Rethinking Reformation

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Coming to Terms with the Reformation

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Abstract: The quincentenary of the Reformation in 2017 challenged different actors or subjects (such as civil societies, states, and churches) to come to terms with "the" Reformation. This article argues for gaining an awareness of the constructive character of the word "Reformation", so that "coming to terms with the Reformation" will mean different things depending on the particular meaning of "Reformation," and, of course, depending on the different acting subjects. The article focuses mainly on how the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Roman Catholic church addressed and answered the challenge of a common commemoration and celebration of the Reformation on a global level, especially with a view to previous centenaries that led to serious religious conflicts between Protestants and Catholics. The article analyzes how ecumenical dialogues allowed for a common perception by Lutherans and Catholics of the theological and spiritual gifts of the Reformation for the whole church, and how distinguishing this meaning of "Reformation" from another meaning of "Reformation" that denotes the sequence of events leading to the split of the Western church was the basis of the historic ecumenical prayer service with Pope Francis in Lund (Sweden) and the leaders of the Lutheran World Federation on October 31, 2016, commemorating the Reformation both in gratitude and lament and committing themselves to continue on the journey from conflict to communion.

Keywords: Reformation, ecumenical dialogue, Lutheranism

1 Preliminary reflections

The quincentennial of the Reformation poses the question of how to come to terms with what we call "the Reformation." Interestingly, during the first centenary of the Reformation in 1617, "a new cultural practice was launched that nowadays seems to be just natural, but by no means is so, namely, the historical jubilee celebrated according to the rhythm of round years."[1] The topic of coming to terms with the Reformation opens a wide range of possible questions. Thus, it is necessary to specify what will be addressed in what follows. A first question might be: Who is meant to be the *subject* of coming to terms with the Reformation? A second question: What do we understand as the *object* of this coming to terms? After having answered these two questions, it will be possible to identify in which direction we might pursue what "coming to terms" means for our purpose.

Concerning the subject: Are we thinking of civil societies or even state institutions in countries whose history has been deeply shaped by the events that we call "the Reformation?" Being unsettled by massive

1 Wendebourg, "Vergangene Reformationsjubiläen," 9 (my translation). It is deserving of attention that it was the University of Wittenberg that asked its electoral prince whether they were allowed to celebrate a *primus Iubilaeus Christianus* on October 31, 1617, preferring the commemoration of the beginning of Luther's criticism of indulgences over many other possible events that could have been commemorated. The electoral prince mandated celebrations all over his electorate, and also invited other princes to join him in so doing. This initiative was very successful; the celebrations in 1617 formed the matrix for later celebrations (ibid.).

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migration, several Western countries have recently been challenged to ask themselves: Who are we? How have we become who we are? Thus, the fifth centenary of the Reformation in 2017 provoked the question: What role has the Reformation played in the formation of these societies and states?

In 2017, an article by a Finish author was published in a German newspaper with the title "Luther, the most important Finn."[2] He explained:

> Nowhere else was the Reformation implemented so thoroughly and country-wide as in the Nordic countries. Lutheranism became the state religion, [and] the religious communion functioned as the basis for the state before any idea of the nation emerged at all. Sweden, Denmark and the countries that were dominated by them for centuries, Iceland, Norway, and Finland, have been the most Lutheran countries of the world … Luther, his church and doctrine have been a constituent of Finish history, even though today many people may not necessarily feel this and only 70% of the population belong to the Evangelical-Lutheran church.[3]

In Germany, a solemn state ceremony for "500 Years of the Reformation" was celebrated in October 2017. On this occasion, the then-President of Germany, Joachim Gauck, stated:

> Our society as we know it today would not be conceivable without the Christian churches. And it is not conceivable without the Reformation … the Reformation is everyone's business; it has played an important role in shaping the history and destiny of many countries of Europe, as well as parts of the world beyond Europe, but especially our nation of Germany and our Scandinavian neighbours.[4]

In these countries, commemorating the Reformation also means being confronted with the respective nations' histories. Thus, civil societies and states are challenged to be the subjects of coming to terms with the Reformation. This includes identifying and distinguishing the legacy of the Reformation, evaluating its helpful features like individuality and freedom, a sense of social responsibility, an emphasis on education, and the Reformation's influence on vernacular language and culture[5], but also negative aspects like excessive obedience to temporal authorities, marginalizing and persecuting religious minorities such as the Anabaptists, and, especially in Germany, anti-Judaism that turned into anti-Semitism centuries later.

For civil societies and states, perceiving and evaluating the Reformation legacy depends largely on contemporaries' understanding of their own time, whether they appreciate modernity and how they see the contribution of Reformation to the emergence of modernity. Two examples may suffice to illustrate this. Former German President Gauck in his aforementioned talk declared:

> [T]he discovery in the course of the Reformation of the freedom of the individual in particular, justified by the Bible, is part of Europe's long and often bloody history of the struggle for freedom. This discovery remained a dynamic driving force for creating, at long last, a society in which political freedom is guaranteed by the state and in which each individual is a legal person in their own right. It was also, in the long term, an extremely effective catalyst for the history of emancipation that man now stood directly before God, without any intermediary. Priests and the church no longer stood between the individual and their God as a guardian, so to speak. This empowerment affected women and men alike and transformed stewarded laypeople into independent believers. This also had an impact on civic and state life. The call for democratic participation has its origins in the coming of age of the Reformation. This is a precious legacy.[6]

This perspective was promoted by Protestant churches, too.[7] In a time of shrinking influence on society and state, these churches tended to explain the impact of the Reformation by emphasizing the contribution of the Reformation to the history of freedom and human rights, partly implying that the freedom appreciated by the vast majority rests on certain causes – including religious causes – and requires certain conditions.

