

From Conflict to Communion

Introducing the Document of the International Catholic-Lutheran Commission for Unity in Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017¹

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the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, which asks Catholics to recognize with joy the Christian values and views they share with their brothers and sisters of other churches (see Unitatis redintegratio 4), in 2017 Catholics and Lutherans are invited to commemorate important aspects of the Protestant Reformation that belong to a common Christian heritage. Mindful of the church's division in the sixteenth century, a commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation is for both sides an invitation to welcome the new steps toward mutual understanding, respect, and even agreement. It is also a time for conversion and a mutual confession of sins that relate to those religious and political leaders, including princes, the emperor, the French king, and even Ottomans, who created the misunderstanding and division that led to the splitting of the Western church. Above all, as suggested by the "Five Ecumenical Imperatives" with which the document concludes, Catholics and Lutherans are called to be inspired in thought and action from a perspective of unity, not division, and to witness gospel life together.

In 2017, how can Protestant and Catholic Christians commemorate together the beginning of the Reformation five hundred years ago? The International Lutheran/Roman Catholic Commission on Unity has been dealing with this question over several years, and with significant effort has developed a document titled: *From Conflict to Communion*.² The main difficulty of the Commission's task was that for Protestant and Catholic Christians the

2. The Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2013).

This article explains the history of the research and dialogue that have paved the way to composing the document From Conflict to Communion, with which the Catholic-Lutheran International Commission for Unity has laid the groundwork for a joint commemoration of

1. This article is based on an address given during a ceremony on September 3, 2014, for the Auxiliary Bishop Dr. Jaschke, celebrating his twenty-fifth anniversary as bishop in the Catholic Academy, Hamburg. It was published in *Nuova Umanità* 221 (2016): 45–63, and was translated from the German by Christina M. Weilier, Purdue University.

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word “Reformation” has different, even contrary, associations and connotations. Protestant Christians associate the word with the rediscovery of the gospel, freedom, and assurance of faith in the word of God, whereas Catholics think of the separation of the church. How can a common remembrance be possible in the face of such different associations?

The difficulties have intensified once more around the following question: Is a common Reformation *commemoration* all that is possible, or could there be a common Reformation *celebration*? *Common commemoration* or *common celebration*? That was the question. While the French and the Germans could together commemorate the outbreak of World War I in 2014, they of course could not celebrate this event. One can celebrate only when one has experienced something good. The outbreak of a war certainly does not belong among the good events of history, no more than the schism of a church. Joy and gratitude, the Catholic side argued, can apply only to the ecumenical movement that attempts to overcome the schism of the church that occurred with the Reformation; it could not be applied to the Reformation. Therefore, in 2017 only the ecumenism could be celebrated, not the Reformation as such. For Protestant Christians, however, a common commemoration of the Reformation cannot succeed in this way because for them the word “Reformation” is associated with feelings of gratitude and joy. They have to be able to express this joy, as much as they lament its association with the split of Western Christianity in the sixteenth century.

If we take this one step further and agree that, indeed, one can only celebrate something good, then, conversely, if one has nothing to celebrate with regard to a past event, then there is also nothing good in it. With regard to the Reformation, we might

conclude: If there is nothing to celebrate here, then there is also nothing good to be found in the event. It would be better had it not happened, according to which we might conclude: It would be better if there were no Protestant Churches. One may not turn a blind eye to this consequence. However, if this were the case, then it would not make sense to have ecumenical dialogues. It would not make sense to attempt finding a deeper communion through dialogue. Hence, in the challenge of how to commemorate the beginning of the Reformation in the year 2017 and in preparation for it, ecumenism is at stake.

When theologians deal with such oppositions, they traditionally cultivate the art of differentiation. In fact, the word “Reformation” has many different meanings. For our purpose, we can distinguish two. First, the word “Reformation” can refer to a sequence of events in the sixteenth century that range from the publication of Luther’s 95 Theses on indulgences in 1517 to the Peace Treaty of Augsburg in 1555, and to the Council of Trent (1545–1563). Here, “Reformation” refers to a chain of events. However, second, “Reformation” can mean the entirety of the reformers’ theological insights into the gospel, as well as the resultant congregations, and finally the churches in which these insights have come to fruition. In the first meaning of the word, the Reformation does not belong solely to the Protestants; the reformers and their followers are by no means the sole subjects of this history. Next to Luther and his theological colleagues, like Philipp Melanchthon, subjects of this history are also the pope, bishops and cardinals like Cajetan or Albrecht of Mainz, Luther’s Saxon electoral princes, the emperor, the French king, the Turks, and many others. It is important to make this clear because it is in this story that the Western church was split.

However, since this story involves so many actors, its outcome cannot be attributed unilaterally to Luther and the other reformers. This impression is created time and again when one makes the following argument:

1. “Luther is the initiator of the Reformation.” (Here, “Reformation” means an “ensemble of theological insights.”)
2. “The Reformation led to the schism of the church.” (Here, “Reformation” means a chain of events.)
3. Conclusion: “Luther created the division of the church.”

