

Doctor communis?

The ecumenical significance of Martin Luther's theology

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Distinguished participants of the 12th International Congress for Luther Research, sisters and brothers in Christ.

It is a great joy and honour to welcome you to Helsinki, and especially to the Lutheran Cathedral of Helsinki. As you entered the sanctuary, you noticed the statues of three Reformers, Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, as well as our own, namely, Bishop Michael Agricola. This Cathedral was built with money granted by the Russian Orthodox Czar in the 19th century. Yet, we Finns, and now you, our honoured guests, are solidly situated in the midst of the Reformation tradition. The altar painting truly depicts the person central to our Christian faith, Jesus Christ.

The nature of scholarly research is that it is analytical and critical. The objective is to find the specific characteristics of the subject under scrutiny, that is, its exceptionality. In the study of history, we aim to put emphases on the uniqueness of each era, every ideological trend, each individual thinker.

In addition, when we study the Reformation we frequently ask how Martin Luther stands out from his own environment and background, from his contemporaries. What is Luther *specificus*? What relation does he have to the Medieval Roman Catholic Church and its theology?

This issue can be approached from different angles. For a good while, we looked for »the real« Luther by emphasising the differences and disputes that he had in regard to the mainstream of his time. Many researchers maintained that it was either Luther's fault or to his credit that the western part of Christendom was divided in the 16th century.

The viewpoint of this research shifted as late as the middle of last cen-

tury. While nonetheless admitting the differences, both Catholic and Lutheran scholars now aim to assess how Luther connects with the preceding age and with the classic interpretation of Christianity. This has no doubt happened because of the rise of the Ecumenical Movement since World War II. As 2017 draws nearer, we find it appropriate to ask what the ecumenical significance is of Martin Luther and his theology, what they mean a half a millennium after the Reformation.

I Martin Luther as ecumenical »problem«

In the Fifth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation at Evian, France, 1970, Cardinal Jan Willebrands applied the classic Roman Catholic title of *doctor communis* to Martin Luther. Cardinal Willebrands referred to the well-known thought of Luther that justification is the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls. In speaking of this matter, Luther can also be a »common teacher« for the Roman Catholic Church, because Luther desires that »God will remain our Lord and that our most important human response is unconditional trust and respect for God.«¹

The title Cardinal used of Luther, *doctor communis*, is one of the honorifics of St Thomas Aquinas. According to Willebrands, St Thomas and Luther, the Middle Ages and the Reformation, belong together. Luther represents and continues a common tradition. Nevertheless, *doctor communis* is not simply a historical title, pointing to the past. With this title, the Cardinal wishes to show us that Luther has something to say jointly to the Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches.

Cardinal Willebrands' thoughts are continued by Karl Lehmann, then Roman Catholic Bishop of Mainz. Cardinal Lehmann writes of the ecumenical significance of Luther's *Small Catechism*. Lehmann states that the *Small* and *Large Catechisms* – in contrast to certain other writings of Luther – are an excellent example of the linkage of the Reformer with earlier tradition.

Within the history of the church Luther's *Catechisms* are neither new nor the random contrivance of a single theologian. Rather, they are closely

1 J. WILLEBRANDS, *Mandatum unitatis. Beiträge zur Ökumene*, 1989, 124.

related, both in their structure and their content, to the classical theology of the early church and the medieval church. According to Lehmann, Luther is a »Teacher of the Faith« (*Lehrer des Glaubens*).²

Although the churches' evaluations of Luther have throughout history differed greatly as to content and estimation, both sides have long held certain features to be common. Just as Luther's valuation as *doctor communis* has not been self-apparent to Roman Catholics, it has not been that clear to Protestants either. Luther has been interpreted as an individual, a person who started something new – whether that was negative or positive. Luther created a new »protestant« Christian belief – or at least he presented an interpretation of the original belief which differed radically from the faith of earlier centuries.

According to Roman Catholics, Luther departed from the one, catholic tradition – which was his downfall. In the assessment of Protestants, Luther departed from tradition, and that was his accomplishment. Overstating the case only slightly, we can say that Luther was not *doctor communis* for either side.

