

Sunday, October 23, 2016
EXPRESSIONS by Father Ed

Ecumenism

This month marks the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Celebrations commemorating the occasion are planned throughout the world. One of the most important celebrations, however, will take place on October 31 in Sweden. Even Pope Francis will attend. While it may seem somewhat strange that the leader of the Catholic Church would want to participate in the celebration of the birth of Protestantism, Pope Francis believes that his presence will validate the ecumenical progress achieved since Vatican II and promote even more.

On institutional levels, much progress has happened over the last 50 years. Condemnations and excommunications have been rescinded. Joint prayer services have been organized, e.g., the annual meeting of the major Christian leaders in Assisi. Numerous international commissions have been established to deal with fundamental theological issues in order to find points of agreement and attempt to resolve differences. Vatican II credited Protestantism for its emphasis on Scripture, the priesthood of all believers, and its liturgical practices of the vernacular and communion under the species of bread and wine. All of these were later incorporated in the reforms of the Catholic Mass mandated by Vatican II. Centuries of religious rifts finally are being bridged, proving that antagonists can become allies, despite continuing differences. Ecumenism, therefore, is a model for the rest of the world that division and polarization can be overcome.

Nevertheless, not everyone is in favor of ecumenism. Some see it as doctrinal compromise, or even worse, surrender. In fact, it is a religious necessity and duty, especially in an increasingly secularized world. If Christians disagree over the terms of truth, how can they expect others to pay attention? Division, in some ways, has been more detrimental than helpful. While Luther hoped to reform the Church and simplify belief, he unwittingly encouraged further division, as Protestantism continued to split into more and more sects. It is now time to reverse course. Furthermore, religion functions as a conscience for the world. A united Christianity would offer clearer guidance and direction on contemporary ethical issues of peace, environment, bioethics, and compassion to the needy. Division is worse than scandalous; it is unfaithfulness to its basic purpose.