

U.S. Catholic, Lutheran bishops mark 500th anniversary of Reformation

By Joyce Duriga

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CHICAGO - Catholic and Lutheran bishops gathered in Chicago March 2 for a prayer service commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and to release a statement on the event.

The service took place at the Lutheran Center during a joint meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations.

Each year Lutherans mark Oct. 31 as Reformation Day, honoring Martin Luther, who was a Catholic priest in 1517 when he began the process that became the Protestant Reformation. His "95 Theses" were a list of topics on which, Luther believed, the Catholic Church needed to reform.

In a joint statement issued March 2, the U.S. Lutheran and Catholic bishops acknowledged the two churches' ongoing relationship.

"Lutherans and Catholics in this country have long affirmed the ecumenical principle that 'what unites us is greater than what divides us.' For more than 50 years we have contributed to the theological dialogues that have helped move us 'from conflict to communion,'" the statement read.

"We join our work, our prayers and our commitments to the efforts of Christians around the world who this year are commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation," it continued. "To our sisters and brothers representing other ecumenical partners, we extend a special welcome as you join us in prayer. We Catholics and Lutherans understand that our work together toward reconciliation between us is for the sake of healing in the whole body of Christ, into which all of us are incorporated through baptism."

It was important for the group of U.S. bishops that their March 2 service model the one Pope Francis and Bishop Munib Younan, president of the Lutheran World Federation, presided over in the Lutherans' Lund cathedral in Lund, Sweden, Oct. 31, 2016.

During that service the two church leaders signed a joint statement in which

Catholics and Lutherans pledged to pursue their dialogue toward full unity and committed themselves to work for the poor, the needy and victims of injustice.

Together Pope Francis and Bishop Younan “affirmed both the sorrow and the tearing apart of the body of Christ but also the joy and expectation of the reality and hope that 500 years into this that we have begun again being able to see each other as sisters and brothers,” said Lutheran Bishop Donald Kreiss, chair of the ECLA’s Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations.

“And that amongst our people on both sides there is a deep longing for fellowship at the table,” he said. “We’re not there yet but it’s an important part of this observance on this 500th anniversary of the Reformation to say, ‘Look how far we have come.’” For 50 years, the Evangelical Lutheran bishops and Catholic bishops have met to dialogue.

“The dialogue is important in part for Lutherans because if we remember our history the Reformation started as an effort not to separate the church but to reform it,” Bishop Kreiss said. “Over the centuries since, we have not forgotten that we are part of the church catholic and that that is where our deep roots are. This is in some ways a way to honor the home from which we came.”

The USCCB’s Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs has formal dialogues with 14 different faith groups. This dialogue with the Evangelical Lutheran church has been going on for 50 years.

Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski of Springfield, Massachusetts, who is chair of the committee and a former auxiliary bishop of Baltimore, agreed with Bishop Kreiss that Luther didn’t mean for the Reformation to be a split from the Catholic Church.

“We acknowledge the pain of that separation but we also say we can’t leave it right where it is. Christ wants us to be united and so he’s bringing us together in the Holy Spirit in bringing us together in our dialogue discussions and in the many times we meet as Lutherans and Catholics,” Bishop Rozanski said.

He sees the dialogue as important for the good of Catholics in the pews – especially for married couples where one spouse is Catholic and the other is Lutheran.

“I think it is very important that we model for them that this separation is not meant to be permanent but that there is hope of us coming together,” Bishop Rozanski told the Chicago Catholic, the archdiocesan newspaper. “For them it’s a powerful witness but I think for all Catholics and all Lutherans it’s a sign that we’re not allowing the status quo to remain as it is, that we feel very deeply that we’re called to unit.”

Praying together and recognizing a painful history is relevant today, said Lutheran Bishop William Gafkjen, chair of the ECLA.

“Historically of course it’s reaching across 500 years of being apart in order to be together,” Bishop Gafkjen said. “I think that has significant impact given our current

climate, especially in this country today where we need the stories of people who somehow find a way to do the hard work of reconciliation, the profound honoring of each other, welcoming each other, including our differences and then finding ways to move forward for the sake of the world and its life.”

Catholic Bishop Denis J. Madden, now-retired Baltimore auxiliary, who is co-chair of the U.S. Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue, said that the prayer service and statement show the close relationships between the Evangelical Lutherans and Catholics.

“We’ve been really working hard at it. I think there’s been kind of – Pope Francis uses the word impatience – a kind of impatience that we move forward. I think both of our communities share that same feeling. There’s a desire in both communities to come together and be one church.”

This work also has Gospel implications, Bishop Madden said.

“We are a distraction for the world as long as we are apart,” he said. “It’s hard for people to concentrate on the Gospel when they see those who say they profess it not to be in union with each other.”