

# A Letter to non-Catholic Christians



My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

This October, many will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the “95 Theses” by Martin Luther in 1517 which began the Protestant Reformation. The problems Luther saw needed to be addressed, but the disunity that resulted has harmed the ability of Christians to teach the truth of Jesus Christ. As a Catholic bishop my concern focuses on this disunity.

Jesus Christ prayed His great high-priestly prayer on the night before He suffered. He prayed fervently for the unity of His followers in ages to come, saying, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:20-21)

Today, in East Texas, we are those people; the ones who would believe through the words of the evangelists. Jesus Christ Himself prayed that we would be one, united people, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you,” precisely so that the world would believe in Him. In His divine wisdom, He knew that the unity of Christians would be a vital part of the Christian witness to an unbelieving world.

As I write to you 500 years after the Reformation began, we are divided into many, many types of Christians rather than being unified as the one Body of Christ of which St. Paul writes. Just as Jesus warned us, our lack of unity has compromised our witness. Today, atheism and secularism have captured the minds of the young, and are simply the default religious philosophies of the overwhelming majority of young people. In all matters pertaining to sex and gender, the world is rapidly moving away from the foundation of Christian morality into uncharted territory where sins are celebrated and vices are called virtues.

The family itself, the most basic building block of human society in God’s plan, is under intense attack, and we are not succeeding

in protecting it. Same sex marriage, co-habitation, a culture of divorce – all of these forces and more are tearing at the integrity of the family. I cannot help but think that a UNITED Christianity would be a more effective witness that could do so much more for our world. In short, I know Jesus was right and I understand why He prayed for the unity of Christians.

That is why rather than celebrate choices which lead to the fracturing of the Body of Christ, I urge all Christians to seek deeper unity. Every church faces constant stresses to unity, great and small, just as the Church in Germany in the 16th century faced problems. But, problems come and go, and have always come and gone within the Church; the Lord built the Church on men, not on angels, and He knew there would be challenges. In the 2,000-year history of Christianity, there have been many problems and many successful reformations that did not destroy the unity of the Church. I ask that we all embrace this 500th anniversary as a time to renew and reform our efforts to seek the unity Our Lord prayed for in the Gospel.

None of us living today are the authors of these divisions. Most of us have inherited our positions from our parents and ancestors and, to a great degree, the faith one practices today in East Texas is determined by which side of one or another border one’s great-grandparents lived on. We have inherited prejudices and propaganda from the past and it has damaged us. It is damaging our world. In my life as a Catholic priest and preacher of the Gospel, I have far more often had to dispel misconceptions about the Catholic faith than deal with any real criticisms of it. There is a tremendous amount of misinformation on all sides of this terribly divided Christianity.

I invite everyone reading this to make a personal attempt to repair this disunity by learning the truths of Jesus Christ more deeply. My belief as a Catholic is that Jesus Christ established the Church on the Apostles and their successors to guide His flock through the ages. I invite you to investigate the Catholic faith. We trace our history directly back to Jesus Christ in 33 AD. We claim that we believe and teach today exactly what was taught by the apostles, with the Spirit-guided insight of 20 centuries to enrich and deepen the way in which we express those teachings. We claim that there is an unbroken, traceable, sensible chain of teaching the one faith, delivered by Christ to the Apostles, proceeding through the history of the Church without modification or revolution.

These claims are either true or they are false. Many of our members have come to belong to the Catholic Church by setting out to dispute these claims, but in the process have become convinced that the claims of Catholicism are true. I invite everyone to enter into the same investigation simply for the sake of better understanding of what Catholics believe.

I love the people of East Texas and I realize many will never share my Catholic faith. I simply ask that we strive for understanding. Let there be no animosity or suspicion or prejudice between us. We must work together to give a powerful witness to this world which is sliding further into chaos each day. Let us use this anniversary in wisdom, recognizing that an attempt at reformation which results in severe disunity is a cause, not for celebration, but for reflection on our responsibilities as Christians.

Because Jesus prayed for unity and warned us of the effects of disunity, we must be serious about seeking this unity. We must pray for it and work for it!

I will be happy to discuss Christian unity with any non-Catholic pastor and to work in concrete ways to achieve it. I will, by the grace of God, continue to pray for all of the people of East Texas, that Jesus Christ, who is the Truth, will lead us into all truth and all unity.

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all the people of East Texas!



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Bishop of Tyler

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