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We have completed a year-long commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the symbolic beginning of the Protestant Reformation on October 31, 1517. On this day Martin Luther sent his 95 Theses questioning the practice of selling indulgences to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz and, according to popular legend, posted them on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. New biographies of Luther appeared recently, including *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet,* by Lyndal Roper, which present him as a complex, charismatic leader, who was learned, affectionate, gentle and funny but was also, at times, harsh and unforgiving. The extended commemoration made space for confessing the sins of the past, which divided the church in violation of Christ’s prayer for unity. The commemoration also provided an opportunity to celebrate significant progress toward restoring Christian unity, especially the 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, which achieved a consensus on the disputed central teaching of the Protestant reformers. Despite the progress, important divisive issues did not get solved during the commemoration year, leaving Catholics and Protestants still striving for visible unity and full communion.

The Eucharist, which should be a sign and cause of unity for all Christians, remains a church- dividing issue. In 2013, the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity published a 93 page report, “From Conflict to Communion,” to prepare for the 2017 commemoration. In a section on the Eucharist, the report begins by sketching out Luther’s understanding of the Lords’ Supper (n140-148). Most importantly, he firmly held that in the Eucharist Christ gives himself, his body and blood, that are really present “in, with and under” the bread and wine, as Luther himself argued in a debate with the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), who held that Christ was not present in the bread and wine but in the hearts of those participating in the sacred feast.

Luther did contend that Christians were not bound to accept the teaching of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) on “transubstantiation,” which tried to explain how the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ. He preferred the notion of “sacramental union,” which means that in the remembrance of the Lord’s Supper, the consecrated bread and wine are really united with the body and blood of Christ, which believers truly receive in communion. Based on Christ’s words of institution, Luther also argued that the Church did not have the right to deny the consecrated wine to the laity and should offer communion under both species at every Eucharist.

Some of Luther’s strongest objections were directed at the popular late medieval understanding of the Mass as “another sacrifice” in addition to Calvary, which led to the multiplication of private Masses directed to specific intentions. He argued that in the Eucharist we do not offer Christ but receive him in faith as a gift. For Luther, thinking of the Mass as a sacrifice transforms a divine gift into a good work.

After outlining Luther’s objections, the report takes up Catholic concerns regarding the Eucharist (n149-152). Responding to the Reformers, the Council of Trent insisted on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but distinguished that truth from its technical explanation which the Church has “suitably and properly” called “transubstantiation.” Thus, the Council left open the possibility of other legitimate ways of explaining how the real presence of Christ is effected. Trent also defended the practice of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, which the reformers questioned, but did so while maintaining the traditional teaching that the primary purpose of the Eucharist is the communion of the faithful, who consume the consecrated bread and wine at Mass as Christ intended. Furthermore, the Council continued to speak of the “sacrifice of the Mass,” without explicitly defining how that relates to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

The current Catholic-Lutheran dialogue has achieved a consensus on the real presence: “In the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is present wholly and entirely, in his Body and Blood, under the signs of bread and wine” (n154). Both traditions reject a spatial or natural manner of presence as well as a more commemorative or figurative presence. The contemporary retrieval of the concept of “*anamnesis,*” or remembrance, has facilitated the emerging consensus. By remembering the saving acts of Christ at Mass, as the Lord commanded, they become present in the power of the Spirit. The sacrifice of the cross is made present in remembering the Lords’ Supper “without the sacred meal being a repetition or completion of the cross event” (n159). By focusing on the Eucharist as an effective remembrance, the different emphases of Catholics and Lutherans on Eucharistic sacrifice need not be church dividing.

Since the Second Vatican Council adopted the Lutheran practice of receiving both species at the celebration of the Lords’ Supper, “Catholics and Lutherans are at one in the conviction that bread and wine belong to the complete form of the Eucharist” (n160). Both traditions also agree that a church- appointed minister must preside at the Eucharistic celebration, but serious differences remain on the issue of church ministry.

“From Conflict to Communion” concludes with five ecumenical imperatives to guide the ongoing discussion between Catholics and Lutherans on disputed issues. (1) Both sides should always begin from the perspective of unity and not division in order to strengthen what we hold in common even though the differences are more obvious. (2) We should allow ourselves to be transformed by our encounters with others and by their witness of faith. (3) We should commit ourselves to concrete steps to achieve visible unity. (4) We should jointly rediscover the power of the gospel of Christ for our time. (5) We should witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world.

