

MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY: BUILDING TOGETHER ON THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

Introduction

The theme of this year's NAAE assembly is inspired by the statement of the WCC's ninth Assembly: "Called to be The One Church." In this presentation I would like to do three things. First, to reflect on that statement and some of its features, keeping in mind its call to mutual accountability. Second, to reflect on mutual accountability in light of a century of ecumenism. Third, to reflect on mutual accountability and the year 2017.

1. "Called to be the One Church": A Contribution to "The Unity we Seek"

The statement "Called to be the One Church" of the WCC's Ninth Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2006¹, is in line with, and the most recent of WCC Assembly descriptions of "the nature of the unity we seek", published by Assemblies of New Delhi (1961), Nairobi (1975) and Canberra (1991). These statements, though brief, are one gauge of some major developments in ecumenical dialogue, and of ecumenical progress. Looked at together, these statements can help give us a sense of where we are in the ecumenical movement.

Each of the statements has built on the last, identifying further qualities of "the unity we seek" based on new developments in the ongoing dialogues since the previous statement. The 1991 Canberra statement, "The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling,"² reflected the strong focus on the biblical concept of *koinonia*/communion emerging strongly in dialogue concerning the church in the period just before Canberra. The Canberra statement's challenges to the churches (no. 3.2) also build on significant Faith and Order developments in the years before it. To mention two, Canberra calls the churches "to recognize each other's baptism on the basis of the (1982) *BEM* document" and "to move towards the recognition of the apostolic faith as expressed through the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in the life and witness of one another," referring to the 1991 Faith and Order study on this theme.³

¹ "Called to be the One Church, Text on Ecclesiology, An Invitation to the Churches to Renew their commitment to the search for Unity and to deepen their dialogue," *God in your Grace... Official Report of the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, Edited by Luis N. Rivera-Pagán. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007, pp. 255-61, citation on 257.

² "The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling", *Signs of the Spirit, Official report Seventh Assembly World Council of Churches, Canberra Australia, 7-20 February, 1991*, edited by Michael Kinnemon. Geneva: WCC Publications and Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991, pp. 172-74.

³ See *The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Ecumenical Perspectives on the 1991 Canberra Statement on Unity. A Study Document requested by The Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches*. Ed. Günther Gassmann and John A. Radano. Faith and Order Paper No. 163. Geneva: WCC Publications (1993), pp.2-3.

Some new aspects in “Called to be the One Church” concern its treatment of baptism, of the church and its mission, and this clear call to mutual accountability, again reflecting developments in the period between Canberra and Porto Alegre. Regarding baptism, the Joint Working Group Between the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches had published with its Eighth Report in 2005 a lengthy study entitled “Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of a Common Baptism,”⁴ building on BEM. In the period leading up to Porto Alegre, Faith and Order has done significant work on the church, inspired by BEM, publishing in 1998, “The Nature and Purpose of the Church,”⁵ and a revised version of that in 2005, “The Nature and Mission of the Church.”⁶ Some of this work is reflected in “Called to be The One Church.”

While baptism has been basic in each of the previous statements as an important part the unity sought in the ecumenical movement, “Called to be the One Church” treats it more at length than did previous statements. Two full paragraphs are dedicated to baptism (nos. 8-9). More poignantly, these paragraphs spell out more than in previous statements, and with biblical support, the implications, of a common baptism for ecumenical responsibility in seeking the unity of Christians. We will come back to this later.

Porto Alegre reflects further agreement and common understanding regarding the church, developed in the fifteen years since Canberra. For example, Canberra states that “The goal of the search for full communion is realized when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness” (no. 2.1). Porto Alegre states more dramatically: “We confess one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church as expressed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)” (no. 3). Furthermore, it develops in several paragraphs, some explanation of the meaning of each of these marks (nos. 3-6).

Porto Alegre speaks more at length and more broadly of the mission of the Church than previous statements. While the Church’s primary mission is “to proclaim the gospel and to offer the living Christ to the whole creation”, Porto Alegre is the first of these statements to also comment on dialogue with other living faiths and ideologies. “The churches find themselves living alongside people of other living faiths and ideologies. As an instrument of God, who is sovereign over the whole creation, the church is called to engage in dialogue and collaboration with them so that its mission brings about the good of all creatures and the well-being of the earth.” (no. 11).

According to Canberra (1991), God’s grace and love “enable the Church to live as sign of the reign of God and servant of reconciliation with God, promised and provided for the whole Creation” (no. 1.1). The calling of the Church, it says, “is to proclaim reconciliation and provide healing, to overcome divisions based on race, gender, age, culture, colour and to bring all people into communion with God.” It recognizes that the divisions of the churches within themselves and among each other, are scandalous and damage the credibility of Christian witness. (no. 1.2). Porto Alegre, stressing even more the sense of responsibility and accountability, indicates that the Church allows the Kingdom of God to be perceived when it not only proclaims reconciliation, but is itself “a reconciled and reconciling community (emphasis

⁴ *Joint Working group Between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches Eighth Report. Geneva-Rome 2005.* Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005, Appendix C, pp. 45-72.

⁵ *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A stage on the Way to a Common Statement.* Faith and Order Paper No. 181. Geneva: WCC/Faith and Order. 1998.

⁶ *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement.* Faith and order Paper No. 198. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005.

original) called to holiness: a community that strives to overcome the discriminations expressed in sinful social structures, and to work for the healing of divisions in its own life and for healing and unity in the human community” (No. 10).

Most significantly, “Called to be The One Church” stresses more than previous statements, and speaks explicitly, even urgently of the importance of mutual accountability and mutual responsibility on the part of the churches so that they can build on the achievements of ecumenism.

The relationship among churches is dynamically interactive. Each church is called to mutual giving and receiving gifts and to *mutual accountability*. Each church must become aware of all that is provisional in its life and have the courage to acknowledge this to other churches. Even today, when Eucharistic sharing is not always possible, divided churches express mutual accountability and aspects of catholicity when they pray for one another, share resources, assist one another in times of need, make decisions together, work together for justice, reconciliation, and peace, hold one another accountable to the discipleship inherent in baptism, and maintain dialogue in the face of differences, refusing to say ‘I have no need of you’(1 Cor. 12:21). Apart from one another we are impoverished. (no. 7).

