

Hong Kong Churches Engage in Exchange 500 years After the Reformation

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On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his famous 95 theses on the main door of the Church in Wittenberg, demanding that the Church live up to her faith. This led to his excommunication from the Catholic Church. Martin Luther also declared himself to be independent from the Catholic Church. Eventually, such actions generated a wave of new denominations within Christianity. Since then the Catholic Church and the newly established Protestant Churches have undergone a situation of competition, or even antagonism for more than 450 years. It was not until the early 20th century that the ecumenical movement emerged, which the Second Vatican Council encouraged. Then the Catholic, Protestant and the Orthodox Churches had the chance to remove the walls of separation amongst themselves, and to walk together along the road of ecumenism.

As 2017 marked the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, Christian communities in Hong Kong assiduously worked to promote mutual exchange and dialogue. *Tripod* now attempts to abstract a few enlightening points on this topic for this issue. The first is by Rev. Po Kam-Cheong (the General Secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council), who wrote an article entitled “From Conflict to Communion” which appeared in the Catholic newspaper *Kung Kao Po* on April 23, 2017. In the article, Rev. Po Kam-Cheong pointed out 5 areas which called for further development in ecumenism.

On dogma: Every Church tradition and denomination has its own unique history and dogmatic interpretations. Dogmatic differences were a main cause of schism. But the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church, after listening to each other in dialogue and arriving at mutual understanding, jointly announced in 1999 the

“Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.” Then 2013 saw the publication of *From Conflict to Communion: a Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*. This shows both Churches have found an appropriate language to express a common faith.

On spirituality: The Christian Church has gone through 2000 years of history, and is very rich in spiritual traditions and legacies that all denominations should inherit and treasure. Unfortunately when the Protestant churches carried out the Reformation, many traditions were thrown away. Recently many pastors and the faithful of Protestant Churches have rediscovered the rich content of Catholicism and started learning from it. Conversely Martin Luther’s promotion of Bible studies and love for the Word of God resulted in a rich exegesis and biblical tradition in the Protestant Church. This in turn affected the Catholic faithful, making them pay more attention to the Bible. So the influences were mutual.

On liturgy: As there are so many different denominations in the Protestant Church, all of them developed different liturgical features. Since believers use different liturgies, this causes further separation among the denominations. In the recent past, Churches in China collaborated in the compilation of two hymnals *Universal Worship* 《普天崇拜》 and *Universal Praise* 《普天頌讚》. This is an important achievement under the aspect of liturgy. Thus the Catholic and Protestant Churches can have more exchanges on liturgical services and hymns, which would enhance mutual study, and have an influence on the liturgy of each side.

On social witness: Social witness is a common element in both the Catholic and the Protestant Churches. The Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (天主教的正義和平委員會) and the Catholic Commission For Labour Affairs (勞工事務委員會) have a fruitful and long-standing partnership with the Committee for Social Justice and People's Livelihood of the Hong Kong Council of Churches (協進會的社會公義與民生關注委員會). In the 1970s, the World Council of Churches proclaimed the social vision

of *justice* that is *participatory* and *sustainable*. It accords with Catholic Social Teaching as well as issues raised by Pope Francis in his encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*. In the areas of ecological concern, world peace, anti-war and anti-nuclear armaments, there is a lot of room for cooperation.

On pastoral service: If we each see the other as a limb of the Body of the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church,” if pastors keep an open and positive attitude to work with other denominations, we can better fulfil the needs of the congregations. We can better share resources, and better develop the talents of the faithful. It may be easier to recruit speakers/instructors in joint course-offerings by different denominations.

The Catholic Church and the Methodist Church recently co-organized a symposium on “From Conflict to Communion.” Fr. Jacob Kwok, professor of Church History at the Holy Spirit Seminary College gave the first talk, pointing out that during the three hundred years before Martin Luther, the Catholic Church had gone through a lot of reforms. The Church is always in need of reform, he said. The Church faces tensions and even failures in the course of reforms. But through the trials, reforms can bear fruit.

