



Marking the Reformation: 500 years on – a Roman Catholic perspective

Dr Kieran J O'Mahony OSA contributes the fourth article in our series marking the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation.

Some years ago, a group of ordinands of the Church of Ireland posed this question to me: 'Do you regret the Reformation?' My first response was that it is not possible to regret events which triggered so many new ways of being a disciple, bringing an astonishing vitality to the Christian project and still resonating today.

My second response was to draw a comparison. When the island of Ireland was divided into two jurisdictions in 1920, the emerging states did not have to negotiate with significant minorities and each became in its own way an oppressive kind of 'theocracy'. I do regret what the separation made each of us become.

In a similar way, when it comes to the Reformation, I also regret what the separation made each of us become. With the broadest of brushstrokes and aware of exceptions, the Reformers lacked what we may call the 'instruments of communion', while the Catholics, increasingly centralised and authoritarian, lacked the necessary prophetic voice. So, in one way, some of the consequences of the Reformation are to be regretted but hardly the event itself which brought such vitality and variety to the living of the Gospel, right up to our own day.

Such an appreciation of the positives of the Reformation would not be typically Catholic for most of our divided history. As we mark events in Wittenberg this year, it is salutary to recall that for about 450 years the more standard reactions were mistrust, hostility, antagonism, condemnation and excommunication.

All along, there were notable exceptions. Philip Melancthon, the younger contemporary of Martin Luther, tried hard to bridge the emerging differences at the Diet of Augsburg (1530). Cardinal Girolamo Seripando OSA, Archbishop of Salerno and an Augustinian like Luther, promoted – unsuccessfully – a higher regard for Scripture at the Council of Trent (1545-1663) and had a sympathy for the reformers' views on justification, grace and faith. These exceptions did not prevail. However, the historical hostility and mistrust did eventually begin to break down, starting with the Ecumenical Movement (1910).

This Spirit-inspired, Protestant initiative eventually bore considerable fruit for

Catholics at the Second Vatican Council (1963-65). Of the various subsequent dialogues with different traditions, one is outstanding. With tremendous commitment and effort, the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church issued their *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* in 1999.¹

Here is a true milestone, resolving the core theological issue of the Reformation. The wider growing acceptance of this agreement is a good measure of its significance – the World Methodist Council (2006), the Anglican Consultative Council (2016) and the World Communion of Reformed Churches (2017). In theory, if not yet in practice, the presenting conflict was resolved and the excommunications were withdrawn. For all this, we give thanks and glory to God.

The Reformers lacked what we may call the 'instruments of communion' while the Catholics, increasingly centralised and authoritarian, lacked the necessary prophetic voice

It emerged early on in the Reformation that *authority* was a key issue. Often people think that Martin Luther pitted the Bible against tradition.² This is only very partially the case. He himself continued to read, for example, Augustine and John Chrysostom. The problem was not so much tradition but the teaching authority of the Church. Luther affirmed both Bible and tradition but rejected that teaching office as final arbiter.

Unfortunately, the issue was clouded at the time by the papacy's involvement in politics and power brokerage. But, since that time, the ground has shifted again. As 21st-century Christians, we are not typically conflicted over the metaphysics of grace today (there are exceptions). So, how has the ground shifted? Two issues are outstanding, one looking inwards and the other looking outwards.

In the first place, many Churches of the Reform have revised who may be admitted to the ordained ministry so as to include women. This evolution is an example of development of doctrine and personally it is not a problem for me. Nevertheless, two kinds of questions arise. From a historical viewpoint, how do we trace and understand the emergence of orders in the early Church, including the biblical data? From a church viewpoint, is it *adequate* for local churches to propose significant evolution in doctrine without reference to the Church as a whole?

In the second place, the Churches now both agree and disagree considerably over ethical issues, which are important and which impinge on our daily lives. The emerging consensus on environmental ethics is broad and solid. By contrast, there is lack of consensus on the ethics of conception and death and more or less anything in between. This is partly due to the rapid changes of attitudes in society as a whole and to the even more rapid developments in medicine. Societal attitudes can be somewhat unthinking, along the lines 'there is no issue here at all'.

This is usually not the case, if one reflects only a little. In any case, such ethical issues are complex and our knowledge is always by definition incomplete. It tells us that the divisive issues of the past such as justification, Eucharist and authority are not so alive today. Instead, ministry and ethics are the neuralgic issues, marking new disagreements between the Churches. So, where to from here? Let me close with two final remarks.

