

"MARTIN LUTHER - WITNESS OF JESUS CHRIST"

*Comments and Questions about the document of the Joint Roman Catholic/Lutheran Commission
on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther*

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The document entitled "**Martin Luther — Witness of Jesus Christ**" was drawn up by an International Commission set up in 1973 by the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation. The declaration was adopted on the occasion of the plenary session of the Commission held on May 6, 1983 in the Kirchberg Monastery (Wurttemberg, Federal Republic of Germany) and was signed by Hans L. Martensen, Bishop of Copenhagen (Denmark), and George A. Lindbeck, Professor of theology at Yale University, New Haven (USA), joint chairmen of the Commission. A statement by the Roman Catholic Church, above all, would now seem necessary and, indeed, would meet widespread expectations in this connection.

The document of the Joint Roman Catholic/Lutheran Commission was intended to meet these expectations. Its carefully considered tone, its factual approach and easy and open style and, above all, the fact that some of the more important results of modern ecumenical research in various branches of science have been worked into the text, all these combine to confer considerable advance credit upon the declaration about Martin Luther as witness of Jesus Christ. Since the text is intentionally couched in irenic language and, as far as possible, seeks to meet and satisfy both sides, there is also presumably a danger that some differences may be assessed in an excessively positive manner, thus tending —if anything —to hide or attenuate them behind somewhat optimistic statements (without bad intentions, of course!). We shall examine this aspect in greater detail later on, though without in any way wanting to belittle the real merit that is due to the work of the Commission, namely the fact that, faced with such difficult and delicate facts, it has succeeded in submitting an on the whole well balanced text to

describe, as it were, the present situation and therefore —albeit indirectly—also the existing possibilities of an ecumenical rapprochement. The joint declaration endeavours in a very honest manner to do justice to the identifying faith and beliefs of both confessions, doing this not only in its historical assessment of the Reformation, the so-called counter-Reformation and of present ecumenical efforts, but also in its doctrinal presentation of the patrimony of faith. Both the basic tenor of the text and its individual statements seem to be primarily concerned with making Lutheran points of view plausible and rendering the figure and work of Martin Luther more accessible to Catholics and at times, indeed, pressing it upon them in a pleasant, friendly and benevolent manner.

Comments and Questions regarding Individual Aspects

First of all, the title of the document "**Martin Luther — Witness of Jesus Christ**" undoubtedly seeks to bring out the ultimate concern of Martin Luther. In Christian traditions, however, the term "witness" often has the specific meaning of "martyr", a martyr for the faith, and could therefore be understood as a kind of glorification of Luther, something that not even the majority of Evangelical Christians would approve. Luther was wont to describe himself as an "evangelist", and it might therefore be more appropriate if the title were to speak of him as "Proclaimer of Jesus Christ" or "Proclaimer of the Gospel of Jesus Christ". The document never employs the term "prophet", even though a look at some of the prophetic figures of the Old Testament suggests that the life and work of Martin Luther could well be included in the literary genre of prophecy, not forgetting the light and shade and the contradictory aspects invariably associated with such a category. Very

characteristically, Luther never referred to himself as a “reformer”, since he was perfectly conscious of the fact that “reformation”, i.e. reform, had to come from God and not from men.

I. *From Conflict to Reconciliation*

This title goes too far. Reconciliation has yet to be achieved. It would therefore be more appropriate to title this section “From Dispute to Encounter”, for encounter, rapprochement between the two confessions, is now effectively taking place at all levels.

1.4 It is undoubtedly true that there is “on both sides a lessening of outdated, polemically coloured images of Luther”, but one should not overlook the resistance that still exists on the Catholic side and keeps on coming to the fore. The epithets of “witness of the faith” and “teacher in the faith” that the document applies to Luther sound suspect to many ears on the Catholic side and raise the suspicion that the partial recognition of Martin Luther is yet another step, at least indirectly, towards the loss of one’s own identity.

1.5 The statements made in this paragraph seem to be excessively global and optimistic, especially when one bears in mind how many “ifs” and “buts” there are in connection with the genesis of the “Confessio Augustana”, its authorship and, above all, the extent to which its reception is obligatory within the Evangelical churches.

1.6 The expression “our own unfaithfulness to the gospel” ought not to be allowed to create the impression that what is here intended is “infidelity in faith and/or in dogma” on the Catholic side; if at all, this phrase is rather to be understood as “infidelity in the life of faith”, this in the sense of a kind of “heresy of life” (which has to be very carefully distinguished from a dogmatic heresy).

II. *Witness to the Gospel*

11.8 The phrase “in the midst of the fears and uncertainties of his time” should be replaced by “in the midst of his personal fears and the uncertainties of the time”, because the so-called “reformation discovery” was something strictly personal for Martin Luther and was subsequently hardened in a polemical manner in view of the growing resistance in the universal Church.

