

A HERMENEUTICS OF HISTORY FOR AN ECUMENICAL FUTURE

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As the churches plan for the 2017 commemoration of the date used to mark the German Reformation of the sixteenth century, a new look at the traditional narratives of that era is in order. This paper will survey some interpretive principles developed in the ecumenical movement to help understand and reinterpret the Christian narrative for a reconciled future, using the 16th century as an example. The paper is presented as an invitation to ecclesialogists, the theologians of history, and the historians of Christianity and especially the sixteenth century.

The churches', including Orthodox and Roman Catholic, embrace of the modern ecumenical movement has meant entering into an open narrative.¹ The commitment to dialogue toward an open future narrative implicitly opens the churches to revision of their particular,

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¹ For a description of open narrative approaches to tradition see Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 2003), 85 ff. See also Vincent Miller, 'History or Geography? Gadamer, Foucault and Theologies of Tradition,' in Gary Macy, ed., *Theology and the New Histories*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1999), 56–88. Also the World Council text discussed below: *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: An Instrument for an Ecumenical Reflection on Hermeneutics*, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/iv-interpretation-the-meaning-of-our-words-and-symbols/a-treasure-in-earthen-vessels-an-instrument-for-an-ecumenical-reflection-on-hermeneutics.html>, 25, 33. See also Paul Avis, 'The Hermeneutics of Unity,' in *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology: The Church Made Whole?* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 39–59; and S. Sinn, 'Hermeneutics and Ecclesiology,' in G. Mannion and L. Mudge, eds., *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church* (London: Routledge, 2007), 567–93.

identity forming narrative for themselves and a new master narrative for the Christian community informed by the truth clarified by the dialogue.

From early in the ecumenical movement, the need for a common narrative was identified:

Practically, every church has its own distinctive picture of the Church's journey through the centuries. Churches and church historians are therefore confronted with the question: How is the past to be seen as a common past? How are the different perspectives to blend together into a single perspective?²

Fifty years of this ecumenical dialogue has brought new insights, methods and theological perspectives for viewing the history of the Church. For all of the churches and for the theological community, the methodologies and results of the dialogues have produced a new set of interpretive issues.³ These can serve the church as we face the reception⁴ of the results, the reinterpretation of one another as churches: our confessional texts; our theological understandings of ourselves, of our partners and of the Church universal.

There is a hesitation in the post-modern world to attempt a common narrative: 'Our fundamental life options and religious narratives are being confronted repeatedly with difference and otherness. They would appear to be nothing more than specific ways of dealing with life, society and reality as a whole. We have become

² Lukas Vischer, ed., *Church History in an Ecumenical Perspective* (Bern: Evangelische Arbeitsstelle Oekumene Schweiz, 1982), 7.

³ Anton W.J. Houtepen, 'The Faith of the Church Through the Ages: Ecumenism and Hermeneutics,' *Bulletin Centro Pro Unione* 44 (1993): 3-15; Houtepen, ed., *Ecumenism and Hermeneutics* (Utrecht: Interuniversitair Instituut voor Missiologie en Oecumenica, 1995); 'Hermeneutics and Ecumenism: The Art of Understanding a Communicative God,' in Peter Bouteneff & Dagmar Heller, eds., *Interpreting Together* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2001).

⁴ William G. Rusch, *Ecumenical Reception: Its Challenge and Opportunity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). 'Learning the Ways of Receptive Ecumenism—Formational and Catechetical Considerations,' in Paul D. Murray, ed., *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 149-59.

conscious that our narratives have historically evolved, are contextually embedded, and are the results of a multitude of accidentally circumstances.⁵ However new, reconciling master narratives, losing none of the vital diversity with which the Holy Spirit has gifted the churches in their separation, recontextualize our story, and can deepen communion as we move into the future.⁶ However, as Charles Taylor asserts of our secular understanding of the modern:

Our past is sedimented in our present, and we are doomed to misidentify ourselves, as long as we can't do justice to where we come from. This is why the narrative is not an optional extra, why I believe that I have to tell a story here.⁷

The success of the theological dialogues in the World Council, the bilateral conversations and in official decisions placed before our churches have required the churches as institutions to develop new ecumenical tools to move from dialogue, to official evaluation, and on to decisions.⁸ This essay will lay out 1) the hermeneutical challenge as it has been encountered, especially in interpreting and responding to texts like the 1982 *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 2) the interpretive perspectives produced by the dialogues to approach this challenge, and finally, 3) the specific opportunities of reinterpreting history in

⁵ Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 2. In the context of the interreligious encounter, Boeve outlines the epistemological problems of constructing such a common narrative, and the importance of the dialogue partners' grounding in the truth claims of his or her own community and narrative (p.44). Like experience, there is no unmediated history (p.71). See also Vischer, *Church History*, 10.

⁶ For an examples of ecumenical recontextualization and rereception methodology see Walter Kasper, 'Introduction to the Theme of Catholic Hermeneutics of Dogmas of the First Vatican Council,' in *The Petrine Ministry: Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue* (New York: The Newman Press, 2006), 7-23. Karl Lehmann, Michael Root, William Rusch, eds., *Justification by Faith: Do the Sixteenth-Century Condemnations Still Apply?* (New York: Continuum, 1997).

⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London: The Belknap Press, 2007), 29.

