

“Re-formatio”:

The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century and Church Reform Today¹

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This article begins by noting that historians are still unclear as to whether Luther pinned 95 Theses on indulgences to the door of the church of Wittenberg Castle. Many believe that what actually happened is that on October 31, 1517 Luther sent his reflections to Archbishop Albrecht of Brandenburg and then to his colleague theologians for an academic discussion. There was no intention to provoke a division within the church as it later came about in the context of complex historical and ecclesial circumstances and other factors. In the central part of the article the author investigates the basic principles of the theology of the Reformer, intimately related to spiritual and pastoral concerns: from the merciful image of God as revealed in Christ crucified to

its anthropological consequences. The “wonderful exchange” is central: between Christ taking upon himself our sins and sharing with us his love for exchange between us and our neighbors. With this historical and theological background, the author turns to the document From Conflict to Communion and addresses the importance of Luther’s theology for both Lutherans and Catholics today as an opportunity for joint discoveries which may help to promote a constant reform of the church.

Next year, on October 31, 2017, the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s Protestant Reformation will be celebrated. The precise date is symbolic: that was the day, according to tradition, when 95 Theses on indulgences were pinned to the door of the church of Wittenberg Castle in Saxony. This town was home to one of the prince-electors of the empire and to an emerging university. For centuries, Catholics have seen this event as the first step in what was to become the breakdown of church unity in the West. Lutherans, on the other hand, have celebrated the event as marking the beginning of a more evangelical church. Later, under the influence of the Enlightenment, the same event came to be seen also as a public act of liberty and the affirmation of the modern subject in its autonomy.

In reality, the Ninety-Five Theses on indulgences were different from anything these interpretations suggest. Historians are still unclear as to whether in fact this public act ever took place. It is plausible that what actually happened is that on October 31 Luther sent his reflections to Archbishop Albrecht of Brandenburg and then to a limited number of his colleague theologians, so that they might become the subject of an academic discussion,

1. This article was translated by Declan O’Byrne (Sophia University Institute) and has been published in Italian in *Nuova Umanità* 221 (2016): 13–25.

as was the custom in his day. The latter seems the most likely hypothesis.

What is undoubtedly true is that in these theses Luther argues vehemently against a clear abuse that had spread owing to economic interests as well as other motives.² That said, there was no initial intention to attack the pope, and even less so to provoke a division within the church.³ The fact that a break in church unity did come about cannot be attributed only to Luther or to his impulsive character but has to do also with complex political and ecclesial circumstances, cultural differences between North and South of the Alps, the development in those years of the printing press, and other factors. In any case, we should keep in mind that calls for a reform of the church from top to bottom had been heard for quite a number of years in the late medieval period.

2. Archbishop Albrecht of Brandenburg wished, through the sale of indulgences, to pay debts related to the assignment of the diocese of Mainz in addition to the diocese of Magdeburg. Rome requested payment for the assignment of a second diocese. The money was used, among other things, for the building of Saint Peter's Basilica. In exchange, the archbishop was allowed to preach a special indulgence. It was at the hands of the Dominican John Tetzel that the disgraceful sale of indulgences criticized by Luther took place.

3. See in this regard the *Message of John Paul II to Cardinal John Willebrands, President of the Secretariat for Christian Unity*, on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth: "In fact, scientific research by Evangelical and Catholic scholars, the results of which have already reached notable points of convergence, has led to the outlining of a more complete and more differentiated picture of Luther's personality, of the complex web of historical reality in society, in politics and in the church of the first half of the 16th century. Consequently Luther's profound piety that, with burning passion, was driven by questioning on eternal salvation, is clearly delineated. Similarly it becomes clear that the break in ecclesiastical unity is not reduced to a simple lack of comprehension by authorities of the Catholic Church nor to only the simple lack of comprehension of true Catholicism by Luther, even if both had their role."

Challenges of the Church in the Late Middle Ages

A careful study of Luther's works reveal that the 95 Theses on indulgences that provoked the conflict with Rome were no more than the tip of an iceberg. They are to be understood as the expression of a wider unease with the pastoral practices and theological concepts in vogue at the time. Luther's theses highlighted two challenges in particular.

On the one hand, certain aspects of *popular piety*, from the scrupulous accumulation of good works in order to collect "merits" with God to the multiplication of the celebration of Masses in order to gain God's favor, risked not only commercializing God's grace but, more significantly, upturning the authentic relationship with God. The risk was giving the impression that human beings could influence God by their acts and, in a sort of trade, obtain certain things from God. For Luther, the dynamics of true faith were quite different: Believing in God means entrusting oneself radically to him and allowing that he acts on us.⁴

On the other hand, Luther had various reasons for objecting to the *theology* of the late scholastic period,⁵ particularly as it related to theological anthropology, that is, the understanding of the relationship between ourselves and God. This theology overestimated

4. See, for example, in the second cycle of lessons on the Psalms: "In such a way we do not get ready to be transformed by faith in him, so that he may be God for us, but through our works we try to change his attitude towards us and to make him act according to our votes, so that we become idols for him" (*Weimar Ausgabe* [WA] 5, 446, 14–16).

