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Reformation: 1517 / 1530 / 2017

By Br. Richard Herbel

I am sure that most readers of this letter are aware that October 31st of this year will be celebrated as the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. While this is generally regarded as the beginning of the Reformation movement that marked the 16th century, I do have a little quibble about the choice of the date. I would suggest that for Lutherans at least we exercise a little more patience and wait thirteen years and commemorate the presentation of the Augsburg Confession on June 25th, 1530. I suppose it is too late for the idea to gain much traction, but perhaps we could make an effort to proleptically include this later date in the present anniversary.

Conventionally we speak of Luther's nailing of the Ninety-five Theses to the Wittenburg Church door as the beginning of the Reformation. There are some problems with this. Historians debate whether or not Luther actually nailed his theses on the church door or published them in a less dramatic way. In any case, the Theses themselves were narrow in scope, dealing only with specific abuses and misrepresentations in the sale of indulgences, and were deferential in tone.

This event has bequeathed to us the image of Martin Luther before a church door, serious in demeanor, and hammer in hand that has become the virtual icon of the Reformation. To the historically uniformed this can suggest a general hostility to the institutional Church. It resonates too easily with angry, destructive, and ill-defined protests which are more about de-construction than reformation. This is not a proper characterization of Martin Luther or of the movement that bears his

name and which is often described as a conservative reformation.

This brings us to the year 1530 and the presentation of the Augsburg Confession which *was* an intentional, carefully considered and substantive proposal for the reform of certain abuses and practices in the Church at that time.

The Augsburg Confession is divided into two parts. The first part is a rehearsal of the chief articles of the faith and doctrine of the Church. These articles are presented in a mostly conventional way and where the reformers offer a fresh understanding or emphasis in doctrine or vary from current practices of the time they claim the authority of tradition and the teaching of the fathers. They see this part of the Confession as affirmative and unobjectionable. The second half of the Confession deals with certain matters that are in dispute and give an account of how perceived abuses have been corrected. Copious documentation from the Scriptures and tradition is adduced to show that in these matters the reformers are not innovators but believe they are restoring earlier and more authentic traditions.

The intent and character of the Confession is beautifully revealed in its conclusion, a paragraph of which is worth quoting in full:

Nothing has here been said or related for the purpose of injuring anybody. Only those things have been recounted which it seemed necessary to say in order that it may be understood that nothing has been received among us, in doctrine or in ceremonies, that is contrary to Scripture or to the church cath-

olic. For it is manifest that we have guarded diligently against the introduction into our church of any new and ungodly doctrines.

We often associate the Reformation with strident, intemperate polemics. The Augsburg Confession is a good reminder that it did not start out that way and it need not be that way today.

Having said all that, I now must return to the 1517 date and to the posting of the Ninety-five Theses and admit that I do find one compelling argument for counting that event as the beginning of the Reformation. It is that it would mean that the first impulse of the Reformation was pastoral and not ideological. It arose out of the concern of a pastor and confessor for the spiritual welfare of the Christians in his charge and not as a hostile critique of the institutions or leaders of the Church.

The first of the Ninety-five Theses directs us to the foundation of all genuine renewal in the Church: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." This call to repentance is found at the beginning of our Lord's public ministry: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 4:17). Along with his invitation, "Follow me," this command is the beginning of discipleship, and for believers it is the source for all subsequent renewal in that discipleship. In the Small Catechism Luther sees this ongoing process as a continuation of our Baptism which signifies "that the Old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die... and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise." In a similar way the Church herself must be in a permanent state of reformation and renewal if she is to fulfill her vocation to be the sign and instrument of God's love in the world.

As I celebrate this anniversary year I am doing so as a Lutheran who is also in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. That is an unusual perspective but not a contradiction. Among the confessional Lutherans to whose company I aspired I called myself an evangelical catholic, and that is how I continue to describe myself, with the accent falling only slightly differently. I also still count myself a son of the Reformation, one whose Christianity is indelibly and inescapably shaped by this event. It was in the Lutheran communion that I was baptized and then instructed in the faith with the Small Catechism of Martin Luther. This is the

irreplaceable foundation of my Christian identity; it cannot be rejected or regretted. Nor, on the other hand, does any of this detract from the gratitude I now feel to be in full communion with the bishop and Church of Rome and to be pastorally guided by her magisterium. Earlier in my theological education I had learned that confessional Lutheranism was a way of being Catholic; now I understand my Catholicism as a way of being Lutheran. An ecumenical vision of Lutheranism has long been fostered here at St. Augustine's House and I believe it is expressed succinctly and well in our mission statement printed in the Fellowship brochure: "We identify with the Lutheran tradition, understood as a movement within and for the one holy catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ."

This does not mean that we cannot or should not regret the lamentable divisions that occurred in the sixteenth century and that persist to this day. And so our mission statement goes on to commit us "to the pursuit of ecumenical understanding." And among the expectations of the members of the Fellowship is that they "pray daily for and with the whole Church, especially that Christians may better manifest the unity we have in the one Lord Jesus Christ."

To pray for something reminds us that what we ask for is a gift. We often think of Christian unity as something we ourselves must achieve through a political process of diplomacy and compromise. But unity is not first of all a human work. It is the gift of the Father through the prayer of the Son that his disciples may all be one and in the truth and love inspired by the Holy Spirit. This gift is made manifest wherever believers through humble repentance are converted more fully to Jesus Christ, for to draw closer to Christ is also to draw closer to all others who are in Christ. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent," he willed that our entire lives be one of repentance and in in this way that his Church be both continually reformed *and* united in love. To that end let us persevere in our Fellowship of prayer.