

FROM CONFLICT TO COMMUNION

Key Extracts from the

Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017

Foreword

Martin Luther's struggle with God drove and defined his whole life. The question, How can I find a gracious God? plagued him constantly. He found the gracious God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. **"True theology and the knowledge of God are in the crucified Christ."**

In 2017, Catholic and Lutheran Christians will most fittingly look back on events that occurred 500 years earlier by putting the gospel of Jesus Christ at the center.

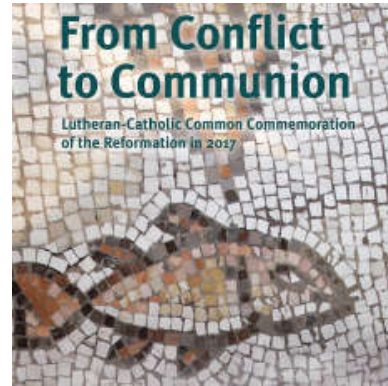
Both as individuals and as a community of believers, we all constantly require repentance and reform—encouraged and led by the Holy Spirit. "When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'Repent,' He called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Thus reads the opening statement of Luther's 95 Theses from 1517, which triggered the Reformation movement.

The true unity of the church can only exist as unity in the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The fact that **the struggle for this truth in the 16th century led to the loss of unity in Western Christendom belongs to the dark pages of church history.** In 2017, we must confess openly that we have been guilty before Christ of damaging the unity of the church. This commemorative year presents us with two challenges: the purification and healing of memories, and the restoration of Christian unity in accordance with the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Eph 4:4-6)

We invite all Christians to study the report of our Commission both openly and critically, and to come to a deeper communion of all Christians.

Karlheinz Diez, Auxiliary Bishop of Fulda
Catholic co-chair

Eero Huovinen Bishop Emeritus of Helsinki
Lutheran co-chair



1. Introduction

More Unites than Divides

Lutherans & Catholics today enjoy a growth in mutual understanding, cooperation, and respect. They have come to acknowledge that more unites than divides them: above all, **common faith** in the Triune God and the revelation in Jesus Christ, as well as recognition of the **basic truths of the doctrine of justification.** (1) Both the Catholic Church and the World Lutheran Federation agree on this key issue of the Reformation: **"Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works"**

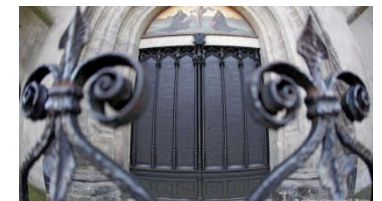
Old Confessional Controversies Now seem Obsolete

For more than a hundred years, **Pentecostal and other charismatic movements** have become very widespread across the globe. These powerful movements have put forward new emphases that have made **many of the old confessional controversies seem obsolete.** The Pentecostal movement is present in many other churches in the form of the charismatic movement, creating new ... communities across confessional boundaries. Thus, this movement opens up new ecumenical opportunities while, at the same time, creating additional challenges that will play a significant role in the observance of the Reformation in 2017. (14)

2. New Perspectives on Martin Luther & Reformation

More Balanced Evaluation of Luther

Detailed historical research has demonstrated that Catholic literature on Luther had been significantly shaped by Johannes Cochaleus, a contemporary opponent of Luther. Cochaleus had characterized Luther as a destroyer of Christendom, a corrupter of morals and a heretic. The achievement of this research was the freeing of Catholic research from the **one-sided approach of such polemical works on Luther.** Sober historical analyses by other Catholic theologians showed that it was not the core concerns of the Reformation, which led to the division of the church but, rather, **Luther's criticisms of the condition of the church** that sprang from these concerns.(22)



The **Castle Church in Wittenberg** is seen as the home of the reformation. This is where Martin Luther is said to have nailed his 95 theses to the door in 1517.

Consensus on the Basic Truths of Justification

The [Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification](#), signed by both the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church in **1999**, built on this groundwork as well as on the work of the US dialogue *Justification by Faith*, and **affirmed a consensus in the basic truths of the doctrine of justification** between Lutherans and Catholics. (25)

Reforms of Second Vatican Council

The [Second Vatican Council](#)...dealt with such themes as esteem and **reverence for the Holy Scripture** in the life of the church, the rediscovery of the **common priesthood** of all the baptized, the need for **continual purification and reform** of the church, the understanding of church office as service, and the importance of the freedom and responsibility of human beings, including the **recognition of religious freedom**. (26)

Luther's intention to Reform not Divide the Church

Implicit rapprochement with Luther's concerns has led to a new evaluation of his catholicity, which took place in the context of recognizing that **his intention was to reform, not to divide, the church**. This led to a new ecumenical understanding of Luther as a "witness to the gospel." (29).



