



# FACE . . .

## Celebrating the Reformation in an Ecumenical Age: Common Lenten Renewal

RICHARD J. SKLBA

**H**OW DO WE CELEBRATE OLD FESTIVALS IN A NEW DAY? OR DO WE? TO LIVE AS A post-Holocaust Christian, for example, is to be confronted by the countless ways in which the “teaching of contempt” has been overtly or subtly a strand in our catechesis or public prayer. In an effort to restore balance and truth to our lives of faith, can we Catholics continue to proclaim the passion narrative of John, with all its anti-Judaic rhetoric, on Good Friday each year? How does one enhance respect for the ongoing witness of God’s chosen Israel in our day?

The Feast of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary in the Catholic sanctoral cycle was occasioned by the victory of Christian naval forces over the Turks in 1571. In some parts of Europe today that celebration only lightly masks a persistent hostility against Muslim faith and people. Can the feast be purified of its historical roots, or must it be sent to a library shelf of curious antiquities?

For similar reasons, the question of reformation (and consequently Reformation Sunday) is a serious pastoral concern for our churches today.

Each individual disciple of the Lord, as well as the entire community of believers, is summoned to life-long reformation and renewal. Christ’s very first admonition as recorded in Matthew’s gospel is a commanded *μετανοεῖτε* (Matt 4:17). He also taught that the angels of heaven rejoice more over even a single person in the process of such renewal than over ninety-nine who feel no such need (Luke 15:7). Over the years I have dared to suggest that this is even more foundational than the great commandments of love for God and neighbor! Thus it would seem clear that the obligation to personal and communal reform falls upon all of us in the church of Christ, head and members as well as every individual community scattered throughout the world.

From earliest centuries Lent has been the primary time for personal and ecclesial reformation. Personally, I make a point each year of suggesting that the distribution of ashes is not disobedience to the Lord’s admonition to wash one’s face even while fasting (Matt 6:17-18), but rather a public commitment to one’s promise that the entire community will be visibly different by Easter.

In an ecumenical age, even though still living in a partially divided Christian-

*(continued on page 426)*

# TO FACE

## Celebrating the Reformation in an Ecumenical Age: A Prelude to All Saints

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**E**IN FESTE BURG IST UNSER GOTT.... ARE YOU HUMMING? UNE ÉPÉE ET BOUCLIER victorieux.... Now? *Con su poder nos libraré*.... Come on, you know it! *And wins salvation glorious*.<sup>1</sup> Sing it out! ... Or not?

To celebrate Reformation Day or not, that is the question. Or better yet, to celebrate what? What does this mean, this annual festival of word and song? It is the eve of All Saints, and how might we best praise God? Certainly not by advocating that Protestant is the opposite of Catholic, that somehow “they” are wrong and “we” are right. The epistle for the day, with its declaration that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23), should cure anyone of such aspirations.

We live in an age of ecumenical bridging and neighborliness, of churches working together to live out the prophetic voice of Micah as they care for the hungry poor.<sup>2</sup> Is there still reason to recognize and strengthen an historic reformation identity, not in ways that foster deeper division but in ways that call the whole household of faith to attention and that strip the church (any church) of idolizing pretensions? You bet there is.

While the placing of a liturgical celebration on October 31 became normative following the blood of the Thirty Years’ War, and so admittedly has its roots in division,<sup>3</sup> a remembrance that prepares us to sing with the saints of every age (that great host arrayed in white) may be that which cures the fever in our blood. Indeed, it may be our only hope: to listen to Holy Scripture, be sung into faith, and pray for the reconciliation of the Great Reconciler to come.

So, if Lutherans and other Protestants dare to leave the Revised Common Lectionary on the twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 25) and praise God as heirs of the Reformation, as protesters of indulgences, then they ought to consider inviting the nearest Catholic parish to join them, both on that day and when November 1 rolls around (All Saints’ Day). Hymn-sing and potluck, Scripture and prayer, proclamation and a meal—all leading to the kind of resurrection conversa-

*(continued on page 427)*

<sup>1</sup>*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, Martin Luther’s reformation hymn, can now be sung in some 200 translations.

<sup>2</sup>Alas, they may be better at doing justice and lovingkindness than at walking humbly with God (Mic 6:8).