For Roman Catholics Luther has been one of those deviating from the main tide, in other words, a heretic, while for the Protestants he has been a guiding light whose significance is emphasized against an otherwise dark firmament overshadowing the church. And even when Luther has been studied in relation to his background of ecclesiastical and general history, his qualities, uniqueness and digression from the norm, that is to say, his significance as an individual has come to the fore. So it is rather understandable that there has not been enough motivation for scrutinizing Luther as *doctor communis*, as a representative of the one, classical Christendom.³

2 K. LEHMANN, Luther als Lehrer des Glaubens? Die ökumenische Bedeutung seiner Katechismen (LKW 45, 1998, 131–146).

3 »Die Bedeutung des überkommenen Dogmas für Luther kann schwerlich überschätzt werden; sie ist in der Forschung weithin zu gering veranschlagt worden.« B. LOHSE, Martin Luther. Eine Einführung in sein Leben und sein Werk, 1981, 171. On the history of Luther research, see 207–246.

II Luther, individualist destroying the Church?

During the Reformation, Roman Catholics depicted Luther as an arch-heretic and as a destroyer of the unity of the church. Even at the beginning of the 20th century Luther was seen in dark colours, not only to be avoided in doctrine but also to be studied under the typology of a personal pathology. For example Heinrich Denifle claimed that Luther had created his doctrine of justification simply in order to be able to live a carefree, libertarian life himself. From these viewpoints, we could say that both Luther the person and Luther the theologian were viewed as a sum of individual flaws and biases.

On the eve of the Second World War, there was a new breakthrough both academically and ecumenically in the publication of Joseph Lortz's book: *Die Reformation in Deutschland*. Lortz critiqued the errors of the medieval church. He strove to understand Luther's own spiritual intentions. He appreciated Luther as a »religious personality«. Nonetheless, he concluded that as a theologian Luther was a »subjectivist«. In Lortz's view Luther represents a catholicity without being catholic in an authentic sense. In a unique way Luther had stressed the significance of the Apostle Paul. Yet, Luther did not attend fully (*Vollhörer*) to the Holy Bible. The revolutionary Luther was entirely a prisoner of his own deliberations.⁴

The theory of Luther's subjectivism was soon re-evaluated by Roman Catholic scholars. Lortz's own students, in particular Erwin Iserloh and Peter Manns, held that the thesis of subjectivism was overly superficial and denigrating. Manns used the name »Father in Faith« (*Vater im Glauben*) for Luther. Manns examined Luther with special reference to the devotional life of the medieval and early churches. The title »Father in Faith« arises from that spiritual tradition.

In his broad-ranging study of St Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther, Otto Hermann Pesch asserted that their understanding of the doctrine of justification was not mutually exclusive. Thus, Luther's theology is to be

4 J. LORTZ, *Die Reformation in Deutschland*, Bd. I–2, 1941. See also: E. HUOVINEN, Die ökumenische Bedeutung des Luther-Verständnisses von Joseph Lortz für die Lutherforschung in Finnland (in: *Zum Gedenken an Joseph Lortz. Beiträge zur Reformationsgeschichte und Ökumene* [VIEG.B 30], hg. v. R. DECOT/R. VINKE, 1989, 262–292).

properly situated among the common traditions of Christendom, regardless of the denomination of the person doing the evaluation.⁵

In official Roman Catholic evaluations after Vatican II, the position afforded to Luther is substantially different from those given at the beginning of the 20th century. In addition to Cardinal Willebrands and other ecumenics, Pope John Paul II in several instances quoted Luther's spiritual texts, e.g. the *Commentary on Romans*. Furthermore, he spoke positively of Luther's significance for all of Christendom.

III A precursor of individual freedom?

Mutatis mutandum, Protestant Luther research has followed the same channels as Roman Catholic scholarship. Protestant studies either historically or systematically tended to support a view of Luther as »the Reformer«. Indirectly, this research setting quite possibly led to an emphasis on Luther's distinctiveness and exceptionality.

In examining the history of Protestant Luther studies⁶, it is rather amazing how radically Luther is emphatically viewed as extraordinary and original. During the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy, Luther was held by many to be unique, even infallible, as a teacher of correct doctrine. Luther was considered to correspond to the angel in Revelation: »having an eternal gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people« (Rev 14:6). Pietism regarded Luther's theology as an expression of individual piety, i.e. from the point of view of regenerated, living faith and sanctification. In such a view, the significance of the Christian faith lies in the internal and personal experience of belief.

