

Making peace for peacemaking

by Margaret O'Gara

Photo submitted



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This article was first given as a talk in August 2004 at Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, at the meeting of Bridgefolk, a movement of Mennonites and Roman Catholics who seek to learn from each others' traditions of peacemaking and prayer.

Last year marked the publication of an historic agreement between two church communions that have been deeply estranged ever since the Protestant Reformation. Mennonites and Roman Catholics clashed in the sixteenth century, but 450 years later, they have announced their common vocation to peacemaking.

In a surprising and carefully written report, members of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference testify that they are "Called Together To Be Peacemakers" (available at www.bridgefolk.net/called-together.htm).

The writers readily acknowledge the historic significance of their statement, noting that rupture and separation began the relationship—or lack of relationship—between Roman Catholics and Mennonites in the sixteenth century. Mennonites are raised with the painful memory of many of their forebears who were martyred by Catholics in league with sixteenth century governments. "Since then, from the sixteenth century to the present, theological polemics have persistently nourished negative images and narrow stereotypes of each other," they acknowledge. So the very fact of an agreement is a significant accomplishment.

The agreed statement is not grudging or minimal. On the contrary, it probes carefully into early Christian history and the Reformation era, as well as discussing the church, the sacraments and the approach of each church

communion to peace and violence. The writers were frank in signalling areas of unresolved differences or disagreements, but they also indicate a striking number of agreements—many probably for the first time in a Roman Catholic-Mennonite conversation.

Four areas of convergence are especially striking.

Creating a shared new memory

First, the writers reread certain periods of church history together in an atmosphere of openness that participants say has been "invaluable." Openness allowed a broader view of Christian history and counteracted the loss of perspective resulting from centuries of separation. Participants write, "Our common rereading of the history of the church will hopefully contribute to the development of a common interpretation of the past. This can lead to a shared new memory and understanding. In turn, a shared new memory can free us from the prison of the past."

Participants explain that memories must be purified before they can be healed. "This involves facing those difficult events of the past that give rise to divergent interpretations of what happened and why," they explain. So the agreement sets out to examine the situation of Western Europe on the eve of the Reformation.

Emphasizing the complexity of this period, it notes that "church life and piety were flourishing" with an abundance of good preaching, vernacular translations of the Bible, lay religious movements, and movements of reform. The facts about the rupture between Anabaptists (the forebears of Mennonites) and Roman Catholics are reviewed, and different images of each other are acknowledged.

While "Catholics never suffered any persecution at the hands of the Mennonites," they have known persecution, says the statement. But Mennonites are unique, since they were persecuted but they did not persecute any group. "The danger of persecution and martyrdom became a part of the Mennonite identity" the statement recognizes.

The statement also studies the way Roman Catholics and Mennonites think about two earlier periods in church history: the Constantinian era and the medieval period. Because Roman Catholics and Mennonites have different views of these earlier periods, they affect the self-understanding of each church communion and its view of the other.

Ordinances and sacraments

A second part of the agreed statement is its discussion of ordinances and sacraments. While Mennonites speak of "ordinances" and Roman Catholics of "sacraments," the Mennonite description of the way ordinances are understood to work sounds very familiar to Roman Catholic ears accustomed to sacramental talk.

In particular, the statement is creative in emphasizing that Mennonites experience ordinances, not only as signs, but as effective signs. The statement notes, "Mennonite confessional statements as well as centuries of practice suggest that baptism is understood not only as a sign that points beyond the baptismal ritual to its historical and spiritual significance, but that in and through baptism, the individual and the community of faith undergo effectual change."

Mennonite confessional documents reveal "the expectation of transformation" through participation in baptism. Again, while emphasizing that

Mennonites understand their celebration of the Lord's Supper as "a memorial and a sign," the statement notes, "Mennonite confessions of faith do not dismiss the effectual power of the ordinance to bring change to the participants and to the community of faith." Roman Catholics can feel quite at home with all this talk about the "effects" of baptism and *Eucharist*, a point often emphasized in Catholic sacramental theology.

The issue of peace and war

Third, I think the presentation of the Roman Catholic position on peace will find a particular welcome among Mennonites, for whom the nonresistance to violence has played an identity-shaping role. The statement presents recent Roman Catholic teaching on war and peace in quite an exciting way. It uses a broad perspective to describe Catholic teaching, discussing the social vision of the church, religious freedom, peacemaking and the call of all Christians to holiness.