⁸ Work on interpreting the ecumenical councils, for example, Vatican II provides some important resources: Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004).

light of a reconciling hermeneutic, illustrating with some issues raised by the rereading of the Reformation narratives.

I. The Interpretive Problem in Reception

When the churches entered into ecumenical dialogue, the original members of the World Council in 1950 and the Roman Catholic Church in 1965, they laid out principles. Some of these are embodied in the so called Toronto Statement, enhanced in the Faith and Order Christocentric methodology of 1952 and the Catholic *Decree on Ecumenism*, subsequently crystallized in the 1993 *Directory for Principles and Norms of Ecumenism* and the 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*.

Decades of dialogues focused on ecumenical study of the church divisions incorporated in the confessional, magisterial texts of previously divided churches, produced amazingly positive results, unimaginable in 1950. The churches have before them ecumenical results for which there are few precedents in history. Therefore, the ecumenical priority has moved from the research task of dialogue to the theological institutional task of reception. This occurs at the level of theological and doctrinal evaluations, and is eventually oriented to ecclesial action and transformation of the lives of the churches together.⁹ Let me illustrate this new hermeneutical challenge by three examples involving the Catholic Church:

1. *The Problem*

The dialogues moved along smoothly, presenting a plethora of reports to the churches, some requesting response or reaction, but all part of the patrimony which Pope John Paul II would call a 'common heritage' in his 1995 encyclical.¹⁰ In 1982 the Catholic Church was presented with two texts for evaluation, of a very different character calling for quite different responses. Both focused on similar themes: a) the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC)

⁹ John Hotchkin, 'The Ecumenical Movement's Third Stage', *Origins* 25 (1995): 353-61.

¹⁰ John Paul, '*Ut Unum Sint: On Commitment to Ecumenism*', *Origins* 25 (1995) 49-72.

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.html

Final Report and the b) World Council Faith and Order text *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM). The third process used for illustration here is the Lutheran, Catholic and Methodist decision to officially sign a c) *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ). Each of these illustrates new, maturing interpretive approaches of the Catholic Church to this early stage of ecumenical interpretation and reception.¹¹

a. ARCIC I Final Report response

When the decade and a half work of the ARCIC I was ready to be sent to the churches for their evaluation in 1981, there was an extended delay in its simultaneous release by the two churches. Within the Roman Catholic leadership there were different points of view as to whether an ecumenical text could be released ecumenically, or whether it should be preceded by an evaluation by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF).

It was finally decided that the text would be released simultaneously by the two churches, which would each use their own evaluation processes. For the Catholic Church this would require a new process, since the last ecumenical text to be evaluated was the Council of Florence (1439). Bishops' conferences were asked for their evaluations, the CDF provided some comment, and an official Catholic reply was readied by 1991. The 1982 CDF notes were helpful in informing ecumenically attuned bishops' conferences in their reports, so that many of the reservations were clarified, enhancing the quality of the final official response of the Holy See.¹²

The content of the Catholic report was positive for the most part on the sections on Eucharist and Ministry, where consensus was claimed. It asked for clarifications which the Commission was able to make in due course. However, the rhetoric of the response and quality of theological drafting came under critique by many Catholic and

¹¹ The post-modern context has produced both new challenges and new resources in facing reception, themes that will not be treated here. See, for example, Lambert Leijessen, 'Oecuménisme, sacraments et postmodernité. Réflexions herméneutiques sur la réception du rapport BEM', *Questions Liturgiques*, 81/2 (2000): 122-38.

¹² William Purdy, *The Search for Unity* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 219-272.

ecumenical scholars. They felt it was not at the level of which the Roman Catholic Church was capable.

This first attempt at reception of a bilateral text provided many learnings about what skills are needed, in church leadership, if principles of interpretation are to be consistent, competent and contribute to the unity of the Church. The tone of this response made many readers wonder whether it was the texts that were under evaluation, or the rituals of the other ecumenical partner or the partner church as a body. It was clear that persons familiar with the method and content of the dialogue, the partner church and the liturgical life of the other church are in a better position to evaluate ecumenical texts.¹³ This process demonstrated the need for a clearer understanding of the hermeneutics of ecumenical texts.

b. WCC Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry

The response and reception process for this text was quite different because of the variety of the churches represented by theologians drafting this text, its proposal of mere convergence and not full agreement, and the attention that needed to be given to processes of reception, evaluating and decision making. The churches in many contexts, like the United States, came together to study the text and the process by which they would proceed in reception.¹⁴ Many worked together on its evaluation, at both diocesan and national levels.

Again, for the Catholic Church, the bishops' conferences were canvassed, and in some cases, like the United States the bishops' conference response was informed by diocesan responses. Although the text became available in 1982 in the same time frame as ARCIC I, an official Catholic response was produced in 1987. Like the response to ARCIC, it was submitted by the Pontifical Council (then Secretariat) for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) to the World

¹³ Christopher Hill and Edward Yarnold SJ, *Anglicans and Roman Catholics: The Search for Unity: The ARCIC documents and their reception* (London: SPCK/CTS, 1994).