5. See especially the *Disputatio contra scholasticam theologiam* (1517) and the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518). On the latter see: J. E. Vercruysse, "Gesetz und Liebe: Die Struktur der Heidelberger Disputation Luthers (1518)", *Lutherjahrbuch* 48 (1981): 7–43; and his article "Homo cum theologia crucis: Considerazioni sull'antropologia di Lutero nella disputa di Heidelberg", in *Vol. I: La Sapienza della Croce nella Rivelazione e nell'Ecumenismo* (Torino: Leumann, 1976), 588–93.

the part of the human being. It thus risked falling into what is technically called “Semipelagianism,” wherein Christian life seems almost to be a matter of raising oneself to the level of God with one’s own powers, a perfecting of oneself, certainly with the help of grace, but done by us. In reality it is always God who takes the initiative and only God who can bring about the first moves toward conversion and gradually transform our lives. Rather than ascension of the human person toward God, Christianity is a matter of God’s descent toward us.

Luther also criticized scholastic theology for what he saw as its excessive rationalism and fascination with philosophy and speculation. Such theology was not biblical enough, not experiential enough, not existential enough. What Luther calls *theologia practica*, in contrast, was to be a theology at the service of Christian living, at the service of concrete existence, a theology that has to help us to overcome a self-centered life, to put our trust into God, and to live a life dedicated to our neighbor.

How to Find a Merciful God?

Luther’s approach to theology and to the truth of the faith is linked to his experience in life. It is born, in particular, from an anguished question about God, who appeared to him, though not to him alone, as a severe judge: *How can I find a merciful God?*

There has been much speculation on the “subjectivism” of this inquiry and on possible psychological pathologies that might explain his acute sensitivity on these points. In reality, his questions were shared by many in this period. Following the devastation of the plague, people lived in close contact with death and were fearful of God’s implacable judgment. Undoubtedly, Luther experienced all of this in a particularly accented way, to the point of

feeling himself torn apart by tribulations that he did not hesitate to compare with the pains of Hell.⁶ But in this respect he expressed what was the general unease of his time.

It is against this background that between 1515 and 1516, while he was teaching on the Letter of Paul to the Romans, he became ever more aware that God’s justice is not to be understood by following the distributive logic of rewarding good works and punishing sins, but rather by accepting God’s welcoming and justification of the human being in a fully gratuitous way. By such justification, God makes the person just and a new creature, as long as the person entrusts himself or herself to God. Romans 1:17 is the point of departure for this discovery: “*Iustus ex fide vivit*—the righteous lives by faith.” Luther recalled years later, almost at the end of his life:

And so I began to understand God’s justice as that justice by which the righteous one lives through the gift of God and precisely by faith . . . as is written: “the righteous lives by faith.” Here I felt myself to be completely reborn and as if I had passed through the gates of Paradise itself. The whole Scripture immediately took on a new aspect for me.⁷

In 1518, we find the same discovery once again expressed in other words in the famous final thesis of the *Heidelberg Disputation*: “*Amor Dei non invenit sed creat suum diligibile, Amor hominis fit a suo diligibili*” [God’s love does not find what he loves, but he creates it: human love is originated by what is loveable]. Divine

6. WA 1, 557, 33; 558, 18.

7. Autobiographical fragment from 1545 in the preface to the Latin edition of his works (WA 54, 185, 12; 186, 20).

love is directed especially “not where a good is found to enjoy, but where it can communicate good to what is wicked and in need.” It “loves sinners, the wicked, the foolish and weak, to make them righteous, good, wise and strong.”⁸

Which Image of God?

It is important to emphasize the change in the image of God that is implicit in these discoveries and that for Luther, as for us, represented an ever new conquest throughout his life. The idea of a God who is judge and despot is so strongly rooted that it tends to re-emerge continually. Throughout millenniums, God was described by humanity with superlatives: the Absolute, the All-Powerful, the Omnipresent, the All-Seeing. Human beings, bound by creaturely knowledge, can have only minimal knowledge of God. This is the Majestic, Holy, and Transcendent God we find also in the Old Testament, before whom no human being can stand: No one can see him and live (see Exodus 33:20).

