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From differences to unity

The Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg, and the Lutheran-Catholic Commission on Unity

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The decisive step in the establishment of the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg, was taken at the General Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Helsinki, when on 10 August 1963 a resolution was made to establish the Lutheran Foundation for Inter-Confessional Research. The Foundation acted swiftly and eighteen months later, on 1 February 1965, the Institute for Ecumenical Research began its work.

As we nearly 50 years later evaluate the history of the events leading to the launching of the Ecumenical Institute, we may be amazed that the objective set at the Helsinki Assembly was not the unity of the churches or of Christians. Nonetheless, the charter states the foundation is “inter-confessional”, meaning its purpose is “to contribute to the fulfilment by the Lutheran churches of their ecumenical responsibility in the area of theology.” In actuality, what the ultimate objective of ecumenism might be is not mentioned.

In place of unity, the main focus of the document seems to lie in how the churches differ from one another. According to the statement of purpose, the foundation is to exercise “appropriate and critical theological research, both historical and systematic, in areas where Christian churches are divided in matters of doctrine and church order, and where theological questions are a matter of controversy.”

Thus, “division” and “controversy” are the concepts whereby inter-confessional relations are approached. Further, a few other expressions in the rules seem to bypass the unity of the Church or leave it to the unforeseen future. “In contacts and conversations with theologians from other churches...” the institute is “to obtain direct knowledge of their doctrinal convictions and theological methods.” There is a desire to make Lutheran traditions known to the representatives of other churches as well as to “communicate the understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and His Church as rediscovered in the Lutheran reformation.”

So the Foundation appeared to be content with the fact that ecumenical dialogues fulfil their purpose when representatives become better acquainted with the doctrines and theologies of other churches and when the Lutheran views on faith are communicated to others. These objectives are more modest than if the visible unity of the churches, doctrinal consensus—or at least theological and ecclesiastical convergence had been sought.

Is the primary goal of the ecumenical agenda one of unity or differences? Is the objective of the Institute in Strasbourg or of this summer seminar to distribute information on inter-confessional differences or do we have to set the goal higher, i.e., on the unity of the churches?

Inter-confessional differences a part of ecumenism

Those well-versed in the history of ecumenism note by now that my question setting includes a certain lack of historicity as well as an intended provocation. There are several reasons why inter-confessional and practical differences have to be spotted, studied and worked on for possible reconciliation to result.

First of all, we have to be honest and remember that the differences are realities and cannot be bypassed. The history of the Christian churches has since the beginning and throughout the centuries been a tragic narrative, due to the emphasis on differences. We cannot omit this historic fact, even though we see it as an undesirable development. Personal views on faith and individual profiles have been stressed ever since the first apostolic collegium. It is not necessary to list examples of how an emphasis on differences has led to further divisions. In particular, the development of Protestantism is a sad story in this respect. It is not only about human failures but that the truth was defended with such passion that unity and also often love were forgotten. The tension between truth and unity is paradoxically a challenge to us all. How is it possible to hold on to one's personal faith while being true to Christ's prayer "that they might all be one"?

Secondly, differences cannot be bypassed, as a genuine search reaching for the unity of the Church always calls for a careful analysis of existing theological and doctrinal differences. Without an honest knowledge and study of differences a solid foundation for future unity cannot be built either.

May I assume that the theologians promoting the launch of the Foundation 50 years ago were well aware of the fact that unity could not be striven for without scientific, independent and "critical theological research". Therefore the seminars at the Institute are to be of "scholarly nature", its professors are to be "research professors" and their "academic freedom for scholarly research shall be guaranteed". Theological research calls for an analytical and dissecting interpretation where attention is certainly placed on the specific features of the phenomenon under study, in other words on how it digresses from other phenomena. When in the spirit of academic freedom we study, e.g., the Lutheran doctrine and compare it with Roman Catholic dogma, attention is naturally drawn to differences.