As mentioned, its treatment of baptism shows the connection between sharing a common baptism, and taking mutual responsibility to move toward unity. “Baptism into union with Christ calls churches to be open and honest with one another, even when doing so is difficult”(cf. Eph 4:15). “Baptism bestows upon the churches both the freedom and the responsibility to journey towards common proclamation of the Word, confession of the one faith, celebration of the one eucharist, and full sharing in one ministry”(no. 8). “Our common belonging to Christ through baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit enables and calls churches to walk together even when they are in disagreement.” “In God’s grace, baptism manifests the reality that *we belong to one another* (emphasis original), even though some churches are not yet able to recognize others as Church in the full sense of the word.”(no. 9)

Its treatment of the church, too, brings in this sense of mutual accountability to one another. “Churches in the ecumenical movement have also explored divisive questions through multilateral and bilateral dialogues. And yet churches have not always acknowledged their *mutual responsibility* to one another, and have not always recognized the need to give account to one another of their faith, life and witness, as well as to articulate the factors that keep them apart. Bearing in mind the experience of the life we already share and the achievements of multilateral and bilateral dialogue, it is now time to take concrete steps together”(no. 12).

The Ninth Assembly, in this statement, invites all of our churches “to engage in the hard task of giving a candid account of the relation of their faith and order to the faith and order of other churches. Each church is asked to articulate the judgments that shape, and even qualify, its relationship to the others.”(no. 13). With the “goal of full visible unity” in mind, it provides a series of *questions to be addressed* continually by the churches. It should be noted that these questions are not a call, abstractly, “to the churches” (cf. Canberra 7 question 3.2) to do certain things. Rather, with a more personal tone it addresses “your church” to take responsibility. To mention three of its ten questions:

- a. To what extent can your church discern the faithful expression of the apostolic faith in its own life, prayer and witness and in that of other churches?
- f. To what extent can your church share the spirituality of other churches?
- i. To what extent does your church share with other churches in faith formation and theological education?

Thus, this focus on mutual accountability is given new emphasis here, among these statements on the unity we seek, suggesting that this is more urgent in the current period.

2. Mutual Accountability after a Century of Ecumenism: Acknowledging the Progress We Have Made

With the commemoration in 2010 of the centenary of the 1910 World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh, Scotland, we recognize that a century of ecumenism has gone by, a century in which Christians have taken significant steps to address the divisions which began in previous centuries, and have existed from that time. The achievements of the century of ecumenism are many. Significant steps have been taken to **resolve long standing differences**. Three volumes of the *History of the Ecumenical Movement*⁷ and three volumes of *Growth in Agreement*⁸ collecting reports produced by decades of dialogue, give us some indication of the intensity of the ecumenical story in the century of ecumenism since Edinburgh 1910.

In light of a century of ecumenism, a sense of mutual accountability challenges Christians to acknowledge the ecumenical achievements of that century as a basis for getting beyond their tendency to be satisfied with co-existing in division,⁹ and strive to deepen the communion they now share.

Ecumenical progress during the first century of ecumenism

We can speak now of beginning a second century of ecumenism which will benefit greatly from what has been achieved in the first. Important conflicts of the past have been resolved. For example, with the year 2017, understood as the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, before us, many ask whether that anniversary can be commemorated in an ecumenical way. While that is not yet clear, what is clear is that, for the first time, any commemoration of a major anniversary of the Reformation will be done with the knowledge that, with the official signings in 1999 and 2006 of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)* Lutherans, Catholics, and Methodists have resolved the major theological issue at the root of Luther's disputes with Church authorities of his time.

Looking further into this century, 2051 will mark the 1600th anniversary of the Council of Chalcedon (451), which was followed by a division in the Church when some churches did not receive the Christological formulations of that council. Whether or not that anniversary will be commemorated, it will take place with the knowledge that, in joint common Christological Declarations, Pope Paul VI and Coptic Patriarch Shenouada III (1973),¹⁰ Pope John Paul II with Syrian Orthodox Patriarch Mar Zakka I Iwas

⁷ Starting with *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, edited by Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, Second Edition. Philadelphia: The Westminster press, 1967.

⁸ See notes 13-15.

⁹ According to the Canberra Statement, despite the degree of communion they have achieved, Christians remain satisfied to co-exist in division (no. 1.3).

¹⁰ "Visit of His Holiness Amba Shenouada III, Common Declaration," Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity *Information Service [=IS]* 22(1973): 9.

(1984)¹¹ and with the Armenian Apostolic Patriarch Karekin I (1996),¹² have together confessed the same faith in Jesus Christ True God and True man. Through dialogue, Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox have been able to express agreement on the same common faith (even if these results have not yet been formally received by all involved).¹³ This Christological agreement is also expressed in other international dialogues such as in Reformed-Catholic dialogue¹⁴, Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue,¹⁵ Old Catholic-Orthodox dialogue,¹⁶ Reformed-Oriental Orthodox dialogue,¹⁷ and in the Anglican-Oriental Orthodox dialogue.¹⁸ The Common declarations especially, but these other agreements as well, have virtually resolved the Christological differences which led to separation of those churches from the rest of Christendom after the Council of Chalcedon 451.

Looking further still in this second century of ecumenism, 2054 will mark a millennium since the tragic events, the mutual excommunications of 1054 which led to the beginnings of a schism between the Sees of Rome and Constantinople. It can be noted then, that in 1965, Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I, in a joint declaration consigned those excommunications of 1054 to oblivion, and began to recognize each other as “sister churches”; their successors have sent delegations to the other twice a year as a continuing face to face process of reconciliation, began a dialogue in 1980, in which they have faced some of the key issues between them. Popes and patriarchs have confessed together the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed in the original Greek,¹⁹ shared relics of saints such those of John Chrysostom and Gregory Nazianzus who both venerate, when Pope John Paul II consigned to Patriarch Bartholomew I in 2004, some of their relics long held in St. Peter’s Basilica; began areas of common mission together, such as the 2004 Joint statement of Patriarch Bartholomew I and Pope John Paul II on the environment, and earlier when, in 1994, at the invitation of John Paul II, Bartholomew wrote the meditations for the Pope’s Way of the Cross held annually in the Colosseum in Rome on Good

¹¹ “Common Declaration of Pope John Paul II and HH Mar Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, *IS* 55(1984): 62.

¹² “Common Declaration of John Paul II and Catholicos Karekin I,” *IS* 94(1997): 30.

¹³ “First Agreed Statement”, *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of ecumenical Conversations on a World Level 1982-1998 [=GAI]*, Edited by Jeffrey Gros FSC, Harding Meyer, William G. Rusch. Geneva: WCC publications and Grand Rapids Michigan/Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000, p. 192.

¹⁴ “The Presence of Christ in Church and World” (1977), no. 84, *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical conversations on a World Level [=GA]*, Edited by Harding Meyer and Lukas Visser. New York/ Ramsey: Paulist Press and Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1984, p. 453.

¹⁵ “Authority in and of the Church”(1995), (no. 5a), *Growth in Agreement III: International Dialogue Texts and Agreed Statements 1998-2005 [=GAI]*, Edited by Jeffrey Gros, FSC, Thomas F. Best, Lorelei F. Fuchs, SA. Geneva: WCC Publications and Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007, p. 16.

