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Summarizing and drawing together implications for theology in the life of the churches and for theological formation

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Indeed to God leisure is a service; yes, there is nothing greater than leisure. For that very reason He wanted the Sabbath to be so rigidly observed.

Luther from Coburg to Melancthon in Augsburg, 1530

I shall start with a mandatory disclaimer for this occasion. I apologize in advance for what by necessity is going to be a botched attempt at summarizing in 30 minutes, 6 days of interaction, seminars, group discussion and almost 20 profound and rich lectures.

This last week marked an historical event in the life of theological studies in the LWF. It is the culmination of a process that was formally begun when the Executive Council of the LWF met in Namibia fourteen years ago. On that occasion, the Council received the “Ten Theses on the Role of Theology in the LWF” drafted by the Program Committee for Theology and Studies. This seminal document stated that unlike the way in which theology had hitherto been carried out in the LWF, in which the Department of Studies has been a center of production and dissemination of theology, the times now called for theology to be done as a network, connecting local theological knowledge produced throughout the whole of the communion to (a) give expression to theology in the life of the churches and (b) to offer guidance that could orient and correct the ministry of the church in function of its mission.

What was envisioned at the time was to carry out theological studies in the LWF with substantially reduced financial and human resources. This offered the possibility to re-imagine theological formation in and for the life of the churches. However, the culmination of this process, as witnessed in this conference and others that led up to it, evinced a tension that the churches of the Reformation inherited from their inception, because the Reformation was not about reforming theology, but about “re-forming” the church. Theology was a function of this re-forming. And, to put it bluntly, the tension is a question of power. In other words, the question is, Who speaks for the church? This speaking for the church has two senses: one in which it means to speak *as* church, as the authoritative voice of the church (*ecclesia docens*); the other means to speak *to* the church, addressing it and correcting it (*ecclesia discens*).

In this tension between the teaching church and the learning church, between the church that speaks and the church that is spoken to, *communio* happens, and happens only as this tension abides. Phrasing it differently, *communio* is the event that takes place in the exact tense interface between the teachings of the church and its mission, because mission is only mission if it is listening to the other and speaking back to the church. Remember our examination of the use of *koinonia* by Paul in Galatians 2. The pillars of the church of Jerusalem were speaking *as* Church; Paul, because of his mission to the uncircumcised, was speaking to the church. In that tense meeting, *koinonia* happened without settling the

differences in theological convictions. The pillars (Cephas, John, James) spoke *as* church, Paul, out of his missionary challenges, spoke to church for the sake of the people. The only point that kept the communion was that they agreed to remember the least ones, the ones that had the face and the wounds of Jesus.

The point I am stressing here is that we are truly inheritors of the Reformation not only by the content of its theological formulations, but above all by the audacious spirit exhaling through the movement in which speaking *as* and speaking *to* became a crossing, the community of the cross in its feeble, unstable, and weak (re)formation. And in this tension, conflict and strife were not a transitional moment in the process of finding new stable ground and settling there. It was the Reformation itself which survives insofar as this audacious spirit keeps on breathing life into the church; there is no guaranteed stable ground for the church to be church in the spirit of the Reformation. And it is in this unstable ground between church and the challenges of its mission that communion happens. If the expression (later coined) that the reformed church is always a reforming church (*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est*) means anything, this is it.

And how did this come about? As the moment arose when those who spoke *as* church, its magisterium, had to be spoken to, had to be held accountable to the very source, the apostolic witness, which they claimed as the ground for their speaking *as* church, the foundation of their legitimacy. This speaking to, the theological voices of protest were raised by those who experienced in their lives and studied in unyielding freedom the transforming power of the Word of God (apropos, this is all that *sola scriptura* means). Indeed, experience makes a theologian (Luther). Certainly, the Reformation did not separate speaking *as* from speaking to, much less cancel the former. One cannot exist without the other, the teaching church needs simultaneously to be a learning church. When one speaks *to*, it is already speaking *as*, and vice-versa, but the distinction is important because one of these “voices” at any given moment takes the commanding tone, there is a time to teach and there is a time to learn.

