

A new era in Evangelical-Catholic relations



Last week it was my privilege to meet Pope Francis for the third time. I first met him after his installation. This past summer, at his invitation, I visited him in his home for a three-hour private, non-scripted conversation. Last Thursday I led a 24-person delegation of leaders from the World Evangelical Alliance for an historic official meeting. During each encounter I recognised his warmth, authenticity, sense of humour and depth of spirituality. This only confirmed what I was told by our Evangelical colleagues from Argentina who know Pope Francis well from the time when he was still Cardinal Bergoglio.

The theme of our engagement was a “new era in Evangelical Catholic relations”. Some have wondered if I was making some sort of predictive announcement about this new relationship. The truth of the matter is that I was simply stating a picture of the reality around most of the world. While there are some ongoing tensions, this new era is an acknowledgement that there are many localised partnerships between Catholics and Evangelicals, which are developing into large-scale collaborations in response to tragic social problems.

For example, we know that in many cities around the world, Evangelical and Roman Catholic Christians are cooperating to respond to human trafficking, while at the same time Evangelical and Catholic scholars and activists have begun collaborating to analyse and respond to the terrible problems of religious persecution. We know that Evangelicals and Catholics have worked together for many years in numerous crisis pregnancy centres, we have made joint representations to governments and legal bodies on issues of shared concern, and around the globe we serve together as witnesses for the fullness of life offered to us freely by Jesus.

We now have the opportunity to develop these wonderful initiatives into something larger, increasing both the range of social problems to which we respond, and our level of joint global response. For example, we are terribly worried (and know we must take further action) about the many refugees from the fighting in Iraq and Syria, many of whom are praying to our Heavenly Father for help. We have to be the giving hands of Jesus together. The recently launched “Cradle of Christianity Initiative” is one joint expression through which we can share our concern for those who are facing great peril. At the same time, Christians have to work together on the frightening issue of nuclear weapons before another Cold War brings humanity to the brink of disaster.

During my speech I proposed a new level and quality of public discussion of our core beliefs, including both areas where we agree and areas where we have differences, so that together we might be enabled by the Spirit to find ways to share the love, peace and justice that we have in Jesus with a

world suffering from hatred and wars. This proposal was warmly received by Pope Francis and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

In all the 160 years of history of the World Evangelical Alliance there had never been such a meeting like was held last week. History will determine the impact of such a gathering. But I am hopeful.

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