5 Martin Luther »Reformator und Vater im Glauben«. Referate aus der Vortragsreihe des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, hg. v. P. MANNS (VIEG.B 18), 1985; P. MANNS, Vater im Glauben. Studien zur Theologie Martin Luthers, Festgabe zum 65. Geburtstag am 10. März 1988, hg. v. R. DECOT (VIEG 131), 1988; O.H. PESCH, Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquin, 1967; O.H. PESCH, Martin Luther, Thomas von Aquin und die reformatorische Kritik an der Scholastik. Zur Geschichte und Wirkungsgeschichte eines Missverständnisses mit weltgeschichtlichen Folgen, 1994.

6 See LOHSE (see n. 3), 213–240.

During the Enlightenment, Luther was construed as the precursor of the freedom of reason and the conscience, the one who freed the Christian faith from the dark disbelief of the Middle Ages. The general anthropological mode of thought, characteristic of the era, led to a delineation of Luther as a situation-bound thinker whose thoughts could not claim normativeness. Luther was esteemed as a great person and fighter, but he too was to be critically evaluated on the basis of reason and the ethical demands of the conscience.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing boasted of Luther that he set people free from the bondage of tradition. The task of the Enlightenment was only to carry this liberation to its fruition. Frederick the Great was not satisfied even with this, but rejoiced that Luther, the »poor, damn devil«, freed the people from the yoke of the priests and thus increased the income of the state. Lutheranism began to change into Protestantism, which turned into enlightened subjectivism.

Albert Ritschl strove to place Luther into his own historical framework. Nevertheless, Ritschl was of the opinion that Luther's value was primarily in the overturning of old speculative metaphysics and mysticism. Ultimately, Luther proclaimed freedom and independence of the soul.

More recent Luther research has been deeply influenced by the same Protestant theological models. In popular church discussions Luther is often held to be a situation-bound dilettante, or an otherwise unrestrained exception in the history of theology, one to whom Christians following current trends should not be too committed. Such comments often reflect, in their background, the same setting of the question: Was Luther a private sage or *doctor communis*?

Contrary to the previously used paradigm emphasizing the differences between the Catholic Middle Ages and Luther, we find that, for example, in the United States, Profs. Robert Jenson and Carl Braaten's theological interpretation of the »Catholicity of the Reformation« has brought up new points of view.⁷ In Finland, similar new thoughts were also intro-

⁷ See C. E. BRAATEN/R. W. JENSON (ed.), *Catholicity of the Reformation*, 1996.

duced by Prof. Tuomo Mannermaa and his students.⁸ Both of these parties delineated the philosophical, theological, and spiritual nature of the Middle Ages, thus attempting to understand the era preceding Luther. Furthermore, they focused their attention on how the modern image of Luther has been influenced by various philosophical preconceptions and trends.

So, back to our fundamental question: Was Luther exceptional, unique, i. e. in some manner a *novum*, or was he rather one link, one witness on the chain of the shared classic Christian faith? Without a doubt, this question is, to the observant academic researcher, quite a generalised one. Nonetheless, answering it may be a justifiable attempt to understand heuristically what is at stake in Luther's theology and, shall we dare to say, the whole of Christian belief. Was Luther simply the father of Lutheranism or was he also, for all of Christendom, »*Vater im Glauben*«? *Doctor privatus* or *doctor communis*?

IV *The ecumenical significance of Luther's Catechisms*

In attempting an incipient answer to the question above, I want to adapt the interpretation of Karl Lehmann. According to Lehmann's view, particularly the *Catechisms* of Luther can, for their part, shed light on both Luther's relationship to the tradition preceding him and on his significance for the church today. Lehmann says he is astonished how little Luther's *Catechisms* have undergone ecumenical evaluation.⁹ There appear to be at least six well-founded reasons for giving the *Catechisms* an ecumenical reading.

