

Studying Mormons: One Franciscan's Encounter with the World of the Latter-day Saints

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Since my teenage years, I have been interested in all things Mormon. I have given countless hours to studying the history, corporate structures, leadership, scriptures and theology of the Latter-day Saints. It has led me to places I would not otherwise have visited: places like Friendship and Palmyra in New York; Kirtland, Ohio; the banks of Pennsylvania's Susquehanna River; Independence, Missouri; Salt Lake City, Utah; and Sharon, Vermont. I have made numerous trips to the Hill Cumorah Pageant, have joined the Mormon History Association, and have read hundreds of books, pamphlets, and journal articles that were in any way related to Mormonism. Indeed, it was my interest in Mormons that caused me to read Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*. I taught a seminar on Mormons and Shakers in the nineteenth century and I found, probably with help from an LDS Family History Center, that I am, in all likelihood, a distant cousin of Emma Hale Smith, the (first) wife of Mormonism's founding prophet. I even have some idea of the difference between a Hendrickite and a Strangite.

How did this obsession begin? What attracted me to this study? And why, as a Franciscan and a Roman Catholic priest, do I continue to be absorbed in Mormonism to this day?¹

Before I ever heard of Joseph Smith or Mormonism, I was very much taken with America's indigenous peoples. As a child I knew all about longhouses, birch bark canoes, and wampum. My favorite Indians were the Mohawks, perhaps because I was born in the Mohawk Valley. I apparently

came to believe, thanks to tall tales of my grandfather, that I myself was an Indian. When we children played cowboys and Indians, I would have nothing to do with the former. I kept hoping that I might even find a lost tribe of Native Americans living somewhere in my suburban neighborhood. As luck and genealogy (a very Mormon pastime) would have it, in my forties I found that I did have a Canadian Algonquin in my family tree. All of this is by way of stating that Mormonism's claims about ancient Americans had a real fascination for me. I already loved the "Lamanites" before I had ever read that exotic name for our native peoples.

Nevertheless, despite my yearnings for pre-Columbian America, I was also quite aware that I was really an Irish Catholic. And I think that perhaps my Irish heritage has given me a mystical sense of place and a love for old graveyards. As a historian, I love to commune with the past; indeed, I feel, and believe, that those who went before us are still present. Few Christian doctrines excite me more than belief in the Communion of Saints.² Though I do not believe that God the Father and Jesus Christ actually appeared to Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove near Palmyra, my own visits to Assisi, Guadalupe, Rome, and even Auriesville, New York, help me to understand the tears of a young Mormon sister as she expressed her thrill at being at that otherwise ordinary grove of trees.

As a believing Catholic Christian, I have become increasingly "incarnational." I believe that God is found in the most surprising places and in the most unusual people. So I was prepared to find God among the Mormons. I was also taken by the sensual nature of Catholicism: candles in a darkened chapel; holy images of Jesus, Mary, and the saints; the sound of Gregorian chant; the feel of a rosary or Bible in my hands; and the sound of scripture being proclaimed.

Put this all together and you will see why an afternoon visit to the Wingate branch of the Schenectady County Public Library changed my life. There, while browsing among the offerings in religion, I chanced upon a curious purple book with a golden angel embossed on the cover. I liked the size and feel of it in my hands, and I was intrigued by the strange cover page informing me that it was "an account written by the hand of Mormon upon plates taken from the plates of Nephi." I was fascinated; and though I found the actual reading of the book a trifle tedious, I have been fascinated by the Mormon story ever since. My love of Indian lore, my Irish mystical bent, my attachment to Christ and to the Church, and

my fascination with the past had all prepared me for that visit to the library.

But I am not a Latter-day Saint, nor do I expect that I ever will be one. Sometimes Mormons will hear that I have read the Book of Mormon, the Pearl of Great Price, and Doctrine and Covenants, learn of my visits to Palmyra and Salt Lake City, or find that I've traced my family tree. They will often assume that "Heavenly Father" is trying to tell me something! Yet my dealings with Mormonism have actually made me a more convinced Catholic. Still, I think that our Heavenly Father does have a purpose for me in all of this. My study has given me new insights and delightful gifts. Why do I continue to be absorbed in this study? What can a study of Mormonism offer to a Catholic "gentile?" And how does my Franciscan vocation come into play?

The most important gift of Mormonism to me has been an increased ability to empathize with those who are different. I can see myself in the eager young Mormon elders who are filled with both zeal and triumphalism. I can appreciate their enthusiasm, smile at their youthful conviction that they have all the answers, and remain comfortable with my own tradition. All of us are human beings before we are anything else, and my experiences are not that different from a Mormon's. Like a Latter-day Saint, I come from a church that is hierarchical, that considers itself "true," that has both glories and scandals in its history. Like Mormons, we Catholics know what it is like to not quite fit in American society. Like many Mormons, I see the beauty in angels, church buildings, and all the physical, musical, and poetic aspects of faith.

