

**Reformation Sunday 2017**  
**October 29, 2017, Year A**  
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Did you know that today is Reformation Sunday? It's not on the Catholic calendar, but Protestant communities have been celebrating it for centuries-- Martin Luther, the 95 Theses, and all that. But I thought it might be worth a mention because it's been 500 years since Martin Luther posted his Theses on the church door in Wittenberg Germany, Oct. 31, 1517.

Some today doubt he actually posted them on the door, but he did in fact send them to his archbishop with a cover letter dated October 31, so close enough.

It is generally accepted that Luther, Augustinian monk and Catholic priest, did not intend to start a new Church community separated from the universal Church of the Apostles and headed by the pope. He meant to reform the Catholic Church, and in that he had a lot of company. Calls for reform have echoed through the centuries. John the Baptist and Jesus both preached: "Repent and reform your lives!" St. Augustine preached a series of sermons reminding his fellow bishops that they were supposed to be pastoring the sheep, not themselves. Augustine also went after a group of Christians, known as the Donatists, who had split from the universal church over reconciliation. They said that anyone who had publicly denied Christ could not be forgiven. The pope said they could. The Donatists went into schism, claiming to be the faithful remnant of the true Church. Augustine said, "You are not. Get over yourselves and come home."

In the 11<sup>th</sup> century there was a major reform effort led by the popes. Since bishops and abbots of monasteries controlled land, they were vassals of feudal lords above them in the pecking order. Since lords liked nothing better than loyal vassals, they took it upon themselves to name the bishops of the Church. They preferred personal loyalty over genuine faith and upright morals, so the Church was laboring under the scandalous example of unfit leaders. To correct the corruption, the popes claimed for themselves the right to appoint bishops, which caused a huge uproar. One Holy Roman Emperor even chased the pope out of Rome into exile, where he died. But the principle got established: the Church would appoint her own leaders.

The enhanced power of the papacy had good effects in many ways, but it eventually turned the papacy into a political football, with rival Roman families vying to get one of their own on the papal throne. So, more calls for reform. At one point the popes moved to Avignon in the south of France. Catherine of Siena wrote him there, telling him very bluntly that he should man up and get back to Rome where he belonged.

Oh, how pleasant the Church would be if it weren't for human beings! But that's what the Church is, humans struggling with the help of the Holy Spirit to be God's faithful people. So, there will always be abuses and corruptions and zealous reformers. Martin Luther thought he was one of the reformers. Unfortunately, neither he nor the Church authorities were all that interested in a calm, open and honest dialogue about the real issues. Rome did send someone to interview Luther and see what the fuss was all about, but the Pope was more interested in his hunting dogs and Italian politics, and inclined to rely on bad habits of repression to keep dissidents in line. Luther for his part had a stubborn disposition, a violent temper, and was rather enjoying tweaking the Holy Father from the safety of the local German princes protecting him. In other words, all kind of factors were coming into play-- personal, political, financial, as well as religious-- pushing the main actors into extreme positions.

Five hundred years later, we finally have what should have happened then-- a calm, open, and honest dialogue about the actual issues; chief among them, what Luther called the “ruler and judge over all other Christian doctrines”, is justification. The theological discussions can get very technical, but the basic question is very simple: what puts us right with God: what we do, or what God does?

The debate is as old as the Bible itself. St Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans, uses Abraham as an example that we are justified on the basis of faith, not of our own works. He says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” (Rom. 4:3) But James, in his Epistle, addresses that very example and says, “Do you want proof that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with the works, and faith was completed by the works.” (James 2:20-22)

Who's right? Is it by faith, or by works? Both must be right, for both are inspired scripture, so we must understand the terms of the debate in a such a way that they do not exclude each other. What exactly is meant by “justification”? That's what Catholic and Lutheran theologians have been working on in recent decades, and in 1999 they published a “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification”, dated Oct. 31. The six-page appendix is full of hair-splitting technicalities, but there is one line that seems to sum it up:

“Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.” (par. 3)

So, God accepts and befriends us before we deserve it, a pure unmerited gift. That's grace. But as friends of God we are called to reform our lives, do good works. I hear the echo of a phrase from Paul's letter to the Galatians: all that matters is “faith working through love”. (Gal. 5:6) Faith working through love takes the initial grace of justification on home

to final salvation.

I'd like to conclude this Catholic observance of Reformation Sunday by quoting how the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" itself concludes:

"We give thanks to the Lord for this decisive step forward on the way to overcoming the division of the Church. We ask the Holy Spirit to lead us further toward that visible unity which is Christ's will."