

From Conflict to Communion
Common Lutheran-Catholic commemoration of the Reformation in 2017

Press release from the catholic partners

1. In 2017, Lutheran and Catholic Christians will commemorate together, but with different accesses, the publication of Martin Luther's indulgence theses 500 years ago. Already the 450th anniversary of the Confessio Augustana offered both Lutherans and Catholics the opportunity to develop a common understanding of the foundational truths of the faith by pointing Jesus Christ as the living center of our Christian faith. On occasion of the 500th birthday of Martin Luther in 1983, some of his core concerns could have been emphasized together. An intensive work on Luther's person and his works permitted to appreciate him as witness to the Gospel, teacher to the faith and admonisher to spiritual renewal. With view to 2017, we have today the opportunity to perceive Luther's theological reforming agenda as spiritual and theological challenge.

2. The view of the Catholic Church on Luther was based since centuries on the restricted and pejorative view of Johannes Cochlaeus, an influential theologian in the 16th century. The Catholic research of the twentieth century on Luther has paved the way for an appropriate discussion about the person and the theology of Luther: The breakthrough in the Catholic scholarship came with the thesis that Luther overcame within himself a Catholicism that was not fully Catholic. According to this view, the life and teaching of the church in the late Middle Ages served mainly as a negative foil for the Reformation: The crisis in Catholicism in the Middle Ages made Luther's religious protest quite convincing to some. Moreover, a hermeneutical comparison between the theology of Thomas von Aquin and Martin Luther indicates that both theologians have gone very different ways in the thinking which must not necessarily exclude themselves mutually, but can be complementary to each other in some respect. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, signed by both the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church in 1999, is built on this catholic groundwork. It affirms a consensus in the basic truths of the doctrine of justification between Lutherans and Catholics.

3. To understand Luther's spiritual and theological importance for the church, it is necessary to deal with his theology. The new Lutheran-Catholic document does so in detail by focusing on four main topics of his theology: Justification, Eucharist, ministry and Scripture/tradition. In a first step, it presents Luther's perspective on this topic and shows in a second step how it has been possible to treat this topic in an ecumenical way as well as from the point of view of the Catholic Church. So Luther's own theological understanding becomes obvious:

3.1 The conflict about the theology of Martin Luther focused on the understanding of the justification. Even in the sixteenth century, there were significant convergences between Lutheran and Catholic positions concerning the need for God's mercy and humans' inability to attain salvation by their own efforts. The Council of Trent clearly taught that the sinner cannot be justified either by the law or by human efforts. Catholics, however, had found some of Luther's positions troubling. Catholics stressed that the justified should be involved in the unfolding of grace in their lives. Today, the consensus in the basic truths of the doctrine of justification means that the

human is accepted by God's grace through faith alone and therefore receives the Holy Spirit, who equips and calls him to good works.

3.2 Luther's objection to the Catholic doctrine was not to deny the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of Eucharist, but rather to understand the "mystery of change" in the Lord's Supper. Today, Lutherans and Catholics can together affirm the real presence of Jesus Christ, even though they do it in different ways. It is similar with the question of the sacrificial meaning of the Eucharist. Luther's contradiction did not refer to the question whether the Eucharist could be understood as sacrifice, but how the church taught to understand this mystery. The ecumenical dialogue has succeeded in resolving this controversial question.

3.3 Luther's objection to the understanding of ministry in the Late Medieval church is not directed primarily against the denial of the ordained office, but against its quite widespread interpretation in the Middle Ages. This interpretation asserts a real difference, a conflict, between ministry and being a Christian. According to Gratian, there were two types of Christians, clerics and the laity. With his doctrine of the common priesthood, Luther wanted to take away the basis from this differentiation. It was the Second Vatican Council being able to resolve this contradiction. The Lutheran-Catholic dialogue acknowledged this achievement of the Council and included it.

3.4 Luther's understanding of the role of the Holy Scripture within the doctrine of the church developed from his dealing with the doctrine of indulgence and penance. His former opponents J. Eck and S. Prierias interpreted Luther's understanding as being contradictory to the authority of the teaching and to the authority of the church. But Luther emphasized the exclusive authority of the Holy Scripture not against the authority of the church, but in association with the church. The ecumenical dialogue helped to clarify as follows: In dialogue, Catholics strongly emphasized the role of the Holy Scripture in the life of the church.

4. The fact that the western Church had been divided at the time of the Reformation can not be disregarded on the occasion of an ecumenical remembrance. It belongs to the tragedy and the history of guilt of the church that in the dispute over the truth of the Gospel untruths and falsifications have been spread about the opponents. The Lutheran-Catholic document hereby takes into consideration the efforts of the popes who dealt with the confessions of guilt: Already in his message to the imperial diet in Nuremberg on 25 November 1522, Pope Hadrian VI complained of abuses and trespasses, sins and errors insofar as church authorities had committed them. Much later, during the last century, Pope Paul VI, in his opening speech at the second session of the Second Vatican Council, asked pardon from God and the divided brethren of the East. Pope John Paul similarly acknowledged guilt and asked for forgiveness as part of the observance of the 2000 Holy Year.

5. Luther's theology challenges Catholics today in a theological and spiritual way:

- Luther invites us to understand and to live the human life before God. Therefore, the question of the relation to God is the decisive vital issue ("How can I find a gracious God?")
- Luther invites us to draw from the Holy Scripture the decisive orientation for the understanding of God and the understanding of the human being

- Luther invites us to regard Jesus Christ as being the center of the Scripture and the center of faith, the one Mediator between God and human (see "Dominus Iesus").
- Luther invites us, the people living in a meritocratic society, to take seriously the words "by grace alone" even because Christ is the one Mediator. God's initiative precedes all human answer, however, seeks and awakens this answer.
- Luther invites us to take seriously the incarnation dimension of the faith, the corporeality of the mediation of the salvation and of the Gospel: God, who has become human in Christ, comes to us in the audible word of the sermon and pastoral care and in the bodily form of the word, the sacraments. From this point of view, it is possible to find agreements in the church understanding.

This common witness, which gives reason for joy and gratitude, is the basis for a deeper community between Lutherans and Catholics. They are already aware that they live in a deepened communion with Christ and which seeks visible unity in faith to Jesus Christ.

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