(1) First, the *Small* and *Large Catechisms* are examples of Luther's deepest desire to be *doctor communis*. In the *Catechisms*, if anywhere, Luther

8 On Finnish Luther research, see J. FORSBERG, *Die finnische Lutherforschung seit 1979* [LuJ 72, 2005, 147–182].

9 LEHMANN (see n. 2), 142. In 1999 the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church approved a new official *Catechism*. Its base text was written by Eero Huovinen. Due to its historical and ecumenical significance, the *Catechism* included the entire text of Luther's *Small Catechism*. This new *Catechism* has been translated, e. g., into English, Swedish, Latin, Arabic, Russian, Chinese, Hungarian, German, Spanish, Croatian, and French.

was *doctor*, a teacher of the ordinary people and a guide of priests in need of theological knowledge and training. Among Luther's writings, the *Catechisms* emphasize most visibly what is common to the classic Christian faith.

In accord with the basic idea of a catechism, Luther wanted to teach what is necessary in being and living as a Christian. As *doctor*, Luther, the catechete, was primarily a spiritual teacher. His goals of teaching and learning were not just to increase knowledge for its own sake, but to foster faith in God and to strengthen love for one's fellow human being.

(2) Secondly, in his *Catechisms* Luther was *doctor communis* in the sense that he structured his catechetical teaching on the foundation of a long tradition. That is to say, Luther's *Small* and *Large Catechisms* were firmly, knowingly built on the framework of the tradition of the Jews and of the early church (the Decalogue, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Sacraments). Even in its own time Luther's catechetical ideas were neither original nor a new plan. The Commandments, Creed, and Lord's Prayer were the didactic heritage of the Middle Ages.

Although catechetic-type books of this form had not been written down, the three primary points mentioned above were the main body of Christian upbringing. Peter Abelard prepared his famous *Commentary on the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer*, which all Christians were to study together and learn by heart. Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote a catechism soon after 1510. This is the structure Luther developed and deepened.

The very framework of the catechism emphasizes continuity with the tradition of the faith. The Ten Commandments are the foundation of the Judeo-Christian way of life. The Apostles' Creed has its roots in the first Christian century. The Lord's Prayer is the model prayer taught by Jesus. The solutions of Luther's *Catechism* are more those coming from the Jews, the New Testament and Early Christianity than they are innovations of the Reformation.

(3) Thirdly, Luther's *Catechisms*, especially the explanation of the Third Article of the Creed, are constructed on two classic dogmas of Christianity, i.e. the doctrines of the trinity and the two natures of Christ.

Although justification is not mentioned as a term in the catechisms, it is implicitly a central theme and is firmly based on trinitarian doctrine and christology: Salvation is the work of the triune God, which is grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Currently, the Roman Catholic Church, the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, as well as the constitutions of many other ecumenical organizations are built upon these *dogmata*.

(4) Fourthly, Luther's *Catechisms* are also witness to the common faith in the sense that, in them, controversial theology aimed at either Rome or the radical Reformation remains only in a subordinate role. The *Small Catechism* does not include any direct polemic. The *Large Catechism*, intended for pastors, has some critical comments on the »church of the Pope« and on spiritualistic baptismal concepts, but in comparison to Luther's other writings, it does not have anti-ecumenical, controversialist traits.

(5) Fifthly, in line with Karl Lehmann's thoughts, in Luther's *Large Catechism* one can discern a spiritual self-critical ethos, which may also have ecumenical significance.

The *Large Catechism* is a good example of what an honest and open-minded analysis of the church and Christendom could be. At the same time the *Catechism* boasts of the breakthrough of the Gospel, it appraises not only the problems of its theological opponents but also, in the same measure, the pitiful mediocrity of the Christian life of its own camp.

In the Preface, for example, we read that it is expressly its own »shepherds«, i.e. the priests who had migrated to the Reformation camp, who were afforded an earful as »lazy bellies« (*faule Wänste, ignavos vetres*) and »presumptuous saints« (*vermessene Heiligen, praesumptuosos sanctos*). They are depicted as being more interested in the perquisites of their office than in the duties of the office, or in such matters as prayer, study and serving the parishioners: »These shameful gluttons and servants of their bellies are better suited to be swineherds or keepers of dogs than guardians of souls and pastors.« Self-criticism in regard to one's own Church and one's own state of Christianity is a precondition for genuine ecumenical relations.

