

ECUMENICAL TRENDS

Vol 45 No 1 ■ Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute ■ January 2016

A Ministry of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement

Martin Luther through Catholic Eyes Before and After Vatican II

By Ramil R. Marcos

On the eve of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation movement, many conferences around the world tackle the figure of the man who served as catalyst for the reform of the Catholic Church. This paper modestly desires to contribute to the burgeoning reflections on the person of Martin Luther – his crisis, struggles, thoughts and firm positions that produced an ecclesial tremor in the church of his day, and whose aftershocks still affect the world around us today. Martin Luther has always been a controversial figure. In the Catholic Church, whose faithful priest and monk he was, certainly his image has been a bewildering one, giving rise to varying descriptions and depictions throughout the centuries.

In the Catholic imagination, there has not been a permanent portrait of Martin Luther. There has been a remarkable shift of perception on Luther's stature and impact among leading Catholic luminaries in theology as well as in church leadership. From a past that employed polemic language steeped in vitriolic attack against Luther, the Catholic Church today has produced some of the most remarkable studies on the Reformer, shedding light on the formerly unappreciated aspects of a brilliant mind and soul.

In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, which has just celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2012, it is worthwhile to review the major pronouncements, through the words of the recent popes in history, regarding the revived vision of the man whose principled words and actions destabilized a complacent Western Christianity in the 16th century. Both

Pope St. John Paul II and pope-emeritus, Pope Benedict XVI have written terse but very significant evaluations of Luther. In these, they both embody the spirit of Vatican II's commitment to objective treatment of the Church's historical divisions in the past and its confident hope for a purification of memories that will lead to the reunion of all Christians.

I. A Cascade of Pictures

Before considering the pronouncements of Vatican II figures regarding Martin Luther, it will be good to refresh the memory about the evolution of thought regarding his person and his work. The congenial language of the present has gone through a series of changes through the years that are reflective of the kind of growing relationship Catholics had with Luther and his spiritual heirs from the beginning. By recalling the past images of Luther, we can more fully appreciate what we have gained at present and reinforce the lessons learned along the way.

From the moment that Luther became vocal about his theological ruminations, his critiques of practices and his opposition to imposed authorities in both Church and state, his reputation traveled all over his homeland Germany and

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crossed over the Tiber to Rome. The earliest images of Luther naturally came from his contemporaries, from people who knew him well or those who heard of him from other sources.

1. Early Images of Luther

Pope Leo X (1513-1521) asked the Augustinians to look into the Augustinian German priest who was disseminating “*novas res... nova dogmata*” among the faithful. The Dominicans in Germany, sympathizing with Johann Tetzel their confrere and archenemy of Luther on the matter of the sale of indulgences, started preaching to the people against this “*heretic*”, warning them that this man undermined religious practice and departed from standard Catholic teaching. Further, they surmised about his eventual disgraceful defeat and possible death at the stake. (cf. *Jared Wicks, Roman Reactions to Luther, 1983, pp. 523-4*)

Later attempts to apprehend Luther through canonical process showed that he was to be tried as a “*suspect of heresy*.” The pope, ordering an upgraded process of inquiry on the man and his teachings wrote that Luther was a known and obstinate “*teacher of heresy*.” (*Jared Wicks, Roman Reactions to Luther, 1983, p. 528*)

The Dominican Cardinal Cajetan, the man who was to represent Rome in evaluating the orthodoxy of the positions of Luther, exhibited moral reserve against immediately issuing a judgment on Luther, although he instinctively found censurable points in the German priest’s thoughts. Cajetan’s final evaluation, added to the obstinacy judged from Luther’s own behavior during the examinations, however surely had a powerful effect on the definitive actions to come through the papal pronouncement of Pope Leo X.