According to Luther, the mystery of God is impenetrable. It escapes our attempts to penetrate it. God remains the hidden God (*Deus absconditus*). Authentic theology, on the other hand, in faithfulness to the New Testament, is called to find God where he reveals himself. “*In Christo crucifixo est vera Theologia (et) cognitio Dei*” [True theology and knowledge of God is found in Christ crucified],⁹ he writes in the *probatio* of the twentieth thesis of the *Heidelberg Disputation*. Just before this statement he affirms that this concretely means seeking God not in glory and majesty but in the humility and ignominy of the cross. That is knowing him

8. WA 1, 365, 1–2; 13–15; 9–10.

9. StA 1, 208, 17.

“from behind” (see Exodus 33:23), in sufferings, his and ours, in which he hides himself and in which he appears to be anything but God.

Luther explains that God reveals himself to us *sub specie contraria*: as non-God, in a manner opposite to what we think about God. The question is: Does this mean that God reveals Godself in a way that is contrary to how God is *in reality*, or contrary to how we imagine God to be? It is difficult to find an answer to this question in Luther. God’s transcendence remains. What is decisive, what alone is important according to Luther, is taking seriously the way in which God reveals Godself in Christ crucified. In this regard, he never tires of focusing attention on the Christological hymn of Philippians 2:6–7: Jesus Christ, even though he was in the form of God, emptied himself and assumed for us the “form of a slave.”¹⁰

This is the foundation of the *wondrous exchange* that occurs between Christ and the faithful, which for Luther, in line with Pauline theology—“Christ ransomed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13, see also 2 Cor 5:21)—goes beyond the perspective of patristic theology. The Fathers had emphasized that God became man so that human beings might

10. See, for example, in *De libertate christiana*: “The same is said also of Christ [who], even though he is Lord of all, was ‘born of a woman, born under the law’ [Galatians 4:4], free and at the same time a servant, in the form of God and at the same time in the form of servant” (WA 7, 50, 2–4). In the German edition of the tractate, the quotation of Philippians 2 is found at no. 26: “Have this sentiment in you that you see in Christ, who, although he was in everything in the divine form and was complete in himself and did not need his life, activity, and passion to become through them pious or blessed, he nevertheless stripped himself of everything and took on the form of a slave, operated and suffered a lot, not considering anything but our best; and so, even though he was free, he out of love for us made himself a slave” (WA 7, 35, 13–19).

become God. Fixing his gaze on the death of Jesus on the cross, Luther extends the exchange: Christ did not assume only our humanity but also our sins to give us his righteousness and make us participants in his holiness. Here is how he speaks, for example, in his *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–1521), commenting on Psalm 21 (22), 2 (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”):

And this is that rich mystery of divine grace towards sinners: by a wondrous exchange our sins are no longer ours, but belong to Christ, and the righteousness of Christ is no longer his, but ours. He emptied himself of it, to fill us with it and clothe us in it, and he filled himself with our sins to empty us of the same.¹¹

It is interesting to note that what makes this exchange possible is the spousal relationship between Christ and us: “Here in fact the Spouse and the bride become one flesh, a mystery (*sacramentum*) about which we can never speak, preach or meditate enough.”¹²

One is prompted to ask: In this donation of Christ and in this exchange with us is it really what is “contrary” to the nature of

God that is revealed? Or is it what is most intimately true of God: his being Love, Creator, Giver?¹³ Thesis 28 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*, already quoted, appears to orient us rather in this second direction when it affirms: “The love of God does not find what is already loveable, but it creates it.” Here what is emphasized is that God, unlike us, does not seek his own advantage but that of whatever is in need.

For Luther this is a constant, one might almost say a dogma, that he derives in particular from the *Song of the Magnificat* (Luke 1:46–55), from the Canticle of Anna in 1 Samuel, and from various Psalms: God looks down and directs his attention to the humble, to everything that is nothing, while he stands up to the proud and looks at them from a distance (see Psalms 17:28; 138:6; 146:6).¹⁴ God brings about death and life, lowers and exalts (1 Samuel 2:6–8).

It is on the basis of this that Luther is convinced that all of Scripture is to be interpreted as Law and as Gospel (*lex et evangelium*). With his commandments, and especially with his commandment of disinterested love that is the synthesis of the whole Law, God unveils the self-referentiality of the human heart and its invincible attachment to itself (*incurvatio in se*), making it impossible for us

11. WA 5, 608, 6–9.

12. WA 5, 608, 16–18. See also the *Heidelberg Disputation*: “By faith Christ is in us, indeed is one with us” (probatio thesis 26; StA 211, 11–12) and “when Christ lives in us through faith, he moves us to works” (probatio thesis 27; StA 211, 18); *De libertate christiana* 12: “The third incomparable grace of faith is this: it joins the soul to Christ as the bride to the groom. With this sacrament, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh . . . and it follows that also all things are in common, both the good ones and the evil ones. . . . Christ is full of grace, life and salvation, the soul is full of sin, death and damnation. Now faith is placed between them, and sin, death and hell belong to Christ, while grace, life and salvation are in the soul” (WA 7, 54, 31–55, 2).

