

QUEST COLUMN

WHERE HAVE ALL THE PROTESTANTS GONE?

Has anyone noticed the almost complete disappearance of Protestants from our nation? "What!" I can hear my readers exclaim, "Storck has really gone off his rocker this time. Why, just down the street there's an Assembly of God church and two or three Baptist churches and the Methodists and so on. My cousin just left the Catholic Church to become a Protestant and my niece just married one. Moreover, evangelical Protestants have many media outlets of their own and they have great influence in the Bush Administration. They're everywhere." All this, of course, is true. Except that for some time, they no longer call themselves *Protestants*, but simply *Christians*, and increasingly they've gotten Catholics to go along with their terminology.

I recall over 10 years ago when I was a lector at Mass, for the prayer of the faithful I was supposed to read a petition that began, "That Catholics and Christians...." Of course, I inserted the word "other" before "Christians," but I doubt very many in the congregation would even have noticed had I not done so. Just the other day I saw on a Catholic website an article about a Protestant adoption agency that refused to place children with Catholic parents. The headline referred not to a Protestant adoption agency but to a *Christian* one. And how often do we hear of *Christian* bookstores or *Christian* radio stations or *Christian* schools, when everyone should know they are Protestant ones?

Now, what is wrong with this? Well, it should be obvious to any Catholic — but probably isn't. Are only Protestants Christians? Are we Catholics not Christians,

indeed the true Christians? About 30 years ago, Protestants, especially evangelicals, began to drop the term Protestant and call themselves simply Christians as a not too subtle means of suggesting that *they* are the true and real Christians, rather than simply the children of the breakaway Protestant revolt of the 16th century. This shift in Protestant self-identification has taken on increasingly dramatic proportions. A recent *Newsweek* survey (Aug. 29-Sept. 5, 2005) found that, between 1990 and 2001, the number of Americans who consider themselves "Christian" (no denomination) *increased* by 1,120 percent, while the number of those who self-identify as "Protestant" *decreased* by 270 percent.

But perhaps I am getting too worked up over a small matter. After all, are not Protestants also Christians? Yes, I do not deny that. But usually we call something by its most specific name.

Protestants are theists too, but it would surely sound odd if we were to refer to their radio stations and bookstores as *theistic* radio stations and *theistic* bookstores. Language, in order to be useful, must convey human thought and concepts in as exact a way as it can. And, in turn, our thoughts and concepts should reflect reality. As Josef Pieper noted, "if the word becomes corrupted, human existence will not remain unaffected and untainted."

Moreover, words often convey more than simple concepts. A certain word may seem only to portray reality, but in fact it does more. It adds a certain overtone and connotation. Thus, it is not a small matter whether we speak of "gays" or of homosexuals. The former term was chosen specifically to inculcate acceptance of an unnatural and immoral way of life. When I was an Episcopalian, I was careful never to speak of the *Catholic* Church, but of the *Roman* Catholic Church, as a means of limiting the universality of her claims. I always called Episcopal ministers *priests*, again as a means of affirming that such men really were priests, in opposition to Leo XIII's definitive judgment that Anglican orders are invalid and thus that they are in no sense priests. Perhaps because of these early experiences, I am very aware of the uses of language to prejudice and control arguments, and I am equally careful now never to call Episcopal ministers priests or refer to one as Father So-and-So. And I think we should likewise not go along with the evangelical Protestant attempt to usurp the name Christian for themselves. They are *Protestants*, and public discourse should not be allowed

obscure that fact.

Apparently, though, it is the case that some Protestants call themselves *Christians*, not out of a desire to usurp the term, but out of an immense ignorance of history. That is, they ignore history to such an extent that they really don't understand that they *are* Protestants. Knowing or caring little about what came before them, they act as if their nicely bound Bibles had fallen directly from Heaven and anyone could simply become a Christian with no reference to past history, ecclesiology, or theology. The period of time between the conclusion of the New Testament book of Acts and the moment that they themselves "accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior" means nothing. Even Luther or Calvin or John Wesley mean little to them, since they can pick up their Bibles and start Christianity over again any time they want. These souls may call themselves simply *Christians* in good faith, but they are largely ignorant of everything about Church history. They do not understand that Jesus Christ founded a Church, and that He wishes His followers to join themselves to that Church at the

same time as they join themselves to Him. In fact, one implies and involves the other, since in Baptism we are incorporated in Christ and made members of His Church at the same time.

So let us not go along with the widespread practice of calling our separated brethren simply *Christians*. They are *Protestants*. Let us begin again to use that term. It is precise. It implies Catholic doctrine in the sense that it suggests that such people are in *protest* against the Church. Moreover, it forces them to define themselves in terms of, rather than independently of, the One True Church. And if we do resume referring to our separated brethren as *Protestants*, perhaps a few of them might even be surprised enough to ask us why — and then, behold, a teachable moment!

Thomas Storck

Thomas Storck is a Contributing Editor of the NOR and author, most recently, of *Christendom and the West: Essays on Culture, Society and History*.

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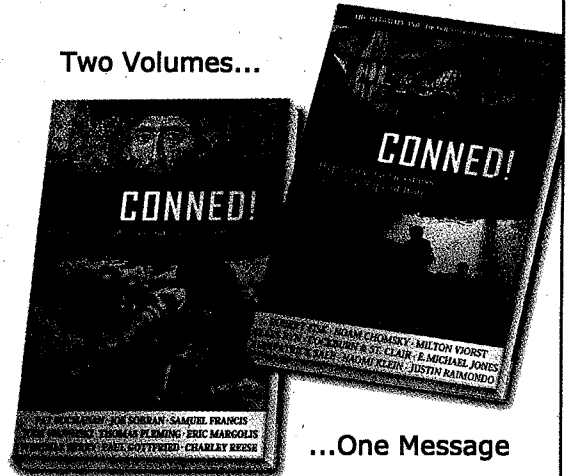
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