

LUTHERAN CATHOLIC DIALOGUE. THE 2017 ANNIVERSARY

The year 2017 will see both the five hundredth anniversary of Luther's famous ninety five theses, traditionally regarded as the beginning of the Reformation, and the fiftieth anniversary of the international Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, which has gone on continuously since 1967 and which has been one of the most detailed and fruitful of all the bilateral ecumenical dialogues. With these anniversaries in mind and desiring a commemoration of them which is both joyful and yet also penitential, on account of the past sins and deficiencies within both communions, the international Commission has produced its latest report *From Conflict to Communion. Lutheran- Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*.

An important tone is set by the two co-chairs in their Foreword where, having stressed Luther's teaching that 'the entire life of believers should be one of repentance', they say, 'we Lutheran and Catholic Christians want to take it seriously by directing our critical glance *first at ourselves and not at each other*', (my italics). Such an attitude should characterise the partners in *any* bilateral dialogue, the willingness to look again at their own denominational history and development and to acknowledge that within it which has been distorted as a result of polemics and self-justification against others. An early example is given in the ensuing discussion of the medieval legacy which constituted the immediate background to the Reformation. Both partners recognised that they had presented distorted views of that heritage in the generation following the Reformation schism, with Lutherans tending to present it as an era of darkness, whilst Catholics extolled it as an age of light, both views ignoring the very complex mixture of spiritual achievement, coexisting with deficiencies that cried out for reform and renewal, within the *same* period¹.

Roman Catholics may wonder what there is to commemorate about the Reformation per se. The answer, given by the Commission, is the genuineness of Luther's spiritual search and its very positive results in re-emphasising the centrality of God's free grace in the life of the Church and each Christian. The second chapter of the Report, 'New Perspectives on Martin Luther and the Reformation' gives flesh to this, showing how Roman Catholic scholars have come to a very different evaluation of Luther from the traditionally negative one of the Counter-Reformation and the Roman Catholic Church in general up to the time of Vatican II. It is now recognised that the Augsburg Confession of 1530, still the standard Lutheran confession, stated the doctrine of justification *within* the context of the faith of the traditional creeds and that it called for a real reform of the Church and a new zeal in Christian spirituality rather than a complete break with the past.

Para 30 cites the tribute paid in 2011 by Pope Benedict XVI to Luther. 'What constantly exercised (Luther) was the question of God, the deep passion and driving force of his whole life's journey. "How do I find a gracious God?"- this question struck him in the heart and lay at the foundation of all his theological searching and inner struggle. For him, theology was no mere academic pursuit, but the struggle for and with God'. Benedict clearly believes that this struggle still has lessons for us all today. He continues 'for who is actually concerned about this today-even among Christians?'

Reference is also made to modern Lutheran research as helping Lutherans to recognise the human messiness of the whole Reformation process, so often romanticised in the past, not just by Lutherans but by all Protestants. 'Lutheran theologians recognised the entanglements of

¹ *From Conflict to Communion*, p. 17 (para 19), hereafter cited as *Report*.

theological insights and political interests, not only on the part of Catholics, but also on their own side. Dialogue with Catholic theologians helped them to overcome one sided confessional approaches and to become more self-critical about aspects of their own traditions².

It is as a result of such mutual advances in understanding that dialogue becomes necessary. Para 32 stresses that, within it, both common agreements must be discerned, despite differences in formulation, but also that real differences must be tackled. ‘Because of the former, dialogue is possible; because of the latter, dialogue is necessary’.

It is perhaps a pity that no reference is made, as such, to the recent very interesting research into Luther’s understanding of sanctification. This has come particularly from Finnish Lutheran scholars, in part in the context of their dialogue with the Orthodox³. There is, however, mention of Luther’s strong doctrine of the ‘joyful exchange’ between Christ and the believer, in which the Christian receives his or her share in the righteousness, holiness and priesthood of Christ⁴.

The Report consists of six sections. The first, *Commemorating the Reformation in an Ecumenical and Global Age*, stresses the very different context from all the previous centenaries⁵. Due account must particularly be taken of the global context, including the concerns of the churches of Asia, Africa and Latin America, of the secular context with all the challenges of a post-Christendom era in which belief of any variety can no longer be taken for granted, and of the rise of new movements within the oikoumene, particularly those of a charismatic and Pentecostalist nature.

We may note that there are already separate, significant Lutheran and Catholic dialogues with Pentecostalists⁶.

