

## THEOLOGICAL ROUNDTABLE

# Luther's Ninety-Five Theses: Ecumenical Prospects on Its Quincentennial

*Five hundred years after the start of the Protestant Reformation, what are the possibilities for individual and ecclesial ecumenism between Protestants and Catholics? What are the possibilities for common prayer, shared worship, preaching the gospel, church union, and dialogue with those who are religiously unaffiliated? Why should we commemorate or celebrate this anniversary?*

**Keywords:** Martin Luther, Reformation, ecumenism, Ninety-Five Theses, dialogue

### **Together on the Way: Can We Not Walk Together Another Stretch of the Road?**

It was the most memorable moment of the 2016 Churchwide Assembly, the triennial meeting of the highest governing body of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). After technological delays heightened the tension, the tallies appeared: more than 99 percent of the thousand voting members said yes, with a near unanimity beyond memory in these Assemblies. What were they voting for? The motion before them had significant theological content: to receive thirty-two Statements of Agreement concerning church, ministry, and Eucharist and thus to affirm that on those specific points we do not now have church-dividing differences

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*As presiding Bishop, she emphasizes these ELCA commitments: we are church; we are Lutheran; we are church together; we are church for the sake of the world. During the five-hundredth Reformation anniversary, she led the church in study of Martin Luther's Small Catechism; participated in the Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Namibia; preached for Reformation Sunday in the National Cathedral in Washington, DC; and received the Interfaith Unity Award from the Islamic Society of North America.*

with Roman Catholics.<sup>1</sup> There was also commitment to continue dialogue on remaining differences. But the intensity of emotion—deep quiet as we waited, then joy and tears as the result was announced—went deeper than the statements themselves explained. Our people had spoken from the familial pain of separation at the altar during weddings and funerals; they expressed gratitude for their formation in ecumenical friendships forged in college classrooms, shared advocacy and diaconal work, and common prayer. The result was sealed when the question, “Will this action move us closer to sharing the Eucharist together?” was answered affirmatively by Bishop Denis Madden, the Catholic cochair of the task force that identified the Agreements. Afterward he held aloft the chalice given him and told the Assembly he looked forward “to the day not too far distant when we can share this chalice and the Precious Blood together.” As another Catholic participant remarked, “We did not know that Lutherans would care so much about moving toward unity.” We Lutherans confessed ourselves somewhat surprised as well.

With that action, the ELCA resoundingly committed itself to be “on the way” to a transformed relationship with our Catholic sisters and brothers. Behind this event lies a pioneering form of ecumenical text, one that is not yet at the point of declaring “consensus on the basic truths of the doctrine,” as does the landmark 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, but that yet is able to present a significant “declaration on the way toward fuller agreement.”<sup>2</sup> To be “on the way” is to find ourselves walking together, much as did the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24. In this multilayered story, discouraged disciples find themselves walking with Jesus even as his identity is beyond their grasp; at the end is the post-Easter promise of broken bread in which the risen Lord is known.

If the ELCA Churchwide Assembly provided one indelible marker of where the Lutheran movement finds itself ecumenically at its five-hundredth anniversary, then surely October 31, 2016, was another. On that date the inauguration of the Reformation commemorative year was cohosted in Lund, Sweden, by leaders of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF)—and by Pope Francis. The

<sup>1</sup> Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Statement of Agreements,” in *Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry, and Eucharist* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 9–15. The complete text is available for download and individual reproduction at [http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Declaration\\_on\\_the\\_Way.pdf](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Declaration_on_the_Way.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, October 31, 1999, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html).

shape of the Common Prayer liturgy was given by the study document from the international dialogue commission, *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*.

*From Conflict:* While the religious wars that scarred memories on all sides are behind us, habits of defining our communities in opposition to one another have persisted to our own time. Yet despite continuing significant differences, Lutherans and Catholics come to this first centenary anniversary of the ecumenical age speaking in different tones of voice both to and about one another. They are committed irrevocably to ways of relating that have warmed in the span of a single lifetime.

*To Communion:* While the fullness of this goal still lies ahead, Catholics and Lutherans claim for themselves the “real but imperfect”—the “imperfect but real”—communion which already exists between them. Exploring this relationship is the task of the current phase of international dialogue, whose report on “baptism and growth in communion” will be completed next year.

