

CHURCH/ECUMENISM

Topic: Barriers and Bridges: The Challenge of Mormon-Catholic Dialogue

Convener: Thomas P. Rausch, Loyola Marymount University

Moderator: Thomas P. Rausch, Loyola Marymount University

Panelists: Peter Huff, Centenary College

Richard Bushman, Claremont Graduate University

James Massa, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

In the first presentation, “The Mormon-Catholic Moment: Christianity Plus, Ecumenism Plus,” Peter Huff argued that while some evangelicals like Richard Mouw have approached dialogue with members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) or Mormons respectfully, raising the question of their “Christian but different” identity, dialogue with Catholics still remains in an initial, uncertain stage. Some recent events such as the controversy over Mitt Romney’s presidential candidacy and the controversy over same-sex marriage as well as “family resemblances” between the two traditions—specifically their common emphasis on hierarchy, sacramentalism, supernaturalism, apostolic continuity, magisterial teaching, and episcopal and priesthood authority—suggest that the time is ripe for greater inter-church engagement and a Catholic recognition of the Christian nature of Mormon faith.

Huff’s paper explored the Mormon emphasis on the centrality of Christ, love of Sacred Scripture (though with broader canon), concept of ongoing revelation, baptism, and daily Christian life, “elements and endowments” included in Vatican II’s delineation of authentic Christianity (cf. UR 3). He observes that the negative 2001 CDF decision on the validity of Mormon baptism appears to deviate from the longstanding Catholic tradition of recognizing the validity of baptism in heretical and schismatic communities. In the documents accompanying the decision, Luis Ladaria pointed out that the negative verdict did not include a judgment on LDS members, while Urbano Navarrete admitted, “Mormons can perhaps be considered Christians socially.” Thus, the CDF decision does not address directly the issue of Mormon Christian identity. Huff’s conclusion was that Catholics are already engaged with Mormons on a number of fronts and stand at the threshold for an enhanced dialogue.

In his presentation, “Mormon-Catholic Dialogue,” Richard Bushman chose to focus on priesthood and sacraments. While traditionally Mormons have seen their movement as a continuation of the Reformation, recent Mormon scholars are just as likely to say that Mormonism reversed the Reformation and turned back towards Catholicism. Two principles provide a starting point for a conversation. First, in restoring the priesthood as a specific office not given to all believers and required for sacramental acts, Mormonism went in a different direction than Protestantism. They believe that each person “must pass through the waters of baptism as a priesthood holder offers the prayer” to be saved. The second principle addressed the problem of “the uninformed” who have never heard of Christ.

While he sees Catholics as dealing with this through “in voto baptism,” the LDS solution is to recover the names of each person who has lived and then perform a vicarious baptism on his or her behalf. Hence, the great Mormon interest in genealogy is a sign of God’s concern for the salvation of all. In concluding Bushman raised his own question about why an authorized minister was required for sacraments in both traditions.

James Massa was prevented from attending at the last moment. His paper, “Catholic Bishops and Mormons: Building Bridges over Troubled Waters,” was read by Christopher Ruddy. Massa’s paper began by relating a story about a Mormon request to have Mormon leaders from Salt Lake City attend the interfaith meeting with Pope Benedict during his visit to the United States in April of 2008. Noting again the negative CDF decision on Mormon baptism, Massa argued that both Code of Canon Law and the teachings of Vatican II suggest reasons for making room under Christ’s mantle for Mormons, even if they deny other essential elements of the Christian faith.

Acknowledging a cultural affinity with Mormons and other such as Evangelicals and Pentecostals over issues such as marriage, unborn life, and immigration, the U.S. Catholic hierarchy seems favorably disposed toward deeper ties with the LDS, though questions remain about their place on the spectrum of ecumenical and interreligious partners. In regard to the question about their participation in the Pope’s visit, after consulting Orthodox hierarchs and Evangelical mega-pastors, it was decided to invite the Mormons to the prayer service with the pope, but only with *second row seats*! A lively discussion followed.

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