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Has the Reformation Been a Failure?

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Zhou Enlai, the brilliant first foreign minister of the Peoples' Republic of China, was once asked about the consequences of the French Revolution. He replied, "It's too early to tell." The question of today's lecture, "Has the Reformation Been a Failure?" is one that we could answer in the same way: "It's too early to tell" – and then go home and enjoy a free evening.

Moreover, just what is the *Reformation* that may or may not have failed? Our question is complicated by the fact that "Reformation" is a singular noun, but it refers to very complex, multi-faceted events and trends that profoundly affected every aspect of European life over the course of more than two centuries: 1490 to 1700, in the estimation of one of the Reformation's premier historians, Diarmaid MacCulloch.

Now, in 2017, as we mark the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation with Martin Luther, we naturally think of Luther when we hear the word *Reformation*, but we cannot lose sight of the fact that the *Reformation* is really the *Reformations*. Besides Luther, we have Zwingli, Calvin, Bucer, Beza, Müntzer, Karlstadt, Simons, Cranmer, and, yes, Ignatius Loyola. This list could go further, much further, naming people who led some particular and important reform movements during this period. Perhaps, however, our question, "Has the Reformation Been a Failure?" is not unanswerable after all.

Even though there were many reformers besides Luther and many reformations besides his, each genuine reformer would have said that they did not want to found a new Church and that division was anathema to them. Rather, they wanted to reestablish the whole, true, and pure Church as our Lord Jesus Christ had intended it. Therefore, amid the bewildering complexity

of the various reformations of the 16th and 17th centuries, we can discern this, their common goal, and ask, “Did they succeed or not?”

Apparently Luther never said the exact words, “Here I stand; I can do no other” when he had been summoned to defend himself at the Diet of Worms in 1521, but these phrases surely express his conviction that his own judgment trumped the authority of the Church. It is fair to say that he saw himself as a prophet of a renewed church. But then his message trickled down from the clergy and nobility to ordinary people. They were delighted to learn about their freedom and dignity from Luther and took his message to mean, “Let’s get rid of the old, tired, corrupt Church!” His preaching and writing fostered a new spirit of rebellion against established authority that spread rapidly. As the reform movement disintegrated and violent peasant revolts broke out in Germany in 1524, Luther himself was horrified to see what people did with his notion of Christian freedom.

In fact, Luther and his fellow reformers had unknowingly faced huge obstacles in pursuit of their goal of a renewed Church. On April 4, 1864, Abraham Lincoln wrote to a correspondent, “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.” Luther would have surely understood and agreed with Lincoln’s sentiment. In 1517, however, he did not yet fully realize that he was lighting a fuse to some explosive elements; in particular, the pervasive terror of God’s wrath that seemed to be using an aggressive Islam as its instrument. MacCulloch reminds us that southeastern Europe had been vulnerable for decades and Hungary would be conquered in 1526. Muslims would lay siege to Vienna in 1529. Therefore, an angry God had to be placated by a vigorous, painstaking defense of the right forms of belief and practice, even against other Christians. This fear explains much of what to us may seem the theological hair-splitting that the Reformers practiced incessantly.

Repeated efforts were made to heal the divisions and come to agreement – and these efforts were often spearheaded by emperors and princes, who did not want their lives complicated by severe religious discord with their realms. However, Luther and Zwingli could not find enough common ground when they met at Marburg in 1529. The Diet of Augsburg in the following year could not end the twelve-year division of the Church, despite the heroic efforts of Philip Melancthon. (Of course, his text became the Augsburg Confession, part of the foundation for a new form of Christianity.) Eleven years later, the Regensburg Colloquy broke down over theological disagreements that could

not be bridged. Reconciliation and reunion seemed hopeless now and so the boundary lines hardened.

After some decades of relative peace and a “live and let live” religious policy pursued by the Holy Roman Emperors (who were not necessarily holy nor Roman nor emperors!), a militant Catholic, Ferdinand II, became emperor. Stability ended because he wanted to make Roman Catholicism alone the religion of his realm - and so he began harassing Protestants. When his representatives in Prague were unceremoniously thrown out of a window (the famous “defenestration of Prague”) in 1618, the terrible Thirty Years War broke out. Mercenary armies ravaged Europe, mainly but not only in German territories, killing, raping, pillaging, and looting, leaving famine, disease in their wake. Brecht’s powerful play, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, testifies to the immensity of the war’s suffering and grief.

So the full story of the Reformation is painful and bloody. Throughout the period, Christians despised, persecuted, tortured, and killed one another in the name of Jesus. In England alone, to take just one example, more Catholics were “legally” murdered under Queen Elizabeth than in any other European country. England’s Protestants were then martyred under Elizabeth’s sister and successor, Queen Mary or “Bloody Mary,” and *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* profoundly and permanently shaped the identity of the English Reformation.

