

[This essay was published in the fall 2020 issue of Lutheran Forum]

## THE FUTURE OF EVANGELICAL CATHOLIC LUTHERAN WITNESS

### The Ecumenical Task of Evangelical Catholicism

Br. Richard George Herbel

Evangelical catholicism may be considered from two perspectives. On the one hand, one may regard it as one movement, party, or lobby within a Lutheranism that is increasingly varied and confused in its self-understanding and expression. On the other hand, evangelical catholicism within the larger Christian context may assert itself simply to be Lutheranism as it was originally conceived and as it is authentically and historically to be understood. It is an appeal for reform and renewal within and for the whole Christian (or Catholic) church; and it may do this under a variety of denominational structures or arrangements. Not all evangelical catholics are in Lutheran denominations.

Since entering the Roman Catholic Church five years ago, I see things more from this broader ecumenical perspective, although I also understand the necessity for the first, intra-Lutheran perspective. I believe evangelical catholicism is the authentic form of Lutheranism and the only interpretation of Lutheranism with a significant role to play in the future of Christianity. In my present circumstance, I cannot forget the grace and truth that came to me through Lutheranism, even the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ; and of this I intend to remain a witness.

I often identify myself as a Lutheran who is in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. It is my firm conviction that I was led into this full communion not because I rejected the Lutheran faith in which I was raised, but because the Catholic dynamism within Lutheranism drew me to seek visible union with the Church of Rome. To the extent that my entry into the Catholic Church can be described as a homecoming, it is in large part because so much of what I found there was already familiar to me as a Lutheran. Richard John Neuhaus expressed it this way: "I became a Catholic in order to be more fully what I was and who I was as a Lutheran."<sup>1</sup>

Here I will first give an account of my faith journey and then offer a few observations or suggestions for the evangelical catholic movement and its ecumenical orientation.

#### *My Journey toward Full Communion*

I was born into a large, multigenerational, and solidly Lutheran family in the panhandle of Oklahoma. I was baptized a few weeks after birth in the Missouri Synod church in our town. My parents provided me and my two siblings with a stable and religious environment in which to grow up. They modeled the Christian faith in their daily life, and instilled the habit of attending church on Sundays and on the great feasts of the church year. The practice of the Christian faith was an assumed and unaffected part of our normal life.

More formal religious education was provided in church and Sunday school, and by four years of Saturday school in preparation for confirmation.

Along with generations before me, I learned the chief parts of Christian doctrine through memorizing Luther's Small Catechism. He based his catechism on earlier medieval models, and today Lutherans who read the new (1994) Catechism of the Catholic Church cannot help recognizing the similarity in structure. Luther's catechism could, with a little tweaking, serve well in a Roman Catholic setting.

My Lutheran baptism is now my Catholic baptism because it always *was* a Catholic baptism; and according to the Catholic Church, it constitutes a sacramental bond with all other baptized Christians as well. Likewise, the teaching and example of my parents and family along with the instruction of my first pastors is the irreplaceable foundation of my Christian faith, and it retains this function to the present day. This history takes nothing away from the gratitude I now feel to continue this education in the gospel guided by the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church.

After high school I followed a call into the ordained ministry, which I pursued within the Missouri Synod. It was probably at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, that I first encountered evangelical catholicism as a movement. It was certainly there, under the influence of Arthur Carl Piepkorn, that I began to understand confessional Lutheranism as substantively the Catholic faith and to hear this understanding explicitly and persuasively argued. I learned from Piepkorn to identify myself first as a catholic, second as a Western catholic, and third as a catholic of the Augsburg Confession. The early 1970s was also a time when the Lutheran-Catholic dialogues fostered the hope that unity between the Catholic Church and at least some Lutheran communities was close at hand.

This ecumenical optimism was tempered by the controversy in the Missouri Synod that was coming to a head at this time, and in which I was a partisan. I observed how quickly positions and perceptions become fixed; complex issues were reduced to slogans; and as the ensuing division deepened, it forced even those with mixed loyalties to take sides. This personal experience has ever since informed my reading of Reformation history. Amid this turmoil, I was ordained into the LCMS ministry and for seven years served as pastor for two country churches near Jefferson City, Missouri. Toward the end of this time I followed many of my teachers and seminary classmates out of the LCMS and was later grandfathered into the ELCA.

In 1981, I followed a long-standing interest in the monastic life by coming to St. Augustine's House, a community founded by Fr. Arthur Carl Kreinheder in Michigan. The fact that Fr. Arthur had been active in the League for Evangelical-Catholic Reunion (*Bund für evangelisch-katholische Einheit*) founded in Germany by Pastor Max Lackmann was one of the things that attracted me to the community. Fr. Arthur had also lived for a time in the ecumenical Taizé community in France and knew two of the founders, Roger Schütz and Max Thurian.

