

BULLETIN -- NOVEMBER 5

Follow-up to Reformation Sunday: A papal reflection on Luther. During a visit to Germany, on September 23, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI met with the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany in the Chapter Hall of the former Augustinian Convent in Erfurt, where Father Martin Luther, O.S.A., had lived and studied theology. His remarks to them included these magnificent and timely points for us to ponder:

"For Luther, theology was no mere academic pursuit, but the struggle for oneself, which in turn was a struggle for and with God. 'How do I receive the grace of God?' The fact that this question was the driving force of his whole life never ceases to make a deep impression on me. For who is actually concerned about this today – even among Christians? What does the question of God mean in our lives? In our preaching? Most people today, even Christians, set out from the presupposition that God is not fundamentally interested in our sins and virtues. He knows that we are all mere flesh. And insofar as people believe in an afterlife and a divine judgment at all, nearly everyone presumes for all practical purposes that God is bound to be magnanimous and that ultimately he mercifully overlooks our small failings. The question no longer troubles us. But are they really so small, our failings? Is not the world laid waste through the corruption of the great, but also of the small, who think only of their own advantage? Is it not laid waste through the power of drugs, which thrives on the one hand on greed and avarice, and on the other hand on the craving for pleasure of those who become addicted? Is the world not threatened by the growing readiness to use violence, frequently masking itself with claims to religious motivation? Could hunger and poverty so devastate parts of the world if love for God and godly love of neighbor – of his creatures, of men and women – were more alive in us? I could go on. No, evil is no small matter. Were we truly to place God at the center of our lives, it (evil) could not be so powerful. The question: what is God's position towards me, where do I stand before God? – Luther's burning question must once more, doubtless in a new form, become our question too, not an academic question, but a real one. In my view, this is the first summons we should attend to in our encounter with Martin Luther."

As a great admirer of the theology and person of our retired Holy Father, I wanted to share a portion of his very powerful and very current reflection with you.

You might not have heard that Vice President Mike Pence announced on Wednesday, October 25, that the U.S. will now work directly with faith-based groups to get genocide victims the help they need to rebuild their lives. This key action from the White House is a real game changer for persecuted Middle East Christians. The President has order the State Department to stop funding the United Nations' ineffective relief efforts. *None* of those programs has succeeded in bringing any help to the thousands of Christians, mostly Orthodox and Catholic, who have been driven from their ancestral homelands. These believers and fellow disciples of the Lord Jesus have lived in their towns and villages for centuries before Islam made its appearance in the 7th century. Among the organizations which have been instrumental in providing aid with up-to-now private funds are the Knights of Columbus, Aid to the Church in Need, Catholic Near East Welfare Association, and Catholic Relief Services. Please note that any request for

funds that you might receive from these organizations in a private mailing can be trusted, should you wish to make donations directly to them. The difference is that now, direct and official U.S. aid will also be available *through* them for those in need. It is organizations like these that are intimately in touch with the situation, have boots on the ground, and will not avoid aiding Christians because of political considerations or secular ideologies.

Notice to our visitors and guests: George Washington never slept here. Robert E. Lee never attended a service here. But you'll never know about everyone else who's been here!! Mwah-ha-ha-ha-ha!!!

Does that make you somehow uneasy? Does it make you feel unsafe? Perhaps we should have a gathering room over in the school where we can provide a nice carpet, fluffy pillows, cookies, milk, and teddy bears for those who are in any way disturbed by the message of the Gospel, and the need of all of us for salvation.

Christ Church in Alexandria, VA, has spent months debating whether to remove sanctuary plaques commemorating George Washington and Robert E. Lee, both of whom were members there. The decision has been made to remove the plaques and place them elsewhere, in a suitable memorial site. "The plaques in our sanctuary make some in our presence feel unsafe or unwelcome," church leaders said. "Some visitors and guests who worship with us choose not to return because they receive an unintended message from the prominent presence of the plaques."

The members of Christ Church may do as they please inside their church. I don't doubt for a minute that the debate has taken months, and that there have been passionate arguments presented pro and con. But I am wondering what the "unintended message" was that some visitors and guests have received. "We support war (as in Revolutionary and Civil)"? "Old white men worshiped here"? "We advocate the restoration of the slave trade"? If those are the "unintended messages" that any had received for choosing not to return, I hope that their next stop was at a psychiatrist's office.

Some years ago, a former parishioner of a local Catholic church mentioned to me that she had not been back to St. X since her mother's funeral some 15 years earlier. "I can't even drive by it," she stated. "The memories are just too painful."

"Did something go wrong at the funeral?" I asked with pastoral concern. "Was something said that was hurtful?"

"Oh, no," she replied, "just seeing the steeple reminds me of my mother, and I miss her so much."

Now, I'm not a mental health professional by any means, so I did not say the next thing that came to mind: "Lady, you need a shrink!" But maybe I should have. She needed a good slap, verbal or otherwise, back into reality. And so I wonder about Christ Church. Did any of those non-returning visitors and guests actually TELL someone that the reason they were not coming back was because of the plaques? Or is this just another example of people making up straw men to bolster an argument which need not even take place? Have we really grown so thin-skinned that our entire world must be designed around anything that might drive us to seek out a "safe place" with comfort food and a soft blanket? Good luck with that.

I'm tempted to put up bold notices in our pews: "WARNING! The last person to sit in this pew was a SINNER!! (Oh, and we're leaving this notice up here for the NEXT

person, too!)” But I rather hope that this current craze of attempting to make the world antiseptic for all will go the way of the ridiculous habit of adult and teen thumb-sucking, which I recall being on ubiquitous public display for a time back in the early 1990’s. No kidding! And if you said a word about it, you were subject to harsh criticism for not understaaaanding and respecting people’s personal choices. Give me a break. God bless you!

Fr. Den

Thought for the week: How come they can breed the scent out of roses, but not out of skunks?