Within the discussion of peacemaking, the statement notes the new attitude in Catholic discussions of peace and war, arguing that the Catholic tradition "has increasingly endorsed the superiority of nonviolent means and is suspect of the use of force in a culture of death." Even in the Catholic teaching about just war, the "criteria have grown more stringent in recent years, insisting that the function of the Just War Tradition is to prevent and limit war, not just legitimate it." It continues, "The Just War today should be understood as part of a broad Catholic theology of peace applicable only to exceptional cases."

In both of these last two cases—sacraments/ordinances and the issue

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of peace and war—I see fruits of the dialogue. One tradition has pushed the other to recover aspects of itself that had been neglected or underdeveloped. This is truly the "exchange of gifts" Pope John Paul II called for in his encyclical on ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint*.

Finding healing through mutual forgiveness

Fourth, the statement ends in a spirit of repentance where each church communion asks forgiveness for sins and failings of their community toward the other. The Roman Catholic writers made a wise choice, I think, by not speaking alone but echoing the official apologies of the whole Roman Catholic Church made on the Day of Pardon at the time of the millennium.

During those prayers, Pope John Paul II led Roman Catholics in confessing sins committed in the service of truth where Christians have used methods "not in keeping with the Gospel" to defend the truth, and "sins which have rent the unity of the body of Christ." The Roman Catholic dialogue members echo the pope's words from that service of repentance: "Have mercy on your sinful children and accept our resolve to seek and promote truth in the gentleness of charity, in the firm knowledge that truth can prevail only in virtue of truth itself."

Mennonites, for their part, confess that they "have frequently failed to demonstrate love towards Catholics" and have "thoughtlessly perpetuated hostile images and false stereotypes of Catholics and of the Catholic Church."

Finally, there is one area where I would suggest that the Roman Catholic writers could have gone further in probing and presenting their own position.

While Roman Catholic teaching on the relationship between Scripture and tradition is correctly presented, its

implications are not fully drawn.

Roman Catholics agree with Mennonites that the Scriptures are the highest authority for the faith and life of the church. But Roman Catholics add that tradition is indispensable for the interpretation of the Scriptures, while Mennonites say that the church needs "to test and correct its doctrine and practice in the light of Scripture itself." Mennonites hold that "tradition is valued, yet it can be altered or even reversed, since it is subject to the critique of Scripture."

But the suggestion of a contrast here is somewhat misleading. In fact, there are different levels or kinds of tradition within Roman Catholic life and teaching. Roman Catholics also test their teaching by the light of the Scripture. The agreement itself mentions examples in the Roman Catholic tradition where teachings are being altered or reversed.

On nonviolence and the just war theory, for example, Roman Catholic tradition shows significant signs of alteration or—I would say—growth; and on religious liberty, Vatican II reversed an earlier Catholic position. The apologies made by John Paul II for a variety of earlier positions and actions by Roman Catholics demonstrate the possibility of some kinds of change within the Catholic tradition.

On the other hand, Roman Catholics believe that central teachings like the divinity and humanity of Christ are not changeable, although their formulation could be altered as the church enters different times and cultures. Such central teachings are a defense and translation of the biblical faith, and not really an addition to the same faith which both Catholics and Mennonites believe is tested by the Scripture.

The agreed statement missed an opportunity to clarify how Roman Catholics distinguish between

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changeable and unchangeable teachings. Such a clarification would have actually shown the fuller implications of the agreement itself, which explores such distinctions without naming them.

But this just shows that the dialogue has not ended; in fact, it has

barely begun. This first step shows real promise for the future. As Mennonites and Roman Catholics begin to make peace between themselves, they take a step toward becoming peacemakers together.

Looking ahead

In the Advent 2005 issue, we feature these stories:

- ◆ "You know the Spirit, because the Spirit abides in you" (John 14)...reflections on tracing the Spirit by pastoral theologian, author and retreat leader James D. Whitehead.
- ◆ Exploring the common Christian spirituality that informs Benedictine monastic and oblate life by Reverend Maxwell E. Johnson, professor of liturgical studies, department of theology, University of Notre Dame.
- ◆ Spiritual community feeds personal yearning by Dean Ryerson, member of Community of Benedict, Saint Benedict Center.



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