

**Reformation Sunday - 2009**  
**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Buffalo, NY**  
**The Rev. John A. Buerk**

## **OUR LUTHERAN LEGACY**

For many Lutherans Reformation Sunday is a big deal. Even non-Lutherans – including some Roman Catholics – get on the bandwagon and sing. **A Mighty Fortress is our God.** We celebrate with red paraments, and special music, and special sermons, and today we are even going to tap a keg of beer!

However the things said in sermons on Reformation Sunday are a lot different these days from generations past. Some of us “old-timers” remember when the Reformation Day sermon would be about all the things we thought were wrong with the Roman Catholic Church and the things we thought were right about the Lutheran Church. Needless-to-say, the issues were always over-simplified and often exaggerated, but back then there seemed to be a battle to be fought and a war to be won.

But this isn't the case any more - the world we live in is different from the one we lived in fifty years ago. In fact things have changed so much that ten years ago, on Oct. 31, the most significant document in Christendom since the Reformation was signed in Augsburg, Germany. After thirty years of dialogue and negotiation, the Lutherans and Roman Catholics signed the, **JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION**, in which they agreed to rescind all the nasty things they had said about each other in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and they affirmed the Reformation principle that salvation comes through God's grace and not through our good works.

The document was signed in Augsburg because it was there that the Lutherans presented to King Charles V, the Augsburg Confession that contained 28 articles stating the position of the Lutheran Reformation leaders. Actually, a number of these articles became part of the Roman Church after Vatican II, when John XXIII was Pope. For instance, the Lutherans said that the Mass should be said in the vernacular – the language of the people – and the Mass is now said in the language of the country where it is celebrated. Another article called for Holy Communion to be administered in both species. - that is, the laity should receive the bread and the wine, and that is done in a number of Catholic parishes. The practice of

the laity receiving only the bread was part of the separation between laity and clergy that had evolved over the centuries.

The great plague also had something to do with withholding the cup from the people – and it looks like with the new swine flue threat, that concern is being revisited in some congregations – including our Western New York Catholic Diocese.

The Augsburg Confession called for the Bible to be made available to the people, and most Catholic parishes now encourage Bible study.

Of course, there were a few items in the Augsburg Confession that the Roman Church has resisted and a prominent one is the right of the religious – priests and nuns - to marry. Luther's position was that the discipline of celibacy was in order, but that it should not be compulsory for ordination. Unfortunately, it seems that the old men continue to insist that young men should stay single – how quickly they forget.

Interestingly, celibacy wasn't officially incorporated into church dogma until the eleventh century. Several Roman Catholic scholars have pointed out that celibacy seems to have had less to do with piety and discipline, than with owning property. In the Middle Ages the Western Church owned nearly two thirds of Europe! By not allowing the clergy to marry, the church prevented the offspring of clergy from having any legal claim to the Church's property by subsequent generations.

An interesting anomaly here is that the Polish National Catholic Church is in Communion with the Roman Church, but their priests can marry. The same is true with the Orthodox Churches, although if a priest's wife dies he cannot remarry, and their Bishops must be celibate. Also, some clergy – especially Episcopalians and Lutherans can convert even if they are married, and they are reordained by the Roman Church. The last I heard there were about fifty such priests in the United States.

The current fuss this week about the Holy See agreeing to accept Anglicans – including their married clergy – has gotten a lot of attention. Some have speculated that it is Rome's way of allowing for married clergy to come in through the back door.

Sometimes, we forget that the Reformation was a very complicated event. It was not a bumper sticker movement. It took place in the midst of unprecedented change.

For instance, it took place during the enlightenment. Luther was born in 1483 and died in 1546. In the century and a half that surrounded Luther's life, the world gave birth to **Copernicus, Columbus, Galileo, Bacon, Hobbs, Descartes, Locke, Newton, Leibnitz and Pascal** –all names you recognize as being people who changed the Western world's way of thinking and acting.

Second, a lot of things were happening in that 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Cities were emerging along with all the commerce that relates to urbanization and Capitalism was on the rise.

Nationalism was coming to the fore – the Germans didn't like sending their German sausage to France and Italy.

The Holy Roman Empire was coming apart at the seams, and many European countries were developing their own identities and fostering their own languages.

There was a communication explosion – Guttenberg designed movable type and built a printing press to use it.

And then there was the exploration of space – Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492 – confirming that the world was not flat. Luther, however, was not convinced. He thought that all this talk about a round earth was foolishness.

All these phenomena effected the Reformation, and many were affected by it. And perhaps the most significant issue was the threat of the Muslim Turks who had conquered North Africa and Spain and who had laid siege to Vienna. Charles V was so consumed by this threat that he was afraid to send troops to Wittenberg to wipe out this troublesome group of religious reformers. If he had, there probably would not have been a Lutheran Reformation.

But, Luther survived, and his forceful mind drew him into the world around him. He responded in the problems of his day. He was upset with the incompetence in bureaucracy, and he was acutely aware of the need to have

an educated citizenry. Luther was especially concerned about the education of children and he did what he could to provide schooling. Listen to what Luther said about educating children. **Schools should be fun. Today schools are not what they once were – a hell and purgatory in which we were tormented with cases and tenses and yet learned less than nothing despite all this flogging, trembling, anguish and misery. For my part...I would have children study not only languages and history, but also singing and music together with the whole of mathematics.**

Luther was also concerned about providing for educated leaders: he wrote: **In ancient Rome boys were so taught that by the time they reached their fifteenth, eighteenth or twentieth year they were well versed in Latin, Greek and all the liberal arts, and then immediately entered upon a political or military career. Their system produced intelligent, wise and competent men, so skilled in every art that if all the bishops, priests and monks in the whole of Germany today were rolled into one, you would not have the equal of one Roman soldier. As a result their country prospered; they had capable and trained men for every position.**

But here we are today – we spend a fortune on education at all levels, but nearly three quarters of our college graduates are illiterate – they cannot write a paragraph without a spelling or grammatical error. No other country would let their students graduate from high school without mastering the skills of their own language. We need an educational reformation.

In Luther's day, commerce kept kids from getting an education. Today, it is commerce that demands education. If you have any doubts read Thomas Friedman's book, **THE WORLD IS FLAT.**

You know the phrase – **The more things change, the more they stay the same.** Those things that were happening in Luther's day – an information explosion, exploration of space, the increase in urban populations, the expansion of capitalism – these are the very things that surround us today. And they all need our due diligence.

Lutherans come from a remarkable historical tradition of making the faithful responsible and caring and loving, and the Church relevant. And that is the goal of the Roman Church as well.

I hope and pray that we can remain faithful to that tradition.