¹⁶ “Christology, Agreed Statement, Chambesy 1975 and 1977”, *GA*, pp. 396-99.

¹⁷ “Agreed Statement on Christology”, (1994), *GAI*, pp. 292-93.

¹⁸ “Agreed Statement on Christology”, (2002), *GAI*, pp.35-37.

¹⁹ For the first time during the visit of Patriarch Dimitrios I to Rome in 1987.

Friday. Popes and Patriarchs in their speeches and correspondence have honored the Virgin Mary together, seeking her intercession for their journey toward unity. Their ecumenical engagement continues. But one can see that what has been done constitutes a movement from the schism of 1054, to a serious partnership acknowledging a real though imperfect communion existing between them (Paul VI in 1971 described it as “almost perfect communion), and seeking full communion.

The century just completed was filled with many other ecumenical events and achievements. In contrast to centuries of separation, with the birth of the WCC in 1948, the ecumenical movement has created a permanent structure of ecumenical engagement which tries in an ongoing way to keep the churches, including non-member churches such as the Catholic Church, permanently in touch with each other with a goal of seeking visible unity, praying and celebrating with each other at its General Assemblies, dealing together with the great issues of the day (such as violence, as seen in the recent assembly in Jamaica organized by the WCC Decade to Overcome violence, and years before that, the Program to overcome racism, which helped overcome apartheid). These are things that the churches had not done together before, as are the many church unions that have been formed, and church union movements. Reports from various dialogues have shown that long-separated Christians share much of the apostolic faith in common.

Recently Pentecostals and Evangelicals have engaged more than previously in ecumenical dialogue. The recent successes of the Global Christian Forum, which originated in the World Council of Churches in 1997, have brought Pentecostals and Evangelicals on the one hand, and historic mainline churches throughout the world, on the other, into closer contact on a larger scale than they had been previously. Since these communities which constitute some of the fastest growing Christian communities had not been involved so much before with the WCC or in other formal processes of the modern ecumenical movement, this development takes on more significance. Its aim is to bring more people into the ecumenical search for unity.

But there are also many other developments, results of ecumenical dialogue which have not been properly examined to see what their contribution is to the search for unity. Part of our mutual responsibility is to address this situation, to continue to study the progress we have made, and are making, so as to receive their results in to the life of the churches.

The “Harvesting” Project

A very recent project seeking to identify the results of dialogue is found in Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits. Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue* (Continuum, 2009). This was an intense study, done by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (Vatican City) between 2007-2009, of the reports of four dialogues which began after Vatican II, between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, the Anglican Communion, the World Methodist Council, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, thirty six reports in all. It is one of the most intense studies of achievements of several international bilateral dialogues ever done, involving two years of study. Ecumenical partners were involved in evaluating the results of the study.

This project was undertaken because this large body of dialogue reports, for the most part had not been analysed thoroughly to determine how the dialogues have brought us closer to unity. It aimed at identifying what the four dialogues said on four major topics: (1) Fundamentals of our common Faith: Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity, (2) Salvation, Justification, Sanctification, (3) the Church, and (4) the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist.

The extensive convergences/consensus found on these topics led to important preliminary conclusions. “It can be happily stated that some of the classic disputes, which were at the root of our of our painful divisions, have today been basically resolved through a new consensus on fundamental

points of doctrine”(no. 100). Some of the findings include (1) **our shared apostolic faith** “We confess together the Triune God, and that Jesus Christ our common Lord and savior is truly human and truly divine, the one and universal mediator between God and man. Together we confess that there is one holy, catholic and apostolic Church to which in different ways we belong, so that even in our differences, we are brothers and sisters in the one Lord and in the one Spirit of Christ. Thus our dialogues can confirm and deepen our common foundation in the one apostolic faith and in our real but still incomplete communion”(no. 101). (2) **A fresh and renewed understanding of the relation between Scripture and Tradition.** Since the 16th century Christians have been divided not just on questions of faith, but also on approaches regarding the criteria to resolve those questions, that is, should the Church appeal to Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) or must argument derive from Scripture and Tradition? Today it is no longer possible to set Scripture and Tradition at odds with each other (no. 102). We venerate Scripture as the inspired Word of God. We agree upon the primacy of Scripture. “For all of us, Scripture is the witness to the original and primeval normative apostolic Tradition, given once and for all times.”(no. 102). (3) **Basic agreement on the doctrine of justification.** “The core message of the Bible is God’s gracious and merciful salvific will to reconcile sinful humanity with himself, and to bring reconciliation and peace (Shalom) to our divided and chaotic world. This is the meaning of the doctrine of justification. Previously, different and contradictory interpretations of justification weakened Christian witness to the world. But with the *JDDJ* we have consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification, in light of which 16th century condemnations of Lutherans and Catholics on justification no longer apply. Further more, “With the *JDDJ* it was possible to see anew that the Protestant affirmations of *sola gratia* and *sola fide* do not contradict the affirmation that by grace we are made capable of bearing good fruits through works of justice, mercy and active love, and that through justification God’s saving grace calls, frees and capacitates us for holiness” (no. 103). (4) **Deepened understanding of the nature of the church.** God does not call and justify us only as individuals, but as his chosen people to give common witness to his marvelous deeds. It states, significantly, “In the past, the understanding of ...the Church was divided by the sharply contrasting visions of a visible institutional Church and a hidden spiritual Church; a church as *mater et magistra* and a Church under the Gospel; a Church as a sacrament of grace and Church as *creatura verbi*.” But “many elements of convergence have been found in these and other controversies. The Trinitarian roots of the Church have been re-emphasized, and there has been a focus on its nature as *koinonia/communion* (no. 104). All four dialogues agree that the church as People of God, Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit is in intimate relation to the economy of the Trinity. All four confirm the unique mediation of Jesus Christ, and the role of the Holy Spirit as primary agent within the Church. “This convergence has done much to lessen, or indeed dispel, the Reformation suspicion that Catholic ecclesial self-understanding obscured the sovereignty of God’s action on behalf of human salvation. The dialogues have shown that the challenge of the Reformation has been an important impulse in advancing the Catholic self-understanding of the Church”(no. 74). These dialogues reveal many other convergences and agreements about the church (nos 24-79). At the same time, the report concludes that, notwithstanding all the important and welcome achievements, “a full breakthrough in ecclesiological questions is still to come.” Behind the many unresolved questions, there is one fundamental problem and one fundamental divergence in the understanding of the church. “This becomes clear when we ask, not only **What** is the church, but **Where** is the Church and where is she realized in her fullness? While Protestants answer this question with the response that the church is realized in communities in which the word of God is correctly preached and the sacraments are duly administered (CA VII), Catholics answer that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church, i.e., the Church is concretely, fully, permanently and effectively realized in communion with the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him (*LG 8; UR.4*)” (no. 78). (5) **New approaches to the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist.** The rediscovery of our common baptism has helped Catholics

and other Christians to recognize each other again as brothers and sisters in Christ. Also, we have rediscovered the centrality of liturgy. The sacrificial character of the Eucharist, and the real and true presence of Christ occasioned some of the forceful controversies of the Reformation era. Through the biblical idea of *anamnesis/memoria*, ecumenical dialogue has unveiled new perspectives of understanding, leading to convergences on these matters. The same is true of the rediscovery of the importance of the *epiclesis*, and of the Holy Spirit as the main agent in the liturgy of the Eucharist and all sacraments (no.105). While the dialogues have not claimed full consensus on the eucharist, significant convergences have been found.

