

*Lent is a great time for Missionary Ecumenism. Our Eastern Orthodox Christians observe Lent, and more and more Protestants are seeing the benefits of preparing for the Week of the Bright Sadness, from Palm Sunday to Easter.*

*Pay attention to the drop-out Catholics in our families and neighborhoods. Let's not be afraid to invite them to Mass on the great, final days of Lent.*

*May we show our love to those who suffer especially from cancer/alzheimers, alcoholism/drug abuse, and divorce. May the minority groups in our midst sense the love of Jesus which we offer them.*

*Attached is an article explaining that there are antagonistic people in both the Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches, as we try to heal the wounds of the Protestant Reformation. Pope Francis uses the word "Encounter," in a special way to deal with this situation.*

Encounter and Dialogue as Part of the Ecumenical Imperative: Fr. Nicholas Gruner and His Lutheran Counterparts

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I first came across the difference between "Encounter" and "Dialogue" when the visit of Pope Francis to the 9/11 Memorial at the NY Trade Center was being planned in September 2015. The Vatican's preparation used the term "Encounter," the US Bishops, "Dialogue." As I watched the actual service, especially Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove and Imam Khalid Latif going back and forth, it became clear that dialogue is a rational term involving mainly the head. Encounter is much more than rational. It involves the heart.<sup>1</sup>

Then I saw Dr. John Borelli's article in the October 2016 *Ecumenical Trends*: encounter "a broader concept" than ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Dr. Borelli linked Pope Francis' use of the expression "a culture of encounter" to "the steadfast accompaniment of one another,...a cooperative venture and a profoundly and broadly engaging experience."<sup>2</sup>

A third surprise: Sr. Katarina Schuth's *Seminary Formation*, with the article by Msgr. Peter Vaccari, "The Culture of Encounter: The Future of Seminary Formation." Although Msgr. Vaccari never defines what encounter means, it is clear that it involves a relationship.<sup>3</sup>

Schuth's book also documents the lessening impact of ecumenism and inter-faith studies in USA seminaries, and includes Fr. Ron Rolheiser's almost damning indictment of seminarians today:

Ecumenism and interfaith outreach are central to our catholicity and not a matter of choosing to be involved depending on one's time, temperament and energy.

I highlight this because I fear indifference to ecumenism and interfaith outreach might be more the norm than the exception. At the school where I teach, we host an evening of prayer for church unity each January during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. We have more than one hundred diocesan and religious seminarians studying at our school and normally not a single seminarian shows up for this ecumenical event. It is not that these seminarians are anti-ecumenical; it is rather that the whole issue of other churches and other religions is simply not on their radar screens."<sup>4</sup>

A search on the internet reveals that both English and Spanish include a secondary meaning for encounter and *encuentro*: that of a struggle. To encounter someone or something has a hint of strong difference.<sup>5</sup>

A very negative article on our Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue in *The Fatima Crusader* made me wonder if ecumenism itself includes much more of encounter than we have been accustomed to. The late Marian theologian Father Nicholas Gruner and his followers might benefit from our encountering. Describing Pope Francis's visit to Sweden to take part in the joint worship service of Oct. 31, 2016, John Vennari called it "the insanity of today's practice of ecumenism." After several pages giving only the worst of the old portrayal of Luther, Vennari quoted "a high Catholic churchman" who praised Luther for his "deep religiousness." Vennari called that praise "madness." The footnote identifies the churchman as Pope St. John Paul II.<sup>6</sup>

While Lutherans may have only one tribe of Fundamentalists (see below), God has blessed the Roman Catholic Church with two: Those fixated on the Third Secret of Fatima, such as in *The Fatima Crusader*, and those fixated on the Tridentine Mass. Pope Francis went out of his way to encounter the latter, when he said that absolution granted by the priests of the Society of St. Pius X would be valid during the Year of Mercy. He then extended that to absolution from abortion.<sup>7</sup>

In the Midwest, where I minister, we have not only the moderate Lutherans of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, who have signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, but the fundamentalist Lutherans of the Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Synod, who have not. (The former are losing membership; the latter seems to be growing).