These introductory words are guide posts to help me situate what happened here during these last days. Times have indeed changed in the last half a millennium. Hardly a theologian, church representative, or office in the tradition of the Reformation would claim to be speaking *as* church, but the same attitude, grounded in a claim to legitimate authority, to an entitled voice, is very much among us—and needs to be. Today, this can be recognized when the commanding, magisterial tone of a theological discourse comes as a presentation of what the case is, analogous to the presentation of a picture that purports to describe what the case is, a scenery, a person, or whatever the camera manages to convey. This picture is framed by what entitles its claim to the truth, and can be many things: Luther’s writings, the confessions, ecumenical agreements, a tradition, a liturgical practice, a philosophical foundation, an epiphany, and so forth. The “picture” can be quite impressive and elaborate, very inclusive and sophisticated, detailed and clear to the point that if one accepts what is portrayed *in it* there might be very little to dispute regarding its representational accuracy. However, the frame that entitles it to a claim to the truth always excludes something that is deemed not to be important to convey what the case is. This is when speaking *to* ensues. And this is always also a speaking *for* that which is left outside of the “picture” by the frame. This then is the other theological voice that comes through those who represent something or someone in the sense of proxy, of standing for those realities excluded by the frame; and this voice claims the right for inclusion, or at least contesting the hegemonic function of the

portrait. When this happens we have the spirit of reform at work and the tension that (re)forms community. When these two are unhinged, and the “picture” is impermeable to anything else, we have fundamentalism. When we have only the “proxy” attitude without any claim to a place in the picture we have anarchy, or else the voice of “proxy” frames another alternative picture, and then we have sectarianism. But when the two are hinged in a tense relation then we have disputation, controversy, revolt or, hopefully, a conversation (“to keep company with,” “to turn about with”). And this conversation (but without excluding some revolt, controversy and protest) is what I read in the texture being woven in this conference, and the communion taking place here. These distinct voices could be heard in the discussions after the lectures, in the seminars, group discussion and personal exchanges. While the lectures were attempts at holding the hinge in place with an eventual emphasis either on the “picture” or on the “proxy” side, some occasional interventions lifted up the distinct tonalities of the two voices I refer to as the conversational parties that make Reformation a living event.

What Happened? The Axes of Conversation

This conversation runs along different axes and could be garnered from the lecture hall, seminars, as well as in formal and informal conversations. In each of these axes we may identify elements of the same tense polarity between speaking as and speaking to the church for the people. So, consider these that I harvest from my frantically scribbled notes, and you might add others I have missed:

a. **The methodological axis:** text vs. context, acculturation vs. inculturation, academic vs. non-academic, center vs. margin, proclamation vs. dialogue, theory vs. praxis, the one vs. the many, unity vs. diversity, the solid vs. the fluid, stability vs. instability, discipline vs. interdisciplinarity, etc.

b. **The thematic axis:** purity vs. hybridity, dissemination vs. networking, confessionalism vs. ecumenism, colonialism vs. postcolonialism, orthodoxy vs. orthopraxis, mission vs. indigenization, Luther scholars vs. biblical scholars, systematic vs. pastoral theology, anthropocentrism vs. environmentalism, straight vs. gay, liturgical rigor vs. spontaneity, biblical literalism vs. secularism, formalism vs. event, etc.

c. **The geographical axis:** The West vs. the East, the North vs. the South, the global vs. the local, cosmopolitan vs. parochial, etc.

d. **The institutional axis:** hierarchy vs. egalitarianism, academia vs. community, church vs. society, conservative vs. liberal, liberalism vs. liberation

These poles that carry the stances of the “picture” and of the “proxy” happen at different levels. They were displayed at this international meeting, as they can be observed in local contexts as well, very much like the dynamics in a family (particularly in there are teenage children around), or even in one’s own personal experience when we have what is called cognitive dissonance, the process by which our mind keeps changing, which is the evidence that we are still alive.

