



An Unassuming yet Surprising Common Word: The Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Commission on Unity

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I. INTRODUCTION

At the Lutheran World Federation's (LWF) Thirteenth Assembly in Krakow, Poland (September 13–19, 2023), a Common Word was presented and read by the LWF General Secretary Rev. Dr. Anne Burghardt and His Eminence Kurt Cardinal Koch, Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity (DPCU), Vatican City. This unassuming Common Word of only 1200 words has a long history; in fact, almost four years of history and ecumenical negotiation.

The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church have had a series of bilateral discussions going back decades. Recently they issued another report on their work, this one focusing on elements that they hold in common, and looking forward to possible advances in the future.

In the early winter of 2019, a study group met in Geneva to discuss the excommunication of Martin Luther. The hope of the LWF and the (then) Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (now the DPCU) was to produce a joint statement (or Common Word) on the excommunication, analyzing its implications, its reception (or non-reception), its impact, and its influence up until today. The target date for such a Common Word was January 3, 2021, the 500th anniversary of the excommunication of Martin Luther and his followers.

As work began, it became evident that the task was historically, canonically, and theological complex. For example, the anomaly that the excommunication, though a historical fact with a specific date, did not have an immediate effect. Despite being excommunicated, Luther appeared at the Diet of Worms. Despite being excommunicated with all his followers, the Augsburg Confession (AC) was given a hearing in 1530. Despite being excommunicated, Luther's influence extended implicitly even in the decrees of the Council of Trent,¹ and Lutheran worship and music were not absent from post-Tridentine Catholic piety. Luther's theological and liturgical reform was latent within the Roman Catholic tradition.

Unfortunately, three months after the initial meeting of the Study Group on the excommunication of Martin Luther, Covid-19 paralyzed the world. The intense study, reflecting on the paradigm shift in Luther's theology and its initial public rejection (but implicit reception), was halted. The work to be done was too difficult to accomplish via Zoom. Another event also slowed down the study process, the non-approval of the Joint Commission's Report *Baptism and Growth in Communion*² by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). This non-approval was the first in the long history of the ecumenically significant Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, which has produced twelve major publications³ and defined the methodology of differentiating consensus. This situation was addressed in a special Preamble added to the Report that states: the Catholic side "has expressed serious concerns that focus, above all, on various

¹ Bernard Sesboüé, *Sauvés par la grâce. Les débats sur la justification du XVIe siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions Facultés Jésuites de Paris, 2009).

² http://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/baptism_and_growth_in_communion_en_0.pdf

³ <https://lutheranworld.org/what-we-do/unity-church/lutheran-roman-catholic-dialogue>

ecclesiological presuppositions and consequences as well as ambiguities and misunderstandings in the chosen terminology.”⁴

This public letter or preface in Italian however was still not the “Common Word,” which had promised to make a statement on the excommunication of Martin Luther and hopefully suggest a way forward for the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue.

January 3, 2021 however was looming on the horizon. In response to this important date, a public letter was written and signed by His Eminence Kurt Cardinal Koch and the former LWF General Secretary Martin Junge. It was published as the preface to the Italian translation of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ).⁵ The Italian translation in itself is an ecumenical milestone as it facilitates reception of the JDDJ in the Roman Catholic world. This public letter or preface in Italian however was still not the “Common Word,” which had promised to make a statement on the excommunication of Martin Luther and hopefully suggest a way forward for the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue.

The Study Group attempted to reconvene after the initial phase of the pandemic but now another topic was added for consideration by the Roman Catholic side: how to deal with the statements made by Luther on the papacy as antichrist? The question, in itself very legitimate, created a conundrum for the Study Group because the relationship between the Luther’s antichrist statements and his excommunication are not historically (chronologically) related. The Papal Bull *Exsurge Domine*⁶ condemning Luther makes no reference to Luther’s statements on the pope (or the papacy) as antichrist. The excommunication and the antichrist statements cannot be considered under the same lens. Historically, one did not cause the other.

⁴ *Baptism and Growth in Communion*, 5.

⁵ Italian translation of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*: https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/joint_declaration_2019_it.pdf

⁶ *Exsurge Domine*. <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/leo10/l10exdom.htm>

If anything, Luther's antichrist statements were occasioned by his excommunication.