For example, the Church reform during the Council of Pisa in 1409 was a failure because it did not solve the problems. The Church had to wait another ten years until the Council of Constance, to achieve success. The Catholic Church had tried repeatedly to get rid of clerical abuse of power and reform the formation of priests, but it was not successful until the Council of Trent (1545-1563).

Fr. Kwok pointed out that the reform during the Council of Trent was not a response to Martin Luther’s Reformation. Rather, it arose from the needs within the church. And a century before Luther, reformers such as John Wycliffe (1324-1384) and Jan Hus (1369-1415) had lashed out at the Church for becoming rich and corrupt. At the same time, Fr. Kwok pointed out that Luther was not aiming at schism. Reformers like Luther had continued the tradition of the early Church Fathers. So from Avignon to Trent, the Catholic Church reflected deeply on the need to reform multiple

shortcomings of the Church. Before the Council of Trent, some reforms had already emerged from the grassroots (the body). Later on, the curia (the head) also pioneered reforms. For example, Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), when he was the Bishop of Brixen, promoted comprehensive diocesan reform. The Pontiff as a loyal, individual Christian should carry out personal reform.

Fr. Kwok cited Gasparo Contarini (1483-1542), one of the authors of *Consilium de emendandâ ecclesiâ*. Even before 1517, when discussing a bishop's duties, he advocated personal reform as the starting point for wider efforts. Fr. Kwok also cited a Second Vatican Council document that said, "The church, containing sinners in its own bosom, is at one and the same time holy and always in need of purification and it pursues unceasingly penance and renewal" (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 8). Lastly he quoted Avery Dulles that, "The church exists in an imperfect but perfectible state" (Avery Dulles, "The Church Always in Need of Reform," p.39).

Dr Francis Ching-Wah Yip of the Divinity School of Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, on the same occasion, elaborated on Lutheran theology. He pointed out that the Reformation was not only a matter of theology but it also included the Church system, church and state relations, and different nationalist ideologies in Europe, etc. Church Reformation brought dramatic changes to Europe and to the whole world as well. These included the Thirty Years' War, the subsequent Peace of Westphalia which created the framework of modern nation states. By encouraging personal interpretation of the Scriptures, Lutheran Reformation weakened the mediating role of the Church. Dr. Yip stressed that personal exegesis sped up the emergence of subjectivity. It broke down the dualism between the sacred and the secular, because the clergy and those who work in the secular world are both serving the Lord. Luther also stressed the ministry/vocation of the laity.

Regarding ecumenism in greater China, Dr. Yip pointed out that discrepancies in translation need not be an obstacle. In earlier times, local theologians worked together on a Chinese translation of the Nicene Creed. In the future church organizations could work together on hymns, and through other popular channels.

In his reflection, Dr. Yip gave examples of three Church views of the Eucharist.

For Luther: Christ is present in the flesh

For Calvin: Christ is present in the spirit

For Ulrich Zwingli: Christ is present symbolically (i.e., the Eucharist is a commemoration)

Dr. Yip suggested that in comparison with other Protestant denominations, Catholics and Lutherans are far closer in their understanding of the Eucharist. The presence of Christ in the Eucharist is important in revealing “the Bread of Life.” The different Church views of the Eucharist are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The eucharistic prayer of some denominations allow for different interpretations.

In his conclusion, Dr. Yip said that the main problem today is how to prevent Church reformation from becoming sectarianism. Ecumenism poses three tasks:

- (1) How to resolve the discrepancy of language (between Catholic and Protestant Churches)?
- (2) How to learn from one another?
- (3) How to give common witness in the world?

During a Q&A session, Pastor Lee Kwong Sheng of the Lutheran Church, who had taken part in the translation of *From Conflict to Communion*, said that the translators used “Shang Zhu” (上主) to render the word “God,” instead of “Tian Zhu” (天主) or “Shang Di” (上帝). In this way they arrived at a common language. Fr. Kwok also pointed out that “justification by faith” was not a new invention by Martin Luther. The phrase first appeared in the Catholic Church at the conclusion of the Council of Orange in 529AD.

In mid July the Lutheran Church and the Catholic Church in Hong Kong will gather in a signing ceremony at the Catholic Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception—to mark the Chinese translation of *From Conflict to Communion*.