

A JOURNEY TOWARD UNDERSTANDING

The Lutheran and Roman Catholic Ecumenical Pilgrimage of October, 2007

I. A Brief Historical Background

Years of dialogue between Lutheran and Roman Catholic Theologians culminated in the signing of the **Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith** in Augsburg, Germany on October 31, 1999. Those who are familiar with the events surrounding Martin Luther's critique of the Church of his day will recall that a major part of that critique was that the teaching and practice of the Church was failing to make use of the crucified and risen Christ in its theology and practice. In that failure, the baptized people of God were inclined to either rely upon their own efforts to gain assurance of salvation or to despair when they recognized their inability to gain such assurance. Article IV of **Augsburg Confession**, published in 1530, principally written by Luther's colleague, Philip Melancthon, was the attempt by the Reformers to indicate that their teaching was, in fact, not novelty but the teaching of the Church throughout the ages. After the Roman Catholic theologians wrote a critical response to the **Augsburg Confession**, the Reformers responded by writing the **Apology to the Augsburg Confession** in which it becomes clear that, from the perspective of the Reformers, the central issue of the debate was the matter of whether or not one is justified by God's grace through faith in Christ Jesus.

The Pope's excommunication of Martin Luther, the identification of further theological concerns, the escalation of rhetoric among participants on both sides, political differences, and warfare were among the many factors that hardened the division between the Roman Catholic Church and what came to be known as the Lutherans who were understood to be a part of the Protestant Movement.

That separation has continued throughout the ages. Many Lutherans were convinced that Roman Catholics believed that they were saved by the good works they did. For their part, Romans Catholics were convinced that Lutherans were indifferent to good works as that which grows out of one's life in Christ. Most of us have stories that illustrate the "hardening of hearts" with respect to the relationship between Lutherans and Romans Catholics.

By God's grace, a breakthrough has taken place in the relationship between Lutherans and Roman Catholics as a result of over 30 years of "official" dialogue as well as much prayer and conversation. The **Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith** insists that there is now a common understanding of this central article of the Christian faith. That was a major breakthrough. At the same time there is acknowledgement that there are significant theological issues that still divide so as to preclude the possibility of sharing in the Eucharist from the Roman Catholic perspective.

II. The Relationship between the Toledo Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church

and the Northwestern Ohio Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Throughout the history of this synod a cordial relationship has existed between the Toledo Diocese and the Northwestern Ohio Synod. For example, I recall a Lutheran/Roman Catholic farewell service for my predecessor, Bishop James Rave. Bishop James Hoffman of the Catholic Diocese of Toledo attended the service when I was installed as bishop in 1998. Bishop Hoffman was a great source of personal encouragement in my early years in this office, specifically in requesting my participation in the Ohio Council of Churches and the quarterly Northwestern Ohio Denominational Leaders Meetings. Together, one year we facilitated an Ohio Council of Churches retreat for Denomination Leaders at the Pontifical College Josephinum in Columbus.

Following the signing of the **Joint Declaration**, Bishop Hoffman and I determined to have a local celebration. We did so at a Service of the Word and Affirmation of Baptism at Rosary Cathedral in Toledo on September 16, 2001, only a few days after “9-11.” In that timely, powerful service we signed a Covenant to work together as we are able in order to affirm our shared unity in Christ. A Covenant Commission, made up of a panel of Lutherans and Roman Catholics, was created to implement this Covenant.

Following the death of Bishop Hoffman, I was invited to address an Assembly gathered for Evening Prayer at Rosary Cathedral, the day before his funeral. Some time later I was invited to be present at the Installation of Leonard Blair as Bishop of the Toledo Diocese. Over the years we have developed a friendship and a relationship of mutual respect and love.

At the encouragement of the Covenant Commission, a Service of the Word was held at St. Michael’s Roman Catholic Church in Findlay to celebrate the Fifth Anniversary of the Covenant on October 22, 2006. At that time the Covenant signed in 2001 was reaffirmed by both Bishop Blair and me.

At about the same time, members of the Covenant Commission expressed their conviction that a “natural” next step for our relationship would be for the two bishops to lead a pilgrimage of Lutherans and Roman Catholics from Northwestern Ohio to the Luther Sites in Germany and to Rome. We agreed and, incredibly, plans began to unfold for what would come to be called, **A Journey Toward Understanding**. Leadership and planning for the event would be provided by Father James Peiffer, Pastor Tim Philabaum, and Assistant to the Bishop, Pastor Marc Miller.

III. A Journey Toward Understanding

On October 11, 2007, a group of 58, including Bishop Blair and 18 other Roman Catholics and 39 Lutherans left from the airport in Detroit to begin this pilgrimage. What follows is not a complete review of the trip but a brief description of some of the highlights for me.

