

*'Unity is the gift of God' John 17:21*

A statement on the occasion  
of the 500th Anniversary  
of the Reformation



Bishops Commission for Ecumenism  
and Inter-religious Relations



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In Wittenberg on 31 October 1517, Martin Luther posted ninety-five theses concerning abuses he saw in the church. The consequences of that action were no doubt unforeseen by him at the time, yet their effect has shaped the religious and cultural history of the west ever since. The date and the event have become symbolic of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. The anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 cannot go unnoticed. While it most directly touches Lutherans and Catholics, it is not without significance for other Christian communions, and indeed for western society. Five hundred years on, even though both the situation of the church and the world situation are very different from the time of Martin Luther, the effects of the Reformation endure.

The Bishops Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-religious Relations of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the bishops of the Lutheran Church of Australia are issuing this joint statement in acknowledgement of this anniversary. There are three dimensions to our commemoration: we are deeply aware of the past and of the damage that was a consequence of conflict and division; we thank God for the healing of the relationship between Catholics and Lutherans that has taken place in recent decades and for the impetus for unity that we share; and we look forward to walking a common path in the future, witnessing together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world.

In acknowledging the past, we recognise that the time of the Reformation and the years since have often been marked by animosity towards each other and the conviction that the other was unfaithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. These attitudes were felt in Australia for several generations, and contributed in some cases to people abandoning the practice of the faith. Despite this, there remain enduring examples of inter-church families who have lived a life of Christian communion. As we commemorate this anniversary we acknowledge the damage done to the witness of the gospel and the pain suffered by many. We pray for forgiveness from God for the sins and errors of the past. We rely on a merciful God who has not abandoned his church, and we open our heart to the Holy Spirit who heals painful memories.

By the grace of God there has been a fresh impetus towards unity during the last half century. The Second Vatican Council not only opened the way for Catholic participation in ecumenical dialogue, but also provided a pathway for renewal. Lutherans in Australia, as elsewhere in the world, responded positively to this opening for dialogue. Catholics and Lutherans have now been engaged internationally in theological dialogue for fifty years. The anniversary of the Reformation is an appropriate time to acknowledge the steps that have been taken to heal the wounds of the past five hundred years. The most important step was the signing of the Joint Declaration on the

Doctrine of Justification by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation in 1999. The Lutheran reformers regarded justification as the “first and chief article” of Christian faith, and disagreement over the doctrine lay at the heart of division between Lutherans and Roman Catholics in the sixteenth century. At that time both Lutherans, in some of their confessions, and Romans Catholics, at the Council of Trent, condemned each other’s teaching on this doctrine. The consensus reached in the Joint Declaration allowed both Lutherans and Catholics to declare that “the doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century, in so far as they relate to the doctrine of justification, appear in a new light: The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent. The condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this Declaration” (#41).

The Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue in Australia, which has met continuously since 1975, also studied the doctrine of justification. The resulting agreement stated: “Lutherans and Roman Catholics together see justification as God’s free and saving action in Christ whereby our sin is forgiven and we are both declared and made righteous. Together we confess that it is solely by grace and through faith that we are justified and not through our own merits. Together we say that justification cannot be separated from regeneration, sanctification, and the

renewal of our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Together we affirm that justification, or salvation in Christ, is central and normative to our Christian faith.” (#3)

The Australian dialogue also studied other fundamental doctrines that divided Catholics and Lutherans. Significant convergences, and sometimes agreements, have been achieved. These have included statements on baptism, Eucharist (the Lord’s Supper), church, ministry, Scripture and tradition, the ministry of bishops, and the papacy. While we have not yet arrived at full communion, the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church of Australia have a growing awareness of the substantial communion that exists among us. As we commemorate the anniversary of the Reformation and note the fruits of more than forty years of dialogue in Australia, we commit ourselves to a more profound reception of those fruits as a way of deepening the communion we already share.

The Catholic Church welcomes the 2013 decision of the Lutheran Church of Australia to change the designation of their presidents to “bishop”, and believes that this opens up possibilities for a new relationship between Catholic

and Lutheran bishops to be a sign and agent of communion within and between our churches. In recognition of this change the Bishops Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-religious Relations of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the bishops of the Lutheran Church of Australia would like to meet together to consider the pastoral challenges and opportunities facing the churches.

For many, the issues that led to division in the sixteenth century seem remote from the concerns of twenty-first century people. Yet when we sift through the many words written at that time we discover a simple desire on both sides, namely that people come to know the justice and mercy of God and experience them in their lives. Seen in this light, the concerns of the sixteenth century are not as foreign as they may have seemed at first, even if their manifestation is different. The question the church faces today and into the future is about how we communicate the truth about God. The anniversary of the Reformation prompts us to reflect together on this question. It will require a renewed commitment to teach God’s word. It will require a re-statement about the saving love of God revealed in Jesus

Christ through the Holy Spirit. It will require fresh imagination about how to speak of God to a diverse society like Australia, characterised as it is by religious pluralism, by scepticism about God and by suspicion of the church. In commemorating this anniversary, we commit ourselves to that on-going renewal that will take us to the heart of the gospel. We commit ourselves to working with our ecumenical partners to re-discover the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ for our times.

Unity is the gift of God and the will of Christ for his church (Cf. Jn 17:21; 1 Cor 12:13). Both the Lutheran Church of Australia and the Catholic Church acknowledge the unity we already share, and together we confess the one faith. We encourage all members of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church to hear from God a call to be continuously transformed by our encounter with each other and to be living witnesses to the power of the gospel (Cf. Ac 1:8; Rom 1:16).

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