

The Commemoration of the Reformation as an Ecumenical Opportunity

Towards a Joint Declaration on Church, Ministry and Eucharist¹

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1. 2017 as a confessionalistic or ecumenical year?

Whether and in what way the commemoration of the Reformation can be celebrated in ecumenical fellowship and therefore as a significant ecumenical event depends in the first instance on how one understands the year 1517, the date to which the 500th anniversary commemoration of the beginning of the Reformation refers. The year 1517 recalls the nailing of the 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg by Martin Luther, and indicates unmistakably that it concerns – among the many Reformation events – the Reformation led by Martin Luther. But even the Lutheran Reformation was introduced in various countries at quite different dates. In Finland the Reformation was not a popular movement as it was in Germany, but was proclaimed and effected from above in 1527, as throughout the whole Swedish Kingdom. Mikael Agricola, known as the Finnish Reformer, did of course have good connections with Germany because his brother Skytte had sent him to study at Wittenberg University, where he was a student of Melanchthon, Bugenhagen and Luther, and he subsequently followed Luther's model in his work in Finland.

That prompts us even more to ask how the year 1517 is to be understood. In this regard one can imagine two distinctly different possibilities. If one interprets it on the basis of the first centenary in 1617, for which the decision was made during preparations that the 31st of October should be celebrated as

¹ Vortrag bei der Spring Assembly of the Finnish Ecumenical Council in Helsinki am 27. April 2015.

the beginning of the Reformation, then the Reformation commemoration would be placed under the confessionalistic banner of dispute and conflict. In 1617 it was clear that Europe was moving towards a momentous conflict and even a religious war. Since the Protestant communities in Germany and throughout Continental Europe needed a common point of reference in order to develop a clear identity, the first centenary celebration of the Reformation – which was at the same time the first Reformation Day – was characterised by anti-Catholic polemics and aggressive rhetoric.² The Lutheran pastor and General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Olav Fykse Tveit, has stated frankly: “The first celebration in memory of 1517 was the prelude to a series of destructive religious wars, the 30 Years War, which turned the remembrance of Luther’s courageous deed in 1517 into a weapon.”³

By contrast, the year 1517 appears in a quite different light if we consider it for its own sake and not in the shadow of later Reformation anniversaries, and furthermore if we take note that today not a few historians assume that the nailing of Luther’s 95 Theses did not take place at all in the manner it has been traditionally handed down: that the publication of his theses is instead to be understood as an invitation to an academic disputation, with which he above all wished to achieve the goal of “confronting the loss of credibility of the Church he loved”, and to rescue the Catholic Church which had until then constituted his world.⁴ In this respect, the year 2017 recalls the time when it had not yet come to a breach between the Catholic Church and the Reformer, the unity of the Church had not yet been broken and Martin Luther was still living within the

² Vgl. Th. Kaufmann, Reformationsgedenken in der frühen Neuzeit, in: *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 107 (2010) 283-324.

³ O. F. Tveit, Das Erbe der Reformation und seine Bedeutung für die ökumenische Bewegung heute, in: P. Bosse-Huber, S. Fornerod, Th. Gundlach, G. W. Locher (Hrsg.), *500 Jahre Reformation: Bedeutung und Herausforderungen. Internationaler Kongress der EKD und des SEK auf dem Weg zum Reformationsjubiläum 2017 vom 6. bis 10. Oktober 2013 in Zürich (Zürich – Leipzig 2014)* 109-124, zit. 110.

⁴ Th. Kaufmann, *Reformation und Reform – Luthers 95 Thesen in ihrem historischen Zusammenhang*, in: P. Klasvagt / B. Neumann (Hrsg.), *Reform oder Reformation? Kirchen in der Pflicht (Leipzig – Paderborn 2014)* 23-41, zit. 26. Vgl. Ders., *Der Anfang der Reformation (Tübingen 2012)*.

communion of the Catholic Church. This means that the year 2017 cannot be celebrated other than in ecumenical fellowship. But since it later came to a breach which is to be overcome ecumenically, it would be more appropriate in the first instance not to commemorate the year 1517 but the year 1530 in ecumenical fellowship, since the Augsburg Diet represents the determined endeavour to rescue the endangered unity of the Church, and can therefore not be underestimated in its ecumenical significance, as the Ecumenical Working Party of Evangelical and Catholic Theologians rightly evaluates: “It is possible that the churches of Western Christendom were indeed at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 as close to one another as they have never been since.”⁵

