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Baptism agreement shows all Christians part of same family

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

A few weeks ago, the American Catholic Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA) -- my spiritual home -- joined to become one church.

Did you miss it?

What happened was this: The Presbyterians -- not to mention three other Reformed churches -- reached agreement with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on mutual recognition of each other's baptisms.

If we agree that our baptisms are legitimate and in essence the same, we have become the same church. Really.

Now, that doesn't mean we've settled the rest of what divides us -- the place of bishops, how we understand the Eucharist, how many sacraments there are and more. But at least we all now officially agree on how being part of the church, the body of Christ, starts.

The "Common Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Baptism" -- approved by the Presbyterians in 2008 and by the USCCB in mid-November -- calls baptism "the sacramental gateway into the Christian life." It says baptism "is to be conferred only once, because those who are baptized are decisively incorporated into the body of Christ."

Christians and non-Christians alike may not understand all the differences of theology and polity that divide Catholics from Protestants and both from the Orthodox. And I even grant that some of those differences are quite important.

But if we can come to a common understanding of baptism, the "sacramental gateway" into the faith, many of those other differences now can be thought of as simple preferences within the same faith rather than as lines in the sand over which we need to fight in perpetuity.

Indeed, I consider baptism so central that within my own denomination I argue it should be the determining factor in whether we give otherwise-qualified gays and lesbians the opportunity to be ordained as clergy and as elders and deacons. (The "otherwise-qualified" phrase refers to their sense of call to be ordained and their capability to carry out the required roles.)

Once we're baptized, I argue, we're church members -- although we may set a certain age or the successful completion of confirmation class as a requirement for being a voting member of a particular congregation.

In the end, the Christian faith is about discipleship. We acknowledge Jesus Christ as our savior and we pledge to do our best to follow him into a transformed life that now will be shaped by the revolution of love and grace he brought. That's the essence.

If that's true, why should it divide us that some of us think apostolic succession is important and others place more emphasis on the priesthood of all believers? Why should it matter so much that Catholics rely on transubstantiation to explain the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of Holy Communion while Presbyterians affirm that same real presence without using transubstantiation as an explanation of it?

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Can't we simply agree to disagree about such things now that we hold in common the affirmation that our two churches (as well as the Reformed Church in America, the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the United Church of Christ) do baptisms that are all equally valid?

Look, it's easy to find things theological about which to fight. And as my friend Kathleen Norris says in one of her books, we Presbyterians get especially vicious when those fights are over the holy of holies, the church kitchen.

But how about if instead of looking for more reasons to disagree, we celebrate the new reality that we are together on baptism and that now we should look for other ways to act as if we're part of the same family?

The reality is that there are no normal human families. Each one has its eccentricities, its dark secrets, its goofball members.

The same is true of church families. Can't we just admit we all come from the irregular bin and love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ?

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