

Catholic scholar apologizes to Pentecostals

Citing 'intolerance' on behalf of Roman Catholics, Kilian McDonnell's statement seeks to heal a painful rift

A leading Roman Catholic scholar has apologized for the church's rift with the Pentecostal movement. Kilian McDonnell, a recognized Catholic authority on charismatic issues, said that Catholics had treated Pentecostals with arrogance, "leading to intolerance, discrimination and exclusion."

In a statement to the Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS) in Kirkland, Wash., last month, the president of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research said that "Catholics have lived in culpable ignorance of what Pentecostals believe and have misrepresented them, promoting Pentecostal stereotypes."

McDonnell said that he was speaking personally, prompted by Pope John Paul II's earlier confession of the sins Catholics had committed during the last millennium, but that he believed he was "led by the Spirit to confess the sins that Roman Catholics have committed against classical Pentecostals."

"We have employed methods of evangelization not in keeping with the gospel, using the state to harass and oppress Pentecostals," he told SPS attendees. "When we were in the majority, we deprived Pentecostals of their civil rights. Many Catholics have identified all Pentecostal churches as 'sects,' thus demeaning them."

McDonnell added that many Catholics had "failed to recognize

the true ecclesial and sanctifying elements in Pentecostal churches” and “not received with gratitude the gifts and spirituality they offer.”

McDonnell’s individual apology carries weight because of his years of respected involvement with Catholic-Pentecostal issues. A founding member of the SPS, he was also until recently co-chair of the International Dialog of Classical Pentecostals and Roman Catholics, a Vatican appointment.

A Benedictine monk and priest, he also has served for several years as the theological advisory to the United States Bishops Committee on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal.

McDonnell said his statement had been met “for the most part with a sort of stunned silence” but that later many people had thanked him.

“One man said, ‘I had been a missionary in some Latin American country for 17 years, and you can’t imagine what this means to me.’” One Catholic bishop who heard of the confession “expressed very positive approval,” he added.

McDonnell’s statement was “very moving,” said founder Vinson Synan, dean of the School of Divinity at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Va., who is an authority on Pentecostal and charismatic history. “Everyone wished that we could have responded to him in a similar way, but he said he did not want us to do that.”

Synan said he thought the statement could be very helpful in places like Latin America and Italy, where there is little dialogue between Catholics and Pentecostals.

“Many Pentecostals have been persecuted, and this would be very meaningful to them,” Synan said, adding that the move toward reconciliation is part of what God is doing “across all lines—gender, racial and denominational.”