Thirdly, we have to remember that during the first years of the foundation, doctrine and confession were held in high esteem in the Lutheran world. The knowledge of our own history, roots and identity was important, not only in principle but also because of the practical activity the churches were involved in throughout the changing world. To appreciate our own doctrine and confession is to know its specific features. We have to know the gifts of grace given to each member of the body.

It is actually quite easy to understand that the Foundation launched in Helsinki is inter-confessional and that its rules clearly and emphatically speak about the doctrines of the Church, about doctrinal convictions, about church order, about theological methods and about theology on the whole.

When the Foundation was first established, the Lutheran World Federation felt a growing need to define its specific role among the Christian churches. The Lutheran world itself was not quite certain about what it meant to be Lutheran. It is paradoxical that on the one hand the Helsinki

General Assembly witnessed the start of the inter-confessional foundation to study doctrinal differences, but on the other hand that meeting was incapable of expressing what the focal point of Lutheranism, i.e., justification by faith, meant.

The Helsinki General Assembly attempted to say what “justification today” meant. The many theologians preparing for the topic understood the classical theme of the Reformation had become of greater interest in a new way. They were facing questions proposed by the ecumenical movement and the modern world. On one side the strengthening of the ecumenical movement and on the other the existential questions raised by the modern world forced theologians to probe deeper into what is the very spiritual identity of Lutheranism. A strong investment in Lutheran theology and know-how was needed, a Lutheran Think Tank, our own Faith and Order Centre, i.e. the Institute in Strasbourg.

May I venture to consider that in order for us to clarify our Lutheran self-understanding, we need the Ecumenical Institute in Strasbourg today as well. A need for theological thinking has by no means diminished, rather on the contrary. It would be fortunate for both ecumenism and Lutheranism itself if this function remained strong in the work of the Lutheran World Federation and its member churches.

Fourthly, 50 years ago talking about differences was also understandable, because the ecumenical situation was quite different from today. A need for mutual learning was great. After the Second World War it was becoming gradually evident that the cooperation of the Lutheran churches was no longer about their mutual confessional unity but rather about what position they held among other Christian churches. The name of the foundation expresses a broader goal; it was to be inter-confessional.

In particular, the changes in the ecumenical movement in the early 1960s called for a reaction from the Lutheran world. In the New Delhi General Assembly 1961, many Orthodox churches joined the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council merged with it. In October 1962 the Second Vatican Council convened. The Fourth Faith and Order World Conference met in Montreal just before the Helsinki General Assembly. It was understandable and necessary that the Lutheran World Federation should strengthen its position during this time of ecumenical breakthroughs.

The Second Vatican Council afforded special emphasis to the newly-initiated activities at the Institute. Examples of a new type of opening in Roman Catholic theology had already been seen, heard and read about. Alongside a theology of controversy, there now rose a desire to understand other churches and communities. Church history and the history of theology were not studied simply for the strengthening of a church’s own position but in order to understand those who thought differently. Catholic conciliar theology wished to interpret its own history irenically and seek not only doctrinally differentiating factors but also those things uniting churches. That the Roman Catholics excelled in high standard Luther research free from outdated prejudices had to have an impact on ecumenical relationships as well. Luther was no longer studied for his heresies, but rather for what tied him in to the classical Christian tradition.

The Lutheran world had to be able to respond to both the strivings for renewal of the Roman Catholic Church as well as to the new theological and scholarly openings presented by Catholic

theology. Therefore, there were very strong grounds for the launch of the Ecumenical Institute in Strasbourg.

Unity the ultimate goal of ecumenism

While I wish to take the differences between churches seriously, I still think it is of primary importance that the goal of ecumenical activity should always be the visible unity of Christ's one Church. This goal may seem self-evident and it is easy to admit it should be our common goal—at least in principle and theory. Unity must however not remain only a festive statement of principle, something admitted to be right yet often forgotten in practice. The goal of visible unity is to be kept in mind constantly. We must really declare it out loud whenever it seems to be furthest from us. If the unity of the Church is not always in our minds, we have forgotten Christ's prayer that His disciples might all be one. The unity of the Church must be talked about, written about, sung about. This unity must be understood as much as possible and meditated upon, thought about, prayed about, exhorted and sought.