Lutheran scholar Martin Marty recently noted that Lutherans in Africa and Asia now vastly outnumber Lutherans in the USA. And many in the USA are now Latino.<sup>8</sup> As with the Anglican Communion, more Lutherans in Africa and Asia than we suspect are probably tending towards the right, away from their USA moderate counterparts.

World-wide, the moderate ELCA belongs to the Lutheran World Federation (whose members have signed the Joint Declaration); the fundamentalist Missouri Synod to the International Lutheran Council and the fundamentalist Wisconsin Synod to the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference, neither of which have signed.

How do we support moderate Roman Catholics and Lutherans who live next door or work with their fundamentalist counterparts? Could we apply the spirituality of encounter to this situation? The one favorable time is when tragedy strikes both, and forces us together. It is especially then that our shared baptism and profession of faith in Jesus Christ may overcome the prejudices and rigidity between the two groups.

We may need to remember that Fundamentalism has saved Christianity during several periods of our two thousand year history. Fundamentalism rules when the organization is severely threatened and its members circle the wagons. Unfortunately, when the danger is over, some cannot come out.

We have the challenge of living at a time when five different ways of being Christian are present: catholic, evangelical/charismatic, Vatican II/neo-orthodox, fundamentalist, and liberal. This has only happened once or twice during our history, usually during the few times of extended peace.<sup>9</sup>

The growing spirituality of encounter offers a way for all five to work together, to spread Christ's Good News.

Dr. Borelli sums it up very well, and introduces the bonding element of joy:

"A culture of encounter seems to have fewer limits than the previous efforts at dialogue, requires more complete engagement and accompaniment, and focuses on immediate rather than long-term goals. It requires participants to listen to one another carefully. There is an emphasis on mutuality and mutual accountability. A culture of encounter requires that spiritual engagement be an essential feature of all conversations. The joy of the gospel pervades all these encounters."<sup>10</sup>

Notes:

1. For the Vatican version, see the Vatican website, Papal Visit to NY City, 11:30 am Sept. 25, 2015, "Interreligious Encounter." For the USA version, see Cindy Wooden, "Pope at 9/11 Memorial," Catholic News Service, Sept. 25, 2015.
2. Dr. John Borelli, "The Paul Wattson Lecture, San Francisco, Creating a Culture of Encounter: The Next Steps for a World in Need of Dialogue," *Ecumenical Trends* 45 (Oct. 2016,9) 1/2, 129/30.
3. Sr. Katarina Schuth, O.S.F., *Seminary Formation* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2016), Msgr. Peter Vaccari, "The Culture of Encounter: The Future of Seminary Formation," pp. 164-73.
4. Schuth, *Seminary Formation*, pp. 30-31, 38, 113 for the decline of ecumenism in seminaries; Fr. Ron Rolheiser, O.M.I., "Toward a Spirituality of Ecclesial Leadership," p. 127.

5. Internet search using Merriam-Webster Dictionary for both languages, Dec. 2, 2016.
6. John Vennari, "Celebrating an Apocalyptic Plague, The 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Revolt," *The Fatima Crusader* 116 (Autumn, 2016) 21, 27, 31 n.15.
7. For the Year of Mercy provision, see [en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/09/01](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/09/01); for the extension, see [www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope\\_extends](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope_extends), Nov. 21, 2016.
8. Dr. Martin E. Marty, "Reformation Jostlings," Oct.31,2016, <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/reformation-jostlings>.
9. For the Biblical foundation and short history of each of the five ways, see [www.harrywinter.org](http://www.harrywinter.org), Five Ways page.
10. Borelli, *Ecumenical Trends* 45 (Oct. 2016, 9) 8/136, citing "three concrete images ...of a culture of encounter," from Diego Fares, S.J.: "church-bell thought, shoe-leather thought, and friendly thought."