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What this Presbyterian loves about the Catholic church

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

It didn't surprise me that a few of the readers who responded to my last *NCR* column about Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City accused me of anti-Catholic bias.

This is an old and ridiculous charge, and I could waste time working up some outrage about the way some readers misread me -- at times, I think, willfully.

But instead, let me give you an incomplete list of what this Presbyterian loves about the Roman Catholic Church. Then you decide whether, as one reader charged, I am "a very prejudiced man" and have "deep malice towards the Church."

- I love many of the priests I've known over the years. Same with many of the nuns. I call several of both groups good friends.
- I love the richness of the liturgy of the Mass. I find it full of mystery and grace, though I was more attached to the previous English translation than I am to the latest version.
- I love the fact that the faith as the Catholic church has expressed it over the centuries has been the inspiration for astonishing art and music that has enriched the world in untold ways.
- I love the long list of brilliant minds that have helped the church understand and express its faith. One could go back to the early church fathers, such as Augustine or Origen, but in more recent times, we need think only of such brilliant scholars as the late Raymond E. Brown as well as many of the minds the church has sought to quiet, such as Hans Küng and Leonardo Boff.
- I love the fact that so many Catholics have taken their faith so seriously that they have entered the world of monasticism, an important, nurturing tradition almost entirely missing from my Protestant world.
- I love that Catholicism has encouraged people to design and build extraordinary monuments to

God's glory, including the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris and, where I live, Redemptorist Catholic Church in Kansas City.

- I love the fact that for more than 100 years now, the Catholic church has encouraged scholars to exegete the scriptures in deep and profound ways, using modern techniques that help us understand what holy writ might have meant to the first people to hear or read it. Pope Benedict XVI's latest book on the infancy narratives of Jesus benefited from such scholarship and reflects why it is so important to take the Bible seriously, which cannot be done if we take it literally.
- I love the commitment many Catholics have to standing with the poor and voiceless. Stories about these motivated people appear regularly in *NCR*, but I also know of others, equally committed, whose stories never get told -- a fact that bothers them not one bit.
- I love the fact that Catholic clergy wear identifying clothing even outside church buildings. I view it as a way of saying to the world that their witness to the saving grace of Jesus Christ is not confined to the sanctuary. Yes, I think some of the hats worn by those toward the top of the Catholic hierarchy seem silly, but I also thought most of the magniloquent hats Presbyterian women used to wear when I was a boy were silly.
- I love the ways in which the Catholic church honors its dead in worship services that don't try to deny the harsh reality of death but that, nonetheless, affirm the doctrine of the resurrection of the body and seek to give comfort and hope to the bereaved. Catholics know how to do this ritual really well.
- I love the fact that about 50 years ago, some Catholics wanted an independent Catholic voice to help members of the church understand not just Vatican II but the whole of the church, so they started the *National Catholic Reporter*.

[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@kc.rr.com.]

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