As a goal the unity of the Church is of extreme importance when the differences between churches seem irresolvable. It is part of the nature of this unity that it will face obstacles and hardships. The highway to ecumenism is by no means easy or straight. Why else would Christ have prayed for His disciples?

Are we today going through a period where differences and controversies between churches attempt to surface? When profiles are being raised and new reasons for differences are coming out, then people turn their faces away and critical evaluations of others grow stronger, they withdraw from each other, they strengthen their own troops and publish the failures of others. In brief, differences and divisions seem to come to the forefront. This development is not only between churches but also within churches and is shared by the Lutherans, Catholics, Anglicans and Orthodox alike.

If we hold the unity of the Church of Christ dear, we have to find again counter-forces to those developments stressing differences. Could we begin all our talks and meetings by what unites us? Could we start our seminars by expressing our gratitude for all the good things we have already discovered together over this last half-century? Could we again and again set as our primary task the deepening of what we have already achieved so far? Could we consciously avoid making decisions and giving speeches which set up roadblocks on our way to visible unity?

Controversies and differences cannot be bypassed, but they must always be placed into proper perspective with what already unites us Christians and churches. Over and over again we must recall what Pope John XXIII said 50 years ago: "What unites us is much greater than what divides us." The words of the Bishop of Rome are simple and clear but still hard to keep before our eyes. Could we all share this attitude?

What unites us?

The history of ecumenism is filled with attempts to express what unites Christian churches. I will, if I may, take a leap back in time to two thousand years ago, as I wish to return to our first roots, the classical description of the unity of the Church of Christ in the Letter to the Ephesians. Among the Pauline letters this letter is one of gratitude, courage, hope and unity, a letter of the grace of God, the peace of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Christ is the Head of the Church, its cornerstone. He unites the members of His Church into one family and one building.

In the Finnish Church Bible the beginning of the fourth chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians has the title “Unity of the Church of Christ”.

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. (Eph 4:1-7, NASB)

The words of the Apostle Paul are like a *directorium*, a magna charta, guide and handbook concerning what is essential in the unity of the Church of Christ, and how we are to act in order to promote that unity. I have five points in mind concerning the Apostle Paul’s message to us.

Firstly, just like the modern-day consultant who is very conscious about being customer-oriented, Paul starts with what our share and task in this is. What would our ecumenical dialogues and encounters be like if we had the energy to exercise humility, gentleness, patience, love and peace in everything? It is true that the virtues listed by Paul are the fruits and gifts of the Spirit yet they are also our calling and responsibility.

Secondly, the Apostle Paul reminds us that the unity of the Church is basically something created by the Holy Spirit: “being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” It is our part to seek by bonds of peace to retain what the Holy Spirit, yes God Himself, created and creates. Even when we do theological work for the sake of unity, it is necessary to remember that unity is ultimately the gift of God. This guides us to humility before others and before God. Let us act as if everything depended upon us, yet let us have confidence that everything depends on God.

Thirdly, the Apostle Paul states that the unity of the Church is the basis for all of ecclesiastical life: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling.” The unity of the Church is not a church-political issue isolated from all other spiritual life, or an ecclesiological hobby. The unity of the Church is tied to the oneness of faith and the oneness of God. Just as there is only one Spirit, one Lord, one Christ and one God, so the flock of believers is one. There is no Christian faith without the unity of the Church.

Fourthly, the words of the Apostle Paul indicate where we have to return time and time again when we speak about the unity of the Church: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” Looking through and beyond the differences in individual churches and theologies, we have to return to talking about God, Christ, faith and baptism. So if we want to promote ecumenism, we have to return to these four points again and again. Would it be too

extreme to hope that each and every document on ecumenism will start with what God and Christ mean to us? God, Christ, faith and baptism united the Ephesians and they can unite us too.

Fifthly and finally, Paul's ecumenical *directorium* focuses our attention on the fact that the diversity of the members of the body of Christ is only mentioned after everything that unites them has been listed. Paul definitely knew the differences among the members of the congregations. However, the role of the differences comes out only after we are first reminded of unity.

