


REFORMATION

500

1517
to
2017



ON THE ROAD TO UNITY



October 30th, 2017 – A special day for Lutherans and Roman Catholics to come together to jointly commemorate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation by a special service held at Jurong Christian Church at 7.45 p.m.

It was a traditional Lutheran liturgical service with the sanctuary filled to the brim by Lutherans and Roman Catholics, graced by Archbishop William Goh of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese in Singapore and Bishop Terry Kee of the Lutheran Church in Singapore.



Bishop Kee shared that Martin Luther had no intention of rebelling against the church. He was intending to invite dialogue and discussion on the 95 theses, but no one came forward. In addition, his superior was both a prince and the Archbishop of 5 localities, and therefore might be politically motivated not to act on the theses. Some historians/theologians also mentioned that Martin Luther

might not have used a hammer and nails to pin the 95 theses to the door of the church, but used some sort of adhesive to stick them there. However, the image of Martin Luther using a hammer and nails have been passed on from generation to generation and might have given Roman Catholics the misunderstanding that he was rebelling against the church. On the contrary, his true intention was to bring the church back to the centrality of Christianity – Christ alone, salvation by grace through faith and not by good works. Nevertheless, because of the differences or misunderstandings between the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics, battles/wars were fought with many casualties. This saddens God, who wants to see the church united. Instead of focusing on the differences, which though there are many, we should instead focus on the many similarities that both Lutherans and Roman Catholics share; i.e., one Lord, one Faith, and one Baptism. (Eph. 4:5)

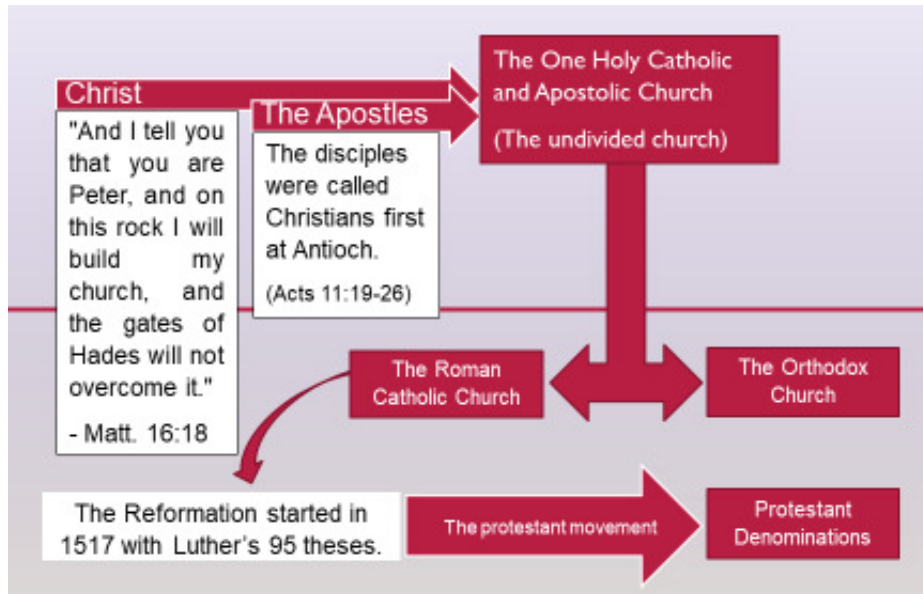


Archbishop Goh acknowledged that Martin Luther had no intention of rebelling against the church but was primarily wanting to bring back Christ into the centre. It was not that this was absent from the Christian doctrines in those days, but the church had somehow deemed this as already in the hearts and minds of the Roman Catholics who should therefore move on to doing good works. (James 2:14-18). The affable Archbishop went on to share a bit of humour saying, “That’s why Roman Catholics love to do good works.” ☺ While affirming that the central doctrine in the Roman Catholic church is still salvation by grace through faith, and not by good works, the Archbishop also cautioned that living by grace doesn’t mean continuing to live a life of sin (Rom. 6:1-2), pointing out to his listeners that even the Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, mentioned the concept of “cheap grace” in his book “The cost of discipleship”.

It is good to note the cordial atmosphere in which leaders of both the Roman Catholic church and the Lutheran church can exchange views to develop better understanding of our intersecting traditions. Ideally, the church should be united by the message of/from our Lord Jesus Christ. However, because people sin, it is a matter of historical fact that schisms in the church had to happen. As we recall 500 Years of The Reformation arising from Martin Luther’s famous act in 1517, we tend to think about the event as the greatest schism in Western Christianity whereby we have become familiar with the dichotomy of theologies between what we know today as the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church.

