

“MONDAY MORNING QUARTERBACKING” THE SEEDS OF THE REFORMATION

All you need do is read the closing decree of the Church’s **Ecumenical Council Lateran V** (1512-17) to know that Church leaders completely missed the warning signs. Before that council there was a serious schism, following the return of Pope Gregory XI to Rome from **Avignon France** in January of 1377 A.D. Sadly, the end of that turbulent period in history only heightened the factions in the Church when he died a year later. Frankly, they were driven much more by politics than doctrine. The Western Schism was only healed when two rival claimants to the Chair of Peter each resigned and a third was excommunicated as an anti-pope—yikes! This was deliberately done in order to clear the deck for a conclave. **Pope Martin V** was elected, essentially ending the schism. The collective sigh of relief was but short lived. Martin V’s papal motto should have been *Vacuefaciamus Paludem*—“Let us drain the swamp!” Sorry, couldn’t resist! But the damage was done, the Church’s vitality severely weakened.

The Church was ripe for reform in several key areas, yet when the bishops gathered at the Lateran Palace (the papal residence before they moved to the Vatican), they squandered their chance. The decree paints a picture in which the bishops were “assembled in the Holy Spirit, to the greatest satisfaction of everyone.” In reality, they were eerily myopic and monumentally tone deaf to reality: “There was peace for the whole church and a resulting union. The moral habits of churchmen as well as of secular and other persons were reformed, insofar as this seemed appropriate, and several matters concerning the true faith were defined... Finally, it was reported to us on several occasions, through the cardinals and prelates... that no topics remained for debate and discussion by them, and that over several months nothing at all new had been brought before them by anyone... we bring this present council to a close and we discharge it with the Lord’s blessing.” That decree was dated March 16, 1517.

Just **seven months** later, on **October 31, 1517, Martin Luther**, an Augustinian monk, nailed 95 theses (all in Latin, I might add!) to the door of All Saints’ Church, the castle Church at **Wittenburg**. In doing so, he was inviting a theological debate on a number of topics of concern, most notably that of the practice surrounding indulgences. It would unleash what turned out to be the period known as the Reformation, the most painful split in the Church’s history. Yes, I’m a “Monday morning quarterback” here! But how could Church leaders have been so mistaken about there being “peace for the whole Church,” (*universalis ecclesiae pax*) while the storms of discontent had been brewing for so long? What signs did they miss, what voices did they tune out in their failure to inaugurate true reform? In the end, the Reformation did tremendous harm to the Church, unleashing the destruction of monasteries and churches. Priceless library manuscripts were destroyed, religious art was appropriated from churches, etc. Only with the **Council of Trent** in 1545 A.D. was any meaningful reform enacted.

In 2015, the **Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue**, made up of the Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) released “**Declaration on the Way**,” a joint statement drawing upon 50 years of national and international dialogue. These are carefully worded documents, nonetheless significant in pinpointing the areas of agreement, without negating the differences that remain between the two ecclesial bodies. At the heart of this document lies 32 consensus statements of agreement where Lutherans and Catholics have achieved some points of convergence on a broad range of topics about church, ministry and the Eucharist. While not equating to doctrinal decrees, they accurately summarize the state of the theological dialogue today.

To cite just one example (Statement # 30): “Lutherans and Catholics agree that in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, Jesus Christ himself is present: He is present truly, substantially, as a person, and he is present in his entirety, as Son of God and a human being.” The difference, of course, centers upon the “**mode**” of **Christ’s presence**, a topic for another column! Or, concerning the reservation of the hosts in a tabernacle after the celebration of the Eucharist, it is true that “Many Lutherans have taken exception to Catholic practices of adoration of Christ in the Eucharistic elements outside the Eucharistic celebration.” The statement rightly notes, however, that many of those concerns had their origin in the **polemics of the Reformation**, a time in which Catholics “received Communion rarely and viewing the elevated host was seen as a powerful form of

contact with Christ as a sort of substitute for receiving Communion. In the current situation where Lutherans and Catholics are encouraged to commune frequently, and parishes regularly make Communion available, the concern about the Eucharistic adoration supplanting reception of Communion is less justifiable.” Though heady, the document is a good read and situates some thorny 16th century disagreements in their proper historical context.

Ecumenism is painstaking, it is arduous and it bears fruit only incrementally. It is neither possible nor desirable to summarize all the areas of convergence or disagreement in such a short column. Suffice it to say that serious theological dialogue is occurring and on common areas of interest, there is solid collaboration, including outreach to the poor for example. At the same time, some key areas of divergence are growing, and these must not be ignored. But for now, a **healing of memories** is most likely to bear fruit, recognizing that 500 years ago, Martin Luther did not initially intend to start a new Church, but to reform the one Church of Christ. While he engaged in some painful polemics and personal attacks against the pope, it is equally true that had some of his (and others) concerns been taken more seriously, perhaps the future would have unfolded much differently. For now, the focus cannot be on the past, but on forging a path forward for the future. (Next Week: Luther’s Piety)

- I hope you can join us for **All Saint’s Day**, a Holyday of obligation. We will offer **four Masses**: Tuesday Oct. 31 at 5:15 p.m. (anticipatory); Wednesday November 1st at 7:00 a.m., 12:00 Noon and 5:15 p.m. (with Children’s Choristers). We hope you can join us. **All Soul’s Day** Masses on Thursday will be at 7:30 a.m. and 5:15 p.m. Don’t forget to set back your clock one hour on Saturday night, as we return to Central Standard Time.
- The U.S. abortion rate dropped 25% between 2008 and 2014! Total abortions dipped below 1,000,000 for the first time since 1975, though the prevalence of the morning after pill factors into this. Yet I am convinced that the pro-life message is resonating with millennials. Even the Guttmacher Institute (closely affiliated with Planned Parenthood) admits that pro-life efforts are at least partially responsible for the decline.
- This is the first **World Series** since 1970 between two regular season 100-win teams. Given Hurricane Harvey’s devastation, an Astros pennant would be good for the area. Go Houston!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector