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Document „From Conflict to Communion”. Some Historical Approaches

The International Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity has produced its report, titled “From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017” (2013, FCC)¹. The intertwining of these two anniversaries - of the Reformation and of the dialogue commission’s healing work - appropriately invites to plan some joint events. This is the first centenary commemoration of the Reformation marked by a real desire on both sides to come together for its observance. “From Conflict to Communion” is the first attempt by both dialogue partners to describe together, at an international level, the history of the Reformation and its intentions.

1. Rediscovering Unity

We Christians may not suppress from our historical consciousness the fact that the current secularisation and privatising of Christianity is largely self-inflicted. For it should be understood as certainly undesired and unintentional, but a tragic consequence of the division of the Western Church in the 16th century². The emancipation of the modern cultural world, firstly from the contrasts presented by the estranged confessional churches and ultimately from Christianity as a whole, must be judged as a result of exhaustion from the split in the Church and the bloody religious wars. Because Christianity has since then only been tangible in the form of the different denominations, which have fought each other, often to the death, these historical circumstances have made it, as an unavoidable result, that peace between the confessions had to be bought at a high price, and that this has been disregarded by confessional differences and, in the broader picture, by Christianity itself in order to be able to

¹ *From Conflict to Communion. Lutheran–Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*, Paderborn-Leipzig 2013. Cited further as FCC.

² L. Schorn-Schütte, *Die Reformation. Vorgeschichte, Verlauf, Wirkung*, München 1996.

give a new basis for social peace. If put the other way around, this insight must mean that the recovery of a public declaration of the Christian message presupposes the overcoming of the inherited divisions in a newly discovered unity among Christians.

2. The Lund Principle

As Catholics and Lutherans gather in Lund (31th October 2016) to mark the Reformation, it is good to recall another important ecumenical event that took place in the same city in 1952. This was the Third World Conference of the *Faith and Order* Commission. A committee of theological stalwarts including Georges Florovsky, Albert C. Outler, Edmund Schlink, Michael Ramsey, and D. T. Niles produced an opening statement titled “Word to the Churches.” This statement included what has become known as “The Lund Principle,” often summarized as “Do everything together as far as conscience permits.” But, as Baptist scholar Morris West has noted, the original context of the statement was not an exhortation, much less an imperative command, but rather a question to be answered. “Should not our Churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other Churches and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?” This was a probing interrogative to be asked repeatedly and to be applied to the ongoing, day-to-day life of the churches.

While there were four Catholic “observers” at Lund in 1952, it would be another ten years before the Roman Catholic Church would fully enter the ecumenical movement at Vatican II—and, by doing so, transform it. But the question asked at Lund 1952 bears asking again at Lund 2016—not only of Catholics and Lutherans, but also of the Orthodox, the Pentecostals, the Evangelicals, and all other believers in Jesus Christ who know themselves to be a part of the pilgrim church destined for that City with Foundations.

In going to Lund, Pope Francis was following in the footsteps of his two papal predecessors, both of whom were deeply committed to the ecumenical pathway set forth in the documents of Vatican II. In 1983, on the 500th anniversary of Luther’s birth, Pope John Paul II himself preached at a Lutheran church in Rome and called for a new understanding of the epoch of the Reformation. He referred to Luther as a man of „profound religiousness” who was “driven by the examination of eternal salvation”. At Erfurt in 2011, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of the Christological center at the heart of Luther’s theology: For Luther, he said, the true and living God is no mere philosophical hypothesis.

But why Lund? Luther was German, not Swedish, and the case might have been made for holding this event in Augsburg, where the Joint Declaration on Justification was unveiled in 1999, or in Erfurt, where the Augustinian friary Luther entered still stands and where Pope Benedict XVI preached in 2011. Even more attention-getting would have been the iconic Wartburg near Eisenach, where Luther translated the New Testament from Greek into German, working furiously for ten weeks in 1522. But Sweden has claims of its own, including the fact that it was one of the first nation-states to adopt the Reformation in the sixteenth century – even though, as in England, there were reasons of state as well as reasons of faith behind this decision. Olaus Petri is called the “Martin Luther of Sweden”. Petri, who became a pastor in Stockholm in 1524, had studied with Luther in Wittenberg, as had his brother Laurentius Petri. Through their work and that of other early reformers, the New Testament was translated into Swedish in 1526, followed by the complete Swedish Bible in 1541.