This is, however, a classical fallacy owing to this equivocation. The word “Reformation” has different meanings in sentences 1 and 2; thus, the conclusion is erroneous. If a common Reformation commemoration is to be successful, it must depend on whether and how different meanings of the word “Reformation” are distinguished. More precisely, according to what has been stated before, it will depend on whether something can be found in the theological insights that Martin Luther gained and that generated a public movement which Catholics may also judge as something good. The Second Vatican Council, as well as ecumenical studies and dialogues, have made possible a positive answer to this question.

The Second Vatican Council paved the way for a positive answer by recognizing “elements of healing and truth” outside the boundaries of the Roman Catholic Church. The document *From Conflict to Communion* takes up this impulse of the Council and puts at its center (chapter 4) four main aspects of Luther’s theology that were understood as controversial in the sixteenth century and have continued to be controversial: justification, the Lord’s

Supper, ministry, and Scripture and tradition.³ In regard to these aspects, the ecumenical dialogues over the past fifty years have shown that they contain a number of fundamental commonalities which Catholics can share. In this regard, the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* signed in 1999 plays a special role because it has been officially accepted by the Catholic Church as well as by the Lutheran World Federation and thus has special authority. In this chapter of *From Conflict to Communion*, the word “Reformation” is used to mean the ensemble of theological insights of Martin Luther and his fellow reformers. Insofar as something common can be recognized in this fundamental theological issue, there exists something commonly understood as good by Protestants and Catholics. This is a reason for both to celebrate.

Indeed, the Council explicitly determined that “Catholics must gladly acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage which are to be found among our separated brethren. It is right and salutary [note the language of the Eucharistic Prayer] to recognize the riches of Christ and virtuous works in the lives of others.”⁴ When, thus, the Council calls for Catholics to “gladly acknowledge,” what then should keep them from also commonly celebrating those aspects of the reformatory insights that have been recognized as common in the ecumenical dialogue? It thus becomes clear how important it is for a 2017 ecumenical commemoration that there is evidence, provided in the ecumenical dialogues, for these “endowments from our common heritage.”

3. See the article in this issue of *Claritas* by Prof. Wolfgang Thönissen.

4. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4.

Thus, the document *From Conflict to Communion* can also be understood as the theologically well-justified request that Catholics rejoice together with the Lutherans in the important theological insights of the Reformation. The document emphasizes that the common commemoration has its basis in baptism, which introduces Lutherans as well as Catholics into the one Body of Christ. About the Body of Christ, however, one must state, according to Paul, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Cor 12:26). Hence, when Protestant Christians recall the beginning of the Reformation, their commemoration also concerns the Catholic members of Christ’s Body. “In remembering with each other the beginning of the Reformation, they are taking their baptism seriously.”⁵

“Reformation” as referring to the events in the sixteenth century that led to the schism of the church is also taken seriously in the document, in a short sketch of these events given in the third chapter. This sketch describes some important stages and makes clear that the formation of a new church was not the intention of the reformers and that the split of Western Christianity was the result of complex interactions between numerous actors. Among these are not only the reformers but also persons responsible for the Roman Church so that the Reformation *in this sense* is the work of Luther as well as of those responsible in Rome and of numerous political actors. In this sense, as a chain of events that led to the schism of the church, the Reformation indeed calls forth regret, mourning, and recognition of guilt.

5. *From Conflict to Communion*, 221.

That this is not the first time churches have publicly recognized guilt is made clear through examples from the Catholic Church and from the Lutheran World Federation. However, it is clear that a possible recognition of guilt in 2017 cannot be a one-sided affair, as if the Protestant side alone were responsible for the schism of the church and the Protestant Christians thus had to confess their guilt. Guilt existed on both sides, so a confession of guilt must come from both sides. I would note that the document does not recognize the guilt of the theologians on both sides in the fact that they stood by their different views. Had they given up their convictions without first gaining better insights, they would have acted against their conscience and thus would have become guilty. A Protestant theologian cannot be convinced of the truth of the doctrine of justification as it was understood by Luther and at the same time see Luther as guilty for standing by this doctrine. The guilt of the reformers and of their opponents is seen rather in *how* they have asserted their opinions: often by misunderstanding their opponents and interpreting them *in pessimam partem* so that in different ways they violated the eighth commandment not to speak falsely about their neighbor. They did so by caricaturing, ridiculing, and demonizing their opponents; by putting the enforcement of their own position far ahead of the preservation of unity. A confession of guilt on both sides prepared thoroughly and meant sincerely would greatly improve the relationships of the churches with each other. It would also testify to the society of churches’ willingness and capacity to do what they demand from their people time and again: to seek reconciliation. For *From Conflict to Communion*, common joy and common pain belong together in the 2017 commemoration.

The text ends with five imperatives that ask Catholic and Protestant Christians as well as their churches to choose and affirm unity, in other words, to think and act from the perspective of unity and not from the perspective of division. To think from the perspective of unity requires perceiving the other church not primarily as other but as part of the one Body of Christ. Hence, it is about taking the catholicity of the church seriously, as it is known in the *Credo*. The relationships to other churches then are not external but internal in the one Body of Christ. To believe the catholicity of the one church in such a way that it finds expression in the life of the individual churches requires an ever new conversion, one of the heart and of the mind. The well-known first of Luther's 95 Theses states: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Would not 2017, which commemorates the publication of these theses, be an excellent opportunity for the churches to take the first thesis seriously together by engaging in such a conversion of the heart and mind to unity?

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