

Alluding to the image of being together on the way, he appealed to them: “Can we not walk together another stretch of the road?”<sup>11</sup>

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### A Joint Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017

When the young Augustinian friar, Martin Luther, affixed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church on October 31, 1517, calling for the reform of the church, he could hardly have anticipated the succession of events that would lead to the division of Western Christendom. Luther had no intention of creating a “Lutheran” Church, nor could he have foreseen that his initiative would give rise to an ecclesial divide that would persist for half a millennium. The Second Vatican Council’s *Decree on Ecumenism*, which acknowledged the need for continual reform and renewal in the church, created the conditions for the Catholic Church to enter in earnest into a dialogue “on equal footing” with other Christian communities.<sup>12</sup> The Lutheran-Catholic Commission on Unity, as it is known today, was established in 1967 and was the first commission for

<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis to German delegation, February 6, 2017, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/speeches/2017/february/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170206\\_chiesa-evangelica.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/speeches/2017/february/documents/papa-francesco_20170206_chiesa-evangelica.html); with slightly different English translation in <https://zenit.org/articles/popes-address-to-ecumenical-delegation-from-germany>.

<sup>12</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)*, §9, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html). On renewal and reform: “Every renewal of the church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to the church’s own calling. Undoubtedly this is the reason for the movement towards unity. In its pilgrimage on earth Christ summons the church to continual reformation, of which it is always in need, in so far as it is an institution of human beings here on earth” (§6).

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official bilateral dialogue. Thus, as we commemorate five hundred years since the Reformation, we also mark with gratitude fifty years of official dialogue and growth in communion.

The annual observance of “Reformation Sunday” every October 31 by Lutheran communities traditionally has been marked with a strongly confessional, even anti-Catholic tone. Lutherans and other Protestants celebrated previous centenaries with “lavish and festive” events designed to retell the epic history of the Reformation in triumphal terms, depicting Luther “as the liberator from the Roman yoke” or as “German national hero.”<sup>13</sup> This year Lutherans have chosen to commemorate the Reformation in a decidedly different spirit, saying they could not imagine remembering “the events which led to the particular formation of their churches ... without their Catholic fellow Christians.”<sup>14</sup> This is a truly remarkable indication of how a half century of sustained dialogue has contributed to the deepening recognition of the common faith that binds Lutherans and Catholics together. Today, Lutherans and Catholics recall the events of the Reformation *together*, in a spirit of humility and repentance for our continued separation, in a spirit of joy for the faith that we share, and with renewed hope and commitment to the search for full unity.

To inform Lutherans and Catholics of both the progress achieved through dialogue and the remaining differences between the communions, the Lutheran-Catholic Commission on Unity has prepared a brief resource. *From Conflict to Communion* invites readers to move from the oppositional perspectives of the past to the communal perspectives uncovered through dialogue. In doing so, they follow the trajectory of the patient dialogue and study that has led both Lutherans and Catholics to greater clarity regarding the conflicts of the past. Dialogue has resulted in a careful reevaluation of our judgments concerning one another, setting out a substantial degree of consensus on fundamental matters of doctrine, and clarifying the areas where disagreement persists. Many readers who have not followed the progress of Lutheran-Catholic dialogue in detail will be helpfully informed by its summary. Framed as a common rereading of the history of Lutheran-Catholic relations, with attentive study *From Conflict to Communion* will help to correct persistent misperceptions. The text’s invitation to embrace five “ecumenical imperatives”—including a commitment to privilege the perspective of unity over division, to allow ourselves to be transformed by

<sup>13</sup> Lutheran-Catholic Commission on Unity, *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: Bonifatius und Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2013), §§5–6, 11–12.

<sup>14</sup> *From Conflict to Communion*, §221, 80.

encounter with the other, to renew the search for visible unity and initiatives for common witness—also form the core of the text proposed for liturgical celebrations of the joint commemoration.<sup>15</sup> This common account of our shared history will help to shape new memories and inform new generations of students or members of the faithful.

A second, more comprehensive “reception” document, *Declaration on the Way*, was drafted by a special task force established by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and published in 2015, in view of the joint commemoration.<sup>16</sup> Motivated by a desire to “make more visible the unity we share,” the *Declaration* enumerates an impressive thirty-two points or “benchmarks” of agreement on the core doctrines of church, ministry, and Eucharist, providing supporting documentation from the agreed statements of the Lutheran-Catholic international and regional commissions.<sup>17</sup> The drafters commend the declaration to the leadership of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) in the hope that they might “create a process to implement” and draw practical consequences from this high level of agreement. They call for an official act of recognition that the points of agreement identified need no longer be considered church dividing, and for an effort to address those questions named as requiring further study without delay. Finally, the document calls for increased attention to the concrete expression of unity in church life, including increased attention to common prayer, education and faith formation, and collaboration in common witness.