¹⁴ Jeffrey Gros, ed., *The Search for Visible Unity* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984); 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry Conference,' *Midstream* 25 (1986): 322-329; 'Reception of the Ecumenical Movement in the Roman Catholic Church, with Special Reference to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry,' *American Baptist Quarterly* 8 (1988): 38-49; John A. Radano, 'The Catholic Church and BEM, 1980-1989,' *Midstream* 30 (1991): 139-156.

Council, but formulated with the collaboration of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith.

This text did not present so many problems for the Catholic response, and some have considered its rhetoric and theological interpretations a bit more competent.¹⁵ This is because: a) the discussion of ARCIC I created some ground rules in the Roman Curia, b) the text did not necessitate the same level of evaluation, since no full agreement was claimed, and c) the experience of PCPCU and CDF collaboration had created a greater climate of trust and common hermeneutical principles.

In its history the CDF has been exploring texts for errors that might be detrimental to the Catholic faith. The new task put before it with the Council and the various tasks of ecumenical reception required quite different hermeneutical skills.

While the response to BEM illustrates the problem, many of the churches faced similar difficulties, if ensconced in different hermeneutical principles and ecclesial cultures. The WCC report summarizing all of the responses in 1990, showed that many of the churches were uninformed by the previous Faith and Order work that stood behind BEM, like the 1963 text *Scripture, Tradition and the traditions*, and subsequent studies on hermeneutics; by the work of the bilateral; and by the ecumenical liturgical and sacramental renewal.¹⁶ Therefore the report suggests more work on sacramentality, hermeneutics and ecclesiology, all of which have been very productive in the World Council.

Both of these texts demonstrated that a hermeneutics of symbols, rituals and practices was needed. It is also the thesis of this paper that these examples demonstrate the need for an ecumenical hermeneutic of history, to provide a common interpretive approach, not only to the

¹⁵ Max Thurian, ed., *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry' text*, Volume VI (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1988): 1-40. George Vandervelde, 'Vatican Ecumenism at the Crossroads? The Vatican Approach to Differences with BEM,' *Gregorianum* 69 (1988): 689-711.

¹⁶ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: Report 1982-1990* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990). Thomas F Best; Tamara Grdzeldze, eds., *BEM at 25: critical insights into a continuing legacy* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007).

sacramental and liturgical life and teachings on one another, but also to the identity-forming narrative by which our communities live.

c. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

With the experience of the interpretive difficulties in these two processes, when the Catholic Church began to draft the *Joint Declaration* building on the German and US theological work of the 1980s on Justification¹⁷ and the Condemnations of the Reformation Era,¹⁸ representatives of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith were engaged early on in the process.¹⁹ The approach to reception, here, was to produce an officially approved common agreement, and not to have an evaluation of texts by entities within the churches external to the dialogues.

In fact, this process proved to be more successful than ARCIC I, though on a very different theme. There was a minor glitch in the process toward the end in 1998 and 1999. This problem demonstrates the importance of a hermeneutics of each others' texts and decision making process.

When the Holy See issued its declaration of agreement to sign, by PCPCU's Cardinal Edward Cassidy, it was accompanied by two other texts: 1) some clarifications necessary for Catholics to understand the text and 2) an interpretive press conference by Cardinal Cassidy helping to clarify the declaration and the clarifications.²⁰ Some outlets produced only the first two texts, not differentiating between them. Others chose to neglect the Catholic hermeneutical principles outlined by Cardinal Cassidy, and to interpret the 'yes' as ambiguous, or even to select the clarifications as somehow more important than the declaration of the Holy See.

However, a year's negotiation, some careful and helpful back channel conversations among some Bavarian bishops: Lutheran and

¹⁷ H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, Joseph A. Burgess, eds., *Justification by Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985).

¹⁸ Karl Lehmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, eds., *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era, Do they Still Divide?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). Five more volumes of this study exist in the German. See also *A Treasure...*, 28.

¹⁹ John Radano, *Lutheran & Catholic Reconciliation on Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

²⁰ Cardinal Edward Cassidy, 'Press Conference,' 128-30, 'Official Catholic Response: Declaration,' 130, 'Clarifications,' 130-2, *Origins* 28 (1998).

Catholic, made the signing possible with a clarifying Annex.²¹ For all of the care invested in this text and its celebration, the process demonstrates the need for a hermeneutics of one another's process of reception.²²

Many of the difficulties in German ecumenism of the last few years demonstrate the importance of the hermeneutics of churches as well as texts. Many German Lutherans, for example, saw in the JDDJ an ecclesial position they found unacceptable, even when the position to which they objected was not articulated in the text.²³ Others found it impossible to understand how Catholics could celebrate a jubilee indulgence after the text, even though issues of indulgences and prayers for the dead are explicitly not covered in the text.²⁴

2. *The Challenges*

All of these processes show us the importance of providing hermeneutical principles that go beyond texts, biblical, confessional and ecumenical; to the hermeneutics of ritual, practices and institutions. Both ARCIC I and BEM demonstrate how the celebrations of baptism, Eucharist and ordination must be reevaluated in light of both theological dialogue, and liturgical reform. They illustrate the deep polemical pieties that continue a negative evaluation of one another's churches even after theological and even liturgical polarizations are overcome. They illustrate that piety and practices as well as rituals and doctrinal formulations must be reassessed to serve the reconciling calling of the Church. Finally, they demonstrate the long and careful task of 'healing of memories', of creating a new hermeneutics of history to serve the reconciling call of Christians.