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2 Nyberg, "Luther, der wichtigste Finne" (my translation).

3 Ibid.

4 Gauck, "Speech."

5 Even in a predominantly Catholic country like Slovenia the literary language reminds the people of the Reformation, since it was developed and introduced by the reformer Primus Truber (1502-1586), before the Protestant majority in this country was reduced to a very small minority by state oppression. See Ilic, "Primus Truber (1508-1586), the Slovenian Luther," 268-276.

6 Gauck, "Speech."

7 See Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, *Rechtfertigung und Freiheit*. In English: *Justification and Freedom*.

This seemed to be important especially in view of many migrants who did not attribute the same significance to individual freedom and human rights. Historians criticized this master narrative attempt by insisting that the history of freedom is much more complex, and the role of the Protestant churches in it is not so unambiguous.[8]

Quite different is Brad Gregory's view in his book "The Unintended Reformation."[9] His description of the Reformation is based on a comprehensive critique of modern society, claiming that the deficits of Western culture originate in the failures of the Reformation. Again, Reformation is seen as decisive for the rise of modernity, but the basic features of modernity are negative in Gregory's eyes, and the Reformation is responsible for them, even though the reformers did not intend those features (including hyperpluralism, "Excluding God" from academic discourse, "Relativizing Doctrines," "Subjectivizing Morality," and consumerism).[10] Gregory argues that by denying the authority of the Roman magisterium, and instead claiming the authority of *sola scriptura*, the Reformation opened the way to endless subjective interpretations of the Bible without being able to achieve a common binding understanding of it. "Protestant rejections of the authority of the Roman church produced an open-ended range of rival claims about what the Bible meant. Correlatively, they yielded rival claims about what the Christian good was and how it was to be lived in community."[11] Gregory attempts to create a master narrative, too; one that is contrary to the Protestant narrative that could be seen in President Gauck's speech and that of the EKD.

Yet, another subject of coming to terms with the Reformation are the Protestant churches that, if understanding themselves correctly, do not call themselves "churches that have originated from the Reformation," but rather as "the Catholic church that has gone through the Reformation,"[12] and the Roman Catholic church. Interestingly, the Catholic theologian Johanna Rahner emphasizes "the fact that the Roman Catholic Church has actually also been shaped by the Reformation, probably even more than those churches who proudly boast that they originate from and carry on the spirit of the Reformation."[13] Thus, both the Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic church have been challenged to define their relationship to the Reformation and to each other in this respect. This will be the main focus of this article to be taken up later.

The second question mentioned previously is the question of the object of coming to terms with the Reformation. What does the word "Reformation" mean? I will not offer a definition. Rather, I would like to point out a basic problem inherent in how we use the word. We often speak of "Reformation" in singular, "*the* Reformation," even though we all know that historians speak of the Wittenberg Reformation, the Zurich Reformation, the Geneva Reformation, the radical Reformation, the magisterial Reformation, the Counter- or Catholic Reformation, and so on. It is relatively easy to distinguish these types of reformations, but it is more difficult to recognize that "the" reformation or even "these" reformations are not entities that are well-defined in themselves. If one studies the history of the *word* "Reformation," this plurivocity becomes quite clear.[14] In truth, the word "Reformation" points to an almost infinitely complex reality, and depending on its respective definitions we pluck out special aspects of this complex reality for examination. Thus our concepts of "Reformation" are not simply right or wrong, but more or less appropriate in addressing certain problems from a certain perspective. Our concepts are constructed, even though they relate to reality, but they do this by focusing on certain aspects of the reality identified simply by the respective

8 Thomas A. Howard in his informative and insightful book "Remembering the Reformation" states as a conclusion from his inquiry on earlier centenaries: "One should [...] resist the temptation to wax oracular in 2017, to make blanket, unqualified assertions about the meaning of Protestantism or to invoke the Reformation as a catch-all-causal agent to explain this or that, positive or negative, development in the modern world. The historical complexities involved are simply too immense." (*Remembering the Reformation*, 151)

9 Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*.

10 The words in quotation marks are titles of chapters in Gregory's book.

11 Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 185.

12 The former President of the Council of the Protestant Churches in Germany, Bishop Wolfgang Huber, stated: "Die evangelische Kirche ist die katholische Kirche, die durch die Reformation hindurchgegangen ist" ("Überlegungen zum Stand der Ökumene").

