

Pondering our common humanity

Nov 24, 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

I try hard not to address purely spiritual topics in this space very often, knowing The China Post is a secular newspaper that welcomes readers of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints. Today's column is an exception to the type of observations I usually offer.

Regular readers of this space on Sundays already know that I am a Catholic priest ("shen-fu"). I am sorry that I still feel it necessary, by the way, to attach that reminder for the Mandarin word for "priest."

Many friends in Taiwan, and no criticism against them for it, do not understand the technical difference between priest, pastor, minister, and related words in English. This surely holds true for the meaning of "Catholic" and "Christian."

I am forever explaining to my students that for most of the world's English language speakers, a Christian is any believer in Jesus Christ. A person in a group or denomination that accepts Jesus as Lord and the Son of God is a Christian.

Catholics thus are indeed Christians. What some of our brother and sister Christians locally should call themselves in English is "Protestants."

There is nothing shameful in being a Protestant. "Protestant" refers to a massive series of events in Europe that we call the Protestant Reformation. That historical protest, or reformation, more or less began with the publication of The Ninety-five Theses in 1517 by Martin Luther, a former Catholic priest. Reformers similar to Luther in spirit included John Wycliffe and John Calvin, to name but two. The schism within Western Christianity, lasting (regrettably) till today, began at that time.

As turmoil gathered steam, these religious reformers commanded considerable following and protested in many ways against the sin and corruption of the Catholic Church at that time. Political factions within countries and at times within protesting groups were also a part of the story. In Germany alone, whole swaths of the country wound up Lutheran, and whole swaths remained Catholic.

My grandfather was born into a Lutheran family in Germany in 1881 and emigrated to the United States as a boy. Years later, my Dad was a devout Lutheran when he met my mother. Only later did he become a Catholic. Before and after, he was a Christian through and through.

All Christians believe in the power of prayer. This belief comes as a part of the gift of Faith. Prayer, we believe, is not merely for those for whom we pray. Prayer is very much for us, for ourselves as well. When we pray, we seek strength in our weakness and comfort in our sorrow.

Words cannot express the grief that we've all been feeling since the first moment we learned of Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) and of the indescribable suffering it has brought to the Philippines.

Last Monday's China Post carried a photo of Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-bin in a crowd of Filipinos praying for victims of the typhoon. He was quoted as saying that this is a time when the people of Taiwan should put aside personal differences with the government of the Philippines and fully support humanitarian aid to the country. He pointed to the many contributions Filipino workers have made for many years to our society, our families, and so on.

Thank you, Mr. Mayor. Whether we are Christians or not makes no difference. We would all do well to carry out your sentiments. Photos of Taiwan military craft and personnel rushing in with desperately needed supplies and assisting in medical efforts attest to the generosity and care of all in Taiwan.

At the same time, those of us who are Christians, Protestants and Catholics alike, now see an opportunity to dig deeply into the reservoirs of our Faith, and unite. Our entire biblical tradition, from the Book of Genesis and the story of Joseph and his brothers to the powerful laments of the Psalms, supports us with our desire to become better brothers and sisters for one another at a time like this.

The same Jesus who suffered, died and, according to our common belief, rose from the dead, expects us to be witnesses to our Faith. This Faith insists we have one creator above us all. All Christians everywhere, and all non-Christians as well, belong to one human family. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. This column is quite "religious" in its focus, as the author speaks of the history of Christianity for a culture like ours in Taiwan, which may not know much about Jesus. Although you may not be a follower of Jesus (a Christian), what is your general impression of him and his teachings?
2. One reason that "prayer" is a special word is because maybe only people who believe in God know what prayer is and how meaningful it can be. For those who do not believe in God, 'to pray' may seem a strange idea. If you'd like to answer this Q, you may: what does prayer mean to you?
3. After the terrible typhoon a few weeks ago in the Philippines, some people in Taiwan said Taiwan should not send aid because last year a few Filipino navy personnel shot and killed a Taiwanese fisherman. Were you surprised at this opinion? How do we separate political or nationalistic feelings from humanitarian feelings?

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