²¹ Cardinal Edward Cassidy, Ishmael Noko, 'Official Common Statement Regarding *Joint Declaration on Justification*,' 'Annex Statement,' 'Press Conference,' 29 *Origins* (1999): 85-91.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-annex_en.html

²² *A Treasure...*, 31.

²³ Richard Schenk, 'The Unsettling German Discussion of Justification: Abiding Difference and Ecumenical Blessings,' *Dialog* 44 (2005): 152-63.

²⁴ Michael Root, 'The Jubilee Indulgence and the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*,' *Pro Ecclesia* 9 (2000): 460-75.

II. Ecumenical Work on Hermeneutics

All of the ecumenical dialogues are informed by a hermeneutics of reconciliation as well as other approaches, so a careful task of harvesting can assemble a set of principles used in the variety of dialogues. In this section, we will focus on one text, the World Council's Treasure in Earthen Vessels of 1998.

As the churches respond, for example, to the three illustrative examples above, the theologians and the pastoral ecumenists at the congregational or judicatory (diocese) level both provide input on the institutional response and begin further work to deepen bonds of communion to overcome unresolved issues. As Pope John Paul II challenged his own Church:

While dialogue continues on new subjects or develops at deeper levels, a new task lies before us: that of receiving the results already achieved. These [dialogue texts] cannot remain the statements of bilateral commissions but must become a **common heritage**. For this to come about and for the bonds of communion to be thus strengthened, a serious examination needs to be made, which, by different ways and means and at various levels of responsibility, must involve the whole People of God. We are in fact dealing with issues which frequently are matters of faith, and these require universal consent, extending from the Bishops to the lay faithful, all of whom have received the anointing of the Holy Spirit. It is the same Spirit who assists the Magisterium and awakens the *sensus fidei*.

Consequently, for the outcome of dialogue to be received, there is needed a broad and precise critical process which analyzes the results and rigorously tests their consistency with the Tradition of faith received from the Apostles and lived out in the community of believers gathered around the Bishop, their legitimate Pastor.

This process, which must be carried forward with prudence and in a spirit of faith, will be assisted by the Holy Spirit. If it is to be successful, its results must be made known in appropriate ways by competent persons. Significant in this regard is the contribution which theologians and faculties of theology are called to make by exercising their charism in the Church. It is also clear that ecumenical commissions have very specific responsibilities and tasks in this regard.

The whole process is followed and encouraged by the Bishops and the Holy See. The Church's teaching authority is responsible for expressing a definitive judgment.

In all this, it will be of great help methodologically to keep carefully in mind the distinction between the deposit of faith and the formulation in which it is expressed, as Pope John XXIII recommended in his opening address at the Second Vatican Council.²⁵ (emphasis added)

In response to the churches' need for hermeneutical understanding of how to read the ecumenical text BEM, Faith and Order launched its hermeneutics study. However, in the process of discussion, it encountered the necessity of 1) contextualizing the historical critical method so helpful in ecumenical work, but inadequate to take account of the emerging new contextual hermeneutical perspectives, on the one hand; or traditional interpretive approaches which were the presuppositions of many of the confessional texts, on the other; and 2) looking beyond the written texts to begin to examine interpretive approaches to rituals and practices of the churches.

For the majority of Christians in their personal lives, their cultures, pieties and identity-loyalties are much stronger in their ecclesial formation than the official texts of their churches. New texts about the Eucharist may claim to reconcile differences over the Lord's Supper, and put aside 16th century polemics. However, textual agreements do not clarify the ritual lives of one another at the Lord's Table, and Christ's presence in the celebration of other Christians. Liturgical reform may be a more important reconciling witness than textual precision.

The World Council study proposes interpretive approaches to Scripture, noting in particular that 'the historical-critical method needs to be combined with reading in critical interaction with experience, the experience both of individuals and communities.'²⁶ It also goes on to develop perspectives on interpreting the Tradition and the individual ecclesial traditions, in a section entitled 'Interpreting the Interpreters.'

These principles are significant, since many of the biblical and traditional church dividing issues have been placed in a new context by modern biblical, historical and dialogical studies. For example, in

²⁵ John Paul II, *On Commitment to Ecumenism: Ut unum sint*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.html, 80, 81.

²⁶ *A Treasure...*, 22. See Bouteneff, Heller, *Interpreting Together*.

resolving the Pauline doctrine on justification for the JDDJ, both the use of Paul in the 16th century and current scholarship had to be taken into account, since the Catholic conciliar and Protestant confessional affirmations presumed hermeneutics of their period.

