

## Working as one is the route to survival

**Raymond McCullough** says that Catholics and Protestants must come together, despite their differences, to evangelise an increasingly non-believing world

**W**HEN I was a teenager — more than 20 years ago — I was not what you would call an ardent soccer fan, but I did go to Windsor Park, Belfast, every spring to watch Northern Ireland play in the home international matches. The result was almost invariably the same: the Irish team would play brilliantly but would lose 1-0 due to some slip-up in defence early on in the game.

Watching the behaviour of the church in Ireland in recent years, I get a distinct feeling of *déjà vu*. We spend more time scoring own goals than successfully attacking the "opposition". Firstly, we had the Bishop Casey case. And recently, we have had not one but a series of paedophile and sex abuse cases, which have sent severe shock waves through the church, State and judiciary.

So why should I worry? Born a northern Protestant, should I not be gloating and saying: "I told you so." Well, no, actually. If we see the church as God sees it, then, like Him, we must become "colour blind" to denominational differences. When one member suffers,

the whole body suffers.

The church is depicted as the "body of Christ" and Jesus himself said: "He who has seen Me has seen the Father." But when we look at our churches — Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican, Evangelical, Pentecostal — we see only part of the body. In Kipling's story of blind men feeling different parts of an elephant, each gets a different — but distorted — picture. When we look at one denomination, we see only one piece. We only see the whole picture when we bring all the pieces together.

Since the Catholic and Protestant churches separated, each has tried to distance itself from the other — Protestants avoid anything that may seem too Catholic, and Catholics avoid anything which seems too Protestant or evangelical.

In so doing we have divided the body of Christ and totally distorted the image of God presented to the non-believing world, which is increasingly all around us. We have effectively painted ourselves into a corner.

Official ecumenical get-togethers are not the solution. A deep wound

cannot be healed by simply stitching together the surface skin — underneath the flesh will fester and the wound will eventually burst open again. What is required is a coming together of hearts, of true believers who realise that no one church can represent all of Jesus Christ.

Burying our heads in the sand will not solve anything. Let's face it — the Catholic Church in Ireland is in real trouble. In parts of the greater Dublin area, only 5 to 10 per cent now attend Mass. One Dublin priest remarked to a friend of mine: "If you can get these people interested in God, more power to you. We've given up. If they put money in the offering, that's about all we can hope for."

Some 18 months ago I organised a trip involving Christians from both Protestant and Catholic traditions. We travelled around the south of Ireland presenting the Gospel in the form of music, drama and dance — performing on the streets, in shopping centres and at the *Feile '93* rock festival, and communicating mainly with the 15-30 age group. Out of many hundreds of people we talked to, we met only six practising Catholics. Most of these young people did not know what Christianity — in any form — represented.

About 100,000 people attended *Feile '93* — most were drunk or stoned for most of the weekend. At the festival were drug dealers, fortune tellers, New Age evangelists, Hare Krishnas with a marquee, rock band and free food, and — including six of us — a total of 21 Christians, presenting an answer to those searching through drink, drugs, sex and music. Young people were hungry for the truth, but where were the Catholic Church, the Presbyterians and all the other churches?

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The Presbyterian has pointed out to me that the Jehovah's Witnesses have nearly 600 full and part-time people actively seeking members in the Republic, while the Presbyterian Church — Ireland's largest Protestant denomination — has six. And this at a time when Muslims now have three mosques in Ireland and New Age "worship centres" are springing up from Kerry to Donegal.

In a few years this country of ours may no longer be a Christian "land of saints and scholars".

Is there any hope for the church — Catholic or non-Catholic? Isaiah says: "When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Lord will raise up a standard against him."

But we need to work together in a joint effort. The charismatic movement in the 1970s began well, and influenced many, but since then it has often become swallowed up by those whose ambitions were for a Catholics-only set-up. Many became frustrated and formed evangelical "house churches".

Two years ago some lay Catholics published a document entitled *What is an Evangelical Catholic?* in order to provide a bridge between "born-again" Catholics and evangelical Protestants.

**C**HARLES Whitehead, an English "evangelical Catholic", has experienced co-operation in evangelism between Catholic and Protestant churches in England. Speaking in Dublin two years ago, he said: "Evangelism is *not* in the heart and mind of the average Roman Catholic, but is usually thought of as a specialist job — with Protestant overtones. Catholicism teaches that evangelism is at the heart of the work of the church. The Roman Catholic Church is moving fast into evangelism, but response in the pews is slower."

Religious orders and lay Catholics have been much quicker to respond to renewal than parish priests, who would have to relinquish some of that long and dearly-held power — which, in any case, is now fast disintegrating. If the church is to survive it must change — we must act as one army. Imagine the result of the Gulf War if the allies had decided not to bother with a joint command. Let us not fear one another, but unite to win that final victory.

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