

Remembering 500 Years of Reformation

John Borelli
October 30, 2016
Holy Trinity Parish

Remembering and Re-membering

“Remembering” these days in church circles refers to the healing of memory. Recall the message of Pope John Paul II for the World Day of Peace 2002, the January 1st message in the year after our 9/11: “There is no peace without justice and no justice without forgiveness.” We do not forget the past; we survive by learning to live with the past and move on to new futures. John Paul II developed the idea of “remembering the past” as a “healing of memory” so that we can move forward in fostering justice for all.

Today is Reformation Sunday, the last Sunday of October and the Sunday closest to October 31, the day traditionally associated with Martin Luther’s posting of the 95 theses on repentance, confession, grace, and salvation on the door of the college church of Wittenburg. For centuries it was a major time for celebration by Protestants of their freedom to become the Christian traditions that they represent. Reformation Sundays for the 17th year of the past four centuries were particularly important, and the nature of the celebrations in those years gives evidence of the state of relations among the churches. These were celebrations of a fracturing or splintering of the church turned into ways of unifying particular communities. I refer you to page six of *One Hope: Re-Membering of the Body of Christ* (Augsburg Fortress and Liturgical Press, 2015):

1617 was a year of consolidation of Lutheran and Reform Churches, the 30 Years War was yet to get underway
1717 was a time of minting coins
1817 was a date for rising German unification, Prussian defeat of Napoleon
1917 during World War I and need for German encouragement
2017 something new is being proposed

Reformation Sunday 1960, which was also October 30 as this year: On Reformation Sunday, October 30, 1960, clergy affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, the National Association of Evangelicals, Protestants, and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, and the Dallas-based Citizens United for a Free America used their sermons to urge their congregations to vote against Kennedy and thereby “keep any Catholic from being elected President of the United States – ever.” *The New York Times* reported that Harvey H. Springer, the Southern Baptist turned "cowboy evangelist," planned to release 1.5 million volunteers "to call on voters and give them our literature on Kennedy" and that he had "a secret little letter that is going to defeat him."

On Tuesday, Pope Francis is traveling to Sweden to be received by Archbishop Antje Jackelen and participate with Lutheran World Federation officials in Lund in a common commemoration, a co-memorization, of the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. This is something new. Interviewed as to what he hoped to accomplish, he answered—to become closer. The Church of Sweden has retained the historic episcopacy. The nation is Lutheran in name though it is largely secular. The Catholic population is largely immigrant and includes many Poles.

Re-membering, with the hyphen, as it appears in the title of *One Hope* is a play on this word for what we are seeking to do in the ecumenical movement. We are re-membering, reconstructing the one church by drawing the members back together. The difference between 1054 and the mutual excommunications between the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople and subsequent events and what happened in 1517 and the excommunication of Luther and the reform in Germany that took on a life of its own is all the difference there is between schism and condemnation. Despite of living apart for 1000 years and more, officially Catholics and

Orthodox generally did not consider one another heretics but schismatics. However, the charge of heretic was hurled wildly between Catholics and Lutherans, then among Protestants, and everyone involved in the Reformation and that continued over the past five centuries. Even today, while 90% of Lutheran churches belong to the Lutheran World Federation, the largest non-member church is the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Officially for this U. S. church the pope is still the anti-Christ. I am pretty sure that the Lutheran churches belonging to the Lutheran World Federation do not hold such a view. Certainly they don't in Sweden.

For the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther back in 1983, Pope John Paul II had offered very positive reflections to accompany the common statement of the international dialogue. There was considerable good will by then among ecumenical Lutherans and Catholics.

