

ABUNDANT GRACE:  
THE HUMANNES OF CATHOLICS AND  
LATTER-DAY SAINTS AS A BASIS FOR  
FRIENDSHIP AND COLLABORATION

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At the conclusion of each Mormon History Association’s annual conference, there is a “devotional.” (Until I became a devotee of Mormon history, devotional was always an adjective, as in “devotional literature,” but the Latter-day Saints have shifted my grammatical foundations, and, because of my exposure to Mormons, I’ll never hear words like “fireside,” “garments,” or even “Jell-O” in the same way.) At these devotionals, I always look to see if my favorite LDS hymn is being featured—“The Spirit of God”—number 2 in the LDS hymnal. My Catholic heart is lifted up as we begin to sing “The Spirit of God like a fire is burning! The latter day glory begins to come forth.” As a Catholic, of course, the meaning has to be filtered a bit, but in all good conscience I can sing out most of the words. That is, until we come to the end of the chorus where there is a reference to God and the Lamb: “Let glory to them in the highest be given.” “Them?” I hesitate. I suppose I can give this a Catholic interpretation, but my Trinitarian scruples cause me to mentally substitute “Him” for them; or, if I am feeling inclusive, I quietly sing “Let glory to ‘God’ in the highest be given.”

When it comes to Catholics and Mormons, it can be both instructive and amusing to look at our hymnody. Imagine what mental

gymnastics it takes for me to honestly belt out number 19, “We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet.” I must publically confess that, though I briefly think of Thomas Monson, I interiorly shift the reference to Pope Francis, or Martin Luther King Jr., or Oscar Romero.

Sometimes the words of an LDS hymn send me immediately to a Catholic hymn. I’m sure Latter-day Saints are familiar with Eliza Snow’s “O My Father” (no. 292). I know very well what she was getting at when she wrote that “truth is reason; truth eternal tells me I’ve a mother there.” But, for me, there is an immediate mental shift to the Catholic hymn “’Tis the Month of Our Mother,” referring to the Blessed Virgin Mary:

Oh! what peace to her children,  
mid sorrows and trials to know,  
that the love of their Mother,  
Hath ever a solace for woe.<sup>1</sup>

I like to think Eliza Snow would have found use for those words.

One of the things I’ve noticed over time is that we do borrow from each other. Occasionally the Mormon Tabernacle Choir features a song like “Immaculate Mary,” and the words may not even be changed, so a beautiful Catholic hymn about the Blessed Mother goes forth from the crossroads of the West, thanks to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>2</sup> Of course sometimes the words are changed. A Catholic can lustily sing “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty” (no. 72) but will be brought up short when right after “O my soul praise Him for he is thy health and salvation,” instead of “All you who hear, now to his altar draw near,” the lyrics read: “Join the great throng, psaltery, organ and song.” But no theological harm has been done—and even Catholic versions of this one differ.

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1. “Catholic First,” retrieved from <http://www.catholicfirst.com/thefaith/prayers/marianhymns.html#TisTheMonth>.

2. Mormon Tabernacle Choir, “Immaculate Mary,” retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4K3WxJR7p38>.

Then there are the missing hymns. I would not expect to find “Tantum Ergo” or “Ave Verum Corpus” in the LDS hymnal, but surely, I thought, it would have “Holy, Holy, Holy.” But it was not to be found. Still, I knew I had heard the Tabernacle Choir sing it—so I betook myself to YouTube—ah, there it was!<sup>3</sup> It was a beautiful rendition, but—“God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity” had become “God in thy glory through eternity.”

One of the more amusing moments for me was when I wanted to add some Catholic hymns to my iPod. I found an album entitled “Catholic Hymns: Instrumental Piano Music.” There I was able to download that dear old Catholic hymn—“Come, Come, Ye Saints.”<sup>4</sup> It’s probably best that it was an instrumental version so as not to confuse the faithful.

Mormon songs also help me with my vacation plans. For example, I find that I might visit Adam-ondi-Ahman, or perhaps I could hie to Kolob. These two are a little harder to give a Catholic twist. Fortunately I have already been to Adam-ondi-Ahman, but I very much doubt that I would ever want to hie to Kolob—unless it is part of an MHA post-conference tour. Being an astronaut never appealed to me as a boy. I will note, however, that when I hear the latter song I recognize the tune of one of our own—“I Heard the Voice of Jesus”—same tune, different planet I suppose.

