Newsbrief:

Lutherans and Catholics

Spoiler alert: Martin Luther was a Roman Catholic monk and priest. (At least in the beginning.) And he didn’t set out to found a church. (Most true reformers don’t—they simply want to make some changes for the better.) When he nailed the 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, he wasn’t committing an act of vandalism or defiance—that was how people got the word out about something they wanted to discuss. And it wasn’t intended to overthrow the church structure. He just wanted to have a debate about the 95 issues on his mind. One of his chief concerns was the sale of indulgences, a practice which he found suspect theologically and ethically. His theological concerns were that indulgence sellers had a way of implying that all one needed to do was to buy an indulgence, and sins would be forgiven, years of purgatory would be eliminated. Such claims did not square with his own theological understanding of grace. The ethical concern was that money was pouring out of the pockets of the poor—who could ill afford it—to build the magnificent St. Peter’s in Rome.

Martin Luther’s call for a debate took on a life of its own. Thanks to the new technology of the printing press, the 95 Theses were reprinted and distributed all over Europe. What began in northern Germany, far from Rome, soon caught the attention of the religious authorities. Luther was called to account, ordered to recant his writings and his teachings. He refused, and was formally declared both a heretic by the church, and an outlaw by the state. He was a marked man, and could be killed on sight.

By this time Luther had many followers, both in the religious sphere, and in the political sphere. Whether it was acceptance of his interpretation of the Gospel, or a power play to move out of the sphere of influence of Rome, many people declared themselves to be in Luther’s camp. In addition, there were other reformers who took up where Luther left off. While Luther was in hiding in the aftermath of being declared a heretic and outlaw, a much more radical group of reformers took over the town of Wittenberg in his absence. Where Luther questioned the efficacy of praying to saints, the radical reformers began the practice of smashing all statues of saints, in an effort to prevent idolatry. (Does this ring any bells in our current situation? Hint: think Taliban.)

You need only to visit St. Peter’s Church in Geneva to see a stark reminder of the extreme attempts to eradicate visual distractions. It is devoid of statues, and is, frankly, bleak.

Because of the close intertwining of church and state in Luther’s Europe, there was no way to separate a religious movement from the intrigues of the rulers. First German, then other European rulers declared themselves to be either firmly in line with Rome, or on the side of Luther and the reformers. What started as a reform movement soon became a split, with vast implications.

In the years since the early days, Lutherans and Catholics have condemned each other, persecuted each other, and even fought wars. Many of us who grew up in the 20th century will remember prejudice and suspicion between Catholics and Lutherans.

But mid-20th century, it all began to change. In 1962, Pope John XXIII called a “Second Vatican Council.” Vatican 2, as it is called, opened up the Catholic Church to the 20th century, and to the recognition of other Christians as being legitimate. While Protestants had been exploring ecumenism for 50 years, the entrance of the Catholics Church into the conversation in the 1960’s was a game-changer.

Not long after Vatican 2, Lutheran-Catholic dialogues began formally and informally, internationally, nationally and locally. And we are continuing to bear the fruit of those conversations. Numerous publications have resulted from the Dialogues over the years.

In 1980, Lutherans and Catholics together noted the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, by meeting in Augsburg and issuing a joint statement which read:

*“Reflecting on the Augsburg Confession, Roman Catholics and Lutherans had discovered that we have a common mind on basic doctrinal truths which point to Jesus Christ, the living center of our faith! Faced as we are with new questions, challenges and opportunities in our world today, we cannot rest with simply repeating and referring back to the Confession of 1530. What we have discovered as an expression of our common faith comes out of fresh articulation. It points the way to a confession here and now, with Roman Catholics and Lutherans bearing witness in the message of the world’s salvation in Jesus Christ.”*

In 1982, the World Council of Churches released a ground-breaking ecumenical document, “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry,” with participation from Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox theologians. It was another significant step for Lutherans and Catholics.

In 1999, on the eve of a new millennium, the conversation took a different turn. It went past discussions and delineation of the area of agreement and disagreement. In 1999, the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. This, the fruit of decades of dialogue, was the first time the parties signed an agreement, and with worldwide implications. The Doctrine of Justification, one of the rallying cries of the Reformation, was a stumbling block between Lutherans and Catholics for centuries. But the careful work of scholars and church diplomats, and the trusting relationships that had built up over years of dialogues, made it possible to listen more deeply to one another, and to come to the conclusion that Justification is no longer a doctrine that separates Catholics and Lutherans. The Declaration was signed by Lutherans and Catholics in Augsburg, Germany, on the symbolic day of October 31, 1999. And celebrations took place all over the world. In Montana we had a celebration at the Helena Cathedral, and our Synod also signed a “Covenant between the Montana Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Great Falls/Billings and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Helena. The covenant affirms certain truths and hopes, and pledges further work.

In the intervening years, work has continued to strengthen ties between Lutherans and Catholics. The ELCA adopted a statement on ecumenism early in our life together. And it is embedded in our constitutions as well. In 2000, Pope John Paul II wrote an encyclical on ecumenism, “That They May be One.” (Et Unum Sint)

In 2010, working with the momentum of decades of dialogue, the US Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue published “The Hope of Eternal Life,” which brought the conversation farther along. The preface reads:

*“We are united as Christians by our baptism into Christ. We are taught by Scripture and tradition and share a common life in Christ. We affirm as Lutherans and Catholics in the dialogue process a commitment to the goal of full communion even as we recognize that further agreements are necessary before full, sacramental communion can be restores. Maters for such consideration include the nature of the church, the ordering of ministry, patterns for the formulation of authoritative teaching, and the anthropological and ecclesial contexts for making judgments about human sexuality and other concerns.”*

On a more local level, in 2012, Bishop Michael Warfel (Diocese of Great Falls/Billings) and Bishop Jessica Crist (Montana Synod), along with Pastor Paul Seastrand, did 5 Lutheran-Catholic Conversations across the territory, engaging laity and clergy in conversation on the 50th anniversary of Vatican 2.

In 2013, the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity published “From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017.” This is a very accessible book, with history and hopes for the future.

And, in 2015, the ELCA Conference of Bishops, the ELCA Church Council, and the Ecumenical and Interreligious Committee of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops received another ground-breaking document, “Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry and Eucharist.” This document lists the 32 major issues on which Lutherans and Catholics have reached agreement in our years of dialogue, and suggest areas where we still have disagreement.

One of the activities commemorating the Reformation in 2017 will be a conference sponsored by the Montana Synod and the 2 Catholic Dioceses in Montana. We have come a long way since 1517!

Bishop Jessica Crist, a member of the Montana Synod Reformation Anniversary Task Force.

Resources:

“Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry,” WCC, 1982.

“Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org)

“Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” , Eerdmans, 1999.

“The Hope of Eternal Life: Common Statement of the Eleventh Round of the U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue.” 2010.

“From Conflict to Communion.” Bonifatius, 2013.

“One Hope: Remembering the Body of Christ,” Augsburg, 2015.

“Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry and Eucharist,” 2015.