

Reformation 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary (Oct. 22, 2017)

Bishop Timothy L. Doherty

A single edition of a recent weekly magazine posted two separate articles quoting writer William Faulkner: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” This seems appropriate for many present circumstances. In one forum, we are trying to untangle public monuments and Civil War history. In another sphere, we are observing an event filled 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. There is much more to appreciate than the moment in 1517 when Augustinian monk Martin Luther proposed his ninety-five theses at Wittenburg, Gemany.

The Catholic Church split into East and West before that. The Reformation and its aftermath divided into Protestant and Evangelical, and all together there are thousands of autonomous churches or sects. This year’s anniversary again states the obvious, that Jesus could not have wanted anything but unity in faith and complementary practice. Fifty years ago, the Second Vatican Council in the Catholic Church referred to such divisions as a “scandal,” an obstacle to preaching the saving action of Christ.

With hope being the main Christian virtue, we can search for ways to unify because this is a mandate of faith and Scripture. There has to be a broad approach beyond doctrinal and Scriptural debates, as important as they are. Healing also arrives, and we indeed continue to experience it, in fraternal socializing and public activity for the common good.

Healing eludes us because of at least a couple of realities. The first is that scholarship has continued to unearth facts contributing to the divisions, and the interpretive standards employed by historians have evolved and changed in number. Just as astronomers get different answers when using ultra violet or infra red instruments, historical methods also suggest different or conflicting data.

Secondly, those of us trying to get a good picture of the past are, in fact, on a moving train. The angle keeps changing depending upon what we hold are the correct definitions for justice, government, marriage and family, the content of individual rights, the effects of Sacraments. The Catholic use and appreciation for Scripture, so central to other-than-Catholic Christians, advanced in huge leaps in Vatican Council II, the Catechism, and a wonderful 2010 apostolic exhortation by Pope Benedict XVI titled “Verbum Domini.”

All these dynamics make it almost impossible for us to point to one book or article and say “this is what the Reformation is all about.” Do not overlook the work of Catholic reformers at work well before 1517. Or how the relation between church and state was seen both before and after, a difficulty when we know that these were often mixed in single jurisdictions and unique members of noble classes. But we keep researching and reading for insights that can help us move forward, or keep us from repeating old mistakes and mistrusts.

The last thing I would want is for us to be cynical about the prospects because “history keeps

changing.” It keeps changing because we discover a revealing parchment, an architectural inscription, or a personal diary of a king, president or merchant on the Silk Road. History writing is not simply a matter of facts but also a discovery of human motives. It helps us to be critical about how we observe things and whether we account fully enough for our own motives and God’s leading graces.

One of our deacons recently supplied me with a DVD series named “This Changed Everything: 500 Years of Reformation” by the Christian History Institute. I recommend it as a good educational tool. It supplies facts, for sure, but more importantly it illuminates questions we have to wrestle with as we aspire to a God-inspired unity.