But if we return to the prospective Reformation commemoration, in looking back historically not only to the 500 years since the beginning of the Reformation, but also to the past 50 years of ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans, it must be obvious that a Reformation commemoration today can no longer be celebrated in the way that it took place in previous centuries. The Catholic Church is grateful for this ecumenical sensitivity and is pleased to accept the invitation to a common Reformation commemoration, as Pope Benedict XVI has already stated. In his address to the Special Audience for the delegation of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany in January 2014, Pope Benedict XVI stressed that on this occasion Lutherans and Catholics will have an opportunity “to celebrate an ecumenical commemoration world-wide, and to wrestle with the fundamental issues world-wide”, naturally not in the form of a “triumphal celebration but in shared profession of the Triune God in shared obedience to our Lord and his word”.⁶ In a similar manner, Pope Francis stressed in his audience for a delegation of the same Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany last December, that Lutherans and Catholics

⁵ V. Leppin und D. Sattler (Hrsg.), Reformation 1517 – 2017. Ökumenische Perspektiven = Dialog der Kirchen. Band 16 (Freiburg i. Br. – Göttingen 2014) 67.

⁶ Benedikt XVI., Ansprache bei der Sonderaudienz für die Delegation der Vereinigten Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche Deutschlands (VELKD) am 24. Januar 2011.

would have the possibility of “celebrating one and the same ecumenical anniversary world–wide, with as its focus, alongside the joy of following an ecumenical path together, joint prayer and heartfelt intercession to the Lord Jesus Christ for forgiveness of mutual guilt”.⁷

2. Ecumenical questions to the Reformation commemoration

Part of a Reformation commemoration in ecumenical fellowship, in which dialogue *par cum pari* is constitutive, is attentive and sensitive listening to one another regarding how those who invite and those who are invited understand the common commemoration, and in what way they can be involved. In this sense, a second train of thought attempts, in the spirit of ecumenical friendship, to formulate those questions which arise in view of a common commemoration from the Catholic point of view and thus from an ecumenical perspective.

a. Reformation and reform

“The Reformation did not intend to found new churches but wanted reform, the renewal of the whole of Christendom in the spirit of truth of God. The lamentable acceptance of the division of Christendom, the self-satisfaction with which one continues to live in confessionally divided churches and even to anxiously maintain the separate confessional tradition although every Christian confesses the one universal Christian church – that is profoundly ‘un-Reformational’ ”.⁸ These robust words of the Lutheran theologian and ecumenist Wolfhart Pannenberg suggest in the first place recollecting that the word “Reformation” includes the much more fundamental word “reform”, to distinguish between reform and Reformation and to ask how these two realities

⁷ Franziskus, Ansprache an die Delegation der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche Deutschland am 18. Dezember 2014.

⁸ W. Pannenberg, *Reformation zwischen gestern und morgen* (Gütersloh 1969) 25.

relate to one another. If one confronts this line of questioning, on the one hand the 16th century Reformation can be understood as a process of reform of the Church through the rediscovery of the gospel as its foundation, and through the concentration of Christian existence and ecclesial life on the person of Jesus Christ as the living word of God. The Reformation gives clear evidence of the fact that a true reform of the church can only come out of a profound encounter with the word of God in which the Church finds its true identity.⁹

In spite of this fundamental significance of the 16th century Reformation for the whole of Christendom, it cannot on the other hand stake an exclusive claim to the reform of the Church as a whole. Even a brief glance into the history of Christendom shows that in all crisis situations it has always referred back to the fact that in its life and in its mission the word of God must be accorded primacy. If we recall the two founders of the mendicant orders, Saint Francis and Saint Dominic, who in the first instance did not at all intend to found new orders but to renew the Church from within, and indeed by daring to live the gospel “sine glossa”, in its literal totality, in the evangelical form of life. Or we think of Saint Carl Borromeo who, on taking possession of his episcopal see in the Lombard metropolis, diagnosed the most widespread failings of the clergy in the absence of preaching, and saw his primary mission as bishop to be “a witness, to proclaim the mysteries of Christ, to preach the gospel to every creature”.¹⁰

With this principled stance he made a great contribution towards the implementation of the Council of Trent within his diocese and far beyond, and is for his part credited with the fact that in the period between the end of the Council of Trent and the middle of the 17th century, the Catholic Church was

⁹ Vgl. K. Kardinal Koch, Die identitätsstiftende Kraft des Wortes Gottes im Licht des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils, in: P. Klasvagt / B. Neumann (Hrsg.), Reform oder Reformation. Kirchen in der Pflicht (Leipzig-Paderborn 2014) 71-100.