Firstly, both at official level and at parish level, amazing progress has been made over the last 50 years. We know each other better. We are familiar with each other's styles of worship. We co-operate more easily. This is especially important at ground level, where the real ecumenism takes place. Such practical developments are at least as significant as cordiality between higher Church officials. Such ease and familiarity are a grace, sometimes leading to edgy impatience with continued lack of communion. Such impatience is *itself* a grace and a sign of the Spirit at work. It is also a reminder that there are considerable

outstanding issues — otherwise, as one Presbyterian put it to me, we may as well all come in under the Holy Father.³

My second issue is more urgent. Are we content to remain at this friendly, co-operative level or is there a real desire for complete reconciliation and full communion? We *do* ask ourselves if such a goal is realistic, desirable or possible.

The final declaration at the commemorative Edinburgh 2010 gathering speaks plainly: ‘Recalling Christ, the host at the banquet, and committed to that unity for which he lived and prayed, we are called to ongoing co-operation, to deal with controversial issues and to work towards a common vision. We are challenged to welcome one another in our diversity, affirm our membership through baptism in the One Body of Christ, and recognise our need for mutuality, partnership, collaboration and networking in mission, so that the world might believe.’⁴

The initial inspiration for ecumenism was ‘so that the world might believe’ and it remains our priority. Much depends

on how church is understood. Do we need an overarching communion for the coherence of our proclamation today? What ‘instruments of communion’ could we all agree on?

Finally, how should we remember and celebrate the Reformation? In *thanksgiving* to God for the fabulous diversity in response to the Gospel. In *sorrow* for the wound of division and lack of communion, so much against the will of Christ himself. In renewed *commitment* to work together to re-establish our real fellowship in Christ, so that the world may know ‘we are Christians by our love’ and, seeing such love, may be attracted to Christ himself.

¹ The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint declaration on the doctrine of justification*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids MI, 2000.

² Peter Stanford, *Martin Luther. Catholic dissent*, Hodder and Stoughton: London, 2017, 142-151.

³ For an excellent exploration of outstanding issues, see Patrick G McGlinchey, *Rattzinger’s Augustinianism and Evangelicalism: an exploration in ecumenical rapprochement (Studies in Christian History and Thought)* Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2017.

⁴ www.edinburgh2010.org/fileadmin/Edinburgh_2010_Common_Call_with_explanation.pdf

Dr Kieran J O’Mahony OSA is a member of the Order of St Augustine and a biblical scholar. He now works in the Office for Evangelisation & Ecumenism of the the RC Archdiocese of Dublin as Co-ordinator of Biblical Studies. As one of the ecumenical canons of St Patrick’s Cathedral, Dublin, he preaches regularly there and takes part in worship. His most recent book is *Speaking from within: biblical approaches for effective preaching*, Dublin: Veritas, 2016. Kieran maintains a website: www.tarsus.ie.

‘All people are called to minister’

This is the title of the strategy for the development of lay ministry in the Methodist Church in Ireland which was agreed at Conference in Lisburn. The Lay Ministry Committee has been tasked with producing an operational plan to implement this strategy by Conference 2018. An emphasis of the strategy is that ‘the whole body of Christ is called to share in ministry within the Church and at the “frontlines of everyday life”’. Over the next nine months, the *Methodist Newsletter* will be printing stories from around our Connexion to highlight the different ways in which ‘all people grow in their discipleship, discern their calling and exercise their gifts effectively’. The first of these stories is from Cynthia:



Cynthia with husband Johannes, daughter Laone Truda and son Alex Lefika.

My name is Cynthia Nnye Letshwiti (née Mojanaga). I came to Ireland from Botswana in 2007 to be with my husband, Johannes, who has been here since 1999, and to advance my career. I had hoped to work as a nurse in Ireland but God had a totally different plan for me. We have been blessed with two beautiful children – a boy, Alex Lefika, now aged nine and a girl, Laone Truda, aged four.

At present, I am staying in Dunboyne, County Meath, but will soon relocate to Castlebar, County Mayo, to join Johannes who is working there as a paediatrician. Since I arrived in Ireland I have been attending the Methodist Church, first at Dublin Central Mission and now at Blanchardstown in Tyrrelstown.

My children occupy most of my time

during the week but I have also been involved informally in the pastoral care of the Blanchardstown congregation. The people there are down-to-earth, loving and care for one another. They extend that love to the rest of the community. I have recently attended a workshop to acquire skills to help me show this pastoral care more efficiently and effectively.

My life has been full of challenges but my faith has been vital in helping me deal with them. I have seen God’s mighty work in my life, and in the lives of other people, and this encourages me to wake every day eager to serve the Lord the best way I can, regardless of circumstances, with humility and love trusting him and standing firm on his promises. This in turn gives me joy and peace!