These are significant results which have been documented in these dialogues. The areas of convergence and consensus documented here could be supplemented by examining the results of other bilateral and multilateral dialogues. Much more could be said.

Remaining Difficult issues

At the same time, there are serious disagreements still to be resolved. There are remaining differences between the Catholic Church and the Reformation churches expressed in *Harvesting the Fruits* especially concerning the sacramental nature of the Church (nos. 106-111) and the ministry, and also differences on these questions between Reformation churches.

(3) Mutual Accountability and the year 2017: Getting Beyond Co-existence

The 1991 Canberra statement makes this important observation. It acknowledges achievements of the ecumenical movement, the many ways in which, thanks to God, “the churches walk together in mutual understanding, theological convergence, common suffering and common prayer, shared witness and service, and they draw close to one another.” They “recognize a certain degree of communion already existing between them” but “have failed to draw the consequences for their life from the degree of communion they have already experienced and the agreements already achieved. They have remained satisfied **to co-exist in division.**” (no. 1.3)

If that is the case, It seems to me that Porto Alegre’s call to Mutual Accountability must include receiving the achievements, those seen above and others, into the life of the churches, so as to assist them in **making a transition from co-existing in division to living more deeply, and shaping more clearly the common life in Christ**

From the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement there has been a sense that something very new was beginning, aiming at resolving historic divisions of the past. Bishop Charles Brent, the key figure in the Faith and Order movement which emerged after the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, was inspired at Edinburgh to think that God “was preparing a new era in the history of Christianity,” which led him to think that unity was attainable within a century.²⁰

In 1964, Anglican Bishop Oliver Tompkins, former Associate general secretary of the WCC, and then chairman of the WCC’s Faith and Order Commission, wrote that for centuries, and especially after the great schisms between East and West, and within the West at the Reformation, Christian thought, by one group separated from others, was dominated by the simple alternative of “Either in the Church—

²⁰ Alexander C. Zabriskie, *Bishop Brent: Crusader for Christian Unity*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1948, p. 145.

or else out of it.”²¹ Each group passed judgment on others, assessing the degree in which they were either in the church, or out of it, according to its own understanding of the church. But within the ecumenical movement, a shift has taken place, and there has appeared “a new desire to affirm, as fully as possible, our *common* Life in Christ.”²² According to Tompkins, it was in this spirit (of putting first our common life in Christ) that the World Council of Churches was born.²³ Many other prominent early witnesses to this “shift” could be cited.²⁴

The significant ecumenical progress of a century of ecumenism, and especially during the second half of that century, gives added support to the shift which has taken place, to the steps that have been taken to get beyond division. In light of that, the warning given by the 1991 Canberra statement is sobering: that Christians are satisfied to coexist in division. Christians are often unable to make their behavior coincide with the ecumenical progress they have made.

The challenge of 2017

In this context, the year 2017, The 500th anniversary of the Reformation, offers an ecumenical opportunity, and provides a challenge to mutual accountability and mutual responsibility. It is an opportunity to test the achievements of dialogue.²⁵

The significance of the anniversary in 2017 can be seen in the fact that plans to commemorate it have been set in motion years in advance, on the national level among Lutherans in Germany, and on an international level, between the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. The latter began even in 2005 to reflect on whether and/or in what ways they might commemorate together that anniversary then still twelve years ahead.

A. Luther Decade in Germany

In Germany, The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the Luther region began preparing for the Reformation Jubilee 2017 by designing a “Lutheran Decade” which began in 2008, in a celebration opened by Bishop Mark Hanson, President of the Lutheran World Federation. The challenge of the

²¹ Oliver Tompkins, *A Time for Unity*, London: SCM Press LTD, p. 26.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁴ William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury (1942-44), who succeeded Bishop Charles Brent as Moderator of Faith and Order was convinced that separated Christians needed each other, that northern Protestantism needs the Roman instinct for order to keep it from “fissiparous sectarianism”, while Rome needs the northern love of liberty to prevent hardening of the arteries in the fellowship. The practical West, Temple thought, needs the East’s philosophy and mysticism, while the East needs the ethical concern of the West to save it from metaphysical unworldliness and brooding stagnation. See Joseph Fletcher, *William Temple Twentieth Century Christian*, New York: Seabury Press, 1963, p. 117.

²⁵ Some of this discussion on plans for 2017 is based on my Archbishop John Ireland Lecture entitled “From Reformation and Counter-Reformation to Reconciliation? Approaching the Year 2017 with an Ecumenical Perspective” given on April 20, 2010 at St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity, St. Paul, Minnesota.

decade would be to illustrate how much the Reformation changed and influenced the Church, society, music, art and language, and many other things, and has continued to influence them to the present day. This Luther Decade focuses primarily on the German national level, and is connected with an inner renewal process among German Lutherans, aiming at helping the Lutheran faithful to appreciate their Reformation heritage, and also with an interest of the eastern German regions to promote tourism to the Luther places on that occasion, which in turn would also promote the economy.

Each year focuses reflection on a specific theme on which Luther's Reformation made a significant impact. These include: 2009: Reformation and Confession; 2010: Reformation and Education; 2011: Reformation and Freedom; 2012: Reformation and Music; 2013: Reformation and Tolerance (which is to be given an ecumenical orientation since it is also the 450th Anniversary of the Council of Trent 1563, the Catholic answer to the Reformation and start of the Catholic reform); 2014: Reformation and Politics; 2015: Reformation-image and Bible; 2016: Reformation in a united world.