It goes without saying that many of our hymns, Catholic and LDS, are really Protestant. Where would any of us be without Charles Wesley, who wrote “Christ the Lord is Risen Today”; “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus”; “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”; and “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”?<sup>5</sup>

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3. Mormon Tabernacle Choir, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qCmtUhiKcA>.

4. “Catholic Hymns: Instrumental Piano Music,” Shamrock-n-Roll Inc., 2009.

5. All of these can be found in the Catholic hymnal, *Worship* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1986), and several in *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985).

Two very poignant moments for me came through hymns that I heard among Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City. When I was asked to give the opening prayer at an MHA devotional held in the Assembly Hall on Temple Square, by sheer coincidence, the closing hymn was “All Creatures of Our God and King.” The song is based on St. Francis of Assisi’s “Canticle of the Creatures,” the first poem written in vernacular Italian; it is often called, by friars like myself, the Franciscan National Anthem as we invariably end almost every one of our most important gatherings with it. On an even more personal note, I found myself getting misty-eyed in touring the LDS Conference Center, when, as the guide showed us around, a pianist was playing “Veni Creator Spiritus,” one of my all-time favorites, and a song that I had requested at the very first mass I celebrated after my ordination. Indeed, it is one of those hymns I would like to have at my funeral.

As I thought of all these various tunes, I began to see how music can illustrate both our differences and our similarities: though the theology may be different, we can find ourselves moved in very similar ways; we can find that God has touched us, even if we can’t define God in exactly the same way. So I have begun to read hymn books, comparing and contrasting the words. I’ve also noted the criticisms and critiques of third parties, as in an Evangelical critique of verse four of the hymn “High on the Mountaintop” (no. 5 in the LDS hymnal):

For there we shall be taught  
The law that will go forth,  
With truth and wisdom fraught,  
To govern all the earth.  
Forever there his ways we’ll tread,  
And save ourselves with all our dead.

What? Save *ourselves*? As a Catholic, my head tends to agree with the Evangelical theology on this one, but my heart sympathizes more with the Mormons’ sense of heartfelt connectedness to the dead.

Nevertheless, I have found that keeping an LDS perspective in the back of my head while I sing causes me to pay more attention to lyrics. When we hear and sing a hymn for decades, there is a tendency not to give the words too much thought. Singing each others' songs can lead to thoughtfulness and to a new level of engagement with the words. While Mormons and Catholics share a great deal of vocabulary (e.g., God, Savior, scripture, salvation, church, prophet, apostasy, Melchizedek, and baptism), we also find words and phrases that make us different (e.g., Liahona, triple combination, Moroni, *Theotokos*, Immaculate Conception). And sometimes we use the same word but with different meanings (e.g., exaltation, sacrament, angel). Being together causes us to think; we cannot help but ask ourselves, "What do we mean by this term?" "How would we explain this to my friend here?" or "Why do I believe what I believe, instead of what he or she believes?" As we enter more and more into each others' experiences, we clarify our own beliefs and just possibly our hearts are drawn closer to God and each other. In short, our interactions have a clarifying effect that can help us build what Mormons might call a stronger "testimony" and Catholics might call a stronger faith.

Coming together also calls upon a sense of humor, even when that humor touches on what is sacred to us. I don't mean so much that we should engage in that sophomoric humor that pervades the popular media, but that we develop a sense of empathy for others and don't let ourselves become too easily offended. I will give just one illustration. I was sitting in the back of the bus on an MHA tour of Southern Alberta. It was late in the afternoon, so I was either dozing off or carrying on a conversation with those in my immediate vicinity. Suddenly, several people began to make their way to the back of the bus to apologize to me. I didn't have the slightest idea what they were apologizing *for* until someone told me that a local person had come onto the bus and thanked us for coming to Alberta. Apparently he said something like "I am so grateful that the Mormons came here. It could have been the

Catholic missionaries who didn't believe that the Indians had souls!" I was touched at the concern of my LDS friends and sorry if anyone had received a distorted image of my Catholic forbears, but it actually struck me as humorous. I remember thinking "Boy, did we waste our time, lives, and energy in countries all over the Americas!"<sup>6</sup> I suppose I could have taken offense on behalf of my religion, but I came away with a smile because of my friends' empathy and because the whole premise was amusing.

