

Facing Unity

A Catholic View on the international Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue

BURCKHARD NEUMANN

*Dr. Burckhard Neumann is Privatdozent and Director at the Johann Adam Möhler Institut in Paderborn, Germany. The Möhler Institute is a Catholic research center for the study of ecumenism and ecumenical theology. Among his many publications could be mentioned the monograph *Sakrament und Ökumene. Studien zur deutschsprachigen evangelischen Sakramententheologie der Gegenwart*, Paderborn 1997. Dr. Neumann is also a co-editor of the *Lexikon der Ökumene und Konfessionskunde*, published by the Möhler Institute in 2007, and of several other books and articles commenting upon the progress of Catholic-Protestant dialogues.*

Introduction

The year 1967 was an important year for various reasons and on different levels. For my own life it was very important because I started school in September, 1967. It was also the year The Beatles released their famous and most influential Album "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band", which some of you may know, and I hope also like as I do. Furthermore, it was the year the Joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic Study Commission held its first session in Zürich, Switzerland, the same commission that in 1972 published the so called "Malta Report" on "The Gospel and the Church".¹ One member of the Lutheran delegation was the person we honor by this symposium, Per Erik Persson.

Up to now I think that this title still marks the special emphases of Lutheran and Roman Catholic theology and doctrine, which a later document expresses by the title "Church and Justifi-

cation".² The way Roman Catholic and Lutheran doctrines define the relation of these two points marks the difference between the Churches, though I am convinced that this difference does not divide our churches but is a differentiated consensus, and I think especially the document "Church and Justification" shows that the special emphases are not mutually exclusive.

If you read this report from 1972, including the special statements of some members of the commission, after more than forty years of dialogue, you may get the impression that this text is already a kind of summary of many results of the official dialogue and the questions this dialogue raises. Reading this text against the background of the other dialogues, it seems to me that most of the theses of this text were justified or clarified by documents that were to follow.

The most obvious example is the doctrine of justification. A particular sentence of the "Malta Report" seems to be one of the most frequent quotations on this doctrine – in No. 26 the report states: "Today, however, a far-reaching consensus is developing in the interpretation of justifi-

¹ "Report of the Joint Lutheran – Roman Catholic Study Commission on "The Gospel and the Church", 1972" ("Malta Report"), in: *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level*. Ed. by H. Meyer and L. Vischer, New York-Geneva 1984 (FOP 108), 168-189.

² *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998*. Ed. by J. Gros, H. Meyer, W.G. Rusch, Geneva-Grand Rapids 2000 (FOP 187), 484-565.

cation.” 27 years later this statement was officially accepted by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation by signing the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in October 31st 1999 in Augsburg, Germany.³ But the fact that it took so long tells us that we need a lot of patience on the way forward to the unity we seek.

It might be helpful, as well as comforting and encouraging, to compare this document to the ongoing dialogue, and ask for similar results. As one of the third generation of ecumenists, I would like to give a brief overview on the themes of this dialogue, in no way complete or detailed, of course, and to ask some questions or name some problems. I consciously use the title of the last document of the second phase of this dialogue, “Facing Unity”, but, as you can see, I put a question mark behind this title. So, this is the question that stands behind my brief statement: Are we really facing unity today?

1. The themes of the dialogue

If you look at the international Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue, I think one could speak of a “honeymoon” concerning the first years that form the first and the second phase of this dialogue. It was the most productive time of the dialogue; after the “Malta Report” the commission published six documents up to 1984, and especially the documents on the Eucharist (1978)⁴ and on the Ministry in the Church (1981)⁵ are milestones that are still challenging our churches. They still pose the question whether we have received and implemented them in the doctrine, the life and the liturgy of our churches. But also the statements to the Augsburg confession “All under one Christ” (1980)⁶ and to Martin Luther “Martin Luther – Witness to Christ” (1984)⁷ are still worth reading and could, I think, be very helpful in approaching the year 2017 together. It is only to be expected that the end of this phase saw the publica-

tion of the document “Facing Unity” (1984),⁸ which even braved a kind of roadmap to unity. So these years could be regarded as a kind of honeymoon; the first phase of a new and vivid relationship, which sooner or later has to deal with the everyday life and the fact that the partner still remains different from me and my fantasies. And maybe this last document in particular was published too early, expressing a hope or vision that now faces the challenges of everyday life.

