“FROM CONFLICT TO COMMUNION” PRINCIPLES AND POSSIBILITIES  
FOR THE ONGOING ECUMENICAL PROCESS(1)

Cardinal Kurt Koch

Mr President  
Mr General Secretary  
Dear sisters and brothers in Christ

My sincere thanks for the invitation to speak at this Council meeting of the Lutheran World Federation and for the great honour which you have bestowed on me. The reason for this encounter today is to take a look ahead into the near future, namely to the year 2017, which is a reminder of the publication five hundred years ago of Martin Luther’s theses on indulgences, generally regarded as the beginning of the Reformation, but also indeed to look ahead beyond the year 2017, as we seek to find further possibilities for our continuing ecumenical journey.

1. Common commemoration of the Reformation

It is in keeping with the growing ecumenical sensitivity developed through the conversations that have been going on over the past 50 years, that you as Lutherans do not want to keep the commemoration of the Reformation just among yourselves, but also to celebrate it together with us Catholics. The Catholic Church is happy to accept this invitation, as Pope Benedict XVI has already declared. In his address at a private audience with the delegation from the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany on 24 January 2011, Pope Benedict emphasised that on this occasion Lutherans and Catholics would have the opportunity “to celebrate throughout the world a common ecumenical commemoration, to grapple at the world level with fundamental issues” and to do this not “in the form of a triumphant celebration, but as a common profession of faith in the One Triune God, in common obedience to Our Lord and to his Word”.

In accepting the invitation, the Pope at the same time expressed three specific expectations, which we want to consider together. For him it is first of all important that in this celebration an important place is given to “common prayer and to heartfelt entreaties addressed to our Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of mutual wrongs and for the faults related to those divisions”. But also, for Pope Benedict, part of this purification of memories and of conscience is the “reciprocal exchange on how we should appraise the 1,500 years that preceded the Reformation, and which are therefore common to us both”. And thirdly Pope Benedict emphasised that it is particularly important to ”pray together assiduously for the help of God and the assistance of the Holy Spirit” in order to “take further steps toward the unity that we long for, and not to be satisfied with what has been achieved so far”.(2)

If we take into consideration this ecumenical address from Pope Benedict XVI, then we will not find it hard to recognise the decisive key points which are also contained in the document “From Conflict to Communion” which has been compiled by the joint Lutheran/Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and is now being published today. These are firstly gratitude and joy over our growing convergence in both life and faith which has become possible over the past fifty years, bearing in mind our long and common history before the Reformation, secondly sorrow and repentance for all the misunderstandings, ill will and injury that we have inflicted on one another over the last five hundred years, and thirdly hope that the common commemoration of the Reformation will grant us the opportunity of being able to take further steps towards the full unity for which we hope.

2. Coping with historical conflicts

One of the first priorities in relation to common commemoration of the Reformation is also the need to listen to one another, to hear what this commemoration really means for both sides. It is understandable that for you as Lutherans what is paramount is joy over the rediscovery by the Reformation above all of the gospel message of justification through grace alone. We Catholics share this joy with you: but at the same time we ask for your understanding that this Reformation commemoration is associated with deep sorrow, because it led to the division of the Church and many negative consequences. When this document from the Commission bears the title “From Conflict to Communion”, then both of us are challenged not to rush too quickly to “communion”, but also to come to terms with the “conflict” and indeed to do this in two respects.

