

BULLETIN -- OCTOBER 29

Reformation Sunday. Many in the Protestant world are celebrating this weekend as a particularly significant one, since this year they are marking 500 years since Father Martin Luther, O.S.A., nailed his 95 theological points of dispute or theses to the door of the university church at Wittenberg. As a monk and a professor, he was doing what academics did in those days: trying to get some discussion going over things about which he had formulated questions. It is highly doubtful that he was at that time thinking, much less *promoting*, rupture within the Church. Many of his points of dispute were well answered by the reforms of the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Unfortunately, by the time that that Council had its off-and-on run beginning some 28 years later, LOTS of history had washed over Christianity's dam. The levees had failed. The unity among his disciples for which Christ had prayed, already fractured by the polarization of East (Orthodox) and West (Roman), now flowed out seemingly in an irretrievable manner in the Western Church.

Politicians had become involved, as ever, with their own agenda, cementing division along civil lines as well as ecclesiastical. When all was said and done, the split Church just went on splitting, over matters serious and trivial, eventually even over things like punctuation (does Latter-Day have a hyphen or not?). A recent drive through the Carolinas revealed church names like "Independent Fundamental Baptist Church of God of Toonerville," distinguishing it from its no-doubt mother congregation *without* "Independent" in its title, right down the road. Families are sure to have been caught up and split in *that* rupture! And the tragic thing is that, even with the various dialogues that *are* taking place on local or international levels, many will forever refuse to so much as sit at the table and talk with *those* people, whoever they might be—all in the name of Christ, who, as we have noted, prayed for UNITY among his disciples.

Human weakness, not divine desire, led to the Reformation and to its divisions. There was no monopoly on human weakness in either "camp." The real tragedy is that some will claim that the various manifestations of Christian belief and practice which have sprouted, splintered, and "grow'd like Topsy" are in fact a fulfillment of Christ's prayer. To my mind, this is akin to an adulterer excusing his sins by saying that his mistress is helping him to be a better husband to his wife. Christianity is indeed spreading all over the globe, but often carrying with it the virus of division and of incomplete doctrine and practice which frequently characterize those who rejoice in the work of the false Reform. And that ultimately impedes and makes mockery of the very message we bear: "See how they love one another!"

Had the reforms of Trent been carried out with zeal and devotion 100, or 50, or 20 years before that fateful October 31, 1517, the church door at Wittenberg might well have remained unknown except to the local students and townspeople. If the churches of the Reformation are honest, they will recognize that Luther's intent on that day was to debate, not to divide. If Catholics are honest, we will recognize that, as Protestant theologian Karl Barth borrowed from a thought of St. Augustine, "*Ecclesia semper reformanda*" ("The Church is always in need of re-form"). That should be obvious from our own situation as individual sinners. What is true of each is true of all, even with the prayer of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The very fact that the Catholic or

universal Church consists of over 20 “ritual churches” (Maronite, Ukrainian, Ruthenian, Melkite, Armenian, Roman, Coptic, Chaldean, Malabar, etc.), each with its own disciplines and liturgical practices, is indicative that unity need not manifest itself in *uniformity*, except in essential doctrines and sacramental actions. On this Reformation Day, let us pray for the healing, that all may be one, in fulfillment of Christ’s wishes.

Among the serious losses of the Reformation have been the loss of the sense of Church and of the great union of the Mystical Body of Christ in the communion of saints. “Communion” here does not mean the Eucharist. The *communion of saints* mentioned specifically in the Apostles Creed as a matter of our belief is our relationship in Christ with all the baptized, and with all those faithful who have gone before us in death, whether in the complete happiness of the Kingdom or in the state of purification for the Kingdom by the merciful action of God (*purgatory*). Lack of belief in the communion of saints goes hand in hand with lack of belief in devotion to the saints or in the efficacy of prayer for those who have died. And that is contrary to Catholic and Orthodox doctrine and practice.

We need not delve here into some of the bizarre popular misunderstandings of devotion to the saints and prayer for the departed which have burdened some Catholic piety. The “real McCoy” is very simple to understand, and will lead us to recognize the beauty of correct practices regarding both sacramental preparation for death and the funeral rites for believers.

The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is intended for anyone of the faithful who is suffering from a serious illness or facing a serious surgery or treatment which could potentially result in death. Hint, by way of example: if the procedure for which you are being prepped is serious enough that the hospital sends someone in to review with you the risks of stroke, heart attack, or death, you’re a good candidate for the Anointing. If you are so ill that you cannot get out of the house for over a month to get to church, you are a candidate. If you have suffered a serious and sudden physical injury or illness endangering your life, you are a candidate. If you are suffering from the creeping infirmities of old age, you are a candidate (probably, though, not more than once a year). The Anointing is a sacrament, NOT a sacramental. A general blessing for the sick or the private use of St. Anne’s Oil or of a relic of a saint is a sacramental, and can be used with great spiritual benefit. The Anointing is the specific sacrament which conforms us to Christ in his suffering and death for the Church. It should neither be avoided nor celebrated casually or thoughtlessly. We do well to instruct our families or those with whom we live that we would EXPECT them to summon a priest to our home or at the hospital for the Anointing if our condition warrants it. That is, after all, along with the sacrament of penance, a primary reason we have priest-chaplains covering the hospitals.

It is also good for us to discuss with our families and to have written directions regarding our death and burial. The Church is ANXIOUS to offer the Eucharistic funeral liturgy for each of her baptized members. You have had the dignity of being called by God to be a member of Christ’s Body, a temple of the Holy Spirit. How many times you have been nourished with the Body and Blood of Christ! Perhaps your life has been consecrated by marriage vows. You have participated in Christ’s merciful forgiveness of your sins. A “celebration of life” without the Eucharist is giving the big lie to who you are and have been. Scattering of ashes in some pagan ritual fashion is completely absurd

and unbecoming for the baptized, as is the use of cremains as a memento or a mantelpiece. BURYING THE DEAD, whether the whole body or the entire cremains, is a corporal work of mercy, as is entombment in a mausoleum or columbarium. Anything other is a desecration unworthy of members of the communion of saints.

Finally, PRAYER for the departed is not only highly recommended, but incumbent upon all of us as members of the Church. It is one of the spiritual works of mercy, which we can and should all perform regularly every day. Traditionally, our grace after meals concludes with the verse, “And may the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.” Offering that or other prayers (an Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be, for instance) when we visit or pass by a cemetery is to be recommended. Prayer for all the departed or for our own beloved dead during the month of November or on anniversaries keeps us in touch with them through the great communion of saints. And of course, there is the supreme prayer of the offering of the Mass for one or more of the faithful departed, which the Church strongly encourages. Every Catholic ought to be completely familiar with the verse and response, “Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord. And let perpetual light shine upon them.” Don’t think for a moment that all these practices have fallen out of use. If they have, it’s only because we have failed to use and teach them, not because the Church ever recommended discontinuing them. God bless you!

Fr. Den

Thought for the week: “The life of fathers and mothers in advanced age should be honored for what it has generously given, not discarded for what it no longer has” (Pope Francis, addressing the Pontifical Academy for Life, October 5, 2017, No. 1).