Even though contemporary Pauline work, for instance on Law and Gospel and the evaluation of Judaism, has moved beyond the presuppositions shared by Lutherans and Catholics in the 16th century, the ecumenical hermeneutics had to address both.²⁷ Likewise, in studying purgation and purgatory, the US Lutheran-Catholic dialogue had to provide an appendix *On the Interpretation of Biblical Texts* to clarify the variety of approaches to passages which were used to defend and critique these elements of Christian piety, practice and teaching through the centuries.²⁸

The World Council text goes on to suggest the hermeneutics of sign, rituals and practices be taken as seriously in ecumenical work as that of texts:

Traditions are transmitted orally as well as through written texts. Ecumenical hermeneutics - as every hermeneutical task - is therefore a dynamic process concerned not only with written sources but also with oral tradition. In addition to textual and oral tradition, meaning is conveyed through non-verbal symbols: Christian art and music, liturgical gestures or colours, icons, the creation and use of sacred space and time. Christian symbols or signs are important aspects of the way in which the various dialogue partners understand and communicate their faith. Ecumenical hermeneutics needs to be intentional about incorporating this rich, but also neglected, source material for interpretation, communication and reception.... Even when there is a basis for theological convergence on the meaning of, e.g. baptism or eucharist, attention needs to be given to the practices surrounding these rites in particular ecclesial communities. Here as elsewhere, hermeneutical reflection can serve as an aid in the process of recognizing the same faith underlying different practices.²⁹

²⁷ David E. Aune, ed., *Rereading Paul Together: Protestant and Catholic Perspectives on Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

²⁸ Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue, *The Hope of Eternal Life* <http://old.usccb.org/seia/lutheran.shtml>, 80. Lowell Almen, Richard Sklba, *Hope of Eternal Life: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue XI* (Minneapolis, Lutheran University Press, 2011), 130-2.

²⁹ *A Treasure...*, 35.

A good example of the hermeneutics of symbols and practices is the hermeneutics of sacraments. The Catholic Vatican Council II made a significant shift from a juridical to a theological and ecumenical interpretive perspective. Such attitudes change only gradually, even given the interpretive principles outlined by the Council and subsequent documents.

Joseph Ratzinger as a private theologian notes, even where we do not yet recognize the full Eucharist mystery in one another's celebrations, we interpret the sacraments of others as means of grace:

I count among the most important results of the ecumenical dialogues the insight that the issue of the eucharist cannot be narrowed to the problem of 'validity.' Even a theology oriented to the concept of succession, such as that which holds in the Catholic and in the Orthodox church, need not in any way deny the salvation-granting presence of the Lord in a Lutheran Lord's Supper.³⁰

Similarly, churches that once defined the Catholic Mass as blasphemy and idolatry have revised their interpretations with the help of common liturgical renewal and face to face dialogue.³¹

The WCC text goes on to develop the role of the community in ecclesial discernment and interpretation, including authority and reception.³² These themes deserve expansion and exemplification in ecumenical work, but will not be the focus here.

III. Toward a Hermeneutics of History

In addition to the hermeneutics of texts: biblical and confessional; rituals and practices; the ecumenical movement also proposes the healing of memories, a hermeneutics of history oriented to building the bonds of communion. In this section we note: 1) the challenges, 2) several texts with proposals, and 3) orientations toward further research, singling out the 16th century as an example.

³⁰ Quoted in the US Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries*.

<http://old.usccb.org/seia/koinonia.shtml>, 107.

³¹ Jeffrey Gros, 'The Roman Catholic View,' in Gordon Smith, ed., *The Lord's Supper: Five Views* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2008): 13-30.

³² *A Treasure...*, 54-66.

1. *The Challenges in the Hermeneutics of History*

The challenges to an ecumenical understanding of history include a) the inherently perspectival, often confessional presuppositions of the professional historian, b) iconic narratives deeply etched in Christian piety, and c) the specialized, often fragmented character of the dialogues' contribution to rereading history.

a. All History is 'Confessional'

Each narrative, no matter how carefully grounded in research on the data; emerges from the questions brought to the data by the historian; the cultural environment of both the witnesses and archivists, and the cultural formation of the historian; as well as decision of the narrator as to the form to be given to the events, and the sequence and periodization selected.³³ As we look at the Reformation, for example, the great mass of research is driven by traditions that see their own heritage there, whether it be one of the Protestant traditions or various strains of Catholicism. Even the more secularist oriented approaches clearly bring a perspective, selectivity and integrative ideology to the synthetic narrative.³⁴

As one historian of the period reminds us:

Despite their endeavours to break free, even modern historians remain to some extent the prisoners of their educational, social, and ecclesiastical environments. While rejoicing in the new wave of ecumenism, we **do not believe ourselves capable** of the superhuman detachment from the opposed confessional ideals. ...Yet at no stage can we afford to relax our steady determination to see both sides and assimilate 'new' evidence however much it may conflict with our former judgements and prejudices. Such vigilance remains, for us and for every other historian of the Reformation, a heart-searching struggle which produces many losers and no outright winners.³⁵ (emphasis added)

³³ See Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 135.

³⁴ For example, Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Penguin Putnam inc., 2004). For a discussion of the importance of outsiders' contributions see Vischer, *Church History*, 109

³⁵ A.G.Dickens, J.M.Tonkin, and K.Powell, *The Reformation in Historical Thought* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 4. An historian of theology puts it thus: 'history may tend to be less about 'what happened in the past' and much

The enlightenment era concerns about national identity produced a rich harvest of socially oriented historical research, but to quite a different end!³⁶

Collaborative writing of history is a helpful ecumenical strategy in face of this admonition: 1) The individual historians may process the data, but 2) the interpretations and 3) the coherent narrative can then be developed by a dialogue team of historians, much in the manner that convergence texts are produced on systematic themes. There are no objective outsiders to human history.³⁷

b. Iconic Status of Historical Events, Persons and Symbols

Certain moments in the history of the churches have taken on the character of identity markers, sedimented in the collective memory in such a way that mere historical-critical research or even common accounts will not easily transform these into reconcilable moments.³⁸

more about how historians explain and justify the present cultural location of their own society or group.' Macy in *Theology and the New Histories*, vii. See Vischer, *Church History*, 106, notes 10, 11 and notes 37 below. For an account of Catholic hermeneutical developments see Hubert Jedin, 'Catholic Reformation or Counter-Reformation,' in David Luebke, ed., *The Counter-Reformation: The Essential Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999): 19-46, John W. O'Malley, *Trent and all that : renaming Catholicism in the early modern era* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000). For another account of Reformation influences see Carter Lindberg, *The Reformation Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 381.

