There is a certain irony in the scholarly disdain heaped on the myths that are part of the fabric of Pentecostalism. Many of these same scholars highly esteem sections of canonical materials they judge to be mythical. The inconsistency of valuing one set of myths while unilaterally condemning all such things when associated with Pentecostalism may demonstrate an ethnocentric view of reality. Analysis of the belief systems of ordinary people has often been held in disrepute by intellectuals and always provided an easy target for ridicule. The lack of interest in popular religiosity can be measured by the level of disinterest among Roman Catholic theologians toward teachings prevalent among their own masses. Voices from the pew have been muffled or conveniently not heard. Theological tomes, erudite expositions, and Vatican pronouncements virtually eliminate any concern for interacting with grassroots thinking. In the meantime, scholarly treatments of popular religion is edging ahead. The fourth phase of the dialogue will require continued patience from both teams as they chart the future.

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Response to Perspectives on Koinonia

I want to express my kindest regards and extreme gratitude for having been asked to respond to such a well presented document. Discussions regarding conversion, baptism and sacramentalism are not really novel, but have been re-cast in a new way. Much praise has to be accorded participants in a Catholic-Pentecostal dialogue that has sought to be relevant at a time when shifting theological priorities leave us gasping for breath.
I am hopefully and joyfully amazed at the level of consensus among both participants. There was far less consensus when I participated in the first quinquennium 1974 dialogue at Schloss Craheim (W. Germany) as we dialogued on the issues regarding baptism in the Holy Spirit, Christian Initiation, etc. My participation was limited by my skepticism and the fact that I was an “only” Afro-American participant. At that time being a “first” and an “only” was a badge of honor, distinction and identification. Today it is viewed with disdain. If the goal of Christian ethics is maturity, I may have been afflicted with such a malady. Oh, how my mind has changed! As a third generation Afro-American with roots in the classical Pentecostal tradition, I no longer view religious realities only through the lens of European theology and the bifocals of Western philosophy. More recent eye exams have revealed a need for different lenses to aid my failing or, better still, aging sight. On the one hand we all “see darkly as through a glass mirror,” as we await the one who alone can endow us with perfect sight. In the meantime, we must use sight and pray for vision. It is through the prison of oppression that I view this document, consequently, whatever else follows is biased. I make no apologies for my philosophical and theological presuppositions, for in a real sense they are a reflection of the real “me.”

In a more critical sense, the document suffers not by what is stated, but by its glaring omission. The issue of inclusiveness arises. I listen for far more participation by Third World adherents. My ears have been attuned to listen much more for concrete ways in which Koinonia could be expressed in the world. What an opportunity to have engaged the issues of sharing with regard to power, poverty and powerlessness. The document tends to dwell too much on issues which address inward piety with little or no concern for concreteness. Any discussion about the Incarnation that does not address concrete ways it can be realized within the blood, guts and tissues of society is meaningless (see 14-16); What about the sharing of power within the usual elitist ecclesiastical hierarchy of the church in which major decisions affecting the destinies of many are usually “handed down”? What about the sharing of wealth by Vatican hierarchy in third world countries in concrete ways other than “brick and mortar”? Who is to caution Pentecostals about their new obsession with buildings, prestige, power and those who have bought the “prosperity” message with its cultural baggage, and by the very presuppositions it embraces indicts third world persons whose poverty is for the most part cultural? The breaking of bread in Acts 2:42 and the sharing of “all things in common” is restricted if it is viewed only in terms of sacramentalism. Both Catholics and Pentecostals alike have the opportunity during this final quarter of the twentieth century to begin the crucial task of sharing “all things in common” beyond its “sacred institutional walls.” The conditions are ripe all over the world for such engagement. Section 32 completely omits such emphases.