

From Conflict to Communion – Baptism and Growth in Communion

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After having finished the study on “The Apostolicity of the Church” in 2006, the International Lutheran/Roman Catholic Commission on Unity has got two tasks for its new round of dialog beginning in 2009: first to prepare an analysis of and offer a proposal for how to commemorate 500 years of the Reformation in 2017 ecumenically, and secondly to explore the potential for ecclesial communion of the fact that Catholics and Lutherans mutually recognize each other’s baptisms and that they perceive them as incorporation into the one Body of Christ (“Baptism and Growth in Communion”). Obviously, both tasks are connected. The outcome of the Commission’s work with the first task is the report "From Conflict to Communion" (Leipzig 2013). In the meantime, this document has been translated in more than ten languages. It is the basis for the ecumenical service in Lund on October 31, 2016 that is jointly led by Pope Francis and LWF-President Bishop Younan and LWF-General Secretary Martin Junge together with Archbishop Jackelén and Bishop Arborelius from Sweden.

Concerning the first task: The Commission first identified the main aspects of the new situation in which the commemoration of the Reformation in 2017 will take place compared with all previous centenaries. (a) It will no longer take place in a mainly German or Western context, but in the context of the globalization of Christianity and the Christian churches, (b) amidst a long lasting process of secularization in Western countries in which often the majority of the population no longer belongs to Christian churches, (c) within a multi-religious context in many countries, (d) in a situation that during the last hundred years around the world new churches and communions have emerged (Pentecostal, charismatic, and independent churches) and, above all, (e) in an ecumenical context, concretely: after 50 years of Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue. All previous centenaries provided opportunities for serious polemics between the churches: Lutherans accused the Catholics of ruining or darkening the gospel and putting the authority of the pope over the authority of the Holy Scriptures, Catholics accused Lutherans of splitting the church, leaving the true doctrine and running into eternal damnation. Chapter one of “From Conflict to Communion” offers a short description of this situation.

Since "From Conflict to Communion" focuses on the ecumenical aspect of the commemoration, the second chapter explains what has changed in this respect in the last hundred years so that one can envisage an ecumenical commemoration of the Reformation. On the Catholic side, the Second Vatican Council is the basis for a new relationship between the Roman Catholic church and the Lutheran churches acknowledging "elements of sanctification and truth" also outside the Catholic church, elements through which the life of the church is built up. The Council even goes so far to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit uses the "divided churches and communities" as "means of salvation". The Council's judgments were prepared by the long lasting biblical, liturgical, and patristic movements within Catholic theology. In addition, Catholic theological-historic research corrected the mainstream Catholic image of Luther that was under the ban of the description of Luther's fierce opponent John Cochläus for four hundred years. Cochläus had called Luther an apostatized monk, a destroyer of Christendom, a corrupter of morals, and an arch-heretic. In the course of the last century, Luther's spiritual and theological concerns were recognized, and Catholics realized that he wished to reform the church and not to divide it. Pope Benedict XVI for example called Luther's question "How do I find a gracious God?" "the driving force of his whole life [that] never ceases to make an impression on me" (§30). For dialogue and rapprochement, it was necessary that Catholics and Lutherans learnt to distinguish between the contents of the respective doctrines and their expression in language, thought forms and concerns. On the other hand, Lutherans recognized that quite a number of their judgments about the Catholic church have turned out to prejudices, and they withdrew some of them explicitly, above all Luther's characterization of the pope as Antichrist.

Nevertheless, despite of these changes the basic problem for the Commission remained: Catholics spontaneously associate the word "Reformation" with the division of the church while Protestants regard it as denoting the rediscovery of the gospel, freedom of a Christian, assurance of faith and salvation. How is it possible to achieve a common commemoration if the starting points for it are so different? "From Conflict to Communion" is based on the insight that the word "Reformation" points to a highly complex phenomenon so that the word can have different meanings. These meanings are not simply true or false, rather they are more or less meaningful regarding the respective contexts and purposes of a certain discourse. "Reformation" can refer to a sequence of events in the 16th century that range from the spreading of Luther's 95 Theses on Indulgences in 1517 to the Peace Treaty of Augsburg in 1555 or to the Council of Trent (1545-63). Here, "Reformation" means a chain of events in history. We can call this "Reformation 1." However, secondly, "Reformation" can also mean