Since this is especially a project of the Evangelical Church in Germany the question can be raised whether the Luther decade is intended to sharpen the Protestant profile, or to widen its ecumenical spectrum. A recent publication states that "In earlier centuries, the major anniversaries related to the Reformation were celebrated separately according to political and confessional divisions. Luther was presented as a popular German hero and the celebrations were used by Protestants as a means to establish distance between themselves and Catholics. The Anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 aims to achieve the opposite. It is to be defined by openness, freedom, and the ecumenical spirit."²⁶ In 2009, Dr. Margot Käsemann, at that time Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hannover and chair of the Evangelical Church of Germany, speaking at a LWF consultation "Theology in the life of Lutheran Churches: Transformative Perspectives and practices Today," insisted that "despite their disagreements and their specific identities, the Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches have more things in common than separate them." Making reference to the 2017 Reformation Jubilee, she issued a strong plea to "give the jubilee of the Reformation a clear ecumenical dimension". She felt that it is extremely important that the event is used as an opportunity for critical reflection. "I am convinced [that] the churches of the Reformation in Germany, as well as Lutheran churches worldwide, are strong enough not to blind out the dark sides of their great founder."²⁷

B. Developing Plans for an International Lutheran-Catholic Commemoration

On the international level, the PCPCU and the LWF have been making plans to develop an ecumenical approach to 2017.

In November, 2005, leaders of the Lutheran World Federation visited Rome, met with leaders of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and together began to plan for 2017 on the basis of ecumenical achievements of recent years and with a renewed commitment to continue in that direction. It became clear that it would be difficult for Catholics to *celebrate* that anniversary because for them it recalls the tragic division from the Catholic Church. Dr. Ishmael Noko, LWF General Secretary offered a helpful perspective stating that it was important for Lutherans and Roman Catholics to prepare

²⁶ Luther 2017 500 Jahre Reformation. What is the Luther Decade?.
http://www.luther2017.de/eng/450_ENG_HTML.htm

²⁷ "Reformation Jubilee in 2017 Must Have Clear Ecumenical Dimension," (<http://www.lutheranworld.org/lwf/index.php/reformation-jubilee-in-2017-must-have-clear-ecumenical-dimension.html>)

for the 500th anniversary together “so that we are not commemorating that we became Lutherans, but we are commemorating that through the reformers the Church was constantly renewed.”(The Council of Trent in the 16th century was a reforming council). Bishop Brian Farrell, PCPCU Secretary said that the new Lutheran-Catholic dialogue commission would take up, for the fifth phase of dialogue, a “study of what the Reformation meant and what it has meant down the centuries and what it actually means today for both of us.”²⁸ There was a sense that Lutherans and Catholics might be able to *commemorate* together, if not celebrate, that anniversary in a constructive way, emphasizing not the division of the past, but rather the ecumenical rapprochement that has been achieved since Vatican II. It is notable that 2017 will also be the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the Lutheran–Catholic international dialogue in 1967, which has fostered our movement toward reconciliation. Today the fifth phase of the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue is working on a common text concerning the 2017 anniversary of the Reformation, focusing on what Lutherans and Catholics are able to say together now after five centuries of separation.

Invitation to the Pope.

An interesting development took place when, on December 16, 2010, a Lutheran World Federation delegation visited Rome, led by its President Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan and General Secretary, Rev. Martin Junge. At a private audience with Pope Benedict XVI, President Younan invited Pope Benedict “to work together with the Lutheran communion in realizing an ecumenically accountable commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.”²⁹ It is interesting to note that President Younan here, and in what follows, makes his case in terms of ecumenical accountability, our mutual accountability.

Indicating that the LWF has a strong hope for full visible unity, Younan emphasized this hope especially because “we Lutherans already look toward 2017, the 500th anniversary of the reformation movement.” “We recognize that this will be a test case for ecumenical relations.”³⁰ On the one hand, for Lutherans “there is joy in the liberating power of the gospel proclaimed afresh by the Reformers, and we will celebrate that. At the same time, we intend our anniversary to be ecumenically accountable: to recognize both damaging aspects of the Reformation and ecumenical progress since the last major Reformation anniversary (referring probably the 450th anniversary in 1967). But we cannot achieve this ecumenical accountability on our own, without your help. We are called, both Lutherans and Catholics, to our common vocation of witnessing to the world for the sake of Christ’s kingdom. Thus we invite you to work together with us in preparing this anniversary, so that in 2017 we are closer to sharing in the bread of life than we are today.”³¹

²⁸ “Lutherans, Roman Catholics begin Planning for 2017,” *ELCA News Service*, November 16, 2005.

²⁹ “LWF President Invites Pope Benedict XVI to Help Plan 500th Reformation Anniversary,” *Lutheran World Information*, No. 12, 2010, p. 6.

³⁰ “A Message from Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan...to Pope Benedict XVI, 16 December 2010,” <http://www.lutheranworld.org/lwf/wp...>

³¹ *Ibid.*

He concluded: “in love, we ask God to bless your distinctive ministry, and the entire Catholic Church. We ask you to remember in your prayers the Lutheran World Federation and our 145 member churches, even as we continue to remember you in our petitions to the God who comes to us anew this Advent.”

Greeting them, Pope Benedict “expressed gratitude for ‘the many significant fruits produced’ by decades of bilateral discussions between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, saying it had been possible ‘slowly and patiently to remove barriers and to foster visible bonds of unity by means of theological dialogue and practical cooperation, especially at the level of local communities.’ In the years leading up to the next Reformation anniversary, ‘Catholics and Lutherans are called to reflect anew on where our journey towards unity has led us and to implore the Lord’s guidance and help for the future.’” Pope Benedict pointed out that the signing of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, whose tenth anniversary was marked in 2009, “has proved a significant step along the difficult path towards re-establishing full unity among Christians and a stimulus to further ecumenical discussion”. Furthermore, the Pope was pleased to note “that for the reformation anniversary, the International Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity was preparing a joint text which would document ‘what Lutherans and Catholics are able to say together at this point regarding our closer relations after almost five centuries of separation.’”³²

And while this joint text just mentioned is being prepared, another joint contribution to an ecumenical preparation for that anniversary is also underway. The Johann-Adam-Möhler Institute in Paderborn, Germany (sponsored by the German Catholic Bishops Conference), and the Institute For Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, France (affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation), are working together to develop a common analysis of Luther’s ninety five theses---emphasizing what both can say about those theses today. The results of both of these projects, should provide important perspectives contributing to a mutual commemoration of 2017.

A broader context supporting reconciliation

Besides achievements in Lutheran-Catholic relations, both sides can also refer to other achievements of reconciliation vis-à-vis the Reformation period. In the *Annual Report 2010-2011 of the Lutheran World Federation*³³ the focus of its chapter on ecumenical affairs is “Moving toward 2017: An Anniversary that is Ecumenically Engaged and Accountable.” Preparing for 2017, the LWF Office for Ecumenical Affairs “emphasizes the progress in relations with other Christians, distinguishing this 500th Reformation anniversary from earlier celebrations.”

