

RECONCILIATION AND UNITY BENEATH THE CROSS

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“While we are profoundly thankful for the spiritual and theological gifts received through the Reformation, we also confess and lament before Christ that Lutherans and Catholics have wounded the visible unity of the Church.” With these words in the Joint Statement which Pope Francis and President Munib Younan signed in Lund, they gave expression to the message that is represented visually by the Lund Cross.

Two symbols mark the long axis of the Cross, namely the baptismal font at the bottom and the altar at the top. They point back to the cross of Jesus from where, according to the report of Saint John the Evangelist, blood and water flowed from the wound in Jesus’ side (Jn 19:34). The Church Fathers interpreted the water and the blood as images for the two sacraments of baptism and the eucharist, and in so doing expressed the fact that the two foundational sacraments derive from the cross of Jesus and constitute the Church. The Lund Cross expresses visually that we are on the way from baptism, which is already common to both of us, to the eucharist which we long to celebrate together and towards which we must take further steps. Thus the cross of Jesus shows us what already unites us, and for that we must be profoundly grateful. Gratitude therefore stands foremost in the Joint Statement.

The word “thankful” is then followed by the confession of guilt and repentance for the sin of wounding the body of Christ which both Catholics and Protestants have committed to the same degree. Confession of guilt and repentance cannot however stop there, but call for reconciliation. That however we can only receive from God, as Saint Paul states unmistakably in today’s reading: “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses

against them” (2 Cor 5:19). This is the liberating message of the Christian faith: God does not wait until we human beings come and reconcile ourselves with him; according to all human experience, God would in that case have to wait a long time. But more than that: We human beings cannot even go to God to bring him a compensatory offering in order to reconcile us with him. Instead, God comes towards us human beings and reconciles us with himself. Reconciliation is the underivable initiative that God takes, and a gift that he makes to us and the entire cosmos.

God’s reconciliation with us human beings takes place on the cross. Martin Luther rightly placed the message of the cross at the heart of his Reformation, and in so doing he challenged us to set our eyes on the gravity of the cross. The reconciliatory action of God in Jesus Christ is not a simple matter but hard work, or in the words of the Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer: not cheap but costly grace that became apparent in its ultimate logic on the cross of Jesus. According to human logic the cruelty of Jesus’ death on the cross should have meant revenge to the bitter end so as to restore the world to order once more. But on the cross God showed that the only “revenge” that he knows is his uncompromising No to violence and vengeance, and his absolute Yes to reconciliation as far as it can reach. The cross of Jesus is his great reconciliation day, his universal Yom Kippur.

We may also allow this unheard of message to speak to us in view of the history of the Reformation and church schism, in which we encounter much that is unreconciled and even war-like, and which calls us to reconciliation. The cross of Christ shows that we Christians can only be reconciled with one another if we first allow the reconciliation that God grants us to speak to us. Only in that way can we honestly claim to be on the way “from conflict to communion”.

Reconciliation occurs beneath the cross of Jesus. Beneath his cross we also find the source of unity. That becomes visible in the hour when Jesus on the cross entrusts his beloved disciple to his mother and vice versa: “Woman, behold your son” – “Behold, your mother”. When Saint John’s Gospel goes on to say that the disciple from that moment on took Mary into his home (Jn 19:24–27), we can glimpse there the deepest root of the unity of the family of God.

The Lund Cross too bears witness to this longing for unity. When it is handed over and entrusted to the Ecumenical Centre in this celebration, it is surely accompanied by the encouragement that the World Council of Churches continues to be engaged in the service of reconciliation and unity among Christians. When we receive the gift of reconciliation from God we are also called and obligated to proclaim God’s reconciliation and to work for reconciliation, with the authorisation of Jesus Christ himself. Let us ask him to continue to accompany the World Council of Churches in its mission to be ambassadors of reconciliation and unity in today’s world and to live according to the challenge of Saint Paul: “Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ: Be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20). Amen.

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