For that commemoration of Luther's fifth centenary, the Lutheran-Catholic Commission for Unity, the international dialogue co-sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican's Commission for Promoting Christian Unity, issued a statement on Luther that reflected the consensus of Catholic and Lutheran recent scholarship. It concludes with a reflection on how Vatican II took up several of Luther's important concerns and transformed these into major achievements:

1. An emphasis on the decisive importance of holy scripture for the life and teaching of the Church (*Dei Verbum*, The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation)
2. The description of the church as "the people of God" (*Lumen Gentium*, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, II)
3. The affirmation of the need for continued renewal of the church in its historical existence (*LG*, no. 8; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, The Decree on Ecumenism, no. 6)
4. The stress on confession of faith in the cross of Jesus Christ and of its importance for the life of the individual Christian and of the church as a whole (*LG*, no. 8; *UR*, no. 4; *Gaudium et Spes*, The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 37)
5. The understanding of church ministries as service (*Christus Dominus*, Decree on the Pastoral office of the Bishops in the Church, no. 16; *Presbyterorum Ordinalis*, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests)
6. The emphasis on the priesthood of all believers (*LG*, nos. 10-11; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, no. 24)

7. The commitment to the right of the individual to liberty in religious matters (*Dignitatis Humanae*, The Declaration on Religious Liberty)

8. The use of the vernacular in the liturgy, the possibility of communion in both kinds, and the renewal of the theology and celebration of the Eucharist (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, The Constitution on the Liturgy).

This year, Pope Francis is going to a Lutheran country and joining in a service of commemoration to mark the beginning of a year of remembrance for Catholics and Lutherans. Pope Francis believes that actions are more important than words. We have much to reflect on this point—how can we Catholics and Lutherans join together in actions that make a difference?

It might be helpful to recall what Luther was concerned about. In a word, he was concerned about repentance, and he found solace in the words of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans. This is why October 31, all hallows' eve is so significant. Pilgrims were filling the treasuries of wealthy lords and bishops to view the relics of the saints and to pray for healing and the forgiveness of sins. Pope Leo X, one of the Medici popes, was using the occasion to sell an indulgence for the remission of all sins to raise money to expand St. Peter's basilica. Think about it the next time you enter that beautiful church. These circumstances, plus the unrest in Europe, especially in Germany for freedom from the Holy Roman Empire, contributed to the significance of Luther's challenge to the whole enterprise of indulgences. In other words, his theological/pastoral concerns provided the needed match to the political concerns of the powerful lords of Germany.

Luther did not want a split but a dialogue. If we review a few key theses from the 95 that he posted, we can see this.

From the 95 Theses:

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said "Repent," he intended the entire life of believers be repentance.

2. This word cannot be understood as sacramental penance, that is, as the confession and satisfaction that are performed under the ministry of priests.

3. It does not, however, refer solely to inward penitence; indeed, such inward penitence is nothing, unless it outwardly produces various mortifications of the flesh.

8. The penitential canons are imposed only on the living, and no burden ought to be imposed on the dying, according to them.

9. Therefore, the Holy Spirit acting in the Pope does well for us, in that, in his decrees, he always makes exception of the article of death and of necessity.

30. None are sure of the reality of their own contrition, much less of the attainment of the full remission of sins.

37. Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the Church and this is granted by God, even without letters of indulgence.

54. Wrong is done to the word of God when, in the same sermon, an equal or longer time is spent on indulgences than on the word of God.

62. The true treasure of the Church is the Holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God.

68. They (indulgences) are in reality in no way to be compared to the grace of God and the devotion of the cross.

In 1983, the U. S. Catholic-Lutheran Dialogue produced a 24,000 word statement “Justification by Faith,” which concluded with a remarkable four paragraph declaration of consensus on the doctrine of justification by faith. This was the key doctrine on which all stands and falls for Lutherans. If we truly believe that Christ’s action has saved us and that we should live an upright Christian life focused on this truth, then, indulgences and sacramental penance are a distraction. Here is what the Catholic and Lutheran representatives in the U. S. could say together already in 1983.