Like Mormonism, Catholicism is a living religion. The Holy Spirit speaks in God's Word, the Bible; but the Spirit also speaks in the here and now—through the Church and our own experiences. While faith is essential, both traditions would agree with James that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26).

But while increased empathy is probably the greatest gift of Mormonism to me, it has also helped me to hone my critical skills. These have helped me to evaluate the truth claims of our two faiths and have reaffirmed my commitment to Roman Catholic Christianity. Others have skillfully presented the arguments for and against the two faiths; so I will simply, and I hope respectfully, note that I do not believe that the Book of Mormon is ancient scripture; and I am especially critical of the Pearl of Great Price. I believe in one God who is Triune; I believe that God created

all that is—not that God rearranged eternally existing matter; I do not believe that God, from all eternity, had body, parts, and passions, or that he is an exalted man. I believe that Jesus Christ is 100 percent human and 100 percent divine. And I believe that the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church”³ founded by Jesus Christ never experienced a “great apostasy” causing all authority to be lost from the earth. I believe that that same church still subsists today in the Roman Catholic Church. For me it is the fullest and most complete expression of the Church.

While I believe “all that the Holy Catholic Church teaches,”⁴ I also believe that God is everywhere at work. God’s Spirit can speak to Mormons through their church, and God can even speak to me through their church—as God can speak to me through Buddhism, Judaism, or Islam. We can pray for and with each other. Joseph Smith and I would agree with the apostle James as he expressed himself in the passage that sent Joseph into the woods to pray: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (KJV James 1:5).

Finally, I am a Franciscan. Franciscan, in my case, means that I am a member of the Order of Friars Minor, a worldwide Roman Catholic community of brothers founded by St. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226). We are generally recognized by our brown robes with a cord around the waist. We live in homes called *friaries* with men who share our particular way of being Catholic Christians. Some of us are ordained priests while others are not. In our ranks we have professional clergy but also teachers, laborers, medical doctors, accountants, and men of almost every other occupation imaginable. We are part of a larger family that includes religious women (nuns or sisters) as well as married and single men and women of every walk of life, ethnicity, and nationality. In the Order of Friars Minor, we follow a *Rule* written by St. Francis in the year 1223. It is our particular way of living out the gospel of Jesus Christ.

During the Crusades, St. Francis, at the risk of his life, crossed through the lines to engage in a dialogue with the Muslim sultan. It was an encounter that was unusually respectful on both sides. I sometimes feel that, as Francis was called to a reappraisal of Islam and a new approach to Muslims, I have been called to a relationship with the Latter-day Saints. In his rule of 1221, Francis wrote of those who would go among the “Saracens” as follows:

Friars who go can conduct themselves spiritually in two manners

among them. One manner is that they cause no quarrels nor disputes, but be subject to every human creature for God's sake and let them confess that they are Christians. The other manner is, that, when they have seen that it would please God, they announce the word of God, that they should believe in God the Almighty, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, the Creator of all things, the Redeemer and Savior, the Son, and that they should be baptized and become Christians (Rule of 1221).⁵

It is to the former method that I feel called—to be a sympathetic presence while remaining true to my own beliefs. I am not sure I am called to move to Utah, but the tremendous growth in membership of the LDS Church means that the Latter-day Saints have already come to me. Let me be among them as a person who knows their tradition and appreciates my own. Let me be respectful of their testimonies and ready to share my own. If we believers broaden the scope of our inquiry and concern, we can all easily make our own the challenge of Moroni:

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things. (Moro. 10:4-5)

Notes

1. Two Franciscans who may be familiar to Latter-day Saints in Utah are the early explorers, Fray Francisco Atanasio Dominguez and Fray Silvestre Velez de Escalante. Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Utah, 1540-1886* (1889; reprinted, Las Vegas: Nevada Publications, 1982), 7-17. For more on the life and times of St. Francis, a handy introduction is Mark Galli's *Francis of Assisi and His World* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

2. One definition says in part: "'Saints' are primarily the members of God's people, who are one in the Holy Ghost (today we would normally say 'Holy Spirit') in the grace of justification, in love, and in the sacraments, and accordingly they intercede for one another in prayer and deed. Hence . . . the communion of saints also signifies union with the dead who have gone before us and with the angels." Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Concise Theological Dictionary*, 2d ed. (London: Burns & Oates, 1983), 84.

3. This well-known phrase from the Nicene Creed is found in numerous places, but see, for example, *The Catholic Prayerbook from Downside Abbey*, edited by David Foster (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 17.

4. This phrase from a traditional prayer known as the "Act of Faith" can be found in *Catholic Prayer Book*, compiled by Ruth M. Hannon (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1991).

5. Regis J. Armstrong et al., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, 3 vols. (New York: New City Press, 1999), 1:74.