2. Official Images of Luther in the Papal Documents

The official church portrait of Luther came through the two papal responses to the crisis caused by the Augustinian from Germany and the increasing number of princes and people he later influenced. On June 15, 1520, the pope issued a warning to Luther, identifying 41 erroneous teachings in his theological opinions. The papal bull, *Exsurge Domine*, called Luther the “*new Porphyry*.” (Porphyry was an ancient

neoplatonic enemy of the early Christians, who pointed out the defects of Christian beliefs and taught that Jesus must be regarded only as a learned philosopher.) This official document likened Luther to heretics who employed malicious sophistry to advance their cause. But in a compassionate note, the papal missive referred to Luther as the “*prodigal son*” who could still be received kindly once he realized his need for reconciliation with the church. Pope Leo gave Luther time to reconsider his positions and to signify his desire to submit to ecclesiastical authority by renouncing his convictions. (cf. *Pope Leo X, 1520*)

When Luther refused to comply with the demand for submission, Pope Leo X issued a second papal bull, this time, condemning Luther as a heretic and therefore, excommunicating him from the Body of Christ. The title of the bull says it all: *Decret Romanum Pontificem* of January 3, 1521 is the document “*On the Condemnation and Excommunication of Martin Luther, the Heretic and his Followers*.” (*Pope Leo X, 1521*)

In this document, Luther is described as a “*slave of depraved mind*” for insisting on confessing beliefs at variance with traditional doctrines. As an excommunicate, Luther received the most severe penalty that can be imposed by the Church on its members. He was to be excluded from the reception of the sacraments, and impeded from enjoying the spiritual bond with the Church’s teaching, sanctifying and pastoral offices.

The Council of Trent, convoked in 1545 to respond to the Reformation crisis, did not mention Luther by name, although some of that Council’s declarations of anathemas were directed to principles put forward by Luther and his followers. The Council strictly followed the principle that no author should be denounced unless his writings have been subjected to the most accurate and sedulous study. Prior to Trent, Luther’s literary opponents compiled catalogues of erroneous Lutheran tenets. Johannes Cochlaeus produced a list of 500 errors, while Johann Faber collected more than 600 false teachings attributable to Luther. (cf. *Erwin Iserloh, 1983, p. 569*)

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Ecumenical Trends

EDITOR, Rev. James Loughran, SA ■ ASSOCIATE EDITOR, Rev. Timothy I. MacDonald, SA ■ BUSINESS MANAGER, Veronica Sullivan, Editorial Office ■ Ecumenical Trends, 475 Riverside Drive, Rm. 1960, New York, NY 10115 ■ Business and Subscription Office, Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute, PO Box 333, Garrison, NY 10524-0333.

Manuscripts sent to the editor should be in either WordPerfect or Microsoft Word. It is preferable to electronically transfer submitted texts using the software above via e-mail to jlgeii@aol.com. *Ecumenical Trends* is published eleven times a year (monthly except August) by the Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute. *Ecumenical Trends* is a member of the Associated Church Press and the Catholic Press Association. This periodical is indexed in the Catholic Periodical and Literature Index (CPLI), a product of the American Theological Library Association, 300 S. Wacker Dr., Suite 2100, Chicago, IL 60606, USA. email atla@atla.com, www. [Http://www.atla.com](http://www.atla.com). Microfilm copies are available from National Archive Publishing Company: P.O. Box 998, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-0998. Subscription Rates: Print and digital version, US Domestic \$30.00 USD/1 yr.; \$56.00 USD/2 yrs. Canadian & Foreign \$40.00 USD/1 yr.; \$66.00 USD/2yrs. Digital version only: \$15.00/ 1 yr. Bulk rates are available upon request. Address for Subscriptions: Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute PO Box 333, Garrison, NY 10524-0333 (ISSN 0360 9073) Periodicals Postage Paid at Garrison, NY 10524 and additional Mailing Offices. Website: www.geii.org

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3. After Luther's Death

Johannes Cochlaeus

The man whose work set the standard line of thought among Catholics about the person of Martin Luther was Johannes Cochlaeus. Three years after Luther died, Cochlaeus, a German Catholic writer, set out to write in the heat of excited anger against the Reformer. It must be understood that this writer lived in the context of the flared passions and bitter hatreds between the confessional divisions of Catholics and the early Protestants. (cf. *Jared Wicks, Luther and His Spiritual Legacy, 1983, p. 15*)

