OBSERVATIONS ON "FACING UNITY"

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Our approach to *Facing Unity* will be first to recall the background and broader context of the document. Second, the innovative characteristics of *Facing Unity* deserve special attention, for it does go beyond previous results of the Lutheran-Catholic bilateral dialogue to add a new dimension that is ripe with promise. Thirdly, it will be appropriate to note briefly the most significant problems and questions raised by *Facing Unity,* especially with reference to some recent interventions in the field of Catholic-Lutheran ecumenism.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Facing Unity is the seventh published report of international commissions constituted by appointment of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation. The Malta Report of 1972, "The Gospel and the Church",[1] was a first inventory of existing agreement and developing convergences between Catholics and Lutherans, e.g., on the Gospel and tradition, the hierarchy of Christian truths, justification, and the apostolic ministry. At the same time, the Malta Report indicated areas needing more concentrated study in the dialogue, such as justification in relation to Christian freedom, ministerial office by apostolic succession, and the conditions for mutual eucharistic hospitality and intercommunion.

A reconstituted Joint Commission began work in 1973 and is best known for its widely discussed doctrinal declarations, *The Eucharist* (1978) and *Ministry in the Church* (1981).[2] The first-named statement had a special resonance in Germany, where it was in its eleventh printing just four years after initial publication. *The Eucharist* demonstrates the fruitfulness of the biblical and patristic theme anamnesz/s/memorial, which establishes the dense presence of God's reconciling action in Christ in each eucharistic celebration. From this point of departure a fresh approach is possible to the sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist, even if disagreement continues over the Church's actual offering of the oblation of Christ. The booklets in which the Lutheran World Federation published these two doctrinal statements in English[3] are especially valuable for giving the accompanying documentation of liturgical texts followed in Catholic and Lutheran celebrations of the Eucharistic and in ordinations. What is done in worship is an important guide to the lived meaning of what is professed and taught as binding doctrine.

Also, the Joint Commission issued "occasional pieces" to mark the anniversaries of the Augsburg Confession in 1980 and the birth of Luther in 1983.[4] Both of these documents are concise summations of results from an immense effort of historical, investigation seeking to retrieve and restate the true religious and doctrinal intentions of the first Lutheran profession of corporate faith and of the many-sided figure of the Reformer.

The direct predecessor of *Facing Unity* is the study document, *Ways to Community,* issued by the Joint Commission in 1980.[5] Opening with a profound meditation on the grace of unity, this statement described the roles of word, sacraments, and ministry in mediating unity in Christ through the Holy Spirit. What is fundamentally to be accepted and realized by Catholics and Lutherans is unity in faith, hope, and love, with concomitant expression in visible structures that are marked by both pluriformity and dedication to a world-wide service of struggling humankind. Each of these dimensions of unity gives rise to imperatives about steps which can and should be taken to move by stages toward reconciliation and full visible communion between Lutherans and Catholics. Ways *to Community* offered a broad, sketch, touching such particular themes as an intensified spiritual ecumenism and the development of a common biblical hermeneutic. In contrast, the new document, *Facing Unity,* focuses sharply on the central and specific aspects of fellowship that need to be realized. These are community in the confession of one faith, a common sacramental life, and the structured fellowship of Churches having first joint episcopal ministries and then a body of commonly ordained pastoral ministers. Against the background of the previous six documents, *Facing Unity* marks a breakthrough to a new kind of bilateral ecumenical work. It ventures to name the concrete steps to be taken in proceeding toward the achievement of full visible communion between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Churches of the world.

Before turning to a more detailed consideration of *Facing Unity,* we note how during the years of its gestation two important national bilateral dialogues were in progress between Lutherans and Catholics. The dialogue in the USA had resulted in documents on papal primacy and on teaching authority in 1974 and 1978, respectively.[6] Both of these treatments of issues heretofore sharply dividing the Churches were successful in ascertaining a degree of pertinent consensus, which of course co-exists at present with major ongoing disagreements. But the degree of agreement ascertained gave justification to the international Joint Commission to venture ahead into a project of ecclesiological program-planning for Catholic-Lutheran reconciliation, notwithstanding the fact that this is a long-term goal presently beyond easy realization.