In the evening of our arrival in Berlin, in the absence of a room in which to have Evening Prayer, the group gathered in the corner of the hotel lobby for Evening Prayer Service including the singing of hymns. When bystanders inquired as to the nature of the group, more than a few were puzzled (and delighted?) to hear that it was a group of Lutheran and Roman Catholic pilgrims.

We had determined that each morning the Roman Catholics would gather for Mass and the Lutherans would meet for Eucharist or Morning Prayers. The first morning in Berlin we met in adjacent rooms on the 11th floor of the motel, overlooking what once was a divided city. In my homily for the Lutheran gathering I quoted from Cardinal Walter Kasper's little book, **A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism**. In that book Kasper quotes from the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, from the Second Vatican Council. There "Spiritual Ecumenism" is defined: "This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the ecumenical movement, and merits the name, 'spiritual ecumenism.'" I then quoted Kasper:

The way toward reconciliation and communion unfolds when Christians feel the painful wound of division in their hearts, in their minds, and in their prayer. This experience makes them aware of how much harm has been caused by pride and selfishness, by polemics and condemnations, by disdain and presumption. It also awakens in them a readiness to engage in serious examination of conscience, recognizing their faults and trusting in the reconciling power of the Gospel. Only in the context of conversion and renewal of mind can the wounded bonds of communion be healed.
(pages 11-12)

To share the Eucharist (and not to be able to share it with our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters!) in a once divided city was a poignant reminder of the gift of unity in the cross of Christ and the ongoing pain of division within the Christian household. Clearly, members of the group felt and would come to feel on any number of occasions, "...the painful wound of division in their hearts, in their minds, and in their prayer."

The next stop was in Wittenberg, where we viewed the church upon whose door Luther posted *The Ninety Five Theses* as an invitation to debate the various matters related to the sale of indulgences. Within a short walking distance one can visit also the City Church as well as the cloister which became Luther and his wife Katie's home. On the roof line of the 13th century City Church was a sculpture depicting a sow with children at its teats and hind end. Our guide explained that the sow was a metaphor for evil and the children represented Jewish children. Suddenly, it was not hard to understand the "why" of Luther's late life rhetoric against the Jews and the context that would later create space for Hitler and the Holocaust. The Jewish community requested that the sculpture not be removed but that a memorial plaque to Holocaust victims be placed on the ground below the sculpture. At that point I found myself deeply saddened and wondered about how often the Church is shaped by the culture and comes to reflect its own "fallenness."

Other stops would include Eisleben, where Luther was born, baptized, and died, the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt where Luther spent some time, and Eisenach, outside of which is the Wartburg Castle where Luther was hid and took on the identity of Junker Georg while translating the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into the common German language of his day. The “aha” for Lutherans and Roman Catholics in the group was that the Wartburg Castle was also the home of St. Elizabeth of Thuringia some three centuries earlier . You may want to “Google” her to read about her powerful story which is so familiar to many Roman Catholics!

Before leaving Germany, we visited the valley town of Flossenberg, the site of one of Hitler’s “death camps.” Our guide pointed out that, at first, dissidents, mentally and physically impaired, and homosexuals were taken here. Before long Jews also were brought here to work in bitter conditions in the nearby quarry. One can only be silent as one imagines the suffering of this place, as one sees the location of mass burials and observes the site of the incinerator in which bodies were burned. This was also the location where Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hung, together with other dissidents, a few weeks before the war was ended. It was daunting to recall that all this took place only 60 plus years ago in an ostensibly “Christian” nation filled with both Lutherans and Roman Catholics.

After a long bus ride through the Alps, down the “spine” of Italy, we arrived in Rome. It was a privilege to visit the catacombs below the city of Rome where over 500,000 Christians from the first centuries of the Church’s existence were buried. The words from Hebrews 12 came to mind, “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...” At the Office of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, we were received for an hour interview with Executive Secretary Bishop Brian Farrell. At the Augustinian Church, Santa Maria Del Popolo, where Luther presumably presided at Mass during his pilgrimage to Rome, we were greeted by Prior General Father Robert Prevost (a native of Chicago who took a course or two at our seminary in Chicago, LSTC), who has oversight of the Augustinian Order. Obviously, it was a delight to be able to visit the Vatican Museum, the Sistine Chapel, and St. Peter’s Basilica.

On Wednesday, October 24, we participated in the Papal Audience (with about 30,000 or 40,000 others!). During the two hour audience Pope Benedict greeted pilgrims and presented a devotion in about 8 different languages. When he spoke in English he greeted our group by name. Following the audience I had the privilege of briefly meeting with the Pope. I brought him greetings from the Lutherans in the Northwestern Ohio Synod. He indicated that he was grateful for our group’s trip and stated that “The Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue is very important to me.” I expressed appreciation for our relationship with Bishop Blair and the Toledo Diocese and gratitude for the manner in which our group had been received in Rome. I also expressed my prayer for God’s blessing on his ministry on behalf of the Church. It was a grace-filled moment.