13 Rahner, "A Closer Look: How I Changed My Mind about Luther and the Reformation during the Last Decade," 946.

14 See Wolgast, "Reform, Reformation," 313-360.

meanings of the word. We should take this fact seriously and avoid reifications of "the Reformation" and even more essentialist attempts. Amongst other things, this means that we cannot regard "the Reformation" as a *subject* of certain actions or effects. The EKD booklet "Justification and Freedom"[15] speaks about the "Mennonites who are the spiritual heirs of the so-called Anabaptist movement that was persecuted in word and deed by the Reformation"[16]. But don't the Anabaptists belong to the Reformation, too? And even if it had been said: "the Zurich Reformation" or "the Lutheran Reformation" persecuted Anabaptists, this would not be entirely accurate. There were some princes and magistrates who persecuted Anabaptists, indeed with the approval of the Reformers, but can they be called "*the* Reformation," or even "*the* Wittenberg Reformation?" There were also other Lutheran reformers like Johannes Brenz who strongly opposed the persecution of Anabaptists.[17] What is "the Reformation" if we understand it as subject? This reflection on the semantics of "Reformation" should be taken seriously when we try to answer the question of how to come to terms with the Reformation. We need to identify the various aspects of "Reformation."

2 The churches coming to terms with the Reformation

After these preliminary reflections, we will turn to the churches as subjects of coming to terms with the Reformation. The singular "Reformation" is used for the sake of convenience without disregarding the comments already made. Churches, like other communities, take anniversaries and centenaries as occasions to tell collectively where they come from in order to reassert who or what they are. It is assumed that what they regard as their essence can best be seen in their origins. Retelling one's origins helps to identify one's present identity. But this purpose also leads to community histories being told in accordance to the community's perception of its present identity. The narrative of a community's origin not only describes what actually happened, but also creates a specific picture of the past. Thus, these narratives often tell us more about the present self-understanding of a community than about its history. This is well documented in the numerous articles and books published in the last several years describing the ways the Reformation was commemorated in previous centenaries.[18]

The specific character of church commemorations of the Reformation results from the fact that there is not only one community that refers to this event but many, or at least two major groups. On the one hand, there are those Christian communities who see themselves as the heirs of the Reformation, and on the other hand the Roman Catholic community that was in sharp opposition to the Reformation from its beginning. From the Reformation onward, the relations of the Reformation churches to the Roman Catholic church and vice versa have been part of each church's identity, and for centuries this relation was marked by mutual rejection of the other's truth claims. Correspondingly, these two groups had very different narratives of the history of the 16th and 17th centuries. While the Protestant churches claimed that the reformers had to refuse obedience to the bishops of their time and the Roman magisterium in order to be faithful to the apostolic

15 See footnote 7.

16 This is what the German text (*Rechtfertigung und Freiheit*, 39), literally translated, says. The official English translation obviously wishes to soften this inadequate statement by adding two words: "the Mennonites, the spiritual heirs of the Anabaptists who were persecuted in word and deed by the churches of the Reformation" (*Justification and Freedom*, 25). – We find at least five different meanings of the word "Reformation" in this book: Reformation "is an event of global significance" (p. 9), "an open-ended 'learning history' (p. 22) or "a process of renewal that continues to this very day" (ibid.), or a persecuting agent, as mentioned previously. Or: "In its essence, the Reformation was a *religious* event, for the men and women who championed the Reformation expected God *himself* to awaken true faith and thus renew relationship between God and believer" (p. 9). Then the text turns to a reflection on the use of the word "Reformation:" "It was not until later that it became customary to apply the concept of 'Reformation' not as much to this renewal, which was expected to be carried out *by God*, as to the reform 'in head and members' of the church and theology associated with this expectation." This little observation should warn us to use the *word* "Reformation" without having in mind the constructive character of "Reformation."

17 See The Lutheran World Federation / The Mennonite World Conference, *Healing of Memories*, 47–51. New edition in: The Lutheran World Federation, *Healing Memories: Implications of the Reconciliation between Lutherans and Mennonites*, 51-54.

18 See among many others: Schönstadt, *Antichrist, Weltheilsgeschehen und Gottes Werkzeug;* Howard, *Remembering the Reformation*; Wendebourg, *So viele Luthers*.

gospel, Catholics accused the reformers of splitting the church by putting their subjective judgments over the judgment of the whole church, as they saw it. History was told on each side to legitimize one's own church and to delegitimize the other. Each church was portrayed by the other in the darkest colors. Protestants saw the Reformation as a way from darkness into light, from servanthood into freedom, while John Cochläus's portrait of Luther in his *Commentaria de actis et scriptis Martini Lutheri*, which was handed down by Catholics for about four hundred years, described Luther as a "destroyer of the unity of the church, unscrupulous demagogue and wicked revolutionary, who plunged countless souls into ruin through his heresies and brought infinite sufferings over Germany and the whole of Christianity."[19] Since centenaries are special occasions for reasserting a community's identity, Reformation anniversaries and especially centenaries were privileged occasions for mutual polemics. The way the churches understand the history of their conflicts in the 16th century has co-determined their understanding of the relation to the other church in the present, and vice versa. The conclusion to be drawn from these facts is that coming to terms with the Reformation can fully succeed only if the principle "audiatur et altera pars" is observed and realized, and if both share an understanding of the basic features of that history. In other words: coming to terms with the Reformation can only be achieved ecumenically. This is meant in the strict sense. Lutheran or Reformed or Anglican churches cannot find their identity unilaterally if the relation to the Roman Catholic church is any part of their identity (whether good or bad). Of course, all these churches have developed an identity that can be described from their own side, but if this is everything, there is still a deficit in realizing their identity, since the relation to the other church is a two-sided relation (A to B *and* B to A). This also holds true for the Roman Catholic church. Here lies the basic challenge of the commemoration of the Reformation in 2017.