Partly in response to *From Conflict to Communion*, the American bishops and Lutheran leaders established a task force to prepare a summary of the progress made as a result of the fifty years of Catholic-Lutheran dialogue. This task force published the 124 page book, *Declaration on the Way*, in 2015, with the hope that it would contribute to a fruitful 2017 commemoration. The Declaration presents 32 points of agreement on disputed issues, including six on the Eucharist. (1) Catholics and Lutherans agree on highly esteeming the spiritual benefits of receiving the body and blood of Christ in communion. Through the Eucharist Christ nourishes our soul, unites us to himself, forgives our sins, strengthens our faith, and prepares us for heaven. (2) In Eucharistic worship, we agree that the church participates in a unique way in the life of the Trinity. In the classic Eucharistic prayers, we offer thanksgiving to the Father, commemorate the words and actions of the Son, and invoke the Holy Spirit upon the gifts and the congregation. (3) We agree that Eucharistic worship is the memorial (*anamnesis*) of the Christ event, making present the crucified and risen Lord to which the church responds with praise and thanksgiving. When we follow Christ’s command: “Do this in remembrance (*anamnesis*) of me” (1 Cor 11:24-25; Luke 22:19), the Lord, who gives himself for us, is present. (4) In the sacrament of the Lords’ Supper, we agree that Jesus Christ himself is present “truly, substantially, as a person, and he is present in his entirety, as Son of God and a human being” (p 65). Trent spoke of transubstantiation as a way of defending the real but mysterious presence of Christ and not as a definitive teaching that must be accepted. (5) We agree that the Eucharistic communion is a “pledge that our life in Christ will be eternal, our bodies will rise and the present world is destined for transformation, in the hope of uniting us in communion with the saints of all ages now with Christ in heaven.” The Eucharist is a joyful anticipation of the heavenly banquet, the eternal wedding feast, and the promised kingdom of unlimited freedom and righteousness. (6) We agree that sharing in the Eucharistic celebration is an essential sign and effective cause of the unity of the Church. “The Eucharist both nurtures and builds the church in its unity.” It is the source of the daily new life of the people of God, gathering them together and keeping them in one faith. Although these six consensus statements do not break new ground, they do provide a helpful summary of important ecumenical progress.

The *Declaration on the Way* goes on to identify some issues that require further discussion. The Catholic language of the sacrifice of the Mass continues to trouble some Lutherans who are mindful of Luther’s vigorous condemnation of the idea that the Mass is as a propitiatory sacrifice, which he thought diminished the practice of congregational communion. Lutherans today welcome the assurance of Catholic theologians that the Mass makes present the sacrifice of the cross but does not repeat it or add anything to it. They worry, however, that some of the liturgical prayers in the Mass still reflect an older questionable theology: for example, “Pray, brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.” The Declaration suggests that better formation of the clergy and improved catechesis of the laity on this still divisive issue will bring us closer together.

Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament remains a disputed practice. Luther’s objection to this devotion was a response to the common piety of his day which placed more emphasis on seeing the elevated host at Mass than on actually receiving communion. Today, encouraged by Pope John Paul II, the practice of adoration is growing in the Catholic community. At the same time, most Catholics attending Mass today receive communion, which means the Reformer’s original objection carries less weight. Although Catholics and Lutherans both affirm the need for reverence of the consecrated bread and wine after the Eucharistic meal is completed, there is a clear difference on the propriety of adoration of the reserved Eucharistic elements. The issue is not church dividing but represents diverse Eucharistic sensibilities which invite further dialogue.

Catholics and Lutherans remain divided on the issue of Eucharistic fellowship. Most Lutheran congregations invite other baptized Christians to share in communion. The Catholic Church does not normally welcome Lutherans or other Protestants to receive communion at Mass. While Christians are united by baptism, they are divided by Eucharistic participation, which weakens the witness of the church in the world and hurts individual Christians, especially those in Catholic–Lutheran marriages. The Declaration claims there is a need to develop pastoral practices that justify “occasional Eucharistic hospitality,” based on the Vatican norm of “grave and pressing need.” This would be a step forward toward the goal of visible unity and full communion.

Along this line, it is instructive to recall the response Pope Francis made to a Lutheran woman who said she has a happy marriage with her Catholic husband and wonders what can be done so that they can participate in the Lords’ supper together. Admitting he did not know how to respond, the pope asked if sharing in communion is the goal of the journey or the nourishment for walking together. Then, stressing that we have the same baptism, he suggested the value of a family walking together, sharing love and faith, and finding nourishment in the Eucharistic food for the journey. Recalling that his Protestant pastor friend once told him they both believed in the real presence, even though explanations and interpretations are different, Francis said we should always refer back to Paul’s teaching: “One faith, one baptism, one Lord.” Returning to the original question, the pope said: ”I wouldn’t ever dare to allow this, because it’s not my competence. One baptism, one Lord, and one faith. Talk to the Lord and then go forward. I don’t dare to say anything more.” (cf National Catholic Reporter Nov 16, 2015).

Without entering into a discussion of exactly what Pope Francis meant by his response, it does suggest some of his fundamental attitudes on contemporary ecumenism. As a sensitive human being, he has compassion for those who suffer from the divisions within the Christian community, including those distressed by exclusion from the communion table. As a committed Christian, he recognizes that we have failed to maintain the unity desired by Christ. As a wise pastor, he encourages individuals to discern prayerfully their own way of handling the personally painful divisions in the church. As a responsible leader of the whole church, he recognizes that overcoming divisions and moving toward Christian unity requires a coordinated effort by all segments of the People of God. Furthermore, Pope Francis exemplifies an “ecumenism of love,” which emphasizes mutual trust, common beliefs, genuine dialogue, and dedicated service. The pope is indeed a wise guide for Catholics and Lutherans seeking full Eucharistic communion in fulfillment of Christ’s desire that there be one flock and one shepherd (John 10:16).