MORMON/CATHOLIC DIALOGUE: THINKING ABOUT WAYS FORWARD

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Introduction

I would like to begin with an image. There is a tree in the middle of a barren field. A rod of iron extends from it. People jeer from a large building bounded by a river nearby. Those holding on to the rod ignore the jeering from the building and partake of the tree's sweet fruit, but there are some who heed the jeering and become ashamed even after eating the fruit, and are lost. This image is intimately familiar to so many Latter-day Saints as Lehi's dream from 1 Nephi 8 in the Book of Mormon. It is, however, a relatively new image for me. I did not grow up with the image. I do not have a strong sense of the variety of ways in which it could or does become meaningful in LDS religious contexts. I am familiar with the image in an academic context because I teach about Mormonism at a Catholic liberal arts college in Massachusetts.[1] In that context, the image of the tree of life becomes a kind of touchstone not only for what Mormonism means, or can mean, to Latter-day Saints, but also a symbol for the varying perceptions of what it means, or can mean, for Catholics to engage the Mormon tradition.

One way of looking at the image is that it points to the difficulty of dialogue. Those holding fast to the iron rod do not look back, and

1. See Mathew N. Schmalz, "Teaching Mormonism in the Catholic Classroom," *Sunstone: Mormon Experience, Scholarship, Issues and Art* 134 (Oct. 2004): 56–60.

it is at their own peril that they acknowledge the jeers from the great and spacious building. Indeed, some of my students—not all Catholic, but none LDS—see themselves as necessarily in the great and spacious building by default even though they are there not to jeer but to watch respectfully. In fact, some students might want to accompany those on the straight and narrow path on their journey, but find it too daunting to cross the river that separates the rod of iron and the straight and narrow path from the great and spacious building. I will return to this image, not because I mean to give it some definitive Catholic interpretation, rather I want to use a possible interpretation of it to frame something of the conceptual conundra and fears that accompany Catholic and Mormon efforts to engage each other.

Clearly, it is not the case that there is no habitable space between the straight and narrow path and the great and spacious building—the fact that Mormons and Catholics continue to dialogue with each other is testament to that. There are, however, asymmetries when Mormons and Catholics seek to dialogue, and those asymmetries have to be recognized and appreciated. In their general outlines, Catholicism and Mormonism do share some similarities. Both have an all-male priesthood, both emphasize the importance and necessity of rituals of initiation. Both are led by a leader who is considered to be inspired under special circumstances. Both Catholics and Mormons place high importance on the family and associated virtues of chastity and fidelity. But it is also clear that both the Catholic and LDS traditions have very different histories and have developed in very different cultural contexts. Moreover, the theological perspectives of both traditions differ, as does the very role of theology itself in what it means to consider oneself Catholic or Mormon. Catholicism and Mormonism do not have a similar number of adherents, nor do they share the same geographical expanse. The texts they share are few in number and are read through different lenses.

My goal in this short essay is to think about ways forward for Mormons and Catholics to engage each other. I do not intend to list a whole host of

issues that Mormons and Catholics could profitably talk about—though I will certainly mention some. Instead, what I want to focus on are various considerations in dialogue—considerations that acknowledge the asymmetries and difficulties of dialogue while still reaffirming its necessity. To that end, I would like to perform a particularly asymmetrical act by using words and images from the sacred texts from Mormonism to frame what are in my view three essential considerations in thinking about how to move forward with Mormon and Catholic dialogue.

This is asymmetrical on a number of levels: obviously I am not LDS and, as I have mentioned earlier, LDS texts do not have the same significance for me as they do for Mormons. I am also certainly not putting myself forward as some sort of academically astute interpreter, much less an authoritative one. But asymmetries are inevitably part of any human effort at communication, and any effort at dialogue needs not only to acknowledge them but to work through them.

Critical Self-Awareness

Let us begin with the first consideration: critical self-awareness. I would like to quote from Mosiah 4:19:

> For behold are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have, for both food and raiment, and for gold, for all the riches we have of every kind.

King Benjamin's sermon contains powerful statements about social justice, about concern for the poor, and about our own obligations to one another. The principles that King Benjamin articulates definitely mirror and complement central themes in Catholic social teaching such as solidarity, subsidiarity, and the proper use of property. But in the passage I just quoted, there is a broader principle implied that has to do with what I would call critical self-awareness—an awareness, simply, that we are similar to those we find different.

