

Straightened out

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 11, 1999](#) issue

Protestants used to joke about denominational differences. They don't anymore, maybe because most don't know what makes the denominations different from one another, and thus can't provide fodder for jokes. Catholics used to joke about religious orders. They don't anymore, maybe because there are so few members of them, or because they don't wear distinctive garb of the sorts that used to inspire jests.

Back when they did, a familiar joke had a Benedictine (O.S.B.) and a Dominican (O.P.) arguing about which was the best religious order. After having fought to a draw, the two decided to take it to the Lord in prayer. As their prayers rose in the chapel, a piece of paper floated down, bearing a message: "They are both good religious orders. (Signed) The Lord, S.J."

The Society of Jesus also won out in a recent M.E.M.O column in which I assigned the Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis to the Jesuits. Two Protestant graduates of Aquinas called me on this. The fact that no Catholic complained suggests either that a) Catholics don't read the *Christian Century* (which I know is not true) or b) they are too apathetic about religious orders to care or c) they don't know Aquinas is Dominican or don't know the difference between a Jesuit and a Dominican establishment.

I should have known better. For two years I was assistant pastor at a church across the street from the institute's earlier home in River Forest, Illinois. Later I spoke at the school when it had moved to Dubuque. Within the past five years I have lectured at Aquinas's new and thriving home base in St. Louis. I got confused because for a short time I was on the board of a fledgling school of theology at the Jesuit St. Louis University.

At any rate, there are good reasons why a Lutheran should be able to distinguish a Dominican entity from a Jesuit one. After all, John Tetzel, the preacher of indulgences who helped set Luther off, was a Dominican. Albertus Magnus ("the great") and Thomas Aquinas ("the greatest"), despised by Luther but admired at the

University of Chicago where I hang out, spread Dominican influence, as did mystics like Meister Eckhart ("the big one" these days), who keep influencing us. Meanwhile, we know what makes the Jesuits Jesuits and not Dominicans.

Misplacing a Dominican school was not my only gaffe of the month. In my newsletter Context I wrote that Richard Marius, the latest Luther biographer, had earlier written a biography of Erasmus. Readers were quick to remind me that his subject was Thomas More. I suppose I blurred the images of those two heroes of mine (but not of Luther!) on the principle of "once you've seen one Renaissance humanist, you've seen 'em all." Sorry.

It seems my various errors have led my editorial colleagues not to want to have anything to do with me. Friend Foy Valentine tried to mail me something at the Century's 407 S. Dearborn Street address. It was returned: "Addressee unknown."

So there. After more than four decades of having my name on the masthead I have fallen to "Addressee Unknown" status. Knowing the editors' standards, I can only sense that they have put me in the penalty box and I'll have to work my way back into "Addressee Known" graces. I will do this by errorlessly pointing out in this column errors others have made instead of making my own.