13. This is an interpretation of Luther that has emerged ever more strongly in recent decades, especially in Scandinavia. See, for example, Bo Kristian Holm, *Gabe und Geben bei Luther: Das Verhältnis zwischen Reziprozität und reformatorischer Rechtfertigungslehre* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2006).

14. See Edgar Thaidigsmann, “Gottes schöpferisches Sehen: Elemente einer theologischen Sehschule im Anschluß an Luthers Auslegung des Magnificat,” *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 29 (1987): 19–38. According to Jürgen Moltmann, there is a difference between the “theologian of glory,” who looks for and loves that which is similar, and the “theologian of the cross,” who is capable of loving that which is different and in contrast.

to put our confidence in ourselves. It is precisely in this way that we are prepared to welcome the grace that allows Christ to come and dwell in us, and, in a fully gratuitous way, makes us participate in his very life. It is in this that the gospel of justification of sinners occurs: Whoever recognizes his or her own nothingness and entrusts oneself to God is saved.

Thus emerges the image of a merciful God, who for love of us human beings empties Godself and places God at our service.¹⁵ But to see this, we must not conceive of God as made in our image or of our self-referentiality. Rather we must allow ourselves to be transformed by God so that our life might be ever more in God's image.

Anthropological Consequences

The image, or rather, the reality of God, who gives Godself in a totally gratuitous way and communicates God's life and being to us, is immediately extended by Luther into an anthropological vision. As a young district vicar of his order, he speaks of this in an extremely synthetic way to one of his fellow brothers, Georg Spenlein, in a letter of 1516: "Just as Christ welcomed you and made your sins his own, and made his justice yours . . . so too you should . . . welcome your brothers and sustain them with patience and make their sins your own and, if you have anything good to offer, make that theirs."¹⁶

In a similar way, the tractate *De libertate christiana* (1520) recalls that, once we have welcomed Christ in faith, we must in our

turn be "Christ for the other": "Therefore, as the heavenly Father helped us in Christ gratuitously, we also have to help gratuitously our neighbor . . . and become in a certain way Christ one for the other, so that we might be reciprocally Christ for one another, and the same Christ be in everyone: this is what it means to truly be Christians."¹⁷

A little later, this is expressed even more concretely, to the point of proposing a communion of goods:

On the basis of this rule, it is necessary that the goods that we receive from God should circulate freely from one to the other and that they become common in such a way that each clothes his neighbor, and behaves towards him or her as if in their place. All goods have flowed and flow from Christ to us. He clothed us and worked in our favor, as if he were truly what we are. Gifts should flow from us to who needs them.

This text continues with a highly significant expression:

To the very point that it is necessary that I lay down my own faith and justice before God, so as to cover over and ask for forgiveness for the sins of my neighbor, and take them on to myself, burdening myself with them and occupying myself

17. *De libertate christiana* 27 (WA 7, 66, 25–28). Shortly afterward, Luther affirms, "Certainly we are called this ["Christians"] because of Christ, who is not absent, but is living in us, that is when we believe in him and when we are reciprocally Christ one for the other, doing for our neighbor what Christ does for us." And again: "But—such suffering!—this life is unknown throughout the world, and is neither preached nor sought." It is interesting to note how in this context Luther refers to Mary: "An example of this faith, superior to that of the others, is offered to us by the Blessed Virgin" (WA 7, 66, 31–39).

15. For further deepening on Luther's image of God and to understand that there is no basic contradiction in it, at least in his Second Commentary on the Psalms (1519–1521), see 171–185 of my study *Martin Luthers Kreuzestheologie: Schlüssel zu seiner Deutung von Mensch und Wirklichkeit* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1995).

16. See WA BR 1, 35.

with them as if they were my own sins, as Christ did so with us.¹⁸

In continuity with these convictions, toward the end of his tractate, Luther formulates the following touching synthesis on the Christian life:

From all of this we reach the conclusion that the Christian does not live in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor: in Christ by faith; in the neighbor by love. By faith he rises above himself into God; from God he turns to descend beneath himself out of love; even as he remains always in God and in the divine love.¹⁹

According to the life of Christ characterized by *kenosis* and sharing, we too are called to live emptied of ourselves in order to “make ourselves other” and to share everything with him or her. The work of Christ, who assumed the *forma servi* for us, aims at this *trans-formatio* of the human person: from self-referentiality (*incurvatio in se*) to a fully relational existence, doubly ecstatic: in Christ and in the neighbor.²⁰

The Relevance of Luther’s Approach Today

It is worth highlighting, at least briefly and without any presumption of completeness, some ways in which this *theologia practica* of

Martin Luther can be seen as relevant to us today. In doing so, we can see why we should make every effort to ensure that the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation is not merely an occasion to commemorate or celebrate past events but rather an opportunity to rediscover the deep and vital insights underlying Luther’s theology. Let us try to illustrate at least some aspects.

