

Looking back and called forward: A commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation

St. Mary's Seminary, Roland Park

March 11, 2018

First of all let me express my great joy in joining with my friend Bishop Gohl in this ecumenical prayer service here in St. Mary's chapel of the first Catholic seminary in the United States. Thank you Bishop Gohl for bringing your seminarians from Gettysburg with you. I want to also thank you Father Brown for your hospitality and for planning this service and gathering this household of seminarians together as well. Granted our seminarians did not have to travel quite so far as our Lutheran seminarians, but it is Sunday afternoon, so I am grateful for their presence. May I also offer heartfelt thanks to Dr. Kathryn Johnson for journeying from Chicago to represent Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, the Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Thank you very much for being with us this evening Dr. Johnson.

I don't know Bishop Gohl if this wraps up your circuit of 500th anniversary of the Reformation services but if not I suspect it must be near the end. I know that just a few weeks ago Bishop Madden joined you for such a service at St. Ann's Catholic Parish in Hagerstown - a joint service attended by 200 Catholics and Lutherans, on a Tuesday night, who as they left asked both bishops: "why can't we do this more often?"

Well here we are with a large group of future pastors who just might be able to fulfill the desire behind that question.

I am so happy for the close relationship that I have had since coming to Baltimore with the bishops of the Delaware-Maryland Lutheran Synod. One example of this is the trip that Bishop Wolfgang Hertz Lane, Bishop Gohl's predecessor, and I made to Rome along with a group of other ecumenical and interreligious leaders in 2016 to meet with Pope Francis. Our purpose was to discuss with our Holy Father our joint efforts at stemming the growing tide of violence in Baltimore.

Most of the members of our group presented the pope with a gift. Bishop Wolfgang presented Pope Francis with a small stained glass representation of the Luther Rose. We recall how in one of his letters Luther stated that he wanted this seal of his, the Luther Rose, to represent his "compendium theologiae" or summary of theology, signifying that one who believes from the heart will be justified (Romans 10:10).

When one meets with the pope they have photographers all around who take a lot of pictures. There's a wonderful one of the pope smiling widely as Bishop Wolfgang approached the pope and handed him this gift of the Luther Rose.

And I might add, being good Baltimoreans some from our group also presented the pope with a container of Old Bay.

I am also happy to be able to welcome in just a few weeks from April 11th to the 15th the National Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue that will be meeting here at St. Mary's Seminary and University for its ninth annual meeting completing a document on Faithful Teaching that it has been working on for several years. And it will be an added joy to welcome again Dr. Kathryn Johnson one of the members of this dialogue.

One can read books, attend lectures, take classes, participate in webinars but what gives life and meaning to all dialogues is the genuine friendships that ensue from these meetings. And it is perhaps most especially when we pray together as are this evening. This is how hearts and minds are changed, by the grace of God. This is how we give witness to the prayer of Jesus that we all may be one is being answered. And this is how we are made aware that we are blessed to be given this opportunity to play some small role in this great drama.

On Oct. 31, 1999, at the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, the famous JDDJ, Cardinal Walter Kasper and Lutheran World Federation General Secretary Ishmael Noko found themselves joyfully sharing an unscripted embrace signifying the friendship of our two communities.

Looking back to that moment and forward Cardinal Kasper said: “the path to full unity may be long, but it is open before us – and we can celebrate that we no longer pursue our own paths of recrimination and separation but are indeed together on the way.”

On another Oct. 31, this one more recent, 2016, in Lund Sweden which began the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, Pope Francis and Bishop Munib Younan, President of the Lutheran World Federation issued a joint statement which included these words, so fitting for us this evening:

“We pray to God that Catholics and Lutherans will be able to witness together to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, inviting humanity to hear and receive the good news of God’s redeeming action. We pray to God for inspiration, encouragement and strength so that we may stand together in service, upholding human dignity and rights, especially for the poor, working for justice, and rejecting all forms of violence. God summons us to be close to all those who yearn for dignity, justice, peace and reconciliation.”

I am so happy that here in Baltimore that Lutherans and Catholics continue to do just that, standing together and trying as best we can, together, to support all especially the poor who so yearn to be treated with dignity and to have the opportunity to lead lives in peace and safety within their neighborhoods, yes even in their own homes.

What we are about this evening is so much more than what might appear to an unknowing onlooker. We are in fact responding to the call of our dear Pope Francis, the man of peace and reconciliation, “to be bold and creative, joyful and hopeful in [our] commitment to continue the great journey ahead of us. Rather than conflicts of the past, God’s gift of unity among us shall guide cooperation and deepen our solidarity. By drawing close in faith to Christ, by praying together, by listening to one another, by living Christ’s love in our relationships, we, Catholics and Lutherans, open ourselves to the power of the Triune God. Rooted in Christ and witnessing to him, we renew our determination to be faithful heralds of God’s boundless love for all humanity.” (Homily of Pope Francis in Lund, Sweden, Oct. 31, 2016)

This is what we are about this evening, Lutheran and Catholics praying together, laity, seminarians, priests, and bishops worshipping God together, witnessing together to the reality of God’s goodness and love.

And for this blessed opportunity, my brothers and sisters, we give thanks to God this evening.