¹⁰ Zit. bei G. Alberigo, Karl Borromäus. Geschichtliche Sensibilität und pastorales Engagement (Münster 1995) 39-40.

able to experience a far-reaching renewal with regard to religious life and above all its missionary initiative. Even though the Council of Trent is to be understood as a response to the Protestant reform, one cannot see it simply as a Counter-Reformation Council or an anti-Protestant counter-offensive. It must rather be acknowledged as an instance of Catholic reform, which has prompted the church historian Hubert Jedin to rightly replace the concept of Counter-Reformation – at least a one-sided understanding – with that of Catholic reform.

Against this background, the concept of reform has a home within the Catholic Church, and the Catholic Church understands itself as an *Ecclesia semper reformanda*. Following this line of thought, in the more recent past the Second Vatican Council also initiated a similar reform of the Church,¹¹ in that it restored to the Word of God that centrality that it must have in the life and mission of the Church. By fulfilling important demands made by Martin Luther, such as the rediscovery of the common priesthood of all the baptised, the celebration of divine worship in the language of the people and the option of distribution of the cup to the laity, the Second Vatican Council has even prompted the assessment that in the Council, Martin Luther in fact “found his Council”.¹²

When one calls to mind these and many other reform processes in the past and in the present of the Catholic Church, it is not legitimate to identify reform and Reformation with one another: they must instead be differentiated from one another. History shows that the Reformation is not and cannot be the only response to the necessity for reform of the Church. And history also shows that the churches of the Reformation too are time and again in need of reform. Since reform therefore demonstrates a greater radius than Reformation, the question

¹¹ Vgl. K. Koch, Was bedeutet heute „Reform“ der katholischen Kirche in der Schweiz? Zur Lage der Konzilsrezeption, in: M. Delgado / M. Ries (Hrsg.), Karl Borromäus und die katholische Reform. Akten des Freiburger Symposiums zur 400. Wiederkehr der Heiligsprechung des Schutzpatrons der katholischen Schweiz (Freiburg / CH – Stuttgart 2010) 365-394.

¹² A. Brandenburg, Martin Luther gegenwärtig. Katholische Lutherstudien (Paderborn 1969) 146.

arises even more pertinently of precisely how the constantly necessary reform of the Church and the historical process of the Reformation relate to one another.

b. Reformation and Church schism

In order to answer this question, let us once more briefly call to mind the – in my view undoubtedly – most radical reformer of the Church, namely Saint Francis of Assisi. Historical memory of him brings to light that it was not the mighty Pope Innocence III who in those troubled times preserved the Church from collapse and renewed it, but the humble and insignificant monk; moreover, it must be borne in mind also that Francis of Assisi in no way reformed the Church without or against the Pope, but always in communion with him. Francis is the successful example of a radical church reform in unity with the ecclesial hierarchy, and he shows that reform is a positive word also in the Catholic Church, but that the Catholic principle of a permanent need for reform seeks to avoid any breach with the tradition. By contrast, the church reforms of the Reformers all led to schism. This is the most profound reason why joy over necessary reform is on the part of the Catholic Church also mingled with pain, because it ultimately led to the division of the Church and to other negative ramifications. As a consequence, the commemoration of the Reformation cannot for us Catholics be a jubilee celebration, but must also be an occasion for reflection, confession of guilt and conversion.