Paul's manner of speaking can also be an example to us. Where we speak about differences between churches, the Apostle talks about the gifts of grace. Talking about differences may challenge unity, talking about the gifts of grace gives space within unity. The Apostle Paul and Pope John XXIII speak the same language: "What unites us is much greater than what divides us."

The Institute works to further the unity of the Church

Even though in my portrayal of the early history of the Strasbourg Institute I paid attention to the role of differences between churches, this image may change when we look at what the Institute has done in practice. To highlight this somewhat, we might say that the Institute understood the significance of the unity of the Church better than what its rules originally expressed. In all of life it is fortunate if the realisation of something exceeds its original purpose and intent.

The goal of the Institute presents itself in an especially appealing light when we observe what role it has had in Lutheran-Catholic dialogues.

As early as the first year of the Institute's activities, 1965, a *Lutheran-Roman Catholic Working Group* was convened. It was officially authorised by both parties to discuss possible contacts, to hold conversations, and to deal with forms of cooperation. The Working Group agreed it was important to enter into comprehensive dialogue about the basic issues separating and uniting the two churches. This start was realistic and, in a wise way, cautious.

Following the official endorsement of the Working Group's recommendation by the LWF and Roman Catholic Church, the *Joint Lutheran-Catholic Study Commission* met for the first time in 1967. After five sessions, in 1972 it submitted a report titled *The Gospel and the Church*. This report, known as the Malta Report, remains a significant ecumenical attempt to consider various aspects of the Church in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As far back as that time, a far-reaching consensus was achieved on the Gospel and also on the Doctrine of Justification.

The Working Group and the Study Commission gradually became the *Roman-Catholic-Lutheran Joint Commission*, until these came under the present name, which aptly expresses the ultimate ecumenical objective, the *Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity*.

The slight changes of the names of the groups and commissions clearly show the convergence: from a "Working group" to a "Study Commission" and a "Joint Commission", and now finally the "Commission on Unity".

The themes which the commissions dealt with in their discussions and reports are central theological topics, typically in the area of Faith and Order. After the Malta Report the second phase of the dialogue commission was fruitful in a great many ways. Several important documents came out in the years 1978-1984, first *The Eucharist*, 1978, then *The Ministry of the Church*, 1981. Apart from these documents, the commission published two texts in honour of the commemorative years of the Reformation. *All Under One Christ* was published in 1980 on the 450th Anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. As 1983 was the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's birth, *Witness to Jesus Christ* was printed. It was the purpose of the two texts to assess Reformation history in an ecumenical spirit.

In two other documents it published, the commission deliberated on how the visible unity of the Church could be reached. As for their ecumenical methodology, *Ways to Community*, 1980, and *Facing Unity, Forms and Phases of Catholic-Lutheran Fellowship*, 1984, were significant texts.

The purpose of the third round of the dialogue commission was to meditate on what the Church means in the light of the doctrine of justification. Even the early Malta Report brought forth the concept that a far-reaching consensus on the doctrine of justification was central to the work of the commission. Now, 20 years later, the report of the commission, *Church and Justification*, 1994, formed a solid foundation for the later approved *Joint Declaration on Justification*, 1999, a landmark in Lutheran-Catholic relations. As the result of the fourth phase of the commission, an extensive document was created, *The Apostolicity of the Church*, 2006. Its assessment is currently under way.

The role of the research professors of the Institute

In all Lutheran-Catholic dialogues and processes, the role of the Institute and its research professors is central and, may I be so bold as to claim, from the viewpoint of the Lutheran side, their work was and is decisive. I can see I am getting to be so old I have at the very least met all the professors of the Institute who have contributed to the Lutheran-Catholic consensus over the past decades: Vilmos Vajta, Günther Gassman, Harding Meyer, Marc Lienhard, Michael Root and, last but not least, Theo Dieter.

