

Commentary on the Statement "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World"

by Harry E. Winter, OMI. Printed in Ecumenical Trends 46 (Oct. 2017, 9):10-11.

Insight by Fernando Velazquez, OMI, May 15, 2017: part of the neglect of this statement comes from the earlier document "Dominus Iesus" (2000). Mission exists in a difficult and creative tension with Unity/Dialogue.

As an ecumenist convinced that Mission is at the heart of Christian Unity, I was stunned at the May 1-4, 2017 National Workshop on Christian Unity (NWCU) to discover that the statement "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World" was published in November, 2011. I had never heard of this remarkable, vital and practical accomplishment of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance. Until the Rev. Dr. John H. Armstrong, Founder and President of ACT3 Network, and the Rev. Don Rooney, Pastor of St. Bernadette Catholic Church, Springfield, Virginia, began preparing to lead, during the National Workshop, their Ecumenical Engagement Seminar 4, "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World," scheduled for Thursday, May 4, 9-10:30 am, neither had anyone else.¹

Rooney told the 100 or so participants in Seminar 4 that he and Mrs. Jan Skrehot, President of the Catholic Association of Diocesan and Ecumenical Interreligious Officers (CADEIO) were working on Catholic participation in The Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington when they discovered the 2011 statement. Rooney had worked previously with Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, so he wrote Tauran about the statement, mentioning that the NWCU would have a seminar about it.

Tauran's letter, published above, is dated May 3, 2017, and was received just in time for the seminar. Rooney informed us this was the first time anyone in the Vatican had praised the annual Workshop.

Rooney and Armstrong alternated in explaining the statement, beginning with the expressions "never heard of," and "a well-kept secret." Armstrong noted that the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) is the oldest of the three authorizing groups. He explained that, until the Liberal-Fundamentalist crisis in Protestantism of the 1900's, WEA had been very interested in Christian Unity. The growth of Fundamentalism discouraged the participation of WEA in ecumenism until about 15 years ago, he felt, when a new president of WEA met with the pope. Along with the influence of the Catholic Charismatic Movement, the more open attitude of the WEA president enabled it to participate in authoring the statement.

The statement begins with a short Preamble: "Mission belongs to the very being of the church. Proclaiming the word of God and witnessing to the world is essential for every Christian. At the same time, it is necessary to do so according to gospel principles, with full respect and love for all human beings." The preamble notes "tensions" between people and communities of different religious convictions," disclaims being "a theological statement on mission," encourages churches to reflect on their current practices, and promises recommendations. Armstrong commented that it is difficult, from

a purely human standpoint, to do both Mission and Ecumenism. He has also experienced more and more people claiming to be Christian, attending a Christian church, but refusing to be baptized.

The first part of the statement, "A basis for Christian witness," contains seven numbered sections, and, like the second part, includes at least one reference to Scripture in each section. Both the joy of witness (1) and the cross (2) are mentioned. Rooney observed that the reference to the experience of the early church sharing its goods (3) sounds like the religious orders which sprang up with the vows of chastity, obedience and poverty.

Armstrong wondered if #7 should have been #1: "Christians affirm that while it is their responsibility to witness to Christ, conversion is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 16:7-9; Acts 10:44-47). They recognize that the Spirit blows where the Spirit wills in ways over which no human being has control (cf. John 3:8)." Both Rooney and Armstrong attacked the numbers game, in which success is based on the number of "converts." They expressed a strong dislike for using the noun "converts." We must witness, but it is the Holy Spirit who converts.

The second part, "Principles," contains 12 sections. The tone of these 12 rejects triumphalism, asking Christians in #3 to "overcome all arrogance, condescension and disparagement (cf. Galatians 5:22)." See also 4, 6, 10.

Echoing the famous Jesuit 1975 mandate "the promotion of justice is an integral part of the priestly service of the faith,"² #4 states that "Acts of service, such as providing education, health care, relief services and acts of justice and advocacy are an integral part of witnessing to the gospel." This section, along with #8 and #12, recognize that cooperating "for the common good" is urgently essential for all believers today.

