

BULLETIN -- JULY 9

Thank you to all who helped to make our Solemnity of SS. Peter & Paul truly solemn and an occasion of great sociability. The Knights of Columbus, Tami Domeier with sons Jake and Noah, and Barbara King were the perfect hosts for our annual celebration after Evening Prayer and Benediction.

Our patronal feast, along with a wonderful morning of teaching on the Creed by Dr. Scott Hahn at Immaculate Heart the preceding Saturday, provided much food for thought. One of the stories related by Dr. Hahn was most interesting. He had been invited to debate a Muslim scholar about the nature of God. As it turned out, the two of them wound up in the same town some months before the debate was to take place, and the host invited them both to breakfast. The scholar strode in, brimming with confidence after just having demolished an evangelical scholar in a debate the night before. Pleasantries were brief. As soon as Dr. Hahn mentioned something about the Fatherhood of God, the Muslim slammed his fist on the table and shouted so loudly that it disturbed other patrons. "NO! That is blasphemy! I cannot sit in the presence of someone who dares to put God in human terms!"

Dr. Hahn went on quietly, and soon enough referred to how we are invited by Christ to share, by adoption, in his Sonship. Pounding the table again, the scholar shouted with even more emphasis, "No! I have warned you, I will not tolerate any talk of human participation in the life of the All-Holy, praised be his Name!"

Seizing on the opportunity, Dr. Hahn pointed out that Muslims do understand Allah as being All-Holy, All-Wise, All-Mighty, and ascribe to Allah numerous other attributes. But those attributes are understood by humans as infinite superlatives of the human attributes to which they refer. However, it is God who is the *source* of those attributes, not us; so in striving to imitate him, we who are made in his image can share in his attributes, and that's one reason we can refer to God in familial and relational terms. The enraged scholar leaped to his feet and fairly screamed, "No! I will sit no longer in the presence of blasphemy." He stormed out of the restaurant, leaving everyone in a state of some shock and distress. Needless to say, there was no debate.

I fear only that I have not done due justice to Dr. Hahn's account of this incident. It is not nearly as well known as the much-misunderstood 2006 Regensburg address of Pope Benedict XVI in which he proposed, "Not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature." Benedict very carefully built the case that since faith and reason depend so profoundly on each other, violence has no place in faith. These deep philosophical realities were beyond the comprehension of many in the Muslim world, as well as many in the secular, agnostic Western world. The Westerners resorted to harsh criticism and even mockery. And in various places in the Middle East, deadly violence broke out, making Benedict's words ironically prophetic. In a nutshell it was, "One of the problems is that no one can discuss God rationally with you without you resorting to violence." And the response to that was? Violence! So how do we have, not agreement, but even a *meeting* of the minds about that?

Reflecting on Dr. Hahn's experience with the scholar who had no interest in a genuine exchange, I came to the Gospel for the Solemnity of SS. Peter and Paul. Muslims revere Jesus of Nazareth as a prophet, but a lesser forerunner of Muhammad.

However they might appreciate *some* selected sayings of Jesus, they certainly cannot accept words like those in Matthew 16. Peter confesses, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Far from correcting him, Jesus replies, “Blessed are you, Simon, son of John, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.” Father. Son. Revelation. The fact is, our firm belief as Christians is that God has revealed himself to us in this way, not that we have gone crazy and made up some blasphemy on our own. In fact, we acknowledge that it *would* be blasphemy if it were not revelation, God’s own self-description.

Earlier, in Matthew 11, we have the beautiful prayer of Jesus addressed to the Father, in which he says, “Father, Lord of heaven and earth, to you I offer praise. For what you have hidden from the wise and the learned, you have revealed to little ones. . . No one knows the Son but the Father, and no one knows the Father but the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him.” Let’s face it, we’re not about to expunge those words from the Scriptures to avoid offending Muslims. But they came along, following their prophet, Muhammad, over 600 years *after* Christ, *after* centuries of the shedding of Christian blood in witness to Christ, *after* centuries of debate among Christians themselves regarding the true nature(s) of Christ. “Who do you say that I am?” he asks Peter in Matthew 16. In fact, he asks *every* Christian that, on a daily basis, along with the other questions he put to Simon Peter after the resurrection: “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?”

Yes, our God is Love. God wants us to be very much in love with him and with each other, because he is so rapturously in love with us! Even the Commandments of the Old Law must be read in the light of the New: “If you love me, you will honor your father and mother. If you love me, you will not kill.” And so on. These basic truths are fundamental to Christianity, and that is what makes us so abhorrent to Muslims. That is why there really can be no compromise of our doctrine with theirs. We both worship One God, but God revealed himself as a Triune Family long before Muhammad proclaimed the distant, uninvolved, and unreachable nature of Allah.

When Islam first appeared, many churchmen and scholars were inclined to treat it as another of many Christian heresies. But like the Jehovah’s Witnesses some twelve centuries later, it became quite apparent that its view of God and salvation and heaven and earth were all *so* different that it could not be reconciled with Christianity. That didn’t mean that, from *our* point of view, Christians and Muslims could not live near each other, conduct business, and even become friends. The problem was that for many Muslims, then as now, the followers of the Nazarene, the “Messianics,” were infidels who needed to be exterminated. Since their *own* lives were in no way dear to an impersonal, uninterested, unloving Allah, Christian lives were all the more expendable. And for many around the world, still are.

This is certainly not a declaration of war on Islam. We could be very happy to co-exist in peace. There is much cooperation among Muslim and Christian neighbors on the local level, and even nationally and internationally. Just because we believe that in Jesus Christ there is the fullness of revelation, there is no need to go around with an attitude of “Christians 1, Muslims 0.” We Christians are quite obviously ourselves capable of horrible sins and horrible violence. After all, we’re the ones with the confessionals, and they’re not for the Muslims! But we also cannot be blind to the real challenge and danger that not a few in the Muslim community present to us and to all

non-Muslims--and even other Muslims--the world over. We should not heed those who say, "*That* is not the true face of Islam," as though Islam (or Christianity, for that matter) had only one face. Christ our Savior has told us how to show others the way to the Father. "Love one another" is not an invitation to roll over and play dead in the face of opposition, but rather a call to overcome evil with good. So let's get started, again. There's a long way to go. God bless you!

Fr. Den

Thought for the week: "From all sides, mysteries besiege and assail us, uninterrupted and more persistent than cosmic rays" (Fr. Nicolae Steinhardt, 1912-1989, Romanian Orthodox monk and philosopher).