The third chapter is entitled ‘A Historical Sketch of the Lutheran Reformation and the Catholic Response.’ This addresses the ambivalent and indeed accidental nature of much of the process. It is stressed that Luther insisted that his original theses were intended not as assertions but precisely for academic discussion. Para 46 underlines this

‘Luther offered questions for disputation and out forward arguments. He and the public, informed through many pamphlets and publications about his position and the ongoing process, expected an exchange of arguments. Luther was promised a fair trial. Nevertheless, although he was assured that he would be heard, he repeatedly received the message that he either had to recant or be proclaimed a heretic’.

Para 48 argues that Luther and Cajetan, the two ablest theologians of their era, misunderstood each other. Para 53 argues that the dispute was not so much about the supremacy of Scripture as its interpretation. Luther had no intention of founding a new church; however, he was increasingly drawn into organising new communities in the lands that sided with his teaching.

² Report, para 31.

³ Braaten, C.E. and Jenson, R.W. (eds) *Union with Christ. The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (1998).

⁴ Report, para 162.

⁵ Report, para 6. In 1917, the main emphasis in the quarter centenary celebrations was on Luther as a German national hero, resisting the Roman yoke.

⁶ See e.g. the chapters by Cecil M. Robeck and Ralph del Colle in Rodano, John (ed) *Celebrating a Century of Ecumenism. Exploring Achievements in Ecumenical Dialogue* (2012), pp. 163-217.

The Colloquy of Regensburg of 1541 was able to agree on justification, but, crucially, not on the eucharist. In some respects, one may see it as a forerunner of the Joint Declaration on Justification. However, in such matters, context can be all determinative of success or otherwise. In 1541, the context was one of hardening mutual alienation. In 1999, by contrast, it was one of increasing mutual rapprochement, powerfully aided by an ecumenically committed Pope and a Lutheran commitment to wide ranging ecumenical dialogue, the latter in particular showing important advances not only with the Roman Catholic Church but also with Anglicans, Reformed and Methodists⁷.

The fourth chapter looks at basic themes of Luther's theology in the light of the modern bilateral dialogue. Naturally, it 'harvests the fruits', to use Walter Kasper's phrase, of the earlier sessions of the dialogue, but it also adds some important points and lists, in particular, continuing Catholic concerns. It reminds us that the level of authority of the dialogue documents varies. Only one document, the *Joint Declaration*, has received the highest level of authority within both churches, in which respect it is unique amongst all the bilateral dialogue reports involving Roman Catholics and separated western churches. The other reports of the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue have been extensively studied but not accepted as definitive in either communion⁸.

The four basic subjects studied in this chapter are justification, the eucharist, ministry and Scripture and Tradition.

On justification, stress is placed on Luther's understanding that 'the words of God are words that create what they say'. They are promises that must and can only be received in faith. Sacraments 'are also words of promise-that show God's saving will.'⁹

A key balance in Luther's thinking is emphasised 'Salvation takes place by grace alone. Nevertheless, Luther constantly emphasised that the justified person would do good works in the Spirit'¹⁰. An important Lutheran theologoumenon is mentioned in para 107.

'Luther describes the relationship of human persons with Christ by using the image of a spiritual marriage. The soul is the bride; Christ is the bridegroom; faith is the wedding ring. According to the laws of marriage, the properties of the bridegroom (righteousness) become the properties of the bride, and the properties of the bride (sin) become the properties of the bridegroom. This 'joyful exchange' is the forgiveness of sins and salvation'. The next para follows this up with 'Luther insists that our righteousness is totally external because it is Christ's but it has to become internal by faith in Christ'. Para 113 adds that 'participation in Christ's righteousness is never realised without being under the power of the Holy Spirit who renews us. Thus, becoming righteous and being renewed are intimately and inseparably connected'.

Luther stressed, however, that the process of inner renewal of the justified will not come to an end in this earthly life¹¹ and in this we can see a tension with Catholic teaching which does affirm that in the case of those whom the Church can recognise as saints, this process can be

⁷ An excellent LWF booklet, *Lutherans in Ecumenical Dialogue: 2003-2010* is obtainable from the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg and gives a good idea of the current range of such dialogue..

⁸ *Report*, para 97.

⁹ *Report*, paras 103, 104.

¹⁰ *Report*, para 106.

¹¹ *Report* para 115.

and has been brought to a victorious conclusion *within* this life. The ensuing section on Catholic concerns regarding Justification, records that while Trent agreed with Luther that we cannot be justified without divine grace, it nevertheless affirmed the responsibility of the Christian in co-operating with divine grace. Catholics also feared that Luther's teaching on forensic justification 'seemed to deny the creative power of God's grace to overcome sin and transform the justified'¹².

