

THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

“From Conflict to Communion”: Strengthening our Common Witness, Globally and Locally

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It is my pleasure to provide a response to this fine document produced by the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Commission. It gives me great joy to share this opportunity with His Eminence, Cardinal Koch. We have met in Jerusalem and on other occasions. I deeply appreciate the work you do in both ecumenical and interreligious relations, not only for the Vatican but for the benefit of Christians throughout the world.

Today, my aim is to provide some general comments on “From Conflict to Communion” and comment on each of the five “ecumenical imperatives” that provide the document’s conclusion and our way forward into the future of Lutheran-Roman Catholic relations. Throughout, I want to focus attention on the ways I expect this effort will deepen relationships between Lutherans and Roman Catholics in local communities throughout the world.

In my context, ecumenical distinctions and religious differences are a common part of daily life. As one of the heads of churches in Jerusalem, I work with leaders in many other churches, including Roman Catholic colleagues. In my work as one of the Presidents of the Middle East Council of Churches, I deal with ecumenical issues on a daily basis. Close collaboration with my Roman Catholic counterparts in ministry is a source of joy.

This is the context in which I first read “From Conflict to Communion.” Above all, the document seeks to address difficult points in the history of Lutheran-Roman Catholic relations so we can deepen our relationships globally and get on with the work of jointly participating in God’s mission for the sake of the world. In places around the world, Lutherans and Roman Catholics live next to each other. Too often, they live with some vague sense of suspicion of one another or some sense that they are really not supposed to admit enjoying each other’s company. Through the centuries, we have engaged in violent conflict with one another. More often, however, we have failed to abide by the Eighth Commandment

and have borne false witness about one another. Now, as we approach the 500th anniversary of the moment that sparked the Reformation, “From Conflict to Communion” provides an opportunity to reflect on our particular history—now worded jointly by Lutherans and Roman Catholics—so we can correct our behavior and engage one another more constructively for the sake of God’s mission.

As President of this global communion, I am very interested to see this document received in local communities among our 75 million members. It will be helpful in places like Jerusalem where we already collaborate in strong witness. I think it will be even more helpful in places where there are still tensions and problems between Lutheran and Roman Catholic communities. In each of our regions and within each of our member churches, local relationships with Roman Catholics take different shapes. It is my sense that this document can be an important tool in improving relationships and, more importantly, common witness, in all contexts.

The new phase of Lutheran-Roman Catholic relationship signified by “From Conflict to Communion” could also lead to growth in higher levels of our relationship. The Commission has called baptism “the basis for unity and common commemoration.” It is the foundation of our shared witness. Baptism is what unites us. Through Water and the Word, we are engrafted into the church, the Body of Christ. In baptism, we are sent out into the world together for the sake of God’s holistic mission, in diaconal purpose. This shared foundation in Holy Baptism could challenge us to ask if we are only an ecclesiastical community or if we are a church with the marks of a church. We look forward to this issue being addressed in our ongoing dialogue. We hope that this document will be a bridge to this common recognition.

Speaking at the World Bank in April 2012, Oley Dibba-Wadda, Executive Director of the Forum for African Women Educationalists, shared the African proverb: “If you don’t know where you are coming from, you don’t know where you are going.”¹ “From Conflict to Communion” is grounded in a shared re-telling of the history of relations between Lutherans and Catholics. But it is not history told for its own sake. It is history that drives us toward new understandings of ourselves and our Roman Catholic neighbors so we can enjoy the fruits of a new relationship. In its closing pages, the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint

¹ See <http://10x10act.org/2012/04/>.

Commission offers five “ecumenical imperatives” intended to shape interactions between Catholics and Lutherans in this new era of dialogue. I will go through each in turn, offering brief comments.

- The first imperative: “*Catholics and Lutherans should always begin from the perspective of unity and not from the point of view of division in order to strengthen what is held in common even though the differences are more easily seen and experienced.*”

This means that in our Gospel-centered striving for Christian unity, our conversations and interactions should be focused primarily on what brings us together. This is not a call to ignore all difference. Far from it! But we should not allow those differences to drive wedges between us where bridges could instead be built.

- The second imperative: “*Lutherans and Catholics must let themselves continuously be transformed by the encounter with the other and by the mutual witness of faith.*”

This imperative reminds us that we are sisters and brothers in Christ. We are not to treat one another as theological opponents locked in a formal dispute (the manner of engagement familiar from Luther’s time). Even more, we avoid the temptation to act as though recognizing the good in our Catholic sisters and brothers somehow means a diminishment of our own Lutheran perspective. Instead, we are confident that the Gospel of Jesus Christ works throughout the entire world, drawing us into God’s mission and witness for the sake of the world. In this, we are mutually transformed.

- The third imperative: “*Catholics and Lutherans should again commit themselves to seek visible unity, to elaborate together what this means in concrete steps, and to strive repeatedly toward this goal.*”

We see unity not because it is simply a good idea, but because it is the desire of Jesus, grounded in his commandment of love. John’s gospel tells us that Jesus prayed to God the Father “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their

word, that they may all be one . . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17.20–21). Too often, the call to ecumenical unity can seem like a political arrangement or a simple treaty between countries, a formal agreement far from everyday life. Jesus makes it clear, however, that the quest for unity is for the sake of God’s mission, which is tied intimately to human lives. Different Catholics and Lutherans will have several understandings of what “visible unity” might mean. As President of this communion, I urge Lutherans and Roman Catholics to keep pressing toward the goal of sharing the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Again, this is not a matter of mere formality, but a real hope for local communities with families sharing both traditions. Such Eucharistic hospitality would be a profound sign of our visible unity as we gather in the presence of our crucified and risen Savior.

