

Reform and Reformation: Ecumenical Approaches in Light of the Document *From Conflict to Communion*¹

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This article begins by recalling the path that Catholic and Lutheran theological and historical research has taken over the last century to liberate the image of Martin Luther from one-sided interpretations and distortions. The dialogue between the two churches demonstrates how much Luther and his theology are rooted in the great tradition of the church, although his approach differs somewhat from that of scholastic theology, especially late scholasticism. This way of proceeding proved

1. The observations made here serve to introduce, clarify, and explain the new report of the Lutheran-Catholic Commission for Unity: *From Conflict to Communion: Joint Lutheran-Catholic Commemoration of the Reformation in year 2017*, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2013. (Hereafter, FCC.) I have received and accepted suggestions for this by my colleague Prof. Dr. Theodor Dieter. The article was published in *Nuova Umanità* 221 (2016): 25–44, and was translated from the German by Christina M. Weilier, Purdue University.

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ultimately fruitful in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, ratified by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church on October 31, 1999. The article then explains how the document From Conflict to Communion, achieved through the same historical-critical-hermeneutic method, has addressed four topics that traditionally have been in dispute: first, the relationship of grace/freedom and faith/works in justification and sanctification; second, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the sacrifice of the Mass; third, the divine origin of the ordained ministry and its relationship to the common priesthood of all the faithful; and fourth, the relationship among scripture, tradition, and the magisterium. Beginning from these insights, the document shows how the different doctrinal emphases of Lutherans and Catholics, freed from polemical emphases, should not be mutually exclusive and therefore should not preclude consensus on fundamental truths. Giving birth to a different church was not Luther's original intent. Hence it can be argued that in these days the condemnations against Martin Luther ought to be re-examined, making the figure of Luther available to being discovered beyond the regrettable historical events. Here we find his true ecclesiology and ultimately his "Catholicity."

From Heretic to Church Theologian: Exploring Luther Anew

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 hero.² Lutherans and Catholics accused each other of apostasy. In this one-sided

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

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 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 Cochleus, a contemporary opponent of Luther and advisor to Duke George of Saxony. Cochleus had characterized Luther as an apostatized monk, a destroyer of Christendom, a corrupter of morals, and a heretic.³

Through diligent historical work, Catholic research could gradually liberate itself from this one-sided approach to Luther's person and work.⁴ The interest of Catholics in Reformation history was aroused through varied efforts of the 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 Catholic.⁵ 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 theology:⁶

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.⁷

After Cardinal Johannes Willebrands did Luther justice, in a sense, decades later by acknowledging Luther's deep religiousness,⁸ 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 church.⁹ Benedict XVI acknowledged in Luther the deep passion and driving force in his search for God throughout his entire life.¹⁰ It was not Luther's intention to split the church.

6. Ibid., 137.

7. FCC 22.

8. Johannes Cardinal Willebrands, *Mandatum Unitatis: Beiträge zur Ökumene* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1989), 265.

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

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

3. FCC 22.

4. This is the life's work of Adolf Herte. See Jörs Ernest and Wolfgang Thönissen, *Personenlexikon Ökumene* (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2010), 90–91.

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

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 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.¹¹

On 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 church.¹² In this sense, the *Confessio Augustana* is in truth a Catholic document.

11. FCC 23.

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

The project of the ecumenical working group of Protestant and Catholic theologians—under the title "Condemnation of Doctrines: Church-Separating?"¹³—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.¹⁴ In this question of the justification, so central for the reformers, the cause for mutual conviction was dropped.

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

13. Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Lehrverurteilungen—kirchentrennend? I: Rechtfertigung, Sakramente und Amt im Zeitalter der Reformation und Heute* (Freiburg/Göttingen: Herder and Vandenhoeck/Ruprecht, 1986).

14. *Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre*, nos. 14–18.

