

A Reflection on “Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry and Eucharist”

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I wrote my doctoral dissertation while a student at the University of Sant’ Anselmo in the 1980s, never dreaming that a classmate of mine, Kurt Stasiak, would one day become the abbot of St. Meinrad’s, or that my friend and former classmate Gregory Polan would one day fill the office of abbot primate in quarters above my classrooms in Rome. As a graduate of Conception Seminary College, I was happy to return to a Benedictine milieu, although my teachers included at least one Jesuit and one diocesan priest. I was pleasantly surprised that one of the readers assigned to guide my doctoral dissertation was Paolo Ricca, a theologian from the Waldensian faculty in Rome. I was writing on the sixteenth-century theology of confirmation from both sides of the aisle - notably the thought of Robert Bellarmine for the Catholics and of Martin Chemnitz for the Reformers. One day I reviewed with Ricca my newly-written Chapter One, which summarized the sacramental theology of Martin Luther. Within that chapter I had written what I thought was an apodictic expository line, “Martin Luther fought against the Church.” Ricca pounced on it. “No,” he thundered. “Martin Luther fought *for* the Church.” I wanted a diploma, so I changed the preposition. Honestly, though, I saw his point; Ricca helped me appreciate Luther’s work from another angle.

Walter Kasper’s ecumenical take on *Martin Luther* shows Luther was a man of his times. He was born just a few years before Columbus sailed to the new world. He emerged in the years that the printing press unleashed its power. He witnessed the corrupt leadership of the post-Avignon church. And he thrived in a world where academics mattered, where, if you wanted a discussion, you could put forward 95 theses. For complex reasons, the theses provoked polemics and condemnations rather than dialogue and development. Five hundred years later we inhabit a society where science still exposes new worlds ever beyond our reach, where modes of communication evolve at an increasingly quicker pace, where the church has suffered scandals of abuse, and where careful philosophical thought falls victim to the polarizing rants of populist platforms.

Within this society the Catholic Church continues to foster ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Progress often seems slow or stalled, but it really does continue in hope. One example is “Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry and Eucharist,” published jointly in 2015 by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, an arm of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. However, the page

containing the publication data makes its own declaration: “The Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs affirmed the 32 Agreed Statements and commended the Declaration on the Way to Cardinal Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, for further reflection and action. The Declaration is not a Statement of the full body of Bishops of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.” Securing a statement from the full body of these bishops probably would have sunk the declaration into more rounds of debate and delays. Nevertheless, the declaration received sufficient support to advance. Cardinal Kurt Koch had proposed a new kind of document, not one that works out areas of agreement, but one that summarizes agreements already achieved and declares where we are “on the way.” Lutheran and Catholic leaders in the United States took this invitation, developed a work with a title inspired by Cardinal Koch’s remarks, and sent it back to him for consideration. That is where things still stand.

In 2013 the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity issued, “From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017.” It concludes with five ecumenical imperatives, of which the first two apply to the Declaration on the Way. The first imperative is this: “Catholics and Lutherans should always begin from the perspective of unity and not from the point of view of division in order to strengthen what is held in common even though the differences are more easily seen and experienced.” The second imperative is this: “Lutherans and Catholics must let themselves continuously be transformed by the encounter with the other and by the mutual witness of faith.” These points led to the presentation of 32 statements of agreement, followed by an acknowledgment of disagreements that remain. No one pretends that unity has flowered, but no one wishes to obscure its common roots. We are not at the beginning, nor at the end, but on the way.

The Declaration explores three areas: church, ministry and eucharist. I will offer some reflections on each section.

With regard to the Church, both Lutherans and Catholics believe that the church “has been assembled by the triune God” (1). We believe that the church “lives from and is ruled by the Word of God, which it encounters in Christ, in the living word of the gospel, and in the inspired and canonical Scriptures” (5). We believe in sacraments, though we disagree over how many there are. Catholics, unlike Lutherans, hesitate to use the word “sinful” as an adjective for the Church, though we readily admit that everyone in the church sins.