- The fourth imperative: “*Lutherans and Catholics should jointly rediscover the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ for our time.*”

Amen and amen! The legacy of the Reformation is nothing if it is not about rediscovering the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It makes sense that we would partner with Catholics and other Christians to rediscover the beauty in the Good News of God in Christ Jesus. To do this alone, for ourselves alone, contradicts the fullness of the promises God has made the whole world.

- The fifth imperative: “*Catholics and Lutherans should witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world.*”

Grounded in Baptism, we are sent out into diaconal service. Our common witness, however, is weakened by the regrettable fact that we cannot be jointly strengthened by the Eucharist. For centuries, both Catholics and Lutherans have engaged in vital, holistic ministry throughout the world. It is time for us to consider practical ways this work can be done

together. The call to service and the call to mission cannot be separated. If we are doing one together, we are no doubt engaging in both together.

“From Conflict to Communion” calls Baptism “the basis for unity and common commemoration.” Baptism is the foundation of our shared witness. My sense is that we have provided a great deal of emphasis on the questions of the Holy Eucharist—and these are important questions—but we must also lift up the basic unity we find in Holy Baptism. It is Baptism that unites us. Through Water and the Word, we are engrafted into the church, the Body of Christ. In Baptism, we are sent out into the world together for the sake of God’s holistic mission, in diaconal purpose. Our communion has been studying these questions for quite some time. The Institute for Ecumenical Research developed a study document on baptism in the early 1990s that led to intensive ecumenical conversation on the topic. The fruits of that process were collected in the 1998 publication, *Baptism and the Unity of the Church*. “Baptism is both a foundation of the church as a communion and a mirror of its nature,” the study document says. “To be baptized into Christ, to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, is to be baptized into Christ’s activity, both his earthly movement through death to resurrection and his present mission in the world through the Spirit. In relation to each, gift again implies call, a call to live out the gift given.” This vision transforms ecumenical engagement: “‘One Lord, one faith, one baptism’ is not something we must achieve, but the gift in which we are called to live and rejoice.”²

I am inspired by these five ecumenical imperatives, and not just for their capacity to inform and strengthen Lutheran-Roman Catholic relations. My sense is that, in these imperatives, the Commission has given us insights that will be of assistance in all ecumenical dialogues. In

² Michael Root and Risto Saarinen, eds., *Baptism and the Unity of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 12, 21.

fact, one could say that four of the five imperatives to be extended to interfaith relationships, if only we can find “visible unity” as human beings, each of us created children of God. “From Conflict to Communion” insists that the fights of the Sixteenth Century have ended. For this we praise God! Now, as we engage across lines of faith, it is time for all violence perpetrated in the name of God to cease once and for all. Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians each have their extremists and leaders willing to exploit religious identity for their own purposes. “From Conflict to Communion” offers another step in this interfaith awareness by lifting up both Lutheran and Roman Catholic mistreatment of Jews. In our time, even as we continue to work against anti-Semitism, it is also important to recognize our mistreatment of Muslims and Islam, and to counteract the Islamophobia present in many of our communities.

I turn now to grassroots realities. It is true that some Lutheran and Roman Catholic communities will harbor antipathy toward one another for some time to come. Good documents like this do not change everything. But it is also true that many other communities will see this document as finally catching up to the mutual welcome they have extended to one another for quite some time.

In our world today, people meet and marry across many lines of difference. We need to continue taking steps to ensure that faithful Lutheran and Roman Catholic Christians are made to feel that they have somehow betrayed their communities. We need to ensure that their children have no reason to be kept from the Sacraments and the Word of God simply because a priest or pastor challenged them to make a simplistic choice between traditions they both love. If priests and pastors begin demonstrating this hospitality and love, in-laws and grandparents will soon follow.

I know of married couples in suburban Illinois, in the United States, deeply committed to allowing their partners maintain their own confessional identity. One man kept his Roman Catholic confessional throughout his marriage and only joined a Lutheran congregation once his wife died after a long battle with cancer. Our dear, faithful people are negotiating these realities on a daily basis and it is good that we accompany them, supporting , loving and welcoming them as best we can.

And here in Geneva, the German-speaking Lutherans and Roman Catholics have the tradition of celebrating the Eucharist together once per year. This is an expression of Eucharistic hospitality we can model throughout both of our global communions. We can see that our faithful people at the local level are making their own decisions about the Christian life and our shared witness. The challenge before us is whether our global dialogue reflects the reality of our local communities. I therefore ask if it might be possible for us—Lutherans and Roman Catholics together—to declare the goal of establishing forms of Eucharistic hospitality by 2017. Such Eucharistic hospitality would be a visible sign of our unity in the midst of our shared celebrations.

The discipline of being *ecclesia semper reformanda* is a call to humility. As we approach the celebrations of 2017, we have an opportunity to revisit our foundational commitments, including the sacraments of Baptism and Communion. We must ask how we can best prepare ourselves to be in the spirit of the reformation, to celebrate the anniversary as disciples. In our commemoration of the Reformation, we reject triumphalism even as we strive to be clear about who we are and what values we claim. The Lutheran recognition that we are *ecclesia semper reformanda*, a church to be always reformed, is a sign of our humility calling us to

discipleship. It is in this spirit that I am pleased that “From Conflict to Communion” is an important step toward strengthening our common witness. I look forward to introducing this important work to the congregations in my church and supporting its study throughout our global communion.