself an act by which God's grace is bestowed. Most French Evangelicals would say that baptism follows on from the preaching of the Gospel, to which people must respond in repentance and faith before being baptised. In such a framework, it is not uncommon for people who were baptised in the Catholic or Reformed tradition to be baptised or re-baptised in Baptist and Pentecostal churches.

However, despite such a clear and divisive difference in our theologies, we were able to narrow the gap to a certain extent. The Catholics were keen to repudiate the idea of baptism as something magical. It takes place within a believing community, presupposes that those baptised will be instructed in the faith, and it needs to be received and confirmed in faith in order to bear fruit. The Evangelicals needed to say that when they baptise an adult who comes from the Catholic church they are not claiming that before believers' baptism the person was a pagan. The person has moved on from the church they were born into, but need not deny all the positive things they received through their upbringing.

In their conclusion, the Catholic and Evangelical co-presidents recognise that other subjects need to be dealt with, most notably the means by which God's grace is mediated to us. They say that the work so far has helped to dispel prejudices. It is a means of promoting mutual relationships lived out in truth and love. We are not yet at a stage when we can make formal recommendations about joint evangelism.

How is *Évangéliser aujourd'hui (Evangelising Today)* received?

⁵ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 1262-3, 1267, 1272. For the Council of Trent, baptism is the "instrumental cause" of justification (*Decree on Justification* ch 7, cf. ch. 4).

One important aspect of the book is that it was co-edited by the main evangelical publisher, Excelsis, and by a well-known Catholic firm, Salvator. Even more significantly, it was examined and approved of by the doctrinal commission of the French bishop's conference and by the Conseil national des évangéliques de France (CNEF), our equivalent of the Evangelical Alliance. It is not just a position paper produced by some independent thinkers.

This has meant that Catholic parishes and Catholic dioceses have wanted to use the book as a means of better understanding the evangelical world and sometimes invite members or past members of the Conversation Group to speak to leaders or to a wider public. Since Vatican II, Catholics are encouraged to reach out to other Christian communities and to learn from them. Locally, of course, ecumenical commitment varies, but the official line is clear.

An example of this use of the book and of the influence of the Conversation Group was a series of meetings organised in March 2020 by the Catholic dioceses of Valence and Viviers, and by local Protestants. The writer was one of the speakers, and sister Anne-Marie Petitjean, who had recently left the group at the end of her 9-year mandate, was the other. We shared our experiences at public meetings in the two diocesan houses, and spent the best part of a day in workshops with local Christian leaders. The bishop of Viviers, Mgr Jean-Louis Balsa, gave a short opening address on the urgency of evangelism and a team came to record the afternoon round table for a local radio station.

Though more substantial than similar meetings elsewhere, these meetings typified two recurrent problems. Ecumenical meetings seem in some places to attract a mainly older audience on the Catholic side and not many leaders on the evangelical side. In Valence and Viviers, ministers came from the main-line United Protestant Church, which recently brought together the Reformed and Lutheran churches in France, but no pastors came from the evangelical churches.

Why are French Evangelicals difficult to bring on board ?

In my public addresses, I attempted to explain why in many parts of France Evangelicals are not always keen to develop good relations with their Catholic counterparts. Apart from the fact that all Christian leaders these days are under pressure and have to choose between conflicting priorities, the following reasons will apply in various ways to different people.

One reason for lukewarmness among Evangelicals is the history we share with all French Protestants: the early martyrs in Meaux, the 9 religious wars, the terrible persecution organised by Louis XIV. Our collective memory contains stories of men being sent to row as slaves in the royal galleys, of people being burnt at the stake, of pastors being broken in every bone on the wheel. Whereas Mennonites have engaged in a process of healing memories with Lutherans and Catholics, and produced with them documents that are a testimony to reconciliation, to my knowledge nothing similar has been done between Catholics and Evangelicals.

Theology is also an important factor. The Conversation Group has attempted to deal with some of the problems, and is tackling others. But informed opinion apart, many Evangelicals would accuse the Catholic church of teaching salvation through the merits of good works, when the Bible sees it as a gift of God's grace, received by faith alone. Catholics, they say, worship Mary and call on the saints for help, when the Bible teaches that there is only one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ. The mass is seen as a sacrifice for sin, whereas the Bible teaches that Christ offered himself as a perfect sacrifice for sin once and for all. And tradition, as interpreted by the pope and the Church, has added new and false doctrines to what the Bible teaches. The very strong language of the Reformation era is rarely heard today, but the underlying criticisms are still there. How can one enter into a constructive relationship with a system that is so far off the mark?

