

Reformation Weekend: 5 Centuries Later: Healing Between Lutherans & Roman Catholics

October 28-29, 2023

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I'm standing here and holding *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* by Roland H. Bainton, a Methodist church historian who taught at Yale and wrote one of the best biographies of Luther that I've read. We buy these in bulk, so I have copies to give folks who are interested in learning about Luther, Lutheran theology, and the Reformation. If **you're** interested, please let me know, because I have (or **will** have ☺) a copy for you!

When I was a young girl in Roman Catholic parochial school I read a lot of biographies, but certainly **not** one about Martin Luther! We had a very nice school library, but I doubt there was anything Reformation-related in it. Martin Luther may as well have been the devil. He was presented as the one who divided the Church and led a band of renegades off into the wilderness of heresy. I had a little friend, Susie, who was Lutheran. In my mind she may as well have been an adherent of Hare Krishna. I didn't blame **her** for the error of her ways, but I certainly never worshiped with her either. When we had a Saturday night sleepover, her mom always promised to get me home in time to go to Sunday morning Mass at Holy Family. Because of this, I have never even set foot inside Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Florham Park. How we change over time!

Reformation Weekend is a fitting and wonderful time to talk about the reforms Luther instituted in the Church, and also the way the Roman Catholic Church has initiated some of those **same** reforms, over the centuries, including through the Counter-Reformation (in the 100 years or so after Luther's death) and through Vatican II (1962-1965). For instance, the Roman Catholic liturgy and Scripture lessons are now in whatever the language of the people is, instead of in Latin. Often, **both** elements of Holy Communion (Bread and Wine) are offered to the faithful at Mass. Roman Catholics are now **encouraged** to read and study the Bible, rather than being **discouraged** from doing so. The priesthood of **all** the faithful is acknowledged as rooted in Baptism rather than in Ordination. We began to discuss this in our joint lectionary study with the people of St. Denis this past Wednesday and will continue at our next study on Nov. 8. Join us if you're interested in the fine points!

I sit in our ecumenical discussions and realize that the ins and outs of theology aren't always the driving factors in the hearts of the folks in the pew, either here or at St. Denis. Pastoral practice, being included in or excluded from the worship life of our brothers and sisters, especially at tender moments of celebration or grief, like weddings or funerals, is what shapes our attitudes and stirs our emotions. My own godmother, Shirley, had to be married in the rectory rather than the sanctuary in the 1940's/ post-WW II era because my Uncle Phil was Methodist. When I was growing up, our around-the-corner Roman Catholic neighbor didn't attend his son's wedding because he was marrying a divorced woman. My oldest sister was married at the reception venue instead of the church because her fiance's annulment didn't come through in time and they were both in the Armed Forces, due back for duty out-of-the-country. We've all heard or been part of stories like that.

And so we can forget or stay oblivious to the healing that has occurred between our denominations in these past few decades. The Holy Spirit calls us to live in the present, not in the past, to forgive old slights, to confess our own prejudices, to acknowledge the importance of our Lord Jesus' prayer the night before He died (John 17.20-23). He implored Heaven:

*I'm praying not only for them
 But also for those who will believe in me
 Because of them and their witness about me.
 The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind—
 Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you,
 So they might be one heart and mind with us.
 Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me.
 The same glory you gave me, I gave them,
 So they'll be as unified and together as we are—
 I in them and you in me.
 Then they'll be mature in this oneness,
 And give the godless world evidence
 That you've sent me and loved them
 In the same way you've loved me. (The Message)*

2017 was the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, when Martin Luther tacked 95 theses onto the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg. The church door was the university bulletin board and the theses were points of academic debate. They were for internal academic discussion and

were not an intentional manifesto meant for Pope Leo X. But the Holy Spirit has Her ways, and the printing press had been invented by Gutenberg more than 50 years before. It was like somebody snagged the flyer off the church door and ran to Kinko's down the block, ordered 500 copies, and express-mailed them all over Europe.

It wasn't long before the Pope found out that an articulate, bold monk in Germany was denouncing the sale of indulgences and saying that if the Pope had the keys to Purgatory, he should open the gates free, out of Christian charity, instead of charging! (The famous jingle is, "Every time a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from Purgatory springs!") The money flooded in as peasants paid for loved ones to be released from their suffering in Purgatory, or at least for their "sentences" to be reduced. That cash was then sent to Rome for the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica, which was falling into ruins. A new spirit of nationalism had sprung up in Europe in this time of the Renaissance, and Germans weren't so happy about all those indulgence fees heading to Italy, another non-religious historic development that helped drive the waves of Reformation.

There was a lot of mud slung back and forth between Luther and the Pope. Luther frequently called the Pope the anti-Christ ("them's fightin' words") and the Pope referred to Luther as a wild boar rooting around and ruining the Lord's vineyard. Cartoons were popular in the centuries before photography, and very **unflattering** cartoons appeared of both the Pope and Martin Luther. There was a war of words and a war of images, and the war basically continued from the 16th to the 20th century, with Roman Catholics and Lutherans excommunicating each other and wholesale condemning each other's teachings. It took a long time, but in the last few decades of the 20th century and the first couple decades of the 21st century, much progress has been made toward healing and reconciliation between our two communions.

Hugely, the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation created a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in 1999, "effectively resolving one of the key conflicts of the Reformation. It stated clearly that the 'earlier mutual doctrinal condemnations' with which Catholics and Lutherans

accused each other of heresy at the time of the Reformation, do not apply to the teaching of the dialogue partners' today."¹ **What does that mean?** It means that Lutherans and Roman Catholics share the belief that we are made right with God, our sins are forgiven, eternal life is ours, not by anything **we** have done or ever **could** do, but by what **God** has done in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ! **We are saved by grace**, the love of God that comes to us as pure gift, not earned reward. The Good News is that we are all sinners, but we have a Savior, Jesus Christ, God made flesh for us. In the words of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9, NRSV)

During 2017, the 500th anniversary year of the beginning of the Reformation, we discussed with our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters a document produced by both our denominations called *From Conflict to Communion*. It acknowledges that Martin Luther's intent was not to divide but to reform the Church. It emphasizes that the similarities between us are so great that the differences pale in comparison. We continue to work toward the day when we will all share Eucharist together. *From Conflict to Communion* says:

Together Catholics and Lutherans confess: "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works..." ...[T]he message of justification... tells us that as sinners our new life is solely due to the forgiving and renewing mercy that God imparts as a gift and we receive in faith, and never merit in any other way.²

How pleased our God must be that we agree, finally! Let us pray along with our Lord Jesus:

²¹ ...that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:21-23, NRSV) Amen

¹"Ecumenical meeting in U.S. to follow up on Joint Declaration on Doctrine of Justification," The Lutheran World Federation, 21/3/2019.

² JDDC, quoted in *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran/Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*, Justification, para. 124.

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