

**Reformation Sunday:
Moving beyond the Fifth Centenary of Luther's Reformation**

John Borelli

Holy Trinity Catholic Church
Georgetown
October 29, 2017

Introduction

Today is Reformation Sunday, the last Sunday of October, and traditionally observed by Protestants as commemorative of the origin of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Tuesday is Reformation Day, October 31, and the 500th anniversary of events associated with Martin Luther that gave rise to divisions within the church and divisions within the Holy Roman Empire. Probably some may feel very strongly about because it touches on their Protestant identity or for us challenges our Catholic identity. Let me also remind those who have no memory of 1960 that Reformation Sunday (in that year October 30) was the day for the launch of a stop Kennedy movement from Protestant pulpits. They feared papal involvement in the political arena. Some of these critics would in three years' time be singing the praises of Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, in the aftermath of his intervention in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

So this anniversary may even tickle our historical curiosity. I hope it may awaken and deepen a commitment to Christian unity within us. One feature of October 31, 2017, is certain: it will not be like any previous centenary of Luther's Reformation.

We already had a prelude of how very different this centenary will be. Last year, in 2016, at the end of October, Pope Francis travelled to Sweden, and there with Bishop Munib Younan, President of the Lutheran World Federation, co-hosted an ecumenical gathering opening a year of "common commemoration." This is what the international Commission for Unity of the

Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican chose for describing what is happening in 2017, “Common Commemoration.” It is in their 2013 document, “From Conflict to Communion,” available on several websites.

There is one change as we look to the future hidden in the picture from Sweden last year of Bishop Younan, Lutheran bishop of Palestine, and Pope Francis—both bishops are bishops from the global south! The Catholic Church has long been associated with the global south in Latin America, Africa, India, the Philippines, and other parts of Asia. Did you know that 28 per cent of Lutherans are in Africa (mainly in Tanzania and Ethiopia), 15 per cent in Asia (mainly Indonesia and India) while only 6 per cent live in North America out of 80 million worldwide. Half of these Lutherans still live in Europe, Germany and Nordic countries mostly, and 90% are represented in the Lutheran World Federation. (“From Conflict to Commemoration, *The Tablet*, 16 October 2016).

The ecumenical movement emerged in the nations of the North Atlantic at the end of the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century. It is a product of the modern age, and our first fifty years of dialogue have developed from the engagement of churches with modernity. With Pope Francis urging attention to the church at the periphery, with our focus more on global dialogue, and with emphasis on local churches throughout the world providing their own pastoral solutions and incorporating their own local traditions into Christian life, we can expect the ecumenical movement to spread out and take various new forms in the global south. Just as Lutheran-Catholic success in dialogue leads to enrichment of both communities with the gifts of each, we can expect enrichment also from various localities around the globe for the church worldwide.

The Five Centenaries of the Reformation

The centenaries of the Reformation Day are quite relevant in an overview on the images of Luther during the five centuries. In 1617, the University of Wittenberg celebrated the memory of this event with festivities. Actually, it became a celebration of the Reformation in all Protestant regions and in the entire society. Since 1617, the 31st of October became Reformation Day, in spite of the fact that other events were more important for the establishment of Protestantism. Tragically, in 1617, Europe on the eve of the 30 Years War, when German lands became Europe's stomping grounds, in the words of historian Steven Ozmont (*A Mighty Fortress*, 2004).

In 1717, in the context of Pietism, Luther was praised as the religious genius, who had concentrated Christian religion to an immediate experience of Jesus. Luther's writings were not so much in the focus as his individual religious sentiment. Coins were also minted for the first time as commemoratives, and thus solidifying the whole Reformation world.

