

GRAEME HUNTER

RESPONSE TO THE PAPERS BY CECILIA ROYALS AND
MSGR. JOHN MURPHY

Mrs. Royals has vigorously defended the autonomy of the National Institute of Womanhood and its evangelical effectiveness, precisely on the grounds that it enjoys the freedom with which the best thought of Opus Dei and Vatican II entrusts the laity.

Msgr. Murphy stresses the novelty of the new evangelization, calling back to living faith those whose faith has grown cold (sometimes ourselves), the importance of prayer and parish, and of being centred on Christ in the spirit of the year of Jubilee.

In my comments I would like to raise some general questions about evangelization and Opus Dei that their comments leave open to discussion. Evangelization is a hot potato for contemporary Christians for two reasons: (1) It challenges multiculturalism. (2) It challenges the idea that the other churches (the Orthodox Churches) and the "ecclesial communities" (Protestant denominations) ought to be immune from evangelization. Opus Dei is committed to evangelization through ordinary life and therefore can be regarded as having to handle both these hot potatoes. I would like to say why, as a Protestant, I approve of what I understand to be Opus Dei's approach to both issues.

Multiculturalism

First, why is it good to challenge *multiculturalism*? There are 3 reasons:

First, the idea of "culture" at the core of multiculturalism is itself a mistake. Like so many bad things the notion of "culture" as we understand it today appeared first at the end of the eighteenth century. "Culture" originally meant cultivation, in the farmer's sense of the term. It was used for the first time in the romantic period to refer to those vague, but now familiar things: English culture, German culture, Eastern culture (or should that be Chinese culture, Indian culture ... ?) As is the way with vague terms, it turned out to be infinitely extendable. We soon learned to distinguish between high culture and low culture, between pop culture and classical culture etc. The core idea is this: Cultures are supposed to be historically determined ways of life that allegedly distinguish different groups of people and their offspring. Vague, vague, vague—to the point of uselessness. What do people mean—and there are

many such people—who would claim simultaneously to belong to Canadian culture, pop culture, and Protestant or Catholic culture? Do they mean anything other than that they are Canadian, Protestants or Catholics who like pop music? If they mean anything else, I don't know what it is.

Why, then, has this term 'culture' become so prevalent? The answer is because at one time it had a use. At the time of the sudden rise in importance of the natural sciences in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the chattering classes of the day wanted to be able to identify their lofty thoughts with something less mechanical and reductive than the objects of physics and chemistry, in desperation they coined the word 'culture' in its new sense. The sciences dealt with material objects, but humanists like themselves envisioned higher things; they dealt with culture. 'L'homme machine', the human machine, may have suggested a fascinating program of study to people of a scientific cast of mind, but to those of humanist training it sounded like the death of the spirit, what C.S. Lewis would later call the abolition of man.

The word "culture" was also politically useful at that time. It gave focus to the rising nationalism of Western European countries. These were not just groups of people who spoke the same language. Oh no. They were a temporal representation of their trans-temporal "culture".

Vague concepts are the mind's hired help. They make thinking on your own first unnecessary, and then, if they continue to be employed, impossible. How did we think and speak in the days before there were any cultures? In the Christian West the concept of culture was unneeded, because the Christian doctrine of providence did its work for it, and did it better. Christians understood history not as the rise and fall of cultures, nor as the strife of one culture against another, but as the working out of God's eternal purposes in time. And the whole world, not just this or that individual or nation, was God's field of action. The false and foolish doctrine of Multi-culturalism is thus what has arisen to replace the doctrine of the "one holy, catholic and apostolic Church". It exists to prevent us from acknowledging, and in most cases even from recognizing, that the destiny of that Church is one with the destiny of mankind.

Second, even if we think that "cultures" are something different or more important than I give them credit for, Christianity is not one of them. Christianity is not identifiable with any national church or even a transnational one. Christianity is better described as a divinely authored story, a story more ancient and fundamental even than the Christian Church. The birth of Christ, which we celebrated three weeks ago, was the incarnation of God's eternal Word. And even its incarnation in history *preceded* institutional Christianity. Jesus Christ's arrival on earth was heralded by angels with glad tidings of great Joy to **All People**. As Simeon said, in his prophetic moment, holding the infant Jesus, He is the "glory" of Israel, but the "light" of the world:

Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face

of all people, to be a light to lighten the *gentiles* and to be the Glory of thy people *Israel* (Luke, 2:29-32).

Third, and finally, the things that we call cultures, even if you think they have some significance, are no barrier to Christianity. It has been estimated that there are 50,000 converts to Christianity every day in Communist China. Professor David Jeffrey, of Baylor University, and a distinguished auxiliary professor of Peking University, has said that in his opinion it is not unthinkable that a new Constantine may arise in China. African Anglicans, as many of you will know, not only outnumber the Anglicans in the rest of the world but are the main pillars of orthodoxy in the Anglican Church. And South American Christians are rekindling both Roman Catholic and Protestant religious zeal.

Multiculturalism, then, is a vague and dubious concept; it does not apply to Christianity, which is a divinely written story and, to the extent that culture is anything, it is no barrier to the universality of the Christian message.