(6) Sixthly, in the explanations of the Sacraments at the end of the *Large Catechism*, Luther attempts to link up with the teaching of his predecessors. This too has positive ecumenical significance. Sacramental teaching of Martin Luther is characterized by a strong theological realism and an understanding of the effectiveness of the Word of God. Baptism, confession, and Holy Communion do not simply refer to things external to themselves, but they include and give Christ and all his works. They are the efficacious signs (*signa efficacia*) of Christ's presence, God's grace and the communion of Christians.¹⁰

V *The central place of the Sacraments*

The Holy Sacraments have central standing in the *Catechisms* of Luther as well as in his other texts. Baptism joins one both to Christ and to his church. In accord with the strong words of the *Catechism*, in baptism God donates to the believer »victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God's grace, the entire Christ and all his Works, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts.«¹¹ Simultaneously, it is made clear that the one who is baptized every single day needs teaching, prayer, exhortation, and the support of other Christians in order to prevail over troubles, to persevere in faith, and to be strengthened in love.

In addition to Baptism, there is a link established to theological realism in the explanation of Holy Communion in the *Catechism*. The Eucharist is the meal of Christ's presence, which joins to other Christians and donates »the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life«.

Currently, the doctrine and praxis of Holy Communion remain a central ecumenical issue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics as well as other churches. Holy Communion includes nearly all theological *loci* from creation to redemption and eschatology. The bottleneck choking off the visible unity of the Churches is the theology of the ministry, which reaches its culmination in Holy Communion.

¹⁰ On the effective character of the sacraments in the theology of Luther, see E. HUOVINEN, *Fides infantium. Martin Luthers Lehre vom Kinderglauben* (VIEG 159), 1997, 45–74.

¹¹ *Large Catechism*, Baptism, 41f.

Thus, it is interesting to ask what Martin Luther's concept of Holy Communion could bring to the rapprochement between the churches in our day. Could he also be *doctor communis* for the theology of the Eucharist?¹²

VI *The Sacrament of Christ's presence*

To Martin Luther, the Eucharist was the sacrament of Christ's real presence. Thus it is not only a feast of remembrance where we recall Jesus' teachings and deeds. Neither is it a mere symbolic feast where the bread and the wine might remind us of Christ's body, absent and distant in heaven.

Luther frequently repeated the words of institution, that is, »this is my body«, *hoc est corpus meum*. These words are to be interpreted simply and realistically. The host does not merely signify the body of the Lord, referring only to a Christ dwelling elsewhere. The words of institution include and effect what they promise.

The concept of the real presence, naturally enough, is not the sole content of Holy Communion in the Bible and tradition. Luther, too, links other motifs to Communion: grace and the forgiveness of sins, the communion of Christians, the remembrance of Christ, the meal of gratitude to and confession of faith in God. It is at one and the same time the representation of the sacrifice given by Christ on Golgatha and the foretaste of the heavenly feast.

According to Luther the essence of the Eucharist is, however, the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the bread and the wine. To Luther this faith was no abstract theological theory or philosophical idea. He wanted to rely on the simple Word of God, on the New Testament instituted by Christ himself. Christ gave his own body »for us for the forgiveness of sins« (Mt 26: 28).

Faith in the real presence of Christ at the Eucharist has always united Lutherans and Catholics. We have always wanted to have confidence that

¹² See, e.g.: Justification in the Life of the Church: A Report from the Roman Catholic – Lutheran Dialogue Group for Sweden and Finland, 2010.

Christ himself is present at the Holy Eucharist in the bread and the wine »truly and in substance«, *vere et substantialiter*, giving the baptized believer the reality of all of salvation. As a community the church lives in the true meaning of the words *de eucharistia*, out of the mystery and gift of the Eucharist.

In accordance with the Lutheran theology of the Eucharist, Christ's real presence is based on the doctrine of God, on Christology and on the doctrine of justification. To Luther God is in his essence the Giver and the Donor.