Also in the USA, the bilateral group issued its ambitious statement on justification in 1983,[7] which gave extensive verification to the earlier assertion of the Malta Report that a far-reaching consensus was developing between Catholic and Lutheran interpretations of justification. However, a cluster of open questions remain about the ecclesiological ramifications of justification by faith. Currently the American dialogue is working on the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints in the economy of salvation and in the piety of believers.

In the German Federal Republic, the Lutheran-Catholic bilateral working group issued in 1984 a wide-ranging report on Church-fellowship in word and sacrament, which represents a forthright stock-taking on the remaining points of divergence between Catholic and Lutheran doctrine.[8] The German declaration also adds some initial assessments of the seriousness of these differences, concluding that some of them at least do not appear to be Church-divisive, but could be areas of legitimate theological pluriformity in one Church.

Characteristics of the New Document

Facing Unity first surveys the recently proposed forms and models of Church unity (nos. 2-45), drawing especially upon the work of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (nos. 13-34). Because of the well-founded concern for legitimate pluralism, this first section goes on to describe the relation between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, both in the reunion of Florence in 1439 and in the contemporary approaches to each other of these bodies now regarding each other as "sister Churches" (nos. 35-45). The gamut of models leads to the determination of six essential elements in a Lutheran-Catholic reconciliation (nos. 47-49): fundamental agreement in the apostolic faith will be had and confessed; diversity in theology and piety will remain; mutual condemnations will cease; a common sacramental life will grow; structures will emerge for joint action with both local and world-wide scope; Church leadership will be coordinated in a structure of joint exercise of *episcope.*

Clearly, the ecumenical expectation of *Facing Unity* conforms closely to the model of "unity in reconciled diversity" (cf. nos. 31-34, 47, 61-66, 84). The document does not call for the dissolution of the Churches as they move toward communion. It even foresees the possible continuation of neighboring parishes which differ in their respective spiritual and theological patrimonies (n. 144). Further agreements in faith and doctrine must develop, but this is not a process aiming to eliminate the pluriformity of the member-Churches in the future, more universal *communio.*

An important transition passage in *Facing Unity* (nos. 50-54) calls attention to the agreements and proximities already ascertainable between Lutherans and Catholics, for example, as expressed in Pope John Paul Il's assertion in 1980 that beyond partial consensus on particular truths there exists between Catholics and Lutherans "agreement on the fundamental and central truths" (no. 51). Correspondingly, Lutherans are realizing the impropriety of repeating their forebears' condemnations of the papacy and the Mass (no. 53).

Efforts toward Lutheran-Catholic unity must pursue three interrelated goals, advancing toward community of professed faith, a common sacramental life, and unified structures of decision-making and pastoral ministry. These do not follow one another in sequence, but are rather goals to be approached in an integral process through mutual acts of recognition and mutual exchange in each area along with the other two areas (no. 49).

Confession of the apostolic faith in a shared or common way is of fundamental importance. Major areas of Lutheran-Catholic consensus in belief and confession are listed (nos. 57-60), including "a basic though not yet complete consensus in the understanding of Church" (no. 57). While the goal is not theological uniformity eradicating all diversity (nos. 61-64), *Facing Unity* does note realistically that recent Catholic dogmas on Mary and the papacjr seem to Lutherans to be well beyond the boundaries of the doctrinal pluriformity justified by Scripture (no. 66). But a concrete step that is possible, as a genuine movement of approach to fellowship in faith, would be the declaration by Catholic and Lutheran Church leadership that past doctrinal condemnations of the other Church have become meaningless in our day in view of the present doctrines of the Churches and our present state of mutual understanding (nos. 67-69).[9]

Regarding diversity in a reconciled communion, *Facing Unity* declares, "It is not necessary that each Church adopt the specific forms of belief, piety, or ethics of the other Church and make them its own" (no. 63). The document, however, does not go on to state whether explicit confession of all dogmas is necessary for communion between the Churches. Future study and internal dialogue in the Churches will have to clarify whether the original formulations of the faith, the Scriptures and ancient creeds, suffice as the common content of explicit confession and binding teaching. More work is needed to assess the grounds that might warrant pluriformity even in dogma, providing of course that one member-Church in the future communion does not contradict and brand as alien to the Gospel the truths held in another member-Church to be part of Gods saving revelation. Here is without a doubt the

most sensitive point of the ecumenical model of unity in reconciled diversity.