As the study document became liturgy at Lund, the threefold shape of its witness emerged clearly:

*Thanksgiving:* To tell shared but painful history in a common voice, with mutual accountability, is itself an ecumenical act, a step toward healing of memories. In Lund, there was thanksgiving for the witness of the Reformation not only from Lutherans but also from Catholics: both prayers and preaching gave thanks for “the proclamation of the gospel that occurred during the Reformation” and since.<sup>3</sup> In his sermon on John 15:5, Pope Francis first expressed “gratitude” that “the Reformation helped give greater centrality to sacred Scripture in the Church’s life” and thus the “shared hearing of the word of God in the Scriptures” can help nourish and inspire us together. Then he turned to “the spiritual experience” of Luther, which “challenges us,” precisely on “the decisive question for our lives,” to remember his insight into the gospel: that “apart from God we can do nothing.” Finally, the pope underlined the remarkable agreement of the *Joint Declaration*: “With the concept ‘by grace alone,’” he said, Luther “reminds us that God always takes the initiative, prior to any human response, even as he seeks

<sup>3</sup> The Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, “Common Prayer for the Ecumenical Commemoration, Lund, Sweden, October 31, 2016,” in *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 138; “Common Prayer” at [https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/dtpw-lrc-liturgy-2016\\_en.pdf](https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/dtpw-lrc-liturgy-2016_en.pdf); the English text of *From Conflict to Communion* at <https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/From%20Conflict%20to%20Communion%20EN.pdf>.

to awaken that response. The doctrine of justification thus expresses the essence of human existence before God.”<sup>4</sup>

*Repentance:* In planning for the anniversary year, Lutherans had long realized that the language of “celebration,” characteristic of earlier anniversaries, was inappropriate this time. In words from the Lund liturgy, they did not want to remember their own history alone, “without their Catholic fellow Christians.”<sup>5</sup> Making “commemorate” the principal verb was done not only to honor Catholic sensibilities in avoiding a celebration of separation, but also to allow room for repentance on all sides. To be sure, this recognition required not only rigorous theological work but openness to spiritual conversions as well. The humility shown so characteristically by Pope Francis is a dimension of such conversion. More specifically, repentance must be an element of the healing of relations between our separated traditions, for there has been mutual misrepresentation, lack of charity, and even violence aplenty.

Lutherans have recent experience that helped them claim the healing power of ecumenical repentance. In 2010, the LWF Assembly asked forgiveness, from God and from members of Anabaptist/Mennonite traditions, for wrongs committed in Reformation-era persecutions—persecutions in which Catholic and Reformed contemporaries joined. They repented also for not addressing the legacy of that violence in the years since. They confessed sins against the eighth commandment, which prohibits bearing false witness against one’s neighbor. This act of repentance by the LWF Assembly, and the forgiveness extended on the Mennonite side, were powerful agents of reconciliation. Afterward, Cardinal Walter Kasper, then president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU), said presciently that if the spirit of that moment could be the spirit also of 2017, then the Reformation anniversary could indeed be a positive contributor to healing.

*Commitment:* Finally, Lutherans and Catholics committed themselves together to common witness and a changed future. From the study document, the liturgy identified five “ecumenical commitments.” Perhaps the first is most challenging: “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.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> “Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis,” Lund, October 31, 2016, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco\\_20161031\\_omelia-svezia-lund.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20161031_omelia-svezia-lund.html).

<sup>5</sup> “Common Prayer,” 136; quotation of *From Conflict to Communion* §221, 85.

<sup>6</sup> “Common Prayer,” 141; based on *From Conflict to Communion* §239, 92; quoted in *Declaration on the Way*, 3.

Quoted also in the *Declaration on the Way*, this commitment does not deny remaining obstacles to unity. It does, however, contextualize those differences within the framework of agreement on the most central affirmations of faith and within a dynamic perspective of continued commitment to move forward together.