<sup>3</sup>Prior to the Thirty Years’ War there were a small number of celebrations that occurred on varying dates. During the war these disappeared, but they were re-established and spread widely by John George II of Saxony in 1667.

ity, we ought to find some way of sharing that holy season of repentance and reformation in a common fashion, with united ritual and purpose. What a splendid witness would be provided if all Christian traditions, east and west, reform and Catholic, could be united in a public and united response to God's call for the reform of our lives and our churches.

Into that vision comes the practical and historical reality of a traditional Lutheran celebration of the reformation initiated by Martin Luther at the end of October in 1517. Over the centuries, that was often the occasion to preach against the historical abuses of medieval Catholicism and the corruption of the papal court in Rome. A contemporary student of ecclesial history will immediately see the justified validity of the charges, even though the accompanying rhetoric may often have been exaggerated by preachers. The mutual animosity between Lutherans and Catholics was rekindled by annual tirades from the pulpit, and unfortunately stereotypes on both sides were perpetuated even after the abuses had been addressed and largely removed.

After the public signing of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* and the entrance into a new epoch of Lutheran-Catholic relationship, each of these two ecumenical partners needs to review its practices and mindsets to reflect our new level of mutual respect and unity in Christ.

The Catholic Church of the west needs to review its devotional life and the entire spectrum of prayers and pious practices in order to avoid any suggestion that we can be saved by mere human works isolated from the saving and transforming grace of Christ. In all candor, this requires clear and persistent teaching at all levels and may entail concentrated pastoral work for more than a single generation of our Catholic people. My personal conviction that it takes about seventy years to implement a church council may be verified in this matter.

Similarly, I would suggest that the churches of Luther's reform must take a new look at Reformation Sunday celebrations throughout the world. If the focus of such preaching and worship can find a renewed focus on the call for the entire church's ongoing reformation, selves included and perhaps even highlighted, the Sunday can have a useful purpose. Such celebrations might one day become common events for both ecumenical partners. The practice and tradition will need to undergo the "purification of memory," as the Pope is accustomed to describe it in these days of millennial renewal, and be cleansed of historical diatribe or polemics.

Celebrating the common call to reform is everyone's duty. Lent seems the most ancient time for doing so in a fully shared fashion. That would be my preferred suggestion rather than Reformation Sunday with all its historical baggage. ⊕

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tions that bring the comfort of grace and a holy and certain hope. Just like the luncheon that follows a funeral service, such goings-on would not replace Mass on those days, but they could be a way to break bread and give thanks in the name of the One who binds folks together in a love that draws each one of us into eternity. Ratzinger will rail, Hauge will roll over, but those ninety-five theses were meant for the whole οἰκουμένη (household), and now it is this generation's turn to bear witness to such priceless grace for the sake of the whole world.

Orthodoxy is about right praise, for we are shaped by what we do. Right faith or right teaching may sharpen that shape, but like any good set of knives, they can cut more than one thing. Must those of us who keep a liturgical remembrance of the reformation repent for our arrogance because the very means by which God has come to us has been used in our bloodied hands to diminish our neighbors? Reformation celebrations are not to indulge in an idolization of a sixteenth-century man or to turn his insights into a new law, but to let the word that gave him new life speak in this particular moment. In a culture that has moved from watching scripted dramas to engaging in a morbid fascination with “reality” TV, in a world where people put their lives on the web twenty-four hours a day, futilely and narcissistically searching for what is authentic, in a time when ancient enemies serve up modern-day retaliation even before breakfast, a classically Lutheran, openly invitational Reformation service that is intentionally tied with a festive All Saints' Day celebration will allow for what is true to be heard, tasted, and experienced by myriad upon myriad.

Liturgical celebrations carry multiple meanings, because meaning is accumulated. Even a simple hymn never means the same thing the second time that it is sung, because each “performance” adds a new layer of experience. So, what would it mean for a life-long Protestant to hear their Roman Catholic neighbor's voice blend with theirs as the hymn reaches toward its climax: *Were they to take our house, goods, honor, child, or spouse...?* My guess is that there would be few among us focusing on the sale of indulgences, the Thirty Years' War, or some piece of minutia from Luther's life. More likely our thoughts would be about our shared humanity, the losses that each of us has endured, and the God in whose breath we might rise to face another day. With our neighbor's hand in ours we walk humbly with God into a new future: this is the call of an ever-reforming church.

How best might we praise God on this eve of All Saints? Sing out, that the voices of all who have gone before may be sounded in your voice, that you, too, may see him face to face. ⊕

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