Anabaptist debts to late-medieval Catholicism

For a few moments last month, business as usual in Washington, D.C., came to a dramatic halt as members of Congress, the Supreme Court and the White House staff—along with thousands of enthusiastic onlookers gathered outside the Capitol building—listened attentively to a sermon delivered in heavily accented English by an aging Argentinian dressed in white. For many Mennonites around the world, the Catholic Church conjures up images of 16th-century persecution, a male-dominated hierarchy or rites that border on superstition. In some Latin American contexts, it is still common to distinguish between "cristianos" (Christians) and "Catholics."

Yet Pope Francis I defies these easy stereotypes. From the choice of his name (honoring Francis of Assisi) to his modest living quarters and his disconcerting practice of publicly associating with people at the margins of society, Francis has consistently complicated our assumptions about the papacy. I still remember my shock when, asked to describe himself in an early interview, the newly appointed pope began by saying, "I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon."

Yet Mennonites in North America and around the world should not be surprised if we see in Pope Francis—or in the broader Catholic Church—themes that sound familiar to our own tradition. After all, the first generation of Anabaptists were all born and raised in the Catholic Church. And even though these early leaders focused vigorously on the differences, Anabaptist debts to late-medieval Catholicism were profound. Consider, for example, the following:

1. Late medieval mysticism: Many early Anabaptist leaders, particularly Hans Denck, Leonard Schiemer and Hans Schlaffer, were deeply influenced by the mystical writings of Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler. The theme of *Gelassenheit*—yielding oneself fully to the spirit and teachings of Christ—that echoes so clearly throughout early Anabaptist writings and hymns, comes directly out of this tradition.

2. Practical lay piety: Anabaptists preachers often contrasted the university-educated theologians of their day, caught up in convoluted philosophical debates, with the simple teachings of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount and the call to discipleship. That emphasis on following Jesus in daily life came, in part, from their encounter with a book by Thomas à Kempis called *The Imitation of Christ*. That book found a wide and eager readership among Catholic lay people throughout the 15th century, and its themes are unmistakable in many early Anabaptist texts.

3. Freedom of the will: Unlike Martin Luther and John Calvin, who both insisted on the doctrine of predestination, the Anabaptists believed that God never coerced believers into faith. In 1525, Catholic theologian Desiderius Erasmus entered into a vigorous debate with Luther about this point, in which he insisted that human beings have a divinely instilled capacity to make meaningful choices—the gift of grace offered by God must be accepted. Although Erasmus came to different conclusions from the Anabaptists on baptism, they shared with him—and the larger Catholic tradition—a basic understanding of the freedom of the will that distinguished them from most 16th-century Protestants.

4. Monasticism: In the sixth century, a Catholic monk named Benedict formulated a basic handbook for Christian life that became a foundational text for Catholic monasticism. The Benedictine Rule called Christians to a life of devotion and service to Christ. That life began with a formal vow and included a strong commitment to a disciplined community characterized by nonresistance, simplicity, humility, distinctive dress and a life of service. To a remarkable degree, the Anabaptist view of the church modeled all these features. Indeed, I sometimes find it helpful to think about the Amish as "married monastics."

None of these observations should suggest that the differences separating Anabaptists from Catholics in the 16th century were meaningless; nor are they today. Nevertheless, the story is surely more complicated than the harsh language against the papacy in the *Martyrs Mirror* or the inherited anti-Catholic prejudices of our culture.

Last year, shortly after Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was named the new pope, *The Mennonite* published a long article introducing him to Mennonite readers (March 2014). Written by Robert Brenneman—a sociologist raised in a Conservative Mennonite home but educated at the University of Notre Dame—the article bore the title "Habemus papam Mennonitum" (we have a Mennonite pope).

Clearly, Pope Francis is not a Mennonite. But if something in his teachings, practices and demeanor sounds familiar, it may be because we are recognizing deeper debts that have too often gone unacknowledged. TM

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