The opposition in these binary pairings is not static; it is full of tension, unstable, and unsteady. The forms of representation—whether picture or proxy—slither as on a slippery slope and, depending on the context, the sides might be changed. For example, in some contexts, literalism may be the “picture,” while secular liberalism carries the voice of the “proxy;” (as in some of evangelicalism in the US) while in others it is the reverse (as in most

US mainline Protestantism). The saying, “To each tribe its scribe,” conveys the contextually bound character of this equation between the two forms of representation. Within these contexts, we have relative stability (relative because no context is hermetic and globalization has turned them ever more porous). Within these “tribal” contexts, conversation is also relatively stable. Contexts can be defined, among other things, by the fact that they administer dissent. Complications occur when contexts of relative stability are confronted with other contexts in which the “picture” and the “proxy” are different. Then, what in one context might be “picture” turns into “proxy” and vice versa. And this is what happened at this meeting in which people from every corner of the world came together. Who spoke as and who spoke to/from and how is that decided in this multi-contextual meeting?

A series of factors allow us to examine who is who in the multi-contextual occasion of this conference, which in turn allows us to recognize the discourse of those who spoke *as* and those who spoke *to*. One of these factors is the official language utilized, English, which is the *lingua franca* of North Americans and some Europeans. Other factors are symbolic and carry genealogical weight, in this case, the historic city of Augsburg, Germany, the birthplace of the most acclaimed confessional document of word Lutheranism. Genealogies establish birthrights which, in turn, generate entitlement (e.g., in the use of the expression “our Luther”) and lay claim to a preferential tradition (five hundred years in the European continent, which is significantly more than in any other part of the world). But decisive is the interface of this language, genealogy and tradition with political, economic, and ideological resources, many of which were amassed by the First World during and through the colonial enterprise. In summary, if one puts these elements together, what one has is what in political science is called hegemony, which is power linked to entitlement. If you take the first term in the binary settings presented above, it is likely to define the contours of the hegemonic position to the extent that the categories fit. The second term in the binary axes is likely to define those who have little claim to entitlement and limited power. So, in this multi-contextual environment, those who situate themselves in the second set of terms, or to the extent that they do so, are likely to be the ones who speak *to* hegemony and *for* the communities they represent, even if at home they may (and probably are) those who hold the “picture” and set the frame).

The good news is that this trans/inter-contextual multilateral conversation is happening, of which this conference is a superb example, an example of communion happening in the midst of and *because* of all our differences. And it is happening for at least three reasons: first, the very hegemonic center, when challenged to expand its picture of what is Lutheran, came to realize that what it had was indeed an idiosyncratic picture bound to a given context. This is what has been dubbed as “European theology coming to the awareness of its own contextuality.” The second is the mirror image of the first. There is a certain eagerness from those who are the theological subalterns of European (and later North American) Lutheranism to learn it, because this knowledge gives them leverage in addressing hegemony. Postcolonial studies have shown that the subalterns are more adroit at reading the entails of hegemony than those partaking in the dominant power in reading the subaltern (the use of English being the most obvious example). However, it is the third reason that in the present condition is more pertinent. The voices that speak to and for have grown louder. If half a century ago, the Lutheran presence outside the North Atlantic axis was all but negligible, today over 40 percent are already outside Europe and North America—and growing at a fast pace. When we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the majority of those who can claim a legitimate invitation to the banquet will

possibly be outside of the traditional axis of Lutheranism. Lutheranism is migrating *en masse*, and the father of the German language is now speaking in many tongues. Luther's figure is being transfigured. Catchwords of the Reformation assume new meanings, with theological as well as social, economic and political overtones (e.g., "Here I stand!"). This is what the Department of Theology and Studies saw coming more than a decade ago. The DTS has responded to the challenge, which now brought us to this event. Here the networking envisioned happened, here the tapestry into which we are woven has produced new and beautiful patterns.