But before the commemorations of 2017 are addressed, one aspect of coming to terms with the Reformation needs to be mentioned from the past. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the doctrinal conflicts were deeply interwoven with the political structure of European countries; spiritual and temporal concerns were mixed and mutually exploited, so that religious conflicts became civil wars and even wars between different nations. Two features played a special role. First, kings and princes (especially the Holy Roman Emperor) felt it was their holy duty to protect the church, even with military force. Secondly, there was the general assumption that a state could only preserve its unity, stability and peace if all its subordinates shared the same faith. The religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, developing out of the conflicts with the Reformation movements, forced the states to give up this principle step by step. This happened first in the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 with respect to the German Empire as a whole, but religious unity was still maintained by force in individual territories ("cuius regio eius religio").[20] As a result, both Catholic and Lutheran territories co-existed within the German Empire. The claim of religious unity, seen as the condition for state unity , turned out to endanger the survival of the people. In 1648, after the Thirty Years' War, the religious rights granted to Lutheran territories were also extended to the Reformed.[21] Giving up the protection of the churches by rulers took longer. Anabaptists and similar groups were the first to call for religious freedom, corresponding to their strict rejection of any compulsion on people to be baptized and their emphasis on a voluntary church.[22] The development of the constitutional structure of Western states in modern times included the right of religious freedom as a basic civil right or even *the* basic civil right, often in opposition to the explicit wishes of the churches. Nevertheless, Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic church have since come to affirm this right of religious freedom from the very center of their teaching. The Roman Catholic church defined its position at the Second Vatican Council. The traditional argument against religious freedom was: Error has no rights, while the truth has the right to be spread (truth being, of course, Catholic truth). Today, the Catholic position acknowledges the right of each person to come to her own religious convictions free from political or legal pressure. Faith that is externally

19 See Decot, "Katholische Lutherforschung," 18 (my translation). See also: Herte, *Das katholische Lutherbild im Bann der Lutherkommentare des Cochläus*.

20 See Heckel, *Deutschland im konfessionellen Zeitalter*, 33-66.

21 Ibid., 181-209.

22 See Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," 67-88, and for a general perspective: Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*, 794–964.

imposed by force is no faith. Thus the Catholic church today agrees that the state has to guarantee religious freedom.[23] Lutherans, for their part, can refer to Luther's treatise on "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed."[24] His argument was: Temporal authority cannot show the soul her way to heaven, thus it should not interfere in questions about which religion is right or wrong. Since it is the Holy Spirit who creates faith through the external word, it is the task of bishops and not of state authorities to deal with the question of what the true religion is. Unfortunately, Luther forgot his own insights when dealing with the Anabaptists.[25] Today, it is clear that Protestants and Catholics do not regard the right of religious freedom as something externally imposed by a hostile, modern state. Rather, the churches affirm this new legal reality wholeheartedly. It was a bloody history of religious violence, by which Western countries were pressed to develop concepts of religious freedom and to affirm this right. The religious divide emerging in the 16th century is part of this history.[26] Thus, the emphasis on religious freedom is an essential aspect of coming to terms with the Reformation by both Protestant and Catholics. It also has significance for the religious conflicts of our time. Christians should strongly support religious freedom as something they have learnt to appreciate and *in this way* both Protestants and Catholics should see it as a legacy of the Reformation. But they should not be proud or arrogant in doing so, since their forbears inflicted terrible sufferings on other Christians in the course of their doctrinal conflicts. Nevertheless, as a result of a long and painful learning process, they should jointly emphasize this message for today: Living together as a society with people of different faiths – indeed the very survival of such a society – is possible only if religious freedom is guaranteed by the state *and* acknowledged and affirmed by the different religions.

This development has made it possible to distinguish civil society and state from the churches as subjects of coming to terms with the Reformation, as discussed above. This development also allowed churches to encounter each other in a different way from previous centuries. Due to the separation between state and religion / church, churches can no longer expect to enforce their truth claims on people by using the state's means of power. Thus, the conflict over the truth of the gospel has to be led *sine vi humana, sed verbo* ("not with human power but by the Word"[27]). That development is the external basis or context for the ecumenical movement. *Ecumenism is a second chance* to address the theological conflicts of the 16th century in a very different way from then, namely, in a situation where these conflicts are (at least in most cases) not mixed up with political or economic interests and do not lead to civil wars as it happened in the 16th and 17th centuries.

In this respect, the situation in 2017 is quite different from earlier centenaries, especially from the first one in 1617, which historians say contributed to the outbreak of the Thirty Years War.[28]

Since the last centenary, Catholic historians have done much to correct the Catholic perception of Martin Luther and many other aspects of the Reformation.[29] Protestant historians have developed new approaches to the Middle Ages and its relationship to Reformation movements.[30] Since the portrait of history is interrelated with the contemporary relations between the churches, these changes also affect the relation of the churches to each other.