In 1817, within the philosophy of the Enlightenment, Luther was regarded as the bringer of the light of reason, the liberator from the darkness and of the superstition of medieval times and of the papal slavery. The German Enlightenment often referred to Luther, but normally not to his writings but to his revolutionary actions. It celebrated Luther as the guardian angel of the liberty of reason and the conscience and the exemplar of a de-clericalized world. Ironically, this striving for freedom was also directed against the authority of the Bible and the authority of Luther himself as a preacher of the Gospel. In Hegel's philosophy of history, the Reformation was the starting point of the modern age. Modernity is characterised by the search for freedom, which, according to Hegel, had its breakthrough in Luther's work. Citing a presentation by Fr. Peter Neuner, an elder in ecumenism, priest and theologian retired from the University of Munich, who prepared one of the talks at Georgetown University last month, the church historian Adolph von Harnack put it at the starting point: "The era of modernity began with Luther's

reformation. It started October 31st 1517 with the bangs of the hammer at the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg.” We are in no way certain if Luther actually posted the 95 theses. He may not have nailed them, but he mailed them to bishops, and principally his bishop, the Archbishop of Mainz.

Thus, in 1817, everyone, certainly most Germans and their allies, was celebrating the fourth Anniversary of defeat of Napoleon’s German Campaign, and German pride was growing toward nationhood. Luther had become a figure of the whole society, especially in Germany; he even transcended the Lutheran Church. According to Neuner, everyone, Jews, Catholics, Swiss-Reformed Protestants and the few agnostics of the time were welcomed to the celebrations of the beginning of the new age. They gathered in the jubilee of 300 years of freedom, tolerance and modernity.

Protestantism was viewed as the church of the modern age. Protestantism claimed to preserve what is positive in the traditional Christian message. Protestantism is not a new church; it is the genuine apostolic Church. Protestantism liberates the message from all the human traditions. It removes all misuses—worldly power of the popes and bishops, the clergy acting as mediators between God and the faithful. Protestantism elevates Christianity to a higher level. The Christian doctrine and the Church are now realised within the context of freedom, personality and individual decision. Even today in Germany the term “Church of freedom” is used frequently as a self-definition of Protestantism in contrast to the Catholic Church.

The celebrations in 1917 were overshadowed by World War I, and Luther appeared as the hero of nationalism. Prussian authorities praised him as the true German, as a shining example to the soldiers in the trenches and killing fields in France. As the humble monk had resisted the Roman pope and the Spanish-speaking Emperor Charles V., so the German soldiers should resist the enemy and they ultimately would achieve the victory. We know that history

went differently. At the same time there began the Luther-Renaissance only to be hijacked by National Socialism later in the century. What was consistent through four centenaries was the anti-papal theme. How very different 2017 is with a common commemoration!

Fr. Neuner's presentation on the five centenaries, from where I got some of this material, is available on the website for the conference that we held at Georgetown University last September 14-15: "1517-2017: Lutherans and Catholics, Then and Now." Other comments on previous centenaries are in "From Conflict to Communion."

The international Lutheran-Catholic Commission actually put out a second document entitled "From Conflict to Communion," a companion to the report of the commission on unity. This resource is "Common Prayer." We need to do more and more of that. In fact, Lutheran Bishop Donald McCoid and I, who have given several presentations together this year, are thinking of proposing worldwide that Reformation Sunday become Common Commemoration Sunday from now on, provided, of course, that Lutherans agree to the change of what began essentially as their festival.

In Lund, last year on Reformation Day, Bishop Younan and Pope Francis reminded us of how far we have come:

Fifty years of sustained and fruitful ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans have helped us to overcome many differences and have deepened our mutual understanding and trust. At the same time, we have drawn closer to one another through joint service to our neighbors - often in circumstances of suffering and persecution.

Furthermore, Bishop Younan and Pope Francis urged us to do something for this centenary: "We call upon all Lutheran and Catholic parishes and communities to be bold and creative, joyful and hopeful in their commitment to continue the great journey ahead of us. . . Rooted in Christ and witnessing to him, we renew our determination to be faithful heralds of God's boundless love for all humanity."