In this connection I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Professor Dieter, the Director of the Institute and a dear friend. Combined in his person are a highly learned professor, an expert on theology and philosophy, a committed Lutheran, a broadly educated ecumenicist, an impassioned thinker and a spiritually deep person. Theo never settles for superficial or cheap solutions, either in theology or in church politics; thus he is ready to work hard to promote unity and its expression. One indication of Theo's dedication is that his texts, drafts and suggestions usually come in at the last moment, and even after that, but they are always of high quality, fully polished and set on firm foundations. His high-standard expertise is coupled with personal modesty, an example to us all. If Theo were not so humble and if he were a Finn, he surely could say what we Finns are sometimes known to say: "There are no perfect people—or then there are only very few of us."

Since 1994 Theo has selflessly served the Ecumenical Institute in Strasbourg and through it both the Lutheran World Federation and the ecumenical movement in a wider context. I may not be

qualified to evaluate all the theological sub-disciplines of Theo's encyclopaedic knowledge, but I am safe in stating that his knowledge of Luther played and continues to play a decisive role in Lutheran-Catholic dialogue commissions. As one who has followed from the sidelines, I can also assure you that in the preparations and final stages of the *Joint Declaration on Justification* Theo's contribution was essential, even though amidst church political tensions, especially German ones, he did not always receive the public recognition he would have really deserved. And in the current dialogue commission, without Theo we would not be able to fulfil our task of assessing the events of 1517 and their consequences.

A history of the Strasbourg Institute must include the future as well. At a time when polarisation and differences both between churches and inside them have resurfaced, it is necessary to return to the bases and foundations of ecumenism. An Institute which time and again goes back to the core questions of the Christian faith in the spirit of the Letter to the Ephesians remains vital in the Lutheran World Federation as well as in the broader ecumenical context. "What unites us is much greater than what divides us."

Lutheran-Catholic Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017

The Fifth Commission on Unity, which started its work in 2008, set itself two tasks. One of these is the effort I mentioned above, to evaluate jointly what the Reformation year, 1517, could mean to Catholics and Lutherans. How can we remember and commemorate the beginnings of the Lutheran Reformation in ways that are historically, socially and ecumenically responsible and helpful?

Earlier commemorative celebrations were marked by antitheses and controversies. In the last few decades, however, both Catholic and Lutheran scholarship have been able to see the Reformation in new ways emphasising its ecumenical intent and roots. Both those favouring and those resisting the reforms at that time believed they were defending the truth of the Gospel, but both sides also too often acted out of mixed motives.

Now we wish to realise together what happened 500 years ago and why this development led to the division of the Western part of Christianity, thereby breaking the unity of the Church. We openly desire to confess the controversies, suspicions and misunderstandings leading to our separation, so difficult to get rid of even today. We desire to be honest and honour the past in its negative but above all in its positive features. We regret the division and the false witness we have often given, ask God for forgiveness and want to look forward to a future together.

We express our sorrow for our division and pray for unity. During the Reformation, before it and afterwards there was an attempt to renew the Church, but the strivings did not materialise in the desired fashion. Overstating the situations and circumstances made fruitful dialogue difficult and ultimately impossible. These divisions have continued to our day. Even though we have approached one another in many different ways, we have not reached visible unity yet. The Gospel is preached from various pulpits; we are not yet united at the Lord's Table. We are called to continued repentance as well as conversion.

We want to walk together rejoicing over the gifts that we have received from each other over the last few decades. Faith in the Triune God, the Word of God, the heritage passed down from the Apostles, as well as the incarnational worldview unite our churches.

The dialogue commission is convening in Helsinki this coming July. We hope to be able to complete a concise booklet to better help us serve our churches on our walk together toward the year 2017. It is our goal to write a spiritual and theological text whose essential section is a sketch of Martin Luther's theology and of the significance of Catholicism and reform. Professors Theo Dieter and Wolfgang Thönissen have served as experts on these strong theological sections. I believe that together with the commission they have a lot to offer to the churches and the whole ecumenical movement.

As a Lutheran representative of the commission, may I say that I am particularly interested in seeing how Theo Dieter portrays the incarnational character of Martin Luther's theology. While such an interpretation is not totally novel in the Lutheran-Catholic doctrinal talks, yet it will contain a great many possibilities for mutual rapprochement.