I had assumed that at St. Augustine's House, I would be able to coast with some institutional expression of Lutheranism into communion with the Church of Rome. As time passed, this expectation faded, and I realized that the anticipated unity with the Roman Catholic Church would come about only through personal initiative. I did not act immediately, however. As a member and at that time the

prior of St. Augustine's House, my decision was not entirely a private one. I felt obliged to discuss my intention with our governing council and other members of the community, and to seek their support or at least acquiescence. I also thought that having to explain my decision to others would assure that I was acting reasonably and that I would hold to this course. Our discussions took place over several years and were not always easy, but during this time never did I doubt my resolution; I experienced uncertainty only in regard to the manner and timing of its implementation.

I resigned as prior in the fall of 2014 and took something of a sabbatical. I went on a prolonged retreat at Östanbäcks Kloster, the Lutheran monastery in Sweden where I had spent part of my novitiate. I visited my family in Oklahoma over the Christmas holiday, and then returned to St. Augustine's House in early January. By the end of Lent, I had sufficient clarity to proceed. During the Easter Octave I informed the prior, Fr. John Cochran, that I believed the time was right. A meeting was arranged with the pastor of nearby St. Joseph's Catholic Church. The pastor decided and the local archbishop concurred that I was fully catechized and could simply be received into full communion by profession of faith without any further instruction or delay.

Thus it came about on a Saturday morning in June that I, accompanied by Fr. John and several other Lutheran and Catholic friends, traveled to nearby St. Joseph's Church, where we were met by the pastor. In the brief quarter-hour service, we recited the Nicene Creed together at the end of which I added a single sentence: "I believe and profess all that the holy Catholic Church believes, teaches, and proclaims to be revealed by God."

Since then I have lived contentedly as a member of St. Joseph's Catholic Church and a professed brother at St. Augustine's House. I see my situation in the community here as a unique opportunity. In his encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope St. John Paul states that "along the ecumenical path to unity, pride of place certainly belongs to *common prayer*, the prayerful union of those who gather together around Christ himself."<sup>2</sup> He perceives that the practice of ecumenical prayer is crucial to the Christian mission and its credibility. This practice conforms to our community's mission statement, which reads in part: "We identify with the Lutheran tradition, understood as a movement within and for the one holy catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ. We are committed . . . to the pursuit of ecumenical understanding . . . . We seek to serve the whole Church by our life of prayer and by the use of our facilities."

### *The Meaning of Evangelical Catholicism Today*

As one who feels his Lutheran experience has made him a better Catholic, and that my communion in the Catholic Church has made me a more secure Lutheran, I retain a friendly interest in the evangelical catholic movement and so would like to offer a few suggestions.

First, it seems to me that the term *evangelical catholic* has come to share the fate of the term *high church* or *Anglo-Catholic* in the Anglican tradition; that is, it has been associated too narrowly with liturgical practices at the expense of a broader theological and ecclesiastical agenda. Anglo-Catholicism was originally associated with a high view of the institutional church in continuity with the

theology, organization, liturgy, and other traditions inherited from before the English Reformation. I suggest this more comprehensive understanding is something that needs to be recovered in the evangelical catholic movement.

When evangelical catholic is taken as a synonym for Lutheran, it must be further qualified as *confessional* Lutheran. The Book of Concord of 1580 provides a stable and identifiable definition of Lutheranism by which Lutherans can recognize one another, and on the basis of which they can participate in substantive and productive ecumenical dialogue, as the earlier Lutheran-Catholic dialogues have shown. In the Missouri Synod, the specifier *confessional* was a way to distinguish ourselves from an American form of Lutheranism more adapted to the ambient Protestant culture. It also meant that we were not “*Luther* Lutherans”; that is, we did not define ourselves by the personality and character of Martin Luther, nor were we obliged to accept all his opinions. The *Lutheran* Reformation was conservative; it was neither iconoclastic nor was it an ongoing, open-ended process for revision of church doctrine and discipline. While it was critical of many aspects of late medieval Christianity, it nevertheless presupposed a catholic framework for the debate. The *reformed* Church was not intended to be something less than or other than the Catholic Church.

This intention is made clear in the Augsburg Confession, the first formal attempt by the emerging Lutheran movement to explain itself to the larger church and civil society. “Catholics of the Augsburg Confession” has been suggested as a more proper and descriptive name for Lutherans. The mood of the confession is irenic and its purpose conciliatory; its character provides the hermeneutical principle for reading the other confessions and for interpreting the Lutheran movement. This principle is expressed most clearly in the conclusion of the Augustana: “Nothing has here been said or related for the purpose of injuring anybody. Only those things have been recounted which it seemed necessary to say in order that it may be understood that nothing has been received among us, in doctrine or in ceremonies, that is contrary to Scripture or to the church catholic. For it is manifest that we have guarded diligently against the introduction into our church of any new and ungodly doctrines.” The Lutheran movement did not mean—and cannot be allowed to mean today—that it intends another or new church other than the one it meant to reform. With the possible exception of the day of Pentecost, the church has always needed to be reformed, recalled, and renewed; what she has never needed is to be re-founded, restarted, or replaced.