In what we have said thus far, we may have become aware already that in the thought of Martin Luther, theology, spirituality, and pastoral praxis are strongly united. It is not by chance that Luther, while he is certainly regarded as an important theologian, or, more precisely, a biblical scholar, is also remembered as an impassioned preacher. The theology he proposes is of immediate existential relevance. It calls out to us and wants to transform us to be true Christians. From a systematic or dogmatic point of view, this can sometimes be a limit, but it is more obviously a real strength of his thought.

Another important point worth mentioning is Luther’s exquisitely personalistic understanding of our relationship with God. The grace of salvation is not *something* that comes from him, like a “packet” of faculties or higher capacities by means of which an *upgrade* of the human person takes place. Instead, it is *Someone*. It is Christ himself who comes to us and gives himself to us, who takes up residence in us and transforms our way of being, projecting us outside ourselves into God and our neighbors. Much could be said about this vision of the Christian life and how it opens the path toward a relational anthropology that is undoubtedly modern and relevant for our time.²¹

21. See among others, Wilfried Joest, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther* (Göttingen: V&R, 1967), and Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen, *Nos extra nos: Luthers Theologie zwischen Mystik und Scholastik*. Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 46 (Tübingen: JCB Mohr,

18. *De libertate christiana* 27 (WA 7, 69, 1–8).

19. *Ibid.*, 30, from the German version (WA 7, 38, 6–10).

20. See AWA 2, 102, 7–8 = WA 5, 66, 17: “He destroys every vicious form and transforms it, as God wants.” The idea of transformation returns in Luther’s thought in various ways, inspired by scriptural language: the old man and the new man, flesh and spirit, a curved heart and a righteous heart, and so on.

In a society where profit and efficiency are given supreme value, a particular contribution of Luther's theology is to lead us back to the genuinely biblical—and especially Pauline—perspective of anthropology. In this perspective, being a Christian is not a matter of “doing” and even less of “making oneself” Christian by the virtuous effort to perfect oneself. This may be one of the negative side effects of the assumption of Aristotelian ethics on the part of scholastic theology. Rather, being a Christian is opening oneself to God's action, adhering in faith—and, by virtue of that faith, in our doing—to the new life that God gratuitously communicates to us. Luther emphasizes that we are “creatures and not creators.”²² We are the work of God's hands. There is no space for legalism here. What is asked of us is both much less and much more. We are asked to abandon ourselves to God through faith with our whole selves and in this way to allow Christ to express himself in us.

1972). How this relational view in Luther has ontological roots and extends to the whole of creation can be seen, for example, in this passage of *Operationes in Psalmos*: “There is no tree that bears fruit for itself, but it offers its fruits to another. Indeed, no creature lives for itself and serves itself (apart from humankind and the devil). The sun shines not for itself, and water does not flow for itself. Thus, every creature observes the law of love and all of its consistence (*substantia*) lies in the law of the Lord. Even the members of the human body do not serve themselves. Only the inner inclination (*affectus*) of the soul is sinful (*impius*). In fact, it does not only share nothing of itself to anyone, but it does not serve anyone or love anybody, but instead takes from everyone, seeking in all and even in God its own advantage.” (AWA 2, 48, 13–21 = WA 5, 38, 11–20). For more on this see A. Raunio, “Die ‘Goldene Regel’ als theologisches Prinzip beim jungen Luther,” in Tuomo Mannermaa, *Thesaurus Lutheri: Auf der Suche nach neuen Paradigmen der Luther-Forschung; Referate des Luther-Symposiums in Finnland, November 11–12, 1986* (Helsinki: Veröffentlichungen der Finnischen Theologischen Literaturgesellschaft, 1987), 309–27.

22. WA 5, 544, 21.

Another important dimension of Luther's theology is certainly his concentration on the gospel, the accent he places on the Word of God before all else. In a unique way, he shows himself to be aware of the transformative, creative, and re-creative force proper to the Word. Luther recognizes an almost sacramental effectiveness of the Word when it is welcomed in faith. Christ works in us especially through the Word: it is through it that he enters into relation with us human beings, purifies us, and unites us to himself.²³ We read in the *Tractate on Christian Freedom* that:

[T]hese, and all of the words of God, are holy, true, just, pacific, free, and full of every good. For this reason the soul of whoever sticks to the Word with true faith is united so fully with it that all of the virtues of the Word become proper to the soul itself. In this way, by means of faith, the Word of God makes the soul holy, just, true, pacific, free and full of every good thing, a true child of God. . . . Whatever the Word is, the same is made by it the soul: just as the iron becomes red like the fire, by union with the fire.²⁴