Declaration

161. Thus we can make together, in fidelity to the gospel we share, the following declaration: We believe that God's creative graciousness is offered to us and to everyone for healing and reconciliation so that through the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, "who was put to death for our transgressions and raised for our justification" (Rom. 4:25), we are all called to pass from the alienation and oppression of sin to freedom and fellowship with God in the Holy Spirit. It is not through our own initiative that we respond to this call, but only through an undeserved gift which is granted and made known in faith, and which comes to fruition in our love of God and neighbor, as we are led by the Spirit in faith to bear witness to the divine gift in all aspects of our lives. This faith gives us hope for ourselves and for all humanity and gives us

confidence that salvation in Christ will always be proclaimed as the gospel, the good news for which the world is searching.

162. This gospel frees us in God's sight from slavery to sin and self (Rom. 6:6). We are willing to be judged by it in all our thoughts and actions, our philosophies and projects, our theologies and religious practices. Since there is no aspect of the Christian community or of its life in the world that is not challenged by this gospel, there is none that cannot be renewed or reformed in its light or by its power.

163. We have encountered this gospel in our churches' sacraments and liturgies, in their preaching and teaching, in their doctrines and exhortations. Yet we also recognize that in both our churches the gospel has not always been proclaimed, that it has been blunted by reinterpretation, that it has been transformed by various means into self-satisfying systems of commands and prohibitions.

164. We are grateful at this time to be able to confess together what our Catholic and Lutheran ancestors tried to affirm as they responded in different ways to the biblical message of justification. A fundamental consensus on the gospel is necessary to give credibility to our previous agreed statements on baptism, on the eucharist and on forms of church authority. We believe that we have reached such a consensus. [Published in *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 13/17 (October 6, 1983) and in *Building Unity*, Ecumenical Documents IV, edited by Joseph A. Burgess and Brother Jeffrey Gros, FSC (New York: Paulist Press, 1989) 217-290.]

Again, this is remarkable that it was 1983, sixteen years before the international agreement, the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, that would be signed in Augsburg in 1999. Those who forged that 1999 historic document identified the 1983 U. S. report as key resource. In 1983, U.S. Lutheran and Catholic participants in our U.S. dialogue were not naïve. They had produced a very long report in 165 numbered paragraphs with 218 notes. Perceiving that a long road lay ahead to absorb this text, they asked wisely, “What can we do in the meantime?” Specifically, how can Lutherans and Catholic proceed to live together and incorporate into ecclesial life the fact that we can agree on the fundamental doctrine that split us apart five hundred years ago? Keep in mind that Lutherans and Catholics began meeting in dialogue in the United States since 1965. They had produced reports in the twenty-two years before the 1983 one, and they knew that most Catholics and Lutherans would not read their reports.

Since the 1999 signing of the international agreement, other churches have accepted the Joint Declaration on Justification by Faith. Furthermore, since 1983, some churches in the United States have entered into arrangements of full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The major Lutheran church in the U.S. and a major member of the Lutheran World Federation is a “bridge church” in the ecumenical movement. Due to these developments, Protestants and Catholic alike should ask, what does this consensus on justification by faith, proposed in 1983 and signed in 1999, mean for parish and congregational ecumenism today? What does this consensus mean because justification by faith for Lutherans and Catholics, and the others who have signed on, is the motherlode of Christian insight of an element of the core of Christianity?

If indeed there is agreement on the doctrine of justification, now signed officially in 1999, then “Lutherans and Catholics should jointly rediscover the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ for our time.” I just quoted one of five imperatives recommended by Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity in its 2013 report, *From Conflict to Communion*, produced in preparation for a common commemoration of the Reformation. This is such a timely proposal, rediscovering the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ for our time, especially with Pope Francis repeatedly calling us to share the joy of the gospel.

Here are the five imperatives recommended for us to consider in our common celebrations of 2017. These are taken from the consensus text: *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran Catholic-Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* (Available on both the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican [Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity] websites):

The first imperative: Catholics and Lutherans should always begin from the perspective of unity and not from the point of view of division in order to strengthen what is held in common even though the differences are more easily seen and experienced.