The second dimension of Church fellowship is that of sacramental life, treated in *Facing Unity,* nos. 70-82. Significant points of departure are shown to exist for this form of Catholic-Lutheran growth toward communality. The problematic "open questions" still awaiting resolution (no. 83) are not listed, but some of them easily spring to mind, such as the eucharistic offering of Christ by the Church; the sacraments of confirmation, marriage, and anointing of the sick (cf. nos. 78, 80-82); integral confession of mortal sins; and the need of an episcopally ordained minister for a valid eucharist or ordination. But one can be hopeful about future developments, given the shared conviction of Catholics and Lutherans that salvation is mediated to us sacramentally - a central tenet in the patrimonies of our now separated Churches.

The third goal of fellowship concerns the ordained ministry commissioned to foster the faith by preaching and to administer the sacraments by which the Church of Jesus Christ lives. *Facing Unity calls* for the presently separated Churches to commit themselves to eventually realizing a structured form of unity that will include a common ministry (nos. 86-93), notwithstanding the obstacles (nos. 94-103) which now prevent a common ministry. The recommended avenue of approach to overcoming the obstacles is a joint reflection on the early Church practice of the episcopal ministry.[10] Such study could well lead to a deeper consensus about the correspondence of this early-Church complex of forms and practices to the ministry of the apostles of Jesus Christ (nos. 104-116).

Up to this point, Facing *Unity* has covered ground that is for the most part familiar to those who have followed the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue after Vatican II But in no. 117 the document moves into hitherto unexplored territory, as it begins to sketch an integral process by which the separated Churches can move toward the realization of fellowship in the exercise of the pastoral ministry. The Joint Commission has given us an ecumenical *novum* in the short chapters (nos. 117-141) which describe the phases by which the ministry of leadership and pastoral care could be joined and then coalesce into actual communality. Leadership *(episcope)* would first be exercised in a formally coordinated manner (nos. 120-122), leading to an initial act of mutual ecclesial recognition based on consensus in faith, sacramental life, and ministry (nos. 120-126). The recognition would be a transistional act, one which for Catholics would entail an affirmative acknowledgment of the Church of Jesus Christ in Lutheranism but not necessarily the fullness of ecclesiality (no. 124). Upon recognition, a phase of common exercise of episcopal ministry would begin, achieving a collegiality of Church leadership (nos. 127-131). Because of the unique task being addressed, namely, the overcoming of a lengthy separation, at least for a time a situation of geographically overlapping jurisdictions should be tolerated, contrary to the principle of one bishop in each local Church (n. 129). The critical transition actually sealing Lutheran-Catholic ecclesial *communio* would then be the concelebrated ordination of new pastoral ministers by the bishops already exercising collegial *episcope* in a given region, nos. 132-141). Thus a common ministry would result, after the phases of joint exercise of leadership, mutual recognition, and episcopal collegiality. The joint ordinations commissioning a body of pastors for a united Church would thus be a climatic sign of God's grace of unity and would signal the presence in the Church of a body of ministers specially concerned for fostering the apostolic faith held in common and the common sacramental life of the Church. The structured forms in which this united body of ministers would actually exercise their service of word and sacrament in a given locale could well be diverse, as nos. 142-145 suggest with prudent reticence. Some difficult unresolved questions remain about the impact of the sketched process of Lutheran-Catholic reunion upon the pre-existent network of *communio*-relationships of the two Churches, as in Europe where Lutheran Churches have pulpit and altar fellowship with Reformed Churches in the framework of the Leuenbere Agreement of 1973 (nos. 146-148).

