

Catholic

UPDATE

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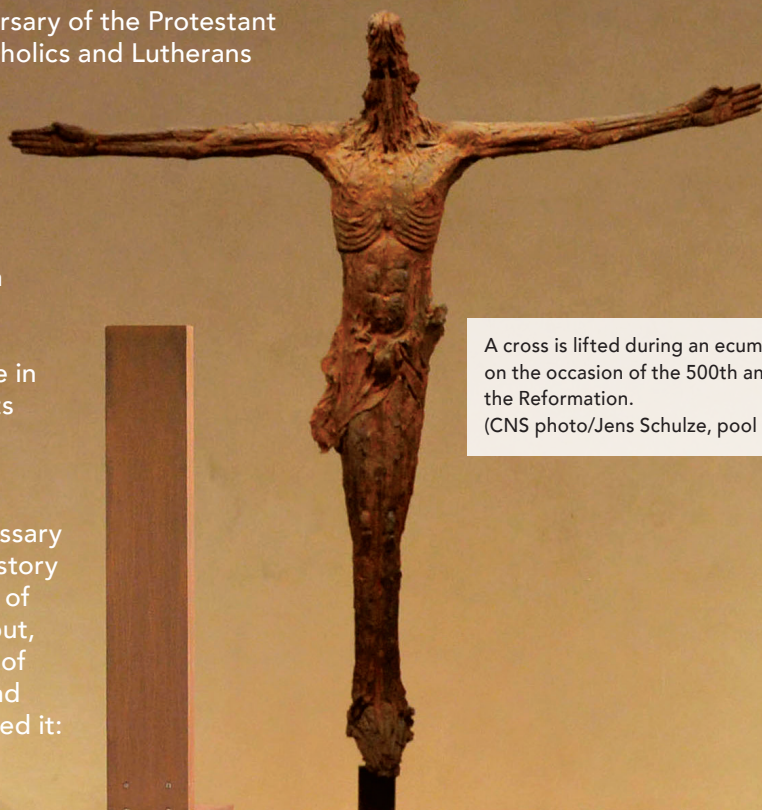
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The Reformation

Five Hundred Years Later, Continuing the Conversation

D.D. EMMONS

The year 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. In commemoration, Catholics and Lutherans are embracing ecumenical efforts that also acknowledge fifty years of successful dialogue and achievement between Catholics and Lutherans as the two churches narrow long-held differences. That the Catholic Church joins in this anniversary acclaim is significant, since Catholics have not always been encouraged to find value in the Reformation. This effort highlights the continuing and genuine intention of the Holy See toward reconciliation with the Lutheran church. To put this commemoration in context, it is necessary to review not only the half-century history of dialogue between representatives of the Catholic and Lutheran churches but, to some degree, examine the causes of the sixteenth-century Reformation and the role of the priest and monk who led it: Martin Luther (1483–1546).



A cross is lifted during an ecumenical service on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.
(CNS photo/Jens Schulze, pool via EPA)

Reformation and Martin Luther

On January 3, 1521, Pope Leo X—who served as pope from 1513 to 1521—excommunicated Martin Luther from the Catholic Church. The cause of this action was based on Luther's controversial disagreements with the Church and his refusal to stop his heretical rhetoric. Leo's papal encyclical announcing the excommunication, *Decet Romanu*

Pontificem ("It Pleases the Roman Pontiff"), was strongly worded.

It not only excommunicated

Luther and his close followers, it condemned them as heretics. In the sixteenth century the punishment for heresy included death, an outcome Luther avoided.

The encyclical also told all members of the Church, under threat of their own excommunication, to shun everyone who supported Luther. In Leo's papal decree of excommunication, he refers to an encyclical he wrote a year earlier condemning Luther for his rebellious acts against the Church and giving him sixty days to recant or be excommunicated. What did Martin Luther, an ordained Catholic priest and an Augustinian monk, do that would culminate in such a decision by the pope?

Before we delve into an answer for that question, here's some background information. That there was corruption within the Catholic Church of the 1500s is well established. A crisis had been building for nearly 200 years, and although the need for lasting reforms was obvious, many, including Church officials, turned a blind eye. This corrupt and often scandalous Church environment, combined with the economic and social upheaval taking place in Europe, contributed to a time ripe for revolt. The Reformation ensued.

Pope Leo X
excommunicated
Martin Luther from
the Catholic Church.



Martin Luther referred
to Pope Leo X as the
antichrist.