From an historian’s perspective, then, there are good reasons to say that the Reformation was a failure, a massive failure. The whole, true, and pure Church as it had been intended by our Lord Jesus Christ had not come to pass, and, considering the Thirty Years War, the Reformation had made lives of people much, much worse than they would have been, even with a corrupt Church. After all, there was a Catholic Reformation that would have gone forward, even without the challenges of Protestantism.

Now, though, let us consider the question of the Reformation’s success or failure from another perspective, that of contemporary Roman Catholic Christianity. This perspective is formed by recognizing and professing Jesus Christ as the absolute mediator of salvation, the One in whom God has offered God’s own self irrevocably to the world, to use Karl Rahner’s terminology. The reality of the Church is more than simply a human institution, though it certainly is that. It is also the historical continuation of Jesus in and through the community of those who believe in him. In this

perspective, the perspective of faith, our question about success or failure becomes more complicated.

Let me tell you a story. Way back in the early 1950s, a friend of mine told me, his mother found herself getting more and more anxious about the state of the world. World War II had ended in 1945, but now, not a decade later; the United States was deep into another war on the Korean peninsula. His mother had worried about her soldier husband all during the world war. Her husband had come home safely, but now she had a son, who is my friend, and she was afraid that he too might have to go to war if the world did not change, the kind of radical change that only God could bring about.

Her fear grew so great that finally she felt that she had to do something about it. She phoned the Archdiocese of Chicago and was able to get an appointment with Cardinal Stritch, the archbishop at the time. After the preliminary courtesies – which probably involved her kneeling and kissing his ring – she told the Cardinal of her fears for her son and all the other sons. “How can we find peace, real and lasting peace?” she asked, and then she answered her own question: “Through prayer. And we know,” she went on, “that God always hears the prayers of children. So please proclaim a day of prayer, Your Eminence, a special day when not only all Catholic children but also the children of all the other churches will pray for peace.”

“Madam,” replied the Cardinal, “there are no other churches.” Stritch was obviously a man of his time. In 1954, the second assembly of the World Council of Churches was held at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois; that is, within the Archdiocese of Chicago. President Dwight D. Eisenhower spoke to the members and urged them to actions that would summon Christians everywhere to “the devotion, wisdom and stamina to work unceasingly for a just and lasting peace.” Catholics would have had to read about the President’s appeal in the newspaper, since Stritch had forbidden Catholics to attend the assembly.

His prohibition and his reply to my friend’s mother reflected the position of the Church as expressed in Pope Pius XI’s encyclical *Mortalium animos* of 1928:

...It is clear why this Apostolic See has never allowed its subjects to take part in the assemblies of non-Catholics: for the union of Christians can only be promoted by promoting the return to the one true Church of Christ of those who are separated from it, for in the past they have

unhappily left it. To the one true Church of Christ, we say, which is visible to all, and which is to remain, according to the will of its Author, exactly the same as He instituted it. During the lapse of centuries, the mystical Spouse of Christ has never been contaminated, nor can she ever in the future be contaminated....

Prior to Vatican II, then, Catholics deemed the Reformation not just a failure but a disaster: a disaster not only on account of the untold suffering and of millions dead, but also because it enticed people out of the one true Church – and membership in that Church was necessary to salvation. That same friend of mine, whose mother went to Cardinal Stritch, recalls his childhood fears that his dad would not go to heaven because his dad was not Catholic.

Meanwhile, however, significant developments had taken place among the Protestant churches, mainly in Europe, beginning in the late 1800s. Historians maintain that the movement began with World Missionary Conference that convened in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1910. Here the realization dawned more forcefully than ever before that the division, which afflicted Christianity, was a serious obstacle to proclaiming the Gospel. We find Pope Saint John Paul II echoing this same conviction in his 1995 encyclical on ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint*.

We should not forget, however, the *Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral*, first adopted by the bishops of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States in 1886, and then accepted by the whole Anglican Communion in 1888. This document was a pioneering effort to promote Christian unity by declaring what the bishops considered the four minimal conditions to achieve it.

In the wake of World War I, 1925, under the leadership of the great Swedish Archbishop Nathan Soderblom, a coalition of Protestant churches formed the Life and Work movement. Its wide-ranging agenda covered issues which today fall under the rubric of peace and justice. Clearly social questions had to be front and center for Christians in order to avoid another war like World War I. Two years later, in 1927, a coalition of eighty churches developed the Faith and Order movement to study the issues of doctrine and church polity that had to be faced in the quest for unity.

None of these significant developments moved the Roman Catholic Church to change its position. In fact, the Faith and Order meeting in 1927 prompted

Pius XI's encyclical, *Mortalium animos* in 1928 that I just quoted. Nor did the formation of the new World Council of Churches in 1948, when Faith and Order joined hands with Life and Work, change the official Roman Catholic position about Protestants and other Christians. After all, in 1943, Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici corporis Christi* had identified the Church of Christ with the Roman Catholic Church.

So what did change the official Roman Catholic position? Let me highlight four factors. I do not mean this list to be exhaustive, but these seem to me to be the main ones.