The Joint Declaration has, however, been able to reconcile these tensions. Para 15 is central with its acceptance that by grace alone...and not by any merit on our part, we...receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts by equipping us and calling us to good works'. Lutherans for their part accept that 'believers are fully involved personally in their faith, which is effected by God's Word' and Catholics see co-operation as 'itself an act of grace, not an action arising from innate human abilities'. Whilst preserving differing definitions of what exactly constitutes sin, the two communions agree that in all Christians there remains a 'contradiction to God within the selfish desires of the old Adam', against which 'a lifelong struggle is necessary'¹³.

Both communions agree that there is no longer any essential church dividing contradiction in their different emphases on this matter.

The section on the eucharist records the high degree of consensus already achieved in the dialogue. There is agreement on the objective presence of Christ in the eucharist, present independently of any degree of faith on the part of communicants. Lutherans surely could endorse the Catholic statement in para 149 that 'when they insist on a transformation of the elements themselves, they want to highlight God's creative power, which brings about new creation in the midst of the old creation'.

The recovery of the concept of anamnesis has helped to reconcile old conflicts over eucharistic sacrifice through a common agreement that 'the one event of the Cross is present in sacramental mode.'¹⁴

Nevertheless, certain tensions are recorded as persisting within this framework. Luther strongly stressed the eucharist as *gift* and was suspicious that any concept of 'offering' turned it into a *work*¹⁵. One wonders whether a contemplation of the achievement of the international Catholic-Methodist dialogue, with its recent stress on the alternate terminology of 'offering' and 'pleading' might help here, as also might the stress on the eucharist as Christ's gift and invitation to enter in active discipleship into the paschal mystery¹⁶. One may add that insofar as we offer anything, even praise and thanksgiving (which Lutherans admit to be integral to the eucharist), we do so only in Christ, through Christ and with Him in the power of the Spirit¹⁷.

On ministry, some differences continue. Whilst there is now common agreement on the royal priesthood of all the faithful, Roman Catholic teaching is clear that there is also a *different*,

¹² *Report*, para 121.

¹³ *Report*, para 135, citing *Joint Declaration*, para 28.

¹⁴ *Report*, para 159.

¹⁵ *Report*, para 147

¹⁶ *Encountering Christ the Saviour: Church and Sacraments* (2011), pp. 37-9,42.

¹⁷ As *Encountering* insists, 'we are drawn into Christ's offering', p. 37.

though related, ministerial priesthood¹⁸. The Lutherans record the fact that, over the last hundred and fifty years there has been a lively debate amongst them as to whether the ordained ministry is of divine institution or human delegation. However, despite Luther's rejection of ordination as a sacrament, he did accept that the ministry was of divine institution and perpetual necessity in the Church¹⁹.

One suspects that the ongoing debate would be helped by the recent agreement within Anglican-Lutheran dialogue in America that while there is one ministry, it exists in three differentiated forms, those of bishop, presbyter and deacon. It is also worth noting that though Lutherans have never denied the legitimacy of episcopal government in the Church and, indeed, have preserved it in the Scandinavian and Baltic countries, there continues to be general agreement amongst them that it is not mandatory.

Three paragraphs retail continuing Catholic concerns, that 'in Catholic theology, the ordained minister is sacramentally empowered to act in the name of Christ as well as the Church' and 'the question of how, without the episcopal office, church unity can be maintained in times of conflict'. Finally, whilst conceding that 'the dignity and responsibility of all the baptised in a for the life of the Church were not adequately maintained in the late medieval period, they are concerned that Luther's doctrine of the common priesthood does not adequately maintain the Church's hierarchical structures²⁰.

The last point raises huge issues of synodality in the Church and the relationship between the magisterium and the duty of consulting the *sensus fidelium* of the people. These are not discussed but will and must be an important part of the future dialogue between all the Protestant churches and Rome, as well in ARCIC.

Finally, I note the rather tentative hope that there may be some further progress towards at least partial Catholic recognition of the Lutheran ministry on the basis both of the fact that 'it has been able to fulfil its task of keeping the Church in the truth' and secondly that Catholic acceptance of the work of the Spirit within 'ecclesial communities' 'would have implications for some mutual recognition of ministry'²¹.

Lastly, we come to the question of Scripture and Tradition. Luther regarded Scripture as the first principle on which all theological statements must be directly or indirectly grounded... He called it the matrix of God in which he conceives us, bears us and gives us birth. He had high regard for its power. 'Note that the strength of Scripture is this, that it is not changed into the one who studies it, but that it transforms one who loves it into itself and its strength.'²²

The Report notes, however, that Luther rarely used the term *sola scriptura*; moreover, he read Scripture 'in relation to the christological and trinitarian confessions of the early Church which, for him, expressed the intention and meaning of Scripture'²³. Nor did he underrate the

¹⁸ *Report*, para 173.