New experiences between Catholic and Protestant Christians in the course of the 20th century changed the official relations between the churches and created a new challenge for theological research. We may focus for a moment on Germany. Catholics and Protestants experienced each others' faith in resisting

23 See Vatican II, "Declaration on religious freedom," 1001–1011, and the brillant articles by the Catholic lawyer Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, written at the time of Vatican II: "Religionsfreiheit als Aufgabe der Christen," 172–190, and: "Die Konzilserklärung über die Religionsfreiheit," 191-205.

24 Luther, "Temporal Authority," 81–129.

25 See The Lutheran World Federation and The Mennonite World Conference, *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ*, 60–64; 111–116 (Appendix: "That the Civil Magistracy Is Obligated to Apply Physical Punishment Against the Anabaptists: A Few Considerations from Wittenberg" [1536]).

26 Martin Kriele shows in his *Einführung in die Staatslehre* how the basic structure of the modern constitutional democratic state has developed historically and theoretically in struggling with the religious conflicts following the Reformation movements.

27 This is how according to article XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession bishops should act.

28 See Burkhardt, *Der Dreißigjährige Krieg*, 128-130.

29 See Decot, "Katholische Lutherforschung," 21-34.

30 See for example Leppin, "Setting Luther into His Historical Place," 927-943.

Nazi Germany;[31] Catholic and Protestant soldiers had similar experiences in the Second World War and afterwards in detention camps; millions of refugees from former German territories in the East who came to the West changed the confessional landscape profoundly and created new and unexpected challenges in dealing with the differences between the churches. These processes called for and strengthened the ecumenical movement that had begun decades before. With the Second Vatican Council the Roman Catholic church entered the ecumenical movement. The dialogue with Lutherans was the first dialogue of the Catholic church after the Council.[32] In what follows, the topic of the churches' coming to terms with the Reformation will focus more narrowly on how the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church responded on a global level to this challenge.

The Lutheran/Roman Catholic international dialogue began in 1967. Thus, in 2017 both communities could look back at five hundred years of the Reformation and 50 years of dialogue, claiming to have overcome a considerable number of traditional doctrinal conflicts. Therefore, it was a great question whether this claim would also hold true with respect to the commemoration of the Reformation. Would the old stereotypes come up again? 2017 was not only about a possible joint *commemoration*, but also a joint *celebration* of the Reformation, since Protestants, in this case Lutherans specifically, are grateful for the Reformation's impact on their churches. This gratitude called for celebration. But many Catholics objected: "There is nothing to celebrate in 2017 because the Reformation was the division of the church. What could be celebrated is, at the most, the ecumenical movement as the attempt to overcome that division." Any celebration requires asserting that something good happened to a person or community. But the other way round it means: If there is *nothing* to be celebrated in a past event, then there was nothing good in it, and it would have been better if it never happened. In the case of the Reformation, this would mean: it would have been better if the Reformation had never happened, and if there were no Lutheran or Protestant churches. In the end, this would mean that the ecumenical dialogues were in vain anyway. Thus, in 2017, ecumenism itself was at stake. The question of celebrating the Reformation was not a secondary question but stood as proxy for a fundamental issue.

The way out of the dilemma of celebrating or not celebrating the Reformation was the insight mentioned at the beginning: the Reformation is not an entity well-defined in itself but a highly complex phenomenon, and according to different meanings of the word we refer to very different aspects of this complex. What was required for a meaningful and adequate commemoration and celebration of the Reformation was the art of distinguishing, an art that has been at the heart of theology since medieval times and in which both traditions excel. The International Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue Commission was given the task of preparing a theological document about how Lutherans and Catholics could commemorate jointly the Reformation. It took as *one* possible meaning of the word "Reformation" the whole ensemble of theological and spiritual insights of the Lutheran reformers and the communities that adhered to them. In the Commission's document called "From Conflict to Communion",[33] the reformers' insights are described exemplarily, presenting their views on the doctrine of justification, the Lord's Supper, the ministry, and Scripture and tradition. These topics were discussed intensively in ecumenical dialogues and studies over the past 50 years; the findings of these dialogues serve as the background for the presentation of the reformers' understandings. The argument then is: Inasmuch as these dialogues have shown that Catholics can share the reformers' insights, Catholics will also regard these insights as something good, in several cases provoking them to a better understanding of certain topics as well.

Before continuing with this argument, let's have a short look at how the dialogues attempt to come *jointly* to terms with the Reformation. One example may be given. In 1518, Cardinal Cajetan was in Augsburg, attending the Diet of the Holy Roman Empire.[34] One of his tasks was to interrogate Luther and force him to recant his position. Before his encounter with Luther, the Cardinal read two texts of Luther's, the *Resolutiones*

31 Ernesti, "Ökumene im Dritten Reich," 35-51.

32 Birmelé and Thönissen (eds.), *Auf dem Weg zur Gemeinschaft*.

33 Lutheran / Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, *From Conflict to Communion*. See also: The Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *From Conflict to Communion*.