Lutherans, unlike Catholics, consider the Lutherans a “church”. The liturgies and statements of the Catholic Church refer to other Christian bodies as “ecclesial communities” rather than “churches.” This has caused pain among many Christians. The kindest spin I can place on this is that the Catholic Church does not regard other Christian bodies as churches distinct from our own. We rather see them as having a real though imperfect participation in the one church. We share the same baptism, and that has to mean something about the church to which we belong. You can see this in the very title of the ceremony we conduct when someone with a valid baptism wishes to be identified as a Catholic. You

sometimes hear people call this service “Reception into the Catholic Church” or even “Reception into Communion with the Catholic Church,” but its proper title is “The Rite of Reception into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church.” The title does not claim that other Christians lack any participation in the church; it presumes that they participate imperfectly in the church and are coming into its full communion. This may not make anyone feel any better, but the expression “ecclesial communities” is trying to preserve a belief in one of the four marks of the church; namely, its unicity.

Second, with regard to ministry, Lutherans and Catholics agree that ordained ministry belongs to the church’s apostolic character (13), that it is of divine origin (15), and that it happens by ordination (21). The most talked-about disagreement concerns the ordination of women. Catholic opposition is well known, yet within the Church there are some Catholics who support the ordination of women, and others who find it reprehensible. For some Catholics this single point of disagreement puts the brakes on any kind of ecumenical dialogue.

In the broader picture of ministry, we find considerable unity on the common priesthood of the people of God, based on their baptism, as expressed in the First Letter of Peter and the Book of Revelation (14). In fact, this aspect of the priesthood of the people lies beneath the primary aim of the liturgical renewal in the Catholic Church: the full, conscious, active participation of the people, which is both their right and their duty. This has led to such developments as celebrating mass in vernacular languages, enhancing the dialogues between the priest and the people, and the reintroduction of the Universal Prayer, or the Prayer “of the Faithful,” whereby the baptized members of the Church exercise their common priesthood in the ministry of prayer. There is considerable agreement on the common priesthood, and this should not be overlooked. However, the Catholic Church’s refusal to accept the validity of Lutheran ordinations has limited not only shared ministry, but also the most important area of all, the eucharist.

With regard to the eucharist, Lutherans and Catholics both esteem “the spiritual benefits of union with the risen Christ” in receiving communion (27). Both affirm the Trinitarian dimension of the eucharist (28), and that eucharistic worship is the memorial of Jesus Christ (29). Both Lutherans and Catholics believe that “Jesus Christ himself is present” in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper (30), but Catholics, of course, believe that Lutherans have it wrong, and many Lutherans feel frustrated and pained by this disagreement.

As to the mode of the presence of Christ in the eucharist, Catholics widely use the term “transubstantiation” to refer to a change pertaining to the elements of bread and wine (2). “Lutherans traditionally affirm that Christ is truly *present* ‘in, with, and under’ the bread and wine, but do not usually speak of a transformation of the elements themselves” (30). The difference may not be as weighty as many think. I do not know of any studies on this, but I suspect that if you asked ordinary Catholics, “At communion, is Christ present in place of the

bread and wine, or is Christ present in the bread and wine?" many would answer "in" with no hint of theological peril.

As to the notion of sacrifice, Catholics hold very dearly not only to belief in the real presence of Christ in the eucharist, but also to the idea of the sacrifice of the mass. As I explained in a lecture at this very monastery just two weeks ago, many celebrations of the mass include bad habits that tip its purpose away from sacrifice and toward adoration, most notably by serving communion from the tabernacle instead of the altar. However, the liturgy as revised by the Second Vatican Council did more than translate mass from Latin into the vernacular languages; it scoured the eucharistic theology of the celebration to enhance its meaning. This has ecumenical potential, but many Catholics have not yet caught on.

The Declaration on the Way does not attempt to break new ground in content, though it does aim to take a new perspective. It pulls one's head up from the deep sands of ecumenical dialogue to survey the ground traveled so far. It aims to encourage. Many disagreements remain, but some are unmasked as mere misunderstandings.

The 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation is uncovering a desire for greater unity; many people are fighting for the church. The first of the five ecumenical imperatives is sometimes the greatest obstacle to unity. It invites us to begin from points of unity rather than from points of division. Some people of good will find this too difficult because the division feels too real. We have all experienced this in personal relationships. We disagree with some individuals - some of whom are friends, some of whom are family. The division may be personal, political or religious. The pain may feel too great to start from points of unity. Yet the quest for peace begins with this belief: there is more that unites us than what divides. If we can affirm that in our personal life, we can do it as Christians, and we will help all the world advance on the way.