the whole of Luther's theological and spiritual insights into the gospel, as well as the congregations, and finally the churches in which these insights have come to fruition (= "Reformation 2"). Reformation as "Reformation 1" does not solely belong to the Protestants; the reformers and their followers were by no means the sole subjects of this history, as is the case with Reformation 2. Next to Luther and his theological colleagues, like Philip Melanchthon, subjects of Reformation 2 were also the popes, bishops and cardinals like Cajetan or Albrecht of Mainz, Luther's electoral princes, the Emperor, the French king, even the Ottomans and many others. It is important to make this clear since it is in this history that the Western church was split. Because there were many actors in this story, its outcome cannot be unilaterally attributed to Luther and the other reformers. But this impression is created if one makes the following argument that you can hear quite often:

- (1) "Luther was the initiator of the Reformation." (Reformation 2)
- (2) "Reformation led to the schism of the Western church." (Reformation 1)
- (3) Conclusion: "Luther initiated the division of the Western church."

This is a classical fallacy of equivocation. The word "Reformation" has different meanings in sentences 1 and 2 ("Reformation 2", "Reformation 1"); thus the conclusion is erroneous. If a common commemoration of the "Reformation" is to be successful, it depends on whether and how different meanings of the word "Reformation" are distinguished.

In chapter 3, "From Conflict to Communion" addresses Reformation 1 and gives a sketch of the sequence of events that led to the split of the Western church. It focuses on pivotal points in this history raising the question whether Luther was actually heard by the Roman authorities, and whether the opponents understood each other correctly. One cannot affirm this question. Further, the chapter describes different attempts to overcome the conflict, either by dialogue and consensus (Augsburg Confession) or by military forces (Smalcald War). Both attempts failed. Finally, in 1555 there was the Peace Treaty of Augsburg dividing Germany in Lutheran and Catholic territories, and the Council of Trent that intended a Catholic reform and rejected the Protestant Reformation, even though in retrospect one can identify some of its aspects that converge with Reformation positions.

In chapter 4, the document offers a presentation of four main aspects of Luther's theology (doctrine of justification, Lord's Supper, ministry, scripture and tradition) but it does so against the background of the ecumenical dialogues that have carefully studied both Luther's position and the Catholic responses to it. Thus the document gives both a short summary of Luther's theology and also of the ecumenical dialogues between Lutherans and Catholics. They have shown how far Catholics agree with Lutheran teachings and how much both have

in common. In the presentation of the fruits of the ecumenical work, the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, signed by the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation in 1999 in Augsburg, plays a basic role. It is an official document expressing a so-called differentiating consensus allowing for differences in the expression of the respective doctrine while affirming the consensus in its content.

Chapters 3 and 4 follow the distinction between Reformation 1 and 2. Referring to Reformation 2 against the background of the ecumenical dialogues allows for affirming how much Lutherans and Catholics have in common in their faith, and Catholics are invited and able to join the Lutherans in rejoicing about the theological insights they have received from the Lutheran reformers. The groundwork of chapter 4 makes it possible that Catholics are able to celebrate Reformation (Reformation 2) together with Lutherans. Chapter 3 refers to the other aspect of the complex reality called “Reformation” that led to the division of the Western church (Reformation 1). This aspect will be commemorated by both, Lutherans and Catholics, with regret, mourning, and the recognition of guilt. In remembering the Reformation, they will have to acknowledge the guilt that both parties have incurred in the 16th century and afterwards by misunderstanding each other and violating the eighth commandment not to speak false witness about their neighbor, by caricaturing, ridiculing, and demonizing their opponents, by putting their enforcement of one’s own position far ahead of the preservation of the unity, by exploiting temporal for spiritual and spiritual for temporal, finally by entering into religious wars that created immeasurable destruction and sufferings for millions in Europe. This twofold way of commemorating is addressed in chapter five. That Lutherans and Catholics are able to commemorate the Reformation together and that they should do so results from the fact that through baptism and faith in Christ they belong to the Body of Christ. Thus it is true for them what the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:26: “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” The document "From Conflict to Communion" concludes: “In remembering with each other the beginning of the Reformation, they are taking their baptism seriously.” (§221)

For the relationship of Catholics and Lutherans, the Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic church it is of great importance that they commemorate the Reformation together. “What happened in the past cannot be changed, but what is remembered of the past and how it is remembered can, with the passage of time, indeed change. Remembrance makes the past present. While the past itself is unalterable, the presence of the past in the present is alterable. In view of 2017, the point is not to tell a different story, but to tell that story differently.” (§16) What happens in history, does not happen by necessity; it could have happened

differently. Ecumenism offers, so to speak, a second chance to realize possibilities unrealized in history. It is the attempt not to continue the conflicts of the past in the present or the future by taking up possibilities not used in the past. Commemorating the Reformation together is the challenge to overcome divisions that could not be overcome in previous centuries.

