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By Rich Preheim

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WASHINGTON (RNS)-In the early 16th century, groups of European Christians started splitting from the Roman Catholic Church in what is now known as the Protestant Reformation. But while Protestants and Catholics were at odds, they had one thing in common: Anabaptism had to be eliminated.

Reformed Christians drowned Felix Manz, the first of thousands of Anabaptist martyrs over the next two centuries. Catholics burned at the stake Michael Sattler, author of the first Anabaptist confession of faith.

An etching of
“Dirk
Willems
rescuing his
pursuer”
from the
17th century
book
“Martyrs
Mirror,”
which
includes
hundreds of
accounts of
Anabaptists
being
persecuted
by the
Catholic,
Lutheran
and
Reformed
churches. In
ecumenical
talks, the
churches are
repenting for
the
persecutions.

Even Martin Luther, who is credited with ushering in the Reformation, urged the execution of all Anabaptists as heretics.

Such persecution helped drive the early Anabaptists—the direct spiritual ancestors of today's Mennonites, Amish and Hutterites and somewhat-distant relatives to Baptists—into isolation, suspicious of the rest of the world.

But now nearly 500 years later, the Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed churches—primary antagonists of Anabaptists in the 16th and 17th centuries—are seeking to make amends.

“We all have black sheep in the family. We all have ancestors that we aren't proud of,” said Joseph Martino, head of the Vatican-appointed delegation that last fall concluded five years of meetings with a group from Mennonite World Conference, the global Mennonite fellowship.

In addition to the Catholics, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and Mennonite Church USA this spring finished a two-year series of meetings, and the Reformed Church in Zurich, Switzerland, scheduled a reconciliation ceremony this summer with participation by Anabaptist descendants from around the world.

As Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed re-examine their history, so Mennonites are prompted to introspection.

“It's always healthy if we should engage another tradition,” said Mennonite historian John Sharp. “That strengthens our own faith.”

The Protestant Reformation was born in 1517 when Catholic monk Martin Luther challenged the church by posting his 95 theses in Wittenberg in what is now Germany. He went on to found the Lutheran Church.

Another pivotal development came in the early 1520s, when priest Ulrich Zwingli renounced Catholicism but remained in the pulpit of Zurich's main church, leading to the start of the Reformed movement.

But some Christians thought Luther, Zwingli and other reformers did not go far enough—particularly regarding infant baptism. For generations, newborns had been baptized, but some believers argued only adults can make a decision to follow Jesus Christ and join the church.

Anabaptists insisted on believers' baptism—first conducted in Zurich in 1525—and refused to have their children baptized as babies.

But the Anabaptist position, while religious, also was political. Baptism not only was the rite of entrance into the church but also into citizenship in the state, since state and church were one, whether Catholic, Lutheran or Reformed. So rejecting infant baptism was seen as threatening the civic order.

As a result, Anabaptists were severely persecuted, forcing them to frequently flee across Europe and eventually to the Americas in search of security to practice their faith.

But that was then, and this is now, church leaders say. In fact, said Lutheran Paul Schreck, many church members are unaware of that chapter of their church's history.

“I think most Lutherans around the world would be horrified that their forebears put to the sword people who disagreed with them,” he said.

Both the Catholic and Lutheran dialogues covered many topics, but they also included repentance.

In the final report of the Catholic-Mennonite meetings released this spring, the Vatican delegation said Catholics “can express a penitential spirit, asking forgiveness for any sins which were committed against Mennonites, asking God's mercy for that, and God's blessing for a new relationship with Mennonites today.”

Following their meetings with Mennonite Church USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America participants released a statement repudiating state-sanctioned Lutheran persecution of Anabaptists.

Starting next year, the conversation will go global, as the Mennonite World Conference and Lutheran World Federation start meeting together. One of the items on the agenda is the Augsburg Confession, a 1530 document still used by Lutherans that includes condemnations of Anabaptists.

The study of history was an important element to both the Catholic and Lutheran dialogues. Martino said it is important for all sides in a conversation to have a common understanding of the past.

“A lot of time, people have strong feelings based on certain things they regard as gospel truth,” said Martino, bishop at Scranton, Pa. “Once the playing field is leveled, then you get into a position where you can talk on a secure foundation. The perceptions and the judgments are adjusted.”

That applies to Anabaptist history, as well as Catholic and Lutheran history. Their martyr heritage has been crucial to Mennonite, Amish and Hutterite identity. Important to those groups is “Martyrs Mirror,” a 17th-century book of 1,290 pages with hundreds of accounts of persecuted Anabaptists.

But that heritage may need re-examination, said Mennonite World Conference Executive Secretary Larry Miller, not to “betray the blood of the martyrs” but to be sure the stories are accurate.

“We like to say we were just being obedient,” Miller said. “But if you take a look at it from another angle, you can say we were socially provocative.”

While Lutheran and Catholic repentance for the persecution of Anabaptists is new, it is not new for the Reformed.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches apologized more than 20 years

ago.

The recent event in Zurich is different, Sharp said, because the ties to mistreatment of Anabaptists are direct and local. The Evangelical-Reformed Church in Zion is taking responsibility for what happened in its territory centuries ago.

The Zurich event, commemorating the 500th anniversary of the birth of Reformed leader Heinrich Bullinger, included a joint worship service and the dedication of a memorial to Manz, who was drowned in the city's Limmat River in 1527.

“The Reformation started as a movement of renewal but immediately turned out to become a story of separation,” said Peter Dettwiler, ecumenical officer of the Evangelical-Reformed Church in Zurich.

“It's time to set a memorial in the city of Zurich, where the roots of both the Reformed and Anabaptists are to be found.”

While Mennonites have historically resisted ecumenical relations, interchurch connections are inevitable, say dialogue participants. Mennonites no longer live in isolated enclaves but consistently rub shoulders with members of other denominations, be it through international relief efforts or local Bible studies.

So intentional religious dialogues “can help us understand we are among Christians,” said Sharp, director of the Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee.

“Let's figure out who we are in relation to them and not over and against them.”

in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.