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 laypeople.¹⁵ Reflecting on Luther's life achievement, Melancthon 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 Melancthon, Luther left the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds completely untouched.¹⁶

Pathways to an Ecumenical Understanding of Luther's Theology

To understand Luther's theological significance for ecumenical dialogue, one has to examine his theology more intensively.¹⁷ It is especially a matter of identifying his theology's particular nature and line of argument. At first, attention is drawn to Luther's

15. FCC 101.

16. Philip Melancthon, *Historia Lutheri*, 1546; CR 6, 155–70.

17. The new report of the Lutheran-Catholic Commission for Unity on the commemoration of the reformation in 2017, *From Conflict to Communion*, does that. The document selects four topics: justification, Eucharist, ministry, and Scripture/tradition, all of which are main topics of Martin Luther's theology as well as the main topics of the Lutheran-Catholic dialogues of the past fifty years.

argumentation: At what is his critique directed? What is he criticizing? Which arguments does he use? What does his theological concern look like? Only when we recognize what Luther is criticizing can we understand his arguments and those of his opponents, especially the argumentation of the Council of Trent. By relating each to the other, the matter of the controversy clarifies. Then, in a second step, in the description of the arguments the respective concerns become clearer. By comparing the concerns of each side with the arguments of the other, we can ascertain whether the concerns of one side are adequately linked with the argument of the other. Through this comparison and with reference to the respective lines of the argument, the ecumenical dialogue has been able to establish that the different mindsets and ways of thinking do not correspond and thus led to misunderstandings and, frequently, to mutual condemnation.

This is more evident today when we consider Cardinal Cajetan's conclusion, after studying Luther's writings, that Luther's understanding of faith certainty implied the founding of a new church.¹⁸ However, this judgement is conclusive only within Cajetan's own theological system. If one leaves this system behind and turns to Luther's way of thinking, concerns and intentions change to a significant extent. Can these misunderstandings, which are rooted in different categorizations of concerns and statements, be cleared up? By representing Luther in his historical context and by showing how these topics have been dealt with ecumenically, we are able to reach new clarity about the logic of Martin Luther's theology. Simultaneously, we can discuss if and how Luther's theology can be received ecumenically. Thereby, we can use the insights

18. FCC 137.

gained from the Luther research. Thus, we can determine where and how convergences, or even consensuses, occur, which enable the overcoming of controversies. This can be exercised here only through the four abovementioned examples. In accordance with the guidelines elaborated here, we can address how the controversy began in order to probe and represent the agreements that have since taken place.

On the Question of Justification

Very early on, the conflict about Martin Luther's theology focused on the understanding of justification and took as its starting point Luther's new reflection on the Sacrament of Penance. This is one of the 95 Theses that address the effect of the indulgence and of numerous texts written at the same time. Luther's opposition did not aim to abolish the Sacrament of Penance. Luther's central question was rather: How do I obtain forgiveness of sins? Luther deduced from the theology of his time that God forgives our sins in an honest act of love when we truly regret them. It is the task of the priest to indicate and explain the forgiving of sins in the absolution that has already happened through the complete repentance. The forgiveness of sins is the effect of repentance.¹⁹ Behind this understanding is the theory that God does not deny grace to those who do what is within their ability to do.²⁰ According to this, the justification of the sinner appears as a consequence of his or her repentance that already happened in God's having forgiven his or her sins. In his intensive examination of the late-medieval doctrine of penance, Luther began to comprehend that repen-

19. Herbert Vorgrimler, *Buße und Krankensalbung* (Freiburg: Herder, 1978), 149.

20. FCC 102.

tance depends on a commitment from God that people accept and adopt through faith. Luther states that Staupitz started this doctrine and that he received important impulses from Bernard of Clairvaux and from Augustine.²¹ Faith is the only appropriate answer to God's commitment, which is given in the Word. The justification of the human being happens through grace alone, through faith in the salvation wrought by Jesus Christ. Indeed, "even in the sixteenth century, there was a significant convergence between Lutheran and Catholic positions concerning the need for God's mercy and humans' inability to attain salvation by their own efforts."²²

However, Catholic theologians found Luther's views unsettling:

Some of Luther's language caused Catholics to worry whether he denied personal responsibility for one's actions. This explains why the Council of Trent emphasized the human person's responsibility and capacity to cooperate with God's grace. Catholics stressed that the justified should be involved in the unfolding of grace in their lives. Thus, for the justified, human efforts contribute to a more intense growth in grace and communion with God.²³

On the one hand, the Council of Trent stated clearly that persons could not be justified through their works or through the powers

21. See Wolfgang Thönissen, "Luthers 95 Thesen gegen den Ablass (1517): Ihre Bedeutung für die Durchsetzung und Wirkung der Reformation," in Irene Dingel and Hennig. P. Jürgens, *Meilensteine der Reformation: Schlüsseldokumente der frühen Wirksamkeit Martin Luthers* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2014), 95.