This stance is totally consonant with the actual concern of the Reformation, above all of Martin Luther himself. His goal was a thorough-going reform of the whole Church, and precisely not a reformation in the sense of the ultimately shattered unity of the Church and the rise of new reformed churches. As Wolfhart Pannenberg has rightly stated pointedly: “Luther intended a reform of the whole of Christendom; his goal was anything but a separate Lutheran

Church.”¹³ If one takes Luther’s intention seriously, one must see in the historical fact that it could not be fulfilled at that time, not only the failure of the Roman Church of the time; the rise of a separate evangelical church body must instead be considered an emergency measure, and not as the success of the Reformation. The real success of the Reformation will only be perceived when the inherited divisions between Christians are overcome, in the restoration of the one renewed Church in the spirit of the gospel. Therefore it is only right and proper to expect that a common commemoration of the Reformation will also be a new and courageous impulse for the process of ecumenical rapprochement.

c. Reformation and tradition

The historical fact that the 16th century Reformation led to schism and the growth of new ecclesial communities gives us cause to name the fundamental difference between reform and Reformation. It belongs to the essence of reform that it can never have the result of that which has been reformed no longer being identical with that which was previously to be reformed. A reform involves the external phenomena and concrete realisation of the body to be reformed, but not its intrinsic nature. Otherwise it would constitute an essential transformation which has made that which was to be reformed into something altogether different from what it was before. From the ecumenical perspective then, that leads to the fundamental question whether the 16th century Reformation is understood in this sense as a reform of the Church or whether it did not instead lead in a much more radical sense to a change in essential nature.

This question arises above all because it is quite understandable that the Reformers had great problems with the medieval paradigm of the papal Church, but they did not however, as one could have expected, in any way return with

¹³ W. Pannenberg, *Problemggeschichte der neueren evangelischen Theologie in Deutschland* (Göttingen 1997) 25.

logical consistency to the Early Church paradigm. This is of course not true of Martin Luther in the early period, in which he to a great extent kept in mind the Catholic understanding of the Church,¹⁴ but only of the later phase of his life and work. In the course of history reformations have increasingly distanced themselves from the foundational ecclesiological structure that developed from the second century onwards and that the Catholic Church shares with all Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches, namely the sacramental-eucharistic and episcopal basic structure of the Church.¹⁵ Since according to this Early Church understanding the Church exists there where the episcopal office in the sacramental succession of the Apostles and together with that the eucharist as a sacrament presided over by the priesthood and the bishop are found, one cannot avoid the judgement that the Reformation produced a different type of church, or different types – since the ecclesial communities soon divided further among themselves – and the ecclesial communities that arose out of the Reformation also deliberately wish to be church in a different way. That leads in turn to the even more fundamental ecumenical question of the relationship between Reformation and tradition, or more precisely, the question how the Reformation relates to the entire tradition of the Church, of which 1500 years are after all shared by Catholics and Lutherans alike. And within this broader horizon, we would need to answer the question how we today as ecumenical partners individually and jointly consider the Reformation: still, as previously the norm, as a breach with the former tradition of Christianity that led to the beginning of something new, or in an abiding continuity with the entire tradition of the universal Church. It involves that question which years ago my predecessor as President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, Walter Cardinal Kasper, posed to the ecclesial communities that originated in the

¹⁴ Vgl. Th. Dieter, Die Eucharistische Ekklesiologie Joseph Ratzingers – eine lutherische Perspektive, in: Ch. Schaller (Hrsg.), Kirche – Sakrament und Gemeinschaft. Zu Ekklesiologie und Ökumene bei Joseph Ratzinger = Ratzinger-Studien. Band 4 (Regensburg 2011) 276-316, bes. 288-299: Kirche als Gemeinde bei Luther.

¹⁵ Vgl. K. Koch, Die apostolische Dimension der Kirche im ökumenischen Gespräch, in: *Communio*. Internationale katholische Zeitschrift 40 (2011) 234-252.

Reformation with regard to the Reformation commemoration, whether they perceive the Reformation as a new paradigm permanently separating ‘Protestant’ from ‘Catholic’ on the basis of a fundamental difference, or whether they understand it in an ecumenical sense as “reform and renewal of the one universal Church”.¹⁶ From the response to this question depends not only the manner in which Catholics can participate in the Reformation commemoration, but also and above all how the ecumenical dialogue of the Catholic Church with the ecclesial communities deriving from the Reformation is to continue.

