

1.

A Catholic Testimony about Southern Baptists

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Most mainline Christian denominations seem more strongly moved by the Holy Spirit today than in the past to respond to what St. Paul wrote in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: “It was God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on his reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18–19). More attention also has been given to the importance of Christ’s prayer for unity among his disciples as found in the seventeenth chapter of John’s Gospel.

Especially in the past twenty years, many religious dialogues have developed and are still in progress. These have prompted various Christian denominations to talk with mutual respect about what they hold in common and to try to understand better their distinctive differences in faith, worship, church polity, and history. Warm friendships and harmonious interdenominational cooperation in rendering human and social services on the local and foreign mission levels have also resulted. Certainly, God must be pleased. Christian charity has reached a new level in our day.

Because I have been personally involved in some of these activities with Southern Baptists, I feel comfortable in giving “A Catholic Testimony about Southern Baptists.”

First of all, I must say that I grew up in a small middle Tennessee town, Lawrenceburg. There Baptists were the large majority. Catholics were the smallest in number. Baptists were my neighbors and friends. Yet in those days of the 1920s and 30s there was seldom any sharing about one’s faith with each other.

About the only time we entered the others' house of worship was to attend a neighbor's funeral or perhaps a friend's church wedding. These were rather uncomfortable experiences because neither knew how to act. Baptists had inaccurate notions about Catholics and Catholics about Baptists. Gradually, this has improved in some places—but not all.

My earliest experience in becoming better acquainted with Baptist faith and worship began when I entered Lawrence County High School in 1933. My homeroom teacher was a Baptist minister, Brother Thornberry. He was a good and kind man, respectful of Catholics. At that time, chapel devotions were held occasionally. In these, I learned of the strong emphasis Baptists place on reading the Bible and on spontaneous prayer. In our Catholic Sunday worship, selections of Scripture were always proclaimed, but little or no time was devoted to spontaneous prayer. Today, Catholics devote much more time to private and group reading and study of the Bible as well as to spontaneous prayer. I, as a child, unlike Baptists, did not memorize Bible passages, but instead I memorized answers to questions on faith, worship, and moral principles for living a Catholic Christian life as presented in graded catechisms on Catholic faith and practice.

Baptists always have put a lot of emphasis on congregational singing. Today, especially since the Second Vatican Council, Catholics give more attention to congregational singing, and we have better-trained church musicians and choirs. This has helped Catholics and Baptists to share more comfortably in one another's worship.

The Second Vatican Council's "Decree on Ecumenism" in 1964 and the "Declaration on Religious Liberty" in 1965 prepared and motivated Catholics to dialogue with other religious communions and to accept them with respect and affection. The "Decree on Ecumenism" stated that Catholics should not forget that anything "wrought by the Spirit in the hearts of our separated brethren can contribute to our own edification" (1, 4).

These two documents moved Catholics on many levels to begin dialogues and friendly religious encounters with many other Christians especially. But these were slow to start between Catholics and Southern Baptists. A real breakthrough began in 1969

with conversations between some Baptists at Wake Forest University and Catholics at Belmont Benedictine Abbey. These were carried on under the auspices of what was called the Ecumenical Institute. I had the privilege of being a participant in some of the Institute's later sessions. From these, there originated some regional meetings between Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics in the early and middle 1970s. These encounters gave me as well as other Catholic clergy and laity a better acquaintance and understanding of Southern Baptists and them of us. We even held in Nashville a trilogy made up of Jews, Roman Catholics, and Southern Baptists. All of this helped me personally to become more familiar with Southern Baptist faith and worship and with Baptist attitudes toward social and political life in our country.

But my greatest acquaintance, understanding, and friendship toward Southern Baptists came from my participation in a Southern Baptist/Roman Catholic Scholars' Dialogue which began in 1978 and has continued to the present. It has been on a national level between scholars of our two religious communions selected and supported by the Department of Interfaith Witness of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenism and Interreligious Affairs of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

In our scholars' dialogue, I have been deeply impressed by the dedicated scholarship and the sincere faith of our Southern Baptist colleagues as well as that of those of my own Catholic faith.

Through our dialogue, I have come to understand and appreciate the strong faith of Southern Baptists in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. This has encouraged me to intensify my own personal commitment to Christ. This personal relationship to and with Christ is the most important thing we hold and share in common with each other. Southern Baptists renew their commitment in week-long religious experiences called a revival. Catholics have traditionally done so in what is called a parish mission. In recent times, Catholics have come up with many spiritual renewal processes in which they renew faith in Christ as the central reality in their life in solidarity with their Church, such as the Cursillo and others.

