

Catholics, Lutherans Jointly to Mark Reformation Anniversary

Senior **Roman Catholic** and Lutheran officials announced on Monday they would mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 as a shared event rather than highlight the clash that split Western Christianity.

The **Vatican** and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) presented a report in Geneva admitting both were guilty of harming Christian unity in the past and describing a growing consensus between the two churches in recent decades.

The 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's 95 Theses, the doctrinal challenge that launched the **Protestant Reformation**, will be the first centenary celebration in the age of ecumenism, globalization and the secularization of Western societies.

"The awareness is dawning on **Lutherans** and Catholics that the struggle of the 16th century is over," the report said. "The reasons for mutually condemning each other's faith have fallen by the wayside."

They now agree belief in Jesus unites them despite lingering differences, it said, and inspires them to cooperate more closely to proclaim the gospel in increasingly pluralistic societies.

"This is a very important step in a healing process which we all need and we are all praying for," LWF General Secretary Martin Junge said at the report's presentation in Geneva.

"The division of the church is something we cannot celebrate but we can see what is positive and try to find ways towards

the future together,” said Cardinal Kurt Koch, head of the Vatican’s department to promote Christian unity.

Seeking Common Ground

Roman Catholicism, the world’s largest church, has about 1.2 billion members or just over half of all Christians. There are about 75 million Lutherans in LWF member churches and other Lutheran groups around the world.

Catholics and Lutherans began seeking theological common ground after the 1962-1965 Second Vatican Council, which opened the Roman church to better relations with other churches, and have ironed out many of their differences over the decades.

They took a major step forward in 1999 by agreeing a common view on justification, the doctrine at the core of their 16th century dispute. At issue was whether Christians attained eternal salvation by faith alone or also by doing good works.

Both sides admitted in the 93-page report that they had often ridiculed each other’s teachings in the past, sinning against the eighth commandment which bars giving false witness.

The Lutheran side confessed its shame and regret over “the vicious and degrading statements that Martin Luther made against the Jews” and rejected other “dark sides of Luther” including his support for the persecution of Anabaptists.

The report said Christians in developing countries, now an important region for both churches, could not identify with 500-year-old European rows. Secularization in Western societies in recent decades meant many old feuds were now forgotten there.

The rise of **Pentecostal** and **charismatic** movements over the past century “have put forward new emphases that have made many of the old confessional controversies seem obsolete,” it added.

Still Apart on Some Issues

The report said Luther's 95 Theses were meant to begin a debate about practices such as selling indulgences and were not intended to found a new church. Both sides mishandled the crisis that followed, leading to the final split.

Disputes over the authority of the Bible, which Lutherans stress more than Catholics, have narrowed so much that lingering differences would no longer justify maintaining their split, the report said. It spoke of the two churches sharing "unity in reconciled diversity" over these issues.

But while ecumenical dialogue has developed new common understandings on some divisive points, other doctrines—such as the office of the Catholic pope or the nature of the ordained clergy—still remain significantly far apart.

The LWF said it wants to talk with Anglican, Mennonite, Reformed, Orthodox and Pentecostal churches about how they might also participate in the 2017 commemoration.

Editing by Michael Roddy

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