The decisive concern of the Reformation and above all of Martin Luther lay firstly in a sweeping reform of the whole Church and was precisely not about re-formation in the sense of an eventual breaking of the unity of the Church and the emergence of new reformed-style churches. If Luther’s intention was a comprehensive renewal of the whole Church and not the emergence of new churches, then one has to recognise the historical fact that the true intentions of Luther did not come to fruition at the time, and with this to perceive not just the failure of the Roman Church of that time but also the non-success of the Reformation itself, as the Protestant ecumenist Wolfhart Pannenberg has so repeatedly and with good reason reminded us. In his view there was nothing further from the intentions of the Reformers than the “separation of distinctive Protestant Churches from the one Catholic Church. The emergence of a specifically Protestant ecclesiology was a less-than-ideal solution; the original aim of the Reformation was the reform of the whole Church”.(3) On the contrary, this point of view means that the true success of the Reformation can only be achieved through the overcoming of our inherited divisions in a renewed Church consisting of all Christians, and that consequently our ecumenical efforts aimed at recovering unity are actually a completion of the work of the Reformation itself. For me, this insight is therefore of particular importance so that Lutherans and Catholics, when looking to the ecumenical restoration of church unity may be able together to declare: “Nostra res agitur.” In this respect one may rightly be allowed to expect from a common commemoration of the Reformation that it will also provide a new and bold impulse for the process of ecumenical convergence.

Secondly, when speaking of “conflict” there is a need to bear in mind the disastrous consequences of the division of the Church above all for European history. We Christians may not suppress from our historical consciousness the fact that the current secularisation and privatising of Christianity is largely self-inflicted. For it should be understood as certainly undesired and unintentional, but a tragic consequence of the division of the Western Church in the 16th century. The emancipation of the modern cultural world, firstly from the contrasts presented by the estranged confessional churches and ultimately from Christianity as a whole, must be judged as a result of exhaustion from the split in the Church and the bloody religious wars that followed in the 16th and 17th centuries, especially the Thirty Years War. Because Christianity has since then only been tangible in the form of the different denominations, which have fought each other, often to the death, these historical circumstances have as an unavoidable result that peace between the confessions had to be bought at a high price, and that this has been disregarded by confessional differences and, in the broader picture, by Christianity itself in order to be able to give a new basis for social peace. If put the other way around, this insight must mean that the recovery of a public declaration of the Christian message presupposes the overcoming of the inherited divisions in a newly discovered unity among Christians.

3. Rediscovering communion

Looking ahead to the coming Reformation commemoration, it is only if we have the courage to face up to the historical conflicts and their consequences that we will also be able to reconstruct the historical path to closer communion between Lutherans and Catholics. This path has begun with a critical review and an overcoming of the traditional Catholic polemical view of Luther, which was already represented in his own lifetime by Johannes Cochläus, who incriminated Luther as the destroyer of Christianity and corrupter of morals, and then was picked up again at the beginning of the last century by Heinrich Suso Denifle. A decisive change in the struggle to find a historically adequate and also theologically appropriate image of Luther in Catholic research on Luther was actually only initiated first by the Catholic historian Joseph Lortz with his now famous thesis, that in his own mind Luther had only ever brought down a form of Catholicism “which was not catholic”.(4)

Going alongside that, in the writing of Protestant history at this time an effort is being made to give a more balanced picture of the Middle Ages and of the Catholic Church, which has revealed that on the one hand the period of the Middle Ages was in no way as dark as it has been painted for far too long and far too willingly, and also that Martin Luther felt much more at home with mediaeval thinking than has been admitted, which is revealed above all in his considerable and apocalyptic mood-swings, during which he regarded the devil as being at work in most of his enemies. Against this background it has finally become possible without prejudice to name the darker side of the life and work of Martin Luther, such as his ever more vehement attacks against the Catholic Church and above all the Papacy, his support for and theological justification of the persecution of the Baptists by the Lutheran authorities, his strong attacks against the peasants during the Peasant Wars and his invidious comments about the Jews.

