

Together in Hope

The Joint Catholic – Lutheran Commemoration of the 500 Years of Reformation

By

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In the year 1517, in the German city of Wittenberg, the monk Martin Luther made public his opposition to the prevailing practice of selling indulgences. He did so on the grounds of his theological and spiritual convictions. His public voice triggered a profound process of transformation in an already convoluted context of social, political and economic upheaval. While Luther had never intended to start a new church, further developments eventually divided Western Christianity and sparked conflict and violence, whose ramifications are still felt today. Centennial anniversaries of the Reformation have been a source of polemics and confrontation between the two confessions.

This time, it will be different. On 31 October 2016, Pope Francis, for the Catholic Church, and Bishop Munib Younan and Rev. Dr Martin Junge, representing the worldwide communion of 145 churches of the Lutheran World Federation, will cohost the joint commemoration of the Reformation, launching its 500th anniversary.

It is the first time in history that Catholics and Lutherans will jointly commemorate the anniversary of the Reformation at the global level. This landmark event reflects the progress made in fifty years of international Catholic–Lutheran dialogue. Initiated after the important decisions taken by the Second Vatican Council, the dialogue has created mutual understanding. It has helped to overcome many differences and, moreover, created trust. It has affirmed the common conviction that there is more that unites than that which divides Catholics and Lutherans. It has given expression to the deep conviction of faith that through baptism, Catholics and Lutherans are called into one body.

But the commemoration also expresses strengthened relationships and more profound mutual understanding reached in many parts of the world in service and witness. Lutherans and Catholics have come closer together, often in extremely challenging contexts of persecution, oppression and suffering.

Among the many agreements that have been reached during these decades of dialogue, the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDD)*, signed by the Catholic Church and the LWF in the year 1999 is pivotal. With this declaration, Catholics and Lutherans overcame the divisive effects of the key controversy of the sixteenth century. This milestone in Catholic–Lutheran ecumenical relations constitutes the theological foundation for the Joint Commemoration that makes possible the public pledge to turn away from past conflict and to open up to the unity into which the church is called.

The Joint Commemoration will be held under the meaningful heading “From Conflict to Communion – Together in Hope.” It will include a common prayer at the Cathedral of Lund, and a public event at the Malmoe Arena (Sweden).

“From Conflict to Communion” is also the title of a report produced by the International Catholic Lutheran Commission on Unity. The report tells the history of the Reformation as it is understood jointly, analyzes the theological topics under dispute and identifies those differences that today can be regarded as having been overcome because of dialogue and a common understanding. It also points out those topics that still require further theological discussion and agreement, notably the understanding of the church, the ministry and the Eucharist. The Joint Commemoration will be structured around thanksgiving, repentance and a commitment to joint witness.

- *Thanksgiving*: because of the gift of the Word of God, and the ways it spoke anew to the church and to the world and continues to speak until now. But also for the particular gifts of the Reformation, as well as the gifts that Lutherans and Catholics recognize in each other.
- *Repentance*: because while dealing with difference, the unity of the church was lost. But also in view of the immense suffering imposed on ordinary people due to a theological dispute, which became aligned to and instrumentalized by hegemonic political interests. As a consequence, long ‘religious wars’ were fought in Europe in the 16th and 17th century.
- *Commitment to joint witness*: because while Lutherans and Catholics continue to search for unity, nothing impedes their joint witness to the joy, beauty and transformative power of faith, notably by serving the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed. The Joint Commemoration invites Catholics and Lutherans to give, because of the mercy they receive in and through Christ.

While these three elements will be solidly reflected in the common prayer at the Cathedral in Lund and in the Joint Statement to be signed by Pope Francis and LWF President Bishop Munib Younan, the third—the commitment to common witness—will be particularly emphasized at the Arena in Malmoe, which can host up to 10,000 participants. During this public event an agreement of cooperation will be signed between the Lutheran World Federation World Service, which currently serves more than 2.3 million refugees globally, and Caritas Internationalis, present in 164 countries around the world with an impressive record of diaconal service to people in need. By giving testimonies, singing songs and sharing reflections, Catholics and Lutherans will thus underline that their pledge to leave conflict behind will not remain only among these two communions, but bear fruit in compassionate and loving service to the neighbor in a world wounded and fragmented by conflict, violence and ecological destruction.

While Lutherans and Catholics are called to leave their conflict behind and turn towards their common future, it is clear that this significant and historic step cannot take place in isolation from their many other ecumenical relationships. Ecumenical representatives will be part of the Joint Commemoration, accompanying Catholics and Lutherans in this significant moment and encouraging with their presence the journey ahead. Such an ecumenical context will also underline the conviction that the sixteenth-century Reformation doesn’t stand on its own, but was preceded and succeeded by other reformation movements. The reformation movement initiated by Luther, has been received and is owned in different ways by different confessional traditions.

In a world struggling with breakdowns in communication, the increasing recurrence of inflammatory, divisive speeches and growing violence and conflict, Lutherans and Catholics will draw from the depth of their shared faith in the Triune God to state publicly:

- Jointly, Catholics and Lutherans will move together evermore closer to their common Lord and Savior Jesus Christ;
- It is worthwhile to remain in dialogue;
- It is possible to leave conflict behind;
- Hatred and violence, also on religious grounds, should not be trivialized, let alone justified, but emphatically rejected;
- Clouded memories can fade away.
- A painful history does not exclude a bright future;
- It is possible to move from conflict to communion and to undertake this journey jointly and in hope;
- There is power in reconciliation, as it sets free to turn to each other, but also to turn to others in love and service.

The Joint Commemoration will be of great encouragement to Catholics and Lutherans in their joint witness in a wounded and broken world. Furthermore it will provide the motivation for committing to even more passionate dialogue so that remaining differences are overcome and the unity that is hoped for can be received and celebrated.