

May 2005, *Equipping*



On the Death of Pope John Paul II

Mennonites have not always had much appreciation and respect for the Roman Catholic pope. With other churches that emerged in the 16th century Reformation, our spiritual ancestors rebelled (protested, hence “protestants”) against various practices in the Roman Catholic Church, including the authority given the Bishop of Rome. Harsh things have been said: it has not been uncommon to refer to the pope as the Antichrist.

On the other hand, it is not uncommon for Mennonites to refer, usually without cynicism, to various leaders as “the pope of the Mennonite Church.” I’ve heard it applied to people in at least eight different offices!

The abstract idea of a pope, however, is not the same as a particular person who holds that office. The late Pope John Paul II was a pope who contributed positively to the witness of the whole Christian church. Many evangelical Christians found him to be an ally in their ethical and political concerns.

During the time of his papacy many Mennonites have grown in their appreciation of the Roman Catholic Church. We have adapted Catholic liturgies, studied Catholic writings, worked together to address moral issues that challenge our society and church. The formal dialogue between representatives of the Mennonite World Conference and the Roman Catholic Church’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity has furthered John Paul II’s passion for reconciliation, forgiveness and the lived expression of the gospel of peace.

Ivan Kauffman is an American Catholic (former Mennonite) writer has suggested the following as impacts of the late pope’s life:

His personal witness.

John Paul showed us it was possible to be committed to the sacraments and the institutional church, and at the same time to be committed to personal conversion and the Scriptures in the way that evangelical Christians have always been. ...He combined a profound personal spirituality and an equally deep commitment to social justice.

His commitment to peace.

John Paul transformed the Catholic Church into a peace church—not a pacifist church, but one committed to peace. He helped lead the nonviolent defeat of the Soviet empire, thus showing that there is an alternative to both the just war tradition and classic pacifism. And his opposition to the Iraq War was the first time that a war initiated by a largely Christian nation has been declared unjust in advance.

His commitment to ecumenical dialogue.

Again and again John Paul insisted that the commitment of the Catholic Church to the ecumenical movement has become “irrevocable.” The long-term implications of this are impossible even to imagine, but already we have seen its first fruits for us in the

International Mennonite Catholic Dialogue and its initial report, *Called Together to Be Peacemakers*.

His personal support. We were amazed when we first began to hear that the pope was taking a personal interest in the Mennonite Catholic dialogue. But over the past six years there have been repeated confirmations—above all when he invited the President of the Mennonite World Conference to give the closing statement at the 2002 Assisi World Day of Prayer for Peace. [Kauffman has written an article with more details on this for an upcoming edition of *Mennonite Weekly Review*.]

We don't agree with every conviction or practice of the Roman Catholic Church. Many Catholics don't agree either. There are many great issues and challenges that all churches and in particular the Roman Catholic Church need to face. We must recognize that these are sisters and brothers in Christ with whom we need—for our sake, for their sake, for the sake of the Gospel and the glory of God—to be in relationship.

This may be a unique moment in the history of relationships between parts of Christ's body that have been separated from and hostile toward each other for 480 years. Let us engage this moment by praying for the successor to John Paul II. Pray that God will guide those who are choosing the next pope and pray for the person chosen. Pray that God would draw the Roman Catholic Church and all churches into the light and truth of Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dan Nighswander', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Dan Nighswander