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Squabbles within a faith should matter less than the outer message

Bill Tammeus | Nov. 27, 2013 A small c catholic

A few weeks ago, one of my Facebook friends who also happens to be a Presbyterian pastor posted a note that said, in part: "I still bristle when people use 'clergy,' especially as over and above 'elders.' Repeat after me: Presbys do not have 'clergy.' We have 'orders of ministry.' "

The comment stirred up much response, and I finally weighed in with this: "This whole discussion, while interesting, should be recognized as deeply inside-denominational baseball and of virtually no interest to the wounded world."

To which the original poster responded: "It may not be of any interest but I think it matters a great deal. If we are to be an exhibition of the Kingdom then yet another hierarchical system where some people are more special will have no effect on the woundedness."

He had a point because we Presbyterians [1] have now returned to calling our pastors "teaching elders" as opposed to those of us ordained to be "ruling elders," me included. But outside our walls, who cares about such titles?

I had a similar reaction when reading about the run-up to -- and post-election analysis of -- this month's gathering of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops [2]. There was lots of speculation about who would become the USCCB's new president. Once again, I thought, that's inside baseball stuff that may in the end make some difference in the lives of American Catholics but in the grand scheme of things is pretty meaningless.

And yet we seem to spend lots of time on such matters.

Even topics that those of us inside the faith think are big deals often mean nothing to people on the outside -- people whom we are to serve.

Do they care that both Catholics and Presbyterians are "Real Presence" people when it comes to the sacrament of Holy Communion but that only Catholics use transubstantiation as an explanation of how that happens while Presbyterians don't?

Does it matter to them what happened at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 or the Presbyterian General Assembly in 2011?

Does the controversy over the most recent English translation of the Mass or over the Presbyterian decision to allow ordination of otherwise-qualified gays and lesbians to ministry make any difference to them?

Oh, maybe one or the other of these examples might have some slight effect on the life of someone outside the faith -- someone searching for spiritual truth and so far not finding it -- but a lot of what takes up the time, energy and resources of people of faith is of absolutely no interest to outsiders.

And so far, I'm mostly talking about some of the larger issues with which religion deals. I haven't even

mentioned the squabbles inside my own congregation [3] over whether the choir and pastors should always wear robes at worship services.

Noses get bent out of joint about this stuff, believe it or not.

When we get legalistic about our faith, when we major in the minors, we discourage people who might otherwise be interested in joining us. When we get passionate about inside baseball issues, we forget that we're supposed to be in the outside baseball business, which is to say, in the business of taking the good news of Jesus Christ to a world desperate to hear some good news.

I'm as guilty in this matter as anyone. I've spent too much energy promoting weekly (instead of monthly) Communion in Presbyterian worship services. I've gotten all out of sorts because people in the pews have never heard of some of the great theologians.

These things matter, but they don't matter anywhere near as much as declaring to the world through both word and deed that God has good news for everyone. And as soon as I can get Presbyterian clergy to convince people in the pews to say "A-men" at the end of prayers instead of "Ah-men," I'll start behaving as if that's true.

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