The second imperative: Lutherans and Catholics must let themselves continuously be transformed by the encounter with the other and by the mutual witness of faith.

The third imperative: Catholics and Lutherans should again commit themselves to seek visible unity, to elaborate together what this means in concrete steps, and to strive repeatedly toward this goal.

The fourth imperative: Lutherans and Catholics should jointly rediscover the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ for our time.

The fifth imperative: Catholics and Lutherans should witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world.

How do you get the achievements in ecumenical dialogue into the lives of the churches?

This task has not faded away over the past fifty years; just the ecumenists, those doing the task, have gone to their eternal rewards. Skilled, and usually elder, ecumenists over the years have come to the podium to provide wisdom from trials and errors of the past and perhaps offer a new insight on how the present moment is truly different from all recent history. The topic has not changed in those fifty years, only the elder ecumenists, who almost refuse to fade away, change.

The hardworking Lutheran-Catholic relationship for the last fifty years has stood out as a remarkable emblem of the change in church relations from preceding decades and centuries. The ecumenical movement is a century old, and we have had fifty intensely ecumenical years in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. There continue to be firsts, like what we will witness tomorrow in Sweden when Pope Francis is traveling to Lund. There have been uniquely significant events too, like the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith, on October 31, 1999. Yet, despite the important firsts, we have had a great deal of repetition of events too. Since ecumenists never fade away, ecumenism for parish life must be reinvented for every generation. Proposals for parish ecumenism neither fade away nor die, they are repeated.

Being Attentive in the Present

Spiritual accompaniment comes up often with Pope Francis. When he visited the Lutheran church in Rome in November 2015, he responded to three questions. One came from the Lutheran wife of a Catholic: Since we are “*not being able to partake together in the Lord’s Supper,*” she asked: “*What more can we do to reach communion on this point?*” I don’t have time or space to give his full reply, but in the last part he presents a question that Lutherans and Catholics can ask together:

I respond to your question only with a question: how can I participate with my husband, so that the Lord’s Supper may accompany me on my path? It is a problem to which each person must respond. A pastor friend of mine said to me: “We believe that the Lord is present there. He is present. You believe that the Lord is present. So what is the difference?” — “Well, there are explanations, interpretations...”. Life is greater than explanations and interpretations. Always refer to Baptism: “One faith, one baptism, one Lord”, as Paul tells us, and take the outcome from there. I would never dare give permission to do this because I do not have the authority. One Baptism, one Lord, one faith. Speak with the Lord and go forward. I do not dare say more.

If life is greater than explanations, and we should make pastoral decisions on the way, together as Lutherans and Catholics, what then is happening on the way? We need to be attentive to the ways that we Christians can accompany one another in life.

Conclusion

In anticipation of 2017, Lutheran and Catholic leaders commissioned an evaluation of the past five decades of dialogue. The result was: *Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry and Eucharist*, Commissioned by the U. S. Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (Available on the USCCB and the ELCA websites). Here is what it suggests for next steps

1. Implement consequences of the 32 agreements on church, ministry and Eucharist
2. Create a process and timetable for addressing remaining issues

3. Expansion of opportunities for receiving Holy Communion together
4. Address the moral issues that are often deemed to be church dividing
5. Deepen many common activities already well-established
 - a. Prayer: Week of Prayer for Unity and many other opportunities for prayer and study together
 - b. Education: develop common religious education opportunities, bible study, seminary and post-doctoral education, review of common statements
 - c. Collaboration: permanent working groups and commissions; serving those in need together; develop ways for collaboration in prayer, study and service; enter into covenants

How should Lutherans and Catholics go about fulfilling these imperatives and living their ever-improving relationship? In 2014, representatives of Augsburg/Fortress Press and Liturgical Press convened six of us, three Catholics and three Lutherans, to put together a parish/congregation resource. It is one thing to suggest that parishes might study. This is the book cited earlier and made available to you today: *One Hope*

It is one thing to take a major text like *From Conflict to Communion* or *Declaration on the Way*, which is interesting to pastors, scholars, and readers with interest in theology, history and dialogue, but it is another thing to ask the parishes focus on these or other texts from the dialogues and joint committees, instructive as they are, and expect wide interest. There may be, but most people are interested in the ordinary concerns of human life and how our faith, as we understand it as Catholics or Lutherans, instructs us and helps us with daily life.

