

The Protestant Deformation

By Robert Phillips, Ph.D.

The announcement that Pope Francis will visit Sweden in October to help commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's fateful initiation of the dissolution of Western Christianity, as it was known for over a millennium, put me in mind of the late Michael Davies' apt description of that disastrous event: "There was no reformation, only deformation."

Apologists for the Pope assure us that he is only "commemorating," not "honoring." Even if I knew what that distinction means, it will certainly pass over the heads of just about everyone else---and the visit will be seen as another Catholic accommodation to an ecumenical spirit that, in a haze of goodwill, erases the traditional Catholic claim to be the Church of Christ as expounded, for instance, in "Dominus Jesus" under John Paul II.

It is sometimes said that Luther was really a traditionalist, not a "protestant," as he just wanted to return the Church to her original simplicity. What was in Luther's complex mind is hard to say. But wherever he began his journey, he quickly left reform behind, with the development of a new and anti-Catholic theology:

- 1) *Sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone is the final authority. Even at the time it was pointed out to Luther that the Church was not founded on the Bible (as Protestants love to say) but that the Bible comes from the Church and therefore the Church is the final authority regarding its meaning. Luther's view entailed private judgment, and if one may privately interpret something as important as scripture, then the demon of absolute autonomy lurks in the wings. And so we have 30K protestant denominations by current count. *Sola Scriptura* is a heresy.
- 2) Free-will—In Catholic theology, God creates man as a free and rational being capable of deciding for or against God. This life is an arena of soul formation in which man chooses Heaven or Hell. The Church exists to assist a broken humanity in this awesome task through her sacraments. For Luther, man is totally depraved and nature is damned. For the Catholic: "Grace builds upon nature and does not destroy it." For Luther, the will is not free; the will is chained. Man does not cooperate with grace. He is saved by the *fiat* of God. But Lutheran "chained will" is heresy.
- 3) Salvation by faith alone—Works count for nothing. Again, even at the time it was made clear to Luther that Scripture is replete with admonitions to good works and to repentance as a precondition of salvation. This is especially reinforced by the Epistle of St. James, a

work Luther removed from the canon of the New Testament. Salvation by faith alone is an enduring heresy.

Then there is the matter of Luther's near psychopathic attacks on the Jews, using invective quoted *in extenso* by the Nazis. In these writings Luther appears as a carpet-biting bully of a type not unfamiliar in German history.

So why is Pope Francis commemorating this man and these heresies? To this question some have replied that, yes, Luther was a heretic---but Lutherans today are not. They are baptized in the name of the triune God and "must be recognized as fellow Christians." We need to "put these past disputes behind us and work together" for, how did you guess?, a better world. The Lutheran church of today "cannot be understood exclusively in terms of" its historical origination. There are "many points of agreement," such as the triune God, the divinity of Christ, the Final Judgment, *etc.*

Yet a Catholic must say that while there are some truths in these Protestant sects, these are mixed with a multitude of errors. Why are we commemorating this? In what does today's Lutheran church consist?

Because Pope Francis is to visit Sweden, let us take a brief look at the status of Lutheranism there. According to the most recent surveys, only 18% of Swedes believe in God. Regarding members of the Church of Sweden (six million), only 15% believe in Jesus, 15% are actual atheists, and 25% are agnostics. Only 2% regularly attend services. In the words of writer Peter Steinfels, religion in Sweden is a matter of "benign indifference." This is the outcome of five hundred years of Lutheranism? Why are we commemorating this?

But perhaps the most egregious matter is the implication for those who have converted from Lutheranism to the Catholic faith. They understood, often after agonies of soul searching, that Christ founded a Church, not churches, and that Church is Holy, Roman, and Apostolic. Special apologies would be due to the countless hundreds of Lutheran clergy converts who sacrificed friends, family, and livelihood to come home to the true faith, if a Roman pontiff commemorates the very heresy they renounced.

In addition to his trip to Sweden, Pope Francis has apologized for a lack of "evangelical" concern for the Lutherans. Here he is assuredly correct, but not in the way he thinks. What is the evangelical proclamation that the Roman pontiff should promulgate on this 500th anniversary? It is: *The faith by which all men must live is the faith of the see of Peter.* And we know this because the Son of God has told us.

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