Before leaving we had the opportunity to visit Assisi, the home of Saint Francis and Saint Clare. It was a moving moment for our group to be able to join together in Evening Prayer and Song in the crypt chapel dedicated to St. Francis.

IV. Some Personal Reflections

1. It was a great joy to travel with a group of Lutherans and Roman Catholics who share a deep love for Christ and his Church. Members of the groups, including many of those traveling as couples, made a point of sitting with a different person each day. The conversations were a delight. I enjoyed hearing responses to some of my questions like, “Who most shaped you in your faith? What aspect of your faith has come to be of greatest importance in your life? How do you find yourself reacting to what you are seeing and experiencing?”
2. It was a thrill to join together with Roman Catholics for Evening Prayer, for Mealttime Prayer and for spontaneous prayer. The sense of being brothers and sisters in Christ was palpable. It has not always been this way.
3. I was reminded that Roman Catholics and Lutherans share more history of being together than being separate. Together we share in the first 1500 years of the Church. Those buried in the catacombs, St. Peter, St. Paul, St Elizabeth, St. Francis, and St. Clare are among those who are our common ancestors in the faith. When we gather at the Table of our Lord we know our unity with them in Christ.
4. The Gospel of John makes it clear that our Lord prays for the unity of the Church for the sake of its mission in the world (John 17). It is a challenge and gift to recognize this unity while also recognizing those places of continued divisions, places that are linked with our understanding of the faith. In the face of such truths, I do not know how we can be faithful without acknowledging the ways in which we contribute to division, without joining in prayer, without studying scripture, without imploring the Holy Spirit for the gift of unity in Christ.
5. The trip reminded me of the “big picture” in terms of the Christian faith. I often get so wrapped up in my world that I cannot see beyond my own nose! How important it is for me to see that I am a part of a parade of those who throughout the ages confess that “Jesus Christ is Lord.” I need to trust the Church to the One who is head of the Church, namely, Jesus Christ.
6. The Church is “fallen.” It is also the “Bride of Christ.” Sometimes it’s (my!) behavior is scandalous and an affront to the Gospel (e.g. the sculpture on the roof of the church at Wittenberg, the silence of so many Christians in the face of the holocausts (and present instances of genocide, etc.). Yet Christ still claims the Church as his own. What comfort and consolation comes from that truth!
7. It is humbling to know how much the culture shapes the Church and the ways in which the baptized people of God live their lives in ways more shaped by the culture than

by our confession of Christ. One sees that truth throughout all of history. Lord, have mercy!

8. The older I get the more I appreciate history. We can hardly know where we are if we do not know where we have been. It was wonderful to have good guides serve as our teachers.

9. Pope Benedict, Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, and other leaders of Christ's Church throughout the world need our prayers. Whether we like it or not, the Pope is the most widely recognized Christian leader in the world. His words and actions do make a difference and have an impact on the Church's witness in the world. But then, so do the words and actions of all of the baptized. On the particular day on which I met him, I was struck by Pope Benedict's authenticity, his care, and his pastoral presence. I hope he saw something of that in me.

10. I was struck by the response of so many whom we encountered when they heard that Roman Catholics and Lutherans were traveling together. In a world that is marked by division and hostility, I sensed delight and joy in the eyes of many whom we met. The world needs more of this!

11. I am grateful for colleagues like Father Peiffer and Pastor Philabaum who do not only talk about Christian unity but who invest time and energy to pray and work for it, "that the Church may be one."

12. I am grateful for my colleague, Bishop Blair, who created space in his schedule to "make this work." I also thank God for his love of the Church and God's people and for his desire to serve faithfully. In the midst of the burdens he bears, he also has my prayers.

13. Romans Catholics, Lutherans, and other Christians need to be in prayer together, in worship together, in conversation together, in service together. When that happens, the unity Christ gives us is palpable, we are enriched, the world is served and Christ is glorified.

14. I give thanks to God for surprises. Pastor Dennis Maurer, Assistant to the Bishop, likes to say, "God is a God of surprises." The incarnation, the cross, the empty tomb, the gift of the Holy Spirit, all make that evident. But God also has surprises as Christ's story intersects with our own. Admittedly and for a variety of reasons, in the beginning I did not have much enthusiasm for this trip. Yet, very soon I found it to be a profound gift and a source of insight and healing. I hope this summary gives some indication of that.

V. Finally...

A number of people have asked me, Will you do this trip again? I would offer several responses. First, others, like the Covenant Commission, Father Peiffer, Pastor Philabaum, and Pastor Marc Miller, were responsible for making this trip happen.

You might talk with them!

Second, this trip, like every trip, cannot be repeated. A wide variety of things combined to make it what it was. But then, that will be true for whatever may be planned in the future.

Third, I invite you to dream as you ask yourself, “What other surprises might God have in store, for Christ’s Church, for you and for me, and for the Church’s witness in the world?”

Submitted by:
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