Sunday, October 29, 1978
THE CONTINUING REFORMATION
John 15:1-12

Not one person predicted it! Many when they first heard it, couldn't believe it! The new Pope, John Paul II, was Karol Wojtyla (Voy-tih-wuh), the first Pope ever from Eastern Europe. The first from Poland. The first non-Italian elected since 1522 and thus, in a real sense the first international Pope to lead the Roman Catholic Church. Furthermore, he is the youngest Pope chosen since 1846. "The Spirit twists and turns and is full of surprises."

When Pope John Paul I, was elected, that was also partly a surprise. Few had predicted that. Then when he died suddenly after only a month in office, that was another surprise. It caused one newspaper reporter to write — "Who's to say the Spirit will not be ready with another surprise when the next conclave opens?" That reporter went on to say — "Because God is good, God does not always grant the wishes of those God loves. God may not satisfy the church's longing for stability, but that doesn't mean God has gone back on His promise to be with you always to the end of time."

Little did that reporter know how completely surprisi.ng the next election would be. If history teaches anything, it teaches that the Spirit can always be counted on to be full of surprises. So be careful when you pray — "Come, Holy Spirit!" You are likely to be in for something you least expected.

Probably the most startling fact that comes to the student of church history is the changeability of the church. Often, we belabor the church in its many forms for being static, too traditional and blindly stubborn. And the church has been that too. Yet within the church as a whole, significant changes of perspective, emphasis, and theology have occurred in each generation. Renewal and reformation movements have continually arisen to challenge complacency. God's ways are not always our ways, and God's timing is not always our timing.

There is no organism or institution which has existed as long as the Christian Church and which has been both an agent of change and susceptible to change for itself. It is easy to forget this fact in light of our limited experience. We often mistakenly think because of our short timespan that the way the church exists in our own time is the way it always was and the way it is always going to be. Such is not the case. Reformation is a continuing force in the life of the church.

Today, the last Sunday in October, is the time when many of the major Protestant denominations remember the beginning of the far-reaching Reformation of the 16th century. That too was a time of major change in the church and very few if any observers in that time predicted what was going to happen either.

Martin Luther was a little-known priest and Biblical scholar in the Roman Catholic Church. Through his continued study of the scriptures, he came to question more and more of the beliefs and practices of the church of his time. He had no idea that his preaching, writing and teaching would have such far-reaching effects.

After much thought and study, Martin Luther had made a list of 95 theses or points of debate which he hoped the church leaders of that time would discuss and take seriously. To draw attention to his topics, he posted them on the community bulletin board which was the front

door of the village church in Wittenberg, Germany. The day he chose to do this was October 31, 1517, the “Hallowed Eve” of “All Saints Day.” Thus, October 31 is often thought of as Reformation Day and the Sunday before October 31 as Reformation Sunday.

This morning let’s look more closely at what the Reformation teaches us about God and the church.

1. First, a study of church history reminds us that reformation in the church and in society as a whole is a continuing process and often comes in ways we least expect it.

Of course, there are periods in the history of the church when the reforming and renewing of the church are more rapid and more evident and far-reaching than in other periods. The Reformation of the 16th century in which Martin Luther and others were key figures is just one example of this.

Sometimes too, it is only years after that we fully realize how much reforming was actually going on. We do not always recognize reformation when it is in process. There are times too when we can mistakenly oppose what is needed and positive reform.

The prophets in the Old Testament were reformers. John the Baptist was a reformer. Jesus Christ was a reformer, and like many reformers before him and after him lost his life in the process.

2. Secondly, note that reformation is not only a continuing process but almost always a difficult process. It’s easier to stay with the status quo. It’s more comfortable. We’re more used to it. It requires nothing of us, while reform requires growth!

When Galileo at times showed his telescope to the leading sages of his day, the result generally fell into three categories of response. Some were properly struck by what they saw and were willing to reconsider their point of view; others peered around the other end of the instrument, convinced that Galileo had past something on the glass the picture of a planet, the moon, whatever. But the third group will interest us most at this point; this group refused to look through the lens. They didn’t want to see anything; they didn’t want to entertain any possibilities at all. That’s how frightened they were. Of what? Of having their old comfortable beliefs challenged! They were frightened of facing the possibility that the truth about the universe might be something different than they had been previously taught or then believed.

