

Pontiff Lauds Martin Luther

Rome — Following are excerpts from Pope John Paul II's letter on Martin Luther, dated Oct. 31, and addressed to Johannes Cardinal Willebrands, Archbishop of Utrecht:

Nov. 10, 1983 is the 500th anniversary of the birth of Doctor Martin Luther of Eisleben. On this occasion, numerous Christians, especially of the Lutheran-Evangelical confession, remember that theologian who contributed in a substantial manner to the radical change of ecclesiastical and secular reality in the West. Our world still experiences his great impact on history.

For the Catholic Church the name of Martin Luther has through the centuries been tied to a painful period in history, in particular to the experience of profound ecclesiastical divisions.

For this reason, the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther must be for us an occasion to meditate, in Christian truth and charity, on that event engraved in history that was the epoch of the Reformation. It is time that we distance ourselves from historic events and assure that they are often better understood and evoked.

Noted personalities and institutions of Christian Lutherans have indicated the opportunity that the year dedicated to Luther be marked by a genuine ecumenical spirit and by discussion on Luther that favors unity of Christians.

I welcome with satisfaction this intention and I send you a fraternal invitation to reach together a deeper and more complete image of the historical events and a critical reflection on the manifold heritage of Luther.

The scientific research of Evangelical and Catholic scholars, research whose results have already reached notable points of convergence, have led to outlining a more complete and distinct picture of Luther's personality, of the complex plot of

historical reality in the society, politics and church of the first half of the 16th century.

As a consequence there has been clearly delineated the profound religiousness of Luther who, with burning passion, was driven by the examination of eternal salvation.

At the same time it was seen that clearly the rupture of ecclesiastical unity cannot be reduced to the lack of comprehension by Catholic Church authorities or, solely to Luther's lack of understanding of true Catholicism, even if both factors played a role.

In the dispute on the relation between Faith and Tradition, fundamental questions were at stake on the correct interpretation and on the reception of Christian faith, which had in themselves a potential for ecclesiastical division not explainable by historical reasons alone.

A two-fold effort is necessary, both in relation to Martin Luther and in the search to re-establish unity.

It is a matter of reaching, through an investigation that does not take sides, motivated only by the search for truth, a true image of the Reformation, of the entire epoch of the Reformation and of the people involved in it.

Only in offering oneself without reserve to a purification through the truth can we find a common interpretation of the past and gain at the same time a new point of departure for the dialogue of today.

And this is precisely our second obligation. The clarification of history that turns to the past and whose significance persists must go in equal steps with the dialogue of faith which we at present embark on to look for unity.

This dialogue finds a solid base, in conformance with the confessional Evangelical-Lutheran writings, in that which unites us even after the separation and that is in the Word of the Scripture, in the confession of faith, in the councils of the ancient church.

Father Schwab to Direct Episcopal Parish Retreat

Father Donald Schwab, Catholic chaplain at Rochester General Hospital, will lead the parish retreat for All Saints Episcopal Church Dec. 2 and 3.

The retreat will be held at the Divine Word Seminary on the west shore of Hemlock Lake.

According to Roberta Smith, secretary at All Saints, the unusual choice of a Roman Catholic priest to direct an Episcopal retreat came about through the offices of Father Richard Kew, pastor of All Saints. The pastor works with the

chaplaincy team at Rochester General, and the two men "have been working closely and building up a good relationship," Ms. Smith said. "When it came time to make a decision, he thought Father Schwab would be a good person."

This will be the first retreat in some time for parishioners at All Saints, though the parish did schedule them a number of years ago, Ms. Smith said.

The Divine Word facility can accommodate 65 people on retreat.

Bishop Clark

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He also mentioned the proposed letter on Hispanics in the Church.

"We are close to finishing that and I believe it can be approved at this meeting -- it will require a two-thirds vote. It is another important issue. The facts and figures indicate that it will be imperative to recognize the rise of the Hispanic presence and language in our culture."

The bishop said the letter must reflect a relationship of the U.S. Church and the "vast spiritual wealth" of the Hispanics. "For instance, look at the number of Hispanic bishops we have and how many Hispanic people who need to be served -- the percentage doesn't come near (to what it should be)," Bishop Clark said.

As for the pastoral letter on women, he said the discussion will be tempered by whether it will be opportune at this time -- "Are we at the point where we can write such a thing and will it be effective and fruitful?"

