

The mob comes for Scott Hahn (and others)

He's popular, the commenters hooted, but he's not a real scholar. Flipping through Facebook, I came across a mob dumping on Scott Hahn. It's a popular sport among Catholics. Find a symbol for the "other side" and let him have it. If you can take down the symbol, you take down the movement. Or so the mob thinks.

I'm writing about it now because it's a useful example of a very bad Catholic habit. Catholics (like Americans in general) complain a lot about polarization and division. While creating it themselves. This is one of the main ways it's created. (I should say that I know Scott and have friendly conversations on the rare occasions we run into each other. But if I thought his critics were right, I'd just keep quiet.)

Catholics on all sides do it. A few years ago, I [wrote about](#) Hahn and Father James Martin as men who had become symbols of all that is best in the Church or of the Church's every major problem, depending on what side you're on. They're either heroes with whom people will identify themselves or villains they will battle. Not many Catholics seem to like both. (I do.) No one seems to read them for what they offer without taking a side.

I suggested people don't invoke them unless they have a genuine need to say something about them and can engage them with generosity even in disagreement. About 98% of Catholics who currently use those names as slogans do not need to mention them at all. This was not, let me say, an entirely welcome idea.

Christians have been doing this since almost the beginning. St. Paul wrote the Church in Corinth that he'd heard "there

are rivalries among you. I mean that each of you is saying, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to [Peter],' or 'I belong to Christ.'" At least they didn't say, "Down with Paul or Apollo or Peter!" but they would have gotten there had Paul not told them to cut it out.

Let me use Scott Hahn as an example. The mob's evidence was his popularity and his popular books. They didn't seem to understand, or care to consider, the challenge of writing that kind of popular book. What's called "haute vulgarization" can be harder to write than pure scholarship, because it requires two skills: a greater understanding of the subject in order to simplify it for readers who are not scholars, and an understanding of what the readers need and will understand.

It may also be, as it seems to be for Hahn, a choice to write the pastoral or evangelistic book before the scholarly. That should be something to admire. Rare is the scholar who values the average reader more than his scholarly reputation.

And it worked. I keep meeting people who read "The Supper of the Lamb." A good many of them were Protestants who'd found their own churches' teaching on the Eucharist too thin. Some of them entered the Church.

Then there is his scholarly work. Among other works, he published a volume in the Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library, a substantial enterprise not given to publishing nobodies. Substantial scholars not given to praising nobodies praised "Kinship by Covenant."

The Jesuit James Swetnam, a professor at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, called the book "masterly in its basic insight." The Anglican reviewer in the Catholic Biblical Quarterly called it a "magisterial biblical theology," and other scholars said similar things.

On a friend's Facebook page, Lewis Ayres, a theology professor at Durham University in England, said he disagreed with Hahn

on some things, "but he's a very smart guy, I always enjoy talking with him, and he does much good." He wants to bring Hahn to lecture at his university, which he would not do if the hooters were correct.

In other words, a serious scholar, a scholar of weight. Not what the mob, none of whom were scholars themselves, thought. Or said. I'm not sure they actually thought about the matter at all. They were hounds on the fox's trail.

Scott Hahn is a Catholic leader with a target on his back. He's not the only one. So are Father James Martin, Bishop Robert Barron and the Holy Father himself. So are the National Catholic Register for some and the National Catholic Reporter for others.

Every side follows the 13th of Saul Alinsky's famous "rules for radicals": "Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it." He explained: "Go after people and not institutions; people hurt faster than institutions."

What to do? The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously said, "Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent." Catholics might take up the rule, "Of whom you need not speak, of him you must be silent." Nothing would be lost if the mob put down their pitchforks and torches, and much gained. The chance to listen and learn, for one thing.

David Mills writes from Pennsylvania.