

When it comes to the Church, Protestants say the darndest things

It's baffling how much even learned Protestants get wrong about Catholicism. They seem to do it most when they think they're disproving the Church's claims. They're like a linebacker who celebrates tackling a receiver when a running back on the other side of the field runs the ball in for a touchdown.

The distinguished Lutheran theologian Peter Scaer recently put up a series of messages on his Facebook page warning his fellow Lutherans against the appeal of Catholicism. He warned them against thinking the Catholic Church was the original Church and the Lutherans a new body that began at the Reformation.

They don't reject the Roman Catholic Church because they reject the truth. These are serious Christians. They reject her because their tradition deeply formed them in the love of God. It satisfies them personally, pastorally and doctrinally. It formed them. The Catholic knows their Lutheran tradition makes some severe mistakes about what God wants of them, but also that they love him and serve him as zealously as we do.

But still, gosh, even someone as learned as Scaer won't or can't give us our due. He wrote, "Peter was the first among the apostles, a George Washington type, but Paul carried out his ministry without constantly quoting the one who was thought to be the holy father." This seems to be a definitive claim for him, because he used it again in the second message. There he wrote, "Yes, Peter was primus, but look at the Acts of the Apostles, where the others went out, and did not always need to quote Peter."

The Catholic scratches his head or rolls his eyes. Whoever expected them to? That's not the way it worked then. It's not the way it works now. St. Paul was the group's main thinker and wrote more than his brother apostles, because that's what he did. He didn't need to quote Peter because he wrote with the authority of an apostle appointed by Christ. Peter was doing other things. Popish things.

The Catholic understanding of the petrine office has never, ever, depended on the idea that the pope is the main source of teaching. Some popes teach. Most don't. The modern popes, starting with Leo XIII, have done a lot more teaching than their predecessors, but they don't have to.

The "Petrine charism" is that of ensuring "the unity of faith and communion," the First Vatican Council's *Pastor Aeternus* teaches. The pope, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger explained, "has a specific ministerial grace for serving that unity of faith and communion which is necessary for the Church to fulfil her saving mission."

Yet a learned Protestant theologian asserts the fact that the early Christians didn't quote Peter much (as far as we know) as a sound, convincing rebuttal to the belief that Jesus appointed Peter and his successors the head of the Church on earth. As I say, you scratch your head. I expect a Lutheran to reject Catholic teaching, as his father Luther did, but I also expect him to know what that teaching is.

I've run into this myself. Even old friends say the most absurd things about the Catholic Church. They'll send me something the pope said they disagree with and demand to know how I can believe this man infallible. I explain the doctrine of papal infallibility, and then a few months later they do the same thing.

They're not stupid, and they're not even very anti-Catholic. But they see the Church through some weird, distorting filters

or lenses. I don't understand it, but it is, as the expression goes, a thing.

Of course, Catholics do the same thing in reverse. Some think they see a mistake and start firing. Here's an annoying example. Too many apologists still (I would have thought the argument discredited by now) like to say that while Jesus said the Church is one, Protestants have split up into thousands of groups. "Hahahaha, Gotcha!" they say. That's, sorry to say this, dumb. Or at least very unfair. Every Protestant believes the Church is one. He just disagrees with the Church in the way he understands what it means to be one.

Even learned Protestants get basic things about Catholicism wrong. I don't think there's a good cure for it. Teaching doesn't seem to work very often. Best to try to explain, but then take it to prayer to commend the critic to God's instruction. Maybe these mistakes pay the Church a compliment. The Thing itself is so hard to damage that the Church's critics look for easier targets.

David Mills writes from Pennsylvania.