3. The Catholic Luther Research

For centuries, Luther was a heretic and church splitter in the eyes of Catholics. On the Protestant side, Luther was glorified as a church founder and stylized as a national hero³. Lutherans and Catholics accused each other of apostasy. In this one-side situation, shaped in a controversial theological and denominational manner, a common perspective with regard to Luther and the Reformation movement he inspired was impossible.

In the twentieth century, for the first time, the new ecumenical movement enabled a cautious joint rapprochement to the person of Martin Luther. Catholic researchers have shown that: “Catholic literature on Luther over the previous four centuries right up through modernity had been significantly shaped by the commentaries of Johannes Cochlaeus, a contemporary opponent of Luther and advisor to Duke George of Saxony. Cochlaeus had characterized Luther as an apostatized monk, a destroyer of Christendom, a corrupter of morals, and a heretic”⁴.

Trough diligent historical work, Catholic research could gradually liberate itself from this one-sided approach to Luther’s person and work⁵. The interest of Catholics in Reformation history was aroused through varied e orts of the

³ Cfr. Martin Luther, *Zeuge Jesu Christi*, Nr. 2 (DWÜ 2, 444f).

⁴ FCC 22.

⁵ See Jörs Ernest and Wolfgang Thönissen, *Personenlexikon Ökumene*, Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2010, 90-91.

Catholic population in the predominantly Protestant German Empire during the second half of the nineteenth century. Based on this interest, ecumenically minded Catholic theologians could free themselves from a one-sided, anti-Roman Protestant historiography and reach a fundamental thesis according to which Luther overcame a Catholicism in himself that was not Catholic⁶. According to this view, which the Catholic historian Joseph Lortz made popular, the life and teachings of the church functioned in the late Middle Ages mainly as a negative background of the Reformation. The key to understanding the Reformation as an abandonment of the Catholic Church lies thus in the constitution of the late medieval church and the theological uncertainty within Catholic theology⁷: “Luther was portrayed as an earnest religious person and conscientious man of prayer... Sober historical analyses by other Catholic theologians showed that it was not the core concerns of the Reformation, such as the doctrine of justification, which led to the division of the church but, rather, Luther’s criticisms of the condition of the church at his time that sprang from these concerns”⁸ (FCC 22).

After cardinal Johannes Willebrands did Luther justice, in a sense, decades later by acknowledging Luther’s deep religiousness⁹, it was especially pope John Paul II and more recently pope Benedict XVI who completed the image of Luther. In 1996, John Paul II emphasized Luther’s willingness to renew the church¹⁰. Benedict XVI acknowledged in Luther the deep passion and driving force in his search for God throughout his entire life¹¹. It was not Luther’s intention to split the church.

In a further step, through a systematic comparison of two exemplary theologians of both confessions, Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther, the Catholic Luther research was able to discover analogous theological positions in different theological thought structures and systems, called *Denkformen* (ways of thinking). A hermeneutical comparison between the theology of Thomas

⁶ See the argument of Joseph Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland*, Bd.1, Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1940, 176.

⁷ Ibidem, 137.

⁸ FCC 22.

⁹ Johannes Willebrands, *Mandatum Unitatis: Beiträge zur Ökumene*, Bonifatius, Paderborn 1989, 265.

¹⁰ Sermons and speeches by Pope John Paul II during his Third Pastoral Visit in Germany, 1996, 126, 32.

¹¹ Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to Berlin, Erfurt and Freiburg, September, 22-25, 2011, 189, 71.

Aquinas and of Martin Luther showed that while the theologians had very different ways of thinking, these ways are not mutually exclusive and can be complementary in some cases: “This work allowed theologians to understand Luther’s theology within its own framework. At the same time, Catholic research examined the meaning of the doctrine of justification within the Augsburg Confession. Here Luther’s reforming concerns could be set within the broader context of the composition of the Lutheran confessions, with the result that the intention of the Augsburg Confession could be seen as expressing fundamental reforming concerns as well as preserving the unity of the Church”¹².

On the occasion of the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession being delivered, it could be shown by both Protestant and Catholic theologians that the *Confessio Augustana* is not the document of the schism, not the founding document of a new church, but a sign and expression in favor of the preservation of the unity in the church¹³. In this sense, the *Confessio Augustana* is in truth a Catholic document.