11.9 Two problems remain to be considered in connection with the question of seeing the “doctrine of the justification of a sinner through

faith alone” as the central point of Luther’s theological thought and exegesis of Scripture. Firstly, the choice (“*hairesis*”) of the “message of justification” as the centre of Scripture and theology brings in its wake the danger of neglecting other aspects of the message of salvation. In this case, indeed, any form of concentration can represent a happy and successful synthesis, but at the same time also an abbreviating and narrowing reduction of the whole. Secondly, the “*solus*” mentioned as typical of Evangelical theology must be preserved from misunderstandings of the so-called Catholic “*et*” as its opposite, because we are not here concerned with identical or equivalent poles (God and man, etc.) and basically even the Protestant “*solus*” as a “*solus*” will ultimately seem a “*nunquam solus*” if, philosophically and theologically, it is not to be reduced *ad absurdum*, something that not even Evangelical theologians would want to do. The real difficulties in understanding each other, in Luther’s days and to some extent still today, seem to lie in the thought forms and categories of speech that the two sides employ in philosophy and theology.

In the second part of N° 9 the text may be drafted a little too narrowly and almost suggests that previously the faithful were not certain of the “promise of God’s grace”. The personal fears of Martin Luther should not be transferred to the totality of the faithful of his day and age. The text should therefore be given a somewhat more open form.

11.11 The formulation according to which Luther’s thinking, especially in the form of his doctrine of justification, is now substantially recognized in Catholic circles as a legitimate form of Christian theology, seems to be excessively optimistic and generalized, because such a consensus does not as yet exist even among a majority of theologians. As regards the reference to “forms of expressions and thought”, see the remark made above in connection with II.9. The “ecumenical declarations” (the joint statement about the Augsburg Confession being a case in point) must be assessed not only according to their form and content, but also in the light of their effective reception and binding recognition in the individual ecclesial communities. For as long as these documents remain no more than texts which, despite their goodwill and their sound theological basis, as yet lack substantial reception by church leaderships and by the people of God, they remain but an “idealistic consensus”, a hope for the future.

11.12 The last statement, i.e. that Luther always points beyond his own person, seems particular-

ly significant because there is still a great deal of talk about Luther as an “individualistic subjectivist”, a view that is difficult to combat, even though Luther’s ultimate concern was not himself, but rather God, grace, Holy Scripture, Christ, and the faith. Even in the conception of the so-called “fides fiducialis” he never ceases to point away from himself and to total trust in God. This paragraph therefore seems too short and should endeavour to illustrate the facts in greater detail.

III. *Conflict and the Schism in the Church*

III. 13 Luther’s concern for Church “reform” and return to the Gospel, however, had already become mixed with a one-sided accentuation in the sense of the “solus” and was well “understood” in both Germany and Rome, even though it is presumably still difficult to excuse the excessively delayed reactions of the competent Church authorities. The justified concerns for reform were already perceived as intermingled with doctrinal questions of at least suspect orthodoxy and were therefore rejected and refused. Moreover, primarily spiritual matters cannot be separated from the problem of authority in the Church. Considerations related to the balance of political power undoubtedly played a far from minor part, but the calling into question of the authority of the Councils and the Popes could not but touch the Universal Church in its most sensitive point, since they had represented the de facto way and place of determining obligatory salvific truth for almost fifteen centuries. The statement “It was not Luther’s understanding of the Gospel considered by itself, but...” would therefore seem to be too one-sided to do justice to the historical facts, because it was precisely this absolutized and unilaterally and polemically sustained “sola scriptura” that led to ever stronger polarization and, as sole criterion of salvific truth, could not but encounter resistance in view of the Universal Church’s marked sense of tradition.

III. 14 The statements made in this paragraph practically amount to an apology and absolution of Martin Luther and give inadequate expression to the permanently “apostolic structure” of the Church. This seems to be the very point where Luther came up against the well justified attitude of the Roman Catholic Church, which neither wanted to learn nor be converted, the point where he failed and ceased to believe in the possibility of reforming the Universal Church.

III.15 As regards the question of the “approaching apocalypse”, Luther should perhaps be seen not so much as the man between medieval and modern times, but rather as the man between the middle ages and the end of time (H.A. Obermann).

III. 17 What we are here concerned with is not

only elimination of the negative consequences of the Reformation, but also acceptance of its positive concerns and aims and of the reform consciousness that it aroused in the Roman Catholic Church, as well the latter’s efforts to safeguard and preserve the “sound tradition in faith” that had grown and proved its worth in the concern of centuries.

IV. *Reception of Reformation Concerns*

IV. 18 Here there arises the question already touched upon in N° II. 11 above, for in the last resort one has to ask oneself just how obligatory and binding Luther’s two catechisms and the “Confessio Augustana” really are for individuals and ecclesial communities on the Protestant side and whether the principle of “freedom” and “protest” is not such as to call into question even the binding character of these documents.