The density and the briefness of these documents is challenging and fascinating. The documents of the following phases – “Church and Justification” and “The Apostolicity of the Church”⁹ – become more voluminous, discussing the different subjects in more detail and with a great amount of biblical, historical and systematic material (which of course is very helpful for a seminary or for academic lectures). The document “Church and Justification” is in my opinion still very helpful for discerning the different ways of understanding the church and its relation to the Gospel according to Lutheran and Roman Catholic doctrine.

Besides the aforementioned Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, however, the dialogue came to focus more and more on the question of the Church, and the ministry in the church. While they are all helpful proposals, it seems to me that the dialogue here comes to an end of sorts – nearly everything is now said, and it remains for the churches to react and answer. In regard of all this, you may well ask yourself the central question: Are we today closer to unity or not? Looking back at the situation in 1967 and comparing it to the present, the only answer is: “Yes, we are”. The results of the ecumenical dialogue are obvious. We have all influenced and learned from one another; we have gone a long way together towards unity and cannot go back.

Yet I wish to ask more precisely what we have reached so far. Certainly, we have reached much more than we could have expected at the begin-

³ *Ibid.*, 566-582.

⁴ *Growth in Agreement*, 192-214.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 248-275.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 241-247.

⁷ *Growth in Agreement II*, 438-442.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 443-484.

⁹ *The Apostolicity of the Church: Study Document of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity*, Minneapolis 2006.

ning of the dialogue, but I would like to add that we have reached less than what is possible, comparing the results of the dialogue itself to the points the churches have accepted and received hitherto. I don't think I have to argue for the former part of my answer. Just compare a typical catholic handbook of dogmatic theology from the first half of the 20th century to a corresponding handbook of today. The changes in the way we regard and appreciate each other are obvious. As for the latter part, I dare say that we are not facing unity in the way described by the document of 1984. It seems to be farther away. I would like to list some thoughts and suggestions on the problems we are dealing with in the ecumenical dialogue at large, not only between Lutherans and Roman Catholics.

2. Current problems of the ecumenical dialogue

a) The problem of identity

One of the main problems the churches are dealing with, consciously or unconsciously, seems to be one of identity. What is Christian identity in a pluralistic world, facing all the different religions and convictions and ideologies? And, after almost fifty years of ecumenical dialogue, what is Roman Catholic or Lutheran identity?

Some years ago a short debate about an "ecumenism of profiles" ("Ökumene der Profile") took place in Germany.¹⁰ Though the term itself may be outdated, the question how we can save our ecclesial identity is still relevant. One critical reproach to the ecumenical dialogue as a whole, and especially to those who are engaged in this dialogue, is that too much of one's own ecclesial identity is given up, or even betrayed. Though I think this is completely wrong, and always state that true ecumenism does not mean to give up or betray one's own faith but to get enriched by the ecumenical partner, I do understand the problem and I think it must be considered and discussed if the ecumenical dialogue is to be fruitful.

¹⁰ Cf. W. Huber, *Im Geist der Freiheit. Für eine Ökumene der Profile*, Freiburg i.Br. 2007

The Lutheran discussion on the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification is a good example, especially in Germany, for the role denominational or ecclesial identity plays on our shared road toward unity. My predecessor at the Johann-Adam-Möhler Institute, Prof. Hans Jörg Urban, once noted that if there were to be a Joint Declaration on Eucharist and Ministry, the discussion within the Roman Catholic church would be as heavy and as controversial as it had been in the Lutheran churches when the Joint Declaration was about to be signed.

b) The lack of reception

So I come to my next point, which seems almost as old as the ecumenical dialogue itself. I am speaking of the problem of reception. The lack of reception of the results of the ecumenical dialogue within our churches, in doctrine, liturgy and life is one of the key challenges of ecumenism. Of course, this is a challenge for the *church authorities*, the bishops and synods in our churches. Besides the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, no other results of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue have been officially received by our churches. And the Joint Declaration demonstrates the importance of such official acts and signs.

