Vatican
Vatican News
A man wearing a red zucchetto and a yellow stole stands next to a woman wearing a clerical

Cardinal Kurt Koch, prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, and the Rev. Anne Burghardt, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, pray during an ecumenical service at the LWF assembly in Krakow, Poland, Sept. 19, 2023. (CNS photo/Lutheran World Federation, Albin Hillert)

Cindy Wooden

View Author Profile


Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — September 20, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

During an ecumenical prayer service at the assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, the Vatican's chief ecumenist and the federation's general secretary formally called for a joint reflection on the Augsburg Confession, a fundamental statement of Lutheran faith.

"A common reflection could lead to another 'milestone' on the way from conflict to communion," said Cardinal Kurt Koch, prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, and the Rev. Anne Burghardt, the federation's general secretary, as they read a "Common Word" declaration to the assembly Sept. 19.

The assembly, held Sept. 13-19 in Krakow, Poland, is the main governing body of the Lutheran World Federation, which represents 150 Lutheran churches in 99 countries.

The Augsburg Confession was drafted in 1530 in an attempt "to bear witness to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church," the declaration said. "At the time of its writing, ecclesial unity was probably endangered, but ecclesial separation was not yet finally accomplished."

Because the statement of faith was meant to witness to the unity of the church before the final ruptures of the Protestant Reformation, the declaration said, it is "not only of historical interest; rather, it holds an ecumenical potential of lasting relevance."

The declaration acknowledged both theological and practical obstacles on the path to full unity.

Advertisement

The Catholic Church's "excommunication of Martin Luther is still a stumbling block for some today," it said. "It maintains its place in confessional memory, even though the excommunication has long since lost its immediate effect with the death of the reformer and Lutherans are not enemies or strangers for Catholics, but brothers and sisters, with whom Catholics know themselves to be united through baptism."

In a similar way, it said, "the fact that Martin Luther and the Lutheran confessional writings refer to the papacy as 'anti-Christ' is a stumbling block even though today the Lutheran World Federation does not support that view."

The two issues, the declaration said, ultimately raise questions about the role and ministry of the pope and "the question of the mystery of the church, its unity and uniqueness," questions the official Catholic-Lutheran theological dialogue continues to study.

That dialogue, the two leaders said, allows Lutherans and Catholics "to discern areas of consensus where our predecessors only saw insurmountable oppositions. We are able to recognize that the journey toward full communion is far greater than the contingencies of a particular epoch."

The "Common Word" also noted how Pope Francis, meeting leaders of the federation in 2021, expressed hope that a joint study of the Augsburg Confession in preparation for the document's 500th anniversary in 2030 could strengthen Catholics' and Lutherans' ability "to confess together what joins us in faith."

"It will be important to examine with spiritual and theological humility the circumstances that led to the divisions, trusting that, although it is impossible to undo the sad events of the past, it is possible to reinterpret them as part of a reconciled history," the pope had said.