This review of the main characteristics of *Facing Unity* shows that the new document is a creative proposal that moves dramatically beyond the earlier ascertaining of areas of agreement in doctrine and polity. The programmed steps take seriously the requirements of visible unity, thus serving as a healthy counterpoint to tendencies to spiritualize the ecumenical goal, by a kind of ecclesiological docetism, or to project it into an eschatological future wholly beyond our planning and effort. Also, *Facing Unity* shows considerable sensitivity to the convictions of the two partner-Churches in the dialogue. Everyone concerned with the cause of ecumenism can be grateful to the members of the Joint Commission for articulating a coherent scenario of development toward Catholic-Lutheran reunion. A long period of study, prayer, and often painful struggle doubtlessly lies ahead, but *Facing Unity* has scouted the terrain to be covered and sketched quite plausibly the goal of our ecumenical efforts.

The New Document and Recent Interventions

Facing Unity has already met with some negative, even indignant, reactions from Lutheran writers, whose reservations combine both protest with calls for alternative proposal.[11] But it would

be intrusive for a Catholic observer to speak so early about the Lutheran reception of *Facing Unity.* In a broader context, however, we can note two recent proposals regarding Catholic-Lutheran ecumenism which are sure to intersect with the dynamic that will be exercised by *Facing Unity.*

First, the German bilateral statement of 1984 will have a bracing effect upon anyone hoping for an early and easy resolution of Catholic-Lutheran differences. *Kirchengemeinschaft in Wort und Sakrament* does verify areas of consensus and points of doctrinal proximity, but in relation to *Facing Unity* the special impact of the German contribution regards the obstacles to unity. Two points can be singled out, which point to major tasks for future dialogues aiming to facilitate the process sketched in *Facing Unity.*

Clearly, greater precision needs to be gained where the 1980 Joint Commission declaration on the Augsburg Confession registered a notable consensus on the nature of the Church, as cited in *Facing Unity,* no. 57. The German statement of 1984 points to the unclarfied and controverted points regarding the interrelation of visible and hidden elements in the make-up of the Church, between institutional forms and realities grasped only in faith. This is an issue of considerable relevance for determining the constitutive elements of Church fellowship. The Catholic ranking of *communio hierarchica* among the essentials is in fact an alien notion for Lutherans.[12]

Also, the German bilateral group addresses the issue of the authority of those holding ministerial office in the Church. Appeal to New Testament examples does not block the emergence of sharp differences of opinion, both within and between our Churches, over official powers to resolve controversies and to issue directives binding in conscience. Further, the locus of teaching authority is situated differently by Catholics and Lutherans, with the Catholic ascription of infallibility in specific cases provoking Lutheran dissent because of what is seen as openness to serious abuse.[13]

Another component in the reception of *Facing Unity* will no doubt be the problematic that has recently emerged concerning an allegedly unreconciled and irreconcilable fundamental divergence between Catholics and Protestants.[14] A variety of accounts have been offered on just how this divergence is constituted. One tendency is to situate it at the level of fundamental thought-forms or mentalities (sapiential vs. existential theologizing, corporate vs. personalist concerns), that often result from different theological visions of the human person. Others point to ecclesiology, for example, to Vatican II's notion of the Church as "sacrament" *(SC* 26; *LG* 1,9), which Protestant teaching rejects. Yet more pointed are assertions, like those of the Munich Lutheran theologian Eilert Herms, of a contradictory opposition regarding the visible church's role in handing on God's saving revelation. Authentic Protestantism, in profound opposition to Catholic doctrine, is said to locate the ecclesial witness *outside* the personal relation between the self-revealing God and the submissive and trusting believer.[15]

The ecumenical relevance of these proposals lies in their potential, first, to call in question the significance of the agreements already ascertained by the dialogues on the sacraments, justification, and ministerial office. Some exponents of the fundamental divergence assert that these particular doctrines are of somewhat marginal importance when compared with the central difference. At least, their proposals would tend to block any ecclesial reception of the dialogue-results by undercutting the value of the consensus they have discovered. Further, if there is such a fundamental opposition, one could question the wisdom of the Commission in moving on from particular doctrinal issues to sketch the possible phases of Catholic-Lutheran reunion, as done in *Facing Unity.*

Secondly, a fundamental divergence on revelation and faith, as recently urged by E. Herms, would shift attention sharply away from the "agreement on fundamental and central truths" (Pope John Paul II). If it is not an outright denial of this view of the given consensus, Henn's thesis is at least a claim that Catholics and Lutherans are very far from the fellowship in faith needed for visible unity according to *Facing Unity,* no. 56. But then the Herms proposal has been severly criticized for misconstruing both Lutheran and Catholic doctrines on revelation and faith.[16]