The Legacy of Luther and Catholics

Cardinal Walter Kasper, formerly head of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity but now retired, produced a small book on Martin Luther, *Martin Luther: An Ecumenical Perspective* (2016). In it, he writes:

Not only the history of the reception of the last council [that is, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, or Vatican II as it is popularly known], but also the history of the reception of Luther has long since not come to an end, not even in the Protestant churches. In Protestantism, there is also a forgetfulness of Luther and alienation from him. Think about his teaching concerning the Last Supper and his Eucharistic piety. It shows that Luther decidedly held to a realistic understanding of the Eucharist against Zwingli and it demonstrates that he cannot be consigned to a religion of interiority. Think, moreover, about the mature Luther's understanding of office, his fundamental openness to the historical episcopacy, as well as his statement that he would carry in his hands and kiss the feet of the pope who allows and acknowledges the gospel. Therefore, it is not possible to appeal only to the polemic statements of the young Luther. Rather, for the sake of ecumenical progress, we must and can also take up anew the question of how to understand church, office, and Eucharist and the relationship between them. (p. 35)

Cardinal Kasper called for the joint reception of Luther and Vatican II. The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council took place over fifty years ago. Called by Pope John XXIII to be an opening to the world and to other Christians, it was ecumenical from the beginning. "Change" and "Dialogue" were the two key concepts that allowed us to reverse centuries of standoff between Protestants and Catholics. At Vatican II, Catholics made the irreversible commitment to ecumenism at that time.

Years ago, I heard a Paulist Priest first say, "Vatican II was really Luther's Council." I believe that is very much true. The Council of Trent, which took place in Luther's century, opening before his death, did not condemn any reformer by name but only positions that were unacceptable and took action on some of the problems that Luther had identified. Vatican I was in no way ecumenical and in some ways more withdrawn from the world at large than it should have been. Vatican II was a different story. Let me just list eight different themes that could be seen as a positive response to Luther's suggestions and which Luther would have welcomes:

1. Decisive Importance of Bible in Life and Teaching of the Church (*Dei Verbum*, “The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation”)
2. The Church as “The People of God” (*Lumen Gentium*, “The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” chapter II, nos. 9-17)
3. The Continued Renewal of the Church (*LG*, no. 8; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, “The Decree on Ecumenism,” no. 6)
4. Confession of Faith in the Cross of Jesus Christ (*LG*, no. 8; *UR*, no. 4; *Gaudium et Spes*, “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” no. 37)
5. Church Ministry 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 Priesthood of All Believers (*LG*, nos. 10-11; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, “Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People,” no. 24)
7. 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.”)

At Georgetown’s event last month, “1517-2017: Lutherans and Catholics, Then and Now,” we were treated to another Fr. John O’Malley keynote on “Luther Trent, Vatican I and Vatican II.” Here is what he said:

For me the icon of what the council stood for regarding the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Reformation but that also stood for the broader reconciling dynamic of the council is what happened a few days before the council closed. On the afternoon of 4 December 1965 Pope Paul VI presided at an ecumenical prayer service with some 200 non-Catholic observers present at the council. He prayed with them. The pope prayed with non-Catholics. It is difficult for us today to comprehend how shocking and revolutionary that event was 1965. Even four years earlier such an action by a pope would have been utterly unthinkable.

The Success of the Dialogues

Best of all, Vatican II gave birth to an era of dialogue. Bishop Younan and Pope Francis referred to fifty years of sustained and fruitful dialogue. Let’s get into the specifics of that dialogue. For example, the dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans sponsored on a national level by our churches has met since 1965. In fact, the first meeting took place in July 1965 and produced its

first document, before the final session of Vatican II convened in the fall 1965. Over the years, this dialogue in the United States has produced eleven agreements:

- Status of Nicene Creed as Dogma for the Church (1965)
- One Baptism for the Remission of Sins (1966)
- The Eucharist (1967)
- Eucharist and Ministry (1970)
- Differing Attitudes toward Papal Primacy (1973)
- Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church (1978)
- Justification by Faith (1983)**
- The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary (1990)
- Scripture and Tradition (1995)
- The Church as Koinonia of Salvation (2004)
- The Hope of Eternal Life (2010)

Notice that I highlight the 1983 agreement statement on Justification by Faith. The U.S. dialogue was a resource for this major agreement. Let me explain how the international dialogue took it up.