Now some Christians who uncritically admit the concept of multiculturalism into their minds are led by it to make false judgements about evangelization, which limit their effectiveness. Many think that one needs to learn a great deal about other religions before one can begin to evangelize among their believers. And since it takes forever to learn anything useful about another religion, and since legions of them are represented in most public situations, little evangelization gets done. It is important to see the fallacy involved in the idea that evangelization requires study of other religions. No doubt whatever you happen to know about another religion may come in handy in talking with those who believe it, but special knowledge is quite unnecessary. That is because the Gospel message is not directed at ideas, but at the ordinary human situation. And the genius of Opus Dei lies to a great extent in the recognition of this fact. The gospel says that Jesus Christ can free men and women from their burdens and that he is the embodiment of all their hopes. It is not a comparative message but a simple declaration. If the people we live and work with have any burdens or hopes (and could they really be people, if they had not?) then that declaration should interest them. Our job is simply to proclaim it in word and deed. The rest is not our business. The part of the Holy Ghost is to open their eyes.

Speaking of eyes suggests a homely metaphor. Religious convictions are like eyeglasses, they enable us to focus on things that we otherwise would not be able to see clearly. To be a Christian, for instance, is to be able to see humility, piety, wealth, sexuality, power and many other aspects of life in ways to which non-Christians are often completely or at least partially blind. The Opus Dei idea of the witness of work is very important here. Just as sighted people inevitably become leaders when working with the blind, so serious Christians will become leaders when working with those whose religion or lack of religion makes them unable to see clearly. We do not need to try to understand their religion, but only to *practice* our own. Let them judge whether our Christian practices are any truer to life than their own. If they are not, we

should expect no converts. Saint Josemaria puts it this way in *Conversations*:

In fact there are many separated brethren who feel attracted by the spirit of Opus Dei and who cooperate in our apostolate, and they include ministers, even bishops of their respective confessions. As contacts increase, we receive more and more proofs of affection and cordial understanding. And it is because the members of Opus Dei centre their spirituality simply on trying to live responsibly the commitments and demands of Christian Baptism. ... Here they find, put into living practice, a good many of the doctrinal presuppositions in which they, and we Catholics, have placed so many well-founded ecumenical expectations.

Intra-mural Evangelization

That fine passage also puts its delicate finger on my second hot potato: What about Christians evangelizing other Christians? intra-mural evangelization I might call it. Should Roman Catholics be evangelizing Orthodox and Protestant Christians? And what about the other way around? I wish to say that a certain amount of discerning evangelism is good in both directions.

The blessing of the Roman Catholic Church during the whole tenure of its present Pope has been so obvious that many Protestants have gladly acknowledged the spiritual leadership of Rome at this time. The Roman Catholic Church has led us to a more perfect recognition of God's intention for women in the Church and for homosexuals. It has brought us to a more Christian understanding of birth control, abortion, euthanasia, and other social issues to such an extent that it is impossible not to feel attracted to it and annoyed by the seeming rudderlessness of those "ecclesial communities" which lack a Magisterium.

Yet a prominent Roman Catholic speaker addressing a group of fervent Protestant believers brought out another important point. "I have more in common with you guys," he said, "than with those inside my own church who do not take their faith seriously." I doubt that there are many serious Christians here who have not recognized this fact, even if they have never had the occasion to say it in public.

Moreover, at least since Vatican II, Roman Catholics have been prepared to acknowledge that Protestantism has made, and, many would say, continues to make valuable contributions to the Christian family. Never has this been shown more generously than in a pre-Vatican II book by the French Jesuit priest Louis Bouyer, called *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, recently re-issued by Sceptre books. Bouyer acknowledges the ongoing contribution of Protestant piety, while arguing that it can only find its fulfillment within the greater Roman Catholic Church.

As one born a Protestant, and open to, but not yet called to Roman Catholicism, I find Bouyer's argument deeply persuasive, and even inevitable. Like Bouyer and the Holy Father, I think it possible and delightful to look forward to a day when we will all be one. Like them again, I find it unthinkable

that unity can come about in any other way than by those who once left in protest rejoining the mother Church. But under the leadership of the present Pope, we have all come to see that we need not and should not rush toward such a union. The error of the kind of ecumenism sought by the World Council of Churches is that it is willing to compromise to get there quickly. But *no* truth available to the Church should be allowed to perish in the process of union, including whatever lights the Protestants have managed to keep alive—lights of liturgy, lights of community, lights of preaching, lights of piety, lights of biblical literacy, lights of closeness to Christ. These are not inconsiderable lights, and it would be wrong to hide them under a bushel.

Thus it seems to me also—though this is perhaps not the best locale in which to advertise the opinion—that intramural evangelization ought still to be able to go in both directions. There seem to me to be Roman Catholics—I know some, particularly from Quebec—who are so burned by their bad experiences in the Roman Catholic Church that they are unlikely to return to it, though one can never discount the power of the grace of God. For some of them, at least, Protestant churches will be a necessary stepping stone on their way back to faith, and for more than a few Protestantism may be their lifelong home.

It has been my own experience to have joyful contact with members of Opus Dei communities to whose houses I have been invited as a speaker and of whose gentle attempts to nudge me toward a more Roman faith I have been gratefully aware. But I have found them also to be, as their founder says they should be, respectfully willing to work together in common enterprises for good. There is a great harvest to be reaped and the workers are few. Our common faith and hope encourage us to believe that those who work together in charity will not be found wanting when the harvest Master calls us to account.