

*Fr. Perozich comments —*

*After ordination my friendship with the director of interreligious and ecumenical affairs for the diocese brought me to conferences, meetings, and association with faithful Catholics, non Christians, with Protestants, and with dissenting Catholics.*

*The latter were clear on their beliefs. Catholics, for the most part, were shier and less inclined to offer our truth for fear of the reaction of non believers to the saving truths of our Catholic faith.*

*Occasionally a piece of profound wisdom would come out, such as when a Presbyterian minister married to a Jewish woman raised his children as Jewish, whereupon an Episcopalian clergyman piped up, “Does Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior mean nothing to some people?”*

*On another occasion, a priest from the Vatican office of interreligious affairs responded clearly and unabashedly to Jewish calls for us to change our scriptures to suit their beliefs, that what they desired never was going to happen, and how dare they even insist on such a thing.*

*My experience is that Catholics are our own worst enemies for fear of offense.*

*In my master’s thesis, “Pastoring from Fear to Trust”, I quoted Dr. Michael E. Cavanagh, Ph.D.”*

*“The basic psychological fears are the fear that someone will damage our self-concept; that inadvertently or purposefully we shall hurt someone whom we care for or love; or that we will cause ourselves some harm by saying or doing something that is self-defeating.”*

*Francis X. Maier quotes Georges Berranos:*

*[D]ear brothers, many unbelievers are not as hardened as you imagine. Need I remind you that God came in Person to the Jews? . . . [Yet when] we seek him now, in this world, it is you we find, and only you. It is you, Christians, who participate in Divinity; it is you, “divine men,” who ever since his Ascension have been his representatives on earth.”*

*I quote St. Paul:*

*Romans 1:16-17 For I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: for Jew first, and then Greek. For in it is revealed the righteousness of God from faith to faith;\* as it is written, “The one who is righteous by faith will live.”*

*2 Timothy 8: “So do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord,\*nor of me, a prisoner for his sake; but bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God.”*

If Christians believe in the heart what is revealed, the Christian needs to proclaim it on the lips, knowing that many will reject, scoff, deny, including prelates in the church.

The only way to conversion for self and for non believers in the Catholic faith is truth in charity, regardless of how it is accepted. Priests have been canceled by bishops for this, and now bishops by the pope.

You lay people may be canceled by your family and friends, but the duty to speak the truth remains.

*1Peter 3:15 “but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who defame your good conduct in Christ may themselves be put to shame.”*

# The Perils of Ecumenical Straight- Talk

**IN THE SERVICE OF TRUTH**

By David Mills | May 2015

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The attempt to describe to a conservative Protestant the differences between the Catholic Church and his tradition usually ends in one of two ways: He will be your good friend or your enemy. He can become your enemy even when he has asked you to explain the differences, and even when you're careful to ring your description with declarations of the respect and admiration you feel for conservative Protestants. In only a few cases, in my experience, will he respond neutrally, in a way that leaves your relationship unchanged. It's not easy to predict who will react which way. I've found that in almost as many cases the polemicist will remain friendly and the nice guy will get angry. The relation improves in about four cases out of ten, and declines in six, though some people may be better at these discussions than I am and make friends with a higher percentage of the people with whom they talk. What one might call the apostolate of ecumenical clarification is a risky enterprise.

Once in a while, a Protestant will even try to convince you that you don't understand Catholicism, that it's either laxer or more rigid than you suppose. A friend, an Episcopal theologian, once explained to me that Joseph Ratzinger believed that Anglicanism was a church just like the Catholic Church. He had badly misread some of the cardinal's books. I tried to explain, pointing him to *Dominus Iesus* and other sources, and he told me I was imposing my own fundamentalism upon the liberal-minded Ratzinger.

To be clear, I'm speaking of explanation, not polemics or evangelization. Over the years since I entered the Catholic Church, I have felt, because of my personal history and my continuing friendships with conservative Protestants, a calling to explain each side to the other, making clear who believes what, how they agree, and how they differ. **Friendships are easier and ecumenical relations advance when both sides say what they mean and look honestly not only at their**

**agreements but at their differences.** We know Christians are divided. We ought to know with some precision how they're divided and why.

