Laudatio for Professor Theodor Dieter

Delivered in Leuven on 15 February 2017
by Professor Peter De Mey, Professor Violet Soen, and Professor Andrea Robiglio

Honourable Rector,
Your Excellencies,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Students,

2017 is an important anniversary in European history. On 31 October 1517 the Augustinian friar Martin Luther expressed his doubts about the practice of indulgences in the Catholic Church and the theology supporting it. He did so in the form of 95 theses that he sent to the Archbishop of Mainz. This event is considered to be the starting point of the Reformation, a movement that would result in an unprecedented rupture for Church, culture, and politics. When a print with Luther’s theses reached Leuven one year later, my predecessors in the Faculty of Theology considered several of these theses to be erroneous. Their theological examination laid the basis of a formal condemnation of the rejected theses by the universities of Köln and Leuven in 1519.

Professor Theodor Dieter, whom we are honouring today, is the main architect of all important ecumenical documents that came out of the international ecumenical dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation in the last two decades. The most recent publication, From Conflict to Communion, encourages both churches to commemorate the Reformation together. The document also presents an ecumenical view of Luther based on new insights in the field of Reformation history. Luther’s theses are now understood to have been formulated as an invitation for academic debate. The decision – only taken in 1535 – for Lutherans to organize their own ordinations was the result of a difficult dilemma: “maintaining the traditional way of ordaining priests by bishops, thereby giving up Reformation preaching, or keeping Reformation preaching, but ordaining pastors by other pastors” (§ 67). Today, Catholics and Lutherans are able to declare together: “Luther had no intention of establishing a new church, but was part of a broad and many-faceted desire for reform” (§ 59). Under the guidance of Professor Dieter the international dialogue commission also developed a liturgical order for a joint prayer service focusing on thanksgiving, repentance, common witness, and commitment that was used at the ecumenical celebration in the cathedral of Lund during Pope Francis’s visit on Reformation Day 2016.
Ecumenical progress can only be made on the basis of profound knowledge of one’s own history and tradition, and the broader historical context of both. Our university wishes to recognize Professor Dieter’s highly acclaimed contribution to the field of Luther research and Reformation history. Professor Dieter has always defended a very nuanced view on the reception of Aristotle’s philosophy by the early Luther. On the basis of his excellent knowledge of the work of medieval scholastic thinkers such as Lombardus, Aquinas, Ockham, and Biel, Professor Dieter was able to distinguish statements in which Luther follows the scholastic reception of Aristotle from the ones that are the result of Luther’s own interpretation. Professor Dieter refused to continue the Lutheran tendency to always look for contrasts between Luther’s theology and medieval scholasticism. Instead, he insists on points of commonality, such as the similar anthropiology or understanding of the human person.

Polemics not only characterized the start of the Reformation: sometimes they are still part of the difficult search for ecumenical consensus today. The Catholic-Lutheran ecumenical dialogue is still the only dialogue between Rome and the Reformation to have resulted in a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, which is binding for the participating churches. This milestone could only be reached because the then still relatively new director of the Strasbourg Institute for Ecumenical Research managed to counter the fierce critique by a host of German Lutheran professors who were convinced that the Lutherans had sold their soul to the Catholics. Since 1999 Theo Dieter continues taking the lead in the dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans, applying the method of the differentiating consensus to other themes as well, such as the question whether and how to organize authority structures in the Church at supra-local level. The most important result of this dialogue to date is a study document on The Apostolicity of the Church that proposes that Lutherans and Catholics can recognize genuine apostolicity in each other’s churches, even if important differences in the articulation of new doctrines continue to exist.

By honouring Professor Dieter, we are also honouring his Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg. This Institute has always taken the lead in proposing new methods for ecumenical hermeneutics, developing new models of unity, and formulating pressing questions to ecumenists. Do ecumenical dialogues, for instance, have to limit themselves to the controversies of the past, or can they reveal the consensus of both churches on contemporary issues as well? You have been a great director of this institute, Professor Dieter, through your research on Luther and Reformation history, your passionate defence of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, and your patient search for new points of consensus in the dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans.

Om al deze redenen, Mijnheer de Rector, verzoek ik u, op voordracht van de Academische Raad, het eredoctoraat van de KU Leuven te verlenen aan professor Theodor Dieter.
Professor Theodor Dieter

KU Leuven is honouring you:

For your meticulous research into Luther’s early philosophy, which revealed a stronger affinity with medieval scholasticism in terms of openness to Aristotelian concepts

For your contribution to the development of a different view on Luther, which puts his condemnation into a more nuanced perspective – including the one by our university in 1519

For your ceaseless efforts to defend the most important joint declaration by Lutherans and Catholics on the doctrine of justification, despite the ongoing polemics

For your key role in the international ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans, as the main driving force behind all consensus documents of the past twenty years

For these reasons, in my capacity as Rector of KU Leuven, and on the recommendation of the Academic Council, I hereby bestow upon you the degree of Doctor Honoris Causa of this university.