

The Nordic Episcopal Conference's Pastoral Letter From Conflict to Communion

In 2017 we mark an event which had great consequences for the Christian faith in Europe, as well as in the rest of the world. In 1517 Martin Luther initiated a process which we call the Reformation, and which particularly for our evangelical fellow Christians became important for the development of their tradition and identity. However, because the Reformation is not imaginable without the Catholic background, it is reasonable that also we as Catholics reflect upon this incident. This became apparent as early as in the publication of the book "From Conflict to Communion", a result of the Lutheran-Roman-Catholic commission on unity of the church. This publication recommends a common commemoration, a common reflection instead of triumphalism.

In spite of all logical reasons, the Reformation has created a division of Christendom which it has suffered from, and still suffers from to this day. In the Nordic countries, this division caused a lapse of time of several centuries until the Catholic Church was able to establish itself again. Because of this fact, the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation cannot be a celebration in the proper meaning of the word, but should rather be a commemoration in the spirit of repentance. The reconciliation process between the Catholic Church and the churches of the Reformation began several decades ago. But we must not allow ourselves to grow tired in our efforts to work towards full unity in Christ.

At the beginning of the 16th century, the Catholic Church was in need of reform. Not only Martin Luther, but also others were aware of this at the time. But instead of discussing the necessary doctrinal questions, Christians from different denominations inflicted pain upon each other. At the close of this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Pope Francis prayed for "mercy and forgiveness for the behaviour of Catholics towards Christians of other churches which has not reflected Gospel values." In Sweden, some evangelical pastors have responded to this, and in turn asked for the forgiveness from us Catholics.

The most pressing question now is how we together can move forward in order to grow together in faith, hope and love. We, the Catholic bishops in the Nordic countries, wish to walk this road together with our Lutheran brothers and sisters and to do everything we can to promote this unity.

Ecclesia semper reformanda¹

The Church must always strive to convert to Christ anew, and allow itself to be renewed by Christ. Whilst it is true that we are a holy people, we are nevertheless a people of sinners on our way to the eternal life. Repentance, remorse, and maturing in the faith are important steps on this road. With the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church has opened up to many issues of importance also to the evangelical Christians, for example the role of Holy Scripture and the importance of the common priesthood of all the baptised. Because of this, many differences have actually vanished.

¹ The Church must always be renewed

What still separates us has to do with the sacramentality of the Church and the understanding of the sacraments and the Church's ordained ministry. As Catholics, we believe that the Church is the fundamental sacrament wherein the Word incarnate becomes present through the sacraments in order to unite himself with us in love and transform us in himself.

At the same time, we see that also many faithful evangelical Christians are opening up to these aspects. An unanswered question, which, from experience, is painful for both sides, is the longing for the common Eucharistic celebration. Although this longing is justified, it remains the case that the unity around the Lord's table must at the same time express the full unity of faith.

Also the Petrine office is hard to comprehend for many evangelical Christians. By Pope Francis' personality, however, it has become more understandable. Pope St. John Paul II had already encouraged all non-Catholic Christians to reflect upon other ways of exercising the Petrine office (*Ut Unum Sint*, 95).

Furthermore, the role of Mary and the saints has been a point of contention through history. Mary's significance as the mother of God, and as a role model of faith, is, however, today more widely recognised by many non-Catholic Christians.

But in spite of some convergence on questions of faith, it appears that in recent years deeper divisions have opened up with regard to ethical and moral questions. Even if this makes the dialogue harder, it must never be abandoned.

The Definition of the Christian Faith

Christians have throughout all times formulated tenets of faith in order to define the faith more clearly, to delineate against false perceptions, or to convey the faith in a clearer way. These formulations have often developed into contested issues which have resulted in strong divisions between Christians. In this way the principles of the Reformation were strongly divisive for centuries. Nevertheless, it is also fruitful for Catholics to concern ourselves with these principles in a constructive manner.