Besides calling attention to the Lutheran and Catholic efforts just mentioned, it refers also to current efforts to broaden the understanding of the historic 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, by deepening the doctrine’s biblical basis. Methodist, Reformed, Lutheran and Roman Catholic scholars have met twice (2010 USA, 2011, Germany) “to prepare a common text which expands the *JDDJ*’s biblical statements by considering Pauline scholarship, the New Testament outside Paul’s letters, and justification throughout the Bible.”

Furthermore, in 2010, the LWF Eleventh Assembly’s official reconciliation with Mennonites committed “the LWF to remember its Reformation heritage in ways that foster reconciliation”. And at the Mennonites’ urging a trilateral conversation with Lutherans and Catholics is beginning “with an eye

³² “LWF President Invites Pope Benedict XVI to Help Plan 500th Reformation Anniversary,” op.cit.

³³ *Annual Report 2010-2011, The Lutheran World Federation*, Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2011.

to strengthening the discipleship-forming practices of all.” In this regard, it can be mentioned here that the international dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Mennonite World Conference led to a report “Called together to be Peacemakers” (2003), which, along with significant theological convergences on the nature of the church and other important matters, also helped contribute to a healing of memories between them concerning conflicts during the Reformation.

Among other factors, the LWF Annual report states that the president and general secretary also offered an invitation to ecumenical collaboration for 2017 even to the Ecumenical Patriarch in March, 2011.³⁴ President Younan “invited Orthodox leaders to seize the festivities surrounding the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 as an opportunity to promote reconciliation and unity.”³⁵ The *LWF Annual Report* also mentions progress in Lutheran-Anglican dialogue, and the Lutheran-Reformed Joint Commission. The Catholic Church has dialogue and good relations with all of these. Many good developments in all of these relationships can also provide a positive context for a Lutheran-Catholic commemoration in 2017 that can emphasize ecumenical achievements as the commemoration’s primary focus.

The current status of the project

The press release of the July 8-15, 2011 meeting of the international Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity gives the current status of the project relating to 2017. The Commission is working on a statement presently titled “From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017.” The text states that the anniversary year “presents Lutherans and Catholics with new theological, spiritual and ecclesial challenges and possibilities” and calls for commemorating the anniversary together:

The 2017 common commemoration is an opportunity to renew our commitment to the ongoing reform of the Christian community. We agree together that the church must continually be reformed and purified. We hope on this occasion neither to glorify the events we commemorate nor to deny the positive consequences of movements of reform; rather we hope that this common commemoration might give us the opportunity to witness publicly to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and God’s mandate that we work for the visible unity of the church and the healing of the world. A common commitment to reform should inspire us to deeper dedication to lives of spiritual and institutional renewal and devoted discipleship in service to both church and world.

According to the communiqué, the statement is intended to provide study resources to be used at many levels of church life. There will be [1] a historical sketch of the Lutheran Reformation, [2] an overview of Martin Luther’s theology, [3] an account of the Catholic response and reform in the Council of Trent and Vatican II, and [4] a summary of central results of the dialogues between Lutherans and Catholics. These results form the basis for the growing communion between the two traditions, a deepening relationship which now invites the common ecumenical commemoration in 2017.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ “Carrying the cross of Christ Together in Solidarity and Suffering. LWF leaders Visit Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople,” *Lutheran World Information*, No. 03/2011, pp. 4-5.

It is estimated that this statement of the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, as well as the joint study of the 95 theses by the two ecumenical Institutes, will both be published and ready for common study and action in the churches in 2012.³⁶

A symbolic planting of trees

Another part of the Lutheran preparations for 2017, is the Luthegarden project at Wittenberg, created by the LWF and others. Lutheran churches from throughout the world are invited to plant a tree, but also ecumenical partners are invited to do so as a sign of reconciliation and spiritual communion achieved through ecumenism. Cardinal Kasper took part in that ceremony at Wittenberg in 2010, and planted a tree.

Then, on January 23, 2011, during the week of prayer for unity, Kasper's successor as President of the PCPCU, Cardinal Kurt Koch, planted an olive tree on the grounds of the Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls, symbolically suggesting the links now between Wittenberg and Rome, discovered through dialogue. The tree has this insignia: "The tree is a living monument to a tree planted in *Lutherstadt Wittenberg* (Germany) as a visible sign of the growth of ecumenical communion between the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church." Cardinal Koch, in his message on that occasion, reflected on the book of Revelation 22:1-5, and indicated the meaning which the planting of the olive tree conveys for our ecumenical relations. To mention one of his reflections, our relations, like a tree, need strong roots, and water to flourish, and that means faith, rooted in the living waters of baptism. We are linked in the living waters of baptism.

C. On what basis could we commemorate 2017 together? Some Personal Reflections

While we look forward to the publication of the statements mentioned above, and the steps which the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation may take in reference to a common commemoration in 2017, we can ask now: on what basis could we commemorate that anniversary together? In the decades since Vatican II, the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation have been involved in an ecumenical partnership aimed at overcoming the divisions of the past, and establishing visible unity. One can point to many ongoing developments which could support that joint commemoration.

First, there have been steps towards the healing of bitter memories of the past. We have tried in dialogue to understand what led to our divisions in the past and have promoted mutual forgiveness. Many Lutheran statements have expressed regrets for Luther's harsh condemnation of the papacy (as anti-Christ) and make clear that it cannot be sustained today.³⁷ The real heart of that reproach is the accusation that the papacy puts itself above Scripture. But it is seen today that, perhaps, it "was substantially unjustified even under the conditions of the sixteenth century, if the way in which the papacy saw itself is precisely evaluated," even if it is "understandable in light of the experience of what

³⁶ As estimated by Msgr. Matthias Türk, staff member of the PCPCU responsible for contacts with the LWF, in email correspondence with the author.

³⁷ *Communio Sanctorum. The Church as the Communion of Saints. Bilateral Working Group of the German National Bishops' Conference and the Church Leadership of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany.* Collegetown, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2004. Foreword by the Chairs, p. vii.

the Reformers saw as the condemnation of the gospel itself by the very office called to serve it at the highest level.³⁸ On the Catholic side, Pope John Paul II, in his visit to Germany in 1980, put the task of Lutheran and Catholic dialogue in the context of the spirit of mutual forgiveness. "Let us no more pass judgment on one another' (Rom. 14-13). Let us rather recognize our own guilt. 'All have sinned' (Rom 3:23) applies also to the grace of unity. We must see and say this in all earnestness and draw our conclusions from it." He went further: "[i]f we do not evade the facts we realize that the faults of men led to the unhappy division of Christians, and that our faults again hinder the possible and necessary steps towards unity. I emphatically make my own what my predecessor Hadrian VI said in 1523 at the diet of Nuremberg: 'Certainly the Lord's hand has not been shortened so much that he cannot save us, but sin separates us from him. ...All of us, prelates and priests, have strayed from the right path and there is not anyone who does good (cf. Ps 14.3). Therefore must all render honour to God and humble ourselves before him. Each of us must consider why he has fallen and judge himself rather than be judged by God on the day of wrath.'"³⁹ In this same spirit, Cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, with 2017 in mind, stated in a recent interview (August 30, 2011) with German news agency KNA that "a common purification of memory" is necessary as part of a joint commemoration of this anniversary.

