

What is an Evangelical Catholic?

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Evangelical Catholic is a term of self-designation used by Christians coming from a broad range of theological perspectives and commitments. The gamut of ecclesial communities vying for their own version of what it means to be an “evangelical catholic” ranges from Lutherans, Anglicans, and various Evangelicals yearning for greater catholicity within their respective communities, to faithful Roman Catholics longing for an evangelical renewal of the Church. Yet, perhaps beneath these apparent differences there lies a common, yet numinous groaning of the Spirit of God, who is seeking to draw the members of Christ’s mystical body into a communal life that is both fully Catholic and fully evangelical.

Here in Madison, Wisconsin, our own community of Evangelical Catholics has certainly shared in this longing for an ecclesial life that is truly both evangelical and Catholic. As we’ve wrestled with these longings, a sort of prototype evangelical Catholic has evolved in our minds. We, of course, do not for a moment imagine that this budding vision of ours is univocal with God’s, but we do sense that in some way we share in the Lord’s own desire for a people who live in the riches of both evangelical and Catholic life. From our own limited vantage point then, and as members of Christ’s faithful people specifically called to be Catholic, we offer our own understanding of what it means to be an Evangelical Catholic:

The Evangelical Catholic is a Catholic Christian committed to living an evangelical life and doing evangelical ministry within and as an obedient son or daughter of the Catholic Church. The Evangelical Catholic laments the tragic divisions in Christendom arising out of the Reformation of the 16th Century. Far from the triumphalist attitudes of either Catholic or Protestant sectarians, these Catholics are filled with sorrow as they daily witness the mutual impoverishment brought about by the separation of the evangelical and Catholic aspects of our faith. So do they love these two traditions that, like children of a broken home, they mourn their familial separation, often feeling torn, as it were, between two that ought to be living in mutual harmony and charity. The Evangelical Catholic feels called of God to live within the bosom and under the protection of Holy Mother Church, but not without a deep sense of loss, and often, in great confusion of heart over the evangelical impoverishment he daily witnesses within this Church that he yet loves, treasures, and obeys.

This sorrow, great as it may often be, is not, however, what chiefly characterizes the Evangelical Catholic. Indeed, he feels uniquely blessed and graced to have been given the sight (and the sorrow) with which to see and experience the riches of evangelical life and ministry within the Catholic Church. He rejoices in being able to feed at both the table of the Eucharist and from the sacred text. He loves both the sacred liturgy and the message boldly preached, rejoicing in both the sacramental ministry of the priest and the evangelical work of the prophet. Moreover, in both his sorrow and rejoicing the Evangelical Catholic remains hopeful and committed to bringing about evangelical renewal in both his personal life and in the life of the Catholic Church.

Mutual Impoverishment

In our introductory essay *The Evangelical Catholic* we used two phrases that some Catholics may find objectionable, namely “mutual impoverishment” and “evangelical impoverishment.” It is argued that given Christ’s promise of [indefectibility](#) to the Church, no such impoverishment is really possible for the Catholic Church. To clarify what we mean by these terms, we offer the concluding remarks of Father Louis Bouyer as recorded in his volume, *Protestant and Anglican Spirituality*, which is part of his 3 volume set, *A History of Christian Spirituality* (New York: Seabury, 1962-1964). Father Bouyer brings to this work not only an impeccable Catholic orthodoxy (his works on liturgy and the Eucharist are famous among faithful Roman Catholics,) but also, as a student of the late great Oscar Cullman (recently eulogized by Cardinal Ratzinger), an intimate knowledge of the best of Protestant theology. Here then are his words:

What holy souls Protestantism has produced among its great spiritual exponents, and what admirable teaching of the most genuinely Christian kind! And, let us say it again, the spiritual principles enunciated by Luther and Calvin were, and still are, the initial driving-force of their whole quest for God in Christ, Yet the quest was successful precisely in so far as it separated these principles from all the non-biblical elements that the reformers themselves had attached to them, and which had made the Reformation schismatic and heretical.

The conclusion of all this is undoubtedly that Protestants belong to the Catholic Church by what is best in them, and that what is most rightfully dear to them can only flourish in a certain and lasting way in her bosom, while the split between Orthodoxy and Catholicism is a misunderstanding, an absurd and scandalous nonsense.

But this is only half the truth. We must now add all the things that the Catholic Church has lost by the loss of the Orthodox and the Protestants, and all that Catholics still need to do to be reunited with them in the one Church.

There is a sense in which no division can cause the Church to lose anything that is essential to it. The separation between East and West does not prevent the Greek Fathers, nor the Eastern liturgies, nor the treasures of thought and spirituality accumulated by the Byzantine tradition and its heirs, from belonging forever to the Catholic Church. And even the ruptures involved in the Protestant Reformation could do nothing to prevent the Word of God from being the great and incomparable richness of the whole Catholic tradition, or salvation from being for every Christian a grace that faith alone can grasp, or faith from being the starting point of the most intensely personal relation of each soul with God in Christ. Whatever the schisms and heresies, every Christian in the Catholic Church can go on drawing life from all that...

But after the growing separation between East and West, what in fact did the Catholic West really and effectively know about the Greek Fathers and the liturgical and spiritual tradition of the Christian East? By concentrating on what was only a part of the traditional heritage of the Catholic Church, has not the West tended to bury itself in that and thus develop a hardening of the arteries.

This surely was not the least of the causes that paved the way for the Reformation with all its jarring and partial characteristics. And who would be bold enough to maintain that after the Reformation the Bible kept or recovered the place that it should

in principle hold in the spiritual life of Catholics? And similarly, did not the personalism of faith give place to a piety in which outward things and the social order played too big a part?

It is true that the Catholic Reformation (when not confined to a mere Counter-Reformation) largely reintegrated Scripture, the Fathers and the whole wide tradition of antiquity within Catholic piety. But was not this largely abortive, as is shown by the development of Jansenism and Quietism, either because it was wrongly confused in the Church with a concealed form of Protestantism, or else because, the problems raised by Protestantism not having been resolved but merely put aside, it slid once more into its errors?

And coming down to our time when so many things are being rediscovered or restored to life in the Catholic Church (things which, had they always been of vital concern, would have forestalled schisms and heresies), can we truly say that we have solved the disastrous either-or of the simple blind conservatism—which conserves one part of the truth only by neglecting the remainder—and those questionable systems of reform which only recover something of that remainder by losing something of the traditional basis and background? [Endquote]

The best lesson we can draw from the study contained in this book is to ask ourselves these questions. They govern the future of Catholic ecumenism and, even more important, of Catholicism itself.