

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Today we celebrate the Festival of the Reformation, but what is the Reformation about? The answer might depend on whom you ask. Ask an historian and he would likely tell you about the major events and persons of the 16th century. And, to be sure, there is a historical context to the Reformation. You know those stories. You know the name Martin Luther. You surely know about his nailing the 95 Theses to the Castle Church door, what most historians count as the start of the Reformation (by the way, you can read some of those theses in one of your inserts). You may know of how Luther became a monk and then a priest. You probably know about Luther's "Here I stand" moment at the Diet of Worms before Holy Roman Emperor Charles V — even if, as historians think, he didn't actually say, "Here I stand." You probably also of the pretense of Luther's capture and confinement at the Wartburg Castle to protect his life. Some of you may know of Luther's return to Wittenberg some 9 months later to quell the iconoclasm, the breaking of windows and smashing of statues, of Andreas Karlstadt and his radical followers, etc.

The historical context is interesting, especially for historians, but that's not what Lutherans celebrate in church. We don't preach Martin Luther; we preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). So what is this festival about, after all, the Reformation is not a commemoration of an important event of Jesus' life. We're not remembering the birth of Christ or His baptism. We're not remembering Jesus' death or His resurrection or His ascension. Thus, the liturgical color isn't Christmas white or Good Friday black or Easter gold.

No, the color is Pentecost red ... yes, the same color we use to remember the coming of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, we might think of this festival as a festival of the Holy Spirit. It may sound odd, but that's how a Roman Catholic bishop characterized it at the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. He said: "the Reformation carried out by Martin Luther 500 years ago was an event of the Holy Spirit," and he added: "The Reformation corresponds to the truth expressed in the saying 'Ecclesia semper reformanda'," that is, the church is always reforming (Staff Reporter, "Cardinal Müller: Reformation was 'revolution against the Holy Spirit'," *Catholic Herald*, Oct. 26, 2017).

Not all Roman Catholics were pleased by this statement. But, what might that mean: "An event of the Holy Spirit?" We often talk about the Reformation being about grace and faith — two of the *solas*. That's part of it. That we are justified by God's grace through faith is a bedrock of Reformation teaching — the article on justification has been called "the article upon which the church stands or falls." We got a little taste of that last Sunday as we heard of the faith of the tax collector (as compared with the Pharisee), and we heard Jesus say of him that "*this man went down to his house justified [righteous before God], rather than the other*" (Luke

18:14). Moreover, today's epistle lesson is explicit: "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.*" Again a bit later: "*we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*" Echoes of this teaching are elsewhere in Paul, but the most well known passage may be from Ephesians: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast*" (Eph. 2:8-9).

This is all good Reformation theology, but to me it doesn't answer the question I posed because of that Roman Catholic bishop. What does the Reformation as "an event of the Holy Spirit" mean? That is answered, I think, by the third of those *solas*: Scripture alone, or as we have it on our Reformation banner here: the Word alone. The importance of the Word is seen in another Reformation motto, often seen as a square with the letters VDMA on it — *verbum Domini manet in aeternum*: the Word of the Lord endures forever.

Now we're getting somewhere, for yes, the word of God is the domain of the Holy Spirit. Peter teaches us that the Scriptures are not made up in the minds of men, but they are the work of men "*carried along by the Holy Spirit*" (2 Pet. 1:21). The Holy Spirit breathed out the Scriptures, and He continues to accompany them whenever they are preached (2 Tim. 3:16). We confess this in the Augsburg Confession: "So that we may obtain this faith [the faith that justifies us], the ministry of *teaching the Gospel* and administering the Sacraments was instituted. *Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given [John 20:22]*" (Augsburg Confession, Article V, 1-2, *emphasis mine*). So whenever the Word of God is involved, the Holy Spirit is at work.

Again, it may seem odd, but I'm going to quote from some other Roman Catholics. A commission of German bishops put out a report in 2016 called, "The Reformation in Ecumenical Perspective." "The bishops' report said the 'Catholic Church may recognise today what was important in the Reformation – namely, that Sacred Scripture is the centre and standard for all Christian life. ¶ Connected with this is Martin Luther's fundamental insight that God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the people is proclaimed in the Gospel – that Jesus Christ is the centre of Scripture and the only mediator" (Jonathan Luxmoore, "Martin Luther was a 'teacher of the faith', say German bishops," *Catholic Herald*, Aug. 12, 2016).

Yes, the Reformation is a festival of the Spirit and of the word of God. It's a festival that centers us on Christ, for that's the Spirit's work as Jesus Himself testified: this "*Helper ... will bear witness about me*" (John 15:26), "*the Scriptures ... bear witness about me,*" and, "*Moses ... wrote of me*" (John 5:39, 46).

You get inklings of that from Luther, still as monk and priest, upset with the sale of indulgences. In his 95 theses, he wrote: “the keys of the church, given by the merits of Christ, are [the church’s] treasure; . . . The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God” (*Luther’s Works*, Theses 60 & 62, vol. 31:31). You understand the importance of God’s word as Luther had to stand before the emperor Charles V and, at the risk of his life, either recant or confess. You know he confessed, saying: “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. ¶ I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen” (*Luther’s Works*, 32:112-3).

Thus, it is appropriate that we consider this Gospel text, Jesus saying to those “*Jews who had believed him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples’ — ‘faith comes from hearing ... the word of Christ’*” (Rom. 10:17) — “*and you will know the truth,*” — Jesus, “*the way, and the truth, and the life*” (John 14:6) — “*and the truth will set you free*” — “*for freedom Christ has set [you] free*” (Gal. 5:1), free from condemnation, free from guilt and shame, free from endless striving after a righteousness that is yours by gift. “Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word” (LSB655:1), “Thy strong word [that] bespeaks us righteous; Bright with Thine own holiness, Glorious now, we press toward glory, And our lives our hopes confess” (LSB578:3).

We have this word because of the Holy Spirit, because He “*[taught the disciples] all things and [brought to their] remembrance all that [Jesus] ... said to [them]*” (John 14:23, 26). And He now uses this word, which has been handed down to us, to call us, enlighten us, sanctify us, and keep us “in the true faith” (Small Catechism, Apostles’ Creed, Explanation to the Third Article). Yes, “*the Spirit of truth,*” who works by Word and Sacrament, now guides us “*into all the truth*” (John 16:13). He leads us to Jesus, and abiding in Him, we “*know the truth*” and we are set free.

And so, today we rejoice in the Reformation, in the heritage that is ours through Martin Luther, in this festival of the Holy Spirit, in the Scripture handed down to us, in the word that testifies to Christ, in the Word of Christ, in the truth of our salvation by grace through faith in Christ Jesus, in our freedom in that Gospel. It’s the Reformation; let us rejoice.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.