Responses to this vision have spread around the world. In Lund, local Lutheran and Catholic congregations continue to meet together. In the Holy Land, the Common Prayer liturgy was adapted for use twice, in a Lutheran and then a Catholic church. In Namibia, at the festival Eucharist of the LWF Assembly in May, the Apostles' Creed was confessed in its interrogatory form—and, as a witness to common faith, the questions were asked of this overwhelmingly Lutheran global gathering by PCPCU president Cardinal Kurt Koch. In Chicago, a local group of Catholic and Lutheran congregations has committed itself to a yearlong series of activities, including study of both *From Conflict to Communion* and *Declaration on the Way*, posada and Via Crucis walks, an early-morning gathering to watch the livestream from Lund, a hymn sing with beer, and a youth pilgrimage of community service. On October 31, 2017, they were present in Holy Name Cathedral as the Lutheran Metro Chicago Synod and the Archdiocese of Chicago renewed their thirty-year covenant relationship.

One theme from these multiple commemorations deserves additional attention. At Lund, the Joint Statement signed by Pope Francis and Bishop Munib Younan, then president of the LWF, included this paragraph:

Many members of our communities yearn to receive the Eucharist at one table, as the concrete expression of full unity. We experience the pain of those who share their whole lives, but cannot share God's redeeming presence at the Eucharistic table. We acknowledge our joint pastoral responsibility to respond to the spiritual thirst and hunger of our people to be one in Christ. We long for this wound in the Body of Christ to be healed. This is the goal of our ecumenical endeavours, which we wish to advance, also by renewing our commitment to theological dialogue.<sup>7</sup>

These sentences were reiterated by United States bishops, Catholic and Lutheran, who gathered for the Common Prayer liturgy in Chicago in March 2017.<sup>8</sup> As at Lund, they affirmed their "joint pastoral responsibility to respond to the spiritual thirst and hunger of our people to be one in Christ."

<sup>7</sup> "Joint Statement on the Occasion of the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation," Lund, October 31, 2016, [https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/joint\\_commemoration\\_joint\\_statement\\_final\\_en\\_o.pdf](https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/joint_commemoration_joint_statement_final_en_o.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> "Joint Statement on the Occasion of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation," Chicago, March 2, 2017, [http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/signed\\_joint\\_statement.pdf](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/signed_joint_statement.pdf).

As Cardinal Koch said following Lund, a relation of “full communion” between Lutherans and Catholics lies far ahead. He distinguished this from “Eucharistic hospitality,” which concerns pastoral discernment in local contexts and is already possible in exceptional circumstances.<sup>9</sup> On their side, Lutheran pastors have been encouraged to invite forward for a blessing those Catholics and others not receiving the sacrament. While ELCA practice welcomes other Christians, including Catholics, to receive the elements, the opportunity to receive a blessing not only extends hospitality by recognizing the disciplines of other communities but also includes in the worshipping assembly around the altar those not now able to receive the sacrament. Still, such practices are not the destination but only a way station on the road.

What lies beyond this anniversary year? We have been given the extraordinary gift to see hopeful narratives of reconciliation speak to our people with power and grace. After centuries of separation, Lutherans and Catholics are developing a new history of sustained engagement, even around contentious questions, that is at odds with the stories of polarization that surround us. To continue to move forward together will require many kinds of encounter and will call on multiple gifts. Pastoral leaders have unique responsibilities. So also, however, do theologians. Those who encounter ecumenically diverse groups in their classrooms; those whose fields of specialization invite specifically ecumenical questions and perspectives; those who can build friendships and initiate conversations and investigate resources to contribute to the healing of Christian division: all can respond to this call. The Lund Joint Statement includes them in its address:

We call upon all Lutheran and Catholic parishes and communities to be bold and creative, joyful and hopeful in their commitment to continue the great journey ahead of us. Rather than conflicts of the past, God’s gift of unity among us shall guide cooperation and deepen our solidarity. By drawing close in faith to Christ, by praying together, by listening to one another, by living Christ’s love in our relationships, we, Catholics and Lutherans, open ourselves to the power of the Triune God. Rooted in Christ and witnessing to him, we renew our determination to be faithful heralds of God’s boundless love for all humanity.<sup>10</sup>

Meeting with visitors to Rome in the days after Lund, Pope Francis expressed once again his trust that the Holy Spirit, who already has brought divided Christians so much further than they dared to hope, would continue to lead them forward, even on knotty issues remaining ahead.

<sup>9</sup> Press conference, Lund, October 31, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/album/4219653/video/189685569>.

<sup>10</sup> “Joint Statement,” Lund.

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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