This self-critical approach of Lutheran theologians to Martin Luther and the Wittenberg Reformation has not, however, hindered the development of a generally positive Catholic image of Luther, but on the contrary has encouraged it. This is evident for example in the position statement of the joint Roman Catholic / Evangelical Lutheran Commission on the Augsburg Confession published in 1980 under the title “All under one Christ”, which testifies to a common understanding in relation to fundamental questions of faith and at the same time points to Jesus Christ as the living centre of the Christian faith.5 Likewise, on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s birthday in 1983, there was an acknowledgement of the fundamental concerns of Martin Luther the Reformer in the conviction that “neither Protestant nor Catholic Christianity can by-pass this person”. And so the special ecumenical significance of Martin Luther has been expressed in the honorary designation “Witness of the Gospel”.(6)

This positive evaluation of the person and the work of Luther has eventually also been taken up by different Popes, above all Pope John Paul II during his visit to Germany in 1996 and Pope Benedict XVI during his visit in 2011 to the Augustinian Monastery in Erfurt, where he made a special point of praising the Christocentrality of the spirituality of Luther and his passionate seeking for God: “He was driven by the question about God and this became the deep passion and driving force of his life and of his whole life’s journey”.(7)

As early as 1970 the second President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity , Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, in his keynote address at the 5th Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation at Evian-les-Bains spoke about Martin Luther in a positive manner and indeed expressed the conviction that a “more balanced judgment of the person and work of Martin Luther” from the Catholic side was a necessary path to follow “in order to restore the unity that had been lost”. From this fundamental approach Cardinal Willebrands even praised the Reformer as a teacher of the faith: “In this he can be our common teacher, that God must remain always as Lord and that our most important human response to God is absolute trust and worship”.(8)

4. Significance of the document and ongoing questions

At that time it was indeed not yet really possible to investigate the theology of Martin Luther from a Catholic viewpoint in a comprehensive way. But this is happening now in the new document from the Lutheran/Roman Catholic Commission for Unity which is being published and presented today. The huge advances made by this document and its considerable merits consist in the way that it gives expression in the setting of ecumenical community to central aspects of the theology of Martin Luther and indeed above all to the theologically controversial and contentious questions of the doctrine of justification, the Eucharist, ecclesiastical ministerial offices and the relationship between scripture and tradition. It is commendable that it has collected and included here everything that has been emphasised in past ecumenical dialogues as common in our understanding of the faith.

This task proves itself today as particularly urgent in respect of the endangering of the ecumenical efforts which so often have to be affirmed today and which the Protestant ecumenist Harding Meyer has called “the danger of ecumenical forgetting”, namely that “everything that has previously been achieved through dialogue is becoming uncertain and is slipping away from us, that what has already been reached is trickling away and evaporating, in a way as if it had never existed”.(9) This danger is to be observed in almost all churches and church communities, so that in all honesty it must be the responsibility of the ecumenical movement to acknowledge that all churches are aware of their ecumenical irritations in respect of this, and should therefore refrain from making one-sided accusations.

Since the document from the joint Commission gathers together the findings of the ecumenical dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics, it can serve as it were as an “in-via-declaration”, which records what has already been achieved in terms of developing community and by implication should no longer be gone back on.

Of course, especially with regard to the brief time that is available just now, it cannot be my own task to present the whole breadth of the results recorded in the document in respect of all this and to enter into a debate on the extent of the load it is able to bear. The ongoing questions which occur to me and which I would want to formulate, not as a critic, but as a contribution to the continuing work of the Commission document, are focused in principle in one direction and fall into two categories.

First of all the question arises as to whether for a firm declaration of common statements about fundamental questions of faith the theology of Martin Luther can be sufficient in itself as a point of reference, or whether other Lutheran confessional writings would not in addition form a more reliable basis. In respect of finding ecumenical agreement it makes a fundamental difference whether one expresses one’s view concerning a single theologian, never mind if it is one particular Reformer, or about church confessional statements. If the second is the case, then it is still the case today that the formulation of an ecumenical consensus on this depends on the significance that these bear for the churches or church communities concerned. For this reason the same assumption would have to be criticised as the then Cardinal Ratzinger famously did in connection with the discussion carried out in the seventies and eighties about a possible recognition by the Catholic Church of the Confessio Augustana, the fundamental confessional text of Lutheranism, namely that a Catholic recognition of the Augsburg Confession presupposes that which is recognised by Protestants, namely the recognition of the idea that here the Church as Church can teach and does teach that “the Protestant <recognition> would in every case be the first internal pre-requisite of Catholic recognition and at the same time a spiritual procedure which would create ecumenical reality”.(10)