³⁶ See, for example, Thomas Brady, 'From Sacral Community to the Common Man: Reflections on German Reformation Studies,' and 'Some Peculiarities of German Histories in the Early Modern Era,' in *Communities, Politics and Reformation in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 335-52, 407-30, citing a 1793 Fichte acclamation during the height of the French Revolution! 'O Jesus and Luther, holy patron saints of liberty who in your time of humiliation seized and with titanic power smashed the chains of humanity,... look down now from your heights upon your descendents, and rejoice in the sprouting grains now waving in the wind.' 358.

³⁷ See Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 93.

³⁸ As has become clear to the theologian: 'empirical claims, even if fully warranted, are not sufficient ... to warrant theological recommendations.' Terrance Tilley, 'Practicing History, Practicing Theology,' in Macy, *Theology and the New Histories*, 10.

The differences over the 4th century adaptation to a new imperial situation is one such moment, which functions in Orthodoxy, Catholicism and magisterial Protestantism as a moment of maturity, creedal consolidation, missionary outreach and ecclesiastical stabilization, on the one hand. For Anabaptists, and some Pentecostals and Evangelicals, on the other, it signifies the 'Constantinian Fall' of the Church.³⁹ Other such moments are the 5th century Christological divisions; the 10th – 13th century alienation of Byzantine East from Latin West; in the United States, the emergence of the African American churches from slavery, and the restorationist churches from the frontier revivals;⁴⁰ and, of course, the Reformations of the 16th century.⁴¹

A dialogue on eschatology, penitential practices or a critical history of purgation and indulgences in the Christian heritage will not dispel the role that the iconic moment of Luther's posting of the 95 theses in 1517 carries for Protestants, especially Lutherans.⁴² The 'consigning to oblivion' of the anathemas of 1054 or the apologies for the atrocities of the 4th Crusade (1204) are only the beginning of healing these painful and iconic memories between churches of the Byzantine and Latin traditions.

Councils often carry an iconic role in Catholicism that goes well beyond their content critically considered. For example, the liturgical innovations of the Council of Trent, though they took 300 years to be received in sectors of the Catholic Church, are seen as somehow normative for all time by some. The variety of interpretations given to

³⁹ S. Mark Heim, ed., *Faith to Creed*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

⁴⁰ Jeffrey Gros, 'Faith on the Frontier: Apostolicity and the American Born Churches,' *One in Christ* 39 (2004): 28-48. Ted Campbell, Ann Riggs, Gilbert Stafford, eds., *Ancient Faith and American Born Churches* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

⁴¹ See, for example, James Payton, *Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstandings* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2010). Geoffrey Wainwright, *Is the Reformation Over?* Père Marquette Theology Lecture (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2000). Mark Noll, Carolyn Nystrom, *Is The Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

⁴² See, for example, Erwin Iserloh, *The Theses Were Not Posted: Luther Between Reform and Reformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

Vatican I, both by Catholics and critics of the Church, indicate that the image more than the critical content of the Council text, functions symbolically.⁴³ The symbolic role of history is as important for ecumenical reconciliation as technical doctrinal and confessional agreement.

c. The Fragmented Character of History in the Dialogues

Almost all of the dialogues include biblical, historical and systematic components, some quite extensive, as with the US Lutheran Catholic recent rounds.⁴⁴ However, treating particular themes, like apostolicity,⁴⁵ soteriology,⁴⁶ or the sacraments may resolve or begin the reconciliation of divergent doctrinal themes, but they do not help the ordinary Christian or, often, the professional historian for that matter, weave a new self identifying narrative, even on microhistorical interpretations of the Wittenberg or Canterbury ordinations, the Marburg Colloquy, the indulgence controversies, or the Tridentine debates.

⁴³ James Puglisi, ed., *How Can the Petrine Ministry Be a Service to the Unity of the Universal Church?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). Kasper, *The Petrine Ministry*. Mark E. Powell, *Papal Infallibility: A Protestant Evaluation of an Ecumenical Issue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

⁴⁴ <http://old.usccb.org/seia/koinonia.shtml>, and with further material in background supporting essays: Randall Lee, Jeffrey Gros, eds., *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries* (Washington/Chicago: US Conference of Catholic Bishops/Augsburg-Fortress, 2005).

⁴⁵ George Tavard, *A Review of Anglican Orders: The Problem and the Solution* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990). Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, *The Apostolicity of the Church* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2006). John Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now: An Ecumenical Church in a Postmodern World* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004). Christopher Hill, Edward Yarnold, eds., *Anglican Orders: The Documents in the Debate* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1997).

