

## Five Hundred Years of Misunderstanding (April 16, 2017)

The heart has its reasons, says Pascal, and sometimes those reasons have a long history.

Recently I signed a card for a friend, a devout Baptist, who was raised to have a suspicion of Roman Catholics. It's something he still struggles with; but, don't we all! History eventually infects our DNA. Who of us is entirely free from suspicion of what's religiously different from us? And what's the cure? Personal contact, friendship, and theological dialogue with those of other denominations and other faiths does help open our minds and hearts, but the fruit of centuries of bitter misunderstanding doesn't disappear so easily, especially when it's institutionally entrenched and nurtured as a prophetic protection of God and truth. And so in regards to Christians of other denominations there remains in most of us an emotional dis-ease, an inability to see the other fully as one of our own.

And so in signing this card for my separated Christian friend, I wrote: "To a fellow Christian, a brother in the Body of Christ, a good friend, from whom I'm separated by 500 years of misunderstanding."

Five hundred years of misunderstanding, of separation, of suspicion, of defensiveness, that's not something that's easily overcome, especially when at its core there sit issues about God, truth, and religion. Granted, there has been much positive progress made in the past fifty years and many of the original, more-blatant misunderstandings have been overcome. But the effects of the historical break with Christianity and the reaction to it are present today and are still seen everywhere, from high church offices, to debates within the academy of theology, to suspicions inside the popular mind.

Sad how we've focused so much on our differences, when at the center, at the heart, we share the same essential faith, the same essential beliefs, the same basic moral codes, the same Scriptures, the same belief in afterlife, and the same fundamental tenet that intimacy with Jesus Christ is the aim of our faith. As well, not insignificantly, today we also share the same prejudices and biases against us, whether these come from fundamentalists within other religions or whether these come from over-zealous, over-secularized, post-Christians within our own society. To someone looking at us from the outside we, all the different Christian denominations, look like a monolith, one faith, one church, a single religion, our differences far overshadowed by our commonality. Sadly we tend not to see ourselves like this from within, where our differences, more often than not based upon a misunderstanding, are seen to dwarf our common discipleship.

Yet, the Epistle to the Ephesians tells us that, as Christians, we share one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all of us. At its most essential level, that's true of all of us as Christians, despite our denominational differences. We are one at our core.

Granted, there are some real differences among us, mostly though in terms of how we understand certain aspects of the church and certain issues within morality, rather than on how we understand the deeper truths about the nature of God, the divinity of Christ, the gift of God's Word, the gift of the Eucharist, and the inalienable dignity and destiny of all human beings. Within the hierarchy of truth this essential core is what's most important, and on this essential core we essentially agree. That's the real basis of our common discipleship.

Ecclesially, the issues that divide us focus mostly on church authority, on ordination to ministry, on whether to emphasize word or sacrament, on how to understand the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, on the number of sacraments, on the place of sacramentals and devotions within discipleship, and on how scripture and tradition interplay with each other. In terms of moral issues, the issues that divide us are also the "red button" issues within our society as a whole: abortion, gay marriage, birth control, and the place of social justice within discipleship. But, even on these, there's more commonality than difference among the churches.

Moreover, today, the differences on how we understand many of the ecclesial and moral issues that divide us are more temperamental than denominational, that is, they tend to be more a question of one's theology than of one's denominational affiliation. Granted, classical denominational theology still plays in, but the divisions today regarding how we see certain ecclesial and moral issues, be that ordination, gay marriage, abortion, or social justice, are less a tension between Roman Catholics and Protestants (and Evangelicals) than they are between those who lean temperamentally and theologically in one direction rather than the other. It's perhaps too simplistic to draw this up in terms of liberal versus conservative, but this much at least is true, the fault-line on these issues today is becoming less and less denominational.

The earliest Christian Creed had but a single line: Jesus is Lord! All Christians still agree on that and so we remain brothers and sisters, separated only by five hundred years of misunderstanding.

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