Second, there have been many achievements from theological dialogue which show how much of the central truths of the faith Lutherans and Catholics actually share, as has been seen above. This relates perhaps especially among Lutherans and Catholics to the formal agreement on basic truths of the doctrine of justification found in the 1999 Lutheran-Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, formally endorsed also by the World Methodist Council in 2006. It includes also, as referred to above, sharing and confessing central truths of the faith: the Gospel as the Word of God, the Creeds of the first centuries which summarize and interpret the gospel message, the Triune God, Jesus Christ true God and true man, the unique mediator between God and man, the one holy catholic and apostolic Church. In varying degrees, according to the issue under discussion, these common perspectives have been found also in dialogues between the Catholic Church with other communions of the Reformation heritage such as Reformed, Anglicans, Methodists.⁴⁰

Third, we have begun to give common witness together; it has been limited but important. There have been some important cooperation between the LWF and Catholic Church on issues of social justice, for example, peace missions to Central America in 1989⁴¹ and 1993 supporting the peace processes in countries such as Guatemala and El Salvador,⁴² and some cooperation regarding the independence of Namibia in 1986.⁴³ On the local level there are many other examples.

³⁸ *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era Do they Still Divide?* Edited by Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989, p. 158.

³⁹ Cited in *Facing Unity: Models Forms and Phases of Catholic-Lutheran Church Fellowship*. Roman Catholic Lutheran Joint Commission, no. 51. Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1985.

⁴⁰ Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits*, no. 101, p.197.

⁴¹ The LWF organized a delegation of Lutheran leaders to go to central American countries in 1989 in support of the peace plan of Costa Rican President Arias who had recently been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. At the request of the LWF, the PCPCU arranged for a Catholic Bishop familiar with that region, to join the LWF delegation. His participation proved very fruitful.

Fourth, further evidence of how much we share in common is shown in the fact that some of the deepest concerns of Luther are reflected in the teaching of Vatican II. The 1983 Lutheran-Catholic international report *Martin Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ*, published on the occasion of the 1983 commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth, was the dialogue's attempt to see what could be said together about Luther, both positive and critical. One of this statement's contributions is to show that certain insights of the teaching of Vatican II, in fact, also correspond to important concerns of Luther. These include: an emphasis on the decisive importance of Holy Scripture for the life and teaching of the church (*Dei verbum*); the description of the church as 'the People of God (*Lumen gentium*, ch II); the affirmation of the need for continual renewal of the Church in its historical existence (*Lumen gentium* 8, *Unitatis redintegratio* 6); the stress on the confession of faith in the cross of Jesus Christ and of its importance for the life of the individual Christian and of the church as a whole (*Lumen gentium* 8, *Unitatis redintegratio*, 4, *Gaudium et spes*, 37); the understanding of Church ministries as service (*Christus dominus*, 16, *Presbyterorum ordinis*); emphasis on the priesthood of all believers" (*Lumen gentium*, 10, 11, *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 2-4); commitment to the right of the individual to liberty in religious matters' (*Dignitatis humanae*). Furthermore, other requests of Luther were fulfilled in light of contemporary Catholic theology and practice regarding the use of the vernacular in the liturgy, the possibility of communion in both kinds, and the renewal of the theology and celebration of the eucharist.⁴⁴ When you add to this the Lutheran and Catholic agreement on justification, and other basic aspects of the Christian faith, the continuing rapprochement and new relationship developing between Lutherans and Catholics becomes more impressive.

There are still important issues which have not been resolved between Lutherans and Catholics. But surely, since Vatican II, there have been many developments which foster reconciliation between Lutherans and Catholics. We have not achieved full communion. But we do share a real though imperfect communion upon which we can build.

The Reformation and Counter-Reformation: The drama of the 16th century

Can we seek to commemorate the anniversary in 2017 in such a way so as to put the centuries of conflictual relationships of the past behind us? The conflicts between the Reformation and the Catholic Counter Reformation were part of the drama of the sixteenth century.

⁴² In 1993 the LWF, in cooperation with the WCC, the Vatican's PCPCU, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, and the Latin American Council of Churches, organized a peace delegation to Guatemala and El Salvador when those countries were getting closer towards peace agreements after long civil wars. The delegation met with many of the main participants in the peace processes in both countries, including Presidents of both countries, the human rights leaders, workers movements, war widows, leaders of the guerrilla forces in Guatemala, and many others. The presence of the delegation served to illustrate support and concern for efforts at reconciliation there on the part of international religious leaders outside those countries.

⁴³ Concerning cooperation relating to Namibia see John A. Radano, *Lutheran and Catholic Reconciliation on Justification* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge, U.K., 2009, pp. 88-89).

⁴⁴ "Martin Luther-Witness to Jesus Christ, 1983," nos. 24-25, *Growth In Agreement II. Reports and Agreed Statement of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998*, Edited by Jeffrey Gros, FSC, Harding Meyer, William G. Rusch. (Geneva: WCC Publications and Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, 2000), pp. 441-42.

But after all the achievements of a century of ecumenism, and of Lutheran-Catholic relations over the last decades, the heirs of the Reformation and the heirs of the Counter Reformation of the 16th century, have come together since Vatican II, to seek the path of Gospel reconciliation and peace. They see together that their long conflict is a scandal to the gospel, and against the will of Christ. And although there is much work to do, they have already taken important steps together on the ecumenical journey.

The decade of preparation for 2017 in Germany mentioned above, with themes for various years proposed, recalls the impact of the Reformation and of Luther especially in Germany, though the impact was, of course, much wider. Many will celebrate that heritage in 2017.

What if we were to aim at 2017 as a time **to acknowledge the transition that has begun to take place** because of the ecumenical achievements during the last century. In contrast to the old paradigm of Reformation vs. Counter (Catholic) Reformation which reflected division and has dominated Western Christianity since the 16th century, the heirs of the Reformation and the heirs of the Counter-Reformation have rediscovered themselves as brothers and sisters in Christ. They have put many of the theological conflicts of the past into a new perspective. They have cooperated with each other for decades.

Ecumenical Reconciliation: The drama of the 20th and 21st centuries: Steps towards 2017

An ecumenical preparation for 2017 could be aimed at inspiring Lutherans and Catholics (and others) to foster together widespread awareness and reception in the churches of the many steps toward reconciliation that have been taken. We need to celebrate these steps toward unity not simply for the importance of what has been achieved, but because, in contrast to the past, they are giving Christians the capability to engage in mission together, in response to Christ's prayer "That they may all be oneso that the world may believe" (cf. John 17:21). Our responsibility to seek unity is related to our responsibility to engage in mission for the sake of the Gospel of Christ.