The second question follows on from this, namely which are those confessional texts recognised by the Lutheran Church today, on the basis of which ecumenical consensus can be reached. This question arises because in the document of the joint Commission it is striking that in the presentation of the Catholic viewpoint not only the Council of Trent is taken into consideration but also further doctrinal developments right up to the Second Vatican Council, whilst the analogous doctrinal developments in the Protestant Churches are somewhat ignored. Since, however, Lutheran churches since the Reformation have similarly undergone fundamental changes, and a distancing from the theology of Luther can be observed among them on some not insignificant points, the Catholic side is entitled to be given an answer about where the current confessional position in those churches can be identified and in what authority it is vested.

5. Consensus on the doctrine of justification and its consequences

In the context of ecumenical discussion it is thus of fundamental importance that, in order to make binding statements of consensus, documents from ecumenical commissions cannot as yet be sufficient in themselves, but only those texts can be taken forward which are actually received by the respective churches and are authoritatively accepted by their leadership. As part of this, note needs to be taken of the particular significance of the 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 Pope John Paul II judged to represent a milestone in the ecumenical encounter between the Lutheranism and the Catholic Church. With this it was possible for a far-reaching consensus to be reached on a central question that had led to the Reformation in the 16th century.

As is conveyed however by the formula used at the time “consensus on the fundamental truths of the doctrine of justification”, a complete consensus on the doctrine of justification itself has not yet been reached and what is more, nor has it on the consequences of this doctrine, above all for an understanding of the Church and the question of ministerial offices. This means that the ongoing outstanding questions concerning a deeper insight into what the Church is, are bundled up together and as a result the theological clarification of an understanding of the Church must belong amongst the main reactants of the ecumenical dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics, particularly the idea that with the Reformation, as Pope Benedict XVI was accustomed to give as his judgment, “a new way of understanding Church” has emerged.(11)

Since these questions have for understandable reasons been dealt with too marginally as yet in the document of the joint Commission, this provides a decisive starting point from which the ecumenical dialogue can and must be taken forward. For clarification of the ecclesiastical problem areas it is certainly not just a case of dealing with isolated questions about the nature of the Church; in the background there may well rather be a difference of perception about the relationship between the divine and the human, or alternatively the activity of the Church in the process of salvation. More precisely, it is concerned with the question of whether the unconditionality of the grace of God, which lies at the heart of the Reformed doctrine of justification, but which is equally believed by both Lutherans and Catholics, allows and indeed releases a combined involvement of the human being and the church community, enabled and supported by the grace of God, or whether the all-effective God also means the only-effective God, with whom only pure passivity from the side of both the human being and the Church is accepted. It is not by chance that this question comes to a head in the question of ministerial offices, inasmuch as hiding behind the protests of the Reformers against the Catholic understanding of ministerial offices, and especially of the institutional church as the means of mediation, lies the Reformers’ suspicion that this meant that earthly mediation between God and humankind rested only in them. In other words it was a matter of the elementary question of whether a sacramental understanding of the Church, according to which the action of God in salvation is always encountered in mediation through the earth-bound human being and the Church, can have a theological justification or not. In considering this however, mention must be made that a theological consensus on this question arising from the theology of Martin Luther is indeed possible, as Theodor Dieter has demonstrated(12), or in any case may be easier to achieve than from the mainstream Protestant theology of today.

When looking at the theological legitimacy and the ecumenical possibility of a sacramental understanding of the church, it can be said in summary that following the agreement that has become possible through the ecumenical dialogues between Lutherans and Catholics concerning basic questions of the doctrine of justification and the basic consensus that has been reached in the doctrine of baptism, then the ecclesiological implications of the doctrine of baptism have to be on the agenda of the ecumenical conversations. This topic has been taken up for some time now by the Lutheran/Roman Catholic Commission on Unity under the working title “Baptism and the increasing Community of Churches” and is being taken forward. This decision is much to be welcomed, as it represents a further important step on the path of ecumenical understanding between Lutherans and Catholics, which could finally result in the preparation of a future joint declaration on Church, Eucharist and ministry, analogous to the joint declaration on the doctrine of justification.