34 For the following see Dieter, "Misslungene Kommunikation und Kirchenspaltung: Augsburg 1518," 227–242.

("Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses")[35] or proofs for the 95 Theses, and the *Sermo de poenitentia*.[36] Being an excellent theologian, Cajetan analyzed these texts carefully and wrote sixteen treatises presenting his findings in the structure of a *quaestio disputata*. Luther's *Resolutiones* reveal a dramatic development in his understanding of the forgiveness of sins, so that by the end of his text he presents a position different from its beginning. Luther ultimately insists that a penitent should firmly believe that his sins are forgiven if the priest has said the promise "Absolvo te" in Christ's name. For the Cardinal, however, this understanding of the firm assurance of salvation was equivalent to "creating a new church".[37] Luther, by contrast, wrote in a letter to Karlstadt that the Cardinal wanted Luther to renounce everything that made him a Christian.[38] This encounter between Cardinal Cajetan and Luther has often been described as paradigmatic for the eternal divide between Catholic and Lutheran understandings of forgiveness. But a careful historical and systematic analysis shows that the Cardinal took Luther's sentences and integrated them into his system of thinking in the line of the four causes of Aristotle, by such concepts as infused and acquired faith or the distinction between the perspectives "from the side of the sacrament – from the side of the recipient", not taking into consideration that Luther's thought structure was already quite different, namely a thinking in terms of relations that conceptually works quite differently from the Aristotelian method. Thus Cajetan seriously misunderstood Luther. It is intellectually imperative to recognize how completely misleading it is to take a Lutheran sentence out of context and compare it directly to a sentence of Catholic doctrine taken out of *its* context. If we acknowledge that many words have different meanings in the doctrines of different churches, that their basic distinctions are different (for example: nature and grace, or law and gospel), that they have different thought structures, and that they have different concerns and fears, *only* then are we able to describe the relation between the two doctrines in the two churches properly. It is very easy to see, for example, that the Lutheran doctrine of justification is different from the Catholic doctrine of grace, but it is very difficult to identify the precise character of this difference, especially whether they mutually exclude each other. as they have historically claimed to do). In order to make this judgment, one must first describe certain commonalities between the two doctrines, because speaking of a contrariety between two doctrines requires that the one definitely affirms a certain position while the other definitely denies it, and furthermore that this is the case *in the same respect*. In order to fulfil this requirement "in the same respect", one must identify certain common aspects. Thus, not only ecumenists have to look for common ground between different doctrines, but so must those who insist that certain doctrines mutually exclude each other. This fact is often ignored by critics of ecumenism.

In the case of the Luther-Cajetan encounter, taking into consideration the structural and terminological difference in the systems of the two theologians has allowed for the following surprising statement in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: "Catholics can share the concern of the Reformers to ground faith in the objective reality of Christ's promise, to look away from one's own experience, and to trust in Christ's forgiving word alone"[39] – which is said with precise reference to that debate. Thus, while the Cardinal declared Luther's understanding to be church-dividing in 1518, in 1999 the Catholic church declared that Catholics can share the concern of Lutherans, and this is their understanding of the assurance of faith.

It is quite clear that both sides do not simply say the same thing. Nevertheless, if we take into consideration the different structures of the respective systems, it is possible to identify a common content. Thus, we should distinguish between the *common* content and the *different* ways in which this *common* content is perceived, being fully aware of the problems in this distinction. But we face similar issues when we translate a text from one language into another language that has different semantics and grammar. We cannot translate a text word for word from one language into another; nevertheless, we assume that we are able to communicate the main content in the other language all the same. By the way, this conviction is just

35 Luther, "Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses," 81–252.

36 Luther, "Sermo de poenitentia," 319–324.

37 Cajetan, "De fide ad fructuosam absolutionem sacramentalem necessaria," 336: "Hoc enim est novam ecclesiam construere."

38 Luther, *Briefwechsel*, 217, 59-62.

39 The Lutheran World Federation and The Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, §36.

the premise of Luther's commitment to vernacular translation of the Bible. Therefore, serious ecumenical dialogues do not aim at "compromise formulas." Rather, they claim to agree in the *Sache*, the *res*, the "thing," while allowing for different ways of speaking about the "same" *Sache*. The method of proceeding this way has been called "differentiating consensus."[40] This means a consensus that distinguishes between the level of doctrine where agreement should exist (that is, in terms of content) and a level where differences are acceptable (that is, in the expression of that content) so that this type of consensus explicitly integrates differences into the concept of consensus.

This distinction is fundamental when it comes to the recognition of the other church's doctrine. Recognition is always recognition *as*; this "as" is decisive, but this "as" requires a certain common ground between the one who recognizes and the one who is recognized *as this or that*. Recognition *is needed* due to the otherness of another doctrine; if the other doctrine were not different, the question of recognition would not come up at all. But recognition *as* (in this case: as Christian or as apostolic) *is possible* because of what both have in common. Otherwise recognition *as* would be meaningless.

