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## **A Catholic perspective on the Reformation**

Bishop John T. Folda

Five hundred years ago this past month, the Protestant Reformation was launched when Martin Luther published his *95 Theses*, a list of grievances and propositions for reform of the Church. One must acknowledge that there were some serious abuses in the Church at the time of the Reformation, and Luther's "protest" was largely directed toward those issues. But over time, the protests of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and others were also directed toward the doctrine and pastoral practices of the Church, and a true separation from the Church took place. In a recent article, Bishop Robert Barron looks objectively at the discord of that era: "Sadly, things got out of hand: exaggerations, over-reactions, impugning of motives, awkward formulations, etc., on both sides. The result was that a reform movement within the church gave rise to a divided church" (*Christianity Today*, March 17, 2017).

From the perspective of history, it seems proper to mark or observe this anniversary, but not to celebrate it. Any division of the Christian people is a tragedy, and one undeniable result of the Reformation has been the sad fracturing of the Christian community. Hundreds of different denominations have sprung up in the aftermath of the Reformation, which unfortunately diminishes the witness of Christianity to the world. It's hard to imagine that Jesus would be content with this state of affairs.

And so, we should do what we can to restore unity and to heal the wounds of division that still remain. Pope Francis himself, in October 2016, traveled to Lund, Sweden to join leaders of the Lutheran World Federation in an ecumenical service of prayer, where he acknowledged the prayer of Jesus for his followers: "That they all may be one." Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI participated in similar events during their pontificates. I too had the privilege of participating in a synodal assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church here in North Dakota, as well as a commemoration of the Reformation at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minn. The priests and deacons of our diocese have gathered in joint meetings with our Lutheran neighbors to discuss matters of mutual interest, including the teachings of Pope Francis and the ecumenical path toward reunion. We have also worked closely with various Protestant groups in the pro-life and pro-family causes that are so important in the current cultural situation. And, every January, many of our parishes join with our non-Catholic brethren to pray together during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The friendships that have developed between us have been a blessing and hopefully will make it possible for us, even in a small way, to move toward the unity that Jesus desires for his Church.

Ecumenical progress seems to move slowly, but Christian unity is feasible if we are open to this possibility and receptive to God's grace. A good example of true progress is the 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, which was the fruit of an international Catholic-Lutheran dialogue that involved years of mutual listening, honesty, charity, and prayer. Not so long ago, such an agreement on the issue of justification would have been unthinkable. In recent years, the group "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" has also issued several statements of common belief, which bear witness to a greater spirit of cooperation among Catholics and Protestants. These statements are not complete or perfect, but they are a good start towards the unity we all hope for, the unity that is essential to God's plan for his Church. And they also remind us that there is more that unites us than divides us. There is still much to be done, but after 500 years of separation, by the grace of God, the process of healing will continue. Even though we still find ourselves disagreeing about important issues of faith and morals, we do so as brothers and sisters, not as enemies.

Catholics should look upon this anniversary of the Reformation with equal measures of humility and hope. We must pray for unity among Christians, as Jesus did, and at the same time immerse ourselves in our Catholic faith by regular reading and prayer with the words of Sacred Scripture. We should study the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in order to know and understand the truths of our faith more fully.

There is also a need for self-examination. In a spirit of humility, each of us must repent for our own failures to follow Christ and to fully live out the gift of faith in the world and in the communion of the Church.

Authentic reform is always necessary in the lives of Christians. From the very beginning, Jesus called his disciples to repentance. And already in the fifth century, St. Augustine coined the phrase *Ecclesia semper reformanda* (“The Church must always be reformed”). He recognized that the Church must humbly and constantly strive to be what Jesus Christ founded her to be. In the years immediately following Luther’s protest, the need for reform gave rise to a new movement within the Church – a *Catholic* Reformation – that began to address the problems and corruption of that time. Great saints like St. Ignatius of Loyola, Pope St. Pius V, St. Charles Borromeo, and St. Francis de Sales worked tirelessly to renew the Church in unity and holiness, and that task continues for all of us today.

Certainly we must always cling to hope for a restoration of unity. Without question, real issues remain that divide us as Christians, and some ask whether Christianity can ever be reunited as a unified body of believers. From our human perspective this might seem impossible, but with God’s grace all things are possible. Jesus himself prayed that all of his followers might be one, and we must never underestimate the power of grace and Christ’s ability to form us as a united Church. Unity among the Christian faithful is a gift from God, and through prayer and humble effort we must dispose ourselves to be worthy of that gift.