Baptism and the growing communion

The second assignment for the dialogue commission is to probe deeper into the topic of "Baptism and Growing Communion". One might critically ask whether choosing baptism as a theme for a dialogue might be seen as a step backwards, a return to something we are already in unity about. There has to be space for critical questions, but let me still assess the choice of the theme from another perspective.

I would like to ask: Have we hastened past and beyond those options and that robustness which are linked to both the existing baptismal unity and to other connected yet still unresolved theological differences? When on the path to ecumenism roadblocks and other adversities appear, we must return to the roots, ultimately to the spirit and theology of the Letter to the Ephesians, where baptism, together with God and Christ belong to the foundation of unity.

Let me take an example. If in the love between a man and a woman the two start to notice some "cracks" in their marriage, they do have to talk about current disagreements and differences, but above all about where their walk together started and how their love came about. Baptism is the Sacrament of joining together and being joined to the Church, and the starting point of our communion. It can only strengthen this communion if the foundation is reinforced.

When Theo Dieter spoke and wrote on the incarnational character of Martin Luther's theology at the meetings of our commission, he hit the nail on the head, both historically and ecumenically. Personally I want to add a question to this on the sacramental nature of the Christian faith. The Incarnation and the Sacraments belong together.

The sacramental character of the Christian faith was strongly emphasised in the report of a Roman Catholic-Lutheran dialogue group for Sweden and Finland, published last year under the title *Justification in the Life of the Church*. This report speaks about the "Sacramental Nature of the Church", "The Sacramental Presence of Christ in the Church", "The Sacramental Word" and "Sacramental Spirituality".

On the Sacraments, there has been a great deal of discussion between the various churches concerning definitions and numbers. It is often thought that the Catholic Church is the Church of Sacraments whereas the Lutheran Church is the Church of Word and Faith. This polarisation is outdated, yet it lives on around the world at the grassroots level.

Theological research has also long held fast to the outdated scenario of controversy where the Catholic and Lutheran doctrines of the Sacraments are set in opposition. It has been claimed that according to the Catholic tradition the Sacraments would be efficacious as mere deeds, *ex opera operato*, whereas according to Luther the Sacraments would not in themselves be efficacious for anything but that their efficacy would solely depend upon the faith of the recipient. Over 50 years ago, the well-known Catholic Luther researcher Joseph Lortz was critical of this polarity. I personally believe that the Catholic and Lutheran convictions are quite close to each other when the efficacy of the Sacrament or the Sacraments as the efficacious signs of God's grace (*signa efficacia*) is discussed.

I am convinced now is the time and we now have the possibility to reinforce our thinking on the foundation we have in the Incarnation of Christ and in the sacramental thought based on it. Baptism and faith are not opposites of each other but the two open up the communion with Christ and God which we lost because of sin.

In the preparatory plans of our commission, it was our intention to concentrate on how we understand the connection between baptism and communion. For both Lutherans and Catholics, baptism is the Sacrament of unity, with spiritual and ecclesiastical significance. Apart from communion with God, baptism creates communion with other Christians, making us partakers in the Church of Christ. If we are members of the body of Christ through baptism, why would our communion not be visible both spiritually and ecclesiastically? In our commission we want to ask how baptism can be efficacious for growth in ecclesial communion, and thus deepen our mutual communion.

Our second topic in the Commission is not only baptism in general but Baptism and Growing Communion. As we talk about baptism we do take a look back at the beginning of our spiritual lives, at where Church membership commences. Yet we also wish to look ahead toward growing communion. We firmly believe the Sacrament of Baptism is not an efficacious sign of grace solely in an individual's life but in the life of the entire Church. Baptism is the foundation and starting point for unity and communion. Baptism creates unity for all Christians and the Church.

In a very powerful way, the Apostle Paul connects baptism, Christ and unity: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:27-28, NASB)

Thus, there are well-founded reasons for being an ecumenical optimist and for walking confidently on the path toward the visible unity of the Church.