This is a short sketch of what ecumenical dialogues claim to do and achieve. Now, coming back to the question of a joint Lutheran/Roman Catholic celebration of the Reformation, "Reformation" understood in the specific sense of the ensemble of the theological insights of the reformers: Inasmuch as the dialogues have shown what Catholics can share with the Lutherans, they have also shown what Catholics can celebrate with Lutherans. The Second Vatican Council stated: "Catholics must gladly acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments which derive from our common heritage and which are to be found among our separated brothers and sisters. It is right and salutary to recognize the riches of Christ and the virtuous deeds in the lives of others who bear witness to Christ."[41] This has opened the door for a joint celebration with respect to the meaning of "Reformation," as explained earlier.

There was also the emergence of different confessional churches in the 16th century and the split of Western Christendom. With respect to this development, the dialogue commission employed another definition of the term "Reformation", namely Reformation as a chain of events beginning with Luther's 95 Theses on Indulgences through the interrogation of Luther by Cardinal Cajetan, the Bull of Indiction and the exclusion of Martin Luther from the Roman church, the Diet in Augsburg in 1530, the first ordinations in Wittenberg in 1536, the Smalcald War and the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, and the Council of Trent (1545-63). In this sequence of events, the Western church split, but the main actors in this sequence were not only the Lutheran reformers and Lutheran princes or magistrates, but also cardinals and popes, kings and the emperor. Even the Ottomans played a role in this process. If one asks to whom the Reformation (understood in this sense) belongs, then one has to say: It belongs to the Lutheran reformers *and also* to the leaders of the Roman church, to the kings and to the Emperor, and also to the laypeople, who gave their loyalty to one side or another for their own reasons. It is not appropriate or historically correct to attribute this "Reformation" unilaterally to the Lutheran reformers. "From Conflict to Communion" has a chapter that offers a sketch of this process.[42] Reformation as a process leading to the *split* of the Western church cannot be celebrated, at least not by Lutherans today. Rather, they together with the Catholics deplore the separation of the churches and their lack of communion. It is one thing to describe the historical development in the 16th and 17th centuries as the pluralization of Western Christendom, but it would be a *katabasis eis allo genos* if the separation between the churches were approved theologically without further reflection.[43] Indeed, the latter is in contradiction to the New Testament understanding of the church as the *one* body of Christ and the Third Article of the Creed. According to the two different understandings of "Reformation," the Commission proposed a twofold commemoration of the Reformation, one in joy and gratitude, the other in lament and repentance.

"From Conflict to Communion" states: "What happened in the past cannot be changed, but what is remembered of the past and how it is remembered can, with the passage of time, indeed change.

40 See Dieter, "Was ist und zu welchem Ende betreibt man Konsensökumene?", 189-215.

41 Vatican II, "Decree on ecumenism" (*Unitatis redintegratio*), 4.

42 Lutheran / Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, *From Conflict to Communion*, chapter III (§§ 35-90).

43 See Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, *Rechtfertigung und Freiheit*; *Justification and Freedom*.

Remembrance makes the past present. While the past itself is unalterable, the presence of the past in the present is alterable. In view of 2017, the point is not to tell a different history, but to tell that history differently" (§16). Since 2013, this report has been translated into some 20 languages, and it is studied in Japan as well as Chile, in Poland as well as Suriname, in Slovakia as well as Canada, and quite often by Lutherans and Catholics together.

"From Conflict to Communion" served as the basis for an exceptional Lutheran/Roman Catholic worship service jointly prepared by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, led together by Pope Francis and the leaders of the Lutheran World Federation. On October 31, 2016, this worship service took place in Lund (Sweden) where the Lutheran World Federation was founded 70 years ago. From the side of the Lutheran World Federation it is remarkable that it did not organize the central service for the Lutheran churches worldwide at the opening of the Reformation year all on its own, inviting its ecumenical partners—Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Reformed, Methodists, Mennonites, Pentecostals, Orthodox—merely as guests. Rather, the Federation organized a common service together with the Roman Catholic church, jointly inviting all the other churches. This is a strong sign that the Lutherans take seriously that the Lutheran reformers did not wish to create a new church. From the side of the Roman Catholic church, it is highly remarkable that Pope Francis commemorated the Reformation together with the Lutherans in a prayer service, even though in 1521 his predecessor Leo X excommunicated Luther and all his followers. The vestments of the three presiders of the prayer service(Pope Francis, the President, and the General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation), were even more telling: all three were dressed in white albs and red stoles. Red is the liturgical color of Reformation Day in Lutheran churches, but it is certainly not the liturgical color for the 31st of October in the Catholic church. Thus, Pope Francis led the prayer service commemorating the Reformation in the liturgical colors of the Lutheran church. This is a remarkable gesture, indeed!

The structure of the worship service in Lund corresponded to the two meanings of the word "Reformation" explained above. In his opening prayer, Pope Francis said: "O Holy Spirit, help us to rejoice in the gifts that have come to the church through the Reformation, prepare us to repent for the dividing walls that we, and our forebears, have built, and equip us for common witness and service in the world."[44] The first part of this commemoration expressed the joy over "the gifts that have come to the Church through the Reformation" – the Catholics join the Lutherans in rejoicing in the gifts of the Reformation! This common prayer did not begin with a confession of sins. Rather it started with joy and gratitude for the gifts of the Reformation – in the presence of the Pope. Quoting "From Conflict to Communion," a detailed description of these gifts was listed in order to give living detail to this gratitude. But even more: what is done in a worship service is done in the presence of God – thus gratitude for the gifts of the Reformation was brought before God in thanksgiving. The prayer reads as follows: "Thanks be to you, O God, for the many guiding theological and spiritual insights that we have all received through the Reformation. Thanks be to you for the good transformations and reforms that were set in motion by the Reformation or by struggling with its challenges. Thanks be to you for the proclamation of the gospel that occurred during the Reformation and that since then has strengthened countless people to live lives of faith in Jesus Christ."[45] This astonishing prayer refers, of course, to "Reformation" in its first meaning, as discussed earlier.