"We need to be careful that we don't write something that sounds wonderful but doesn't lead anywhere. My opinion is that we will write the letter. My hope is that we establish guidelines to assure we are not rash in raising false hopes. We have to exercise pastoral leadership."

Bishop Clark, who has written "The Fire in the Thornbush, a Pastoral Letter on Women in the Church," will be among about 50 bishops who will meet two days prior to the start of the full meeting in order to discuss the possibility of a national pastoral on the issue.

"I am in favor of the letter," he said. "I will support the idea. That is my present frame of mind as I anticipate going to the meeting. What may change my mind would be convincing arguments to delay it. If it is the conviction of the bishops that we need to do more groundwork then I might favor a delay. But I fully intend to support it now."

The bishops also will consider what to do with the precept (Mass obligation) of 10 holy days.

"My guess," Bishop Clark said, "is that we will adopt three Holy Days of obligation -- Christmas, Immaculate Conception and All Saints Day. We will probably remove the precept for Jan. 1 (Mary Mother of God) and the Assumption. We will transfer the celebration of the Ascension to an appropriate Sunday -- the same of the Epiphany and Corpus Christi (which are not even at present holy days of obligation)."

Bishop Clark explained the "why" of such action: "The bishops recognize that in our culture this way of celebrating these mysteries of our faith doesn't seem to be well-observed. They don't seem to have the meaning they once had."

"I stress, however," he added, "that we must find other ways of celebrating them. It's just that it is not done well now, or at least that is the common opinion of the bishops. We must find more fruitful ways to celebrate these days."

The bishop pointed out that the bishops' action must be confirmed by the Holy See in Rome.

The bishops had been working on a possible pastoral letter on "capitalism and Christianity" but that has been delayed because as Bishop Clark explained, "It is felt that on the heels of the letter on peace, it is not the time for another of such magnitude. I anticipate working on that at the meeting a year from now."

Among still other topics on the busy agenda is Confirmation.

"We will study a proposal that we petition Rome to allow local ordinaries to continue confirmation policies that have proved fruitful up to now, pending a full-scale study."

The bishop indicated that he thought there was not enough understanding right now to change the age for reception in some uniform way across the country.

"We should probably study it more so that if and when such a change does come, it will be understood and accepted as widely as possible."

Another topic will be pastor tenure.

"Normally," Bishop Clark said, "pastors are appointed for an indefinite period of time. With approval of a national conference of bishops, a local bishop can appoint a pastor for a limited period under the new code. And so we will study a proposal to approve as policy of the U.S. that there can be a limited tenure but I believe the NCCB desire is to leave the specifics up to the local ordinaries and the pastoral judgment of the community."

And these are only a handful of the many complex issues facing the bishops and their three-day meeting next week. In-house rules as well as other matters affecting the man in the pew are also to be discussed. In fact, in light of this year's busy agenda, one of the topics seems particularly timely -- should the bishops resume twice-a-year meetings?

A Modern Middle-East Mystic: Blessed Mary of Jesus Crucified

By Father Robert F. McNamara

St. Paul says, "God chose those whom the world considers absurd to shame the wise; he singled out the weak of this world to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:27). Pope John Paul will confirm that on Nov. 13, when he declares "blessed" a little Arab Carmelite nun who could neither read nor write.

Sister Mary of Jesus Crucified (1846-1878) is a modern person, but her mystical experiences recall those of the ancient saints of the Middle East. Mary Bawardy was born in Abellin, one of Galilee's least villages. Her parents were Catholics of the Greek-Melkite Rite. George Bawardy was a good and generous man who made a meager living by manufacturing powder. Mary Chahyn, his wife, was

noted for her devotion and charity.

Unfortunately, both parents died in 1849. The mother's sister took Mary's little brother to raise him. The father's well-to-do brother took Mary.

Later on, the uncle's family moved to Alexandria, Egypt. When Mary was 13, he announced to her, without warning, that he had made arrangements for her to marry. Having already decided to become a nun, the young girl refused the offer. The family then began a campaign of brutal pressure.

One day Mary confided her grief to a Moslem servant of her uncle's. To her surprise, the man blamed the whole issue on the Christian faith. When she hastened to defend Christianity, he became furious, cut her throat and left her dying! Years later, when questioned

about this episode as a nun, under the vow of obedience, Mary said she had died. She had even seen heaven, but had been told that she still had much to do on earth.