Unfortunately, the church of that time, by and large was as frightened as anyone. But fortunately, on the other hand there have always been within the church those who were not afraid of new truth; those who were not afraid of reform and renewal. It all depends on where we put our faith. If our faith is in God, then no new truth can be frightening. If our faith in tradition or in a particular way of doing something or a particular way of seeing the world, then we will always be frightened by new discoveries and reform.

Somehow there are those among us who seem to believe that to learn the truth is bad. If you don’t believe it, try this experiment with someone you know, a friend or an acquaintance. Say to that person, “I want to tell you a truth about yourself.” Watch what happens. The odds are at least a conservative one million to one that the other person will immediately become defensive and nervous, maybe even angry. You will see it in the eyes, the change in posture, the words — all of it.

Why? Because when someone tells us that he or she is going to reveal a truth about yourselves, we instantaneously think it will be negative. The suspicious emphasis on “the truth hurts” can make liars of us all.

Be sure that, after you observe the reaction, you tell the person a positive truth about him or her — for example, “You make it very easy for people to get close to you.” Or “you always look so nice,” or whatever else may be true.

So even though reform, making necessary changes, seeing the world differently is always a difficult process for most of us, the reformation says — do not be afraid of it; do not be afraid of learning new truth. Jesus said, “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” This means also being free enough to seek new truth and to also know that at no time do we know all the truth — none of us!

Remember too, that seeking the truth is always controversial. And since most of us shy away from controversy we forget the controversy that is inherent in the Biblical faith. Read the Gospels again in the New Testament and you will find that the one we call Lord was on every page involved in one controversy after another. Not because he sought to be controversial, but in trying to do God’s will that was a natural side-effect.

Then if we study the lives of the reformers of the past and the present, the saints, we find that their religious faith often drove them and others to defy tyrants, to cross hazardous oceans and continents, to die for God and friends. Today we have to admit that many of us usually expect something quite different from our Christian faith.

3. Thirdly, note that we celebrate the Reformation of the church and the fact that the church is in a continuing reformation on the Sunday nearest “All-Saints Day,” Nov. 1. Perhaps it was only a coincidence that Martin Luther chose the Eve of All-Saints’Day — the Hallowed Eve to post his debate topics on the church door; if so it is a happy and significant coincidence, for the Saints among us have always been those who were the ref armers among us, those who have called and led us to see new truth.

And the reformers and saints among us are many and varied. Not nearly all of them have been officially so designated by the church — but they were reformers just the same and many of them saints.

They come from all cultures and all backgrounds — just a few examples from among the hundreds that could be mentioned. Galileo, the observer of creation is one. Gandhi of India, the apostle of nonviolence is another. Martin Luther, Michelangelo, Abigail Adams, Emma Willard, Martin Luther King, Jr., John and Charles Wesley, Elizabeth Blackwell, who in 1849, completed her training at Geneva Medical College and became the first woman ever to receive an M.D. degree. Harriet Tubman who in 1849, guided only by the North Star, made her escape from a Maryland slave farm. Despite a $12,000 bounty on her head, she returned south 19 times and guided more than 300 slaves to freedom. St. Theresa of Avila, Leonardo da Vinci, Johann Sebastian Bach, Susan B. Anthony, Louis Pasteur, the saints, and reformers among us are many. Thousands who worked quietly and without much notice will remain nameless, but we are the better for them.

Jesus said, according to the Gospel of John, “I am the true vine, and my father is the vinedresser... abide in me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it

abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches."

Today we remember the continuing reformation that goes on all the time, and we are thankful for the many saints and reformers who have borne fruit because they have been branches of the true vine. Sometime make out your own list of saints. Who are you going to put on it? Then give thank "for all the saints who from their labors rest," and do not be afraid of the future — trust God and proceed into the future. Amen.