The important ecumenical document, *From Conflict to Communion*,⁷ which was the foundation for the Common Prayer of the Joint Commemoration of the 500 Years of the Reformation⁸ highlights the fact that Martin Luther's insights did in fact retrieve apostolic teaching which had been severely compromised in the church of the early sixteenth century. Perhaps, this historical reality is one reason why the excommunication never "took hold" or why an implicit reception occurred.

The Study Group on the excommunication met one more time, in November of 2022. Some significant insights were recorded concerning the approach in the sixteenth century to basic theological questions, notably the fundamental differences in "think structures" or theological framing, differences that led to misunderstandings and critique. Could a "common word" propose a different grammar for ecclesiology? However, it became clear that the task of dealing both with the excommunication and the antichrist statements (and the relation between them) would be left to the co-secretaries⁹ to parse out and finalize with the Prefect of the Dicastery and the LWF General Secretary.

Half a year later, a draft text of the Common Word was mutually produced and relatively quickly finalized, just in time for translation in the other official languages of the LWF (English, French, German, and Spanish) for presentation at the Thirteenth Assembly of the LWF in Krakow. The text reads as follows:

⁷ *From Conflict to Communion* <https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/From%20Conflict%20to%20Communion.pdf>

⁸ Joint Commemoration of the Reformation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UEBSJugVyY> and the text: https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/dtpw-lrc-liturgy-2016_en.pdf

⁹ Pater Dr. Augustinus Sander (Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity) and Rev. Prof. Dr. Dirk G. Lange (Lutheran World Federation).

II. COMMON WORD (COMPLETE TEXT)

Common Word of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, Vatican (DPCU)¹⁰

Section 1

In the midst of a world that suffers from war and violence of many kinds, and from polarities dividing the human family, our commitment to the unity of the church intensifies. The ecumenical impulse witnesses to God’s Spirit reconciling humanity and all creation. Today, in this celebration, we commemorate “one baptism for the forgiveness of sins” (Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed). With gratitude, we recall the sacramental foundation of our unity and renew our faith in the Triune God.

The ancient Christian Creed of Nicaea, whose 1700th anniversary we will celebrate in 2025, creates an ecumenical bond that has its center in Christ. As early as 1965, before the end of the Second Vatican Council, Catholics and Lutherans in the United States could testify together: “The confession that Our Lord Jesus Christ is the Son, God of God, continues to assure us that we are in fact redeemed, for only he who is God can redeem us” (*The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church. Summary Statement*, Baltimore, July 7, 1965).

Section 2

In baptism, God justifies. In the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)*, Lutherans and Catholics confess: “By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work

¹⁰ <https://2023.lwfassembly.org/common-word-preparing-500th-anniversary-augs-burg-confession>

and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works (*JDDJ* §15). Catholics and Lutherans rejoice in the consensus achieved on justification. Liberated by grace, forgiven, we are bound by baptism and faith, yet we also know of our “history of separation, which we cannot undo, but which can become part of our history of reconciliation” (cf. Preface to the Italian translation of the *JDDJ*, January 3, 2021).

The existential perception of the already existing unity, despite differences between Lutherans and Catholics, nourishes the longing for full visible unity. The international Catholic-Lutheran dialogue was able to contribute its part to the history of reconciliation, especially with the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. “How does a person enter into salvation?” - this crucial question, which led to the division of Western Christianity in the 16th century, found a common answer in 1999: “Justification is the forgiveness of sins (cf. Rom 3:23–25; Acts 13:39; Lk 18:14), liberation from the dominating power of sin and death (Rom 5:12–21) and from the curse of the law (Gal 3:10–14). It is acceptance into communion with God: already now, but then fully in God’s coming kingdom (Rom 5:1f). It unites with Christ and with his death and resurrection (Rom 6:5). It occurs in the reception of the Holy Spirit in baptism and incorporation into the one body (Rom 8:1f, 9f; 1 Cor 12:12f). All this is from God alone, for Christ’s sake, by grace, through faith in ‘the gospel of God’s Son’ (Rom 1:1–3)” (*JDDJ* §11).

