

Is Pope Francis Serious About Christian Unity?

Oct. 31, 2024, will mark the 507-year anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his 95 Theses to the Wittenberg church door and igniting the Protestant Reformation. It also presents another opportunity for Pope Francis to demonstrate that he is truly serious about unity.

Pope Francis has made Christian unity a major theme of his administration. He has reached out to leaders of the Eastern Orthodox churches and to Protestant leaders, including those from the Pentecostal-charismatic movement. A July 10, 2014, article in Charisma News carried the story of a cordial meeting of the pope with Kenneth Copeland and James Robison, which included prayer and high fives.

I commend the pope for his efforts, but if he is truly serious about Christian unity, he can highlight it with a clear and unequivocal statement on this 507-year anniversary of the Reformation. He can do this by lifting Luther's excommunication and removing his label as a heretic.

Luther, after all, was a devout Roman Catholic priest who never wanted to leave the Catholic Church. He wanted to see the church reformed according to Scripture but was excommunicated and labeled a heretic for his efforts.

As a professor of Bible and theology at the University of Wittenberg, Luther began to see how far the medieval Catholic Church had moved away from the gospel. He began to boldly teach that Scripture is our final authority, not the pope. He also taught that we are saved through faith in Christ alone apart from church-appointed works and sacraments.

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When he was ordered to stop teaching these doctrines, he refused, now convinced that he was on the side of Scripture. He was hauled before a religious court—the Diet of Worms—where he faced the highest dignitaries in the church and the emperor himself. He was ordered to recant his teachings, but refused, saying,

I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves. I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis. My conscience is captive to the Word of God; thus I cannot and will not recant anything, because acting against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound. Here I stand! God help me! Amen!

Luther was declared a heretic and an order issued that his books were to be confiscated and burned. He would have been arrested and executed but for the protection of the powerful German prince, Frederick the Wise.

Luther did not recant because he was convinced that he was on the right side of God and history. The late Dr. Hans Kung, the most widely read Catholic theologian in the world today, agreed, saying,

And from a historical perspective there can be no doubt that it is not Luther but Rome which bears the chief responsibility for the way in which the dispute over the right way to salvation and practical reflection on the gospel very rapidly turned into a fundamental dispute over authority in the church and the infallibility of popes (Hyatt, "Infallible Pope: Key to Unity or Source of Division," 54).

So, despite all the good efforts toward unity, Luther remains a heretic according to Catholic doctrine. And, according to Catholic doctrine, Protestant believers are not fully Christian but are "separated brethren," and Protestant

churches are not true churches but mere “Christian communities.”

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So, here are three things Pope Francis could do that would show the world he is truly serious about Christian unity.

1. Remove Luther's excommunication and label as a heretic.
2. Recognize Protestant churches as true churches rather than mere “Christian communities.”
3. Recognize Protestant believers as full and complete Christians through faith in Christ rather than “separated brethren.”

I do not expect any pope to declare Nos. 2 and 3, for that would mean dispensing with the “hallowed” Roman Catholic Church doctrine that this is the only true church. However, acting on No. 1 would show that there is an element of seriousness to the talk of love and Christian unity.

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