

Pope's visit recalls common beliefs between Catholics, Quakers

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At first glance, the Catholics and the Quakers seem to have little in common. The Roman Catholic Church is the embodiment of religious ritual, establishment, hierarchy, and the largest religious body in the world, with 1.2 billion members.

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) is the embodiment of religious simplicity, based on silence, with no ritual, where anyone in a meeting for worship may offer spoken ministry, an ultra-reform element of 17th-century Christianity, based on group decision-making by a "sense of the meeting" of everyone present, and one of the smaller religious bodies in the world with 400,000 members.

Yet the Pope's visit reminded this Quaker that many of us from different religious backgrounds share some common beliefs. Two in particular come to mind in this instance — the possibility of mystical religious experience and the practice of service to others.

To those who watched Pope Francis in Philadelphia, there was certainly an element of mysticism present. And his belief in service to others was obvious in his love for people, regardless of whom or what they may be.

As the Chestnut Hill Quaker Meeting said in an open letter to the pope: "Your messages throughout your visit recognizing the poor, the immigrant, the family, the environment and the champions of peace and justice resonated deeply. Though we worship in a different manner on the surface, we recognize and embrace a fellow traveler in the Spirit that unites us all."

But the pope also reminded us of something else — religious freedom. In his eloquent remarks at Independence Hall, Pope Francis said, "The Quakers who founded Philadelphia were inspired by a profound evangelical sense of the dignity of each individual and the ideal of a community united by brotherly love. This conviction led them to found a colony which would be a haven of religious freedom and tolerance. That sense of fraternal concern for the dignity of all, especially the weak and the vulnerable, became an essential part of the American spirit."

Jim Powell, senior fellow at the Cato Institute, puts it more bluntly in "William Penn, America's First Great Champion for Liberty and Peace. "During the late seventeenth century, when Protestants persecuted Catholics, Catholics persecuted Protestants, and both persecuted Quakers and Jews, Penn established an American sanctuary which protected freedom of conscience. ...

For the first time in modern history, a large society offered equal rights to people of different races and religions," Powell wrote.

One historic event in Philadelphia in 1734 assured the right to religious freedom in Pennsylvania — and it involved the Catholics and the Quakers.

John Andrews Gallery describes it in the Sept. 24 Philadelphia Inquirer published just prior to the pope's arrival: "Religious Freedom. William Penn paved the way for Pope Francis. When Pope Francis celebrates Mass in Philadelphia on Sunday, he will be indebted to an event that occurred 286 years ago.

"In 1729, a Catholic priest — a Jesuit like Pope Francis — came to Philadelphia and in 1733 built a chapel for Catholic worship. ... Citizens protested to the Governor, reminding him that the celebration of the Mass in public was against the laws of the British Empire. And indeed it was —everywhere except in Pennsylvania.

"The General Assembly, dominated by Quakers, affirmed in 1734 that Penn's Charter of Privileges in 1701 provided freedom of religious worship and that included Catholics. And so public mass proceeded in the chapel at 4th and Walnut Streets where Old St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church is today."

Old St. Joseph's describes its origins this way on its website: "... William Penn's 1701 Charter of Privileges made the Quaker city unique. No where else could Catholics enjoy public worship and growth to the extent possible in 18th century Philadelphia....Old St. Joseph's was the first urban Catholic church in the British Colonies."

Ninety years after Penn issued his Charter of Liberties, a new nation adopted the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution, which begin: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the exercise thereof...." (December 15, 1791)

Maybe it takes the People's Pope to nudge us out of our complacency and remind us of some of the more important things in life. Be accepting and tolerant of others. Embrace the mystical aspect of life on earth. And appreciate our religious freedom -- many people can't.

So, thank you, Pope Francis. Come again. Anytime.