After her actual death, three doctors found that her windpipe had indeed once been severed. Those who followed recent scientific investigations of death and dying record similar out-of-body experiences. Mary thus became a martyr who returned to life!

After recovering, in order to escape her uncle, the young woman moved from place to place, working as a domestic. Though desperately poor and often mistreated, she went out of her way to help those in greater need.

In May 1863, when 18, Mary arrived in Marseilles to work for a Syrian family. Under the advice of her Greek Catholic pastor there, she decided to enter the convent. In 1865 she was accepted as a postulante by the French Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition. She proved to be an apt candidate, and God gave her ecstasies and other mystical gifts. However, when her admission to the novitiate was voted on two years later, she was rejected because of an irreversible voting technicality.

The rejection proved providential. When Mary next applied to enter the Discalced Carmelites in Pau, France, she was accepted at once and given the name Mary of Jesus Crucified. The nuns were much impressed by her devotion to the rule and her remarkable prayer-life. She had been admitted as a lay-sister because she was illiterate. Sister Mary liked it that way, and when her superiors promoted her to the rank of choir-sister, she petitioned to be returned to the humbler status.

In 1870, Mary was sent with eight other Carmelite nuns to establish a monastery in Mangalore, India. She was recalled from India to Pau in 1872. Now she persuaded the authorities of her monastery and of the Church to set up a Carmel in Bethlehem. Christ

had revealed to her that He so desired.

Three years later, the group of founding nuns were able to set forth. The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem installed them in their temporary convent in Bethlehem on Sept. 24, 1875. Because of her knowledge of Arabic, Sister Mary was assigned to direct the workmen building the permanent monastery. The Carmelites moved into the still unfinished new building in November 1876.

In the meanwhile, Mary persuaded the Patriarch to allow the foundation of still another Carmel in Palestine, at Nazareth. Mary and two of the Bethlehem superiors went up to Nazareth to select a site. En route she was able to visit her native village.

It was the last time she saw her old home. When she got back to Bethlehem her health began to deteriorate. Following an accident, she died on Aug. 26, 1878. The attendance at her funeral indicated that Sister Mary was highly regarded beyond the convent walls; and the inscription on her tomb called her a "soul of singular graces and virtues, distinguished by her humility, obedience and charity."

It was clear that this young Palestinian was a chosen soul -- one who in an age of proud individualism maintained that humility was the virtue most needed; one of the "poor in spirit" to whom Christ promised the Kingdom.

Many of Sister Mary's prayers and counsels have been recorded. They reflect biblical ideals, draw on nature rather than literature for examples, and have a sweet simplicity and an earthy commonsense.

Here are a few quotes:

"Temptation is the water that washes us; the strongest temptations are as hot water which cleans us better."

"God more readily pardons faults against purity than against charity."

"Do not seek human greatness. The person who extols you today will condemn you tomorrow."

Pope-Luther

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dialogue of faith that, at present, we undertake to search for unity."

Luther, an Augustinian priest, set off a chain of events leading to the Protestant Reformation when he nailed his 95 theses, objecting to what he saw as abuses of church teaching or practice, on the church door. Most notable among the theses was his objection to the manner in which preachers were communicating church teachings on indulgences as they raised money for the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. As Luther gained followers and positions hardened in the ensuing controversies, what began as an effort to reform the church from within ended up dividing Western Christianity into Catholic and Protestant churches.

"For the church through the centuries the name of Luther is tied to the memory of a sad period and, in particular, to the experience of the origin of ecclesiastical divisions," the pope noted.

He added, however, that with time, circumstances which led to that division have come to be better understood.

"Scientific research by Evangelical (Lutheran) and Catholic scholars," the pope said, "has led to the outlining of a more complete and more differentiated picture of Luther's personality, of that complex web of historical reality in society, politics and the church of the first half of the 16th century."

This research has shown Luther's "profound piety," the pope said. It also shows that the break in church unity "is not reduced to" misunderstanding of Luther by Catholic authorities or misunderstanding of Catholicism by Luther, "even if both had their role," the pontiff added.

In the letter, the pope did not define error on either side. He said, however that "guilt, where it exists, must be recognized."

The purpose of this recognition, he said, is not to pass judgment on history but to understand the events better and to become bearers of the truth.

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Vatican City

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