Eschatology was at one time another powerful incentive to reject ecumenism in any form. With the rebirth of Israel and the reunification of Jerusalem, many Evangelicals were convinced that the prophecy of Luke 21:24 had been fulfilled and that the return of Christ was imminent. The terrible warnings of the book of Revelation had to be taken seriously. A false religion, seated on the seven hills of Rome, would deceive the world and persecute the people of God. Rome was Babylon the Great, drunk with the blood of the martyrs. The popularity of that interpretation of prophecy has waned. But where it still prevails, inter-church relationships cannot be easy. In some circles, allergy to the very word ecumenism may be such that the two publications of the Conversation Group studiously avoided the word the term “ecumenical,” using alternative expressions instead.

Members of French evangelical churches come from a variety of backgrounds. Some have come from evangelical families, some from no religious tradition at all, and some from Catholicism. When that is the case, some people see their Catholic upbringing in a positive light and are grateful for all that helped them come to their current understanding of Christ and the Gospel. But others will say that they did not find salvation in the Catholic church, that they were lied to (!), that they were forbidden to read the Bible and that their family disowned them. If in a given community there are many who feel that way, a pastor will find it difficult to be more open.

If Catholics have been working out the implications of Vatican II for over fifty years, in the evangelical world, there can rarely be an official line which is promoted from the top downwards. In France, we seem to be halfway between the entrenched opposition of the southern Europeans and the very open approach that prevails to the north. The leaders of the main evangelical denominations that comprise the CNEF support the work of the Conversation Group, though some might express doubts about particular points. Among the middle leadership things are more contrasted. On the one hand we find local churches and Christians that are happy to work with their Catholic counterparts in different ways; on the other hand there are many who have not had the opportunity to engage in respectful dialogue and who in fact disapprove of it. The work of the Conversation Group needs to be more widely known, and it will be, as our personal experiences filter down to all levels.

Is the Conversation Group representative?

On paper, the Group could hardly be more representative. The Catholic members are appointed by the national conference of bishops. The co-chairman is a bishop, the co-secretary is the Director of the National Service for Christian Unity. There is one lay theologian, one ordained professional theologian, together with diocesan clergy and regular⁶ clergy. The evangelical members are now appointed by the National Evangelical Council⁷, which is the only body which can claim the allegiance of more than 70% of all Evangelicals in France. They come from Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal denominations: Assemblies of God, Baptist, Brethren, and Free Church⁸.

Sister Anne-Marie Petitjean, a theologian in the Jesuit university in Paris,⁹ was a much appreciated member from 2008 to 2016. But today, the members are all men. Given the make-up of Catholic and evangelical church leadership, that is unfortunate, but not surprising.

A more important nuance is that the members of the Group are in the nature of the case people who are interested in dialogue and well-disposed towards their opposite numbers. They also have the theological resources to make that dialogue meaningful. The bishops have not sent people who would be suspicious of the ecumenical tendencies of Vatican II or hostile to Evangelicals. The

6 That is to say men who follow the rule of an order such as the Dominicans.

7 Conseil national des Évangéliques de France, generally spoken of as the CNEF. It is part of the European Evangelical Alliance.

8 Union des Églises Évangéliques Libres, very different from what “Free Church” would mean in Scotland

9 Centre Sèvres

CNEF has not looked to its anti-ecumenical constituency for recruits. We all have to take account of differences of opinion in our respective churches, but the problem is more acute for the Evangelicals, who work on the basis of consensus rather than top-down leadership.

This inherent bias occasionally comes out when we give account of ourselves to our grass-roots. The Catholics have told us: “You people are well-disposed, balanced and theologically able. But our students have never met Evangelicals like that and tell us that you are not typical.” Since the publication of *Evangelising Today*, evangelical pastors have said: “But this is not true Catholicism. This is not what the priest said at that funeral I went to. I was brought up as a Catholic and I know what Catholicism is really like. You are only dealing with an Evangelical-friendly elite.” Some even suspect the Catholic side of duplicity.

We try to ensure that we compare like with like, the best with the best, and to promote that approach as widely as possible.