In the class I taught in 2015 on Mormonism, one student had a former high school teacher who was LDS and stated that she was quite eager to come to class to speak about what it was like to be Mormon. The offer was made with good and gracious intent, but the idea of a "bring a Mormon to class day" or "Mormon show and tell" made me feel uncomfortable. I was also concerned with the questions my students might ask. Indeed, I had asked students what questions they would like to pose to a Latter-day Saint, and there were questions about polygamy in the celestial kingdom, DNA testing and the Lamanites, and horses in the Book of Mormon. When some students asked these provocative questions, I queried how they would feel if they were asked about the sexual abuse scandal in Catholicism. Not the same thing, many of them insisted; they were asking about Mormon doctrine, Mormon belief. Questions about the sexual abuse scandal were different—they had nothing to do with Catholic doctrine or the Catholic Church's claims about itself. I told them I wasn't so sure that they were that different—critics of Catholicism argue that the sexual abuse scandal was the direct result of celibacy and particular and peculiar Catholic attitudes concerning authority. But my point beyond this was a more fundamental one about critical self-awareness. For me the issue was being critically self-aware of the power dynamics surrounding dialogue. In one sense, what I wanted my majority Catholic group of students to reflect upon is how they would feel if they were singled out to speak to some of the more controversial issues surrounding Catholicism and how that might apply to how they would treat or engage a Latter-day Saint who was speaking about her faith in a context in which she would be effectively singled out as some kind of exemplar or spokesperson on difficult or controversial issues.

In thinking about a way forward with Mormon/Catholic dialogue, it seems to me that many opportunities for dialogue also involve asymmetrical power dynamics. One can think of LDS missionaries not just in foreign countries but also in many parts of the United States or Catholics in Mormon-majority contexts. But it also forces us to think

about hidden power dynamics in everyday encounters in which Catholics and Mormons seek to understand each other. In those contexts, some of the hardest questions concern what appears to be different, strange, or other, if not necessarily in a threatening way, then in a way that is often thought to be a barrier or obstacle. But what King Benjamin's sermon reminds us is that often times what we perceive to be other or different merely reflects back what are uncomfortable realizations about ourselves.

Interpretative Charity

If critical self-awareness is a first consideration in thinking about moving forward with Catholic/Mormon dialogue, I would like to offer as a second consideration: interpretative charity. Joseph Smith, in the concluding lines from the King Follett discourse, said:

> You don't know me, you never will. You never knew my heart. No man knows my history. I cannot do it. I shall never undertake it. I don't blame you for not believing my history. If I had not experienced what I have, I could not have believed it myself. I never did harm any man since I have been born in the world. My voice is always for peace. I cannot lie down until my work is finished. I never think evil nor think anything to the harm of my fellowman. When I am called at the trump and weighed in the balance, you will know me then. I add no more. God bless you. Amen.[2]

In reflecting on this passage, it seems to me that much depends on how we read it: "YOU DON'T KNOW ME, YOU NEVER WILL," emphasizing a sarcastic or confrontational tone, or "you don't know, me you never will," which reflects a softer, almost weary, admission of the limits to any effort to "know" what lies in the heart of someone else. Of course, the chief feature of the King Follett discourse is Mormonism's remarkable and quite powerful vision of the afterlife—Joseph Smith states that the

2. Stan Larson, "The King Follet Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 16–17.

first principle of consolation is that we are immortal, and he describes the endless burnings of exaltation.[3] But he concludes this discourse in an equally remarkable way—a way that, at least to my ears, speaks of the interpretative charity that is due each other as we discuss religious issues. The interpretative charity that Joseph Smith asks for himself is based upon his own critical, and I would say painful, self-awareness of his own controversial status during his own time. But he also extends that interpretative charity to others—not just in wishing everyone peace, but in articulating what is a very inclusive vision of salvation, at least when compared to conventional Protestant and Catholic Christian visions of salvation prevalent during that time.

Charity is most necessary when defending our beliefs. Mormonism and Catholicism have strong and complex traditions of apologetics. And it indeed can be argued that defending one's own religious tradition is a positive obligation for believers—Mormon and Catholic alike. After all, to extend the argument, at stake is not our own personal sensitivity, tender though it may be, but truth: Truth with a capital T. In this sense, debating what is true is the highest form of charity because it addresses central questions about the nature and destiny of all human beings. What interpretative charity means or can mean depends upon the context of dialogue, and upon the critical self-awareness that is brought to it. But what I would suggest is that dialogue as debate or apologetics has limited utility, at least in the present context. All too often, we judge before we understand and argue before we hear what the other person is saying. Specifically, the consideration of interpretative charity does mean assuming that the other person has good reason for believing what she or he believes, and that she or he believes it sincerely. What this kind of interpretative charity allows is a space for appreciating how Mormonism and Catholicism find life and meaning in the lives of individuals. It creates a

3. Ibid., 8.

space to know one another's testimonies and histories as testimony and history, not as error or heresy.