22. FCC 119.

23. FCC 120.

of their nature without divine grace.²⁴ The only cause for our justification is God's justice, through which he makes us just.²⁵ On the other hand, although neither faith nor works could earn the grace of justification, the Council emphasized that persons must contribute through free will and through agreeing to prepare for receiving the grace of justification and to increase the grace through good works.²⁶ Together with the forgiving of sins, the human being by his or her works receives the virtues molded through grace: faith, hope, and charity.²⁷

The dispute about these questions finally escalated when Luther and the other reformers started to teach the doctrine of justification of the sinner as the "first and main article"²⁸ and "guide and judge of all parts of the Christian doctrine":²⁹

That is why a division on this point was so grave and the work to overcome this division became a matter of highest priority for Catholic–Lutheran relations. In the second half of the twentieth century, this controversy was the subject of extensive investigations by individual theologians and a number of national and international dialogues.³⁰

After this, the results of these investigations and dialogues could finally be officially received by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation in the Joint Declaration on the

24. Denzinger–Hünemann (Original German), 1551. (Hereafter, DH.)

25. DH 1529.

26. DH 1554.

27. DH 1530.

28. Martin Luther, *Schmalkaldische Artikel* II, 1 (1537).

29. *Weimarer Ausgabe*, 39/I; 205, 2f.

30. FCC 122.

Doctrine of Justification from 1999.³¹ The consensus reached therein about the basic truths of the doctrine of justification states: "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."³² The expression "by grace alone" is explained as follows: "The message of justification . . . tells us that as sinners our new life is solely due to the forgiving and renewing mercy that God imparts as a gift and we receive in faith, and never can merit in any way."³³

Only within this framework can the limits and the dignity of human freedom and action be determined. With respect to the movement of the human being toward salvation, the expression "by grace alone" is interpreted in such a way "that all persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation. The freedom they possess in relation to persons and the things of this world is no freedom in relation to salvation."³⁴ Regarding the salvation of the human being, the cause-and-effect relation between justice and God's grace, between justification and a person's salvation, has been clearly stated. Only in this order set by God can the freedom and the active contributions of the human being be adequately determined. Thus was captured a fundamental consensus that includes the conviction that the once uttered condemnations no longer meet the doctrine of confession of the respective other side. It is a consensus in fundamental truths that supports the different issues and prioritizations.

31. FCC 123.

32. *Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification*, No. 15 (Hereafter, GE.)

33. GE No. 17.

34. GE No. 19.

On the Question of the Eucharist

In late-medieval theology, the prevailing view was that the Real Presence of Christ is unalterably tied to the doctrine of transubstantiation laid down by the Fourth Lateran Council. Of course, later on, theologians focused on the explanation of this doctrine,³⁵ in which no ultimate agreement was found. Luther also believed in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ's body and blood in the sacrament.³⁶ His opposition did not deny the Real Presence. Rather, he stated that it is Christ who gives himself to the communicants in his body and his blood. However, Luther had questions about the manner in which the church doctrine expressed the secret of Christ's presence.³⁷ Thereby, he shared many theologians' skepticism whether the philosophical interpretation could be achieved only with the help of the Aristotelian distinction between substance and accidents. Catholic theologians interpreted his rejection of the idea of transubstantiation as Luther wanting to give up the Real Presence.

However, the Council of Trent also distinguished between the belief in the change of the elements and its conceptual definition: "This change [*conversio*] was called the transformation of substance [*transsubstantiatio*] aptly and in the proper meaning of the word by the Holy Catholic Church."³⁸ The Council grasps this even more clearly in Canon II of the Decree on the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist: The Catholic Church calls "that wonderful and singular conversion of the whole substance."³⁹ In the Catholic

35. DH 802.

36. Burkhard Neunheuser, *Eucharistie in Mittelalter und Neuzeit* (Freiburg: Herder, 1963), 44–53.

37. FCC 141.

38. DH 1642.

39. DH 1652.

view, the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the forms of bread and wine understood as the whole reality of Jesus Christ seemed to be insured through the terminological concept of transubstantiation. Of course, the church was not aware of the difficulties that this concept entailed. This later resulted a clear mutual condemnation, especially with regard to the question of the sacrifice. Luther determined that, in light of the question of sacrifice, no convergence was possible anymore.