⁴⁶ Martien Brinkman, *Justification in Ecumenical Dialogue: Central Aspects of Christian Soteriology in Debate* (Utrecht: Interuniversity Institute for Missiology and Ecumenical Research, 1996). Vali-Matti Karkkainen, *One with God: Salvation As Deification and Justification* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2004).

There are some syntheses of the dialogue, harvesting the results of half century of common work.⁴⁷ However, a narrative synthesis on the microhistorical level, touching the history of a particular theme like authority or baptism is a challenge for the future. Or a macrohistorical harvesting of the East – West and the Reformation dialogue insights that would entail reformulating the historical narrative of 2,000 years in such a way as to contribute to the healing of memories, has yet to occur. A master narrative, in a post-modern historiographic context, will not lose any of the positive particularity of the diverse Christian traditions, but will incorporate them into a common affirmation of the Tradition of the Gospel.⁴⁸

2. *Four Texts Illustrating the Hermeneutics of History*

In addition to the general text on hermeneutics from World Council, four dialogues have made specific suggestions: a) Reformed Catholic proposals for rereading the Reformation together, b) US National Council proposals for writing history, and c) two text with the Mennonites: Lutheran and Catholic; devoted to the healing of memories.

a. Rewriting Reformation History Together

The 1989 *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church* from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches Catholic Dialogue includes a section ‘Toward a Reconciling of Memories,’ which concludes:

We need to set ourselves more diligently, however, to the task of reconciling these memories, by writing together the story of what happened in the sixteenth century, with attention not only to the clash

⁴⁷ Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue* (New York: Continuum, 2009). *The Lutheran-Catholic Quest for Visible Unity: Harvesting Thirty Years of Dialogue* (Chicago/Washington: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America/United States Catholic Conference, 1998). *Journey in Faith: Forty Years of Reformed-Catholic Dialogue: 1965-2005* (Washington: US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004). *Thirty Years of Mission and Witness: United Methodist Roman Catholic Dialogue* (Washington/Nashville: United States Catholic Conference/United Methodist Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, 2001).

⁴⁸ It is the thesis of this author that Jaroslav Pelikan’s, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vols. I - V (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975-89) attempts such a narrative from the standpoint of the history of theology, doctrine and dogma.

of convictions over doctrine and church order, but with attention also as to how in the aftermath our two churches articulated their respective understandings into institutions, culture and the daily lives of believers. But, above all, for the ways in which our divisions have caused a scandal, and been an obstacle to the preaching of the Gospel, we need to ask forgiveness of Christ and of each other.⁴⁹

After treating themes of common witness, the visibility of the Church, and common confession, the text proposes the following conclusion, which makes a substantive challenge and contribution to the methodology appropriate for the hermeneutics of history as applied to the Reformation:

- a) ...serious historical research needs to be jointly undertaken.
- b) We must tackle the problem of the condemnations that the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Churches pronounced against each other.⁵⁰
- c) Particular attention should be paid to the way in which confessional separation was brought to the Americas, Africa, Asia and Oceania. Churches in these areas had no part in originating the separation... A careful historical analysis might well bring to light new factors of separation which have been added to the inherited confessional differences.⁵¹

b. Some Principles for Rewriting History

In 1991 the Faith and Order Commission of the US National Council of Churches published the results of a long range study *Telling the Churches' Stories: Ecumenical Perspectives on Writing Christian History*.⁵² The study outlines five categories to be taken into account

⁴⁹ http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/r-rc/doc/e_r-rc_2-1.html 1.4.

⁵⁰ It can be noted that significant study has been done in the German anathemas project: Lehmann, Pannenberg, *The Condemnations*, and in some of the particular dialogues reassessing sixteenth century condemnations, for example Christian Reformed Church, *Report of the Interchurch Relations Committee Clarifying the Official Doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church Concerning the Mass* (Grand Rapids: Synod Report, 2002).

⁵¹ http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/r-rc/doc/e_r-rc_2-4.html#a43 4.3. See *A Treasure...*, 42.

⁵² Timothy J. Wengert and Charles W. Brockwell, jr., eds., *Telling the Churches' Stories: Ecumenical Perspectives on Writing Christian History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). See Vischer, *Church History*, 12, 13.

in ecumenical history writing: universality, context, commonality, particularity and perspective.

It suggests fourteen principles to historians wishing to write history ecumenically. The study has a very simple thesis:⁵³ ‘every group should tell its own story, and that all must listen to that story in an empathetic yet informed manner.’

In a way this work corresponds to the early Faith and Order ‘comparative ecclesiology,’ which is necessary before a more ‘Christocentric,’ master narrative can be constructed. By eliciting two outside respondents, a historian and ecumenist,⁵⁴ and four case studies from 4th, 16th, 19th and 20th centuries; the study demonstrates its intention to contribute ‘as one voice in an ongoing dialogue – as hypotheses, even as questions...whose usefulness can be determined only by answers gained through application.’⁵⁵

c. Two Texts that Model the Reconciliation of Memories

When I teach the Reformation, I begin with the 2010 Repentance and Reconciliation ritual celebrated by the leaders of the Lutheran World Federation and the Mennonite World Conference, with foot washing pail and servant towel in hand, symbolically reversing the 500 years of alienation and persecution which had characterized the relationship since the 16th century.⁵⁶ This service and the extensive historical text that lies behind it, is a disciplined exercise in retelling a historically divisive narrative of a relationship and set of sad events in such a way as to serve the healing and reconciling of two peoples. This hermeneutical enterprise can serve as a model for the churches as they try to develop new, healing narratives of their divided pasts.