This point brings me to the second half of the phrase “evangelical catholic.” I suggest that in this context *Catholic* should have a very particular reference to the Roman Catholic Church of today and not to a vaguely conceived catholicism, an idealized early church or a fantasized future one.

Earlier in my ministry we spoke of the specifically Lutheran ecumenical task as healing the breach of the sixteenth century; that is, resolving our differences with the Roman Catholic Church. I am pleased that the Society of the Holy Trinity explicitly recognizes this responsibility in its rule: “the Lutheran ecumenical vocation is the unfinished business of the sixteenth century Reformation. . . . Therefore, this ministerium is dedicated to the Lutheran vocation . . . of reconciliation with the bishop and church of Rome.”<sup>3</sup>

Richard John Neuhaus proposed that the Roman Catholic Church is “the Church of Jesus Christ most fully and rightly ordered through time.”<sup>4</sup> I do not know whether it was on his mind when he wrote those words, but it does bring to mind the Augsburg Confession’s definition of the church as the assembly “in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly.”<sup>5</sup> Both these propositions allow for rational investigation of the claims of the Roman Catholic Church and invite frank and respectful debate. This is the way sensible decisions are reached in the real world, and the church is a part of the real world.

We cannot avoid the ecumenical imperative by reference to an invisible, spiritual, or eschatological church. The invisible does not exist as a reality apart from the visible but is a deeper aspect or truth of what is seen, what is earthly. That the unity of His disciples for which our Lord prayed in His high priestly prayer is a visible and evident unity is clear from the tangible effect it is to have: “that *the world* may believe that you have sent me.”<sup>6</sup> The Second Vatican Council adapted sacramental language<sup>6</sup> to speak of this relationship between the visible and invisible. The institutional church that we see—also in her human and sometimes faltering path through history—is a visible sign and instrument which locates for us the real presence of that mystical body of which Christ is the Head.

In carefully chosen words the Roman Catholic Church makes the claim that this church subsists fully, although not exclusively, within her institutional structure; that she is in fact the present-day continuation of the one church of the Jerusalem cenacle gathered on Pentecost with the apostles and Mary; and is still filled by the Holy Spirit according to the promise of Jesus Christ. This is a bracing, and some would say impudent claim. Even if one disbelieves this claim, it should still be treated with an open mind; and as behooves good Lutherans, by putting the best construction on everything. This is not something the Catholic Church feels she is claiming for herself, but rather a grace that has been thrust upon her, an endowment entrusted to her and through her intended for all Christians and for the world. Properly understood, it is a cause for gratitude and humility and not for pride. It is also a commission; the words of St. Peter, accounted the first bishop of Rome, express this outlook : “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God’s people.”<sup>8</sup>

### *Conclusion*

I believe the future of evangelical catholicism lies in clearly defining the two halves of this formulation and discerning an ecumenical objective between them. The Book of Concord and specifically the Augsburg Confession will always remind Lutherans that their faith is derived from the earlier catholic tradition; that it can be interpreted only within that tradition; and that we are specifically called to reconciliation with the older and larger body of that tradition, i.e., the contemporary Roman Catholic Church. Evangelical Catholics (Lutherans) are called not to imitate the externals of Catholicism, but to *be* catholics, to *be* the one holy catholic and apostolic church of the creed. Most Lutherans are probably not prepared and would not feel comfortable to resolve the

issue in the way I have. Each of us, however, is obligated to desire that visible unity of the Church for which the Lord prayed, *and* as opportunity presents itself and conscience permits, to take concrete steps toward it.

There is a saying attributed to St. Catherine of Siena: “All the way to heaven is heaven, because Jesus said, ‘I am the way.’” The greatest and most rewarding journeys in this life are those with an eschatological estimated time of arrival. We are in search of a single pearl of great price; when it unexpectedly presents itself, it will be seen to be entirely the gift of God and not of our manufacture. In the meantime, it is no small thing to share in this quest together; and the closer we walk with Jesus on the way, the closer we are to one another.

Br. RICHARD HERBEL is a professed brother at St. Augustine’s House in Oxford, MI.

1. Richard John Neuhaus, *Catholic Matters: Confusion, Controversy, and the Splendor of Truth* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 33.
2. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, II:22. Text available online at [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25051995\\_ut-unum-sint.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html).
3. The Rule of the Society of the Holy Trinity, VIII: 3–4.
4. Richard John Neuhaus, *passim*; see especially *First Things* 192 (April 2009), 89ff.
5. Augsburg Confession, VII:1.
6. *Lumen Gentium*, I.1; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 774ff.
7. John 17:21.
8. I Peter 2:9ff.