

Remarks

Lutheran-Roman Catholic Vespers to Commemorate the Reformation

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September 26, 2017

As I became involved in ecumenism, I found it was necessary for me to come to terms with the Reformation. Like many Catholics my age, who grew up in the 50's and 60's in the Catholic sub-culture of that time, the Reformation was viewed polemically. In my reflection tonight, I want to focus on how memory plays a defining role for our spirituality, especially for spiritual ecumenism. I'm going to do this by telling you about three events, and the lessons which they provided me in understanding memory in this way.

The first formal ecumenical event between the Archdiocese of Chicago and another single another ecclesial community was the 500th anniversary of the birth and baptism of Martin Luther. The year was 1983. The Lutherans were in the process of which would bring together three major jurisdictions which today form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We invited them to Holy Name Cathedral, where Joseph Cardinal Bernardin and the bishops of the American Lutheran Church, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches and the Lutheran Church in America jointly presided over a vespers service. The preacher was the Rev. Dr. Martin Marty. Professor Marty was the first Protestant pastor to preach in Holy Name Cathedral in the presence of the

Archbishop. It was a signal event. And part of its importance to Catholics was that the anniversary recalled an event in the life of Luther before he became the Reformer, his birth and baptism. In doing so, we remembered Luther for something we shared, our baptismal identity. This event truly situated everything else that followed in our relationships with the Lutherans of Chicagoland.

In 1987, the Archdiocese of Chicago began planning a covenant with the Metropolitan Chicago Synod of the ELCA. After one of the planning meetings, I was talking with some members of the covenant commission, where else but in a parking lot. One of them stated clearly that before Lutherans could engage in multi-lateral ecumenism with other Protestants, they first needed to heal the relationship with the Church of Rome. "Our responsibility is first to repair the breach with the Church from which we separated. Lutheran ecumenism," he said, "requires that a priority be set on ecumenism with Rome and Rome's bishop."

This was not the vague notion of Protestantism that I had been carrying around in my head. This pastor's sense of historical responsibility opened my eyes and mind to the unique histories of each of the communities of the 16th century.

This caused me to realize that there were notions of the Great Tradition alive in Protestantism and animating serious theological reflection about what it would take to restore visible Christian unity in a true, corporate, form. Corporate union means full communion in faith, sacramental life, and ordained ministry, not a vague spiritual or mystical unity, but something visible to the world.

In the past 500 years, we have worked pretty hard at disunity, doctrinally, sacramentally and in terms of the special ministry transmitted through ordination. I came to learn that officially the ELCA was “bold to reach out in multiple directions” to pursue Christian unity, rather than the prioritized Rome-first stance of my colleague. Still, as Catholic Christians we need to realize that among some Lutherans, there is a notion of a Roman priority in their ecumenism.

For me to understand this idea turned on the fact that the men and women I was working with on the covenant commission had a remarkable ability. They could remember the vision of Reformation which existed before the separation. They could remember that all of the original reformers were Catholic, for no separation had yet occurred. They could remember Gasparo Cardinal Contarini as a Catholic evangelical, a proponent of reform and a believer in justification by faith. They could remember Philip Melanchthon as one who viewed grace and works in a synergy. And they could remember that impulse for reform came from within the Catholic Church, evidenced by fact that five general councils of the Catholic Church (one of them ending in 1517) had called for reform of ecclesial life. Against the narrative of the period of severe polemics that followed the religious divisions in Europe, the women and men on the covenant commission remembered instead that the earlier impulse of reform was godly.

One of the key teachings of the Vatican Council is the simple fact that no one alive today had any hand in the separation. We have inherited the consequences, although we did not commit the original offense. Many Christians today, though separated, bear no culpability for their division. And because of our theological

dialogues, today we are also able to confess together that, regarding justification, the condemnations issued in the 16th century do not apply to the churches as they exist today.

These insights about memory add up to a basis for spiritual ecumenism. The teachings of the Second Vatican Council: that we are separated through no fault of our own; that, while we remain divided, it is without culpability; shape our prayer and presents us with a challenge.

Can we change the manner of our memory? Can our minds dwell not on the 16th century sins of separation but on the original impulse for reform? Most difficult of all, can we look within and see where reform is still needed in ourselves, and in our own ecclesial house? If we can, a path of fruitful spiritual ecumenism will open before us.

As I conclude my remarks, I'm going to deviate from the plan of the service for a moment. I mentioned at the outset of how Cardinal Bernardin invited the Lutherans to join him for a joint vespers at Holy Name Cathedral. At that time, the ecumenical officer, Msgr. John Egan, commissioned the renowned Chicago Catholic artist, Franklin McMahon, to draw the scene of Professor Marty preaching. As it happens, Franklin McMahon is the featured artist whose work is on display in Mundelein Hall. You can view it as we go over to dinner. Well, as it happens, Pam DeWitt our director for university events, discovered that the University had a copy of McMahon's 1983 vespers drawing. In recognition of the Society of the Holy Trinity's long association with our Conference Center, and in remembrance of tonight's Lutheran/Catholic Vespers, I am pleased to present you Reverend Senior, with this print on behalf of the University of Saint Mary of the Lake.