3. From historical conflict to ecumenical communion

I have so far outlined the three crucial questions posed – from an ecumenical perspective – by a common Reformation commemoration, which I have deliberately formulated in a pointed manner, in the conviction that we should understand the Reformation commemoration as a welcome opportunity to reflect on our current ecumenical situation and to dare to take new steps into the future. The Reformation commemoration will be an ecumenical opportunity above all if the three focal issues are realised that form the heart of the ecumenical document drafted by the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity in view of the Reformation commemoration, under the significant title “From Conflict to Communion”.

a. Enduring the historical conflicts

Firstly, the title presents an obligation not to proceed too quickly to reach communion, but also to endure the conflict. We all have good reason for that, when we bear in mind that the Reformation was followed by church schism and

¹⁶ Kardinal W. Kasper, *Ökumenisch von Gott sprechen?*, in: I. U. Dalferth / J. Fischer / H.-P. Grosshans (Hrsg.), *Denkwürdiges Geheimnis. Beiträge zur Gotteslehre. Festschrift für Eberhard Jüngel zum 70. Geburtstag* (Tübingen 2004) 291-302, zit. 302.

bloody religious wars in the 16th and 17th centuries, above all the Thirty Years War that turned Europe at that time into a red sea; and that the development of secular nation states with strong confessional boundaries as a long term consequence of this momentous conflict must be judged as a great burden resulting from the Reformation period.

We Christians cannot suppress from our historical consciousness the fact that modern secularisation – or more precisely the process of depriving the Christian faith of its mandate for social peace, and as a consequence its privatisation – is to be understood as an unwanted and unintended ramification of the splitting of the Western church and thus to a large extent the fault of Christianity itself. Because as a consequence of the confessional wars Christendom was historically tangible only in the form of various confessions that were fighting against one another to the death, this historical constellation had to have the inevitable consequence that confessional peace could only be bought at the costly price that confessional differences – and in the long term Christendom itself – were disregarded in order to give the social order a new foundation, as once more Wolfhart Pannenberg has rightly diagnosed: “Where the secularisation of the modern world has taken the form of an alienation from Christianity, it did not befall the churches as an external fate, but as the consequence of their own sins against unity, as a consequence of the church division of the 16th century and the indecisive religious wars of the 17th, which left the people in confessionally mixed territories no choice but to restructure their co-existence upon a common foundation untouched by confessional conflicts.”¹⁷

If we further consider that Martin Luther’s Reformation effected a liberation from the dominance of the papacy entangled in the political

¹⁷ W. Pannenberg, *Einheit der Kirche als Glaubenswirklichkeit und als ökumenisches Ziel*, in: Ders., *Ethik und Ekklesiologie. Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Göttingen 1977) 200-210, zit. 201. Zum Ganzen vgl. Ders., *Christentum in einer säkularisierten Welt* (Freiburg i. Br. 1988).

confusions of the time, but itself very soon became involved in a similar dependence on the princes and among other things provided a theological justification for the persecution of the Anabaptists by the Lutheran authorities, and that in consequence the Baptist and other free church tradition see themselves not as subjects but as victims of the Reformation,¹⁸ we cannot in view of such historical memories so readily utter the claim that with the Reformation the dawn of the modern era had arrived and the church of liberty had been born. Both Catholics and Lutherans instead have every reason to join one another in self-recrimination and repentance for the misunderstandings, wrongs and hurt that they have perpetrated against one another over the past 500 years. Such a public act of penitence must in any case be the first step towards a common Reformation commemoration.

b. Rediscovery of communion

Only if Lutherans and Catholics can in view of the approaching commemoration muster the courage and the humility to confront the historical conflicts and the burden of their consequences will they secondly be able to follow the historical path to greater communion with one another. This path began with the a critical re-examination and re-valuation of the traditional polemical Catholic image of Martin Luther,¹⁹ which began already in his life-time with Johannes Cochläus, who incriminated Luther for destroying Christendom and degrading morality, and was taken up at once more at the beginning of the previous century by Heinrich Suso Denifle. A decisive turning point in the struggle for an historically adequate and theologically appropriate Luther image within Catholic research into Luther was in fact only initiated by the Catholic historian Joseph

¹⁸ Vgl. V. Spangenberg (Hrsg.), Luther und die Reformation aus freikirchlicher Sicht (Göttingen 2013).

¹⁹ Vgl. W. Beyne, Das moderne katholische Lutherbild (Essen 1969).