3. Historical Sketch of the Lutheran Reformation and the Catholic Response

Reformation flashpoint: Controversy over Indulgences

On Oct 31, 1517, Luther sent his "**Ninety-five Theses**," titled, "Disputation on the Efficacy and Power of Indulgences," as an appendix to a letter to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz. In this letter, Luther expressed serious concerns about preaching and the practice of indulgences occurring under the responsibility of the Archbishop and **urged him to make changes**. On the same day, he wrote to his Diocesan Bishop Hieronymus of Brandenburg. When Luther sent his theses to a few colleagues and most likely posted them on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, **he wished to inaugurate an academic disputation** on open and unresolved questions regarding the theory and practice of indulgences. (40)

Tragedy of Misunderstanding

Before his encounter with Luther, Cardinal Cajetan had studied the Wittenberg professor's writings very carefully and had even written treatises on them. But Cajetan interpreted Luther within his own conceptual framework and thus **misunderstood him on the assurance of faith**, while correctly representing the details of his position. ...It is a tragedy that **two of the most outstanding theologians** of the 16th century encountered one another in a trial of heresy. (48)

The condemnation of Martin Luther

Meanwhile, in Rome, the process against Luther continued and, eventually, Pope Leo X decided to act. To fulfil his "pastoral office," Pope Leo X felt obliged to protect the "orthodox faith" from those who "twist and adulterate the Scriptures" so that they are "no longer the Gospel of Christ." **Thus the Pope issued the bull *Exsurge Domine*** (15th June 1520), **which condemned forty-one propositions drawn from various publications by Luther**. Although they can all be found in Luther's writings and are quoted correctly, they are taken out of their respective contexts. *Exsurge Domine* describes these propositions as "**heretical or scandalous, or false**... or subversive to catholic truth," without specifying which qualification applies to which proposition. (50).

Luther's Response – Bound by Scripture and Conscience

Luther responded to this invitation to recant with the famous words: "Unless I am **convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures** or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by Scripture, and my conscience is captive to the Words of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen" (55)

4. Basic Themes of Martin Luther's Theology in light of the Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogues

Influence of Monastic Tradition on Luther

While Luther had a critical attitude toward scholastic theologians, as an Augustinian hermit for 20 years, he lived, thought, and did theology in the tradition of monastic theology. One of the most influential monastic theologians was **Bernard of Clairvaux**, whom Luther highly appreciated. Luther's way of interpreting Scripture as the **place of encounter between God and human beings** shows clear parallels with Bernard's interpretation of Scripture. (99)



Real presence of Christ

The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) used the verb *transubstantiare*, which implies a distinction between substance and accidents. Although this was for Luther a possible explanation of what happens in the Lord's Supper, **he could not see how this philosophical explanation could be binding for all Christians**. In any case, Luther strongly emphasized the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. (142).



Eucharistic sacrifice

Luther's main objection to Catholic eucharistic doctrine was directed against an **understanding of the Mass as a sacrifice**. The theology of the Eucharist as real remembrance, in which **the unique and once-for-all sufficient sacrifice** of Christ (Heb 9:1–10:18) **makes itself present for the participation of the faithful**, was no longer fully understood in late medieval times. Thus, many took the celebration of the Mass to be another sacrifice in addition to the one sacrifice of Christ.

According to a theory stemming from Duns Scotus, the multiplication of Masses was thought to effect a multiplication of grace and to apply this grace to individual persons. That is why at Luther's time, for example, thousands of private masses were said every year at the castle church of Wittenberg. (146)

Nevertheless, Luther could see a sacrificial element in the Mass, **the sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise**. It is indeed a sacrifice in that by giving thanks a person acknowledges that he or she is in need of the gift. (148)

Eucharist not only Commemorative or Figurative

The question of the reality of the **presence of Jesus Christ in the Lord's Supper** is **not a matter of controversy** between Catholics and Lutherans. The Lutheran–Catholic dialogue on the Eucharist stated: “The Lutheran tradition affirms... that the consecrated elements do not simply remain bread and wine but rather by the power of the creative word are given as the body and blood of Christ” (*Eucharist* 51). Both Catholics and Lutherans “have in common... a rejection of an understanding of the sacrament as only commemorative or figurative” (153)

Common understanding of the real presence of Christ

Lutherans and Catholics can together affirm the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Lord's

Supper: “In the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper Jesus Christ true God and true man, is present wholly and entirely, in his Body and Blood, under the signs of bread and wine” (*Eucharist* 16). This **common statement affirms all the essential elements of faith in the eucharistic presence of Jesus Christ** without adopting the conceptual terminology of transubstantiation. (154)



Priesthood of the Baptized

Catholics and Lutherans are agreed that all the baptized who believe in Christ share in the priesthood of Christ and are commissioned to ‘proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light’ (1 Pet 2:9). Hence no member lacks a part to play in the mission of the whole body (177).