The project of the ecumenical working group of Protestant and Catholic theologians – under the title “Condemnation of Doctrines: Church-Separating?”¹⁴ – started after the first visit of Pope John Paul II in Germany at the beginning of the 1980s. Following in the footsteps of the Catholic Luther research, this project helped to review the historical viability of the once proclaimed convictions and condemnations that can be found in Luther’s statements and in Protestant-Lutheran confession texts as well as in the decisions of the Council of Trent. Thus, through laborious historical-critical detailed work, it could be determined that the reciprocal convictions were based largely on misconceptions of the opposite’s positions, on one-sided interpretations, or on wrong accentuations. Therefore, there is no longer the need today to see these positions as having the effect of separating the church. This hermeneutical historical-critical method could at last be applied by the Lutheran World Federation as well as the Roman-Catholic Church in their Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in 1999. The result was that a consensus could be found between Protestants and Catholics on the fundamental truths of the doctrine of justification. In this question of the justification, so central for the reformers, the cause for mutual conviction was dropped.

¹² FCC 23.

¹³ Wolfgang Thonissen, *Alle unter einem Christus*, Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift 10(2011), 325.

¹⁴ Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Lehrverurteilungen - kirchentrennend?* [In:] *Rechtfertigung, Sakramente und Amt im Zeitalter der Reformation und Heute*, Herder and Vandenhoeck/Ruprecht Freiburg/ Göttingen 1986.

These changes in the mutual perception of fundamental theological contents that took hold gradually over the decades also shaped the commemoration of past events. The Catholic Luther research has paved the way for an adequate discussion of Martin Luther's person and theology. Likewise, the Lutheran research has successfully freed the image of Martin Luther from a one-sided and overly accentuated description. Before us appears the theologian and professor, deeply embedded in the thinking of medieval theology and monasticism, who focused his theological work on the interpretation of biblical Scripture. Thereby, he appreciated and respected the Church Fathers, from Augustine to Bernard of Clairvaux; he took a critical stance against Aristotle's philosophy, received primarily by the scholastic theologians; and thus he advanced a new kind of theology of piety that was intended primarily for laypeople¹⁵.

Reflecting on Luther's life achievement, Melanchthon stated in the year of Martin Luther's death that his "struggle for piety" called the people back to Christ by showing them that sins would be forgiven at no cost due to God's Son. One just had to accept this grace of Christ in faith. A clear distinction between law and gospel assists in the purification of the theological doctrine. Otherwise, according to Melanchthon, Luther left the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds completely untouched¹⁶.

This positive evaluation of the person and the work of Luther has eventually also been taken up by different Popes, above all Pope John Paul II during his visit to Germany in 1996 and Pope Benedict XVI during his visit in 2011 to the Augustinian Monastery in Erfurt, where he made a special point of praising the Christocentrality of the spirituality of Luther and his passionate seeking for God: "He was driven by the question about God and this became the deep passion and driving force of his life and of his whole life's journey"¹⁷.

As early as 1970 the second President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, cardinal Johannes Willebrands, in his keynote address at the 5th Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation at Evian-les-Bains spoke about Martin Luther in a positive manner and indeed expressed the conviction that a "more balanced judgment of the person and work of Martin Luther" from the Catholic side was a necessary path to follow "in order to restore the unity that had been lost". From this fundamental approach cardinal Willebrands even praised the Reformer as a teacher of the faith: "In this he can

¹⁵ FCC 101.

¹⁶ Philipp Melanchthon, *Historia Lutheri*, 1546; CR 6, 155–70.

¹⁷ Benedict XVI., Meeting with representatives of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) in the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt on 23 September 2011.

be our common teacher, that God must remain always as Lord and that our most important human response to God is absolute trust and worship”¹⁸.

4. Conclusion

Several generations of Catholic Luther scholars have helped to place the reformer in his proper historical context and to uncover the spiritual roots of his complex and dialectical theology. The Catholic reappraisal of Luther began in earnest with the seminal work of Joseph Lortz and has been refined and extended by Erwin Iserloh, Otto Hermann Pesch, Jared Wicks, and many others. In his *The Reformation in Germany* (1939), Lortz explained the central dynamic in Luther’s thinking in this way: “Within himself Luther wrestled and overthrew a Catholicism that was not Catholic”. According to Lortz, it was Erasmus more than Luther who precipitated the disruption of Christendom in the sixteenth century.