Through centuries of controversial theological disputes and clarifications, the following view has prevailed: "In the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Jesus Christ, true God and true human being, is present fully and wholly with his body and his blood under the sign of bread and wine."⁴⁰ This joint statement embraces the insight that one can hold on to the transformation of substance without acquiring the conceptual language of transubstantiation. "Currently, in the Lord's Supper, the elevated Lord is received by the congregation in his conveyed body and blood, with Divinity and humanity, through the word of promise, in the gifts of the meal of bread and wine in the power of the Holy Spirit."⁴¹ Today, Lutherans and Catholics can emphasize the secret of the Presence of Jesus Christ together, even though they do it in different ways.

A similar situation occurred with regard to the sacrificial character of the Eucharist. Luther's opposition did not address whether the Eucharist could be understood as a sacrifice but how the church doctrine taught the understanding of this secret. In the late Middle Ages, the single and once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ was no longer fully understood. In the Mass many theologians saw

40. *Das Herrenmahl: Bericht der Gemeinsamen Römisch-katholischen/Evangelisch-lutherischen Kommission*, 1978, No. 16.

41. Lehmann and Pannenberg, 122.

another sacrifice that was added 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.”⁴² Here, Luther searched for a theological solution. To avoid the assumption that the sacrifice was a good work of human beings, Luther tied the idea of the sacrifice to the idea of memory. It is Christ himself who gives himself to those who receive him. It was his fundamental conviction that the gift of Christ himself can be received only in faith. Thus, Luther could hold on to the sacrificial character of the Eucharist by understanding it as an offering of thanksgiving.

The Council of Trent also used the guiding concept of memory and understood the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ that in the celebration of the Eucharist is made present for and given to the believers as a true and real sacrifice. The Lutheran-Catholic dialogue has succeeded in largely resolving this controversy:

Together, Catholic and Lutheran Christians profess that Jesus Christ “is present in the Lord’s Supper as the crucified who died for our sins and rose again for our justification, as the sacrifice that was delivered for the sins of the world once and for all.” This sacrifice can neither be continued, nor repeated, nor replaced, nor complemented; but it can and should take effect each time anew amidst the congregation. There are different interpretations among us about the manner and measure of this effect.⁴³

42. FCC 146.

43. *Das Herrenmahl*, No. 56.

The crucial progress lies in overcoming the separation of sacrifice and sacrament. The one event of the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ is present in a sacramental manner in the performance of the Eucharist wherein the events of the cross become present in bread and wine, namely, the presence of his body and his blood in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Memory and presence are not two manners of his Real Presence that are separate from each other but two sides connected with each other in one and the same event. When this becomes clear, then overcoming the controversy lies in bridging different ways of thinking by affirming the fundamental shared conviction that salvation brings the presence of Christ.

About the Ministry

Luther’s opposition to the understanding of the ministry in the late medieval church did not refer primarily to denying the sacred priesthood but to an interpretation popular in the Middle Ages that claimed a real difference between the ministry and being only a Christian. “Luther’s theological vision of the Christian as priest contradicted the order of society that was widely held in the middle ages. According to Gratian, there were two kinds of Christians, clerics and lay people.”⁴⁴ With his doctrine of the general priesthood of all Christians, Luther wanted to take away the basis of this distinction. “What a Christian is as a priest arises from participation in the priesthood of Christ. He or she brings the concerns of the people in prayer before God and the concerns of God to others through the transmission of the gospel.”⁴⁵

44. *Decretum Gratiani* 2.12.1.7 (Emil. Friedberg Edition).

