

Disciples Seek Unity across Differences

499 years ago tomorrow, a young professor of theology in a newly-formed university in the middle of nowhere in eastern Germany invited his colleagues and students to debate whether or not the selling of indulgences – what we might call “get out of purgatory early tickets” – was consistent with the doctrine of justification of faith.

You might say that this echoes the closing words of today’s Old Testament reading from the Prophet Habakkuk: “... the righteous live by their faith.”

Many thinkers in the Church – and there was only one church in Western Europe 500 years ago – agreed that the Church needed reform ... but they did not know how to get the project rolling, until Luther came along.

The storm that followed produced what we call Protestant churches ... and 450 years of alienation and conflict.

That was the situation that I was born into ... and it puzzled me ...

- A boy on the farm next to ours was killed in an accident. The family was Roman Catholic ... I wrestled with this question: did that mean he had not gone to heaven?
- In high school, I asked a Catholic girl to the prom. My mother said, “It’s OK, but that’s far enough.”

Insights came gradually ...

While in seminary, I came into contact with Catholic thought ...

- ❖ My theology professor, who had been among the Protestant Observers at the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church, introduced us to ...
- ❖ I took part in a seminar with RC, Orthodox, and Episcopalian seminarians and faculty, where we explored common understandings of ministry together.

- ❖ I went to a retreat, where a Catholic priest sat at a piano and played his favorite Protestant hymns.
- ❖ Then, when my sister-in-law was married in a Catholic church, the priest invited me to deliver the homily.

The Second Vatican Council opened a door for dialogue between Catholics and Protestants.

In 1972, Lutherans and Roman Catholics began a dialogue that is still going on.

In 1983 – the year of Martin Luther’s five-hundredth birthday – the Catholic archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, invited congregants from the four-hundred-plus Lutheran parishes in greater Chicago to observe the event together.

Lutheran theologian Martin Marty preached at the service. He reports that “I witnessed one or two couples from most parishes, in each case one being Catholic and one being Lutheran. We saw many tears of joy and heard many testimonies about how refreshing the invitation and service had been: here, for the first time, sometimes after decades of marriage, the husband and wife were both recognized as Christians in a sanctuary.” Marty, Martin. *October 31, 1517: Martin Luther and the Day that Changed the World* (Kindle Locations 524-528). Paraclete Press. Kindle Edition.

Then, in 1999 the partners issued a *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* ...

“... we Lutheran and Catholic Christians want to take it seriously by directing our critical glance first at ourselves and not at each other. We take as our guiding rule the doctrine of justification, which expresses the message of the gospel and therefore constantly serves to orient all the teaching and practice of our churches to Christ.”

Essentially, the Catholic Church acknowledged that Luther was right in saying that we are justified by God’s grace.

In 2013, the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity issued a statement titled *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*. The document said this:

The church is the body of Christ. As there is only one Christ, so also he has only one body. Through baptism, human beings are made members of this body. (219)

The Second Vatican Council teaches that people who are baptized and believe in Christ but do not belong to the Roman Catholic Church have been justified by faith in Baptism [and] are members of Christ's body and have a right to be called Christian, and so are correctly accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church. Lutheran Christians say the same of their Catholic fellow Christians. (220)

No one who is theologically responsible can celebrate the division of Christians from one another. (224)

Fast forward to 2016 ...

- Pope Francis will be in Lund, Sweden, tomorrow to take part in a commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation—a year before the official anniversary in 2017.
- That a pope would participate in a commemoration of Luther's posting of his 95 Theses on October 31, 1517—the event usually seen as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation—is a sign of how far relations have come.

Way back in 1749, John Wesley preached a sermon titled “Catholic Spirit.” He based the message on 2 Kings 10:15 ... “If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand.”

“... although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection?

“Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?

“May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?

“Without all doubt, we may.

“Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works.”

My friends, I believe that the Lutherans and Catholics are showing us what it means to be of one heart and love alike, on order that they may forward each other in good works.

Let our prayer for those who worship together in Sweden tomorrow be modeled on Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonian Christians, which we read earlier in the service:

To this end we always pray for them, asking that our God will make them worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in them, and they in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Thessalonians 1:11–12