

## **CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN ADVENTIST AND CATHOLICS**

A Report by Angel Manuel Rodriguez

For some time theologians from the Roman Catholic Church had manifested interest in holding conversations with Seventh-day Adventists concerning Adventist beliefs. After careful consideration, and motivated by the opportunity to present our beliefs to leading Catholic theologians, the invitation was accepted. Consequently, Dr. Bert Beach and Dr. John Graz of the GC Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, and Dr. Angel Manuel Rodríguez of the Biblical Research Institute met in Rome May 5-6, 2000 with Bishop (now Cardinal) Walter Kasper and Msgr. John Radano from the Vatican.

The conversation was very informal, cordial and touched on different topics including the organizational structure of the SDA Church. We provided a brief summary of our doctrines based on the 27 Fundamental Beliefs without analyzing any of them. Catholics placed special emphasis on baptism and the second coming of Christ and pointed out that during Mass there is a daily reference to the Coming of Christ. They showed particular interest in the global nature of our church. We also gave a report on Adventist interchurch relations.

Mgsr. Radano gave a report on how the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity is organized and its activities. It promotes ecumenism inside the church and in regards to other churches. According to him true ecumenism requires faithfulness to the apostolic faith as received from Christ through the apostles and under the safeguard of the church and unity of sacraments and ministry. We discussed some areas of tension. They mentioned that apparently in some regions of the world we were misrepresenting them. We suggested that in those cases they should feel free to contact us and present their concerns. We pointed out that in some parts of the

world our relations with Catholics is fine while in others there are problems on both sides.

Proselytism was briefly discussed. It was clear that they rejected proselytism when it targeted their members. Although they accept civil laws on religious freedom they call for respect inspired by Christian love and unity. When Catholic Bishops visit the Vatican they some complain, they said, about Adventist proselytism. They wanted to know whether we proselytize Catholics because we do not consider them to be Christians—that is to say because we do not accept infant baptism. We commented that a person who lives as a Christian is a Christian but one who does not practice it is not a Christian. We mentioned that there are various definitions of proselytism and added that proselytism is not necessarily wrong. It is based on the person's right to religious freedom that grants the individual the opportunity to explore other faiths and even to accept new doctrinal options. At the end of the meeting Catholics expressed desire to have more informal conversations with Adventists.

Since then three subsequent meetings have been held. The first one was a two day meeting in May 2001 at the John Knox Center in Geneva, Switzerland, named for the leader of the Scottish Reformation. The discussion centered around a paper written by George W. Reid in which he summarized and analyzed Adventist teachings as expressed in the 27 Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists. Other Adventist participants included Dr. Beach, Dr. Graz, and Dr. Roland Meyer. Among the Catholic theologians were Bishop Marc Ouellet, Msgr. John Radano, Dr. James F. Puglisi, and Dr. Ralph Del Colle. The discussion revolved around common doctrinal beliefs. Several questions were raised on peculiar Adventist beliefs but there was no in-depth discussion of any of them. It was anticipated that those could be topics for further discussion in the future.

The second meeting was held in May 2002. The Adventist group included Dr. Beach, Dr. Graz, Dr. Reid, Dr. Rodriguez, and Dr. Richard Lehman, President of the Franco-Belgian Union of SDA. The subject under consideration was Sabbath/Sunday, as requested by the Catholic group. The guiding paper prepared by Dr. Rodriguez focused on an intensive biblical and theological study of the biblical Sabbath. The paper prepared by Catholic theologian Dr. Puglisi focused on a biblical and historical/theological study of Sunday. Catholic theologians argued that the seed of Sunday observance is found in the NT and that it originated as a result of theological reflection on the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus. Adventist commented that doctrines or dogmas are to be based on biblical evidence and not on post-apostolic traditions and that there is no evidence in the NT to support the position that the resurrection of Jesus led to Sunday observance. We also rejected the authority of the church to define and/or establish doctrines without clear biblical basis.

The third meeting took place in May 2003. The Adventist group included this time Dr. Richard Davidson, from Andrews University Theological Seminary, who prepared a paper on hermeneutics, and Dr. Roland Meyer, from Salve Adventist University. The topic of discussion was Adventist and Catholic hermeneutics. The paper on the Catholic side was prepared by Dr. Gospert Byamungu, from the Ecumenical Institute at Bossy. Catholics showed a high view of Scripture while arguing that a modified use of the historical-critical method was not incompatible with it. We also argued for a high view of Scripture but found the classical and modified use of the historical-critical method incompatible with it. Catholics do not separate Scripture from Tradition because according to them Tradition is grounded in Scripture. We argued that as long as Tradition is a witness to apostolic teaching we do not reject Tradition. Our

concern is with post-apostolic traditions that are not based on Scripture. Among them we mentioned such teachings as purgatory, the treasury of merits, indulgencies, Mariology, etc. We obviously disagreed. They argued that those teachings were based on biblical-theological concepts. The role of the Magisterium in the interpretation of the Bible was discussed and Catholics argued that in the area of dogmas the church needs an authoritative interpretation of the Bible and that it is provided by the Magisterium (the Pope and the Bishops together make decisions). As Protestants we argued that the Bible is its own interpreter, that it provides its own rules of interpretation and that through the assistance of the Holy Spirit believers are able to understand its message of salvation without the need of a Magisterium.

At the close of the meeting Catholic theologians asked Adventists whether our application of Rev 13 to the Papacy is based on sola scriptura and whether we still apply the chapter to the Papacy. We commented that our position is not exclusively Adventist but that it goes back to the Reformers themselves and is based on a method of interpretation provided by the Bible itself. The Catholic reaction was to consider our interpretation of Rev 13 to be a sectarian element. In a humorous way Adventists commented that the Mariological interpretation of some biblical passages is also sectarian. On a more serious tone, Adventists commented that we would be less than honest should we tell them that we no longer hold our understanding of those prophecies. However, in conjunction with our eschatology stands an effort to express Christian fellowship and love. Future developments depend on whether religious liberty is practiced or intolerance. As Adventists, it was added, we should not allow our particular prophetic view to determine the way we relate to Catholics and would not like those views to determine the way Catholics relate to us. There is some tension, but we should seek ways of

expressing sincere Christian love to each other.

No conversation has been planned for 2004. The discussions have been useful by providing an opportunity to share with Catholic theologians important aspects of our message and interacting with them. The Adventist papers presented in the meetings are available on our web-page.

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