According to the Creed, the Triune God is not a jealous judge or a merchant demanding compensation, but rather self-sacrificing Love, who loves us and wants good things for us. Luther summed up the message of the Creed by using the metaphor of giving gifts:

We see here in the Creed how God gives himself completely to us, with all his gifts and power [...] the Father gives us all creation, Christ all his works and the Holy Spirit all his gifts.¹³

God's love is the reason for Christ's incarnation and the basis for the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Out of love for us God became man in Christ, making peace with us. Out of love for us Christ instituted the Eucharist so that he might continue to be present among us and to bring the gifts of reconciliation to our lives.

Christ's real presence at the Eucharist is thus in inseparable union with the gift of the Sacrament, its efficacy. The Eucharist is the feast of Christ's death and resurrection, where we partake of the reconciliation on

¹³ M. LUTHER, The Large Catechism (in: The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, ed. by R. KOLB/T.J. WENGERT, 2000, 440). »Here in the Creed you have the entire essence, will, and work of God exquisitely depicted in very brief but rich words [...]. For in all three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart and his pure, unutterable love [...]. We see here in the Creed how God gives himself completely to us, with all his gifts and power, to help us keep the Ten Commandments: the Father gives us all creation, Christ all his works and the Holy Spirit all his gifts.« Large Catechism, II, 63–69. On the theology of the Eucharist in Luther, see e.g.: J. JOLKKONEN, Eucharist (in: Engaging Luther: A [New] Theological Assessment, ed. by O.-P. VAINIO, 2010, 108–137).

the cross, the forgiveness of sins, life eternal – all in all, we partake of Christ himself.

Trust in Christ's real presence in the Sacrament of the Eucharist is such a treasure of faith which could bring Lutherans ever closer to Roman Catholics, the Orthodox, and to other Christians who confess this faith in doctrine and practice.

It is this mystery of faith that Pope John Paul II wrote about in his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Christ, the true man and the true God is present in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist really, wholly and entirely.¹⁴ We Lutherans can also wholeheartedly join in the words of the encyclical concerning Christ's presence and the gift of the Eucharist. Christ's presence is true »in objective reality«, *in ipsa rerum natura*, and »independently of our minds«, *a nostro scilicet spiritu disiuncta*. The Sacrament of the Eucharist, apart from bringing Christ's person and work into the present, also donates them to us personally. »The Eucharist thus applies (*applicat*) to men and women today the reconciliation won once for all by Christ for mankind in every age.«¹⁵

VII The Eucharist and Christ's sacrifice

As a feast of the presence of Christ crucified and resurrected, the Eucharist is also a feast of sacrifice. During the Lutheran Reformation a dispute arose as to how the Eucharist could be understood as a sacrifice in the genuine sense so that the sacrifice would not cancel out the gift. In describing Christ's sacrifice on the cross, the New Testament uses the Greek word *ephapax*, meaning something sufficient, perfect, unique, something not repeatable (Heb 10:10). What is the relation of this sacrifice given by Christ on the cross to the sacrifice of the Eucharist?

In ecumenical dialogues with the Roman Catholic Church we Lutherans have been concerned about the sufficiency of Christ's cross, asking: If the Eucharist is understood as being an independent propitiatory sacrifice, does that not render the sacrifice on the cross insufficient, questioning

¹⁴ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, §12.

Christ as the only mediator?¹⁶ And, Catholics have been concerned about the efficacy of the Eucharist. They ask: If the connection between the Eucharist and Christ's sacrifice were to be severed, would the benefit of the cross and its fruit be left in the past, in which case also the Eucharist might lose its significance?

In the light of both Luther studies and of ecumenical dialogues, we can state that despite the differences in emphases we Lutherans are of one accord with Roman Catholics in two vital issues. United we can say that 1) Christ's sacrifice is unique and sufficient and 2) it is truly and efficaciously present in the celebration of the Eucharist.

The commission on the Lutheran-Catholic dialogues in 1980 stated:

Catholic and Lutheran Christians together recognize that in the Lord's Supper Jesus Christ is present as the Crucified who died for our sins and who rose again for our justification, as the once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world. This sacrifice can neither be continued, nor repeated, nor replaced nor complemented; but rather, it can and should become effective ever anew in the midst of the congregation.¹⁷

For us Lutherans it is important that Christ's sacrifice need not be repeated or complemented. Without the perfect and sufficient propitiatory work performed by Christ, we lack the strength to live. Our faith and sacrifice arise out of joy and gratitude that our reconciliation is perfect and that we can talk about it in the past: Sin *was* reconciled, victory *acquired* and final peace *achieved*. Is this not actually the entire core and content of the Gospel?

