

*Sermon for the Festival of the Reformation 2006
29.x.2006, 10:00, Holy Eucharist – LBW 2
Adult Confirmation of Gayle & John Norris
Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 46, Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania*

Jesu Juva!

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

There is a prayer for the Church in our *Lutheran Book of Worship*, on page 45 in the forepart of the hymnal, and I can think of no more appropriate prayer for the Church on this festival of the Reformation. It was not written by a Lutheran churchman but rather by a Bishop of the Church of England, however not long after the Reformation. Bishop Laud's prayer, as we have it here, is neither as beautiful nor as personal as he wrote it, but it will serve us as we pray that the work of Reformation be

carried on in this and every place. Again, this prayer is found on page 45 in the forepart of the green hymnal Let us offer this prayer together:

Gracious Father, we pray for Your Holy Catholic Church. Fill it with all truth and peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it, where it is in error, direct it, where in anything it is amiss, reform it, where it is right, strengthen it, where it is in need, provide for it, where it is divided, reunite it, for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son our Savior.

Very often I am asked by perfect strangers who happen to see me attired in black shirt and clerical collar at a hospital or other public place, "What is the difference between the Lutheran Church and the Catholic Church?" By 'Catholic Church' they always seem to mean the Roman Catholic Church. Depending on the person and why it seems to me they are asking this question, I can give one of three answers. The first answer, which is for most people the most satisfying

because it has to do with things they have actually seen or can visualize, is to name some observable or audible practices, buildings or objects used in worship, some of which are typically similar between Roman Catholics and Lutherans, and other which differ. Here I have to be careful, because there are a great many things of this sort to discuss, and also because, on the American Lutheran side, there seems to be an increased tendency away from uniformity or, in some instances, even any observable unity at all in visible practice and sacred song. But it still seems to satisfy many questioners to learn that Lutherans and Roman Catholics say they believe most of the same things about Jesus Christ and the Triune God, that Lutherans and Catholics do and use many of the same things in

worship and church life, even if they call them by different names, and that Lutherans and Catholics *could* use even more patterns of private devotion or public worship in common, where they are inclined or inspired so to do.

Another approach to this question, if it looks to me as though the questioner is ready for it, is to explain the beliefs of Lutherans and Roman Catholics, how they came to differ on a few points while remaining united on most, how the teaching of the two church bodies has changed and developed since the Reformation and, most importantly, how official dialog between Lutheran and Roman Catholic Church delegations have led to new areas of agreement, approaching, as we pray, that day when the Roman

Catholic Church can officially accept the Lutheran Churches of the world as essentially Catholic and that day, too, on which world's Lutherans can accept the Roman Catholic Church as essentially based on and faithful too the Gospel, as 'Evangelical' in the Lutheran meaning of that word. This answer is not as satisfying to many questioners, because it makes them question or at least review their own understanding of words they thought they understood as mutually exclusive, words like 'Catholic' and 'Protestant,' words like 'Lutheran' and 'Evangelical.' And, it is probably not the best way to keep a conversation going in a hospital waiting room or on at a bus stop, but it is and would be a great way to spend many hours in a discussion group made up of Lutherans and Roman Catholics. And

such a discussion always has to be part of any instruction in Lutheran teaching and practice for youth Confirmands or for those adults wishing to join a Lutheran congregation for the first time.

The third possible answer to the question, 'What is the difference between the Lutheran Church and the Catholic Church?' is the answer that is closest to my own heart and faith and personal theology of the Church. It is an answer I would hesitate to give anyone with whom I was not in serious theological dialog, as, for example, another theologian, or a member of a Christian education class of which I was a member or which I might be leading. It is the answer that I believe is closest to the doctrine and history and life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

any country, on any continent, in any congregation. It is the reason on account of which I believe God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit preserves and sustains the Lutheran Church at all. I would say that the authentic Evangelical Lutheran Church throughout the world, the truly *Lutheran* Church in each and every place, *is the Catholic Church telling and hearing the truth.*

This truth is the truth of Christ that makes us free by the forgiveness of sins, as we heard in today's Gospel. It is also the truth of the Holy Spirit that frees the Church from her own delusions, from the delusion that she is doing the work of God when she is only serving herself, or from the delusion that she is enlightening people through her teaching and witness when she is in fact confusing or scandalizing people.

It is the truth also about the limits of the Church's doctrinal or theological understanding on a certain point, the courage to say and to hear, 'We do not know. There just are no clear-cut answers here.'

The Lutheran Reformation within the Roman Catholic Church began with such truth-telling. The divisions within Western Christianity stemming from the Reformation were caused by a hierarchy in Church and society that refused to hear such questions raised by a mere teacher and pastor of Christians, by those in higher teaching and pastoral authority who would sacrifice the unity of the Church rather than admit their folly, poor judgment and worldliness.

