

Reformation Sunday

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 1, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, at Mass, our music director impishly had us sing the hymn "Christ's Church Shall Glory in His Power," which is set, in the Worship hymnal, to the tune "Ein' Feste Burg." I don't know how many people got the joke. Yesterday was Reformation Sunday, the day on which our Protestant brethren commemorate Martin Luther's nailing of his Theses to the door of the chapel in Wittenberg.

I am all for ecumenical dialogue, and the dialogue with Luther's direct descendents has been especially fruitful. We now realize what no one realized back then, that we actually agree on the issue of justification by faith. There is today a renewed respect for each other as brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Still, I can't help thinking that the Reformation was a mistake. Luther was right to object to the way indulgences were "sold," and to other corruptions within the Church of the early 16th century. Luther was right to bring a fresh sense of the enormity of the faith's claims to a Church that had been weighed down by cultural encrustations of the faith that obscured our core beliefs instead of enlightening them. Luther was right to be impatient with the failure to enact the reforms called for at the Lateran Councils of the late medieval era. Luther was also, obviously, the outstanding theologian of his day.

But, he was wrong to leave. However great the problems within Christendom, killing the idea of Christendom, the idea that we are all in this together, that the individual is not greater than the whole, that the bonds of communion that must characterize the Church on earth are bonds forged by God and not to be broken, the idea that what one does affects the whole, the idea that the Bible and the tradition belong to the Church, to everybody together, not to any one of us individually, that idea was irrevocably damaged by the decision to leave.

I do not believe that Christians who lived when Christendom was still a reality lived more morally or more devoutly than do the Christians of our own time. But, it seems obvious to me that we have lost something precious, that we have lost the sense of belonging to a reality greater than ourselves and prior to ourselves, the sense that the Church is, in a sense, prior even to creation, tied up with the intense, burning love that characterizes the Trinity itself. I do not know if we can ever get that sense back, having lost it. But, I do know that beyond all the theological controversies of our day, recapturing that sense is the most important task facing the Church and a proper focus of the "New Evangelization" that Pope Benedict XVI has called for.

I hope that today, the Feast of All Saints, the Saints of all the Christian churches, Catholic and Orthodox and Protestant, will help us here on earth to reclaim the sense of Christendom that we lost so many years ago.

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