So how does one define true Catholicism or true Evangelicalism? The evangelical side has had to get used to the idea that in Catholicism there is a hierarchy by which to evaluate theological statements. Individual theologians cannot be authoritative, nor, surprisingly, can a pope or the Catechism. Our Catholic partners only wanted to quote as authoritative and binding what has been accepted by a Council, particularly Vatican II.

Chapter 4 of *Evangelising Today*, on baptism, can illustrate this point. The chapter takes issue with the idea that Catholic baptism is something magical and stresses the importance of faith, sometimes before and always after. It also asserts that one has to persevere in the grace of baptism to the end. Now, these points rarely come to the fore in funeral services. Even when the deceased showed no signs of faith in Christ, the priest will usually stress the importance of baptism for their salvation. Pope John Paul II even wrote this:

...The person baptised, “even if they are not fully conscious of the fact, receives a new life; and in the depths of their being, even if they deny it by their acts, they are transferred to a new homeland, a heavenly home on earth as it were, so efficacious is God’s action and assured to the fullest extent, so far does it outweigh anything man can do to deny it or oppose it.”¹⁰

When tackled on these two different approaches, a former Catholic member of the Group said: “What a pope writes is interesting, but it is not binding.” How does an Evangelical cope with that?

Things are similar on the other side of the fence. Our Catholic partners had to cope with the fact that there is no final and authoritative word on anything, only consensus. But the Lausanne movement¹¹, founded by highly respected leaders like Billy Graham and John Stott, has produced three major documents that reflect a broad spectrum of informed Evangelical opinion world-wide. The Lausanne Covenant of 1974, the Manilla Manifesto of 1989, and the Cape Town Commitment of 2010 are centred on evangelism and the fundamental convictions that are linked to it. Though they do not deal with the whole range of Christian theology, together they form a corpus which could be compared to documents from Trent or Vatican II. The CNEF, which is the most representative evangelical body in France, cites as its foundational documents the statement of faith of the Evangelical Alliance, which is quite short, and the three documents from Lausanne. As the Catholic-Evangelical Conversation Group began to meet, the Catholic theologians often said that

10 Apostolic Letter of 2nd January 1980 *Patres Ecclesiae*. My translation is from the French, as the Vatican web-site has no English version. Cf. also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1272

11 See their very informative web site.

through these documents they had discovered the high quality of evangelical theology and that they envied such clear and wide-ranging texts.

Our Catholic partners have had to accept the diversity of the evangelical movement and the absence of a strong regulatory body equivalent to the papacy. Evangelical members of the Conversation Group have learned to distinguish on the Catholic side between statements that are truly binding and those whose authority is debatable.

A wider perspective

In the course of twenty years the Conversation Group has evolved from its initial aim of promoting mutual understanding to engaging in theological dialogue. But this is not the only way in which Catholic-Evangelical relationships in France are improving. We have moved out of a context of competition into one of emulation.

From an evangelical perspective I suspect it is too early to talk of an “exchange of gifts.” The phrase is readily understood in ecumenical circles: it implies recognising that God is at work in other churches, that they may well have developed insights and practices that one’s own church could benefit from. Though that approach is readily asserted in Catholic circles, I have not come across it among Evangelicals.

However, to be pragmatic, an exchange of gifts is already going on. Modern Christian music knows no denominational boundaries. We hear of Catholic priests following courses on church-planting at the Evangelical Faculty at Vaux-sur-Seine or even going to Saddleback, Rick Warren’s megachurch in California¹². Evangelicals sign up for post-graduate studies and other courses at Catholic institutions. Pastors go for short times of prayer and reflection to Catholic monasteries. Catholics use resources like the Alpha course, which originated in a charismatic Anglican church.

Locally, some evangelical families send their children to Catholic schools. Some Evangelicals find that the most convenient way to serve others is to help out in Catholic charities like the Secours catholique (Caritas). In various places, Catholics have lent their churches to Evangelicals for a wedding or a funeral. Even more generously, they have lent halls and rooms to evangelical churches that were starting up. The Baptist church in Lagny-sur-Marne was started in a Catholic parish hall. Before the Baptist church in Faremoutiers had a building of its own, the Benedictine Abbey lent a room for the older children of the Sunday School to meet in, and the nuns even went so far as to change the crucifix on the wall for a simple cross.