The international dialogue between the Holy See (the Vatican) and the Lutheran World Federation had only a little slower start but has had just as productive an output, nine agreements, over three phases, that is, through four different teams on the dialogue:

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| The Gospel and the Church - The Malta Report (1972) | Phase I |
| The Eucharist (1978) | Phase II |
| All Under One Christ (1980) | |
| Ways to Community (1980) | |
| The Ministry in the Church (1981) | |
| Martin Luther - Witness to Jesus Christ (1983) | |
| Facing Unity: Models, Forms and Phases of Catholic-Lutheran Church Fellowship (1984) | |
| Church and Justification (1993) | Phase III |
| “The Apostolicity of the Church” (2005) | Phase IV |

Note how the third phase produced only one agreement, but that one was a monumental agreement leading toward one of the most important ecumenical events in the history of the ecumenical movement: *the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)*, composed jointly by a special commission in 1997 and signed in 1999. It was signed not without some

difficulty on both sides, reservations expressed by theologians in Germany and Protestant lands and concerns expressed by officials of the Catholic Church. Thus this special commission produced a joint declaration in four years, but it took another two years and a common statement and annex before the signing could take place on October 31, 1999, in Augsburg, Germany.

Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1997)

"Official Common Statement and Annex" to the Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999)

Signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999)

The reservations and concerns actually show how monumental this signing was on the doctrine that Luther considered the one "on which the church stands or falls."

Differentiating Consensus

The joint declaration accomplished much. It is a major milestone in Lutheran-Catholic relations.

It has become an effective bridge over the Protestant-Catholic divide. It is a two-fold agreement:

1) A consensus that condemnations of the Reformation era no longer apply and 2) A common expression on justification. It was accomplished as differentiating consensus: encompassing consensus in basic truths and differing explications in particular statements that are compatible with it.

How did that work? The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999)

involves four major points of agreement on doctrine:

1. Justification is the work of the triune God: 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 us to good works
2. All are called by God to salvation in Christ; the Holy Spirit works through Word and Sacrament in the community of believers
3. We are sinners, our new life is solely due to God's forgiveness and mercy, and we receive this gift in faith, never meriting it
4. Justification stands in an essential relation to all truths of faith

It includes seven affirmations with differing understandings: 1) human powerlessness and sin in relation to justification; 2) justification as forgiveness of sins and making righteous; 3) justification by faith and through grace; 4) the justified sinner; 5) law and gospel; 6) assurance of salvation; and 7) the good works of the justified. For each of these there is a commentary from a Lutheran perspective and a commentary from a Catholic perspective. The framers of the *JDDJ* agreed that these differing perspectives were not church-dividing. Such a differentiating consensus was a lesson learned over “ecumenical time.” Experience has taught us that some agreements will not be a “total consensus” or a “simple consensus” but require

I want to show you how this differentiating consensus works with the third point: “Justification by Grace through Faith.” This is on the issue of keeping faith bound to the other two theological virtues: hope and love. With regard to hope, and our hopes for the future, the *Joint Declaration* reminds us again and again, not to separate hope from faith and love, just as we should not separate faith from hope and love, which we Catholics thought Lutherans were doing, and love from faith and hope, as Lutherans thought we Catholics were doing. Trent condemned what Catholic theologians and officials perceived to be “the vain confidence of heretics,” without naming names, fortunately. It could have been worse. Luther and Lutherans feared that Catholics believed that good works render us more and more acceptable to God and thus our acts of charity and piety are the real ground of our reception into eternal life—a doctrine of works righteousness assisted by grace that they condemned in the sixteenth century and now. We need to get beyond these crippling disputes.

The *Joint Declaration* stated that believers “place their trust in God’s gracious promise by justifying faith, which includes hope in God and love for him.” “Such a faith,” it continues, “is active in love and thus the Christian cannot and should not remain without works.” Lutherans

emphasize that “because God’s act is a new creation, it affects all dimensions of the person and leads to a life in hope and love.” Further, they believe that “such a faith is active in love and thus the Christian cannot and should not remain without works” but that “whatever in the justified precedes or follows the free gift of faith is neither the basis of justification nor merits it.”

