

Yesterday at Notre Dame Cathedral, Eastern Synod Evangelical Lutheran Bishop Michael Pryse and I took part in a service commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Catholics and Lutheran adherents and others from a variety of Christian denominations joined us.

The service included mixed choirs supported by the Basilica's majestic organ, sincere prayers for Christian unity, and the tangible witness of praying together. We were seeking to live out the hope of Jesus at the Last Supper, "that all might be one" (John 17.21).

Many found this a joyous occasion. But not all. The gathering troubled some. Were we about to canonize Luther and his teachings? How can we "celebrate" the Reformation, when it tore apart the fabric of Christ's church? I had several email exchanges and heated discussions with some Roman Catholic faithful.

The purpose of the event was not to glorify Martin Luther or the Reformation, as some assumed. The Prior General of the Augustinians recently noted two aspects of this watershed moment in the history of Christianity. Fr. Antón wrote, "Luther not only abandoned the Order but abhorred religious life with all his might, rejected ascetic practices and piety, rejected praying the breviary and other obligations, radically altered sacramental theology, condemned the vows and promoted the abandonment and the mass exodus of vowed religious..."

"The Order of St. Augustine, to which Luther belonged, has no reason to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation but, yes, to commemorate it. And we do it with serenity, highlighting the positive aspects that it brought about: the revalorization of the individual, the reaffirmed confidence in God, the centrality of Sacred Scripture, the bringing of the liturgy closer to the people, the development of a sense of community, a healthy secularity, and the need for reform, understood as a return to the essentials."

When planning this event, we faced a choice. One option would be to ignore the anniversary of the Reformation. Alternatively, we could acknowledge it and try, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to search out its graces as we work and pray with our fellow Christians who, since 1517, have been separated from us. The Second Vatican Council urged us to do this in its 1964 decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, "On ecumenism."

Catholic and Lutheran theologies disagree in some areas. However, the two faith communities have been working for many years to grasp and, where possible, overcome, differences. There has been progress.

The Catholic-Lutheran dialogue, for example, produced the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* in 1997. This important document clarifies our differences and points of convergence. Both faith communities agreed to a common understanding of the meaning of "justification"—the key concern of Luther—with the approval of then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

To achieve such fruitful results, much effort is necessary behind the scenes, including cultivating occasions of joint prayer and expressing common teaching. Given the drastic effects of the Reformation and the continuing prejudices and misinformation about Catholic and Lutheran

beliefs, seeking common ground is vital. This is increasingly urgent as Christianity faces exclusion from the public square. We can address the divisions within the Christian community without compromising our beliefs.

Through continuing, honest though challenging dialogue, we can faithfully work and pray for greater unity. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

True ecumenical prayer and dialogue seek common ground, but do not ignore important differences. A helpful part of that process is finding occasions where we can pray together, especially in areas that are difficult for both communities.