First, the Modernist crisis. In the late 19th century, some leading Catholics wanted to bring church teaching into dialogue – and perhaps agreement – with contemporary findings in philosophy, history, and the social sciences. Among other innovations, this meant the abandonment of scholastic philosophy and theology, which they now considered outdated. However, Pope Pius X crafted a unitary system out of these various notions, called it "the synthesis of all heresies, and ruthlessly condemned it in 1907. The theological lines were now clearly drawn in the Church. Those who trespassed the boundaries of scholastic philosophy and theology fell under suspicion or were dismissed from their teaching positions.

So scholars began to devote themselves more and more to relatively safe research into the history of doctrine and of the Church. The historical studies that flourished in the following decades revealed not only that Tradition had indeed developed in the Church, but also that the Church had often tolerated a wider range of theological diversity than had been previously thought. This new view of Tradition necessarily suggested new views of the Church itself. It became harder and harder to maintain what Pope Pius XI had said, "The one Church of Christ is visible to all, and will remain, according to the will of its Author, exactly the same as He instituted it."

A second factor was Pope Pius XII's openness to the use of historical-critical methods to interpret the Bible in his 1943 encyclical, *Divino afflante Spiritu*. As Catholics employed these methods more and more, they discovered not only that the Protestants had gotten there first, but also had come to similar conclusions in their research. Thus, a new vision of vast common ground between Catholics and Protestants began to appear.

The third factor was the work of faithful and courageous pioneering theologians, like Paul Couturier, who was chiefly responsible for our annual Week for Christian Unity. But the chief among them was the French Dominican, Yves Congar. His book, *Chrétiens désunis*, which appeared in 1937, became an important text for ecumenically minded Catholics, but, of course, it was constantly under suspicion by the Curia until Vatican II where Congar's influence was immense.

Finally, as ecumenical theologian Michael Fahey, says, "The shift from isolation to tolerance, and then to admiration and collaboration, was influenced by the shared trauma of the two World Wars, especially World War II...." Catholics and Protestants lived and worked and endured side-by-side under extreme wartime conditions. This made it impossible to overlook or to dismiss the Christian faith and commitment of a sister or brother, whom one had previously deemed to be hardly Christian at all. Add to this the witness of Hitler's Christian resistance: people like Martin Niemöller, Karl Barth, and the great Dietrich Bonhoeffer, murdered in 1945, whose *Letters and Papers from Prison* won such a wide readership across the Christian world. How could one say that they did not belong to Christ? These factors gradually dispelled the clouds of prejudice and ignorance that isolated Christians from one another and laid the groundwork for the great leap forward, which the Roman Catholic Church took at Vatican II.

The essence of this leap is expressed in one verb in §8 of Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*. That verb is *subsists* – "subsistit" in the original Latin. It appears in the full, famous sentence: "This Church [of Christ], constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in union with that successor, although many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside of her visible structure." *Lumen gentium* §15 details the implications of this text. After recounting those "many elements of sanctification and of truth," the Council says that non-Roman Catholic Christians "are joined with us in the Holy Spirit, for to them also He gives his gifts and graces, and is thereby operative among them with his sanctifying power." The Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, in §4 expresses this conviction in another way: "Moreover some, even very many, of the most significant elements or endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church herself can exist beyond of the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope, and charity, along with other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit and visible elements."

This means that all Christian churches and ecclesial communities can and must learn from one another and act accordingly. As Christians dialogue with one another and collaborate with one another, they can teach and inspire each other. In and through the quest for church unity, says the Decree (§4), “all are led to examine their own faithfulness to Christ’s will for the Church and, wherever necessary, undertake with vigor the task of renewal and *reform*.” (Latin: *reformationis*; emphasis added.) Thus, said Pope St. John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint* (§28), “Dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some way, it is always an exchange of gifts.” Therefore, as the late and great ecumenist Margaret O’Gara insisted, the ecumenical movement is a reform movement in the Church, a case that she argues in her collection of essays, *The Ecumenical Gift Exchange*.

A similar insight stands behind the “receptive ecumenism,” associated most closely with Paul Murray of the University of Durham. In striving for the unity of the Church, we go beyond mutual tolerance and understanding to ask what we see in our dialogue partner that might deepen and enrich our “own faithfulness to Christ’s will for the Church.” As we challenge and question one another, we enter more deeply, fully into the mystery of our salvation and from that transformation comes reform.

So let me offer a response to our question “Has the Reformation Been a Failure?” If the Church is the enduring historical continuation of Jesus in and through the community inaugurated on Pentecost and, if the Church is still in the process of reformation in a manner directly stemming from the epochal events of the 16th century, then, clearly, we can say that the Reformation is not over yet. The question of its success or failure is premature. It is, indeed, “too early to tell.”

To be sure, serious obstacles still lie in our way forward, such as the central issue of authority in the Church, division over ethical questions, and disagreement about the role of women. Nevertheless, we can and must face these together with trust in our God, “whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever.” (Ephesians 3.20-21)