Lutherans and Catholics acknowledge justification as a sacramental reality, conferred in baptism. As sacramental reality, justification is the certainty of God’s promise and the one hope in God’s continuous action “to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:10). We acknowledge that the gospel and church are bound together. “On the one hand the church lives from

the gospel; on the other the gospel sounds forth in the church and summons into the community of the church” (*Church and Justification*, §170).

Section 3

The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* notes that “there are still questions of varying importance which need further clarification” (§43). Differing theological thought structures led to misunderstanding and conflict and finally division in the 16th century. The excommunication of Martin Luther is still a stumbling block for some today. It maintains its place in confessional memory, even though the excommunication has long since lost its immediate effect with the death of the reformer and Lutherans are not enemies or strangers for Catholics, but brothers and sisters, with whom Catholics know themselves to be united through baptism and through “many of the significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself” (*Unitatis redintegratio* 3). Similarly, the fact that Martin Luther and the Lutheran Confessional writings refer to the papacy as “anti-Christ” is a stumbling block even though today the Lutheran World Federation does not support that view. Behind these two examples is ultimately the question of the Petrine ministry and the question of the mystery of the church, its unity and uniqueness. In the continuation of the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue, it therefore requires our special attention.

We are also painfully aware that the “past”, from the time of confessional “against each other,” can also directly or indirectly influence the “today” of our ecumenical “togetherness.” Yet, even in the 16th century, Luther’s excommunication and the Lutheran anti-Christ statements did not prevent encounter, notably the Augsburg Confession in 1530. Today, differentiating consensus allows Lutherans and Catholics to discern areas of consensus where our predecessors only saw insurmountable oppositions. We are

able to recognize that the journey towards full communion is far greater than the contingencies of a particular epoch.

Section 4

The journey from conflict to communion led to the signing of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Augsburg, 1999) and to the Joint Commemoration of the Reformation (Lund, 2016). As we continue on this journey, we look ahead to the 500th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in 2030. This anniversary can encourage us to rediscover this confession in its original intention: “The express purpose of the Augsburg Confession is to bear witness to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church” (*All Under One Christ*, §10).

At the time of its writing, ecclesial unity was probably endangered, but ecclesial separation was not yet finally accomplished. As a “pre-confessional” witness to the unity of the church, the Augsburg Confession is therefore not only of historical interest; rather, it holds an ecumenical potential of lasting relevance. Its profound intention was “to maintain the unity of the church” and “witness to the truth of the gospel in its own time” (*All Under One Christ*, §27). A common reflection could lead to another “milestone” on the way from conflict to communion, comparable to the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.

Pope Francis explicitly encouraged such a “shared reflection” when he received a delegation from the Lutheran World Federation in Rome on June 25, 2021, the commemoration of the Augsburg Confession. In his address, he described ecumenism as a “journey of grace”: Ecumenism “depends not on human negotiations and agreements, but on the grace of God, which purifies memories and hearts, overcomes attitudes of inflexibility and directs towards renewed communion. (...) In this light, I would like to

encourage all those engaged in the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue to persevere with confidence, in constant prayer, in the exercise of mutual charity, and in passionate efforts to achieve greater unity between the different members of the body of Christ.”

Through jointly rediscovering the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ for our time, Catholics and Lutherans recall the fifth Ecumenical Imperative to “witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world” (*From Conflict to Communion*, §243).

Presented by General Secretary Rev. Dr. Anne Burghardt and Cardinal Kurt Koch September 19, 2023 at the LWF Thirteenth Assembly in Krakow.

III. BRIEF COMMENTARY

This commentary will not be an exegetical parsing of the text line by line but will focus primarily on certain key phrases, accents, and on the structure of the Common Word.

Section 1 begins with an acknowledgment of our unity established in baptism. This unity is sacramentally grounded. This unity is already witnessed in the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea with its focus on Christ as center of all. The very first national Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue Report is cited, *The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church. Summary Statement*, Baltimore, July 7, 1965.¹¹ The Lutheran-Roman Catholic in the United States has continually been a source of insight for the international dialogue. Here, in fact, it begins even before the International Joint Commission on Unity though of course famous American Lutheran theologians propelled both the national and the international dialogues (George Lindbeck, Yale and Warren Quianbeck, Luther Seminary). The quotation affirms Christ as Lord and therefore the starting point for all unity.

