

## If demography is destiny, Pentecostals are the ecumenical future

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Rome

Understandably, the ecumenical focus these days in much Catholic conversation tends to fall on the Anglican Communion, given its present crisis, and on Orthodoxy, given the “preferential option” of both John Paul II and Benedict XVI for the churches of the East. What sometimes fades from view, however, is that by far the largest and most rapidly growing Christian “other” in the early 21st century is Pentecostalism.

There are 79 million Anglicans in the world today and 215 million Orthodox Christians. Pentecostals, however, skyrocketed throughout the late 20th century to at least 380 million, by the most conservative estimate, and perhaps as many as 600 million. Across much of Africa, Asia and Latin America, Pentecostalism has become the *de facto* “Southern way” of being Christian.

News this week from the Vatican of new breakthroughs in Catholic/Pentecostal relations, therefore, may well represent the most important ecumenical development of all in a period of towering symbolism related to the Jan. 18-25 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Fr. Juan Usma Gomez of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the Vatican official responsible for Catholic/Pentecostal relations, published a piece in the January 27 edition of *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper, reporting two new developments that have not as yet garnered wide attention:

- The Joint International Commission for Catholic–Pentecostal Dialogue will shortly publish a new document: *On Becoming A Christian: Insights from Scripture and the Patristic Writings. With Some Contemporary Reflections*. Usma Gomez called the document a “true novelty,” because it’s the first time Catholics and Pentecostals have jointly studied the Fathers of the Church.
- After several years of preparation, for the first time the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity will hold “preliminary conversations” this April with leaders of various non-denominational Pentecostal movements, which could lead to the creation of a formal dialogue. Given that the majority of Pentecostals are now thought to belong to independent and unaffiliated grassroots movements, this means that for the first time the Vatican is opening a channel of communication with that sector of the Christian world where, in many respects, “the action is.”

Surveying recent developments in relations with Pentecostals, Usma Gomez sees a clear pattern of setting aside old polemics, which have traditionally been most heated in Latin America. Catholic bishops in the region have long accused what they call Pentecostal and Evangelical “sects” of draining Catholics away from the faith – in the 20th century, more people converted from Catholicism to Protestantism in Latin America than did so in Europe during the age of the Reformation. Meanwhile, Pentecostal leaders in Latin America have sometimes been ferocious in their criticism of the Catholic Church, even invoking antique Scriptural images such as the “Whore of Babylon.”

In that context, Usma Gomez cites the remarkably irenic conclusion of a recent ecumenical seminar for the bishops of the Southern Cone, held in Argentina and organized by the Council for Promoting Christian Unity: “We believe that, guided by the Holy Spirit, we must go out to meet our Pentecostal brothers, appreciating this current of grace and not attempting to resist the Spirit; with love, prudence, and discernment; overcoming an attitude of defensiveness, because fear is not a fruit of the Spirit.”

In another gesture of outreach, Usma Gomez also lists several contributions which he believes the rise of Pentecostalism has bestowed upon contemporary Christianity:

- Rediscovery of the central role of the Holy Spirit;
- The fact that personal conversion to Jesus Christ is requested in an explicit and continuing manner throughout the life of every single Christian;
- The emphasis placed upon prayer, and the power of prayer;
- Rediscovery of charisms and spiritual gifts as realities, effective and necessary, in the life of every believer.

At the same time, Usma Gomez also cites some negatives associated with Pentecostalism, above all that some Pentecostals “underline their experience and their spirituality as the only one directly produced by God himself,” and thus “they’re not disposed to recognize the same importance or the same role to other Christian experiences.”

He cites a famous Pentecostal adage: “A Christian is not always a Pentecostal, but a Pentecostal is always a true Christian.”

If, as August Comte claimed, “demography is destiny,” then the new efforts to build bridges with Pentecostals described by Usma Gomez are likely to be an important wave of the ecumenical future.

### Pentecostal Explosion

In Christian terms, the late 20th century will probably come to be known as the era of the “Pentecostal Explosion.” From less than six percent in the mid-1970s, Pentecostals finished the century representing almost 20 percent of world Christianity, according to a 2006 study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life called *Spirit and Power*. Combining organized Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God and the Church of Christ, plus the vast galaxy of independent churches around the world with a Pentecostal flavor, such as the African Zionists, the Spiritual Baptists in the Caribbean, and the True Jesus Church in China, brings the total worldwide number of Pentecostals to around 380 million. That would make Pentecostalism the second-largest Christian “denomination” on earth, lagging behind only Roman Catholicism. There are more Pentecostals today than all the Orthodox, Anglicans, and Lutherans put together.