Sola fide

Faith is absolutely necessary for salvation. The central mysteries of the faith – for example the teaching on the Holy Trinity, the Christology, the teaching on salvation and justification – we share with our evangelical brothers and sisters. We rejoice in this unity in faith which is founded in the one baptism and which is being expressed in “The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification”.² Consequently, it is our common task to bear witness to these truths in our secularized society. In the Nordic countries – where most people might be baptised, but where few practise their faith – it is important to preach the joyful message together and with one voice.

Sola Scriptura

Only through the Holy Scripture can we receive the fullness of revelation necessary for salvation, which we are offered in Christ. This revelation was received in the Church and then

² “The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church dated 31st October 1999.

passed on. Through the Church's Magisterium the living tradition was written down in the Holy Scripture and then passed on. For us Catholics, the Church, the Magisterium, Tradition and Scripture belong together. In the Church and together with the Church the Scripture is being opened up to us. In this way, faith is becoming ever more alive. Lately we have seen an increase in the number of evangelical Christians who agree with us and who believe that Scripture and the Church's tradition are closely associated with each other.

Sola gratia

"All is grace,"³ said Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, Doctor of the Church. She can be regarded as the Catholic answer to Martin Luther. Without the grace of God, can we never do anything good. We could never attain eternal life without his grace. Only by his grace can we become justified and holy. God's grace can truly transform us, but we must also respond to this grace and cooperate with it. In Mary, Mother of God, full of grace and immaculate, we see how much God can accomplish in a human being.

For many evangelical Christians, it is still difficult to say yes to this truth. But we also see that many of them are opening up to equivalent questions concerning growth in prayer and holiness.

Simul iustus et peccator

We are all justified and sinners simultaneously. As Catholics, we believe that we really are sinners, but by God's grace we can receive forgiveness for all our sins through the sacrament of reconciliation. As baptised Christians, we are called to holiness. The Church is a school in holiness. The Saints, whom we can ask to intercede for us, are shining examples of, and proof of, this holiness. One of these examples is a woman from our own region, Saint Elisabeth Hesselblad, who was recently canonized. She is for all of us an incitement more consciously to walk the road to holiness.

We see that many evangelical Christians are opening up to saints such as Saint Francis of Assisi and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. In our secularized world we need these witnesses of our faith, living and credible witnesses of our faith.

Martyrium

We know that many Christians also in our time are being persecuted because of their faith, and that there are many blood witnesses. Martyrdom brings Christians from different churches together. We think of all the Christians who – amongst other places in the Middle East – are being persecuted, but nevertheless remain faithful to Christ and his Church. By their example we are also strengthened in our faith. Many Christians from these countries have come to us in the Nordic countries. It is therefore important that we, all Christians in our countries, preserve, protect and mature in what we have in common in the faith. This way we can increasingly give a common witness to the resurrected Lord.

³ Saint Therese of Lisieux on her death bed

Future perspectives

The common declaration “From Conflict to Communion” ends with five imperatives which we Catholics and Lutherans should remember in order to move forward on the common road to unity. These are:

1. begin from the perspective of unity and not from the point of view of division in order to strengthen what is held in common;
2. be transformed by the encounter with the other and by the mutual witness of faith;
3. commit ourselves to seek visible unity;
4. jointly rediscover the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ;
5. witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world.

Although these five imperatives speak of great and not always easy matters, the message is unambiguous, but only when we give ourselves fully to Christ and together discover the power of the gospel yet again. (*vide* The fourth imperative). We rejoice and thank God that the Holy Father, Pope Francis, is coming to Lund for the commemoration of the Reformation, in order to strengthen our faith.

We therefore invite all Catholics to accompany the preparations for the visit of the Pope with their prayers, and encourage as many as possible to participate in the ecumenical gathering in Malmö Arena and at the Mass in Swedbank Stadium. In this way we show our joy in being united with Pope Francis, in addition to showing our respect for our evangelical fellow Christians’ identity which has grown out of the Reformation. In spite of the differences which still remain, we are convinced that through the grace of God it is possible to find ways to a common unity.

The Feast of Saint Theresa of Avila, 15th October 2016

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