Joint evangelism, however, is rare. The campaigns of the Charismatic evangelist Carlos Payan drew support from Catholics in Paris and Lille, but were viewed with some hesitation by non-Charismatic Evangelicals. On Easter Sunday, Catholics and Evangelicals have sometimes come together to bear witness to the resurrection.

On the other hand, leaders have expressed their solidarity when a particular tragedy has struck. When Notre Dame cathedral burned in April 2019, the president of the CNEF wrote to the Bishop’s Conference, and other evangelical leaders did something similar. More recently, when a Pentecostal church in Mulhouse was unjustly accused in high places of being to blame for the explosion of the Covid-19 epidemic in France, local priests assured them of their prayers and a major Catholic magazine came to their support.

Convergence

¹² Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. See Wikipedia or <https://saddleback.com/visit/about/our-church>

Though the theological differences between Catholics and Evangelicals remain significant, in practice it is sometimes appropriate to speak of convergence. Firstly, as we have said, the Roman Catholic Church in France knows that it no longer holds a quasi monopoly and no longer commands the allegiance of a large section of the population. It is still the cultural and historical reference for many, but probably less than 10% of the population go to mass at least once a month, and few couples now get their children baptised. Dioceses have had to reorganise to take account of the fact that village churches are deserted, that they have fewer priests¹³, and that the median age of priests is 75¹⁴. France gets help from dioceses in Eastern Europe and from Africa, who send priests over, and these priests take a little time to adapt to a culture where the social status of the priest is no longer recognised. All this means that the Catholic Church is not just a minority, but has become a church which has to organise itself and to think of its mission in a similar way to the Evangelicals. Membership is not on the basis of family tradition or geography, but on the basis of a free commitment of faith. Theology might not put it quite that way, but pragmatism should.

Sociologists who have looked at the evangelical movement in France have confirmed the by-now standard four-point description first proposed by D.W. Bebbington in 1989. Evangelicals have a particular regard for the inspiration and authority of the Bible, focus on the atoning work of Christ on the cross, believe that human beings need to be converted, and that Christians should express their faith in active commitment. For a long time after World War II it was impossible to be part of an evangelical church without attending all the meetings and maintaining a high level of giving. Churches could only be gathered churches. Conversion, in the evangelical sense, was life-changing and costly. That is still generally true, but as evangelical churches have grown in number and in respectability, so commitment has become less militant. In the Paris region and elsewhere there has been an influx of people from Africa and the West Indies, where large evangelical churches are part of the social fabric. Parents are finding it difficult to pass on the faith to their children. And church life is moving away from being a counter-culture which you have to be very brave to join. It has become more welcoming to seekers of all convictions and none, because all need to be made welcome, whatever their background, and then to be brought on to faith in Christ and consistent discipleship. They discover the church before they discover Christ, which is a reversal of how Evangelicals used to envisage evangelism. So as the Catholic church becomes more of a confessing church, some evangelical churches, despite their continuing insistence on commitment, are showing signs of becoming churches for the multitude.

A second area where de facto convergence can be seen is in the importance given to house groups, sometimes called home groups or simply small groups. In evangelical circles, the philosophy behind them is that the church does not only meet in large assemblies for worship and teaching, but in small groups where personal relationships count. The account given of the first church in Jerusalem shows both aspects, not just because homes are mentioned alongside the Temple, but because among the major emphases fellowship is prominent. It is impossible to have meaningful fellowship before or after Sunday worship if the church is larger than about fifty. But if a dozen people meet in a home, they can read the Bible together, pray about their personal needs, perhaps adopt a missionary and pray for them, and find ways of serving together. Properly led, the small group is a place where people know they belong and where their absence will be noticed.

Several years ago a Catholic magazine ran an article about the rising number of adult baptisms at Easter. But it also said that a number of adult converts did not continue for long afterwards. They had been encouraged and taught and nurtured for something like two years by a

13 https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pr%C3%Aatre_catholique#Les_pr%C3%Aatres_catholiques_dans_le_monde, consulted 20/04/2020. In 2017, France had 14,786 priests, against 28,694 in 1995.

14 That is to say, there are as many priests over 75 as under 75 (figures for 2015 from <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2015/07/02/01016-20150702ARTFIG00030-le-nombre-de-pretres-ordonnes-en-france-n-a-jamais-ete-aussi-bas.php>, consulted 20/04/2020.

catechist and in small groups. But then, after baptism, they could only look for support to the traditional structures of the church, and they fell by the wayside. When I commented on this to a Catholic lady who herself had been converted to Christ late in life and who was a catechist for adults, she said: “Ah, but you have small groups.”