As remarkable as those numbers are, they underestimate the real Pentecostal footprint. Established Christian denominations have also spawned their own versions of Pentecostalism, usually called Charismatics. Combining Pentecostals and Charismatics into an amalgam scholars refer to as “Revivalist Christianity” brings the global total to a staggering 600 million, according to Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, during a 2006 ecumenical conference in South Korea. That’s more than one-quarter of all Christians.

The birth of Pentecostalism in North America is conventionally dated to the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles in 1906, meaning that L.A.’s top cultural export of the last century was not Hollywood sleaze but muscular Biblical Christianity. At around the same time in the early 20th century, other forms of Pentecostalism arose spontaneously in different parts of the world, such as massive revivals in Chile, Korea, and India. Some experts believe Pentecostalism is the main religious beneficiary of globalization, perhaps even the mode of spiritual expression best suited to a global age.

Collapsing such multifarious religious activity under one label, however, risks a false impression of unity. For example, some Pentecostals follow a “Oneness” doctrine of the Trinity, softening distinctions among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, while other Pentecostals defend a classic Trinitarian theology. That Pentecostals can be divided on such a core dogmatic question illustrates their diversity; there’s no Vatican that has the last word. Salvadorian Pentecostal anthropologist Ronald Bueno prefers to talk about “Pentecostalisms,” meaning a welter of highly differentiated and localized groups, loosely united by an emphasis upon miracles, healings, speaking in tongues, and the other gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The same diversity makes keeping track of Pentecostalism a hazardous enterprise. The authors of the Pew Forum study admit their numbers are best guess estimates, fraught with ballpark figures (often self-reported) and debatable definitions of a “Pentecostal.” Some experts peg the number of Pentecostals much lower, between 150 million to 200 million. Even allowing for these nuances, however, Pentecostalism remains the most important new arrival on the world religious scene in the last 100 years.

Luis Lugo, who directed the Pew Forum report, put its bottom line this way: "I don't think it's too far-fetched to seriously consider whether Christianity is well on its way to being Pentecostalized," he said.

At least two-thirds of Pentecostals are in the developing world, and some believe Pentecostalism is emerging as the de facto Southern way of being Christian. Sociologist Paul Freston says the major global centers for Pentecostalism are in Chile, Guatemala, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Korea, the Philippines, and China. The largest single Christian congregation in the world is the Yoido Full Gospel Church, a Pentecostal church founded in 1958 and located on an island within Seoul, South Korea. Every Sunday, 250,000 worshippers show up for nine services simultaneously translated into 16 languages.

Looking around at the Pentecostal explosion, *The Economist* reported in December 2006: "The evidence can be seen everywhere in America and the developing world, in churches the size of football stadiums in Latin America, in 12,000-acre 'redemption camps' in Nigeria, and in storefront churches in the slums of Rio and Los Angeles." The most successful Pentecostal church in Guatemala, the *Fraternidad Cristiana de Guatemala*, recently built a \$20 million facility, said by church members to be the largest building in Central America, complete with a "Burger King drive," seating for over 12,000, parking for more than 3,500 cars, 48 Sunday-school classrooms, a baptism pool with space for hundreds, and a heliport.

Yet Pentecostal growth is not confined to the South. Sociologist of religion Nikolai Mitrokhin, who directs the Moscow-based Institute of the Study of Religion in the CIS and Baltic Countries, said in 2004 that denominations generally viewed as Pentecostal in flavor, such as the Assemblies of God, expanded at a clip of 20-25 percent a year in Russia during the 1990s. Today, Mitrokhin estimates there are at least one million practicing Protestants in Russia, many of them Pentecostals, and he believes that Pentecostal and Evangelical Christianity could be the religious preference of a plurality of Russians by mid-century.

Pentecostalism has long been viewed as the religious choice of the poor and backward, a motley band of "hillbilly holy rollers." Today's research, however, contests that view. Sociologist Fr. Andrew Greeley says that the Pentecostals in Latin America enjoy greatest success among the "aspirational" class, meaning white collar groups not yet among the social elites but hoping to move up. Mitrokhin says the same thing is true of Russia; the greatest expansion of Pentecostal movements, he said, has come among the country's urban entrepreneurial class.

While public fascination surrounds the spectacular number of entries into Pentecostalism, there hasn't been as much attention to what some experts say is an equally remarkable number of exits. In the late 1990s, Sociologist Kurt Bowen found that in Mexico the drop-out rate for second-generation Pentecostals was as high as 48 percent. For a significant percentage of new converts, Pentecostalism may be a way station between nominal membership in a traditional church and a complete lack of religious affiliation; several Latin America nations today have growing pockets of people who say they have no religion, a historic novelty on this intensely religious continent, and sociologists report that many of these new "nones" are ex-Pentecostals.

