"AN EXERCISE ON THE FRONTIERS OF ECUMENISM": ALMOST THIRTY YEARS OF ROMAN CATHOLIC-PENTECOSTAL DIALOGUE

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During the short history of the official ecumenical movement that began with the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948, two radical developments have emerged which have the potential of transforming the future of Christian unity. The first is the gradual opening up of the Roman Catholic Church towards the challenge of ecumenism as a result of Vatican II. The second is the explosive growth of Pentecostalism, currently the second largest Christian constituency after the Roman Catholic Church, and its potential for the future of theology in general and ecumenical theology in particular. Even though both of these two Christian families stay outside the World Council of Churches, they will definitely shape the vision for Christian unity in the third millennium. The sheer numbers of these two churches, currently altogether almost three-fourths of all Christians,1 will guarantee this.

But there is much more to the ecumenism than the "official" World Council of Churches related activities as the emergence of the International Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue evidences. Although this dialogue has escaped even the notice of most ecumenical professionals, the existence of the dialogue is an ecumenical miracle. That the two largest Christian constituencies are ready to enter in mutual talks about some crucial theological and pastoral issues carries an enormous ecumenical potential. Furthermore, the willingness of these two churches, both of which are outside of the official ecumenical apparatus, to dialogue over an extensive period of time means an expansion of a traditional ecumenical picture.

The nature and existence of this most unexpected dialogue, as will become evident during the course of our discussion, also points to the future developments of ecumenism such as the need to reformulate traditional dialogue patterns, the redefining of the vision for Christian unity (other than that of visible unity), and related issues.

The significance of the dialogue is enhanced by the fact that even if official ecumenism has not yet paid much attention to it, several academic

theological studies have been conducted on some aspects of the dialogue both by Catholic and Protestant theologians.2

I will first briefly look at the emergence of ecumenical consciousness among Pentecostals. Following is an account of the mechanics of the beginning of the Roman Catholic-Pentecostal dialogue, its special character, and its main topics over the years. Then I will discuss the defining issues of the dialogue. I will close with final reflections as to the challenges and ecumenical implications arising out of the dialogue.

The Pentecostal Struggle for Christian Unity

There was roughly a sixty-year period between the formation of the first Pentecostal bodies and the beginning of official dialogue between Roman Catholics and Pentecostals. It is obvious that something significant had to take place after the beginnings of the Pentecostal movement and within the Roman Catholic Church before there could even be a suggestion of some kind of discussion together.3

In a very general way, the emergence and development of a Pentecostal ecumenical perspective could be summarized in three major stages:4 1) The initial ecumenical emphasis of the new movement; 2) The development of an exclusive attitude toward other churches, because of their hostility towards

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3 Sandidge, *Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue*, 1: 2; see also pp. 3-21 for a thorough analysis of the factors contributing to the emergence of ecumenical activities among Pentecostals, especially in relation to Rome.