Catholics emphasize how “in justification the righteous receive from Christ faith, hope, and love and are thereby taken into communion with him.” Further, “while Catholic teaching emphasizes the renewal of life by justifying grace, this renewal in faith, hope, and love is always dependent on God’s unfathomable grace and contributes nothing to justification about which one could boast before God,” citing *Romans 3:27*. This is how a differentiating consensus works.

Looking to the Future

In this new context of agreement on justification, in 2013, the international dialogue produced:

From Conflict to Communion as a guide for this centenary. It gives historical background and explanations and the history of the dialogue. Best of all it provides five ecumenical imperatives, which are worth reviewing. These should guide how we commemorate but also how we proceed ecumenically.

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.

Sometime later, Cardinal Kurt Koch, successor to Cardinal Kasper, proposed that perhaps a new genre, a declaration on the way, which the U.S. dialogue picked up and produced with a team of experts from both the Catholic and Lutheran Churches. They acknowledged the “holy impatience” of many faithful directly involved in Lutheran-Catholic relations, hanging on with their fingernails. So, in 2015 they produced: *Declaration on the Way*, looking into church, ministry and Eucharist. Here is what they concluded from their study:

1. Implement consequences of the 32 agreements which they identified on church, ministry and Eucharist
2. Create a process and timetable for addressing remaining church-dividing issues
3. Expansion of opportunities for receiving Holy Communion together
4. Address together the moral issues that are often deemed to be church dividing
5. Deepen common activities already well-established
 - a. PRAYER: Week of Prayer for Unity and 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; serve those in need together; develop ways for collaboration in prayer, study and service; enter into covenants; meet regularly on an ongoing basis, for example, pastors reviewing sermons and sermon themes together, bible study groups, and reading groups

Common prayer and other forms of spiritual ecumenism should not be neglected. That is another reason for the resource *Common Prayer*. More can be done in embodying the principles, such as the five imperatives and these recommendations into the daily lives of Catholics, Lutherans, and other Christians. We need to think even more concretely.

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. We 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. We could draw from what we hold in common. We 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 became separated.

Our group selected six major activities to human life: breathing and praying, eating and drinking, singing and worshiping, 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. These ordinary activities of human life, which we bless and sacramentalize through our baptism, are ways that we embody the gospel and the Christian life for each other. We drew from our agreements and other commonly held sources and encouraged reflection and joint efforts in witnessing in diverse ways the great hope that we share in Christ. “The ministry of Jesus began as a journey through the Galilean countryside,” we reminded readers at the end, and “the ecumenical movement continues the journey that began in Galilee.” This journey we live everyday through these activities. All Christians seeking the restoration of unity are on this journey together.

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—praying, reading, and reflecting together. Parishes and congregations can form prayer groups, reading groups, bible groups, support groups, marriage groups. It is all a matter of someone organizing it.

Conclusion

From the beginning of the turn-around in relations, our leaders have encouraged common prayer, bible study, joint action, regular meetings. These should characterize not only how we are Christians but how we are Catholics and Lutherans. We agree on the goals of reconciliation and

full communion as members of the church. With Pope Francis and Bishop Younan we can say, “While the past cannot be changed, what is remembered and how it is remembered can be transformed.” Additionally, as we remember together our past, we can work on new memories for our ecumenical future. We also can address together the issues at hand in need of our attention.

We can respond positively to what Bishop Younan and Pope Francis urged us to do: “We call upon all Lutheran and Catholic parishes and communities to be bold and creative, joyful and hopeful in their commitment to continue the great journey ahead of us. . . Rooted in Christ and witnessing to him, we renew our determination to be faithful heralds of God’s boundless love for all humanity.”

Martin Luther’s question 500 years ago was: “How can I find a merciful God” In Lund, Pope Francis identified it as “This is the question that haunted Luther,” and observed that “the question of a just relationship with God is the decisive question for our lives.” He concluded his homily that day in Sweden a year ago with this challenge:

As Lutherans and Catholics, we pray together in this cathedral, conscious that without God we can do nothing. We ask his help so that we can be living members, abiding in him, ever in need of his grace, so that together we may bring his word to the world, which so greatly needs his tender love and mercy.