The Reformer after whom our branch of Christianity is named also knew that it was as

important to defend and hold fast to the ancient teaching of the Catholic Church, received from Christ and the Apostles and confessed and explained by official Councils and far-sighted theologians of the Church. Martin Luther had, upon receiving his doctorate in Biblical studies, taken a vow to defend the doctrine and faith of the Catholic Church at the cost of his own life, should that be required of him. The risks he took in so doing nearly did earn him a martyr's crown. Unlike the Calvinist or Anabaptist branches of the Reformation, the Lutherans did not seek to wipe the slate of the Church's memory and teaching and practice blank of the sound tradition of over 1,500 years. Rather, the Lutheran movement that sadly had to function as a separate Church insisted and insists

that all aspects of that tradition be kept in perspective, in service to God's Word to us in Jesus Christ and subject to review by the earliest and holiest and most central memory of that Word as witnessed in the Bible.

There are today, as there were in Martin Luther's day and always will be, those in the Church, and particularly in our own American and Americanized branch of the Lutheran Church, who seem to think it their God-given mission to change and to overturn everything in the Church whenever the whim or advantage of doing so seizes them, even to the extent of turning their backs completely on the great Biblical and spiritual heritage of Lutheran music and public prayer as expressed in the Sacred Liturgy. They despise and attempt to despoil for this and future

generations whatever they do not understand or did not invent. That is not 'Reformation.' That is barbarism, and it, too, needs to be reformed *out* of the Church at every level, an ongoing task, to be sure.

This Church of Jesus Christ, both Roman and Lutheran Catholic, both Eastern and Western, must, in order to live with integrity, be constantly reforming, constantly speaking and hearing hard questions while at the same time finding her entire guidance and peace in the Apostolic faith as that is expressed in her carefully developed teaching and liturgy. The Church is *not* always wrong or mistaken in the way she preaches Christ or in her outlook on the world, and she is unable, I believe, to ever stray

very far for very long from her One Shepherd Who will always lead her on the right path.

Today we welcome two new members of this congregation, each of them baptized in the Name of the Triune God years ago, two worshipping members of this worshipping assembly for well over a year now who have devoted themselves to learning what the Lutheran Church teaches and to incorporating that teaching in their daily lives. The Lutheran Church is significantly different from the churches in which they were raised, and they have come to love and to embrace that difference. This man and this woman have found in the warmth of your fellowship, in the beauty of the Lutheran liturgy and in the Biblical preaching of the Word of God centered around the

Good News of our forgiveness in Christ a refuge and a place of refreshment for their souls, a community of acceptance and mutual support and a source of strength and hope for their lives. They are not ashamed to be called 'Lutherans,' and I pray they never will be.

We welcome you today, Gayle and John, into the Evangelical Lutheran Church as members with us, by your Baptism many years ago, in the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and in a few minutes from now we will confirm you in that faith and pray for the Holy Spirit's constant and abiding presence in your lives and in our common life together. As you have renewed your life in Christ through worshipping with us, through your prayer and concern for the members and mission of this

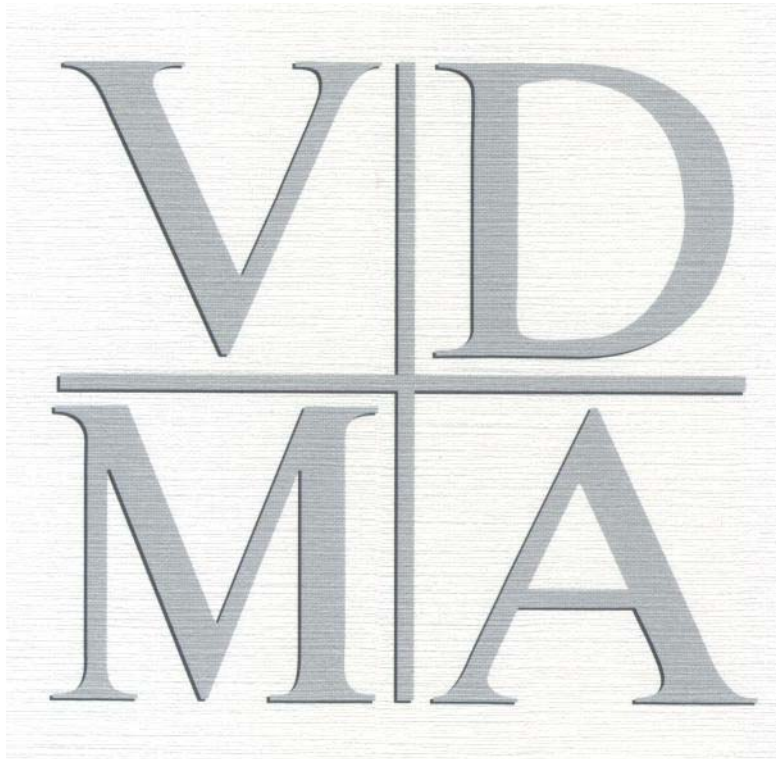
congregation and as you have deepened your own Christian faith through the Catechism's focus on the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Holy Baptism, Holy Communion and the Office of the Keys, may the fullness of the Catholic and Apostolic faith of the whole Church continue to unfold in your lives through unfailing hope and boundless love so that, through your witness, the life of our whole congregation may be renewed as a people who may truly bear the name 'Evangelical' and 'Lutheran,' as truly a Church and a congregation of the Reformation.

✠Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and who has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a

kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever. ✠ Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!



Verbum Dei Manet in Aeternam !

To God Alone be Glory! The Word of God Endures Forever!