Year by year a program of ecumenical preparation might include the following:

2013. *Acknowledging that a century of ecumenism, has brought about a new paradigm, a new context for the relationships among Christians.* In contrast to centuries of separation, the century of ecumenism since Edinburgh 1910 has created a very different situation. It led to the World Council of Churches which, since 1948 has been a permanent ecumenical structure in which member churches (Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant), and partner churches (such as the Catholic Church) relate to reach other in a permanent way, with a vision and commitment to seeking the visible unity of the church. The WCC is a prominent symbol of the ecumenical movement, if not the only one. That structure reminds us of a new paradigm created by the ecumenical movement. Christians no longer simply exist in the divisions handed on from the past, whether from the sixteenth century in the West, or from the eleventh century schism between East and West, or since divisions from the fifth century. Today Christian churches are now in a new relationship---admittedly filled with tensions---but in a new relationship in which they have declared their intention to seek unity. They have been continually clarifying the nature of the unity they seek, as with the 2006 Porto Alegre statement "Called to be the One Church."

These new relationships are documented also in bilateral and multilateral dialogue, in church unions, and in many other ways. They should be celebrated. While the search for unity is not complete, Christians have entered a new age of positive relationships, a constructive time of new positive relations among them which enables them even now to engage in some degree of mission together, which they were unable to do in the past.

2014: ***Celebrating the achievement of a common understanding of justification, and acknowledging the degree of apostolic faith that we share.*** 2014 will be the 15th anniversary of the official signing in 1999, of the Lutheran and Catholic, and later Methodist *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. Issues relating to salvation were at the heart of the Reformation. Justification was the central theological issue in the background of Luther's conflict with church authorities. With the signing of the *JDDJ* we recognize that Lutherans, Catholics, and Methodists (and I believe, others) share "a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification" (*JDDJ*, 40) such that the mutual condemnations of the 16th century do not apply to the understanding of justification expressed in the declaration (cf. *JDDJ* 41). This great achievement of the ecumenical movement, resolving a major conflict at the time of the Reformation, needs to be celebrated and continually received by the churches. Some of the results of the current ecumenical study mentioned above, of broadening the biblical basis of the *JDDJ* can be used when they are published.

This could also be an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate extensive agreement also on other fundamental aspects of ***the apostolic faith*** such as the ***Trinity, Christ, Gospel***. John Paul II, said in 1980, the year of the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, that in the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue "we have begun to rediscover the deep bonds which unite us in faith and which were masked by the polemics of the past."⁴⁵ This can be said of other relationships as well.⁴⁶

This common agreement is important for mission. There is much of the apostolic faith that Catholics and Lutherans, and others, can now confess together before a secularized world.

2015: ***Scripture and Tradition***. The year 2015 could be a renewed opportunity to celebrate and promote the sacred scriptures together, knowing that many conflicts over Scripture have been overcome. Since the sixteenth century Christians have been divided on the authoritative sources of faith, whether questions about faith are to be resolved "by appealing to Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) or must argument derive from Scripture and Tradition?" But dialogue has shown that today, it is no longer possible to set Scripture and Tradition at odds with each other, and such a sharp contrast is no longer tenable. Scripture itself is a product of the earliest Tradition and the later Tradition (in its theological sense) is to be understood as the living presence of the same Gospel throughout the ages right up to the present.⁴⁷ We agree on the primacy of Scripture within the historical interpretative process; for all of us, Scripture is the witness to the original and primeval normative apostolic Tradition; Catholics and other Christians venerate the scriptures as the inspired Word of God, and that the Spirit communicates God's wisdom to us through the scriptures, and through their interpretation in the course of History.⁴⁸ The reception of such insights "in both Catholic and other Christian communities has been a source of spiritual renewal and indeed has led to a high degree of shared biblical spirituality, and a new awareness of our common mission to evangelization."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ "Address to a Plenary meeting of the Secretariat For Promoting Christian unity, February 8, 1980," cited in Radano, *Lutheran and Catholic Reconciliation on Justification*, p. 68.

⁴⁶ Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits*, no. 101, p.197.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 102, p. 197.

⁴⁸ Cf. *Ibid*, no. 102, p. 198.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Common bible study can be taken up with the renewed sense of how much we have overcome the conflicts of the past concerning Scripture. We can cooperate better in bringing the Word of God to the world.

2016: ***The Church and sacraments***. We can celebrate the progress has been made in efforts through dialogue to identify together the nature of the one Church of Christ. As seen above, the dialogues have reported *significant* convergences concerning the Church, helping us to get beyond many past conflicts about the Church. We can see more clearly together that “the nature and mission of the Church belong together; that the church is missionary by its very nature.” Even if a full breakthrough in ecclesiological questions is still to come,⁵⁰ the convergence already achieved “has confirmed and deepened our real (if still incomplete) communion, and has created a new and positive climate of practical cooperation in many fields of private, ecclesial, cultural, social and political life.”⁵¹ There are many ways in which Lutherans, Catholics and others can engage together in mission even now.

The rediscovery of our common baptism has helped Catholics, Lutherans and other Christians to see one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. New ecumenical emphasis on the biblical idea of anamnesis/memoria, and the rediscovery of the importance of the epiclesis, and thereby of the holy Spirit as the main agent in the liturgy of the Eucharist and all sacraments, have helped us to achieve convergences on some of the formerly controversial issues, such as Eucharistic sacrifice, and the true presence of Christ. These have helped us take steps toward the future day when “we may together celebrate the Eucharist as the sign of full communion”⁵² and engage fully, together, in the mission to which Christ calls us.

2017: Should be a year of **repentance** for the harm done to all Christians, and to the church’s mission, by centuries of division which has kept them from witnessing together to the Gospel. It should be a year of **gratitude** for many ecumenical achievements and steps toward unity taken in the modern ecumenical movement. Through decades of dialogue and other contacts, long separated Christians have begun to express agreement on the one apostolic faith, and on the one church of Christ, and to witness together to that faith. It should be a year of **renewing commitment** to achieve the visible unity of Christians, **in response to the prayer of Christ, for the unity of His disciples**.

CONCLUSION

“Called to be the One Church” in lifting up the challenge of mutual accountability, offers us a considerable challenge. But we can face that challenge in light of a century of ecumenism which has helped separated Christians to take important steps away from division, and towards unity. For this progress, we need to be grateful.

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⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 78. p. 153.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, no. 104, p. 200.

⁵² *Ibid.*, no. 105, p 201.