Many Christians like to say, "The things that bind us are greater than the things that divide us," which, though generally true, doesn't help when one Christian has to say to another, "You can't receive communion here," or "Even though you were baptized as an infant, you have to be baptized again." It doesn't help when conservative Christians have an agreeable discussion about the problem of homosexual "marriage" and the talk turns to the nature of marriage itself and the intrinsic need to be open to life. Piping up with "The things that bind us are greater than the things that divide us" does not keep the room from chilling when one side in effect says to the other, "Your wife shouldn't be on the Pill," or, from the other side, "You should be more careful not to have more children."

The same Christians will often say something like "We are united in Christ, not doctrine," or "polity is secondary to faith," claims that have just enough truth in them to confuse the conversation. The speakers don't realize that their formulations propose certain ecclesiological commitments the Catholic can't grant. Explaining why the Catholic can't accept such an apparent truism can be very difficult.

In almost every case, explaining the differences risks offending people you don't mean to offend. I have heard someone make the wildest charge against the Catholic Church as if he were commenting on the weather and then react like a cat being forced into a bath when I merely observed, "Protestants believe this and Catholics believe that." It's a dumbfounding experience to have turned the other cheek and then be accused of starting the fight.

There is a great deal of prejudice to be overcome — and to be fair, from Catholics as well as Protestants. Years ago, when I was still an Episcopalian, a conservative Presbyterian and I were lamenting the barriers to improved relations between Christians. I

made fun of some old book that claimed that tunnels ran between the Vatican and nearby convents so that priests and nuns could have orgies hidden from the world. My friend said quite seriously, “Well, that’s true.” He didn’t say it was true; he said it is true. No, it isn’t, I replied. He was not to be dissuaded. We were talking during the papacy of John Paul II, whom he liked a great deal but seemed to think was presiding over a massive sex party. He turned out to believe a lot of stories like that one.

Let me tell a story of the problems with this work of ecumenical clarification. A few years ago, in *The American Spectator*, one of the major politically conservative magazines, the English writer Jonathan Aitken praised the late Carlo Cardinal Martini for demanding a “transformation” of the Catholic Church “that included an overhaul on the Church’s line on birth control, clergy celibacy, divorce, remarried couples, and gay relationships.” As a “counterweight to papal conservatism,” Martini was, according to Aitken, “the best modern pope we never had.”

I was surprised. Aitken is an evangelical Anglican and political conservative (he’d been a Tory member of Parliament for twenty-four years). He’s written admiring biographies of the evangelical hero John Newton, the slave trader turned minister who wrote “Amazing Grace,” and of Nixon aide turned conservative leader Charles Colson. Aitken is not a man I would have expected to laud Cardinal Martini as the man who should have been pope. A Catholic reader would naturally ask why a conservative Protestant would praise a liberal Catholic and prefer him to Pope Benedict XVI as head of the Catholic Church. It was like opening the newspaper to find Rand Paul praising President Obama as an exemplar of free-market principles.

A natural response, but only because we forget that “conservatism” as it applies to evangelicals has to be understood in relation to modern Protestantism. The two poles of the Protestant and Catholic spectrums don’t line up side by side. They

and we agree on some social issues now being debated, and indeed Protestants form a kind of moral minority with Catholics on most. That's a very good thing, but it does obscure the differences.

I wrote a short article on the First Things website pointing out that mainstream evangelicals generally agree with Catholic dissenters on three of the four issues Aitken discussed — contraception, clerical celibacy, and remarriage after divorce — while, with some exceptions like Aitken, disagreeing with Catholic dissenters about homosexuality. The evangelical is conservative with respect to liberal Protestantism but not with respect to the Catholic Church's developed tradition.