Lortz in his now famous thesis that Luther had in his own person wrestled into submission a Catholicism “that was not Catholic”.²⁰

That has been accompanied on the part of Protestant history writing by a search for a more just image of the Middle Ages and the Catholic Church of that time. In this way it has become clear on the one hand that the Middle Ages were by no means as dark as they have been painted so willingly and for so long, and on the other hand that Martin Luther was far more at home in medieval thinking than has been admitted, which is evident above all in Luther’s widespread apocalyptic tone, in which he saw the devil at work in most of his opponents.²¹ Against this background it has finally become possible to objectively put a name to the dark sides in the life and work of Martin Luther, such as his increasingly crude attacks against the Catholic Church and above all against the papacy, his vehement attacks against the peasants during the Peasant War, his advocacy and theological justification of the persecution of the Anabaptists and his spiteful utterances about the Jews.

This self-critical stance towards Martin Luther and the Wittenberg Reformation by Lutheran theologians has not hindered the development of an on the whole positive Catholic Luther image, but on the contrary fostered it. This became evident in 1970 when the second president of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, spoke positively about Martin Luther in his key-note address to the fifth General Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Evian-les-Bains, in the conviction that a more just assessment of the person and work of Martin Luther on the Catholic side was a necessary path towards restoring the lost unity. In this basic attitude Cardinal Willebrands even acknowledged the Reformer as a “teacher of the faith”: “He may be a shared teacher for us in the fact that God

²⁰ J. Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland* (Freiburg i. Br. 1949) 176.

²¹ Vgl. H. Schilling, *Martin Luther. Rebell in einer Zeit des Umbruchs. Eine Biographie* (München 2012).

must always be the Lord and that our most important human response has to remain absolute trust and reverence.”²² In honouring Luther as a “father in the faith” one can then find his ecumenical actuality also most adequately expressed,²³ insofar as one may see the special contribution of the Reformation, and above all of Martin Luther, for the whole of Christianity in the fundamental regaining of the full depth of the concept “faith”, so fundamental to the doctrine of justification by faith.

The positive view of Martin Luther and his Reformation in Lutheran-Catholic ecumenism is due to a large extent to the fact that an attempt has been made to write the painful history of division in collaboration, as occurred in the Document “From Conflict to Communion”. This pleasing development can in turn be acknowledged as the mature fruit of the ecumenical dialogues of the past decades. For that reason, gratitude and joy over the mutual rapprochement in faith and life that has occurred over the past 50 years, and also in retrospect to the long shared history before the Reformation and the schism in the church also forms part of the common commemoration of the Reformation.

c. Hopeful paths into the future

Repentance in view of the historical suffering and joy over what has been achieved so far towards ecumenical communion between Lutherans and Catholics are followed, thirdly, by hope that a common Reformation commemoration will grant us the possibility to take further steps towards the unity we hope and long for, and not rest content with what has been achieved so far. The ecumenical document “From Conflict to Communion” makes an important contribution because it makes statements in ecumenical collaboration

²² J. Kardinal Willebrands, *Gesandt in die Welt*, in: Ders., *Mandatum Unitatis. Beiträge zur Ökumene* (Paderborn 1989) 112—125, zit. 124.

²³ W. Pannenberg, *Der „Vater im Glauben“ – Luthers ökumenische Aktualität*, in: Ders., *Beiträge zur Systematischen Theologie. Band 3: Kirche und Ökumene* (Göttingen 2000) 260-267.

on central aspects of Martin Luther's theology, principally on the disputed controversial theological issues of the doctrine of justification, the relationship between Scripture and tradition, the eucharist, and ecclesial ministry. The particular value of this document consists in the fact that it collects and gathers what past ecumenical dialogues have demonstrated to be commonalities in our understanding of the faith.

The limitations of this document however consist in the fact that for binding statements of consensus, documents by ecumenical commissions do not suffice, but only those texts can lead us forward into the future that have actually been received by their respective churches and authoritatively accepted by their leaders. Therein we can and may see the particular significance of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, which was agreed between the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity on 31 October 1999 in Augsburg, and which the Pope Saint John Paul II acclaimed as representing a milestone in the ecumenical encounter between Lutheranism and the Catholic Church. With that document a wide-ranging consensus was reached in a central question which had in the 16th century led to the Reformation: nevertheless, unity was not achieved thereby. As the formula "consensus in fundamental truths of the doctrine of justification" used in the Joint Declaration expresses, no full consensus has yet been reached on the doctrine of justification itself, much less on the consequences of this doctrine for the understanding of the Church and the question of ministry above all. That means that the still remaining questions on the precise understanding of what the Church is, and consequently the theological clarification of the understanding of the church must form part of the primary agenda of ecumenical dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics.