Southern Baptists have edified Catholics by their sincere reverence for the Bible as the inspired Word of God and as the sole rule of their faith. This gives us much to talk about, especially today when Catholics are placing much more emphasis on Bible study and biblical prayer. We differ sharply, however, in that Baptists hold that the believer has complete personal power given by the Holy Spirit to interpret all passages in the Bible for his or her personal life. Catholics, on the other hand, believe that in difficult and controversial meanings of the Bible, the authentic teaching of the Church is to be accepted in their interpretation.

In general, Southern Baptists have a zeal on a personal level for sharing and witnessing about their faith to others. This has irritated Catholics in some instances, but in other instances this has inspired Catholics. Today, Catholics tend with greater ease and zeal to share and witness to others about their faith. Perhaps we can give our Southern Baptist friends at least some credit for the good example they have given us in this regard. It has certainly been a good experience in our scholars' dialogue.

Southern Baptists' personal commitment to tithing of their financial income to the support of their local congregations and home and foreign missions, is lacking among many Catholics. Baptists are a good example to us in this matter. As a whole, Baptists have done a much better job than we in teaching the biblical basis for financial stewardship. Catholics have been giving much more attention to stewardship, especially in the last decade.

In our scholars' dialogue, we have discussed many aspects of our Christian faith and practice in our two religious communions. We have come to see that we have much more in common than we thought beforehand. We have a better understanding of our differences and hold each other in mutual respect and friendship. We must thank God who has blessed our openness and good will towards each other.

During the ten years of our dialogue, we have cherished the time we have spent together in prayer and worship. Real bonds of spiritual unity and friendship have grown strong among us. This was deeply experienced—especially at the death of two of the

participants in our dialogue—Dr. John Steely and Father Jerome Dollard, O.S.B.

Together as Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics, we have shared our deep regrets about various recent human frailties within our two faith communions. We are sharply concerned about internal problems that cause polarization within our respective memberships. But our dialogue has helped us to bear one another's burdens.

Today, those Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics who have entered into serious dialogue and participated in various mutual religious encounters aided by the grace of God have come to have a much better mutual understanding, respect, and growing friendship among themselves. God has blessed our good will and mutual good efforts to heal the wounds caused by the lack of loving respect among us who think of ourselves as the faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

For all that Southern Baptists have done to come closer in Christ to Catholics and Catholics to Southern Baptists has been due to the humble openness of us both to the Holy Spirit. For this, I am thankful. As a Catholic Christian and Bishop, I pray that we shall continue to work together and to seek God's grace in our search for the perfect unity which Jesus of Nazareth prayed might be among all his disciples. Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists need to give ever more serious response to these words of Jesus found in John's Gospel: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

2.

I Am a Debtor

ALAN NEELY

For the past nine years Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic representatives have been engaged in what has been described as a “scholars’ dialogue.” It was my privilege to enter the stream of discussions in the spring of 1982. Despite the fact that during this period one, and to some extent, both of our communions have experienced unprecedented theological upheaval, it has been a time of growing appreciation of and affection for my Roman Catholic brothers and sisters. I shall always value their collegue-ship, their encouragement, their scholarship, and their dedication to the cause of Jesus Christ which have been manifested repeatedly in tangible and striking ways. I am in their debt for our shared love, mutual hope, and united struggle to discern what the Spirit of our Lord is now doing in our world.

During the past twenty-two years, I have participated in numerous ecumenical activities ranging from polite, dignified, formal services of worship to informal, spontaneous meetings for prayer, Bible study, and praise, and to frank, sometimes bare-knuckled theological dialogues. In the fall of 1982, I asked Father Joseph O’Donnell if he would be willing to join me in the writing of two articles—I would write one and he the other—on our respective debts to each other as a Baptist and a Roman Catholic. It was one of those ideas that I nurtured, researched, and wrote a preliminary draft, but never got around to finishing before Joe left the dialogue to assume other responsibilities. These comments therefore represent the completion of reflections that I began more than five years ago.

Let it be noted that I am not presuming to speak for anyone other than myself. These are my thoughts and do not necessarily reflect the feelings or convictions of any other Baptist living or dead. There is no office nor anyone to whom I can go as a Baptist for an imprimatur. I do hope, nonetheless, that many of my fellow Baptists can affirm to some degree that we are indeed indebted to Roman Catholics as well as to others of God's children who have preceded us, challenged us, and influenced us in many ways.

