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We must remember Christianity is Jesus, not a doctrine

Bill Tammeus | Jun. 13, 2012 A small c catholic

In my last *NCR* column [1], I wrote about the controversy involving LCWR [2], the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

Among the many responses that piece stirred up was a reader's comment that I want to unpack because I think it identifies an approach to Christianity that, though admirable in many ways, ultimately misses the mark.

Someone who identified himself as "John" wrote this of Catholicism:

> "We are a religion that has central truths. These truths do not change to fit the current fashion."

His clear reference was to statements about doctrine, including the historic creeds. And I agree with what he said.

But here's what he missed: Ultimately, truth in Christianity is not a doctrine, not a dogma, not a creed, not a papal bull, not what's said in a sermon, not even the words in the Bible. Rather, truth in Christianity is a person, Christ Jesus.

Jesus said so himself: "I am the way, the truth and the light."

This is a complex, difficult concept that, in the end, cannot be exhaustively explained.

But it does require us to acknowledge that all words are metaphors, pointing to meaning beyond themselves. If we give ultimate allegiance to the words as they are used in official doctrines and creeds, we box ourselves in. The effect is to miss God's glorious freedom.

Please don't think I'm devaluing doctrine, dismissing centuries of attempts at expressing in words what "John" called our "central truths." I have made my living relying on the power and expressiveness of words. I value words deeply.

But I value the Word even more, which is to say the living, resurrected Christ, whose spirit cannot be contained in our words.

There is a richness to Christian language that we fail to appreciate if we take it all literally, just as many of the first hearers of Jesus' parables failed to grasp the depth of meaning because they sometimes took his words literally.

Think of Nicodemus asking how he could re-enter his mother's womb to be born again. Think of the woman at the well who asked Jesus to give her the living water he mentioned so she'd never thirst again, not imagining that she was in conversation with that water. The examples are myriad.

Similarly, we miss much of the truth and lavish grace of Christianity if we hitch our wagons to the mere words

of doctrine and not to the Word who is the living Christ.

Official Catholicism, of course, knows that this is true, and says as much in the *Handbook for Today's Catholic [3]*: "The Church's dogmatic formulas, however, are not the same thing as God's self-revelation; they are the *medium* through which Catholics place their faith in God."

This is a wise and necessary acknowledgement of the limits of language, which simply is unable, finally, to contain the truth, the reality, the substance of God.

So when "John" argues that Christianity -- specifically the Catholic expression of it -- is a "religion that has central truths," he severely limits his understanding of the faith if, by that, he means just doctrinal statements.

The idea that truth is a person is a category-breaking concept that alters (and, well, altars) our grasp of reality. And for that reason, it is unsettling and easy to reject.

We prefer to nail down our truths, to measure our reality in meters and pounds, light-years and ohms. But when we do only that, we miss the scenery and the breath-taking cosmos found along the path of those meters and light-years, the complexity of life that makes up those pounds, the power and light resulting from those ohms.

In Christian terms, we miss the living Lord. As Msgr. Romano Guardini wrote in his classic book *The Lord*, describing Jesus' escape from an angry crowd, "divine freedom walks right through the seething mob, its irresistible force bound by nothing on earth but its own 'hour.'"

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [4] 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 [5]*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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