Cochlaeus' main goal was to excite revulsion of Luther among his readers. His book *Commentaria de actis et scriptis M Lutheri (Commentaries on Luther's Actions and Writings)* painted an extremely negative portrait of the man in question which today can only be judged as pure fiction, calumny and lies. In it, he called Luther a "monster, a demagogue, a revolutionary, a drunkard, and a violator of nuns." (*Johann Heinz, 1998, p. 253*)

Cochlaeus' fulminations against Luther would deeply influence the popular perception of Luther among Catholics for centuries. But to his credit, Cochlaeus worked with the actual writings of Luther and examined these materials in search of citations that showed blatant attacks against Catholic doctrines, practices and institutions, so in fact, Cochlaeus did not intentionally falsify the words of the Luther. He did however write in a way as to paint the worst possible image of Luther. Cochlaeus was a willing instrument for the cause of Catholic attacks on Luther. (cf. *Jared Wicks, Luther and His Spiritual Legacy, 1983, p. 16*)

The Jesuits

The Jesuits, valiant enforcers of the Counter Reformation, followed the style of Cochlaeus, when in 1640, they published their jubilee book *Imago primi saeculi societatis Iesu* (Image of the first century of the Society of Jesus). References to Luther maliciously called him the "blemish of Germany," the "filthy wretch of Epicurus," and the "corruptor of Europe." (*Johann Heinz, 1998, p. 254*)

Writing in the age of confessional discord, St. Robert Bellarmine, a Jesuit theologian, published refutations of Luther's teachings. While Bellarmine spared Luther from the vicious language of Cochlaeus, his main aim was to consolidate the forces of Church against the Lutheran views on Catholic doctrines and practices, without regard for the actual abuses the Reformation sought to correct. He also rarely made use of actual writings of Luther in his presentations. (cf. *Jared Wicks, Luther and His Spiritual Legacy, 1983, p. 16*)

In the subsequent centuries, while the general climate of polemics continued, the expressions used when speaking of Luther decreased in vicious intensity. In the 18th century, influenced by the Enlightenment, Catholics began to appreciate the personal piety and the cultural contribution of Luther owing to his translation of Scripture and the promotion of the reading of the Bible.

Johannes Janssen

In the 19th century, because of political reasons, the confessional oppositions in Germany were revived and Catholics renewed their attacks on Luther, faulted for creating divisions in the Church. The historian Johannes Janssen wrote a history of Germany on the eve of the Reformation and depicted Luther as the one who wrecked a flourishing piety and culture among the people. He called Luther a "sick man with inferior character." (*Johann Heinz, 1998, p. 254*)

Johann Adam Mohler

Other writers presented a more positive picture of Luther but not of his legacy. Johann Adam Mohler, a historian and theologian from Tübingen, wrote that Luther's feelings were sound and healthy. He stressed that Luther was not a decadent man as he was previously viewed. Regarding the teachings though, the Reformer's doctrines were just a renewal of the Gnosticism of the past.

Ignaz Dollinger

Ignaz Dollinger hailed Luther as the most popular character Germany ever produced. But Dollinger did not speak kindly of the Reformation, a crusade which he branded as a "soul-murdering heresy." (*Johann Heinz, 1998, p. 254*)

Heinrich Denifle and Hartmann Grisar

In the early 20th century, just as hopes for a Catholic revision of the historical image of Luther was building up, new conflicts arose that recalled past hostilities. Two names that would leave deep marks on theological and popular depictions of Luther were Heinrich Denifle and Hartmann Grisar.

Denifle, an assistant archivist in the Vatican and a Dominican priest, in spite of the historical sources at his disposition, set out to demolish Luther's image with the freshest, rudest attacks. For him, Luther was a theological

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ignoramus with a decadent morality. Luther devised new doctrines to find excuses for his immoral lifestyle and inability to keep his monastic discipline. It is from Denifle's pen that flowed the ignominious address to Luther: "Luther, there is no ounce of godliness in you." (*Jared Wicks, Luther and His Spiritual Legacy, 1983, p. 18*)

Hartmann Grisar, a Jesuit church historian from Innsbruck, investigated the writings of Luther and wrote extensively about detailed points of Luther's life and thoughts. While Grisar avoided the direct tirades of Denifle, he employed subtle but offensive accusations against Luther's immorality, abnormality and pride. Grisar detected neurotic attacks in Luther's behavior. While he presented vast factual data on Luther's life, Grisar also succeeded in stirring suspicions about Luther. It was clear that he believed nothing edifying could come from a contact with Luther and his thoughts.