On close examination, these brief comments have brought us to the root of the four “alones” (*sola*) that characterize Reformed theology: *solus Christus*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola Scriptura*. As a careful analysis can show, these have—at least in Luther's original intention—a less exclusive and contradictory character than they

23. See, for example, WA 5, 379, 18–20 on what the Word brings about: “It purifies, makes solid, and tests the human heart, assimilating it to itself, so that it might not know of itself and of the earth, but only what is of God and of heaven.” Also see: AWA 2, 318, 6–319, 3=WA 5, 176, 17–33.

24. From the German version (WA 7, 24, 22–27; 33–35).

might appear to at first glance.²⁵ In contrast to a theology and a practice of piety that risked losing the essential, these are both a corrective maneuver and an indication of priority, a decided, perhaps sometimes too decided, accent on what is at the heart and center of Christianity.

Limits and Stimuli

Given all of the above, we should not overlook or ignore the limits, imbalances, and excesses we may encounter in the theology and work of Martin Luther. These are recognized today even by Lutherans.²⁶

In my view, the greatest defect that demands we undertake the arduous task of accurate study and reconciliation is the same defect found in many of his Catholic adversaries: the polemical tone, that damages communion, poisons relations, distorts reality, and leads, perhaps unconsciously, to revel in dispute and polarization. Such attitudes on both sides led to the opposition, in an exclusive way, of complementary aspects of the Christian faith. Thus emerges the risk of radically opposing the primacy of God's initiative and grace to the cooperation of free will and the role of works in Christian life. Similarly, there is the risk of opposing the scandal of the cross

and God's freedom and transcendence to the concreteness of the sacramental life as a consequence of the Incarnation of the Word. Or there is the risk of opposing the absolute normativity of Scripture to the great ecclesial Tradition (which is not to be confused with the traditions, customs, and church laws that have developed over the course of history!). We could continue to offer more examples on both sides.

In any case, it is important to remember that Luther's theological approach is entirely different from that of scholastic theology; their points of departure and emphases are so different that it was not, and still is not, easy for either side to understand the other. What interests Luther is not so much the systematic exposition of the dogma of Christian faith in a harmonic vision, as was characteristic of scholastic theology, but rather the education of the heart and influencing the correct praxis of the Christian life.²⁷

In such a polarized and complex context, the task of the Council of Trent was far from simple. On the one hand, the Council was at the origin of the Counter-Reform movement, which was dedicated to limiting the spread of the Protestant Reformation and reaffirming the Catholic faith. On the other hand, the Council promoted a Catholic reformation, which brought about a renewal of church life and remedied in various ways the one-sidedness and

25. See the article by Wolfgang Thönissen in this issue of *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture*.

26. See the Declaration "Martin Luther Witness to Jesus Christ" by the Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Commission on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther in 1983: "Together with their gratitude for Luther's contributions, Lutheran churches are in our day aware of his limitations in person and work and of certain negative effects of his actions. They cannot approve his polemical excesses; they are aghast at the anti-Jewish writings of his old age; they see that his apocalyptic outlook led him to judgments which they cannot approve, e.g., on the papacy, the Anabaptist movement and the Peasants' War" (no. 20). (Hereafter, MLWJC)

27. See Benedict XVI, Address during meeting with representatives of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, Erfurt, September 23, 2011: "God, the one God, creator of heaven and earth, is no mere philosophical hypothesis regarding the origins of the universe. This God has a face, and he has spoken to us. He became one of us in the man Jesus Christ—who is both true God and true man. Luther's thinking, his whole spirituality, was thoroughly Christocentric: 'What promotes Christ's cause' was for Luther the decisive hermeneutical criterion for the exegesis of sacred Scripture. This presupposes, however, that Christ is at the heart of our spirituality and that love for him, living in communion with him, is what guides our life."

ambiguities of late scholastic theology and the pastoral practice that arose from it.²⁸ We should not ignore to what extent such efforts were influenced by the challenges raised, and the clarifications offered, by Luther himself.