You are familiar, perhaps, with the proposal of the Lutheran theologian Harding Meyer, that the Churches should make so called "In-via" declarations; declarations that do not state a more or less full consensus on certain questions, but state and save what we have already achieved, and what we don't want to give up or don't need to discuss anymore.¹¹ The document "Harvesting the fruits" published by Cardinal Walter Kasper was an answer to this proposal,¹² and I was very glad to recently read an interview with Cardinal Koch, the President of the Pontifical Council for

¹¹ Cf. H. Meyer, *Stillstand oder neuer Kairos? Zur Zukunft des evangelisch/katholischen Dialogs*, in: ders., *Versöhnte Verschiedenheit. Aufsätze zur ökumenischen Theologie III*, Frankfurt a.M.–Paderborn 2009, 132-144.

¹² W. Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits. Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue*, London 2009.

Promoting Christian Unity, that the council is looking for ways to carry on with this project.¹³

But here I would like to emphasise the role and responsibility of *theology*. Though I do not want to reject what I stated about the change in theological handbooks, I am very often astonished, and sometimes disappointed, that the theological results of so many dialogues haven't yet found their way into systematic theology. For ultimately, theology has a great responsibility in influencing the ministers, the teachers and many others in the church that will then be able and willing to implant these results in the life and practice of our communities. The gap that sometimes appears between the efforts of ecumenical dialogue and the theological formation is a main reason for the lack of reception in our churches.

c) *The hermeneutical question*

This takes me to another point that is crucial for the effort of the ecumenical dialogue. I mean the hermeneutical question, which is probably one of the most complex questions in ecumenism.¹⁴

Though there many books and articles on this subject, the problem is, in my opinion, not yet solved. And needless to say, I am not able to solve it either. I just want to offer some observations that might be helpful for the ongoing debate. As already mentioned, ecumenical theologians often have to deal with the fear or the presupposition that ecumenical theology goes too far, that it is in danger of giving up the truth in the struggle for unity. It is difficult to reply or reproach this fear because it is not only a question of reason but also emotion. Nevertheless, one must always try.

First of all, I think no one engaged in the ecumenical dialogue would agree to that fear. The intense and often controversial discussions in these dialogues rather prove that no one is

willing to give up his or her own faith for the sake of unity. But they try to go as far as possible, because they are convinced that the unity Christ prayed for is worth it. And one could ask if the search for unity could be one of the signs that this theology really is the work of the Holy Spirit. To me it seems that within the so called discernment of the Spirits, the search for unity could be understood as such a sign for the work of the Holy Spirit.

But one reason for such fear and presupposition is that we very often do not realize the new situation; our new frame of self-understanding that has resulted from the ecumenical dialogue on all levels. We can no longer understand ourselves as the one true church and outside there is only heresy. We all know that the deeper reflection on the church led the II. Vatican Council to accept that the borders of the Roman Catholic Church are not the borders of the Church of Christ. As Pope John Paul II observed in his encyclical *Ut unum sint*: "It is not that beyond the boundaries of the Catholic community there is an ecclesial vacuum" (No. 13). Moreover, the first fruit of the ecumenical dialogue mentioned is the "rediscovered brotherhood" (No. 41f.). So we all are brothers and sisters in Christ, despite the fact that we live in different and still separated churches. This is a new situation, a new frame of understanding ourselves in relation to the other churches and Christians.

The upshot is that we have to reflect on this new frame because it challenges us to develop a new kind of hermeneutics. But to do that, we have to accept the efforts of the ecumenical dialogue, and then ask what these efforts show us about the questions of unity and diversity; not within our churches but between our churches. This, in turn, means that hermeneutical reflections, while necessary, are secondary or subordinate. First, we have to accept the efforts and results of ecumenism, not necessarily as a whole, of course, but with a critical discussion. Then, we have to reflect on what these results or efforts tell us about human understanding, what they tell us about the development of doctrine, the relation of unity and diversity, and many other questions. But it seems to me that very often these results are not accepted because one does not

¹³ J. Schidelko, *Neue Impulse gesucht*. Kardinal Koch zieht zur Einheitswoche ökumenische Bilanz, in: KNA-ÖKI Nr. 5, 2.1. 2013, 5f., 5.

¹⁴ Cf. T. Lindfeld, *Einheit in der Wahrheit*. Konfessionelle Denkformen und die Suche nach ökumenischer Hermeneutik, Paderborn 2008 (KKTS 78); W. Thönissen, *Dogma und Symbol*. Eine ökumenische Hermeneutik, Freiburg i.Br. 2008.

want to change the basic hermeneutical frame or pattern.