The *Declaration on the Way* was received with great enthusiasm by the 2016 Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, with a 99 percent vote in favor.<sup>18</sup> While some have questioned the procedural propriety of such a response,<sup>19</sup> the overwhelming support for this initiative

<sup>15</sup> *From Conflict to Communion*, §§238–45, 87–89. See also Liturgical Task Force, Lutheran Catholic Commission on Unity, Common Prayer: *From Conflict to Communion—Lutheran-Catholic Commemoration of the Reformation* (2017), [https://www.lutheran-world.org/sites/default/files/dtpw-lrc-liturgy-2016\\_en.pdf](https://www.lutheran-world.org/sites/default/files/dtpw-lrc-liturgy-2016_en.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> *Declaration on the Way*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> See ELCA Churchwide Assembly, 2016, “Reports and Records: Assembly Minutes, Session 2,” 52–53, and “Session Five [motion and vote],” 144–46, [http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/CWA2016.pdf?\\_ga=2.184361382.104013461.1499283261-1819000471.1499283261](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/CWA2016.pdf?_ga=2.184361382.104013461.1499283261-1819000471.1499283261).

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, William G. Rusch, “‘Commemorating’ the Reformation: Churches Looking Together toward 2017—and Beyond,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 52, no. 2 (2017): 220–30, at 228–30.

reflects the extent of “holy impatience”<sup>20</sup> felt by many of the faithful in both communions for a more visible, concrete expression of church unity. Pope Francis has helpfully provided an impetus, through his presence in Lund, Sweden, for the launch of this year of joint commemoration, to lean into a reconciled future through a renewed focus on initiatives for common witness.

There have been other important signs of progress in the quinquennial year of the Reformation. The primates of the Church of England, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby and Archbishop of York Dr. John Sentamu, chose to mark the 2017 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity by issuing a public statement. They acknowledged that the Reformation “was a process of both renewal and division.” While this anniversary is a time to remember many blessings, including the “clear proclamation of the gospel of grace,” it was also a turbulent time that inflicted “lasting damage ... to the unity of the church, in defiance of the clear command of Jesus to unity in love.”<sup>21</sup> And in July 2017, the General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, meeting in Wittenberg, Germany, signed the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, an agreement aimed at overcoming the church-dividing issue at the center of Martin Luther’s dispute with the Church of Rome, concerning the primacy of God’s grace in the plan of salvation.<sup>22</sup> This formal act of reception built on the agreement signed by the highest authorities of the LWF and the Roman Catholic Church in 1999 and affirmed by the Methodist World Council and its member churches in 2006.<sup>23</sup>

The accumulation of such actions should give us pause. It would not be an exaggeration to say that we are witnessing a sea change, a profound shift in the ecclesial self-consciousness of those churches that have their roots in the events of the sixteenth-century Reformation. More than a subsiding of the anti-Roman “protest” that has long been an element of their self-identification, we may also discern a deep and sincere desire for communion. Agreement on the doctrine of justification is proving to be a significant test case for the ecclesial reception of doctrinal agreement. This unprecedented

<sup>20</sup> *Declaration on the Way*, 13.

<sup>21</sup> “Reformation Anniversary: Statement from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York,” January 17, 2017, <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5826/reformation-anniversary-statement-from-the-archbishops-of-canterbury-and-york>.

<sup>22</sup> “Association of the World Communion of Reformed Churches with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith,” <http://wrcr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/WCRC-Association-to-JDDJ-EN.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*; World Methodist Council, “Statement of Association with the *Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification*,” Seoul, South Korea, July 23, 2006, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/meth-council-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_20060723\\_text-association\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/meth-council-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20060723_text-association_en.html).

consensus on the doctrine of grace provides a whole new context for reconsidering the decades-old backlog of accumulated theological consensus on a host of significant issues relating to sacramental life and the practice of the church that are begging for official reception. Will these fruits remain unharvested and left to rot on the vine? A more permanent and structured life of common witness will find a firm foundation in this yet-to-be-recognized unity in faith. The challenge in the present context will be to hold together initiatives for common witness with sustained progress in theological ecumenism. The five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation offers an unprecedented opportunity to move forward in a new and decisive way to a greater lived expression of unity.

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### **Ecumenism in a Time of Transition**

To assess the present state and future possibilities of personal and ecclesial ecumenism between Protestant and Catholic Christians is a difficult task. On the one hand, the diversity among Protestants is so great few generalities hold for all of them. The challenges involved in Catholic relations with the Church of England are quite different than those involved in relations with the Southern Baptist Convention, and different in yet other ways from those involved in relations with a Pentecostal church in South Africa. In a broad sense, one can think of a spectrum of Protestant churches, some with whom Catholic relations might be close, and then a series of churches at a greater distance from Catholicism with whom relations would be more limited. That picture is only partially true, however. On many social issues, Catholics can work more closely with Evangelicals, with whom there are deep differences over sacraments and ecclesiology, than they can with more socially liberal representatives of, say, the Lutheran or Anglican traditions. In this brief reflection, I will be concerned with the Protestant communities with whom the greatest possibilities of a wide spectrum of closer

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