Ministry of Word & Sacrament

For both Catholics and Lutherans “the fundamental duty of ordained ministry is public service of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which the Triune God has commissioned the church to proclaim to all the world. Every office-holder must be measured against this obligation (179).

Scripture & Tradition

Regarding Scripture and Tradition, Lutherans and Catholics are in such extensive agreement that their different emphases do not of themselves require maintaining the present division of the churches. In this area, there is unity in reconciled diversity (210)

Towards Consensus

Catholics and Lutherans agree that the doctrine of justification and the doctrine of the church belong together. They together testify to the salvation that is bestowed only in Christ and by grace alone and is received in faith. They recite in common the creed, confessing ‘one holy catholic and apostolic Church.’ (216). Further ecumenical conversation is still needed on a number of unresolved issues (218)

5. Our Need to Repent

Ashamed of Dark side of Luther:

Lutherans will also remember the vicious and degrading statements that Martin Luther made against the Jews. They are ashamed of them and deeply deplore them.

Lutherans have come to recognize with a deep sense of regret the **persecution of Anabaptists** by Lutheran authorities and the fact that Martin Luther...theologically supported this persecution.



They deplore Luther's **violent attacks against the peasants** during the Peasants' War. The awareness of the dark sides of Luther and the Reformation has prompted a critical and self-critical attitude of Lutheran theologians towards Luther and the Wittenberg Reformation. Even though they agree in part with Luther's criticism of the papacy, nevertheless **Lutherans today reject Luther's identification of the pope with the Antichrist.** (229)

Both sides bear Guilt for caricaturing their opponents

How theologians presented their theological convictions in the battle for public opinion is quite another matter. In the 16th century, **Catholics and Lutherans frequently not only misunderstood but also exaggerated and caricatured their opponents in order to make them look ridiculous. They repeatedly violated the eighth commandment**, which prohibits bearing false witness against one's neighbour.... Both Lutherans and Catholics bear the guilt that needs to be openly confessed in the remembrance of the events of 500 years ago. (233)

Catholic confession of sins against unity

Already in his message to the imperial diet in Nuremberg on 25 November 1522, Pope Hadrian VI complained of abuses and trespasses, sins and errors insofar as church authorities had committed them. During the last century, **Pope Paul VI**, at the Second Vatican Council, **asked pardon from God and the divided "brethren"** of the East. This gesture of the pope found expression in the Council itself, above all in the Decree on Ecumenism and in the Declaration on Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*). (234)

In a Lenten sermon, **"Day of Pardon," Pope John Paul II** acknowledged guilt and offered prayers for forgiveness as part of the observance of the 2000 Holy Year.(87) He was the first not simply to repeat the regret of his predecessors Paul VI and the council fathers regarding the painful memories, but actually to do something about it. (235)

Lutheran confession of sins against unity

At its fifth Assembly in Evian in 1970, the Lutheran World Federation "that we as Lutheran Christians and congregations [are] prepared to acknowledge that the judgment of the Reformers upon the Roman Catholic Church and its theology was not entirely free of polemical distortions, which in part have been perpetuated to the present day. **We are truly sorry for the offense and misunderstanding which these polemic elements have caused our Roman Catholic brethren.** We remember with gratitude the statement of Pope Paul VI to the Second Vatican Council in which he communicates his plea for forgiveness for any offense caused by the Roman Catholic Church. As we together with all Christians pray for forgiveness in the prayer our Lord has taught us, let us strive for clear, honest, and charitable language in all our conversations." (236)

6. Ecumenical Imperatives



- **Catholics & Lutherans realize that they belong to the one body of Christ.** The awareness is dawning on Lutherans and Catholics that **the struggle of the sixteenth century is over.** (238)
- **Lutherans & Catholics need to rediscover the power of the Gospel of Jesus.** (243)
- **Catholics & Lutherans should witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world.** The ecumenical journey enables Lutherans and Catholics to appreciate together Martin Luther's insight into the gospel of the righteousness of God, which is also God's mercy. Luther wrote that "by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, **he gained new understanding of Romans 1:17** (244)

Lutherans & Catholics share Goal of Confessing Christ, who alone is to be trusted above all things as the one Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5f) through whom God in the Holy Spirit gives himself and pours out his renewing gifts (*Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*) (245)

For full 36 Page Document go to:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/lutheran-fed-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_2013_dal-conflitto-alla-comunione_en.html

A four page Extract is available on the ECI Website at www.evancat.org

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