¹¹ <https://www.usccb.org/committees/ecumenical-interreligious-affairs/status-nicene-creed-dogma-church>

Section 2 then jumps ahead to the ground-breaking document the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, signed by the LWF and the Roman Catholic Church on October 31, 1999 in Augsburg, Germany.¹² It is the only consensus statement in ecumenical dialogues (in the western church) that has achieved juridical status, making it part of the polity of the LWF and its member churches as well as an official text of the Roman Catholic Church. This section summarizes the major consensus statement of the JDDJ, highlighting justification by faith as a sacramental reality (conferred in baptism). It also points to the fact that our two communions are on the way to ever fuller unity citing our one hope in God's continual action (Ephesians 1:10).

Section 3 is the crux of the Common Word. Following up on the JDDJ, which notes that "there are still questions of varying importance which need further clarification" (§43), it focuses on two questions raised in my preliminary reflections: the excommunication of Martin Luther and Luther's attacks on the papacy as the antichrist.

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¹² https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/joint_declaration_2019_en.pdf

¹³ See above footnote 5.

that liturgy, in fact, gives thanks for the many gifts that the Reformation brought to the Church. *From Conflict to Communion*¹⁴ invites into a new consideration of both Luther as reformer and the Catholic Church today. Implicit in this generous approach is the fact that the excommunication never broke the sacrament bond of baptism.

Section 3 then addresses in very straightforward language the question of Martin Luther's antichrist statements found also in the core document of Lutheran churches, the Augsburg Confession (1530). These statements clearly constitute another stumbling block to unity but here, the LWF makes a bold statement: it does not support that view. Both sides are then interpolated to reconsider what does the Petrine Ministry mean for the churches today and how they relate to this ancient and contemporary symbol? Pope John Paul II had already invited ecumenical partners to take this question into consideration in his important ecumenical encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (1995).¹⁵

Section 4 looks forward and reflects on the fact that, in 2030, we will celebrate the 500th Anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. The Common Word states the hope of the LWF and the Roman Catholic Church that this anniversary will highlight the ecumenical potential of the Augsburg Confession. The Augsburg Confession is, yes, a historical text that defines an identity, a Lutheran identity, but even more importantly, it was an ecumenical proposal to the Church in its day, to its "own" church (therefore, in a certain sense, a "pre-confessional" statement). It was a proposal to recognize the apostolicity of Reformation theology and practice. Section 4 quotes the Lutheran-Roman Catholic text published for the 450th anniversary of the AC in 1980: The AC's profound intention was "to maintain the unity of the church" and "witness to the truth of the gospel in its own time" (*All Under One Christ*, §27).¹⁶

As we begin preparing the 500th anniversary, we are reminded that the Augsburg Confession is a continual invitation to confess the Gospel today, in and against culture and societal values that oppose the free gift of justification by faith. Section 4 cites Pope Francis who calls all to passionate work for unity, we might say to a passionate

¹⁴ See above footnote 4.

¹⁵ *Ut Unum Sint* §88-96. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html

¹⁶ *All Under One Christ* (1980). https://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/l-rc/doc/e_l-rc_onechrist.html

act of confessing. It concludes with the Fifth Ecumenical Imperative that calls on Catholics and Lutherans not only to serve the neighbor together¹⁷ but to proclaim the gospel together, the gospel of mercy.¹⁸

A path is traced for ecumenism, for our work together, for this “journey of grace.”¹⁹ 

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¹⁷ LWF World Service and Caritas Internationalis signed a declaration of intent in 2016 and in 2021 a Common Vision, committing themselves to not only joint work in areas of humanitarian crises but also to strategically plan their joint service for those suffering.

¹⁸ The Fifth Ecumenical Imperative, see *From Conflict to Communion* §243–244.

¹⁹ Pope Francis’ address to the LWF Delegation, June 25, 2021. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/june/documents/20210625-federazione-luterana.html>