

Scriptures and Doctrine :: Pope remembers Reformation today

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POPE ON REFORMATION: FORGIVE 'ERRORS' OF PAST, FORGE UNITY

LUND, Sweden — Pope Francis marked the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation by travelling to secular Sweden on Monday and encouraging Catholics and Lutherans to forgive the "errors" of the past and forge greater unity, including sharing in the Eucharist.

Francis and the leaders of the Lutheran World Federation presided over an ecumenical prayer service in the Lund cathedral, the first time a pope has commemorated the anniversary of Martin Luther's revolt with such a symbolically powerful gesture.

Francis quoted Luther and praised him for having restored the centrality of Scripture to the church.

"The spiritual experience of Martin Luther challenges us to remember that apart from God, we can do nothing," Francis said.

Francis and the Lutheran federation president, Bishop Munib Younan, drew sustained applause at the end of the service when they signed a joint declaration pledging to improve relations through dialogue, while working together to heal conflicts, welcome refugees and care for the planet. The goal of the theological dialogue, the statement said, was to bring Catholics and Lutherans together at the Eucharistic table.

Disputes over whether Catholics and Lutherans can receive Communion in one another's churches remain an obstacle after five decades of theological talks.

The Protestant Reformation started in 1517 after Luther nailed 95 theses on the church door in the town of Wittenberg, denouncing what he saw as the abuses of the Catholic Church, especially the sale of indulgences.

Pope Leo X excommunicated him, but the church couldn't stop his teachings from spreading throughout northern Europe or the world. As Protestantism spread, religious wars erupted, including the Thirty Years War in 1618-48, one of Europe's bloodiest conflicts.

In Sweden, Catholics who rejected the new Lutheran faith were punished with deportation or death.

As a result, the pope's visit to Sweden to kick-start the yearlong Protestant anniversary initially raised eyebrows. But the Vatican and Lutheran church both insisted the event was no celebration of Luther's revolt. Rather, they stressed it was a solemn commemoration to ask forgiveness for the schism and rejoice that relations have improved in the last five decades.

Francis' visit "is proof of how far we have come ecumenically over the past 25-30 years," said Lisa Valkehed, a Lutheran watching the Lund event at a nearby arena.

In alternating prayers in the Lund cathedral, the Catholic and Lutheran leaders lamented the divisions and guilt of the schism and asked forgiveness for the deaths and pain that their divisions caused over history.

"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," Francis said. "We too must look with love and honesty at our past, recognizing error and seeking forgiveness, for God alone is our judge."

His appeal was well-received.

"It cannot just be Pope Francis, who put action behind the words that Catholics and Lutherans must get closer to each other," said Ewa Siekierski, a Danish Catholic who crossed over from Copenhagen into Sweden to see the pope. "We â€” ordinary Catholics â€” must also do ours for it to become a reality."

After the Lund event, the Vatican and Lutheran delegations rode together on a bus to attend an event highlighting both churches' peace-making and humanitarian efforts. An Indian environmental activist, a Colombian peace-maker, a Burundi refugee and a South Sudanese refugee athlete topped the list.

Francis continues his visit on Tuesday with a Catholic Mass in the Malmo sports stadium, added in at the last minute after Sweden's tiny Catholic community balked that Francis was ignoring them and coming only for the Protestant commemoration.

Years ago, Francis spoke harshly of the Protestant reformers. But in the run-up to the trip, he has had only words of praise for Luther. He recently called the German theologian a reformer of his time who rightly criticized a church that was "no model to imitate."

"There was corruption in the church, worldliness, attachment to money and power," Francis told reporters this summer.

They are the same abuses Francis has criticized in the 21st-century Catholic Church he now leads.

Olsen reported from Malmo, Sweden. Winfield reported from Rome.