Even as changes in the religious atmosphere would eventually happen, in the early 20th century, the treatment of Luther by philosopher Jacques Maritain and the famed apologist and journalist Gilbert Keith Chesterton, showed that the method of attack inherited from the past had not been altogether abandoned. (cf. *David Steinmetz, 1991, p. 848*)

4. Reactions towards a Positive Evaluation of Luther

Before and during World War II, there was a turning point in the Catholic assessment of Luther. There grew a tendency to seek for a fairer and more objective and balanced consideration of the person and his heritage.

Sebastian Merkle

The vehemence of Denifle and the blanket rejection of Grisar did not satisfy every honest scholar. Sebastian Merkle, a Catholic historian from Wurzburg, wrote that denigrating Luther's role in history was a betrayal of truth and a deviation from true service of the church. Merkle underscored what he found to be religious depth in Luther. He focused on Luther's struggle against strong currents of despair. He also described the decaying state of the church on the eve of the cry for reform.

Joseph Lortz

The intuitions of Merkle found its fruition in the passion of Joseph Lortz to see both Catholics and Protestants abandon their bitter struggle and start serene collaboration, especially in their study of the Reformation. Lortz published his two-volume *History of the Reformation* (1939-49; English translation, 1968), which would become a bestseller and which would be a decisive opus towards ecumenical détente on Luther.

While Lortz was not an uncritical apologist for Luther (he pointed out the extremes of Luther's psychology, pointing out his emotional character), he was equally open to admire the positive traits he discovered. Luther for him was a person authentically seeking for the God of grace. Luther was truly

drawn and fascinated by his God who came to save his people in his Son Jesus Christ. But Luther's milieu was deeply immersed in a theology that was not truly Catholic, with its abuses in administration, its confusion in doctrine and its Ockamist theology too far detached from the Bible and the patristic sources. In conclusion, Lortz concluded that Luther fought with a Catholicism that was not really Catholic.

Lortz offered many Catholics a new context for approaching and discussing the figure of Luther. He abandoned the old-fashioned approach of polemical attacks and consigned to oblivion the legend about Luther's immoral past. The church of Luther's time was guilty of corruptions that prepared the way for the Reformation, which was an event just waiting to happen.

Luther, for Lortz, was truly a Christ-centered believer and thinker with a strong faith that continues to influence subsequent generations of Christians. Protestantism would not have withstood the tests of time if it were merely based on a shallow faith attributable to its founder. Instead, Luther was a man of faith, a real religious man, confessor of the theology of the cross, and an evangelist of Jesus Christ and his Gospel.

Both the early Luther (based on the first writings) and the later Luther (the more mature reflections) had something to offer in teaching effectively the faith in Jesus Christ. Lortz saw through "Luther's pulsating spiritual richness, the wide range of his talents, the vastness of his productive labor for the new community, and the concentration of all his thought on God's grace revealed in Christ and transmitted by the Gospel... an image of Luther marked by prophetic greatness." (*Jared Wicks, Luther and His Spiritual Legacy, 1983, p. 21*)

Lortz detected "catholic" elements in Luther (whom he still considered a heretic), since Luther preserved his earnestness as a monk, his love for the Word, his faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and his life of prayer and piety.