Nevertheless, in a great many meanings we can, together with Luther, call the Eucharist a sacrifice. First, at the beginning of the liturgy of the Eucharist, we carry bread and wine to the altar as an offering and as a symbol of thanksgiving for creation.¹⁸ Second, in Holy Communion Christ is present as the sacrificed and crucified Lord. Third, the Eucharist is the commemoration in word and deed of Christ's sacrifice (*memoria passio-*

16 The Eucharist, §59, Lutheran/Roman Catholic Joint Commission, LWF 1980.

17 The Eucharist, §56, Lutheran/Roman Catholic Joint Commission, LWF 1980. Quotation from the US dialogue document.

18 »Panis enim et vinum antea offeruntur ad benedicendum, ut per verbum et orationem santificentur. Postquam autem benedictus et consecratus est, iam non offertur sed accipitur dono a deo.« WA 6; 525,1–3.

nis). Fourth, Christ's sacrifice is currently present at the Eucharist (*repraesentatio passionis*). Fifth, the fruit, benefit and gift of Christ's cross are applied (*applicat*) to the believing recipients. Sixth, we sacrifice to God thanksgiving when we confess our sins, give thanks, pray and celebrate the Eucharist in accord with the First Commandment, the institution of Christ and the apostolic admonition (Rm 12:1). Seventh, the Eucharist constrains us to sacrifice ourselves to one another as an offering in mutual love.

Eighth – and maybe most importantly – Christ offers himself as a sacrifice prior to us, together with us and after us. He is not only the food and drink of the Holy Supper but also the host of the feast and the celebrant. The Catechism of the Catholic Church names Christ the real subject of the liturgy¹⁹ and Martin Luther expresses the same thought in a different manner: »Christ is the chef, the waiter, as well as the food and drink of the Eucharist«. ²⁰

The Holy Communion can well be termed a sacrifice, above all because »Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come« (Heb 9:11), giving himself to the Father and to us. Luther writes:

From these words we learn that we do not offer Christ as a sacrifice, but that Christ offers us. And in this way it is permissible, yes, profitable, to call the mass a sacrifice; not on its own account, but because we offer ourselves as a sacrifice along with Christ.²¹

19 »Liturgy is an ›action‹ of the whole Christ (*Christus totus*).« Catechism of the Catholic Church, §1136. See also §1084–1090.

20 »Denn der herr hatts nicht alleine eingesetzt, sondern machts vnd hellts auch selbs, vnd ist der koch, kelner, speise vnd tranck selbs«. WA 23; 270,9–11.

21 LW 35,99. »Auß welchen worten wir lernen das wir nit Christum, sondern Christus vns opffert, vnd nach der weyß, ist es leydlich, yha nuetzlich, das wir die meß ein opffer heyssen, nit vmb yret willen, sondern das wir vns mit Christo opffern«. StA 1; 303,11–15.

VIII *The Holy Eucharist as a communal feast*

On the basis of its name (*synaksis, communio*) the Holy Eucharist is a communal feast. St Paul writes: »Is not the bread which we break a sharing [*koinonia*] in the body of Christ?« (I Cor 10: 16–17)

The Holy Eucharist connects Christ and sinner, and a Christian to other Christians. Communion is not only a matter between God and the individual but a communal event with an ecclesiological and ethical dimension. Those who share the consecrated bread and wine also share all joy and sorrow, victory and suffering, concern and comfort. Those who are joined to Christ in the consecrated bread and wine are also joined to one another in faith and love.

The communal nature of this Holy Supper is brought out forcefully in the theology of the Holy Communion of Martin Luther:

Besides all this, Christ did not institute these two forms solitary and alone, but he gave his true natural flesh in the bread, and his natural true blood in the wine, that he might give a really perfect sacrament or sign. For just as the bread is changed (*vorwandelt*) into his true natural body and the wine into his natural true blood, so truly are we also drawn and changed (*als so warhaftig werden wir vorwandelt*) into the spiritual body, that is, into the fellowship of Christ and all saints and by this sacrament put into possession of all the virtues and mercies of Christ and his saints.²²

Again through this same love, we are to be changed and to make the infirmities of all other Christians our own; we are to take upon ourselves their form and their necessity, and all the good that is within our power we are to make theirs, that they may profit from it. That is real fellowship, and that is the true significance of this sacrament. In this way we are changed into one another and are made into a community by love.

