

An Open Letter to our Mennonite and Catholic Colleagues

We are this year initiating what we hope will become an annual event—a joint Mennonite Catholic commemoration of Michael Sattler's martyrdom on May 20, 1527.

Michael Sattler has long been recognized as a martyr and founder in the Amish and Mennonite tradition. Our ability to now also recognize him as a martyr in a Catholic community opens a new page in our shared history.

How this has come about is the result of events which can only be regarded as the direct leading of the Holy Spirit, they were so unexpected and otherwise unexplainable.

They began with Arnold Snyder's biography of Sattler published by the Institute of Mennonite Studies in 1984, which clearly documented the Benedictine roots of Sattler's reform efforts. This was followed three years later by Abbot Eoin de Bhaldrath's essay, based on Snyder's book, entitled "Michael Sattler, Benedictine and Anabaptist", published in a leading Catholic scholarly journal, *The Downside Review*.

This was followed a decade later by what can only be described as a modern miracle—a formal ecumenical dialogue between Mennonites and Catholics at the international level which produced a final report entitled *Called Together To Be Peacemakers* published jointly by the Mennonite World Conference and the Vatican in 2004. That was followed four years later by an even more surprising document, a joint Mennonite Catholic position paper submitted to the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation in May 2011.

But how can Mennonites and Catholics actually be peacemakers if we remain divided, and how can we be united if we do not come to peace with the martyr deaths of the 16th century, often at Catholic hands, on whose heroic witness the present-day Amish and Mennonite communities are based? The polemics of the Reformation era, both

verbal and physical, are a blot on the Church's history, one that must be recognized and dealt with.

Mennonites who regard their Catholic brothers and sisters as products of a long ago 'fall of the Church', and Catholics who regard Mennonites, and the members of other independent communities based on adult commitment, as heretics will both need to re-view their histories if the Christian community as a whole is ever to become a peacemaking force in the world.

The wounds the events of the 16th century inflicted on the Church are still open, despite having occurred nearly 500 years ago. We cannot change the past, but we can change our perception of it, and these sentences from *Called Together To Be Peacemakers*, written jointly by Mennonite and Catholic leaders, surely point the way forward:

"The experience of studying the history of the Church together, and re-reading it in an atmosphere of openness has been invaluable...[We both] hear the challenge to become architects of a future more in conformity with Christ's intentions when he said, 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.' Given this commandment Christians can name the errors in their history, repent of them, and work to correct them.

"We need to be aware that we have developed significant aspects of our self-understanding and theologies in contexts where we have often tried to prove that we are right and they are wrong. We need historical research that helps us to see both what we have in common as well as to responsibly address the differences that separate us."

We at the Michael Sattler House have come to believe that Catholics can now regard Michael Sattler as an early martyr witness to the values of social justice and freedom of conscience which be-

came official Catholic doctrine at Vatican II—in the *Declaration on Religious Liberty*, and in *The Church in the Modern World*.

We also believe Mennonites and Amish can now view Michael Sattler not only as one of their major founders, but also as one who brought with him the riches of the pre-Reformation tradition in which he was formed, and on which many of their own traditions are based.

To view Sattler in this way is not merely an easy capitulation to the false ecumenism that believes our differences don't really matter. It is instead to recognize that he exemplified the best in both traditions, and that he combined them into a new 'lay monasticism' which has survived for nearly 500 years, producing the first fully nonviolent non-celibate Christian community in the Church's history.

Although Michael Sattler was critical of many of the practices of the medieval Church, his focus was on social justice, not on anti-Roman polemics. He offered a positive message, an alternative to what he and many others, especially the common people, had rejected.

He and they had come to understand from the tragic experience of the Peasants Revolt that social justice can be achieved only when lay Christians commit themselves to following Christ without compromise—as the Benedictines had in the past—and that doing so requires uncompromised nonviolence. He and they were martyrs for beliefs that vast numbers of Christians now also hold.

The time for mutual accusations of heresy is past. Judging others, both inside and outside the Church, rarely if ever helps them—or the persons who judge. What does help is listening, as St. Benedict instructed his followers to listen, “with the ear of the heart.”

Surely if members of the long-estranged Mennonite and Catholic communities can listen together with the ears of our hearts the wounds of the past can be healed and we can together become truly a peacemaking Church.

May 20, 2012

Anniversary of Michael Sattler's Martyrdom

*More information about Michael Sattler available
at www.MichaelSattlerHouse.org*