

REFORMATION SUNDAY (Observed)

October 24/25, 2009

“This I Believe”

“This I Believe.” It almost sounds like the title of an essay, the kind assigned to members of a confirmation class. “Write a paragraph – or a page – on the topic: This I Believe.” If you were assigned such a topic, what would you write? Maybe you would look to one of the creeds of the Church – the Apostles’, the Nicene, or the Athanasian – for help. After all, that’s what the Church’s creeds are all about – essays on the topic, “What Do You Believe?”

If you didn’t want to use one of the creeds, how about drawing what you believe? Our children are used to that kind of assignment – draw something and then explain what it means.

Martin Luther lived at a time and place in history when devising a “Coat of Arms” was a common practice. Every family wanted to have one, not just the royalty or the nobility but the common folk as well; and coats of arms were developed for various occupations and businesses, as well as for communities, cities, states, and the like. They were like the company logos of today. A coat of arms said something about you – who you were or what you did.

That’s the way Luther thought about it when he devised a coat of arms for the Church. It would be a “sermon in symbols” as Luther once said, a graphic and visible way of bearing witness to the world, “This I Believe”. And he began with the cross. “The first thing expressed in my coat of arms,” he said, “is a cross, black, within the heart, to say to all that faith in Christ crucified saves us.” And so Luther began his coat of arms where his faith began and where our faith begins as well -- at the cross.

The location of the cross in Luther’s coat of arms is significant. It’s in the center of everything – like a bull’s eye on a target, the thing you are looking for, aiming at, concentrating on – a reflection of St. Paul’s confession when he said, “I am determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” But notice that the cross is not only in the center of the coat of arms in general, it’s in the center of the heart in particular. “For with the heart one believes, and so is justified,” the Bible says. So, keep an eye on the colors Luther chose for they, too, are a part of his confession. He said, “Now, although the cross is black, the color of death and an instrument of pain, yet it doesn’t change the color of the heart, does not destroy nature. It doesn’t kill, but makes alive. ‘For the just shall live by faith,’ by faith in the Savior. Christ died ... so that we might live.”

And so the heart is red and is fixed on the center of a white rose – a symbol of the Christian life that is made possible because of the cross of Christ and its effect on the

Christian's heart – the blossoming of faith into action. He said, "The white rose shows that faith brings joy, consolation, and peace." "Though your sins be as scarlet," the prophet has said, "they shall be white as snow. Though they be crimson, they shall be like wool." Like the triumphant saints in Revelation 7 who "have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and made them white" so now the rose is white as well.

Now the rose is fixed on a sky-colored background. Both of these things are important. The rose signifying the joy of faith in the Spirit and the sky beyond showing that such joy of faith is but a down payment on the heavenly joy that is to come. Thus, the color is blue – the color of hope. Luther said, "Though not yet revealed, our heavenly joy to come is anticipated and held by hope." Thus, the life which Christ gives to us, symbolized in the white rose, the life which is Christ's gift of grace seen in the cross and faith seen in the heart is able to be seen for the wonderful gift it is only when it's viewed against its true background, its ultimate goal, life in heaven forever.

And finally, the circle. A circle is one of the traditional symbols of eternity – a figure that has no beginning and no end. Bliss in heaven is endless, Luther said, and more precious than all earthly joys and treasures. And so the color gold, since, as Luther said, gold is the best and most precious metal, encircles it all.

And so Luther's coat of arms – which began with the cross of Christ – ends where the creeds end as well – with everlasting life. Luther's seal is indeed a sermon in symbols, a confession of faith, a teaching tool, something that we, who follow in Luther's footsteps, can look at and say as well, "Yes, this I believe", for this is our Christian faith.

In Jesus' name. Amen.