The picture on the cover says so much of how things used to be between the Micks and the Proddies! They are in separate groups, speaking without listening, finger pointing in disdain and hostility, harbouring negative judgements about the other, doubting their sincerity, truthfulness, steadfastness and discipleship of Jesus. It all happened so quickly, five hundred years ago, the Reformation. Imagine a good Catholic today not being offended at a Bishop or representative of the Pope offering to sell him or her an indulgence, a seat in Heaven, if you paid him some money. So why are we surprised that the Augustinian Monk, Martin Luther, took offence at this practice, and nailed his ninety-five objections to his church door in Wittenberg in 1517. The Church at that time dominated every aspect of civil life, and it is sad to say that so many of its leaders were worldly and corrupt, and of the clergy, so many were ill-educated not able even to understand the Latin they were reading in the Mass and the prayers. In the Catholic Church there were grave concerns about the corruption, and reports were commissioned by the Pope and sent to him, one of which described the Church as “tottering, almost collapsed”. There was ignorance amongst the laity also, no real knowledge of Scripture, so many superstitions and religious myths were around. There was, for example, a traffic in relics, mostly quite spurious, provided by grave robbers.

Martin Luther translated the Scriptures into the local language, and the new invention of the printing press meant that people for the first time were able to read the Gospels for themselves. There didn’t seem to be any mention of priests or monks, or Bishops or Popes in the Gospels, so where do they come from? Strange arguments took place. For example, the Protestants said that the laity should partake of the Chalice at the Eucharist, and the Catholics vehemently opposed that, which seems remarkable when you look at how the Chalice is encouraged in our churches today.

Christianity was ripped apart in that century between 1517 and 1648, from the nailing to the door of the theses to the end of the Wars of Religion. People slaughtered or murdered each other in the name of religion. At the same time, great reform movements began in the Catholic Church, and there was a rich crop of canonised Saints springing up in the Church, revealing that the Church was still a community of holiness – Francis de Sales, Charles Borromeo, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, Francis Xavier, Philip Neri, Margaret Mary, just to name a few. New Religious Orders began such as the Reformed Carmelites, the Redemptorists, the Jesuits, the Capuchins.

We became the inheritors of by-gone prejudices. Remember that we were not able to go to non-Catholic funerals, or non-Catholic weddings. One could not be a bridesmaid at a non-Catholic wedding! We could not go into their churches and pray together. They thought that we were idolaters, that we worshipped statues, and thought Mary was divine. They thought the Pope was an evil influence.

Thank God times have changed. Following Vatican II, the first signs were the ecumenical Lenten discussion groups in the parishes. How popular they were, Christians of different faiths coming together, and learning from each other. That has continued. Ecumenism is not a matter of one
Church succumbing to another. It is a question of doing together whatever we can, and that does happen throughout the diocese. We gather ecumenically for Christmas services, for the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday, for Prayer Groups. The ministers from our different churches meet and pray together. We do many things to create fellowship together. A marvellous realisation has occurred, that it is the person of Jesus who unites us. Gone is hate, what is present now is a desire on the part of all Churches to preach Christ, and to be signs of His love in the world.

This year we are commemorating the commencement of the Reformation at our Diocesan Assembly. Members of different other congregations are going to join us on the Tuesday 4th April and we will hear from each other, and pray together. We will hopefully have about sixty of our non-Catholic brethren present at the Assembly, and the tables will be arranged so that we do mix together. May it be a graced event, a proper way of commemorating the Reformation, ashamed of the hatred that was produced, and praying now for that unity together of common followers of Christ Jesus.

Bishop Greg O’Kelly SJ