IV. 19 The cause and the frequently hidden (but effective) background of the aforementioned curtailments and distortions is probably to be found in the often one-sided starting points of Luther’s thought. “Luther’s estimate of sacramental life” is obscured by the reduction that he effected in the field of the doctrine and practice of the sacraments.

IV.20 The enumeration of the limits of the person and work of Martin Luther is honest and realistic, although —at least in the context of this enumeration~ no mention is made of the limits of the basic principles that guided Luther and the Reformation in the field of theology and the hermeneutics of salvation, principles that every now and again still come to the fore among Evangelical theologians and Christians (as, for example, in such matters as fundamental theology, tradition, the Eucharist, Confession, etc.).

IV.22 It is precisely in comparing the basic theological positions of Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther that greater attention should henceforth be paid to their different “thought forms” and their different ways of understanding theology and pursuing theological argument (see, for example, the distinction between “sapiential” and “existential” theology, O.H. Pesch). This

would make it possible to eliminate yet other misunderstandings and would also help to throw differences into sharper relief. From the hermeneutical point of view, however, this represents a difficult and lengthy task that can only be harmed by a certain "ecumenical impatience". The modern language sciences could render some good service in this connection. Although one must not expect this approach to solve all outstanding questions, one may look forward to seeing these problems more clearly in their historical context and to clarify them in the light of the history of tradition.

IV.23 It is quite surprising that the speech by John

Cardinal Willebrands quoted in this paragraph, which—when all is said and done—was very balanced, reserved and yet forthcoming, has had such limited echoes and reception on the Catholic side.

IV.24.25 The enumeration is considerable and

offers good starting points for dialogue and for an understanding between the two confessions. Nevertheless, one must here point out that the Catholic Church did dare to take the great step of a reform council in the twentieth century, while similarly important and universally binding reform efforts have not yet been made on the Protestant side. The greatest difficulties of the dialogue and rapprochement are likely to be constituted by the question of who—on the Protestant side—is in a position to give and promulgate a binding interpretation of the Christian message and doctrine and, further, whether the principle of the "freedom of a Christian" does not stress individual autonomy even in questions of faith and dogma to such an extent that a conflict with a binding magisterium is already inherently programmed and must inevitably come to the fore. If almost unilateral emphasis is being placed on the Spirit of God, on Scripture and the individual Christian, then surely it will be difficult to justify, build up and maintain any form of communal binding character of message and doctrine. Another great obstacle continues to be constituted by our as yet inadequate knowledge of each other, and this is not so much at the level of theologians, but rather at the level of the so-called base, i.e. the church people, and at the level of official church leaders.

V. *Luther's Legacy and Our Common Task*

V.26 "We could all learn from him"; the term "joint teacher" (which was used in German by Cardinal Willebrands) could also be misunderstood in the sense of "doctor communis", a title that, in least in the

Catholic world, has a very precise content and an altogether special significance. The quotation is most appropriate as far as content is concerned, but it would have to be brought into the overall context (of both the person and the work of Martin Luther and the speech of Cardinal Willebrands; this, by the way, is also true as regards the words of John Paul II quoted in §1.5). If the "litany" about "legacy" and mission (as argued here) is taken seriously, there yet remains the impression that Martin Luther is really being regarded as a "doctor communis" in the traditional sense and quite a few Christians will ask why concrete consequences are not immediately drawn from this, including posthumous lifting of the excommunication and recognition of the positions assumed by Luther and the Reformation as a Catholic possibility.

V.27 The quotation limits itself to one of the last words of Martin Luther. One should also take note of the fact that, according to the testimony of Justus Jonas, Luther's last prayer, the words of which have been handed down, still represented the Pope as a "persecutor of Jesus Christ" and this inevitably raises the question, often posed in the past, whether Luther could "forgive", whether he could "love his enemies" and practise true humility. And here we are concerned with basic Christian attitudes that should surely form part of the spiritual equipment of a "witness of Jesus Christ".

As already mentioned at the beginning, the document represents a true step forward. Here and there one still finds one-sided views and an over-optimistic view of the whole or of individual perspectives. What we have to bear in mind is the aspect of reception: many people are going to get a "new image" of Luther and the Reformation and will begin to wonder whether, if everything said here is correct, Luther was not right after all. Many will ask why his excommunication is not lifted, and others will wonder why one should strive for "unity" if the "different positions" are in themselves justified. One urgent consequence of this document would therefore seem to be this: Church authorities ought at long last to state their positions and give at least some orientative aids to alleviate the present situation of relative uncertainty among Christians of both confessions, something that does not exclude their honestly leaving a whole series of problems open and unsolved, always provided that these are faced up to. But if we do not start working on a number of concrete points and striving for an appropriate consensus at the various levels, then

effective unity in plurality will simply become more and more remote. One thing remains true: God's Spirit, even today or tomorrow, can perform the miracles he wrought in the primitive Christian communities, always provided that men open themselves and respond to him. And this includes the miracle of unity in legitimate plurality.

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