Without love there can be no such change.²³

As the Eucharist is a *communio* in Christ, so also the sacrament unites us with other Christians and the whole *Gemeinschaft* of the *communio sanctorum*. Participation in Christ through word and sacrament is, in fact, sharing in the body of Christ, in the community of all saints. The interchange of the love of Christ takes place between all the members of this community.

²² LW 35,59 (StA I; 279,31–280,4).

²³ LW 35,58 (StA I; 278,34–279,12).

The manner in which Martin Luther here speaks about the communal nature of the Eucharist and faith can open possibilities for new ecumenical convergence in the field of ecclesiology.²⁴

In the *Large Catechism*, Luther strongly emphasises the role of the Christian church. In creating new spiritual life, the Holy Spirit accomplishes this »through the Christian church.« Luther states that: »In the first place he [the Holy Spirit] has a unique community in the world. It is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God.« When the Holy Spirit sanctifies us, »he first leads us into his holy community, placing us upon the bosom of the church, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ.«²⁵

On the above bases where Luther speaks of the presence of Christ, the communal nature of the Holy Eucharist and the role of the church, we Lutherans may join in with the words of Pope John Paul II that the Holy Eucharist has a »unifying power«.²⁶ »Our union with Christ, which is a gift and grace for each of us, makes it possible for us, in him, to share in the unity of his body which is the Church.« Communion not only joins Christ and sinner, it also joins together Christians within the same church, young and old, women and men, priests and parishioners. It joins together dioceses and finally also local churches ministering to various parts of the world, churches confessing the same faith.

24 S. PEURA, The Church as a Spiritual Communion in Luther (in: The Church as Communion: Lutheran Contributions to Ecclesiology, ed. by H. HOLZE, LWF Documentation 42, 1997, 93–131).

25 The Book of Concord, T.G. TAPPERT, Large Catechism, Creed, the Third Article, 415f.

26 »Eucharistic communion also confirms the Church in her unity as the body of Christ. Saint Paul refers to this *unifying power* of participation in the banquet of the Eucharist [...]. The argument is compelling: our union with Christ, which is a gift and grace for each of us, makes it possible for us, in him, to share in the unity of his body which is the Church. The Eucharist reinforces the incorporation into Christ which took place in Baptism though the gift of the Spirit (cf. I Cor 12: 13,27) [...]. The seeds of disunity, which daily experience shows to be so deeply rooted in humanity as a result of sin, are countered by the *unifying power* of the body of Christ. The Eucharist, precisely by building up the Church, creates human community.« Ecclesia de Eucharistia, § 23f.

It is my fervent wish that we Lutherans could come together with our Roman Catholic and other Christian sisters and brothers at the common Communion table. We yearn for a common table because the Holy Eucharist is the feast of Christ's presence and *communio sanctorum*.

On the basis of Luther's theology we have no difficulty in joining with those words which Benedict XIV, Bishop of Rome, stated in his inaugural homily:

All of us belong to the communion of Saints, we who have been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we who draw life from the gift of Christ's Body and Blood, through which he transforms us and makes us like himself.²⁷

There is, however, no shortcut to a joint Holy Eucharist. Unity does not endure without truth, we require »the truth in love«, *veritas in caritate*. The goal of visible unity and of a common Communion demand that we dig deeper into the foundation of our common Christian faith. We need patience to delve into revealed truth and we need the courage then to take decisive steps when adequate consensus is achieved.

In summary, may I dare to contend that Martin Luther, in his *Catechisms* and his writings on Holy Communion, speaks as *doctor communis*, not attempting to develop new doctrine but rather striving to express and interpret the common faith of the undivided Christendom. Thus his writings still bear ecumenical fruit.

27 Omelia del Santo Padre per il solenne inizio del Ministerio Petrino, Domenica, 24 April 2005.