The process of church reform still had effects centuries later, as Cardinal Johannes Willebrands pointed out in 1970, speaking to the Fifth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation:

Who . . . would still deny that Martin Luther was a deeply religious person who with honesty and dedication sought for the message of the gospel? Who would deny that in spite of the fact that he fought against the Roman Catholic Church and the Apostolic See—and for the sake of truth one must not remain silent about this—he retained a considerable part of the old Catholic faith? Indeed, is it not true that the Second Vatican Council has even implemented requests that were first expressed by Martin Luther, among others, and as a result of which many aspects of Christian faith and life now find better expression than they did before?²⁹

28. MLWJC: “Fear of the distribution of editions of the Bible unauthorized by the Church, a centralizing over-emphasis on the papacy and a one-sidedness in sacramental theology and practice were deliberately developed features of Counter-Reformation Catholicism. On the other hand, some of Luther’s concerns are taken into account in such Tridentine reforming efforts as for example, the renewal of preaching, the intensification of religious instruction and the emphasis on the Augustinian doctrine of grace.” (no. 21)

29. *Ibid.*, no. 23. At no. 24 the Declaration states: “Among the insights of the Second Vatican Council which reflect elements of Luther’s concerns may be numbered: 1. An emphasis on the decisive importance of Holy Scripture for the life and teaching of the church (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation); 2. The description of the church as ‘the people of God’ (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, chapter II); 3. The affirmation of the need for continued renewal of the church in its historical

From Conflict to Communion

If, as Catholics, we identify the 95 Theses on indulgences simply with the will to break church unity, then we shall not find anything of value in the Protestant Reformation, and this fifth centenary of the event will have no ecumenical relevance. Hopefully, 2017 will be an important opportunity to ask forgiveness of each other and make steps toward a fuller reconciliation. But if we recognize the complexity of the events five hundred years ago, and what was at stake, and try to go beyond the historical and political conditionings of that time, then this anniversary can become also the opportunity to receive together some of Luther’s deepest concerns that continue to be important even today. In this way we will be able to allow ourselves to be addressed together by that genuinely evangelical spirit of the Christian message that Martin Luther, according to his original intention, wished to bring back to the fore.

This is the intention of the document *From Conflict to Communion: The Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reform in 2017*, elaborated by the Lutheran-Catholic Commission for Unity working on behalf of the Lutheran World Federation and

existence (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 8; Decree on Ecumenism, 6); 4. The stress on the confession of faith in the cross of Jesus Christ and of its importance for the life of the individual Christian and of the church as a whole (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 8; Decree on Ecumenism, 4; Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 37); 5. The understanding of church ministries as service (Decree on the Bishops’ Pastoral Office in the Church, 16; Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests); 6. The emphasis on the priesthood of all believers (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 10 and 11; Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 2–4); 7. Commitment to the right of the individual to liberty in religious matters (Declaration on Religious Freedom).”

of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity.³⁰ This document, published on June 17, 2013, highlights in its opening comments three challenges that require that this fifth centenary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, unlike past centenaries, should be commemorated together:

1. It is the first commemoration to take place during the ecumenical age. Therefore, the common commemoration is an occasion to deepen communion between Catholics and Lutherans.
2. It is the first commemoration in the age of globalization. Therefore, the common commemoration must incorporate the experiences and perspectives of Christians from South and North, East and West.
3. It is the first commemoration that must deal with the necessity of a new evangelization in a time marked by both the proliferation of new religious movements, and, at the same time, the growth of secularization in many places. Therefore, the common commemoration has the opportunity and obligation to be a common witness of faith (No. 4).³¹

30. English translation at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/lutheran-fed-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_2013_dal-conflitto-alla-comunione_en.html#Foreword.

31. Receiving a group of representatives of the German Evangelical Lutheran Church on December 18, 2014, Pope Francis affirmed: "Today ecumenical dialogue can no longer be separated from reality and from the life of our Churches. In 2017, Lutheran and Catholic Christians will jointly commemorate the Fifth Centenary of the Reformation. On this occasion, for the first time, Lutherans and Catholics will have the opportunity to share one ecumenical commemoration throughout the world, not in the form of a triumphalistic celebration, but as the profession of our common faith in the Triune God. Therefore, at the heart of this event, common prayer and the intimate request for forgiveness for mutual faults will be addressed to the Lord Jesus Christ, together with the joy of making a shared ecumenical journey."

To open the way toward such a commemoration and common witness, in its central section the document revisits the historical events of the sixteenth century and offers a common reading of those events. It also faces the principal points of dissent that emerged at the time of the Reformation, on which the dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation has been working since 1965. On each of these points, the document shows that, once misunderstandings and one-sided interpretations are overcome, there is a basic consensus that is far broader than was once suspected. At the same time, it honestly focuses on points of difference that are more than simply different ways of explicating the same faith (without necessarily contradicting one another) and in fact call for further clarification and study.

A further deepening of this document which summarizes the last five decades of work in this ecumenical dialogue can be found in the articles that follow mine in this issue of *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture*. They are offered by Theodor Dieter, director of the Institute for Ecumenical Research of the Lutheran World Federation in Strasburg, France, and by Wolfgang Thönissen, director of the (Catholic) Johann Adam Möhler Institute of Paderborn, Germany. Both are members of the Lutheran-Catholic Commission for Unity.