I may be wrong, but I sometimes think that many of those that do not accept the results of ecumenical dialogue do so because they think these efforts cannot be true. There is a famous poem of Christian Morgenstern, titled “Die unmögliche Tatsache / The impossible fact” which ends with the lines (and I would like to quote the German text first):

Weil, so schließt er messerscharf,
nicht sein kann, was nicht sein darf.¹⁵

Translated:

”for, he reasons pointedly,
that which must not, cannot be.”¹⁶

I think that this is a real problem. There are the results of the ecumenical dialogue, and in many cases I think they are convincing. But to accept them implies that you accept the fact that questions that separated and divided the Churches in the 16th century maybe no longer separate and divide them in the 21st century.¹⁷ Thus the question arises how this can be possible (given that the believers and theologians in the 16th century were as intelligent and faithful as we think we are today!). If you accept this fact, you have to

¹⁵ Chr. Morgenstern, *Gedichte in einem Band*, Frankfurt a.M. 42009, 78f.

¹⁶ URL: <http://www.alb-neckar-schwarzwald.de/morgenstern/morgenstern_poems.html> (28.1.2013)

¹⁷ Cf. *Lehrverurteilungen-kirchentrennend? I. Rechtfertigung, Sakramente und Amt im Zeitalter der Reformation und heute*. Hg. von K. Lehmann und W. Pannenberg, Freiburg i.Br.-Göttingen 31988 (DiKi 4); Transl.: *The condemnations of the Reformation era: do they still divide?* Ed. by K. Lehmann and W. Pannenberg, Minneapolis 1990; *Lehrverurteilungen - kirchentrennend? II. Materialien zu den Lehrverurteilungen und zur Theologie der Rechtfertigung*. Hg. von K. Lehmann, Freiburg i.Br.-Göttingen 1989 (DiKi 5); *Lehrverurteilungen - kirchentrennend? III. Materialien zur Lehre von den Sakramenten und vom kirchlichen Amt*. Hg. von W. Pannenberg, Freiburg i.Br.-Göttingen 1990 (DiKi 6); *Lehrverurteilungen - kirchentrennend? IV. Antworten auf kirchliche Stellungnahmen*. Hg. von W. Pannenberg u. Th. Schneider, Freiburg i.Br.-Göttingen 1994 (DiKi 8).

reflect on the consequences for your faith, for your understanding of history, or the development of Christian doctrine, and all the questions that are connected to that issue. And if you don’t want to accept these new questions you tend to deny the results of the dialogue. So the challenge of ecumenical hermeneutics is the reflection on how it is possible to rethink the discussions of the Reformation era and to come to different solutions.

Here it may be helpful to investigate the relation of diversity and plurality within our churches and also within the different forms of church communions. E.g. I fail to understand why, on the one hand, in several countries there is full communion between Lutheran and Methodist Churches, though there is a deep difference on the understanding of the *simul iustus et peccator*, while on the other some Lutheran theologians regard this question as the main and still Church dividing difference between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Churches. So a lot of theological work remains to be done on this field.

d) The different understanding and realization of unity

Church communion is another keyword. Facing unity implies that we face the same unity, but obviously, this is not the case. That is why we discuss the church, the sacraments and the ministry in the church. And, of course, we can only hope to come closer to the unity we seek if we do not differ in the understanding of this unity.

From a catholic point of view, this problem is closely connected to the different forms of union or communion of churches between the protestant churches worldwide. For Roman Catholic doctrine and theology it is very difficult to understand how these differences within the protestant churches are possible. And here we are again at the “Malta Report” and the statements of some theologians at the end of this report that point to the inner-Lutheran differences especially on the understanding of ministry. In Germany, most of the Lutheran Churches are members of the “Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe” (CPCE) which is based on the Leuenberg Agreement. In my view the Con-

cord of Leuenberg from 1973 is based on a certain interpretation of the Article VII of the Augsburg Confession which seems to me to collide with some statements made by the international Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue on the necessity of an ordained ministry for the church.