45. FCC 164.

Luther's critique was directed at the difference in the state of grace of a priest and a lay Christian. All Christians are in a truly spiritual state. Luther understood the ordained ministry as public service for the whole church: "Pastors are *ministri* (servants). This office is not in competition with the common priesthood of all baptized but, rather, it serves them so that all Christian people can be priests to one another."⁴⁶ In his writing to the Bohemians, Luther discussed whether an appointment of a priest in the ministry was possible without the act of a bishop—for example, if a congregation in a situation of need could recommend and confirm a suitable person to the priest's office out of its assembly. Thereby, Luther assumed that the ordained ministry was necessary for the church.⁴⁷ After Luther's death, Melancthon held on to the conviction that the ordination could be called a sacrament.⁴⁸

While the Council of Trent spoke of a sacred ministry (*sacerdotii ministerium*),⁴⁹ a visible, and external priesthood,⁵⁰ the Second Vatican Council succeeded in largely resolving this issue: "Ordained ministers have a special function within the mission of the entire Church."⁵¹ The ministry is a form of service to the Word of God, the proclamation of the gospel. It includes the administration and the conferring of the sacraments. Of course, in regard to the topic of the ministry, many questions are still unresolved: the three-stage ministry, the ordination as a sacramental act of

46. FCC 165.

47. *Die Apostolizität der Kirche: Studiendokument der Lutherisch/Römisch-katholischen Kommission für die Einheit*, No. 202.

48. Martin Luther, *Confessio Saxonica* (1551), 409.

49. DH 1765.

50. DH 1771.

51. *Die Apostolizität der Kirche: Studiendokument der Lutherisch /Römisch-katholischen Kommission für die Einheit*, No. 274.

ordination, the episcopate, the universal ministry, and the question of the priesthood of women.

On the Question of Scripture and Tradition

Luther's opinion on the standing of the Holy Scripture in the doctrine of the church developed out of his discussion of the doctrine of indulgence and penance. His early opponents, Johannes Eck and Sylvester Prierias, interpreted Luther's understanding of the Holy Scripture as a contradiction to the authority of the magisterium and Catholic Church. However, Luther emphasized the "sole" authority of the Holy Scripture not contrary to the authority of the church but in connection with it:

Luther himself only rarely used the expression *sola scriptura* [scripture alone]. His chief concern was that nothing could claim a higher authority than Scripture, and he turned with the greatest severity against anyone and anything that altered or displaced the statements of Scripture. But even when he asserted the authority of Scripture alone, he did not read Scripture alone but with reference to particular contexts and in relation to the Christological and trinitarian confessions of the early church, which for him expressed the intention and meaning of Scripture. He continued to learn Scripture through the Small and Large Catechisms, which he regarded as short summaries of Scripture, and practiced his interpretation with reference to the church fathers, especially Augustine. He also made intensive use of other earlier interpretations and drew on all the available tools of humanist philology. He carried out his interpretation of the Scripture in direct debate with the theological conceptions

of his time and those of earlier generations. His reading of the Bible was experience-based and practiced consistently within the community of believers.⁵²

In this debate about Scripture and tradition the Council of Trent decided that the proclamation of the gospel is the “the source of all beneficial truth.”⁵³ This truth is contained in written books and in unwritten traditions:

At a time when new questions concerning the discernment of traditions and the authority to interpret the Scripture arose, the Council of Trent as well as theologians of the time tried to give a balanced answer. . . . Trent held up Scripture and non-written apostolic traditions as two means of handing on the gospel. This requires distinguishing apostolic traditions from church traditions, which are valuable, but secondary and alterable. Catholics were also concerned about the potential danger of doctrinal conclusions drawn from private interpretations of Scripture. In light of this, the Council of Trent asserted that scriptural interpretation was to be guided by the teaching authority of the church.⁵⁴

The Second Vatican Council explained further that the Holy Scripture is God’s speech, while the tradition passes on God’s Word to the successors of the apostles so that they preserve, spread, and explain it in its proclamation.⁵⁵ In dialogue, it could

52. FCC 199.

53. DH 1501.

54. FCC 201.

55. Dei Verbum, 9.

further be explained that Scripture and tradition are not in the same way sources of the revelation. Both indeed arise from the Word of God. However, the Church’s magisterium does not stand above the Word of God but serves it: “The Scripture has made itself present in the tradition, which is thus able to play a significant hermeneutic role. The Second Vatican Council does not say that the tradition gives rise to new truths beyond the Scripture but that it conveys certainty about the truth attested by the Scripture.”⁵⁶ Together, Lutherans and Catholics can state: “Therefore, Lutherans and Catholics are in such broad agreement in regard to Scripture and tradition that their different accentuations in themselves do not justify the present separation of the churches. In this area, there is a unity of reconciled diversity.”⁵⁷

Building a New Church?

