

Words of Thanks by Theodor Dieter

Dear Eminences, Excellencies, Ms. Ambassador, President Pater Lombardi, very honored ladies and gentlemen! For the great distinction of receiving the Ratzinger Prize, I thank you from my heart: thanks to the Selection Committee of the Foundation under the direction of Pater Lombardi; the prize's namesake Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Emeritus Benedict, with whom we prize recipients had a moving encounter yesterday; Pope Francis, who bestowed upon us the prize with warm, affirmative words; and Cardinal Koch for his introductions of the prize recipients.

I accept this honor also on behalf of my colleagues at the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg and in the international Lutheran-Catholic dialogue. The honor is an ecumenical exclamation mark in the year of commemoration of the Reformation, which began five hundred years ago.

Please permit to say a few personal words. Ecumenical engagement was not something that I grew up with. During my studies I was taught that Protestant and Catholic teaching must be distinguished as sharply as possible: the image that came to mind was one of a scalpel, which cuts not only with precision but as deeply as possible. Or we were instructed to elaborate as strongly as possible on the breaking of the Catholic system by the Reformation. Theological work was seen to be successful only if the differences were seen as radical as possible, going right down to the root.

Three factors in particular allowed me to break with this conception of theology. First was the study of the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. Since Aristotle is the philosopher from whom I think I have learned the most, Thomistic theology appeared to me to be extraordinarily enlightening, such that I could not simply dismiss its truth claims, even if it stood in a certain tension with Martin Luther, by whose theology I already was and continue to be convinced. These truth claims appearing to stand in tension with one another forced the question of whether the relationship between the two theologians had really been correctly assessed—and accordingly, whether the relationship between Catholics and Protestants had been correctly assessed.

The second factor was my encounters with Catholics, in whose faith I recognized the very same thing that carried and moved my life, namely unconditional trust in Jesus Christ. Such surprising and heartening experiences of communion in faith did not solve all theological problems for me, but they were experiences that I could not turn back from, and so they motivated me to seek no longer primarily that which divides, but that which binds.

The third factor was finally the biblical insight that Christ founded the church as *one* church, and that this church's nature is much more visible than invisible—as was already my conviction in the case of Lutheran doctrine. At its center stood the living Word of God in preaching and in the sacraments, and in the office of ministry that served these things. In the living Word, which is spoken in the church, Christ is present.

As a result, the necessity of pursuing ecumenical engagement developed for me. It took seriously the tensions that arose from differing truth claims in church teaching, but it also inquired into the assorted thought-forms, conceptualities, and perspectives that appeared in these theologies in order to test whether the traditional oppositions actually existed, or whether it would be possible to identify and express common convictions. Such a project was the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification which was signed in 1999 in Augsburg

by the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation. Joseph Ratzinger, then serving as Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, played an essential part in bringing the Joint Declaration to its intended goal, despite all the difficulties that lay along its path. I am especially happy that, in my receiving this Ratzinger Prize, the name of this great theologian and pope is once again connected to the Joint Declaration. For me, it is a confirmation that the way that we went then is now, twenty years later, still seen as meaningful and helpful by the highest Catholic authorities. And it is an encouragement to pursue courageously and patiently the as yet unresolved and still divisive themes on the way from conflict to communion, indeed to visible communion.

And let me say once again: thank you from the bottom of my heart!