⁵³ Douglas Foster, ‘The Historiography of Christianity in Ecumenical Perspective: A Bibliographical Essay,’ in Wengert, Brockwell, *Telling the Churches’ Stories*, 129.

⁵⁴ Richard Norris, ‘The Fourteen Canons: Some Sidelong Critical Notes,’ Günther Gassmann, ‘The Global Context of Ecumenical History,’ *ibid.* 21– 54.

⁵⁵ Thomas Finger, ‘Reflections on an Ecumenical-Historical Perspective,’ *ib.* 110.

⁵⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYMK14ATxNU>. *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ*, Report of the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission, <http://www.mwc-cmm.org/en15/files/OEA-Lutheran-Mennonites-web-EN.pdf>. See *A Treasure...*, 29.

The Catholic Mennonite text, 'Healing of Memories' of 2003 also takes up a similar theme, though in less detail.⁵⁷ Both of these texts begin the task outlined by the Reformed Catholic dialogue and for which principles were formulated in the US Faith and Order conversation. They can provide a model for all of the churches who root their alienation in the 16th century. Historians can begin the process of reconstructing a common, reconciling master narrative, which will not mute the gifts of the micronarratives, but will, in Christ, bring them into a coherent story in witness to the Holy Spirit's action in that tumultuous century.

3. Proposals for Research on the Eve of 2017

In this final section, I raise two challenges before the ecumenical community as we serve the churches in the common reading of the 16th century history: a) synthesis of historical elements in the dialogue results and, b) enlisting historical specialists in the common project.

a. Synthesis of Historical Work from the Dialogues

Studies focused on particular challenges, like the papacy or justification, the role of scriptural interpretation or the institutional arrangement of the church and its role in society, can all now be focused on building a new healing narrative, both to identify where the old polemics are no longer appropriate, and where there are still painful memories to be healed.

These studies can take the form of looking at particular periods, like the 4th, 11th, and 16th centuries and their continuities and discontinuities, the positive Christian intents and shortcomings on both sides of the divisions, and the influence of new understandings and new theological agreements on the interpretations we can now give to the persons and tragic events of those turbulent decades. They can also surface areas of dialogue, on the polemics of the era not surfaced yet or healed in the ecumenical work to date.⁵⁸

b. Enlisting Specialists

This paper is programmatic, and does not propose resolution to the problems and issues it raises. However, as we approach together the commemoration of a half millennium of alienation among Western

⁵⁷ http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/mn-rc/e_mn-rc-info.html

⁵⁸ See *A Treasure...*, 53.

Christians, we can call forth our professional historians with an ecclesial vocation to devote these next few years to collaborative ecumenical scholarship that will synthesize, in common narratives, the progress achieved until now.⁵⁹ Such studies can be produced on the technical, the professional level for pastors and educators grounded in common criteria,⁶⁰ and in popular versions to inform our congregations on how we may see our fragmented past in service to a reconciling future.

Individual scholars can be invited to cross confessional lines in exploring the implications of ecumenical agreements on interpretation of texts once seen as divisive and polemical. We have a rich stable of Catholic scholars on Luther, Calvin, Anabaptist and the Church of England, not to mention those who follow Pentecostal, Methodist and Baptist developments. Protestants who study Trent and Vatican I bring useful, irenic and helpfully critical insights to the rereading and rereception that will be necessary for a common account to develop, and eventual common recognition of one another's histories as our common Christian patrimony.⁶¹

The culture of Western research is notoriously individualistic and even competitive, but the marvelous results of bilateral theological dialogue witness to the power of collaborative scholarship. Similar developments in the historical enterprise, as witnessed especially in the Mennonite dialogues with Lutherans and with Catholics can be models for a wider range of Reformation historians working together to tell again, in a reconciling perspective, that narrative which is so formative in the Christian identity of so many Western believers.

These texts all present methodological tools and historical-theological results which are resources for constructing a new reconciling, but

⁵⁹ Jeffrey Gros, 'Interpretation, History and the Ecumenical Movements,' *Ecumenical Trends* 16 (1987). 'Toward a Reconciliation of Memory: Seeking a Truly Catholic Hermeneutics of History,' *Journal of Latino/Hispanic Theology* 7 (1999): 56-75. See also Margaret O'Gara, "'Seeing in a New Light": From Remembering to Reforming in Ecumenical Dialogue,' *The Jurist* 71 (2001): 59-76.

⁶⁰ Vischer, *Church History*, 109.

⁶¹ Finger, 'Reflections', 115.

differentiated narrative of Christian history.⁶² Hopefully the years leading up to our commemoration of the fragmentation of the Western Church will provide opportunities for historians to serve this new vision.⁶³

One in Christ 46, 1 (2012), 124-145.

⁶² See Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 68.

⁶³ 'As a practitioner of a tradition, one is engaged in the constant correction of understanding and application,' Miller, 'History or Geography?' in Macy, *Theology and the New Histories*: 77.