So awareness, clarity, and empathy can come from our singing and even joking together, but let me be clear—faith is a serious business. I draw your attention to Philippians 2:12–13: "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." I believe that our differences are neither trivial nor unimportant. So let us begin with a very bold hypothesis. Both Catholics and Latter-day Saints believe they have the truth, that they belong to the "true church." If that is the choice before us, then there are potentially decisions and points of disagreement before each of us.

Either God is Triune—one God in Three Divine Persons; or Father, Son and Holy Ghost are a godhead made up of three individual beings.

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6. In actuality the accusation was not entirely groundless. Some early Spanish explorers had treated the native peoples as less than human. This caused Pope Paul III to issue an Encyclical in 1537 entitled *Sublimus Dei*. It stated "that the Indians are truly men and that they are not only capable of understanding the Catholic Faith but, according to our information, they desire exceedingly to receive it. Desiring to provide ample remedy for these evils, We define and declare by these Our letters, or by any translation thereof signed by any notary public and sealed with the seal of any ecclesiastical dignitary, to which the same credit shall be given as to the originals, that, notwithstanding whatever may have been or may be said to the contrary, the said Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by Christians, are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ; and that they may and should, freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they be in any way enslaved; should the contrary happen, it shall be null and have no effect" (retrieved from <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Paul03/p3subli.htm>).

Either the one God is the only God, in all the universe, or God had parents and there are other gods in the far reaches of space.

Either God created everything *ex nihilo*, out of nothing; or God shaped and rearranged eternal matter.

Either we all once lived in a pre-existence, or we came to this earth as entirely new creations.

Either God is unfathomable in God's inner essence; or God is originally a man of body, parts and passions.

Either there was a great apostasy and God used Joseph Smith to restore authority to the earth; or there was no apostasy and the Catholic Church has always been and always will be Christ's church with full authority to bind and loose.

These are matters that we disagree on; and they are matters that our scholars should consider and on which they will, hopefully with respect, disagree. So to singing and having a sense of humor, I would add studying together, and studying each others' faith with an open mind. In doing this I think of two scriptures—one that we share and one that is particular to Mormons.

The first, James 1:5, is central to the story of Joseph Smith, and is certainly applicable to Catholics:

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. (James 1:5 KJV)

And from the LDS scriptures:

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. (Moroni 10:4)

Let us not be afraid to confront our differences.

But there is another, even deeper, level on which we might engage each other. It is a spiritual level that is utterly human. It is the realm of the heart. Let me give just a few examples: if I am a parent and my child is close to death, I will turn to my faith. I will ask for anointing with holy oil and for prayer—whether I turn to my Mormon bishop or my Catholic pastor, the impetus is the same: the love for my child. The concern, the worry, and the attachment to my respective faith tradition are essentially identical. In this case, even the ritual is similar. If I need to go apart, to pray and to seek guidance, I may, as a Latter-day Saint, find myself in the celestial room of the temple; as a Catholic I may find myself kneeling before the tabernacle, which holds the Blessed Sacrament. If I have grievously sinned, and I am a Latter-day Saint, I may confess to my bishop; if a Catholic I will turn to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Recently, one of my LDS friends, Sherman Feher, and I decided to compare spiritualities—not doctrines so much as spiritual practices. Here is an example of one of our comparisons. Sherman wrote that “One of the primary purposes of Mormon temples is to perform ordinances, such as baptisms for our ancestors. While our ancestors still have the ability to choose whether to accept the ordinances or not, this form of service helps draw us closer to our ancestors, by helping us to get to know the background of our ancestors and by doing the ordinances for them.” Even here, when looking at a distinctively LDS practice, I was able to find a Catholic equivalent. I responded this way:

By receiving communion we [Catholics] are not just uniting ourselves with Jesus of Nazareth—though we are doing that; we are also uniting ourselves with the Cosmic Christ—with the entire body of Christ—with all who are receiving this same body and blood throughout the world. It is, for us a sacrament that transcends space and time. Interestingly, I think it provides for us Catholics what Mormons seek in genealogy and temple worship. For example, when I receive the body and blood of Christ, I am in communion not only with someone in China who is receiving the same Christ at the same time; I am in communion with my father who is deceased and with all my baptized ancestors who



have gone before; I am also receiving into myself all the baptized communicants who will live in the centuries to come.<sup>7</sup>

My point here is not that one of us is right or that one of us is wrong, my point is that our faiths are vital parts of our lived reality, and they are lived out in ways that are incredibly human.