Here the starting point from which ecumenical dialogue can and must proceed becomes evident. Following the accord which has become possible

between Lutherans and Catholics on fundamental issues of the doctrine of justification, the theological implications of this consensus must be placed on the agenda of ecumenical conversations. They will form a further important step on the path towards ecumenical agreement between Lutherans and Catholics, which could ultimately issue in the drafting of a future Joint Declaration, analogous to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, on Church, Eucharist and Ministry. With such a declaration there is no doubt that a decisive step would be taken towards visible church communion, which is the goal of all ecumenical efforts. To raise awareness of this goal anew must be an essential task of the approaching Reformation commemoration.

4. Commemorating the Christocentric heart of the Reformation

A common Reformation commemoration in 2017 will be a good opportunity if that year is not the conclusion but a new beginning of the ecumenical struggle for full communion between the churches and ecclesial communities that emerged from the Reformation and the Catholic Church, in particular in the triad of repentance, gratitude and hope – from which no part can be omitted if it is to be perceived as a symphonic triad chord. It is indeed no coincidence that our reflections issue in the urgent ecumenical question of the essential nature of the Church. This question was also the crux of the 16th century Reformation inasmuch as Luther's indulgence theses of 1517 – the date from which this current Reformation commemoration takes its orientation – ultimately concerned the question of the Church and the question of the ecclesial office that is able to speak and act in the name of the Church. In Luther's Augsburg Disputation with Cajtan too in the year 1518 and in the Leipzig Disputation with Eck in 1519, the understanding of the Church, and more precisely the authority

of Councils and the Pope, were the focus of the disputes.²⁴ Luther's understanding of faith itself was in no way meant individualistically: according to his conviction, the participation of the faithful in Christ implies the unity of the body of Christ. Thus the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ was also for Luther a matter of faith. For that reason, "the thought of founding a new church, a separate church, must have been for him from the outset an impossible thought".²⁵ While this serious question could not at that time be carried to a satisfactory result in these disputes between Luther and his Catholic adversaries, it remains to be hoped that 500 years later the Reformation commemoration of the year 2017 can provide further clarification on the nature of the Church, and will thus serve the growing ecclesial communion between Lutherans and Catholics.

This will prove possible above all if we together invoke that heart of the Reformation to which Pope Benedict XVI gave expression during his visit to the Augustinian Friary in Erfurt in 2011, in acknowledging in the life and work of the Reformer the passionate search for God: "What constantly exercised [Luther] was the question of God, the deep passion and driving force of his whole life's journey."²⁶ In following Luther, the service of ecumenism also and especially today in our extensively secularised societies, must be to bear witness to the presence of the living God, so the greatest common challenge of ecumenism today consists in the centrality of the question of God. Christians do not of course believe in simply any God, but in the God who showed us his totally concrete face in the man Jesus of Nazareth. Martin Luther therefore

²⁴ Vgl. E. Iserloh, Die protestantische Reformation, in: E. Iserloh, J. Glazik, H. Jedin (Hrsg.), Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte. Band IV: Reformation, Katholische Reform und Gegenreformation (Freiburg i. Br. 1979) 56 ff. und 64 ff.

²⁵ W. Pannenberg, Reformation und Kirchenspaltung, in: Ders., Beiträge zur Systematischen Theologie. Band 3: Kirche und Ökumene (Göttingen 2000) 160-172, zit. 162.

²⁶ Benedikt XVI., Begegnung mit Vertretern des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) im Augustinerkloster Erfurt am 23. September 2011.

expressed his concrete and profound passionate search for God in the Christocentrism of his spirituality and theology.

If Lutherans and Catholics today concentrate collaboratively on the question of God and Christocentrism, then an ecumenical Reformation commemoration becomes possible, and indeed not simply in a pragmatic but also in the deeper sense of faith in the crucified and risen Christ whom Luther illuminated anew and to whom we can today only jointly bear testimony. Therein I perceive the fundamental ecumenical obligation which the Reformation commemoration in 2017 calls us to remember together.