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Fascination with Francis stirs Protestant hearts

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

What has intrigued me most about Pope Francis is not the way in which Catholics -- well, most of them, anyway -- have embraced him but the way in which countless Protestants have moved into his fan club.

More is at play here than simple celebrity in our overwrought pop culture. At least, I hope so.

The Protestant fascination with him hasn't broken down the many theological, liturgical and structural barriers that still exist between Protestantism and Catholicism, but it has softened them a bit and it has caused some Protestants to want to figure out what makes Francis tick, what Jesuit theology is all about and what ground we Protestants might share in common with Catholics.

My own congregation is a good example of this phenomenon. Our pastor, Paul Rock, recently began a sermon series he's calling "Jesus, the Pope and a Protestant Walk Into a Bar." His sermons, which started Sunday, can be found [here](#).

To alert people to this series, he posted this short video on our church's website. As Paul says in the video, "This is a pope who has become the people's pope. ... The fact that Pope Francis has been an inspiration to both Catholics and Protestants I think provides us a unique opportunity to take a fresh look at this Catholic-Protestant divide."

I suspect that the intense Protestant interest in Francis is a sign that deep in our protesting marrow, there is a yearning for unity and a latent sense of regret that it had to come to all that division in Martin Luther's time and that the divide has never been healed.

For good and sufficient reasons back then, insistent Catholic reformers broke away from Rome in what became known as the Protestant Reformation, and although countless feelings were hurt and vicious

charges traded, it was surely a reluctant parting. The Luthers, the Ulrich Zwinglis and the John Calvins of the time first sought to fix what they thought had gone wrong in the church. But failing that, they felt they had no choice but to leave.

So off they went in a huff while the Catholics they left behind mostly shouted after them not to let the door slam them in the butt on the way out. It was sad, though perhaps avoidable, but we can't rewrite that history now.

No divorce happens because of what just one of the partners does, thinks or says. It's always a group failure, as it was in this case. But it's also true that no divorce happens without some residual regret.

Some of that residual regret is helping to fuel the Protestant fascination with Francis. Whether it will mean anything in the way of reconciliation over the long haul is unknown. But it's certain that no reconciliation will be possible if both Protestants and Catholics continue to deny the regret they feel and their hope for a different future.

To Protestants, one of the most attractive things about Francis is his humility, his willingness not to rely on, defend and protect all aspects of the hierarchical system of polity that has marked the papacy, especially in the time since Pope John XXIII. That system, at least to Protestant eyes, seems to be in tension with the idea straight from the mouth of Jesus that true leaders must first be servants.

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Now Francis not only is saying exactly that, he's acting as if he believes it.

Protestant polity usually is more decentralized and democratic than the Roman system of governance, but that doesn't mean some Protestant leaders don't also fall into the trap of being insufferable monarchists and worldly kingdom-builders.

Today, however, when Protestants set aside that nonsense and focus on humbly seeking to follow the God of love revealed in Jesus Christ, they find they have been joined by a fellow pilgrim, Francis. And we should welcome each other on the journey.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog for the *Star's* website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*. Email him at wtammeus@gmail.com.]

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