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# THE WAY

of ST. FRANCIS

FIRST PERSON

## A COMMUNION OF CHURCHES

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For ten years now I have been blessed by a unique ecumenical parish experience. Along with a Lutheran pastor, I serve a congregation of Lutherans and Catholics. Called "Mission of the Atonement," it was established jointly by the Catholic Archdiocese and the Lutheran Synod of Oregon. It is a mission of St. Anthony Parish in nearby Tigard, OR, which until recently was a Franciscan parish.

This exciting union came about through the initiative of the Lutheran pastor at the (then-called) Atonement Lutheran Church, a congregation with limited potential for growth as it was bordered by two other sizeable Lutheran churches. The pastor and the congregation agreed to approach the Catholic Church to see if they might have interest in sharing the building space, and in that way be able to meet their own expenses.

The Archdiocesan Office of Ecumenism received the pastor's request with enthusiasm, and the process moved swiftly. On a particular Sunday, the bishop spoke at all the Masses at St. Anthony's and then met with interested parishioners, inviting them to accept this ecumenical mission. Those who met with him described the meeting as an "Acts of the Apostles experience."

Lay people from Atonement and from St. Anthony's took a great leadership role in the creation of this new community. As a result of a shared retreat, they went to



*At Mission of the Atonement, l to r: Matt Tumulty, OFM; Mary and Bruce Swanson, holding newly-baptized twins Diana and Caroline; Lutheran pastor Laurie Larson Coesar; in front, Connie Swanson.*

their respective bishops and requested not just the use of the same building, but to be a *joint community*: an ecumenical community of Lutherans and Catholics. The bishops granted their request. The name was changed to Mission of the Atonement.

While there are a number of places in the country where Lutheran and Catholic congregations share the same building space, this is the only place in the country where Lutherans and Catholics form one congregation. (There is only one other place in the country where something similar is occurring: in Virginia Beach, VA,

there is a congregation of Episcopalians and Roman Catholics.) A strong lay leadership component continues at the Mission today.

Each Sunday we gather as one community in the church, where we have the Liturgy of the Word together, including the homily and the Prayers of the Faithful. After the collection, with an exchange of peace and a sung blessing, we separate for Eucharist. We alternate using the adjoining hall or the chapel for our separate Eucharist services.

Mission of the Atonement provides a grassroots ecumenical experience. We are not theologians meeting for dialogue. Rather, we are people — Christian people — meeting to celebrate the faith in Jesus we have in common, yet respecting the differences that still separate our two Churches.

If you were to visit a Lutheran church and attend their service you would be amazed at its similarity to the Catholic Mass. It is important to realize that we had 1,500 years of common history before our split. In the past 30 years a new climate has developed in our ecumenical relationship. Since 1965 Lutheran and Catholic theologians have been engaged in systematic dialogue, both nationally and internationally. As a result, a growing consensus has been building steadily. Both churches are planning joint statements that would remove mutual condemnations.

A document called "Baptism, Eucharist and Priesthood," which both Catholics and Lutherans had part in writing, shows substantial agreement regarding those three basic elements of our faith and practice. It is important to keep that in mind when we note the differences that exist between us. One difference is in the number of sacraments: Lutherans hold to only two, Baptism and Eucharist (yet they have rituals similar to

ours for Confirmation and Marriage). They do not reserve the Blessed Sacrament as we do. Their understanding of apostolic succession is different from ours. They believe it is based in the teaching of the Apostles, not in the tracing back of the lineage of apostolic authority of bishops in an unbroken line to the Apostles. And they have a different understanding of the successor of Peter's role than we do.

The concern of critics that this close contact would result in a blurring of our distinct traditions has not borne out. On the contrary: not only has it brought a deepening respect for each other's tradition, but at the same time, Lutherans have become more knowledgeable about their own tradition, and Catholics more knowledgeable about ours.

The blessings of this grassroots ecumenical experience have been manifold, but one is particularly noteworthy, for it lies at the heart of our mission: it is the cherished opportunity it offers to ecumenical couples. Previously their Sunday worship experience would take them apart. One partner would go to a Lutheran church, the other to a Catholic church. Now they have what they have longed for — a church life together. It is a gift they treasure.

The Second Vatican Council, when it acknowledged that other Christian denominations are genuine churches within which the Spirit is present, opened up to us and the world a new vision of ecumenism. Now unity is not seen as uniformity, nor is uniformity desirable. Rather, what is sought is a communion where each honors the other. So each Sunday, as one community, we at Mission of the Atonement are together in prayer. Our prayer is not for a merger of our two traditions, but for a communion of our churches. Please join us in that prayer.