Aitken's selection of issues on which he believes the Catholic Church is wrong, I wrote, suggests that he is, "like so many of his peers among conservative Protestants," theologically or at least morally "closest aligned with liberal Catholics." Indeed, he and his peers "in a sense are liberal Catholics at one remove." Provocatively put, I realize, but essentially a description of observable facts. How they came to agree and why they agree, and what that agreement means, were matters I did not address.

A few readers commented on the website and a few others to me directly. The most critical response on the website came from a European evangelical who argued that Aitken was not an evangelical precisely because he took these positions. I responded that, though his views on homosexuality were to the left of the great majority of evangelicals, from what I had been told he identifies with and was identified by conservative Anglicans in England as one of their own. There was a reason the biographies he wrote were of Newton and Colson. One can impose a definition of conservative Anglican that excludes people who hold such positions, but the reality is that most of those people are members in good standing of that movement.

One reader who wrote me directly, a conservative Protestant academic and a very smart man, who had been a colleague in

some of First Things's enterprises (I was then executive editor), was not pleased. My claims, he said in a short but heated note, "seem to be so glib as to be unfair caricature."

I knew him slightly and thought this a broken fence I ought to repair. I didn't think I'd said anything untrue, I wrote. I taught for fifteen years at an evangelical Episcopal seminary — one founded with the help of people like John Stott and J.I. Packer, both patriarchs of world evangelicalism and the latter a friend — and it is a world I know well, made up of many friends and other people I admire.

On the four points Aitken mentioned — contraception, clerical celibacy, remarriage after divorce, and homosexuality — all but one of my former colleagues agreed with liberal Catholics on the first, all agreed with liberal Catholics on the second, and all but one (a different one from the first) agreed with liberal Catholics on the third. I'm fairly certain Stott himself would have agreed with liberal Catholics on all three. A few were quite polemically anti-Catholic on all of them. This would likely be true, I'm sure, if one were to poll the editors of Christianity Today or the faculties of Fuller, Westminster, Gordon-Conwell, or any other of the flagship evangelical seminaries.

Though the faculty at my former seminary is still solidly in favor of the traditional evangelical teaching about homosexuality, some people involved with the seminary have begun to bend on it. A goodly number of men who were solid evangelicals back when I was there have, in the fourteen years since, shifted to the pro-gay-marriage side. Episcopal evangelicals may be a peculiar type and unrepresentative, but several friends from the wider evangelical world, who have some weight in that world, have told me gloomily that they expect the major evangelical organs and institutions to support homosexual "marriage" within ten years. One said, seriously, within five.

In the case of the fourth issue in the list, homosexuality, I was specifically talking in my article about Aitken and his peers,

who are a subset of evangelicals. I thought I'd made that clear, but maybe I didn't make it clear enough. Even if they're outliers — and I suspect, as do many evangelical friends, that they're more an advance guard than eccentrics — on three of the four issues Aitken mentions, mainstream American evangelicals agree with dissenting Catholics and reject magisterial Catholic teaching.

I hadn't thought this observation controversial before getting the testy message from my Protestant colleague. I didn't, and don't, see why a Protestant should think it insulting to be told that he agrees with liberal Catholics on contraception, clerical celibacy, and remarriage after divorce when he agrees with liberal Catholics on contraception, clerical celibacy, and remarriage after divorce. He thinks he's right about these things and that the Catholic teaching is wrong — and wrong in a way that hurts people. He thinks the Catholic Church very wrong on several fundamental dogmatic matters, so he's likely to think her wrong on several moral matters. The first he declares proudly. The second, at least in the case of my colleague, he denies hotly.

Why should he mind that this puts him in agreement with liberal Catholics? He should be pleased that at least some Catholics have begun to see that the Church is wrong (or so he thinks) about these matters, and he should know that, by definition, these Catholics are considered dissenters (a.k.a. liberals). His views of the papacy, the Magisterium, the Mass, tradition, and a host of other matters align with the views of the more radical Catholics, so why should it be a big deal if they agree about homosexuality? The conservative Protestant should be proud that he agrees with today's Catholic dissenters, or rather, since Protestantism got there first, he should be proud that some Catholics have finally come to agree with him.