Reform: Return to the Original Form

What can we hope for? We can hope that, with the grace of God and everyone's commitment, the year 2017 might become a true *kairos*, a moment of God and a time for new developments in the relationship between Catholics and Lutherans and, even more broadly, in the ecumenical communion of all Christians. We can hope that it might be a moment in which we can recognize our failures and ask for forgiveness reciprocally, as indeed has already

occurred.³² But, above all, we can hope that it be a moment to leave behind decisively the logic of suspicion and polemic and move ahead ever more with the logic of encounter and communion. It is only the latter that responds to the gospel, and it is the way to bring about a unity that is not merely uniformity and reduction of complexity to unipolar formulae. Carrying in itself the imprint of the Triune God, unity has to be multipolar and capable of appreciating diversity as the occasion for reciprocal gift and enrichment.

A deeper and more exact understanding of the central intentions of Luther's theology may serve as a light in this time when the churches, perhaps more than in other times, are struggling with the challenge of the *ecclesia semper reformanda*. For Luther, church reform did not mean simply changing or adapting to the tendencies or mentalities of an epoch but *re-formatio* in the sense of a *return to the original form* of Christianity, which appears in the clearest way in Christ crucified.

At the culminating point of his life, the Son of God manifested his divinity precisely by assuming the form of a slave. By coming to us every day and meeting us in his Word, he wants to bring about also in us an ever new *trans-formatio* from a way of living that is centered in ourselves to a way of living that is centered in God and in our neighbors. This way of living is normative not only for the individual Christian but also for the church as a whole. Following the crucified and risen Lord, the People of God cannot search for power, glory, and wealth. In the suffering and abandonment experienced by Christ crucified is revealed, as Luther explains in his comment on Psalm 21 (22), 2, the normative form of the People

32. See *From Conflict to Communion*, nos. 234–37.

of God (*nova populi forma*).³³ The church, by its nature, grows in adversity and weakens in prosperity.³⁴

Drawing some conclusions for today from what we have seen, we can declare:

- Reform, in a genuinely evangelical sense, is an event that never really comes to an end but that needs to occur in every present moment.³⁵
- There cannot really be, neither in the Protestant nor in the Catholic world, a “Reformed” church that can consider itself as having arrived at the perfect form, as if reformation were something that can be achieved once and for all, as if it might become a kind of possession. We are and must always be *ecclesia reformanda*.
- The protagonists of a true reformation in the final analysis are not “reformers” who put themselves forward as such but those who allow the gospel's call to conversion to be heard in an ever new way.

33. WA 5, 610, 6–8.

34. See WA 5, 42, 7–8.

35. Christina Aus der Au, nominated president of the Evangelical Kirchentag to be celebrated in 2017, emphasized this: “Viewed properly, in 2017 we will not be celebrating the 5th centenary of the Reformation, but the Reformation that has been going on for 500 years! And, to be even more exact, not only for 500 years, but for much more time. . . . The Jubilee of the Reformation, in all of its manifestations and meetings gives us an opportunity to discover this faith in a new way. And to recognize it anew in the language of our society and in the face of our problems. . . . In this way, the Reform will continue transversally in all of the churches, so that in the coming 500 years there will be those who live this faith in a sincere and serious, joyful and serene, autonomous and communitarian way.” <http://www.luther2017.de/de/2017/reformationsjubilaum/standpunkte/christina-aus-der-au/>.

- Re-formation takes place with continuous reference to Christ crucified as a distinctive form and as fount and ferment of continuous transformation.
- Authentic reformation, built on him, brings about an ever new overcoming of any form of self-referentiality in order to live ecstatically in Christ and in our neighbors, becoming “Christ for the other,” and I would add: “Christ also for the other church”!

and Culture *editorial board*. On Martin Luther, he is known for his Martin Luthers Kreuzestheologie: Schlüssel zu seiner Deutung von Mensch und Wirklichkeit: Eine Untersuchung anhand der Operationes in Psalmos, 1519–1521 (1995). On ecumenism, he published Ekklesiogenese: Der Welt die Gegenwart Gottes schenken (2011). His most recent book is Jesus Crucified and Forsaken (2016).

In this sense, the path toward the fifth centenary of the Reformation represents an invitation and an opportunity not only to commemorate and celebrate something that happened five hundred years ago but also for a renewed conversion to God and toward one another today. This can take place on both the individual and the church level. It is the opportunity for a shared *re-formatio* based on the deepest contents of the gospel as they come to address us in the free and complete donation of Christ who took on the *forma servi*. In the global situation we inhabit, it appears more urgent than ever to give testimony to this image of God and its implications for relations between persons, peoples, cultures, and religions.

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