¹⁹ *Report*, para 166.

²⁰ *Report*, paras 173-5.

²¹ *Report*, para 194.

²² *Report*, paras 196, 197.

²³ *Report*, para 199.

importance of Tradition in so far as it did not ‘obscure’ Scripture, but rather helped to bring home its meaning²⁴.

The Catholics, in response to these statements, stressed the teaching of Vatican II that the magisterium is ‘not above the Word of God but stands at its service’. They acknowledged, however, that between the sixteenth century and Vatican II, there had been a tendency to ‘isolate the magisterium as a binding interpretative authority from other theological loci’²⁵. They emphasises the current commendation of bible reading in a prayerful spirit (in accordance, we may also note with Luther’s own teaching). They cite *Dei Verbum* on ‘the force and power of the Word of God’ which is ‘the support and energy of the Church...the food of the soul’²⁶. The last phrase is reminiscent of Wesley’s words, ‘words that endless bliss impart, kept in an obedient heart’²⁷. However, the Catholics also note that ‘the Catholic experience was that ecclesial life is enriched by diverse factors not reducible to Scripture alone’²⁸. These, presumably include many devotional practices and forms of Christian service, developed at a later stage, perhaps analogous to those ‘prudential means of grace’ that Wesley commended to the Methodist people alongside the ‘institute’ means, commended directly in Scripture.

Despite this degree of rapprochement, there still remain important related issues to be discussed, particularly in relation to the church, the necessity of sacramental ordination and the sacramental character of episcopal ordination.

At the very end of this section, the Report cites a very significant statement from the 1993 report of the dialogue Church and Justification, a report which proved to be a key building block for the subsequent much hailed *Joint Declaration on Justification*. It stresses that anterior to all discussions on the nature either of Justification or Church lies that action of the triune God which gave rise alike to the Church and its creeds.

‘Strictly and properly speaking, we do not believe in justification and in the Church, but in the Father, who has mercy on us and gathers us in the Church as his people: and in the Christ who justifies us and whose body the Church is: and in the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us and dwells in the Church’. It is the common faith in the saving action of the triune God that lies at the root of all Christian experience and ecclesial life and thus is at the heart not just of this but of every Christian dialogue²⁹.

Finally, the last two chapters of the Report both set out important markers for further progress, particularly in terms of reception. Section 5, ‘Baptism, The Basis for Unity and common Commemoration’ begins by stressing that ‘in remembering with each other the beginning of the Reformation, they are taking their common baptism seriously’. Baptism involves all Christians in the one body and anything that causes distress to one causes distress to all, of which they must then all take due account³⁰.

²⁴ *Report*, para 200.

²⁵ *Report*, para 203.

²⁶ *Dei Verbum* 21, cited in *Report*, para 204.

²⁷ Charles Wesley’s hymn, ‘Come divine Interpreter’, *Singing the Faith* (2011), the current official British Methodist hymnal, no. 154.

²⁸ *Report*, para 201.

²⁹ *Report*, para 217.

³⁰ *Report*, para 221.

It needs to be stressed that the joint commemoration is not a simple celebration as such. It includes elements of repentance, as well as of joy on both sides. The Lutherans invited Catholics to celebrate with them the Luther who gave new emphasis to truths that both can acknowledge, most particularly 'the insight into the mystery of the triune God who gives himself to us human beings out of grace and who can be received only in full trust in the divine promise'. Catholics have the encouragement of Vatican II in responding positively to this, since they 'must gladly acknowledge the truly Christian elements from our common heritage which are to be found amongst our separated brethren...For God is always wonderful in all His works and worthy of all praise'³¹.

However, there must also necessarily be space for repentance, first for joint repentance over the way in which 'in the sixteenth century, Catholics and Lutherans frequently not only misunderstood but also exaggerated and caricatured their opponents', and thus 'violated the eighth commandment, which prohibits bearing false witness against one's neighbour'. The chapter concludes with both Catholic and Lutheran confessions of sins against unity. Catholics record how both Adrian VI in 1522 admitted sins and errors 'insofar as the church authorities had committed them and how Paul VI, in his opening speech at the second session of Vatican II asked pardon from God and the separated brethren of the East.' Their example was to be followed on several occasions by John Paul II. Lutherans record their response to a presentation by Cardinal Willebrands in 1970, in which they were 'prepared to acknowledge that the judgement of the Reformers on the Roman Catholic Church ...was not entirely free of polemical distortions, which in part have been perpetuated to the present day'. The Lutherans also recorded their subsequent 'regret and sorrow' for the harm done by them to Anabaptists and Mennonites in the sixteenth century³².