What Did Not Happen? Deficits

The hypothesis laid out at the beginning of this summary is that this is imbued with the very spirit of the Reformation. This spirit was described as the tense encounter between the voice that speaks as church and the one that speaks to church and for the people, breathing life into the body of the communion. Even as times have changed the content of the debates over the centuries, the tonality of the voices here presented and the tension into which they are inscribed testify to the same spirit, and indeed the spirit of restlessness that enlivens.

Certainly, many could say that there should be more time for this or that in this already long conference; but that is inevitable—and necessary. By its very nature, conversation, if it is true conversation, is always an event that ends in a deficit, and in this deficit lies the key to the understanding of what needs still to be talked about. If these deficits did not exist it would not be a conversation. Some of them became evident and remain in the agenda for to be pursued as we continue to gather. For example, there is a need to deepen our eschatology to other questions. Probably we need to move into such questions as, Where is/are the eschaton/eschata? Where are the dead? Where is hell? There was also a certain uneasiness with regard to probing more deeply into the question of sexuality. The ecological challenge requires further examination so as not to be cast as a First World agenda. What would be a Third World agenda for understanding the human relation to the rest of creation? A similar issue that often cuts across latitudinal lines is the dialogue with peoples of other faith. This dialogue will increasingly be a challenge. Consider the upcoming scenario: not only are a fast growing number of Lutherans migrating to traditionally non-Lutheran parts of the planet, but the majority of Lutherans in the Third World will be members of churches which will be in places where they will be minorities in relation to other faiths, particularly in Asia and parts of Africa. If communion happens in the tension between church teachings and the challenges of mission, what will communion mean in these contexts? What was also surprising was the absence of a discussion about Lutheran theology and economy, particularly in this crucial crisis of an unprecedented global scope. While the last day was dedicated to topics related to church and state, theology and society, little attention was given to the relation of the church to political régimes the context of Islamic states (which is indeed related to the majority-minority upcoming challenge). There was also deficit in the discussion of theology and its relation to church structure. Is it enough to call upon CA VII?

But these deficits are symptoms signaling emerging challenges that invite us to further conversations, even when it is to revision old disputes not yet settled. The point is the conversation that evinces the life-giving spirit that animated and continues to animate the Reformation movement here and now that breathes life into the body communion!

Trajectories: Where from here?

I called this event a culmination of a process begun more than a decade ago. But culminations are not ends. They resemble a summit of a mountain in a range of mountains. Once one is climbed, it is time to go down and plan for the next and, maybe, even higher peak. What counts is the hiking and the climbing.

If the practice of communion and the spirit of the Reformation is to keep on giving life to the people of God, the task ahead is to take heed of what has been accomplished, make a note of what has not been addressed satisfactorily, and be attentive to the signs of time and of places where tensions arise and the promise of community abides—until and where we meet together to keep the conversation going, the labor in the weaving of the tapestry until all strands are woven together. And we know in what has been accomplished how much more is left to be done. The temptation that grows out of frustrating experiences with lack of good communication, the exasperation of not having someone agreeing with us in what seems an obvious point can easily bring the conversation to a halt. And not allow that to happen is a charge with which we should depart from here.

The Gospel of John, chapter 20, recounts the well-known story of doubting Thomas, a person I have, more than I care to admit, deep sympathy for. He was not there when the disciples were gathered and Jesus came into their midst. What the others had already seen, he did not. It is not too much to ask for evidence of a claim that experience shows to be unlikely. He did not do anything a person with of sane mind and sound reason would not do. He probably thought that his friends were delusional, were trying to fool him, or were simply nuts. This would be the perfect reason for him to keep some distance from those less than reliable people. But right after this story, the text continues: "A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them." This is the center of the Thomas story. No matter how much in disagreement he was he did not give up the conversation. And thus a communion was born!