NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

On anniversary of Reformation, it's time to get ecumenical

Bill Tammeus | Nov. 3, 2010 A small c catholic

We Protestants just commemorated Reformation Sunday, annually timed to note the Oct. 31 date on which Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg.

My Presbyterian denomination [1] locates itself within what is called the Reformed Tradition. Our motto is *Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda*, which means ?a church reformed and always reforming.?

In the ?always reforming? tradition -- one I value -- I give at least a little thought each year as to whether, with 500 years of hindsight, the Protestant Reformation was worth it. But because I know we can?t undo history, I don?t spend lots of time crying over this spilled milk.

Nonetheless, despite some crucially important changes brought about first by the Protestant Reformation and then by what scholars used to call the Catholic Counterreformation (the term has gone out of academic style), it?s possible now to argue that Christianity might be better off today had the Reformation never occurred.

Now, I understand that events in Luther?s time would have had to play out much differently than they did for there to have been no Reformation. Luther would need to have been more accommodating to church authorities and those authorities would have had to recognize, name and repent of their institutional sins.

Even then a break might have occurred -- just as one happened nearly 500 years before that -- leading to Roman Catholicism on the one hand and Orthodox Christianity on the other.

Still, Catholics and Protestants today would do well to recognize the mistakes each of our leaders made in the 16th Century. That might help us understand how and why our positions have solidified so much that reunion now seems almost unimaginable.

Oh, not that there haven?t been important efforts toward common ground. There have been -- especially the 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification [2] signed by officials from the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation.

This and other efforts have moved Catholics and Protestants (including Anglicans, who sometimes decline to use the term Protestant to describe themselves) toward more harmonious relations, though it couldn?t be called unity.

Once a divorce occurs reunification becomes extraordinarily difficult. And, as I say, we?ve now been divorced almost 500 years.

A major problem with this continuing division, however, is that it presents a terrible model to the world. We Protestants are guiltier than are Catholics. Protestantism, after all, has simply atomized since the start of the Reformation. Why, there are 349 churches in the World Council of Churches [3], and that doesn?t offer a full picture of the fractious nature of either Protestantism or Christianity.

Indeed, the divisions within our shared faith must break the sacred heart of Jesus.

Perhaps it?s some consolation that there was division even among the 12 apostles and even more rancour after the early Jesus movement slowly broke away from Judaism -- don?t forget *that* split in our history -- and became, finally, Christianity. (As for church growth, it helps to remember that Jesus started out with 12 and wound up with 11.)

In seven years we will mark the 500th anniversary of Luther nailing his theses to the church door.

Why can?t those of us who lead from the pews find ways between now and then to make peace between Protestants and Catholics -- even if it?s just between my own congregation [4] and a single nearby Catholic parish? Or between your parish and the Methodist church down the block?

We need not solve all our differences over transubstantiation or apostolic succession to find ways to greet each other as humans and acknowledge that all of us are disciples of Jesus Christ.

Imagine, seven years from now, the blooming of 1,000 such ecumenical flowers across the United States -- flowers I bet even bishops and presbytery executives would have to notice.

Just as the Reformation started with a single disgruntled monk, so reunification can begin with a single church embracing a neighboring congregation. Who?s with me?

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