Such a declaration would without any doubt be the achievement of a decisive step on the path to a visible communion of Churches, which is the goal of all our ecumenical efforts; raising awareness of this must be an essential task of the upcoming Reformation Commemoration. The document “From Conflict to Communion” offers a good foundation and a helpful direction indicator. For this I am thankful and can only hope that it will be received by both Catholic and Protestant sides, that it will serve the growing Communion of Churches between Lutherans and Catholics and that it will be possible for that to happen which Pope Benedict XVI expected of the time ahead in his address to the Presidents of the Lutheran World Federation on 16 December 2012: “In these years leading up to the 500th anniversary of the events of 1517, Catholics and Lutherans are challenged to come together to think afresh about where our path towards unity has led us and to beg the Lord for His leading and help for the future”.(13)

1) Short address to the Council meeting of the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva on 17 June 2013

2) Benedict XVI, address at the private audience with the Delegations from the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany on 24 January 2011

3) W. Pannenberg: Reformation and the Unity of the Church, in: Ethics and Ecclesiology. Collected Essays (Göttingen 1977) 254-267, cit. 255

4) J. Lortz, The Reformation in Germany (Freiburg i. Br. 1949) 176

5) All under one Christ. Position statement of the joint Roman Catholic / Evangelical Lutheran Commission on the Augsburg Confession 1980 in: H. Meyer, H. J. Urban, L. Vischer (Hrsg.), Dokumente wachsender Übereinstimmung. Sämtliche Berichte und Konsenstexte interkonfessioneller Gespräche auf Weltebene 1931-1982 (Paderborn – Frankfurt a. M. 1983) 323-328.

6) Martin Luther – Witness of Jesus Christ. Statement of the joint Roman Catholic/Evangelical Lutheran Commission for the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luthers, 1983, in: H. Meyer, D. Papandreou, H. J. Urban, L. Vischer (Hrsg.), Dokumente wachsender Übereinstimmung. Sämtliche Berichte und Konsenstexte interkonfessioneller Gespräche auf Weltebene. Band 2: 1982-1990 (Paderborn – Frankfurt a. M. 1992) 444-451, zit. 444.

7) Benedict XVI., Meeting with representatives of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) in the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt on 23 September 2011.

8) J. Kardinal Willebrands, Sent into the world, in: Mandatum Unitatis. Contributions to Ecumenism (Paderborn 1989) 112—125, zit. 124.

9) H. Meyer, Ecumenical Perspectives from an Evangelical Viewpoint, in: J. Krüger and J.-M. Kruse (Ed.), Unus fons, unus spiritus, una fides. Ecumenism in Rome. Experiences, Encounters , Perspectives of the Evangelical-Lutheran congregation in Rome (Karlsruhe 2010) 214-234, cit. 234.

10) J. Cardinal Ratzinger, Clarification on the question of a “recognition” of the Confessio Augustana by the Catholic Church, in: Ders., Theologische Prinzipienlehre. Bausteine zur Fundamentaltheologie (München 1982) 230-240, cit. 235.

11) Benedict XVI, Light of the World. The Pope, the Church and the signs of the times. A conversation with Peter Seewald (Freiburg i. Br. 2010) 120.

12) cf. Th. Dieter, The Eucharistic Theology of Joseph Ratzinger – a Lutheran Perspective, in: Ch. Schaller (Ed.), Church, Sacrament and Community. On ecclesiology and ecumenism for Joseph Ratzinger = Ratzinger-Studies. volume 4 (Regensburg 2011) 276-316.

13) Benedict XVI., Address to Bishop Munib A. Jounan, President of the Lutheran World federation on 16 December 2010.

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