A better understanding of Luther and his times, however, does not mean that all of the differences which led to the rupture of the church at the Reformation have been happily resolved. It is no service to either the truth of the Gospel or to the unity of the church to claim otherwise. *From Conflict to Communion* is not guilty of such easy-going ecumenism, but it does challenge Catholics and Lutherans together to emphasize areas of fundamental agreement and to live out their faith as members of the one Body of Christ. The report concludes on a note of admonition and hope: “The beginnings of the Reformation will be rightly remembered when Lutherans and Catholics hear together the gospel of Jesus Christ and allow themselves to be called anew into community with the Lord. Then they will be united in a common mission which the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* describes: “Lutherans and Catholics share the goal of confessing Christ in all things, who alone is to be trusted above all things as the one Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5) through whom God in the Holy Spirit gives himself and pours out his renewing gifts”¹⁹.

Summary: Document „From Conflict to Communion”. Some Historical Approaches

In the year 2013 the International Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity has produced its report, titled “From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017”. This

¹⁸ Johannes Willebrands, *Sent into the world*, [in:] *Mandatum Unitatis. Contributions to Ecumenism*, Paderborn 1989, 112-125, 124.

¹⁹ *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, Augsburg 1999, 18.

is the first centenary commemoration of the Reformation marked by a real desire of the Catholics and Protestants as well to come together for its observance. The article describes the way to this very important common testimony. A very important sign of the Catholics' recognition of Luther's faith was the word of the second President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, in his keynote address at the 5th Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation at Evian-les-Bains. The culmination of the relationship was that Catholics and Lutherans gathered in Lund on 31th October 2016 to mark commemoration of the Reformation. The milestone on the way to this celebration was the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* signed in Augsburg 1999. The document *From Conflict to Communion* concludes the common way of Lutherans and Catholics in the last 50 years.

Keywords: Ecumenism, Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue, Luther, pope, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*; *From Conflict to communion*

Streszczenie: Dokument „Od konfliktu do komunii”. Uwagi natury historycznej

Artykuł omawia historyczne aspekty powstania luterkańsko-katolickiego dokumentu z roku 2013: *Od konfliktu do komunii*. Autor wskazuje w pierwszej kolejności elementy wzajemnego odkrywania jedności przez luteran i rzymskich katolików, które po raz pierwszy miały miejsce w latach 50. XX wieku. Następnie ukazany zostaje kontekst historyczny modlitwy ekumenicznej, która miała miejsce w luterkańskiej katedrze w Lund 31. października 2016. Braли w niej udział papież Franciszek oraz prezydent Światowej Federacji Luterkańskiej bp Younan. Ważnym wydarzeniem na tej drodze była 3. Światowa Konferencja Komisji *Faith and Order*, która obradowała w Lund. Teologowie różnych tradycji, w tym Georges Florovsky, Albert C. Outler, Edmund Schlink, Michael Ramsey, and D. T. Niles stworzyli tam dokument zatytułowany “Word to the Churches”, znany jako *Pryncypia z Lund*.

Następnie zostaje w artykule przywołana postać kardynała Johannes Willebrandsa, drugiego przewodniczącego Papieskiej Rady do spraw Popierania Jedności Chrześcijan. Kamieniem milowym we wzajemnych relacjach luterkańsko-katolickich jest jednak *Wspólna Deklaracja w sprawie nauki o usprawiedliwieniu*, przyjęta w Augsburgu w roku 1999. Dokument *Od konfliktu do komunii* z roku 2013 jest podsumowaniem wspólnej ekumenicznej drogi luteran i rzymskich katolików. Obydwa dokumenty podkreślają zadanie, jakim jest składanie wspólnego świadectwa o Jezusie Chrystusie jako Zbawicielu świata.

Słowa kluczowe: ekumenizm, dialog luterkańsko-katolicki, Luter, papieŹ, „Wspólna Deklaracja w sprawie nauki o usprawiedliwieniu”, „Od konfliktu do komunii”

Ks. Andrzej Piotr Perzyński (ur. 1958), prof. dr hab. Prezbiter archidiecezji łódzkiej i kierownik Katedry Teologii Ekumenicznej na Wydziale Teologicznym UKSW w Warszawie. Wykładowca teologii dogmatycznej w Wyższym Seminarium Duchownym w Łodzi, Instytucie Teologicznym w Łodzi oraz zagadnień ekumenicznych w UKSW w Warszawie. Działalność naukowo-badawczą w zakresie ekumenizmu i teologii porównawczej łączy z praktycznymi inicjatywami ekumenicznymi zarówno w środowisku warszawskim, jak i w rodzimej diecezji. Brał czynny udział w kilkunastu przedsięwzięciach i projektach związanych ze wspólnym upamiętnieniem 500-lecia Reformacji. Współinicjator powstania *Polskiego Forum Chrześcijańskiego* i jego sekretarz.