For me, it was very significant that the Director of the Oblate of Mary Immaculate Office of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, Father Antonio Ponce, OMI, had jumped at the chance to participate in the Workshop.³ Our experience from May 1-4 is that Mission, Unity, Dialogue, Justice, Peace, Integrity of Creation and Spirituality were blended to a remarkable degree.⁴

When we were looking at what Mission means, Rooney recalled the ending of the Latin Mass: *Ite, Missa est*, and explained that the translation, *Go, It is sent*, meant each person, embodying Jesus, is now sent on Mission after experiencing Mass.

Armstrong was especially concerned about religions being "instrumentalized" for political ends (7). He emphasized the importance of culture as overlapping with religion, and underlined that context is as important as text (9).

On the critical issue of a person changing religions, concerning the time required, and "full personal freedom,"(11), we saw again the sensitivity of this part. Both Armstrong and Rooney spent some time discussing "abortion fundamentalism," when one issue takes over all other concerns. Pro-life should be one important concern, along with other important concerns.

Armstrong instructed us that, if we want to find out if a person is evangelical or fundamentalist, ask what they think of Billy Graham. If they admire him, they are evangelical; if they reject him, they are fundamentalist.⁵

The third part, "Recommendations," begins by including Eastern Orthodox as participants in the statement. The recommendations are especially urged for "those working in interreligious contexts." Today, that would include almost everyone.

Since we were running out of time, and there would be some questions, we noticed that each of the six recommendations began with one word: study, build, encourage, cooperate, call, and pray, the last being described as "integral to who we are and what we do, as well as to Christ's mission." Rooney mentioned his experience that many Catholics are very ignorant of who they are. When #3 mentioned "religious identity," he felt that both must be done: deepening one's own religious identity, and simultaneously studying the faith of the other. He also mentioned how impressed he was when Pope Francis pushed building affordable housing as an urgent need.

I was able to ask Armstrong during the question period if the documents beginning with "Evangelical and Catholics Together for Mission" (May, 1994), has any impact on evangelical-RC relations today. He responded with a quick yes, adding that he was grateful to this group, which he feels includes the editors of the journal Christianity Today.

The final page, "Appendix: Background to the document," observes that "There are increasing interreligious tensions in the world today, including violence and the loss of human life" (2). Almost five years in the making, this statement is a clarion call to all Christians to share it with members of other faiths, and all people of good will. Let us pray that we will experience forward movement caused by this remarkable statement. How can we make it known?

Was the statement hiding in plain sight? Or is it just what people expect Christians to do, and so is not newsworthy? Or are the enemies of Christianity attempting to hide it?

These questions are less important than the fact that we now have discovered this marvelous instrument of Witness, Unity, Dialogue, Justice, Peace, Integrity of Creation and Prayer.

Notes:

1. ACT3 Network, begun by Dr. John H. Armstrong in 1981, brings together especially evangelical and Roman Catholic Churches, for Mission, citing the entire verse of Jo. 17:21, "that they may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me." See the internet description of the ACT3 Network.
2. 32nd General Congregation of the Jesuits, Dec. 2, 1974-March 7, 1975, Decree 4, 67, #18.
3. See Ponce's photos in the account "Cardinal Urges Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Participants to Live a Unique Statement," OMI JPIC website: www.omiusajpic.org, May 8, 2017.

4. The "Workshop Eucharist|Roman Catholic Rite" on Tuesday morning and the "Workshop Eucharist | Methodist Rite" on Wednesday, 8:15-9:15 am were conducted with the necessary instructions on who was welcome to receive according to the discipline of the two Churches. The Bible Study led Tuesday-Thursday mornings , 9:20-10:00 am, by Kenyan Rev. Grace Imathiu, Pastor, Community United Methodist Church, Naperville, IL ,inspired all.

5. This does not mean fundamentalism is entirely destructive. Several times in our history, it has saved Christianity: see www.harrywinter.org, Five Ways page, Dividing or Strengthening, chap. 4.