

Catholics and Lutherans Begin to Heal Divisions

In the News

October 31 this year marks the 500th anniversary of German monk Martin Luther's posting of 95 theses on the door of the Catholic cathedral in what is now Germany that prompted the Protestant Reformation. The Catholic Church has long since corrected the abuses against which Luther spoke. Today many Catholic scholars recognize many of Luther's contributions with respect. Protestants today have much in common with Catholics. The Catholic Church leads millions into real fellowship with Christ, and many non-Catholic Christians recognize Catholics as brothers and sisters in the faith.

Last year Pope Francis co-hosted an ecumenical prayer service in Sweden with leaders of the Lutheran Church to launch a year of celebration leading up to this historic anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.

The visit by Pope Francis was particularly remarkable, since Luther's resistance to papal authority, the sale of indulgences to purchase pardon for sins, and protest against excesses and abuses within the church led to his excommunication as a heretic, the church split known as the Protestant Reformation, and decades of brutal religious wars in Europe.

In the past, Pope Francis has painted Luther as "an intelligent man" who rightly called for reform of a corrupt, worldly church that "was not a role model [but stained by] ... greed and lust for power." At the celebration, the pope stated that "the Reformation helped give greater centrality to sacred Scripture in the church's life."

"We must look with love and honesty at our past, recognizing error and seeking forgiveness," he said, calling on Catholics and Lutherans to "mend" history.

While Catholic-Lutheran relations have been particularly marked by periods of tension and hostility in the past, Christians of all persuasions face the challenge of how to relate to those with whom they disagree.

One of the principal issues dividing Lutherans and Roman Catholics was resolved in 1999, when the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) co-signed a [Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification](#).

Relations between Roman Catholics and Lutherans took further large strides this year with the adoption of "Declaration on the Way" by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which outlines 32 "Statements of Agreement" between Lutherans and Catholics regarding church, ministry and the Eucharist.

Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden of Baltimore, the Catholic co-chairman of the joint task force of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the ELCA that developed the declaration, said he hoped the bishops would endorse it as well.

"Though we have not yet arrived, we have claimed that we are, in fact, on the way to unity," ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton said after the assembly voted overwhelmingly to approve the document. "After 500 years of division and 50 years of dialogue, ... this 'Declaration on the Way' helps us to realize more fully our unity in Christ with our Catholic partners, but it also serves to embolden our commitment to unity with all Christians."

Lutherans and Roman Catholics are still divided on other issues, such as the nature of the Universal Church, the authority of the pope, the role of women in church leadership, and the nature of the Eucharist (Communion).

Rev. Martin Junge, general secretary of the LWF, told reporters that "people feel lack of unity the heaviest around the [Lord's] table." For centuries, Christians have been barred from partaking of the Eucharist in Catholic churches. Most mainstream Lutherans practice "open Communion."

In a joint statement issued in Lund, Sweden, this week, the Roman Catholic Church and the LWF acknowledged that this has been a source of pain especially for family members "who share their whole lives, but cannot share God's redeeming presence at the Eucharistic table. We long for this wound in the body of Christ to be healed" by bringing members of both churches together at the Lord's table, "no longer strangers."

Pope Francis said that while theological differences still exist, the two churches can join forces to serve the poor and refugees, and to fight persecution of Christians. A hallmark of this pope's legacy is his effort to build bridges to other parts of the Christian family, such as the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as to people of other faiths, such as Islam and Judaism.

Rev. Jens-Martin Kruse of the Lutheran Church in Rome described the pope's approach as "walking ecumenism." In the act of "walking together," Kruse said, "we find that we have ... more in communion than we thought before."

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

John 17:20-23

[[Jesus prayed,] "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 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. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 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." (For context, read 17:11, 20-26)

We often experience conflict and division in the family of God, and unity seems elusive. Perhaps that is why, in the hours before he went to the cross, Jesus made it a top priority to pray for his followers to be one.

Questions: What does disunity in the church communicate to the world? What can we do to foster unity in the church, when we have real, substantive differences and disagreements?

1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 20-21

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free -- and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ... As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." (For context, read 12:4-7, 12-13, 20-27.)

While this passage deals specifically with the matter of spiritual gifts as God distributes them to individuals within the church for the common good, the principles of body life can also apply to how the church grows and manifests itself in various times and places. So it might be said that the church universal is undivided, and yet is expressed in various ways by different groups of people who are all members of the body of Christ.

Questions: Why are there so many different churches and denominations? What is good about the variety? What problems sometimes occur because of our differences? What do other churches or denominations add to the body that you value? What does your church or denomination add to the body that others need?

Prayer for the Unity of the Church (BCP p.818)

O God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace: Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions; take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatever else may hinder us from godly union and concord; that, as there is but one Body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so we may be all of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.