

Commemoration of 500 Years Since the Reformation

St. Clare of Assisi Church

1 October 2017

Dear brother, Bishop Mohr, I thank you sincerely for your homily so marked by hope and commitment, and dear brothers and sisters in Christ gathered for this prayer service:

Introduction

The Lord is doing great things for us, and in him we rejoice. How good it is for us to be here to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and the 50 years of “fruitful and sustained ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans.”¹ In the words of the Joint Statement signed last October in Lund by Pope Francis and Bishop Munib Yunan, President of the Lutheran World Federation, “While we are profoundly thankful for the spiritual and theological gifts received through the Reformation, we also confess and lament before Christ that Lutherans and Catholics have wounded the visible unity of the Church.”²

Above all we gather this Sunday afternoon to thank God for the very many steps that have been and are being taken to restore the full visible unity of the Body of Christ for which Jesus prayed with such

¹ Joint Statement on the occasion of the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation, Lund (31 October 2016).

² Joint Statement on the occasion of the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation, Lund (31 October 2016).

anguish on the night before he died for our salvation (cf. Jn 17:21).

Today we acknowledge with gratitude the communion with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit that arises from our Baptism into the one Body. This communion with the triune God creates in turn communion among us, his People, who share in the faith of the Apostles. More than at any time in the last 500 years both Lutherans and Catholics have come to understand “that what unites us is greater than what divides us.”³ Indeed, this celebration reminds us that we cannot “be resigned to the division and distance that our separation has created between us. We have the opportunity to mend a critical moment of our history by moving beyond the controversies and disagreements that have often prevented us from understanding one another.”⁴

Jesus Is the Vine

Now let’s take a look at the Gospel appointed for this prayer service, as it was for that which took place in Lund.

Jesus begins by telling us that he is “the true vine” (Jn 15:1), and that his Father is the vine grower who wants to cultivate a fruitful

³ Joint Statement on the occasion of the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation, Lund (31 October 2016).

⁴ Francis, Homily, Common Ecumenical Prayer at the Lutheran Cathedral of Lund (31 October 2016).

harvest of grapes. On that vine who is Christ Jesus we are branches who remain alive and capable of bearing fruit only if we remain united with and joined to the vine. In him is our source of our life, a life first given us in Baptism, when each one of us was grafted onto Christ, and received the free and unmerited gift of the new life of grace.⁵

As branches we are self-sufficient neither as individuals nor as Churches and ecclesial communities. We depend totally on the vine, in whom we find life in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10). In other words, it's as if Jesus were saying to us: "As branches are joined to the vine, so you belong to me! But inasmuch as you belong to me, you also belong to one another." This belonging to one another is not some ideal, imaginary or symbolic relationship. It is a true communion of life with him and with others, which is rooted in Baptism.⁶

In truth, we cannot bear any fruit, we cannot perform any truly good and meritorious works, if we do not abide with Jesus Christ, if we do not remain with him who is Head of the Body, which is the Church (cf. Col 1:18).

We can well apply to this moment in Christian history the words of

⁵ Cf. St. John Paul II, *Message for the Fifth World Youth Day* (26 November 1989), 2.

⁶ Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily, Berlin (22 September 2011).

Jesus: “Apart from me, you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). These apply to the ecumenical challenges before us: “the purification and healing of memories, and the restoration of Christian unity in accordance with the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Eph 4:4–6).”⁷

He is the one – *solus Christus* – the only one who sustains us and spurs us on to find ways to make the unity we already share ever more visible. But, as Pope Francis has pointed out, God has turned our painful situation of separation which has been “an immense source of suffering and misunderstanding,” into an occasion which “has also led us to recognize honestly that without him we can do nothing; in this way it has enabled us to understand better some aspects of our faith. With gratitude we acknowledge that the Reformation helped give greater centrality to sacred Scripture in the Church’s life. Through shared hearing of the word of God in the Scriptures, important steps forward have been taken in the dialogue”⁸ between Lutherans and Catholics. We truly have gifts to offer one another.

The image of the vine is a sign of hope and confidence. Christ himself came into this world through his Incarnation to be our root.

⁷ Lutheran-Catholic Commission for Unity, *From Conflict to Communion*, Foreword.

⁸ Francis, Homily, Common Ecumenical Prayer at the Lutheran Cathedral of Lund (31 October 2016).

Whatever hardship or difficulty confronts us in our ecumenical pilgrimage together, he offers us the water of life to strengthen us. He takes upon himself all our sins and anxieties, and he purifies and transforms us, in a way that is ultimately mysterious, into good wine. In times of hardship which have so marked our past and lamentably are not yet totally eradicated, we can sometimes feel as if we ourselves were in the wine-press, like grapes being crushed. But we know that if we are joined to Christ we become mature wine. It is necessary that we “abide” in Christ individually as disciples and gathered collectively in our communities of faith so that we may bear fruit for the life of the world.⁹

Pruning

Today’s Gospel also reminds us that the vine grower reaches for his knife; he cuts off the withered branches and prunes the fruit-bearing ones, so that they bring forth more fruit. But this hurts. Pruning is always a painful process. This pruning recalls the image from the prophet Ezekiel: God wants to take the dead heart of stone out of our breast in order to give us a living heart of flesh (cf. Ez 36:26). He wants to bestow new life upon us, full of vitality.¹⁰ This is the Lord’s plan for his people; and that’s why pruning is necessary, above all a pruning of

⁹ Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily, Berlin (22 September 2011).

¹⁰ Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily, Berlin (22 September 2011).

our memories of the past. In the wise words of *From Conflict to Communion* we read:

What happened in the past cannot be changed, but what is remembered of the past and how it is remembered can, with the passage of time, indeed change. Remembrance makes the past present. While the past itself is unalterable, the presence of the past in the present is alterable. In view of 2017, the point is not to tell a different history, but to tell that history differently (n. 16).

Because we have been – and are still being – pruned by the word that the Lord has spoken to us (cf. Jn 15:3), we pray that Catholics and Lutherans will more effectively and more convincingly witness together to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, inviting humanity to hear and receive the Good News of God’s redeeming action. And we pray to God “for inspiration, encouragement and strength so that we may stand together in service, upholding human dignity and rights, especially for the poor, working for justice, and rejecting all forms of violence.”¹¹

Conclusion

As our pilgrimage together goes forward, let us experience more

¹¹ Joint Statement on the occasion of the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation, Lund (31 October 2016).

vibrantly that we are all branches on the Vine who is Christ Jesus, and let us become increasingly aware that on this journey we need the Lord's assistance, that he will have to give us even more help for, on our own, unless we "abide in him," we can do nothing (cf. Jn 15:5).¹²

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB
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¹² Cf. Benedict XVI, General Audience (19 January 2011).