Towards the end of his life, Lortz was all the more convinced that Luther was a prophet, a theologian of high rank, and a mighty spiritual power, whose riches must be gathered into the Catholic Church. With a prophetic touch, Lortz believed that on the doctrine of justification, Catholics could find agreement with the Reformer. (cf. *Johann Heinz, 1998, p. 258*)

Johannes Hessen

The Catholic philosopher Johannes Hessen responded to the study of Lortz. He criticized the psychological explanation of Luther that Lortz relied on. Hessen maintained that this was unsatisfying because Luther's differences with the Catholic Church did not so much stem from psychological reasons as from valid theological ones. Luther had a "real and justified theological burden" in his heart. He was a real reformer and a restorer, exceeding in earnestness and depth his own con-

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temporaries. Luther might have resorted to exaggerations but this was only to more forcefully put forward his theses. Luther's prophetic mission warranted his use of these hyperboles in his writing and preaching style. Through these, he was only fulfilling a historical law. In the period before Vatican II, Hessen gave Luther one of the most enthusiastic tributes. (cf. *Johann Heinz, 1998, p. 258*)

Erwin Iserloh

A student and disciple of Lortz, Erwin Iserloh gained prominence in 1968 after he wrote the book *The Theses Were Not Posted*. Here, Iserloh describes how Luther went through proper church channels to have his voice heard. Luther sent his appeals to the bishops, hoping to hear from them a fair judgment on the indulgence issue. Luther was a theologian who did not believe in compromises but only in a faith confession that proceeded from an authentic religious experience of both God's majesty and the person's sinfulness. Iserloh wrote the account of the German Reformation in a church history book edited by Hubert Jedin, and here Iserloh presented a fair picture of Luther's personal evolution into the leader of the reform movement. Like his teacher Lortz, Iserloh maintained that Luther mixed up late Scholasticism with true Catholicism, and in the process, he fought a deviation instead of the real phenomenon.

Lortz' influence spread wide around the period of the celebration of Vatican II and its aftermath, as more and more Catholic scholars followed his approach. Jared Wicks, well referred to in this presentation admits his indebtedness to Lortz's views on the German Reformer.

Others

Johann Heinz included among the positive Catholic appraisals of Luther, the efforts of the following theologians: Albert Brandenburg who saw in Luther's theology a new hermeneutic; Stephan Pfurtner, who sought a connection on the theme of assurance of salvation between Luther and Aquinas; the Swiss August Hasler, who encouraged deeper knowledge of Luther through primary, not secondary sources; Peter Manns, who produced an illustrated biography of Luther, denying the idea of psychological abnormality and maintaining the "normality of Luther's monastic crisis as well as the profound theological character of the Reformation"; Alfred Lapple, professor from Salzburg, who regarded Luther as a Catholic phenomenon; and theologians Walter Kasper (retired Catholic Cardinal) and the controversial former Tübingen professor Hans Küng, who acknowledged enormous progress on Lutheran studies among Catholics and challenged the hierarchy to follow suit. (cf. *Johann Heinz, 1998, p. 260-5*)

Jared Wicks in his 1983 book mentioned Catholic contributions of both critical and complimentary nature. Among those who were sharply critical of aspects of Luther's thought were: Paul Hacker, who faulted Luther for being

egocentric in his notion of faith; and Theobald Beer, who claims to have uncovered incompatibilities between Luther's ideas and the patristic and medieval sources. These two however, did not go into a direct personal condemnation of Luther. They were respectful of Luther as a serious Christian theologian. (cf. *Jared Wicks, Luther and His Spiritual Legacy, 1983, p. 22*)

Among those who undertook a positive look into Luther's theology were the German Frido Mann, who delved into Luther's early doctrine of the Eucharist, aspects of which have been taken up since Vatican II for the enrichment of Catholic worship and theology; Dutch priest Jan Aarts, who studied Luther's early doctrine on ministry and whose clear and sensitive reading of the topic provides a guide for ecumenical discussions between Lutheran and Catholics on the issue of pastoral leadership in the church; and Wolfgang Schwab who followed the ideas of Luther on the sacraments, with some highlights on his faith in the Real Presence and his conviction that God's authentic gifts come by way of the Gospel and the sacraments. (cf. *Jared Wicks, Luther and His Spiritual Legacy, 1983, p. 23*)

