

THE 500TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE REFORMATION

This particular anniversary, which our Protestant brothers and sisters are celebrating this year, hasn't gotten too much notice in the Catholic community. But as I said in my homily at my two masses last weekend, we really owe so much to Martin Luther for his noble effort to rein in the terrible abuses he recognized in the Church at the beginning of the 16th century. If only the hierarchy of the Church at the time had responded more quickly to his challenge, Christianity would have looked much different today and would have had a much greater impact on the world in the intervening centuries. But sadly, by the time the Council of Trent was convened to initiate what became the Counter-Reformation, it was a case of too little, too late.

The Church that Martin Luther loved and simply wanted to reform was one of the most corrupt institutions in any age. To be sure, there were saintly people in Luther's generation who did great good, from John Fisher and Thomas More to Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross and Charles Borromeo. But the hierarchy of the Church had fallen into the trap that Jesus warned against in last Sunday's Gospel: they loved "places of honor at banquets" and "greetings in marketplaces" and all their works were "performed to be seen." Indulgences were being sold left and right to enrich the clergy, popes openly took mistresses and fathered children, sometimes turning their teenage sons into cardinals, and bishops lived on palatial estates, rarely if ever visiting the dioceses entrusted to their care. The liturgy had become the province of clerics wearing elaborate vestments and celebrating Mass with jeweled chalices and with their backs to the lowly laypeople who understood nothing of what was being said.

Luther simply wanted reform and a return to Gospel simplicity; he had no intention of leaving the Church he loved to form a new one. But there were others who saw his 95 Theses as a call to arms and ran with those complaints to create what we now know as the Protestant Reformation—simply the *Reformation* for our Protestant sisters and brothers. The reforms finally instituted by the Council of Trent begun nearly thirty years after Luther's protest and not completed until 1563 after many adjournments were, as I said above, too little too late. And not everything proposed at Trent became Church law or practice, like the proposal to allow the Mass to be celebrated in the vernacular so that the people could participate more fully. That and many of the other proposals at Trent had to wait another 400 years for Vatican Council II to implement.

We can be thankful today that, in spite of Vatican efforts in the last thirty years to roll back the reforms begun at Trent and implemented at Vatican II, Pope Francis is working hard, by his own example, to call the Church in the 21st century back to the same simplicity and Gospel fidelity that Luther sought 500 years ago. The fact is, there will always be a need for reformation and renewal in the Church we love. Martin Luther deserves our gratitude for setting us on that path.

Fr. Bob