In his pastoral letter of September 2019, Mgr Jean-Louis Balsa, bishop of Viviers, gives a sobering description of the state of Christianity in his diocese and pleads eloquently for a church that is not just responding to a smaller and smaller number of people wanting a taste of religion in their lives, but is actively going out to the population to make Christ known. He sees his diocese as an “experimental laboratory of salvation.”¹⁵ And he identifies “five things that are essential” if the diocese is to become a “Christian community of missionary disciples.” These are:

- paying regular attention to the Word of God, handed down by the Apostles¹⁶
- praying and celebrating the sacraments, of which the Eucharist is the source and summit
- living in a truly fraternal way
- serving the poor in particular
- evangelising those God is calling

The footnote links these five fundamentals to Acts 2.42-47, a passage which Evangelicals regularly appeal to.

A key feature in the bishop’s strategy here is the setting up of small groups, on a geographical basis in the villages, and on a sociological basis elsewhere: in schools, among young people, in charitable organisations, for example. These small groups must live out the five essentials in order to be Christian communities of missionary disciples. And the minimum number of people for a small group is two, with reference to Matthew 18.20.

Now, an Evangelical coming across these pages sees some specifically Catholic emphases. In particular, the groups must function in communion with the whole body of Christ, and that means with recognised leaders and a programme set out at diocesan level. There is a form of liturgy, but there is no Eucharist in these groups, no distribution of pre-consecrated hosts: that would weaken the unity of the diocese. Though the preoccupation with unity is certainly present in evangelical churches, such concern for proper order would be less marked. However, the general concept laid down here is remarkably familiar to what is practised by Evangelicals and shows how, in the light of the Biblical example and as a response to modern society, Catholics and Evangelicals can have a common approach.

The Global Christian Forum

We have explored the theological approach to Catholic Evangelical relations epitomised by the Groupe national de conversations catholiques-évangéliques and have tried to put it in the wider French context. A further development needs to be recognised. In November 2018 a French-language version of the Global Christian Forum was organised in Lyons. The basic concept, meeting one another simply as Christians and sharing our experience of Christ, is more congenial to many Evangelicals in France than the workings of great institutions. The aim was to have 50% of the participants from churches that have an ecumenical tradition and 50% from the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches that did not. The final result did not quite meet the target, it was more like 70%-30%. For most of the 200 participants, it was a unique experience, based above all on small, carefully dosed groups where Orthodox, Catholics, traditional Protestants, traditional Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Charismatics and Copts could talk about their personal walk with God and see each

15 P. 45-52

16 Mgr Balsa sees this as the weakest of the five points in his diocese, p 50.

other as brothers and sisters in Christ. More such meetings need to be organised in France: the Conversation Group, with its more theological orientation, cannot function alone.

Conclusion

Catholic and evangelical leaders are often overworked and need to organise their time quite ruthlessly if they are to meet the demands placed upon them by their calling and by their constituency's expectations. So it is not unusual for evangelical pastors to ask me if Catholic-Evangelical dialogue is at all useful: they certainly do not see how they can get involved in it and may even see it as eccentric. The quick answer to their question can be found in the realm of public relations, the need for venues, the defence of common values and the relevance of joint witness to Christ. But it is not certain that the ecumenical movement in France has made much difference to the number of people actually coming to Christ.

The justification for the work of the Conversation Group and for the kind of practical initiatives we have mentioned needs a firmer foundation than self-interest. It is to be found in Christ's command that his disciples should love one another. If the other person is a brother or sister in Christ, if they are trying to walk with Christ to the best of their knowledge and ability, then I must love them. That love means meeting them, trying to understand them, asking them awkward questions, praying for them, praying with them, and doing together with them whatever can be done in the context of each one's particular convictions.

The question to ask is not: Is it useful? The question is: How can we all grow towards maturity in Christ, in truth and in love¹⁷?

Gordon MARGERY¹⁸

2973 mots dans la première version

7264 mots dans la nouvelle version

English references as follows:

John 3:16,

John 3:16f.

John 3:16-18

¹⁷ The reference is to Ephesians 4:15 and its context

¹⁸ With thanks to father Luc Forestier and pastor Jean-Paul Rempp for their suggestions.