Some experts say Pentecostalism should be understood as the most visible expression of a whole series of deep religious reconfigurations associated with globalization, which is producing mounting diversity across a wide range of options, from intense Pentecostal devotion and reinvigorated Islam, to a smorgasbord of New Age and "emergent church" options, to no religion at all.

#### A Pentecostal Profile

As the term "Pentecostal" indicates, the motor force of the movement is the conviction that the eruption of the Holy Spirit associated with the Feast of Pentecost in the New Testament did not stop with the close of the Biblical era. They believe that the Holy Spirit can enter ordinary mortals and work miracles today, from speaking in tongues to healings to prophecy and visions. The Spirit also has the power to change lives, leading people out of self-destructive patterns of behavior such as crime, alcohol and drug addiction, marital infidelity, and laziness.

Pentecostalism generally has a "low church" ecclesiology, emphasizing the capacity of ordinary believers to make contact with the spiritual realm without the need for sacraments or special clerical intermediaries. It also has a powerful missionary impulse, oriented toward leading others to experience the power of the Spirit in their own lives.

The 2006 Pew report found that renewalist Christians have the following characteristics:

- Belief in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, or prayer for miraculous healing;
- A literal reading of the Bible;
- Strong belief in divine healing of illness or injury;
- Belief in the possibility of direct divine revelation;
- An emphasis on evil spirits (many Pentecostals say they have personally witnessed the devil or evil spirits being driven out of someone);
- Belief that Jesus will return to earth during their lifetimes;
- Belief in a “rapture,” meaning that the faithful will be gathered up before the end of the world and transported to Heaven;
- Belief that miracles still occur as in Biblical times;
- Commitment to “evangelization,” meaning sharing the faith with non-believers;
- Emphasis on Christ as the lone path to salvation;
- A conservative moral code on issues such as homosexuality, extra-marital sex, abortion, divorce, and alcohol consumption;
- Higher-than-average rates of attendance at church services.

The Pew Trust study found that most Pentecostals support a strong role for religion in public life, though in seven of the ten countries surveyed, majorities also uphold the separation of church and state. Pentecostals are more likely than other Christians to say it's important for political leaders to have strong religious beliefs. In most countries, according to the Pew data, Pentecostals are likely to sympathize with Israel, in part because of eschatological beliefs about the Second Coming occurring in Israel. Some Pentecostal churches in various parts of the world actually fly the Israeli flag to symbolize this conviction.

Relations between Catholics and Pentecostals have occasionally been frosty, in part because a few of the biggest names in the Pentecostal firmament are also among the most anti-ecumenical voices in global Christianity.

Frances Swaggart, wife of famed Pentecostal televangelist Jimmy Swaggart, wrote a book in 2006 titled *Catholicism: A Modern Babylon*, which offered a cocktail of time-honored complaints about Catholicism such as the sale of indulgences. When asked in 2006 whether the Catholic Church was the Whore of Babylon, the best another famed Pentecostal, Jimmy Bakker, could do was, “We don't know for sure.” A decade earlier, Bishop Sergio von Helde of Brazil's Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, one of the largest Pentecostal denominations in Latin America, went on TV on the Feast of Our Lady of Aparecida, the national patroness of Brazil, and kicked an icon of the Madonna, declaring, “This is no saint!” Uproar ensued, in which outraged Catholics attacked Pentecostal churches and von Helde was convicted of public disrespect for a religious symbol. While these figures are not representative of the Pentecostal mainstream, their hostility to Catholicism is a real current in some Pentecostal thought.

Yet on some key issues that formed the fault lines of the Protestant Reformation, Pentecostals are arguably closer to Catholics than to the Evangelicals. While classical Protestants stress the doctrine of sola scriptura, that the Bible alone is the only guide to faith, Pentecostals believe in on-going revelation through the Spirit. Similarly, classical Protestantism believes in salvation through faith alone, while many strains of Pentecostalism believe in a faith manifested in holy living and the fruits of the spirit – in other words, both faith and works. Pentecostals and Catholics also tend to see grace and nature as complementary, unlike classic Reformation theology which sees a radical discontinuity. Pentecostalism has a sensual, earthy spirituality similar to some forms of popular Catholic devotion.

For these reasons, Harvey Cox has dubbed Pentecostalism “Catholicism without priests,” meaning an expression of folk spirituality without the Roman juridical system or complicated scholastic theology. Despite strong tensions between Pentecostals and Catholics, these structural parallels suggest a basis for long-term dialogue. They also may help explain why so many Catholics in various parts of the world have found Pentecostalism congenial, since it's not entirely foreign to their own religious instincts.

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