"Reformation" in the second meaning used in this process was addressed in the second part of that worship service. Some of the main failures of the past were mentioned. They were taken up in prayer in three steps. First: "O God of mercy, we lament that even good actions of reform and renewal had often unintended negative consequences."[46] In order to speak in a differentiated way about the failures of the past, the tragic situation in which the good actions of reform had negative consequences was mentioned first. (The phrase "unintended consequences" does not in any way refer to Brad Gregory's "Unintended Reformation.") The second step was to acknowledge the guilt of our forebears – nota bene: not confessing

44 The liturgy of Lund can be found (with slight differences) in The Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *From Conflict to Communion*, 131-143. Quote: p. 136.

45 Ibid., 138.

46 Ibid., 139 (also the following quotations).

their sins on their behalf, but recognizing their guilt in certain actions. These were the words that Pope Francis used: "We bring before you the burdens of the guilt of the past when our forebears did not follow your will that all be one in the truth of the gospel." It is a mutual acknowledgment that our forebears failed in certain respects.

The third step, finally, was the confession of wrongdoings by those who were present at the worship service. Only they can confess their sins in a strict sense. The response to this three-step-prayer could not be an absolution, but was instead an appeal to the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit who give "ever-new beginnings" and offer forgiveness and reconciliation to those who were present in Lund. All the worshippers responded by offering each other a sign of peace.

Two further details should be mentioned. The two sermons by Pope Francis and General Secretary Martin Junge were given in Spanish. Both men come from Latin America, while the President of the Lutheran World Federation, Munib Younan, was a Palestinian bishop from Jerusalem. Thus, the ecumenical commemoration of the Reformation 500 years later was jointly led by church leaders from the Global South. It ended with a strong commitment to continue on the way from conflict to communion. The common prayer was prepared by the theological work of the dialogue commission documented in "From Conflict to Communion," while the common prayer was the so-to-speak official liturgical reception of the dialogue results. In the meantime, the liturgy has traveled around the world and has been celebrated in many countries.

3 Conclusion

This article has focused on the coming to terms with the Reformation by the Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic church. Defining their relationship with the Reformation also means defining their relationship to each other, and vice versa. The centenary in 2017 was different from all previous centenaries by the fact that these churches did not use the quincentenary in order to re-enact the conflicts of the 16th century, and so define themselves in opposition to the other church. Not only common commemorations, but also common celebrations, accompanied of course with lamentation about the split of the Western church, took place in many places all over the world. This will probably be the most significant mark of this centenary. Ecumenism was at stake in 2017, but proved to be strong enough to prevent the churches from falling back into old, controversial stereotypes, strengthening the common realization of their shared Christian heritage and their common faith.

Ecumenical dialogues are religious conversations that are no longer interwoven with the power structures of the states, and they are not conducted to sharpen or exaggerate differences in order to justify separation, but are looking for what is held in common. While it was not possible to overcome the dividing force of the doctrinal conflicts in the 16th and 17th centuries, the ecumenical dialogues are a second chance to take up the doctrinal conflicts of the past under very different conditions, with different methods and very different goals. They take seriously the first ecumenical imperative, expressed in "From Conflict to Communion:" "Catholics and Lutherans should always begin from the perspective of unity and not from the point of view of division in order to strengthen what is held in common even though the differences are more easily seen and experienced." (§ 239) This *option for the unity* has opened a new way for the churches of coming to terms with the Reformation, not each church for itself, but mutually and jointly.

The Lutheran/Roman Catholic commemoration, as described here, used different meanings of the word "Reformation" in order to address different aspects of the complex phenomenon to which we refer by saying "the Reformation." This allowed for a twofold relation to the Reformation – in both celebration and lament. The common celebration presupposes the dialogues that have demonstrated to the Catholics what they have in common with Lutheran theology and doctrine, and even what they learned from it. The dialogues realize a reflective way of addressing doctrinal differences: on the one hand, they take seriously the perspectivity of doctrine; on the other hand, they stick to their truth claims. This requires acknowledging that true doctrine can be expressed in different ways, not only in the Lutheran or the Tridentine way. What has been called differentiating consensus between different doctrines is a deliberate alternative method to a postmodern "anything goes" approach, promoting an *agreement* in the "Sache" (*res*) that allows for

different expressions. Such a consensus has not yet been found in all doctrinal topics; thus "From Conflict to Communion" does not claim that the dialogues have fully come to terms with the Reformation. However, what has been achieved is, as the commemorations and celebrations in 2017 have shown, an encouraging promise and a challenge for the future.

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