Where have the four discourses led us? What do they show? Between 1517 and 1521, controversies about the questions of justification, the Eucharist, the ministry, and the relation between Scripture and tradition developed quickly. These controversies led to divisions and ultimately to the splitting of the Western Church:

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, even while correctly representing the details of his position. For

56. *Die Apostolizität der Kirchen*, No. 410.

57. *Ibid.*, No. 448.

his part, Luther was not familiar with the cardinal's theology, and the interrogation, which allowed only for limited discussion, pressured Luther to recant. It did not provide an opportunity for Luther to understand the cardinal's position. It is a tragedy that two of the most outstanding theologians of the sixteenth century encountered one another in a trial of heresy.⁵⁸

Cardinal Cajetan ultimately did not understand Luther. The different ways of thinking did not allow for coming to an understanding. Thus, Cajetan concluded that Luther's understanding of the certainty of faith implied the founding of a new church.⁵⁹ Luther's other opponents, Eck and Prierias, reached the same conclusion. Can we understand each other better today?

The more precisely one can account for Luther's opposition within the web of discussions about justification, sacrament, ministry, and understanding the Scripture at the time, the more clearly it can be recognized that the respective intended messages do not have to stand in opposition to each other. The Lutheran-Catholic dialogue was able to define more clearly the different statements, their intended meanings, and finally the ways of thinking about them. The explanations attached to the respective individual arguments indicate more clearly the goals and the intended meaning of these arguments. Thus, misunderstandings and obvious errors, which have led to mutual condemnation, can be resolved successfully. By relating, without reducing, the different ways of thinking to each other, agreements between them become possible, which

58. FCC 48.

59. FCC 137.

allows the formulation of a consensus in fundamental truths. This consensus supports differentiating judgments that do not mutually exclude each other and leads to the following conclusion: "The reasons for mutually condemning each other's faith have fallen by the wayside."⁶⁰ Therefore, the dispute of the sixteenth century is over. What has been achieved with this theological result?

Taking Luther's Catholicity Seriously

Through the reform of theological thinking, Luther wanted to reform the practice and the life of the church. The reform of the church at the top and in its different parts has always been a concern of the church itself. And if this concern has always been connected with the Catholic tradition, then we must ask whether the reform efforts in theology and ecclesiology that Luther intended had to lead in principle to the splitting of the church and thus to the abandonment of his Catholicity. Answering this question cannot be a matter of completely rehabilitating Luther's life and work on the Catholic side of our present dialogue. Rather the question can be considered to decide whether the once declared and always repeated convictions and condemnations of Martin Luther's person and work on the Catholic side need to be upheld in the long run.

Both the classic Catholic Luther research and the historical-theological examination conducted in the twentieth century have concluded that the Catholic convictions declared at the time of the Reformation about Luther's person and work, as well as about the doctrine of the confessional writings, were not always conducted properly and were partially based on misunderstandings,

60. FCC 238.

errors, and wrong emphases. Today's judgments make it possible for the dispute of the sixteenth century to be resolved, and thereby the reasons for the Catholic condemnations as well as those of the Lutherans have fallen by the wayside.⁶¹

Hence, we now understand that Martin Luther was and is forever rooted in the Catholic tradition, which includes diverse traditions of theological opinion and teaching. Luther developed his concerns as reform within Catholicism, and he wanted to bring them to the fore within Catholicism. A new church tradition always materializes simultaneously inside and outside of the standing theological and liturgical traditions. In Luther's case, his concerns with reform and his Catholicity did not mutually exclude each other. This view, which grows from new insight into Luther's Catholicity, is now a real challenge for the Catholicity of the whole church. If Luther's Catholicity cannot be denied, then it must be seen as a constant and lasting challenge for the Catholicity of the church. That Luther went his own way with his reform and that eventually a Lutheran confessional church arose cannot be denied historically. Today, this fact constitutes a principal ecumenical challenge. Possibly, its main implication is that whoever wants to be Catholic today has to be ecumenical!

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