I tried to make my response as irenic as I could without bending on anything I thought true. I explained that obedient Catholics expect people like him to disagree with us. We are not insulting Baptists, Presbyterians, or Lutherans by assuming that



they are faithful to their traditions. What we find annoying are the Catholics who disagree with Catholic teaching. I don't think I was saying anything to which an evangelical should take offense.

Possibly I was not as irenic as I intended to be, but I would have thought that a well-meant extending of an olive branch would prompt the extending of an olive branch in return. But no. "I now understand," wrote my evangelical academic, after a sarcastic opening to his letter, "that you hold all 'dissenters' from Rome as an undifferentiated mass — no matter the grounds for that dissent. I would have thought that someone who boasts of your experience would have a more nimble view of the matter. I now know better." A man who parsed fine intellectual distinctions for a living, he ignored all the distinctions I made and reacted as if I'd spray-painted "Protestantism is stupid" on the side of his church.

Maybe I should have given up, but I think a Christian is required to make an attempt to respond to an insult, and I have found that many people who responded angrily quickly regret it, and when given the chance, jump to restore the friendship. The gentle answer often turns away wrath and seems to help people listen more carefully than they had before. They don't change their minds about the issue at hand but they do change their minds about you.

I protested that his summary ("undifferentiated mass, no matter what the grounds") wasn't a fair interpretation of what I'd written. I hadn't touched on the grounds for disagreement, which varies from person to person. My evangelical friends believe their view is more biblical, more Christian, and therefore kinder than the Catholic view. I wasn't blaming them for agreeing with dissenting Catholics. I bear them no ill will for being Protestants, though I was implicitly criticizing dissenting Catholics for being like Protestants. I think the question of motive is important — J.I. Packer is not Charles Curran, Hans Küng, or Daniel Maguire, though he does agree with them on these matters — but in my

article I was simply commenting on the observable facts in the service of a better mapping out of the state of Christianity today.

This explanation did no good. His next response was as angry and ad hominem as the first. We did not just disagree; I was a bad person. At this point, I dropped the correspondence and hoped he would have calmed down by the next time we met.

This is one example, harsher than most, of what can happen when you try to lay out the differences between Christians. You may intend only to clarify the differences, and therefore the agreements, because your Protestant friends matter to you, or because you hope for greater unity among Christians, or simply because you think knowing who's who and what's what worthwhile in itself. However reasonable your motives, you will often find yourself in an argument that may well end badly.

Given the claims people have made in these arguments, I think the reason for their reaction is they feel that a Catholic who describes differences is criticizing them for disagreeing with Catholic teaching. They feel judged or attacked, or perhaps just proselytized. It's the kind of quick irritable reaction one could take as revealing a feeling of inferiority that doesn't like being awoken, or a feeling of superiority that finds criticism presumptuous. They often have a story of an unpleasant encounter with a Catholic apologist, and I'm sure many of the accounts are true, which explains their touchiness.

**The apostolate of ecumenical clarification requires a willingness to displease your friends and risk making enemies of them — or rather, a willingness to see friends make themselves into enemies.** This can happen even, as I said, when they brought up the subject. It can happen when you've simply sent them quotes from the Catechism of the Catholic Church without comment. You find yourself accused of being unkind or (this is a favorite charge) "triumphalist." And enemies they will probably remain, unless a mutual friend

intervenes or you meet in some place that lets you overcome the antagonism.

As long as they remain enemies, they will, as I know from experience, criticize you to others and in a way that exaggerates your alleged aggression. The costs make one think twice about the work, but it is a necessary one, for the good of the Church, so that Catholics know better where they differ with their separated brethren, and for the good of the separated ecclesial communities, who even for their own purposes should better understand the matters that divide them from the Catholic Church. It's a necessary ecumenical work, for Christian unity will only be found by those who recognize the differences, which many good-willed people do not recognize.