

Pain of division must push Christians to seek unity, pope says

VATICAN CITY (CNS) – After receiving the gift of a chalice from leaders of the Lutheran World Federation, Pope Francis said divided Christians should suffer because they cannot share the Eucharist, but that suffering should spur them to work and pray harder for Christian unity.

As the formal Catholic-Lutheran dialogue proceeds, “it will be important to examine with spiritual and theological humility the circumstances that led to the divisions, trusting that, although it is impossible to undo the sad events of the past, it is possible to reinterpret them as part of a reconciled history,” Pope Francis said June 25 as he welcomed the LWF delegation to the library of the Apostolic Palace.

Nigerian Archbishop Panti Filibus Musa, president of the LWF, told Pope Francis that 2021 “is marked by one of those difficult memories: the 500 years of the excommunication of Martin Luther. We cannot change history, but we can retell it in a way that it carries the promise of a better future, thus becoming our story of reconciliation.”

And, presenting Pope Francis with the chalice and a paten, he explained that the gifts were made by members of the ecumenical Community of Taizé in France and that the glaze used was made from the sand taken from the refugee camp in Zaatari, Jordan, the world’s largest camp for Syrian refugees.

“Sharing the Lord’s Supper together is also bearing the burdens of all those who have lost everything,” the archbishop told the pope. The solidarity shared at the altar “shapes who we are and ought to become: a people who, seeing the transfigured face of Christ, walk into the valley to see

Christ in the disfigured faces of the exploited, the hungry and the poor. In this journey, we become fully church, together. Let us act together now, deepening into visible solidarity our union in prayer.”

Pope Francis described the five centuries of Catholic-Lutheran division as a “journey from conflict to communion.”

Progress requires real motivation and passion, he said, in other words, a sense of crisis, “the crisis that helps us mature in what we are seeking. From the conflict we have lived for centuries and centuries to the communion we desire – for that, we put ourselves in crisis, a crisis which is a blessing from the Lord.”

The Lutherans’ meeting with the pope took place on the anniversary of the publication of the “Augsburg Confession,” which is now seen as a key summary of Lutheran faith. But it was presented in Augsburg, Germany, on June 25, 1530, as, Pope Francis said, “a document of intra-Catholic reconciliation” in the hopes of repairing the growing rupture among Christians in Western Europe.

“In its first article, the Augsburg Confession professes faith in the Triune God, expressly referring to the Council of Nicaea,” the pope noted. “The Nicene Creed is a binding expression of faith, not only for Catholics and Lutherans, but also for our Orthodox brothers and sisters and for many other Christian communities. It is a treasure we hold in common. Let us make every effort to ensure that the 1700th anniversary of that great council, to be celebrated in 2025, will give new impulse to the ecumenical journey, which is God’s gift and for us an irreversible commitment.”

The document also stresses the importance of baptism, which the pope called “the primordial divine gift at the basis of all our religious efforts and our commitment to the achievement of full unity.”

“Ecumenism is not an exercise of ecclesial diplomacy but a journey of grace,” he said. “It depends not on human negotiations and agreements, but on the grace of God, which purifies memories and hearts, overcomes attitudes of inflexibility and directs toward renewed communion: not toward reductive agreements or forms of irenic syncretism, but toward a reconciled unity amid differences.”

“In this light,” he said, “I would like to encourage all those engaged in the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue to persevere with confidence, in constant prayer, in the exercise of mutual charity and in passionate efforts to achieve greater unity between the different members of the body of Christ.”