

Catholics, Protestants unite in prayer, but differences don't disappear

FREIBURG, Germany - Divided Christians can celebrate their common faith in Christ with beautiful prayer services, but that does not mean they leave aside all their differences.

After joining Pope Benedict XVI for a long meeting and then for a prayer service Sept. 23 in Erfurt - a German town closely tied to Martin Luther - the head of the council of Protestant churches in Germany and the pope's chief ecumenical officer publicly demonstrated how much is left to discuss.

At a press conference after the papal events, the Rev. Nikolaus Schneider, chairman of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, reiterated the Protestant position that when a Catholic and Protestant are married they should be able to receive Communion at each other's church services.

The question affects tens of thousands of couples in a country where the Catholic and Protestant churches each count about 30 percent of the population.

Swiss Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, stated the Catholic position that shared Communion as a regular practice is appropriate only once the Catholic and Protestant churches come to a fuller agreement on serious theological questions, including the meaning of the Eucharist.

Rev. Schneider responded by saying that the concrete faith lives of married couples, and not just "theological theories," should be given greater consideration by the Catholic Church. Protestants have been raising the issue with the Vatican for a long time, even to the point of perhaps causing irritation, he said.

The Protestant leader also was asked about the hopes some Lutherans and other Protestants expressed that Pope Benedict would "rehabilitate" Martin Luther or

symbolically withdraw his excommunication during the trip, or at least by 2017 when they mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

He said the pope's speeches that morning were, in effect, a re-evaluation of the person of Martin Luther and his praiseworthy goal of exploring how sinful human beings can receive God's grace. Rev. Schneider said he hoped the official Catholic position on Luther would continue to develop and would move toward a re-evaluation of Luther's theology, not just his personal faith.

Cardinal Koch, however, responded that reconciliation is "a two-way street." Both Catholics and Protestants have work to do in evaluating what happened during the Reformation and what has happened since, he said.

The cardinal said Lutherans themselves must ask whether the church life and practice they embrace today is faithful to what Luther envisioned.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, was asked to respond Sept. 24 to questions about German newspapers headlines describing the pope's ecumenical meetings as "disappointing."

In a trip designed to help people see the enduring importance of faith in God, "it was important to focus on Luther's deep faith. It wasn't a secondary aspect" of his life, Father Lombardi told reporters in Freiburg.

"The pope knew people might expect too much," he said, but focusing on Luther as a model of faith "was more important to the Holy Father than just the solution of one or another practical problem."