Finally, Lutherans freely admit the vicious anti-semitism of Luther and, while still arguing for an element of continuing validity in his criticism of the papacy, they 'today reject Luther's identification of the Pope with the Antichrist'³³. One wonders whether a little more should be said about Luther's rather tempestuous character which may have influenced him to overstatement on many occasions.

Chapter VI lists 'five ecumenical imperatives' which are of general relevance to all bilateral ecumenical dialogues and not simply the Lutheran-Catholic one. They are, first, that they 'should always begin from the point of view of unity and not division in order to strengthen what is held in common, even though the differences are more easily seen and experienced.' Secondly, that 'Lutherans and Catholics must let themselves continuously be transformed by the encounter with the other and the mutual witness of faith'. Third, that they should 'recommit themselves to seek visible unity' and 'to elaborate what this means in concrete steps'. This is a particularly valuable point, reminding us that in all dialogues there are nettles that must be firmly grasped if we are to be true to the demands of our entry into the paschal mystery through our common baptism and the need to treat with utter seriousness the claims and perspectives of our sister churches. The fourth imperative is that they 'jointly rediscover the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ for our time'. That surely, is always a key aspect of every act of listening and dialogue, that we may together search more deeply into the mysteries of the faith. Finally, that we should be at one in common mission and service, in the face of a missionary task that will 'become greater the more pluralistic our societies become with respect to religion'.

³¹ Report, paras 225, 227, citing the *Decree on Ecumenism* of Vatican II.

³² *Report*, paras 231-237.

³³ *Ibid*, para 229.

This Report is to be welcomed, not simply by Roman Catholics and Lutherans, as an example of disciplined and irenic re-reading, in the light of the rapprochement effected by fifty years of dialogue, of one of the most creative thinkers of Christian history. The exploration of his towering contribution to Christian theology and spirituality does not solve all the problems, but does hold out much promise for the time when finally Catholics and Lutherans are able to be one in communion, fully united in their mutual affirmation of the riches bestowed by the Spirit on both communions.

As always, the critical issue of reception remains. It needs to be noted that some of the problems in reception differ as between the two churches. The Lutheran World Federation is a communion of most, though not all, Lutheran churches. It is the official partner in the dialogue with the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity. The LWF has no binding over authority over its member churches, each of which is responsible for its own ecumenical agreements and doctrinal standards.

It should also be noted that a minority of Lutheran churches, churches which hold a particularly strict and conservative interpretation of Lutheran and the classic Lutheran confessions, belong to a separate communion, the *International Lutheran Council*, the largest member church of which is the Missouri Synod Church in America. They have just called for an informal dialogue with PCPCU, perhaps spurred on by the recent report. I understand that preliminary conversations are to be conducted with the help of the good offices of the Johan-Adam-Mohler Institute for Ecumenism in Germany. It is hoped these discussions will continue work already begun in some very local conversations in North America and Germany. The ILC is not a signatory to the Joint Declaration on Justification of 1999. It feels that more work is needed on such issues as grace, original sin, sin and concupiscence and sanctification. Its criticisms of the work leading to the Joint Declaration relate primarily to the Lutheran statements in it rather than the Catholic response and emphases which it feels are well and clearly stated³⁴.

Both Lutherans and Catholics face the problem of reception at the local level, amongst their ordinary clergy and parishes. This report, like many of its predecessors is bulky and, at points, theologically demanding. It cries out for work in summary and simplification to be done by those who are capable of expressing its key insights in a way more user friendly to those who are not theologically sophisticated, however devoted they may be to ecumenical friendship with other Christians. This is a task for diocesan and national ecumenical commissions.

Bishop Jana Jeruma-Grinberga, recently retired bishop of the Lutheran Church in Great Britain, says of the report, 'it is clear that this is one report that must not be allowed to gather dust on church leaders and ecumenical specialists bookshelves'.

David Carter.

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³⁴ I owe most of the information in this paragraph to the Rev. George Semiec, a colleague on the Theology and Unity Group of Churches Together in England. He is a pastor of the ILC related Lutheran church in England and spoke to these issues at our most recent meeting. I understand also that the LWF and the ILC have recently held conversations. A few Lutheran churches belong to both bodies.