

REFORMATION 500

In the 15th and early 16th century some leaders in the catholic church started to challenge some of the practices and doctrines of the church. On October 31st, 1517 Martin Luther a catholic monk presented the catholic church with a document called the 95 theses. This document's main focus challenged the practice of indulgences.

“An indulgence was understood as a remission of temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt had already been forgiven. Christians could receive an indulgence under certain prescribed conditions – such as prayer, acts of charity, and almsgiving – through the action of the church, which was thought to dispense and apply the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints to penitents” (From Conflict to Communion, p. 25).

Martin Luther didn't like the idea that one could purchase or work for God's forgiveness. Martin wrestled much in his early life with the belief that God was a wrathful God, and that only the church leaders could decide whether God forgives you or not. When he came upon Romans 3 his belief went through reform, and he started challenging those practices that continued to perpetuate God as a wrathful God. Luther's main issue with indulgences then was that God's forgiveness is freely given, and so, cannot be bought or earned.

In response to Luther's theses, the catholic Pope wanted him to recant, because he felt these theses undermined his authority. When Luther in good conscience was unable to recant, he was excommunicated.

The Reformers didn't only focus on indulgences. The Bible's authority within the church was challenged. The Reformers started to argue that Scripture alone is our true authority in the church, not the Pope. This reform led to the translation of the Bible in other languages besides Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Martin Luther translated the bible into German so the common person could read the Bible and question the church when they proclaimed messages that stood outside what he defined as gospel.

Other reforms that were offered were the offering of both the body (host) and blood (wine) to the lay people. The challenge of relics in the sanctuary. Some Priests and monks were getting married. Martin Luther himself broke his vow to marry a nun named Katharina von Bora. Martin Luther created catechisms to help educate lay people about their faith. Hymns became an important part of worship as Luther and other Reformers wanted more participation from the lay people in worship. Higher education for the clergy was strongly encouraged.

Many reforms were introduced, but with the excommunication of Luther and the refusal to embrace a lot of these reforms from the Pope and Cardinals, many Reformers couldn't see a solution. Eventually, the Reformers started their own churches. This period of history became known as the Reformation.

Since, the dawn of the Reformation, anniversaries and centennials have come and gone.

“For Lutherans, these commemorative days and centennials were occasions for telling once again the story of the beginning of the characteristic – »evangelical« – form of their church in order to justify their distinctive existence. This was naturally tied to a critique of the Roman Catholic Church. On the other side, Catholics took such commemorative events as opportunities to accuse Lutherans of an unjustifiable division from the true church and a rejection of the gospel of Christ” (From Conflict to Communion, p. 11).

During the Second Vatican Council that happened in the late 1960s, the Catholic Church reformed it’s understanding of protestant traditions, and came to embrace some of Luther’s reforms. Lutherans and Catholics started dialoguing with one another. A document came out in the late 1990s called the “joint declaration on the doctrine of Justification”. This document challenged the idea that Lutherans and Catholics saw justification, or faith alone as so different.

In the past few years a document was created called “From Conflict to Communion.” In this document, we (Roman Catholics and Lutherans) challenge one another on how we have both perceived the Reformation, and try to create a new way of understanding the Reformation. Roman Catholics and Lutherans also challenged one another to work together more often to live out those expressions of unity that we are called to live out as the church.

Today, as we commemorate 500 years, we give thanks for those reforms that have challenged us to be more inclusive and loving to those we encounter. We give thanks for those reforms that have made our worship experience more enjoyable. We give thanks for being able to pick up a bible and read it. We give thanks that for the first centennial in our history, we can come together with our Catholic brothers and sisters and celebrate those reforms we share in common.

And yet, we also, grieve, because we still walk together in a church with so much division. We grieve those reforms that we cannot agree on. We grieve the pain and wounds that have been inflicted on one another due to this diversity. And we pray that though these grievances still exist we will use Reformation 500 as an inspiration to continue in our dialogue together with the hope of one day experiencing that full expression of unity that God has in store for us.

Let us come together this year, and show the world that a church that is united is one that truly sheds God’s light and grace in our world.