So let's not stop at singing, having a sense of humor, and even studying; let us move toward things of the heart. Franciscan spiritual writer Richard Rohr quotes St. Thomas Aquinas who wrote, "Life is prior to doctrines."<sup>8</sup> At a time of crisis, we turn to our loving savior, not to a theology textbook.

One thing we might all do, separately and together, is to take ourselves to the scriptures that we share: In Matthew 7:21 Jesus says: "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." The standard for judgment is not a matter of having correct answers to the questions, but in how we live our lives. Let us take with utmost seriousness Matthew 25:34–40:

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

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7. Daniel P. Dwyer, OFM, and Sherman Feher, "Crossing Bridges: A Catholic and a Mormon Reflect on Spirituality," unpublished manuscript.

8. Richard Rohr, OFM, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), xxv.

Ultimately, Jesus seems, at least here, to express little interest in correct church membership or doctrinal exactitude, but rather in how we love and care for others.

I would suggest that Latter-day Saints and Catholics should see each other as fellow pilgrims, as brother and sisters who can help each other navigate the challenges of life in a very secular time. And, while it is essential that we be good neighbors and fellow citizens, I think we can do more on the spiritual level. At a very minimum we can pray for each other—and I don't necessarily mean praying for each others' conversion—although I'm okay with that. Years ago I found out that I have a Mormon cousin. (Thanks to the Family History Center at my local stake, I can add that I am also a distant cousin of Emma Smith, Eliza Snow, Lorenzo Snow, Parley and Orson Pratt, and even Mitt Romney.) If you knew how large and spread out my family is, you would know that I could have lived my whole life without ever even finding this out. I'm pleased to say that that cousin is here today. An elderly Catholic cousin who was close to both of us told me that she suspected he would have her baptized after her death but that she didn't mind. It was a sign of his love and care, and it certainly did no harm—and hey, you never know!

I think we should pray that those in “the other church” experience a true and loving relationship with the divine, and trust that the Holy Spirit will ultimately solve the problems caused by our differences. I think we should pray that God's will and not my will be done in the lives of my friends in the other church. I think too we should pray with each other in ways that are honest and sincere; and we should try to be appreciative of the ways in which our friends are nourished by their own faith. We should share our faiths, not use our faiths to enhance our own egos or to resolve our own doubts by finding fault with someone else's faith.

But what of those standards that Jesus set? What of common actions like feeding the hungry and visiting the imprisoned together? While we should, and do, act together for the common good, we must be aware that this is not always as easy as it seems. In part, that is because both

churches face internal difficulties. For example, at the official level both of our churches acted to promote Proposition 8 in California; whether that was right or wrong, it alienated many within our respective ranks and disturbed the consciences of a good many others. But we should take comfort in the fact that, even as institutions, we are together struggling with issues of conscience and dissent; and maybe we can develop a sense of empathy and help to school each other in charity. A case in point was Pope Francis's famous "Who am I to judge?" which, in my humble opinion, has done a world of good, and refocused all of us on what is core in our two faiths. As the prophet Micah wrote: "what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Micah 6:8).

So I return again to our songs. One of the verses of the "Veni Creator Spiritus" is, I think, a model for our future together. It reminds us that it is the Holy Ghost/Holy Spirit who must act in each of our hearts.

Thy light to every sense impart,  
and shed thy love in every heart;  
thine own unfailing might supply  
to strengthen our infirmity.<sup>9</sup>

I titled this little talk *Abundant Grace*, and to me grace is nothing more, and nothing less, than the presence of God in each and every second of our lives, in each and every corner of our universe. Which brings me to another song—a Protestant one that we all know—"Amazing Grace." I am not sure about Latter-day Saints, but I never much thought of myself as a "wretch." Still, I can relate very well to the part that says:

Through many dangers, toils and snares,  
I have already come;  
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.<sup>10</sup>

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9. Retrieved from <http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/c/c197.html>.

10. "Amazing Grace," no. 584, *Worship* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1986).

May it be so for each of us, and for all of us. To each of my Latter-day Saint friends—active, committed, struggling, or excommunicated, with a strong testimony or holding on by your fingertips—I hope I can help each of you be a better Mormon, and I thank each of you for having made me a better Catholic. My testimony has been enhanced by the struggles and the witness of each and every one of you. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.