Sometimes theology undergraduates are asked the question whether Martin Luther would have been excommunicated if he had lived today. The expected answer is of course ‘no’. That is partly because the Catholic Church rarely uses excommunication as a tool of discipline today, but also because there is a greater understanding of what Luther was trying to do.

He wanted to reform certain aspects of the Church. As we are all aware the Church is always in need of reform, and it was to this which Luther in 1517 and before, was trying to contribute. He is known to protest – rightly – at the sale of indulgences. Please note that he was not, as certain Protestant Divines have tried to maintain, against indulgences, but he objected to the sale of spiritual things. There were also other things to which he objected such as the life-styles of certain clerics, the lack of proper training for some priests, the lack of discipline in the Church, all matters with others, which were to be taken up, not least because of Luther’s protest, at the Council of Trent later in the century.

In other words he was trying to start or contribute to a debate. I am afraid that dramatic as the story is he did not nail the theses to the door of the Church or the castle in Württemberg, but he did send them to his Bishop. In other words he did what many academics would do today trying to organise a seminar or series of seminars on issues which he believed to be relevant.

The first lesson therefore that Luther teaches us is that the Church is always in need of reform. Also that we need to listen to one another and not believe that I have all truth and that I just need to keep on repeating it. As baptised Christians we are all “priests, prophets and kings. Together with the other members of the Church we have the right and indeed the duty to interpret the faith in our times.

This year of remembrance for the Reformation was launched in Lund in Sweden by the Lutheran World Federation together with Pope Francis. At that ground-breaking moment of prayer, Pope Francis prayed a prayer of thanks for the graces of the Reformation. Coming from the head of the Catholic Church, that took some people by surprise. There are, however, real lessons for the Catholic Church and for all Christians from the reformation movement, and not just the need for reform.

One of these is the rediscovery of the role of the Bible in Christian life. I will return in a moment to the question of language. It was true that Catholics probably did have less contact with the Sacred Scriptures than other Christians. The reforms of the twentieth century have changed most of that. Today it is reckoned that Catholics have even more contact with the Scriptures than most Protestants. Few sit at home, however, and read the Bible. But within the liturgy there is now a rich offering of texts from the Bible. A catholic who attends daily or almost daily mass and prays the Liturgy of the Hours will within a two or three year period have heard read or themselves have read nearly the whole of the Bible. A Catholic who only attends Sunday Mass will also over a three year period have heard most of the New Testament and also key texts from the Hebrew Bible. That is a richness that we have rediscovered with the help of our Protestant sisters and brothers. Thank you.

This is of course not an acceptance that each believer can interpret the Bible as he or she sees fit. It is the right to have an opinion but that opinion must be then tested against the understanding of the whole of the believing community. It cannot be denied that this leads at times to conflict, but it does mean an enormous enrichment of the spiritual lives of those believers. All such interpretation must be respectful of the Jewish tradition and that of other religions. Saint John Paul II said that the founders of all of the world’s great religions were inspired by the Holy Spirit.
Luther also made clear that people should understand the Gospel in their own language. It has taken the Catholic church four hundred years to accept this, but we now have nearly all Liturgy and prayer in the local vernacular language. The Church is at times quite slow at reform.

Luther never intended at the beginning to leave the Catholic Church. He therefore was in favour of the sacramental life of the Church. It was the fact that he moved from this position in later writings that meant that the Catholic Church was forced to examine its own view of the Sacraments, and so enrich the sacramental life of the Church. An important and large international seminar was held in Rome earlier this year on the subject of Luther and the Sacraments, which again shows the thankfulness of the Catholic Church for the contribution of Luther to this debate.

A further grace and insight from the Reformation time which we are still experiencing today is the relationship of faith and politics. Luther was if I may say so “taken over” by the political authorities of the time, and used for their purposes. Not least this was to free themselves from the rule of the Pope in various ways. Probably the Pope was as much to blame as the secular national leaders. It is the reflection on this situation which has enabled the Church to go through the very painful process of realising that it should not have direct political power, but at the same must always engage with those who have this power to call them to an ethical and moral behaviour. The Church must speak truth to power. Christians in their daily lives must be part of the secular sphere, but at the same time the Church authorities should not be directly politically engaged.

I have already said that Luther objected to the sale of ‘holy things’ technically known as simony. There is a balancing act to be performed here. The church needs resources in order to preach the Gospel. These cannot be directly attached to that preaching of the gospel. This is said clearly in the New Testament. At the same time there is an acceptance of gifts as alms. The temptation is always to make a direct connection between the preaching of the Word and the necessary support of the preacher. The reformation reminded us of what happens when that balance is lost. It leads inevitably to a loss of faith.

Luther was of course haunted by his own demons. He needed constant reassurance that he was ‘saved’. The anguish of this was real as his life shows. It might even be possible to prove that this was the real driving force behind his movement. I am not a psychologist and trying to ‘psychoanalyse’ someone after nearly five hundred years is an impossible task. What we do learn, however, is that we should never raise our own personal problems and doubts to the level where we make them community problems. The community may be able to provide me with someone who can help me in my anguish, but I cannot expect the community to change just because of my own questions and problems. Luther was probably unconscious of doing this, but to some extent that is what happens.

The International Dialogue group between the Lutherans and Roman Catholics produced for this year a small easily understood book entitled “From Conflict to Communion”. This has been widely quoted and used, even in this country where there are not so many Lutherans. If there is one theme in this work it is that we should be doing things together. In 1999 what was considered the largest obstacle to unity between Lutherans and Catholics was removed with the signing of the Joint Declaration on Justification. This means that the elephant has been removed from the room, even if there are still some unresolved issues. That has left many of us uneasy for as long as the elephant was there we did not need to take seriously the movement for unity. It was in some ways comforting. The elephant has gone but we are still sitting there in the room. We are no longer quite sure of our roles. What we need and not just Catholics and Lutherans but all Christians is to know one another better. We need to get together. That is everything from cups of coffee or tea to social work to bible study, to evangelisation, to quite simply being human beings together. As I have said Luther had some problems of being a human being because of his inner anguish, but if we want to be true to his legacy true to the graces of the reformation then I think that we do need to quite simply recognise that the woman or man beside me is made in the image and likeness of Almighty God, and that is indeed a very good basis, for love, friendship and support.