400+ years before Martin Luther led the theological breakaway from the Roman Catholic Church, there was the earlier Great Schism that led to the formation of the (Western) Roman Catholic Church and the (Eastern) Orthodox

Church from the original Undivided Church (“One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church”) that was first headed by the Apostles in the New Testament era.



Separations in relationships always bring anxieties and angst, no less for the broken body parts of the church. However, if wisdom prevails, separations due to differences of opinions need not be permanent. After a cooling-off period, the causes of original disagreements can be revisited with mutual goodwill and equanimity, with the hope of better comprehending the common foundation of our faith in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ; and seeking the accomplishment of unity in adopting the correct teachings of scriptural truth.

Reconciliation in the church takes time, but every achievement we hope for can begin with a small step. In this regard, the following report speaks to us the encouraging news of a positive step forward with the ecumenical document, "Declaration on the Way":

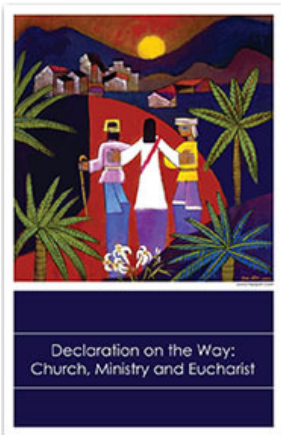
<http://www.usccb.org/news/2015/15-147.cfm>

October 30, 2015

WASHINGTON—Drawing on 50 years of national and international dialogue, Lutherans and Catholics together have issued the "Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry and Eucharist," a

unique ecumenical document that marks a pathway toward greater visible unity between Catholics and Lutherans. The October 30 release of the document comes on the eve of the anniversary of Martin Luther's posting the 95 Theses, which sparked the Protestant Reformation.

"Pope Francis in his recent visit to the United States emphasized again and again the need for and importance of dialogue. This Declaration on the Way represents in concrete form an opportunity for Lutherans and Catholics to join together now in a unifying manner on a way finally to full communion," said Bishop Denis J. Madden, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Catholic co-chair of the task force creating the declaration.



It is notable that “by a vote of 931 to 9, the E.L.C.A. Church wide Assembly overwhelmingly accepted the ‘Declaration on the Way,’ a unique ecumenical document that marks a path toward greater unity between Catholics and Lutherans.” ¹

This historical document contains 32 statements of agreements on church, ministry and Eucharist (Holy Communion). Obviously, a lot more detailed and tough work needs to be done for continuing dialogue and consultations to boost unity as the church grapples with very significant concerns among the divisions on the path to consensus.

From the Great Schism (Western-Eastern split of the church) to The Reformation (started by Martin Luther) and to the multitudes of other ruptures in church unity, the branches and sub-branches that have formed out of the “One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church” can be bewildering.

Forging church unity is the task that “Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/Lutherans/posts/10153893452328775>

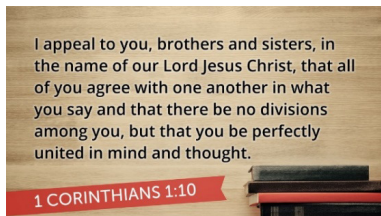
until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Eph. 4:11-13)

Leaders in the church have been aware of the mandate from Christ to forge unity instead of allowing sins to foster divisions. Efforts have been made coveting concord instead of conflict – with dialogue milestones in recent years involving Lutheran, Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox and Reformed partners.



Pope Francis prayed for Christian unity, specifically “that all Christians may be faithful to the Lord’s teaching by striving with prayer and fraternal charity to restore ecclesial communion and by collaborating to meet the challenges facing humanity.”²

Regarding the ‘Declaration on the Way’, Elizabeth Eaton (Presiding bishop of the E.L.C.A.) said, “**Though we have not yet arrived, we have claimed that we are, in fact, on the way to unity.**”



Indeed, we are on the way ... along a journey paved with great challenges. No matter how long the journey, the hand of God is with us to give us unity of mind to carry out the necessary task, following the word of the LORD. (2 Chronicles 30:12)

The gathering of Roman Catholics and Lutherans on the occasion of commemorating the Reformation is neither the first nor the last of opportunities for amiability, goodwill and understanding to build up in the One Body of Christ. Positively, it strengthens the hope for unity to develop, with patience, through continuing dialogue and collaborations.

The endeavour for unity is not an effort to convert Roman Catholics or Orthodox Christians into Protestants, or vice versa. It is to encourage all Christians to approach the Word of God with a teachable spirit and to approach one another with humility while matters in some people’s minds are difficult to understand and accept. We can agree to disagree on some issues temporarily. As Christians prayerfully study and follow the teachings of the Gospel of Christ, the Holy Spirit will illumine the path for everyone.

John Lee

² <https://www.catholicregister.org/faith/item/24064-pope-francis-continues-to-champion-christian-unity-in-2017>