A Willingness to Tarry

This brings us to the third consideration, which is phrased in a slightly different way than the preceding two. The third consideration is "a willingness to tarry." I have to admit that my phrasing is intentionally idiosyncratic but hopefully evocative on some level. I have always been struck by the use of the word "tarry" throughout the sacred texts of the LDS tradition—there is much about tarrying, who's tarrying where, when to tarry, when to not tarry. For example, Doctrine and Covenants 7:1–3 speaks about when to tarry:

> And the Lord said unto me: John, my beloved, what desirest thou? For if you shall ask what you will, it shall be granted unto you. And I said to him, Lord give unto me the power over death, that I may live and bring souls unto thee. And the Lord said unto me: Verily, verily, I say unto thee because thou desirest this thou shalt tarry until I come in my glory, and shalt prophesy before nations, kindreds, tongues and peoples.

On one level, this verse is a prophetic intervention in what is for some a Christian mystery, whether the apostle John is still alive. But what also follows in both the Gospel of John (chapter 21) and the Doctrine and Covenants version of the story is an admonition to Peter: "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?" Peter wants salvation quickly, he wants things done quickly. But John realizes that he must tarry. In particular, he must tarry to bring the gospel to as many as possible. But it is this notion of being with, of tarrying, that is important for us to appreciate as Catholics and Mormons who live together, work together, and wish to understand each other. We need to tarry, to abide, to be present—to hang out, as my students would say. Because it is in the context of that closeness that new understandings may arise, new pathways for speech, for dialogue, and for sharing.

The kind of tarrying together I mean here is not of the activist kind, such as agitation surrounding Proposition 8 in California, where many Mormons and Catholics joined forces. Instead, the kind of tarrying of which I speak is of the more hidden kind—the kind that involves working together on the job, helping one another in need, and expressing the desire to become friends. That kind of tarrying, a hidden kind, such as that associated with John—as the Doctrine and Covenants describe him—is perhaps the best form of witness to the Gospel that we can all give.

The foregoing discussion, as I have framed it, does beg a crucial question: what is Catholic-Mormon dialogue about? And I hesitate to give some sort of definitive answer to that query simply because individual Mormons and Catholics will be motivated by different intentions. Some will want to understand because they are curious or compelled, some will want to work together more honestly and with greater compassion; still others will want to reflect on the similarities and differences between the Mormon and Catholic visions as a way of probing the diverse ways in which God is understood and followed. For all of them, I would submit, critical self-reflection, interpretative charity, and a willingness to tarry are helpful means to understand the process.

My interest in Mormon/Catholic dialogue stems from my wish to understand what is a powerful religious vision for millions of people and how it reflects back to me, often in oblique ways, elements of my own tradition. As a Catholic who participates in a tradition that has very strong notions of authority, I can see similar possibilities in tensions in the LDS tradition. In the mystical dimensions of Mormonism, in its belief in testimony and prophecy, I can see elements both similar to and different from Catholic forms of mysticism in which prophecy is both explicitly claimed and implicitly offered. But I am also a scholar of comparative religions and both Mormonism and Catholicism are, simply put, religions worthy of study and appreciation in their own rights.

I have pursued an asymmetrical approach to Catholic/Mormon dialogue by trying to engage some of the Mormon tradition's sacred texts.

This reflects part of my belief that we should engage with each others' religious traditions, even if that engagement is limited, partial, and subject to correction and change—as my own remarks surely are. For example, I would be especially interested in how Latter-day Saints would engage elements—whether they be rituals or texts—from the Catholic tradition. Such a reciprocal approach would be most productive if mutual and framed appropriately.

I began my reflections speaking about Lehi's vision of the tree of life, and my initial take was that it was a challenging vision to those who see themselves as outside the LDS tradition. But there are other ways of understanding the vision beyond simply seeing it as some sort of geography of salvation. I think Catholics and Mormons would both agree that the tree of life exists, that it can and does symbolize something meaningful and profound. I also know many Catholics who feel themselves jeered at by people in the modern equivalents of the great and spacious building, so the image in some ways can work well for a particular kind of Catholic sensibility that resists secularism and modernity. But for our purposes, perhaps the most significant aspect of Lehi's dream is the mist of darkness that can soon envelop all of us if we stray from the straight and narrow path. There is the rod of iron, of course, but there are also many helping hands. Indeed, we could perhaps extend the vision to see those hands extended across the river, making a bridge of human connection in and through the darkness.