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Forget about sainthood, let's worry about ministry

Bill Tammeus | Mar. 9, 2011 A small c catholic

What opinion should a Protestant like me have about the small controversy over whether the late Pope John Paul II is being rushed to sainthood [1]?

None -- that would be the proper and courteous thing to say. But, in fact, Protestants, like Catholics, have lots of opinions about things that may not directly concern them. So I?d like to share some of that with you Catholics so that you might have a better sense of how non-Catholics may be thinking about you and your church.

The idea of sainthood is not unfamiliar to Protestants. In fact, we?re so attached to the idea that we call absolutely every member of the church a saint. Which sort of devalues the term but is in harmony with our old Reformation idea of ?the priesthood of all believers [2].?

Over the years it?s been my experience that many Protestants are simply baffled by the Catholic Church?s saint-creation process. And, no, most Protestants have no idea that this process has been adjusted several times over the years, the most recent such change being a radical simplification in 1983 when John Paul II was pope.

As Frank K. Flinn?s *Encyclopedia of Catholicism* [3] puts it: ?Since then, less time and fewer miracles have been needed to clinch the case.?

Beyond being mystified by the process, many Protestants don?t understand why the church devotes so many resources and so much effort to it, including having a Vatican agency called the Congregation of the Causes of Saints.

I won?t hide my own opinion here behind these nameless ?many Protestants? to whom I?ve been referring (though they exist). My opinion is that all of the money, staff and other resources the church uses in the saint-naming process could be better used to do needed ministry to a wounded world.

I don?t know what all of that effort and staff cost, but whatever it is, wouldn?t it be better to devote the resources to feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, comforting the bereaved and healing the abused?

Having said that, let me also be clear that the Catholic Church is not the only entity to spend resources on what some people think are questionable projects. My own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), has spent all kind of time and money fighting over the possible ordination of gays and lesbians. It?s an important matter, but it appalls me to imagine how many resources have been devoted to this since we began a public fight about it in the late 1970s.

Similarly, a Jewish congregation with which I?m familiar recently has been slugging it out internally (yes, lawyers have been involved) over whether to renew the contract of its current rabbi. It?s been a bruising fight that has wasted money.

So even though some of us non-Catholics look questioningly at how much effort the Catholic Church puts into

the sainthood process, we would be breaking our own glass house by throwing many stones at it.

Still, perhaps it?s useful for Catholics to know that Protestants (and maybe others) are out in the world quietly (I hope) shaking their heads at the whole issue of creating saints.

It?s not that we don?t admire wonderful role models. We do. It?s just that we?re not clear about why a special category of them is needed. And as Richard P. McBrien notes in his 2001 book, *Lives of the Saints* [4], ?Lawrence Cunningham, a well-established expert on the saints and spirituality, found no evidence in 1980 ?that theologians are doing much serious reflection on the relevance or even the meaning of the saint in the Christian tradition.??

So maybe it?s time for Catholics to take a hard look at the whole question of sainthood. You do that and I?ll try to get some Presbyterian leaders to see if we can?t quit arguing about what the heck predestination [5] means and, instead, get on with ministry.

[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 Web site 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*. E-mail him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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