

## The Evangelical Mind

### Evangelicals and Catholics: A New Partnership

By Richard Mouw

Roman Catholics in the United States have been in the middle of a passionate public debate lately, about the tensions between churchly authority and academic freedom in Catholic higher education. Since I am a seminary president, I have followed the debates with much interest--and I must also confess, with quite a bit of ambivalence. As an evangelical Protestant, I've never been tempted to pray that the pope and his bishops would get more clout. But neither do I think that the cause of Christian theology is well served by an "anything goes" notion of academic freedom.

The basic issue at stake in the Catholic controversy is how closely church officials should be able to monitor what gets taught by theologians in Catholic colleges and seminaries. The pope and some of the more conservative bishops insist that if a school is going to be supported by the Catholic church, the authorities have an obligation to see to it that the church's teachings are upheld in that school.

Even though we evangelicals do not have popes and bishops, we have some sympathy for that kind of argument. Churches support evangelical schools because they want them to stand for things that are ignored--or even opposed--in more "liberal" institutions. And they are right to expect scholars to work within the boundaries of a specific "orthodoxy."

But we also know--or at least we ought to know--that a healthy church is one where theologians are encouraged to face intellectual challenges in an honest and self-critical spirit. The ability to live with this tension is itself a sign of spiritual health.

I have a vested interest in what goes on in contemporary Catholicism, having devoted considerable energy in recent years to evangelical-Catholic dialogue. Indeed, a willingness to engage in serious conversations with Catholics has been one of the ways in which some of us have pushed at the boundaries of acceptable evangelical behavior. And like other evangelicals who have advocated friendlier relations with Catholics, I have received more than my share of angry letters from evangelical critics, some of them falling within the "hate mail" category.

I understand these negative reactions. I was exposed to the worst of evangelical anti-Catholicism in my youth. I regularly heard evangelical preachers proclaim with considerable self-confidence that the Pope was the Antichrist. I also had first-hand experience with evangelicals who believed that Catholicism was a religion of "pagan darkness," and that the only hope that any Catholics had was that they would get to heaven "in spite of what their church teaches."

All of this was forever changed for me in the 1960s. The Second Vatican Council, convened by Pope John XXIII to open the windows of the Roman Catholic Church to the breezes of theological change, has been one of the great spiritual events of my lifetime. In my continuing efforts to be a faithful Christian in a "post-Christian" culture, I have regularly looked to Roman Catholics for companionship and often, wisdom and inspiration--on the path of discipleship.

Nor am I alone in this. Evangelical theologian Timothy George has pointed to an important new phenomenon that he labels "an ecumenism of the trenches," where evangelicals and Roman Catholics have found common cause on a number of social issues, and are even increasingly finding occasions for praying and studying the Bible together.

Several sociological studies have shown that new alliances between Catholics and evangelicals are an important factor in the "culture wars." Members of the two faith communities regularly line

up together these days in opposing what they see as the forces that are promoting moral deterioration in American society.

Not only do I celebrate these developments with a clear evangelical conscience; I also take inspiration from knowing that at least a few evangelical leaders from the past would cheer us on. I was pleased to discover recently, for example, that the great 19th century evangelist Dwight L. Moody had a surprisingly good relationship with Catholics.

In his recent biography of Moody, Lyle Dorsett quotes the text of a letter that the evangelist received in 1875, from a Catholic monk in Wales. "I must send you one word of affectionate greetings in our Precious Redeemer's name," the monk wrote, "to say how rejoiced I am to hear and read of your powerful gifts from 'The Father of Lights,' 'good and perfect gifts indeed.'"

The monk went on to observe that while his community engaged in "the perpetual adoration of the Holy Sacrament," he and his fellow monks also preached "Jesus only as perfect, finished, and present salvation to all who are willing to receive Him. And the only work of the evangelist is to give knowledge of salvation to His people." Moody was very pleased to receive this letter. The evangelist's biographer provides several other examples of how Moody refused to conform to the typical evangelical anti-Catholicism of his day: he even made a personal contribution to the building fund in a local Catholic parish!

Contemporary evangelicals have good reasons to follow in Moody's footsteps. We even have much to learn from Catholics as they debate issues of church authority. Evangelicals certainly have no right to feel condescending on that subject, even though the terms used by Catholics are not exactly the ones we would employ. We evangelicals need all the help we can get in learning how to deal with theological disagreements. Our own record in dealing with differences are not exactly a model for others to emulate.

Evangelicals and Roman Catholics have exciting new opportunities for dialogue and cooperation. And as we talk and work together, we may actually learn some new things about what it means to serve our Living Lord in a contemporary world in which we can emphasize the strength of our common convictions, even as we continue to engage in friendly arguments about the important things that still divide us.