

Church of England Synod backs further reconciliation with Catholics

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Members of the Church of England’s General Synod, meeting in London this week, have backed a motion supporting further reconciliation between Catholic and reformed churches as Christians around the world commemorate the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation.

In a paper distributed to Synod members ahead of the debate on 13 February, Bishop Christopher Cocksworth, Chair of the Church of England’s Faith and Order Commission, noted that one legacy of the Reformation in England had been a “threefold division” between Anglicans, Roman Catholics and dissenting protestants.

“The Church of England, for all our fondness for boasting of tolerance, still bears a heavy burden in terms of the persecution of Christians whose response to the Reformation was at variance with the national church,” he wrote.

“It therefore has a particular responsibility for ensuring that the commemoration of the Reformation Anniversary this year can be an occasion of healing and for growth in unity between the churches in this country.”

In a joint statement earlier this year, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York spoke of the need to “repent of our part in perpetuating divisions”.

Martin Luther's protest against indulgences and other church practices, in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517, is regarded as the trigger for the period of upheaval across Europe from which Anglicanism emerged.

One crucial dividing line between churches for centuries were disagreements about salvation.

Recent dialogue between churches led to a joint declaration by the Catholic Church and World Lutheran Federation in 1999, setting out broad agreement on the doctrine of justification – or the forgiveness of sins.

The declaration, which was affirmed by the Anglican Communion last year, asserts that people are saved “by grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part”.

The Synod motion said it welcomed signs of convergence between the churches on the doctrine of salvation.

The motion also commends initiatives during the anniversary year to foster mutual understanding and reconciliation between churches, in order to better share the central message of Christianity around the world.

An amendment, moved by the Revd Angus MacLeay of Rochester, added that Synod gave thanks for the “rich spiritual blessings that the Reformation brought to the Church of England”.

The synod, which is the Church of England's governing body, is currently meeting to vote on new legislation and discuss issues affecting the Church over five-days in London.

PICTURE: Members of the Clergy listen to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, address the General Synod at Church House in London

Rose Gamble - The Tablet