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Catholic, Lutheran joint celebration a good start toward interdenominational understanding

Bill Tammeus | Aug. 7, 2013 A small c catholic

No doubt it's pointless now, almost 500 years after the start of the Protestant Reformation, to suggest it shouldn't and needn't have happened. What's done is done.

Still, evidence that more generous and accommodating thought and actions in the early 1500s might have prevented the breakup can be found in the fact that today, Catholics and Lutherans have agreed to commemorate [1] the start of the Reformation without rancor or additional insults.

A joint document recently produced [2] by the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation acknowledges this present reality: "Lutherans and Catholics today enjoy a growth in mutual understanding, cooperation, and respect. They have come to acknowledge that more unites than divides them: above all, common faith in the Triune God and the revelation in Jesus Christ, as well as recognition of the basic truths of the doctrine of justification."

We should not, however, look for an immediate merging of Catholic and Protestant churches into one unified body. If that ever happens, it's a long way off. Indeed, there is something to be said for the richness of the different theological and ecclesial styles found in the various branches on Christianity -- Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and others.

It would be a shame to lose that richness for the sake of the idol of uniformity. And the fact is that Protestantism itself is so completely atomized as to make any kind of Protestant-Catholic unification seem a pipe dream. Heck, we Presbyterians are having enough trouble just trying to keep our own house together, much less imagining a merger first with the rest of Protestantism then with Catholicism.

And yet there is much to celebrate in the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue that has brought the Vatican and the World Lutheran Federation to this point. This joint journey did not begin last week. Far from it. As the newly released document notes:

> "Already the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in 1980 offered both Lutherans and Catholics the opportunity to develop a common understanding of the foundational truths of the faith by pointing to Jesus Christ as the living center of our Christian faith. On the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's birth in 1983, the international dialogue between Roman Catholics and Lutherans jointly affirmed a number of Luther's essential concerns."

Additional steps between then and now have prepared the ground for this joint and civil observation of the 500th anniversary of Luther nailing his 95 theses [3] to the cathedral door in Wittenberg, Germany.

The question, of course, is whether all this is merely the product of high-level church officials with not much

relevance for or connection to the people in the pews. So far, we don't know how to answer that except to say that probably a survey of any Catholic or Lutheran congregation would find only a tiny minority of members aware of the status of this relationship.

Indeed, that points to the ongoing problem of the theological education of church members. It seems that often, people's study of the Bible and issues of theology ends in their adolescent years, and though they may be regular attenders of worship, they are often biblically illiterate and woefully uninformed about what seminaries are teaching the future members of the clergy.

And as for such matters as this Catholic-Lutheran dialogue, media coverage usually is so limited that only a few people grasp either its importance or even its existence. *NCR* published the Religion News Service piece [4] about the new statement in the July 5-18 print edition, but coverage in most of the traditional nonreligious press has been scarce.

And yet because several years remain before the 2017 anniversary of Luther's Wittenberg action, there's still plenty of time for individual Catholic and Lutheran congregations to work together to create local events that would educate members and become a model for a richer and broader ecumenical relationship. Will your congregation take the lead? Google the Lutherans. They're easy to find.

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