"From Conflict to Communion" keenly states: "The awareness is dawning on Lutherans and Catholics that the struggle of the sixteenth century is over. The reasons for mutually condemning each other's faith have fallen by the wayside." (§238)

This calls for continuing the way from conflict to communion since Lutherans and Catholics have not yet reached the goal of full communion. The document offers five imperatives by which they commit themselves to keep on the way to communion. The first imperative asks them as well as their churches to choose and affirm the option of unity. "Catholics and Lutherans should always begin from the perspective of unity and not from the point of view of division in order to strengthen what is held in common even though the differences are more easily seen and experienced." (§239) To think from the perspective of unity, to realize the option of unity, means that the other church is not primarily perceived as other, but as part of the *one* Body of Christ. Hence, it is about taking seriously the catholicity of the church, as it is known in the *Credo*. The relationships to other churches are then not external relationships but internal relationships in the one Body of Christ. To believe the catholicity of the one Body of Christ in such a way that it finds its expression in the life of the individual churches requires an ever new conversion, a conversion of the heart and of the mind. Thus the second imperative states: "Lutherans and Catholics must let themselves continuously be transformed by the encounter with the other and by the mutual witness of faith." (§240) It is not enough only to live side by side and simply to tolerate or welcome diversity. The goal is "unity in reconcile diversity," but in order to reconcile differences we are in need of being transformed. The goal of ecumenism is often called "the visible unity of the church," but it is not yet clear how this looks like. We are on the way to this goal, but only on this way we will be able to identify clearer what this goal is. Thus the third imperative challenges: "Catholics and Lutherans should again commit themselves to seek visible unity, to elaborate together what this means in concrete steps, and to strive repeatedly toward this goal." (§241) Christians in the Reformation were deeply moved by the gospel and the understanding that Luther offered to them. Today, Christians in many countries do not experience the gospel in the same way as a moving force, and this is true for both churches. Thus the fourth imperative calls for a new reformation: "Lutherans and Catholics should jointly rediscover the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ for our times." (§242) The power of the gospel liberates us and

commits us to the service of neighbors and foreigners. The church has a calling for the whole world, it does not exist for its own sake but for the sake of the world that the world believes. This is taken up in the fifth imperative: “Catholics and Lutherans should witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world.” (§243) As Jesus in the High Priest Prayer in John 17 asks His Father for the unity of His followers, it becomes clear that this unity is of the utmost importance: it is founded in the unity between the Father and the Son, and its goal is “that the world believes.” Thus ecumenism as striving for the unity of the church and also commemorating the Reformation ecumenically is not optional, it is a “Must” for the churches.

Having this in mind, it is most welcome and worth of the books of history that Lutherans and Catholics do not only commemorate the Reformation together in Lund on October 31, 2016, but that Pope Francis joins them and leads this service together with the leaders of the Lutheran World Federation. This service is based on the groundwork of "From Conflict to Communion". It has three parts: first, thanksgiving for what Christianity received in the Reformation (Reformation 2), penitence for contributing to the division of the church (Reformation 1), and commitment to continue on the way from conflict to communion between Catholics and Lutherans. The presence of Pope Francis is in itself a high acknowledgment of the Reformation (Reformation 2) and of 50 years of Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue, and it is a strong encouragement to strive further for Christian unity. This historic service cannot be estimated highly enough.

Concerning the other task of the Commission on Unity: "From Conflict to Communion" and the ecumenical service in Lund presuppose the common baptism and draw consequences from it. What is done here in a concrete case, is to be explored in a comprehensive way by the Commission: the potential and the challenge that baptism poses for striving for Christian unity. The concepts of unity and communion have to be analyzed, it has to be clarified what “growth in communion” can mean and how it can happen – either by participating in more common elements or in a deeper participation in the same elements. These investigations are not a goal in themselves, they are meant to help Lutherans and Catholics to make the already existing communion visible and to deepen and broaden their communion in the direction of a full and visible communion.