

Calling on Pope Francis to Seize the Moment and Reverse Martin Luther's Excommunication

Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany, 497 years ago today, Oct. 31. These were 95 short statements protesting abuses in the Roman Catholic Church, of which he was a priest and professor of theology.

This simple act turned out to be an epoch event that changed the course of church and world history. The particular abuse of the church that moved him to write these 95 theses of protest was the sale of indulgences whereby one could purchase with money forgiveness of sins and time out of purgatory.

Luther never wanted to leave the Roman Catholic Church but wanted to see it return to Scripture as its primary guide and source of authority, rather than the pope and church tradition. Because his protest was not received by the powers-that-be, *i.e.*, the pope and the Roman curia, another division occurred within Christendom with many new Protestant churches being formed.

In many parts of the world, Lutherans and Protestants are already making plans for celebrations of the 500-year anniversary of this epoch event in 2017. They are also inviting Roman Catholics to join in the celebrations, which some Catholics find challenging because Luther was excommunicated and declared a heretic by the Roman church.

I recently read the book by Pope Francis entitled *The Church of Mercy* and found it a very good book in which he talks much of forgiveness, mercy and reaching out beyond ourselves. I

also appreciate his emphasis on unity and his reaching out to Protestants, including Pentecostals and charismatics.

But if Francis and the Catholic Church are truly serious about forgiveness, mercy and unity, they could demonstrate by planning now to participate in the 500 year celebrations of Luther's epochal act; and contribute to it by removing Luther's excommunication and label as a heretic and recognizing him as a true Christian and teacher of Christian doctrine.

What a powerful statement of forgiveness and Christian unity that would be!

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