The six of us were given a limited amount of time, Monday lunch to Friday dinner, to come up with a resource that was readable and usable in parishes and congregations. I think we did. Together we Lutherans and Catholics confess that the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. We sing together about the church's one foundation. We also share one hope for restoration of unity. We are dedicated to re-membering the body of Christ, and re-membering is used in two ways—reassembling the church and recalling in the sense of the healing of memory

of how and why we are separated. We selected six major activities to human life: breathing and praying, eating and drinking, singing and worshipping, forgiving and reconciling, serving and seeking justice, and dying and grieving. We approached these themes in evangelical and sacramental ways citing dialogue sources on what we share in common. This resource, *One Hope* (Augsburg/Fortress & Liturgical Press, 2015), is aimed at the dialogue of life, that is, how we accompany one another through the great moments of life. This is spiritual ecumenism at its best—prayer, reading, reflecting, and thinking together. Thus, parishes and congregations can form prayer groups, reading groups, bible groups, support groups, marriage groups. It is all a matter of someone organizing it.

As I think back over the years, when Lutherans and Catholics recalled the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in 1980 or the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther in 1983, and we had a few aids from the churches, the dialogues, and the leaders, and I compare with the coming commemorations of 2017, what is different and what is the same? What is new and what has not faded away? What is truly different is that we are now living under the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith. We have settled the major dispute, not by lifting past condemnations but coming to realize that those past condemnations are not applicable. What Catholics have meant by sanctification, Lutherans have meant by justification to mean how we accept through faith what Jesus' death and resurrection has meant for our salvation and how we are expected to live and grow in faith accordingly.

So, our situation in 2016 is somewhat new, both because of the agreement on justification and because of the leadership of Pope Francis. Speaking to a delegation from the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue of Germany, Pope Francis spoke specifically on how we might joint together during this year of commemoration:

Today ecumenical dialogue can no longer be separated from reality and from the life of our Churches. In 2017, Lutheran and Catholic Christians will jointly commemorate the Fifth Centenary of the Reformation. On this occasion, for the first time, Lutherans and Catholics will have the opportunity to share one ecumenical commemoration throughout the world, not in the form of a triumphalist celebration, but as the profession of our common faith in the Triune God. Therefore, at the heart of this event, common prayer and the intimate request for forgiveness for mutual faults will be addressed to the Lord Jesus Christ, together with the joy of making a shared ecumenical journey. This refers in a meaningful way to the document produced by the Lutheran-Catholic Commission for Unity published last year and entitled *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*. May this commemoration of the Reformation encourage all to take, with the help of God and the support of his Spirit, further steps toward unity and not to simply limit ourselves to what we have already accomplished. (December 18, 2014)

What then is the same nowadays compared with commemorations and opportunities for parish ecumenism? Most of the activities that worked years ago, work today. Sharing sermons, joint services, joint cooperative projects, study groups, reading groups, bible study groups, prayer groups, and other ways for Lutherans and Catholics to serve, explore, and pray together. It is always good when we attend events during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity or when we have Good Friday services together, whether the last words of Jesus or stations of the cross. But, we need to develop our relationship and live our ecumenical relationships throughout the year. Catholic and Lutheran pastors will find that they have more in common through their work than what separates them. Catholic and Lutheran faithful want to understand and live the gospel with equal enthusiasm. October 31, 2016, to October 31, 2017 provides us with a great opportunity to grow and develop parish ecumenism.