Of course, I do not want to blame the Lutheran Churches or the other Protestant Churches for this. I just want to point to this problem because I think it is crucial for our ongoing relations. It is very difficult for Roman Catholic theology to understand these different interpretations of the Lutheran Confessions and their consequences for the different forms of church communion. Of course, as a Roman Catholic theologian I prefer a Church communion on the basis of the Porvoo Common Statement from 1993 to a communion on the basis of Leuenberg. But both ways of communion do exist, both are accepted and lived by Lutheran Churches and so raise the question for the shape or form of the unity we seek.

e) The challenge of conversion

One of my problems with the Leuenberg Agreement is the difference between the intention of Leuenberg and its realization. It intends to be the *beginning* of a way to a growing and deepening communion,¹⁸ but in my view – though I may be wrong – it is in fact a form of mutual acceptance based on the *status quo* without any change within the churches. I ask whether this can be a stable, reliable form of unity. For I think that the unity of the churches is impossible without reform and renewal, and that means it is impossible without change.

I am convinced that this problem concerns all our churches, and I repeat that I do not want to be misunderstood as blaming the Protestant Churches for the Leuenberg Agreement. What I want to underscore is that not only a “change of heart” is essential for the way to unity, which the Decree on ecumenism calls one necessary element of the so called “spiritual ecumenism” (along with the “holiness of life” and the “public and private prayer for the unity of Christians”¹⁹),

but also the reform of the churches.²⁰ In No. 4 the Decree on ecumenism says: “Finally, all are led to examine their own faithfulness to Christ’s will for the Church and accordingly to undertake with vigor the task of renewal and reform.” And No. 6 says:

Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth. The Church is always in need of this, in so far as she is an institution of men [and women] here on earth.

This means that the call for unity is intrinsically tied to the call to reform, renewal, reformation. The document of the international Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue on “Martin Luther – witness to Christ” states:

Luther’s call for church reform, a call to repentance, is still relevant for us. He summons us to listen anew to the gospel, to recognize our own unfaithfulness to the gospel and to witness credibly to it. This cannot happen today without attention to the other church and to its witness and without the surrender of polemical stereotypes and the search for reconciliation. (No. 6)

I think this is the main challenge on our way to unity and even the most difficult of the problems I mentioned here. We all confess that reform is necessary for our churches, we all accept the famous sentence of the “*ecclesia semper reformanda*”, but the problem is to put it into practice. But if we do not really dare to go this way, and if we do not listen to the legitimate questions of our brothers and sisters in Christ, we have to ask ourselves whether we really are on the way to unity and whether we really want to go this way.

Concluding remarks

Let me come to the end. Maybe you know the famous labyrinth in the cathedral in Chartres. A Benedictine once showed me that just before you get to the center you are at the edge of the whole

¹⁸ Vgl. No. 35-41.

¹⁹ UR 8.

²⁰ Cf. Groupe des Dombes, *Pour la conversion des Églises*, Paris 1991; transl.: *For the Conversion of the Churches*, Geneva 1993.

labyrinth that means you seem to be as far away as possible. Maybe our way towards unity can be considered as a kind of labyrinth. The difference between a maze and a typical labyrinth is that a labyrinth consists of just one path, so it is impossible to get lost in it. So maybe if the unity is not as near as one could hope or wish after more than forty years of dialogue, we can still be confident that we are on the way to unity. And we all hope for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As the "Malta Report" says: "Lutheran and Catholics are convinced that the Holy Spirit unceasingly leads and keeps the church in the truth"

(No. 22). The road we share toward unity is part of the truth of the Gospel. So if we trust in this guidance we may hope that the Holy Spirit also guides us today, and maybe the impression that we are still far away from the center is just the beginning of his guidance to the center, to the one who unites us, our Lord Jesus Christ. Maybe in 2025, at the 60th anniversary of the end of the II. Vatican Council, we will be facing unity in a way we could not even imagine in 2013. It would be a good year (and now I have to quote Sgt. Pepper!), the year "when I'm sixty-four."

REMEMBERING THE PAST – LIVING THE FUTURE LUTHERAN TRADITION IN TRANSITION

8-10/10 2013 UPPSALA

Kom och lyssna när ett 80-tal internationella och svenska forskare presenterar forskning om reformationens teologier, särskilt luthersk teologi, i relation till dagens värld.

KONFERENSSPRÅK: Engelska
FÖR INFORMATION OCH ANMÄLAN SE:
svenskakyrkan.se/forskning

HUVUDFÖRELÄSARE:

Kirsi Stjerna, *Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, USA*

Christoph Schwöbel,
Tübingen Universität, Tyskland

Vitor Westhelle, *Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, USA*



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

Svenska kyrkan 