The recent contentions over a Protestant-Catholic fundamental divergence will affect one's view of *Facing Unity* by drawing attention to the sections of the document which assess the fellowship in confessing the faith that now exists between Lutherans and Catholics (nos. 57-60). Study, discussion, and assessment of *Facing Unity* should not focus solely on its new proposals of reunion by a collegial episcopate and a common body of ministers. More work needs to be done in the area of fundamental theology, to clarify just how Catholics and Lutherans assent to and lay hold of the truth God has given us about Himself and his economy of redemption.

[1] Published in English in *Worship* 46 (1972) 326-351 and in *Lutheran World* 18 (1972) 259-273.

[2] Published in English in SPCU *Information Service* 39 (1979) 22-35 and 48 (1982) 12-29. Also in Or/gzwj 8 (1979) 465-478 and 12 (1982) 295-304. *The Eucharist* is also in *One in Christ* 15 (1979) 249-273.

[3] *The Eucharist* (Geneva, 1980) and *The Ministry in the Church* (Geneva, 1982).

[4] *All Under One Christ* and *Martin Luther-Witness to Jesus Christ,* in *Information Service* 44 (1980) 138-141 and 52 (1983) 84-88. Also in *One in Christ* 16 (1980) 265-272 and 19 (1983) 291-297. The statement on Luther is also in *Origins* 13 (1983) 65-69 and in the LWF booklet-edition of *Facing Unity* (Geneva, 1985), pp. 72-80.

[5] *Information Service* 46 (1981) 64-79. Also in *One in Christ* 17 (1981) 365-382.

[6] Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy, eds., *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church* (Minneapolis: Ausburg, 1974); and Paul C. Empie, T. Austin Murphy and Joseph A. Burgess, eds., *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church* (Minneapolis: Ausburg, 1980).

[7] H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy and Joseph A. Burgess, eds., *Justification by Faith* (Minneapolis: Ausburg, 1985).

[8] *Kirchengemeinschaft in Wort und Sakrament* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, und Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1984).

[9] A significant reassessment of these doctrinal condemnations, on justification, sacraments, and ministerial office, has just been completed by a working group of Catholic and Protestant theologians in West Germany. See the report, "Auf dem zu einer immer starker verbindenden Gemeinschaft", *Herder Korrespondenz* 40:3 (March 1986), pp. 135-142.

[10] The LWF booklet-edition of Fzzczwg *Unity* includes a short essay by Herve Legrand, OP, "The Practice of Ordination in the Early Church", pp. 68-71.

[11] Andreas Karrer, "Kirchengemeinschaft-um welchen Preis?", *Materialdienst des Konfessionskundlichen Instituts Bensheim* 34 (1985) 67-70. Peder Norgaard-Hojen, "Wege und Irrwege Katholisch-Iutherischer Kirchengemeinschaft", *Okumemsche Rundschau* 34 (1985) 401-427.

[12] *Kirchengemeinschaft in Wort und Sakrament,* nos. 7-9, pp. 13-15, and nos. 72-73, pp- 80-83.

[13] *Ibid.,* nos. 75-76, pp. 84-90.

[14] Harding Meyer has conveniently surveyed the recent interventions in "Difference fondamental, Consensus fondamental", *Irenikon* 58 (1985) 163-179. German version in *Okumenische Rundschau* 34 (1985) 347-359.

[15] Eilert Herms, *Einheit der Christen in der Gemeinschaft der Kirchen* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1984).

[w] Heinrich Fries, in the supplementary chapter, "Zustimmung und Kritik, eine Bilanz", in the special edition of Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner , *Einigung der Kirche -reale Möglichkeit* (Freiburg : Herder, 1985), pp. 178-189. Heinrich Doring, "Einigung der Kirche-Ist sie real möglich ?", *Catbolica* 39 (1985) 81-132 . Jos E. Vercruysse , "Einheit der Christen in der Gemeinschaft der Kir- chen", Gregorianum 66 (1985) 539-543.