I HAVE A HISTORIC DEBT TO CATHOLIC CHRISTIANS

I have a sense of indebtedness to Catholics for the preservation and transmission of the biblical texts. In an age in which we have access to and the use of microcomputers and word processors, it is often forgotten that for nearly 1500 of the 2000 years of Christian history, there were no word processors, xerox machines, typewriters, or moveable type printing presses. Thus, every word, paragraph, and page of the texts that are now neatly arranged, clearly printed, and sturdily bound as the Bible, originally had to be written, copied, and preserved by hand. There were no electric lights, ballpoint pens, or even easily available pencils (the English made the first graphite pencils in mid-1500s). The work of producing manuscripts of biblical texts was tedious and unimaginably time-consuming. It was, nevertheless, patiently and reverently done in monastery after monastery by monks, some of whom dedicated their lives to being copyists, who reproduced and preserved the priceless manuscripts. After Gutenberg and with the Protestant Reformation, the Bible was more easily available and more widely distributed by Protestants. But until the invention of the movable type printing press (c. 1455), the preservation and transmission of the Bible required letter-by-letter and word-by-word hand printing, work done primarily under the auspices of the Catholic Church.

Moreover, not only did the Church oversee the copying of the texts, but also the early translations of the Scriptures into the vernacular versions were largely the work of the Church: Latin

(4th century), French (12th century), Italian and Spanish (13th century), and German and English (14th century).

Consider, for example, the extraordinary production of Francisco Jimenez de Cisneros, the *Biblia Poliglota Complutense* (the Complutensian Polyglot Bible) published in Spain in 1522. On its exquisite pages Cisneros placed the Hebrew, Latin, and Greek texts side by side, and it has been said by some that all subsequent biblical studies would in a sense be dependent on this monumental effort by Cisneros.

I am indebted to the Catholics for the preservation and transmission of the Bible, but my knowledge of history, especially ecclesiastical history, would be but fragments were it not for the historical records of the church.

Frederick Harrison, a 19th-century historian, posed the following question to his readers: "Suppose," he said, "a race of men whose minds, by a paralytic stroke of fate, had suddenly been deadened to every recollection, to whom the whole world would be new. Can we," he asked, "imagine a condition of such helplessness, confusion, and misery?" I owe an inestimable debt to the church for the recording and preserving of the history of Christianity, for whatever else Christianity is and has become, it is a historical faith. The revelation of God, divine revelation, is self-revelation. God took the initiative in mighty historical acts to reveal himself and his will. I know God not in doctrinal propositions or in theoretical analyses, but in divine action that is the result of God's relationship with his people. And without the work of church historians, not only would we lack the Acts of the Apostles, we would also be bereft of a millennium-and-a-half of God's acts in world history.

I AM INDEBTED TO CATHOLICS FOR BASIC DOCTRINAL FORMATION

Furthermore, I are indebted to the Roman Catholic church for the crystallization and formulation of basic doctrinal definitions. One can only speculate as to the direction and destiny of Christianity had the early errors, excesses, and heresies about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and humanity not been resisted and

thwarted by the councils of Nicea (A.D. 325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451). For had the decisions of these councils not prevailed, Jesus would not be recognized by mainline Christians as the Son of God (Nicea), nor would the Trinitarian Gloria Patri be sung widely.

I say this not to minimize the significant doctrinal differences between Roman Catholics and Protestants, nor among the multiple branches of the non-Catholic communions. The basic framework, however, of Christian belief was agreed upon, and if one is willing to spend the time and to be open-minded, one will find there is far more about which we Christians agree than that about which we differ.

I AM INDEBTED TO CATHOLICS LITURGICALLY

Anyone who has been outside his or her own church, and everyone who has worshiped in a culture other than one's own, is aware that there are wide variations in worship forms and style. This is not altogether different from the way Christians worshiped in the early centuries when variations were allowed. Yet, at the same time, the church did achieve a certain uniformity in the service of worship, certain features of which have been followed throughout history and throughout the world: the reading of the Scriptures—both Old and New Testaments—the saying of prayers, the singing of hymns, the delivery of homilies (sermons), and the administering of the sacraments.

A study of Christian hymnology is especially revealing. Edwin McNeely, who was my professor of church music in seminary, lists and discusses in his *Hymnology* two hundred eighty-nine hymns that were used prior to the Reformation in 1517. As far as I have been able to determine, all of these with few exceptions were Catholic hymns. Baptists should note that the following are Catholic hymns included in two of our most recent Baptist hymnals:

“O Come, All Ye Faithful,” tune *Adeste Fideles*; a Latin hymn by John Francis Wade, c. 1743.