Both Heinz's and Wicks' short surveys of recent Catholic scholarly focus on Luther mentioned Otto Hermann Pesch, ecumenical theology professor from Hamburg. A former Dominican priest, Pesch sought a theological reconciliation between Aquinas and Luther, achieving the most complete and thorough works on this topic. Pesch created a new genre in theology – "dialogical theology" and employed this in his systematic and comparative study of the two classical representatives of Protestant and Catholic thought. (cf. *Jared Wicks, Luther and His Spiritual Legacy, 1983, p. 24*)

Pesch believed that there are no substantial differences, only formal ones, between the approaches of Luther and Aquinas. The Dominican theologian and saint was a "sapiential theologian," somewhat a contemplative observer of the marvels of God in creation and in salvation history. Luther was an "existential theologian" who was concerned with God's communication with the individual believer. In the theologies of the two on the theme of justification, there are no major differences. These are in fact, complementary styles that could co-exist and flourish in a healthy relationship. (cf. *Johann Heinz, 1998, p. 261*)

Others who would eventually pick up from Lortz's method were the Dominican Cardinal Yves Congar, Louis Bouyer, Daniel Olivier, Jared Wicks, and Dennis Janz, just to mention a few. (*Rick Serina, 2013*). The dominantly positive re-assessment of Luther had serious consequences on the proceedings of the ecumenical dialogue and understanding between Protestants and Catholics. (cf. *David Steinmetz, 1991, p. 850*)

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II. The New Portrait of Luther in the Spirit of Vatican II

In the 16th century religious turmoil involving Martin Luther, the growing popular and theological appraisal of his person, thoughts and works at the time have strongly influenced how he was perceived both in Germany and beyond, to the highest ranks of the Roman hierarchy. Along with many crucial factors, these portrayals of Luther eventually contributed to a solidified image of the man as a heretic and a recusant in Catholic consciousness. (cf. *Jared Wicks, Roman Reactions to Luther, 1983, pp. 561-562*)

Further vilifications of Luther flowing from the passion of polemics and the fervor of apologetics, left distorted portrayals and a bad reputation that perpetuated for centuries. In today's altered climate of improved ecumenical relationships and growing communion in practical, spiritual and theological matters brought by Vatican II, many Catholic theologians, historians, thinkers and writers have approached Luther from a positively objective and dialogic optic, dismissing the prejudices of the past and welcoming the possibility of learning from his example and his message.

As dreamed by theologians Kasper and Küng, recent papal magisterium since Vatican II direct Catholics to cast a second glance at Luther in astonishingly laudatory and exhortatory language. While Pope Leo X judged Luther a bearer of theological falsity and a baneful influence to unsuspecting followers, the popes since Vatican II discovered in Luther a gem to be treasured and emulated not only in the general Christian community, but also within the Catholic fold.

There are no recorded references to Luther in the addresses or speeches of Pope John XXIII, the convenor of Vatican II, although his contagious desire for unity has affected the spirit of the delegates, including the non-Catholic observers at the Council. The succeeding popes, Paul VI and John Paul I, likewise had no archived mention of Luther as a theme of their discourses. However Pope Paul VI steadily pursued and furthered the ecumenical spirit that was a mandate of the Council while John Paul I's reign was cut short by an untimely death after only 33 days from his election.

The revision of papal attitude towards Luther became pronounced in the words and gestures of the next two popes, John Paul II (now a canonized saint) and Benedict XVI (now a pope emeritus in secluded retirement). John Paul II spoke of Luther during his visits to Germany, and Benedict XVI became the first pope to set foot on the former home of Luther, the Augustinian Monastery in Erfurt in 2011. (cf. *Cardinal Kurt Koch, 2013*)

1. Pope St. John Paul II

a. Visit to Germany, 1980

On Nov. 17, 1980, during his first visit to Germany, Pope

John Paul II, delivered an address to the gathered representatives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. He became the first post-conciliar pope to openly speak of Martin Luther in positive terms.

Recalling Martin Luther's unforgettable pilgrimage to the Holy City of Rome, John Paul spoke of that experience not as an outward activity, one made out of obligation, but as a true interior journey. Luther was a spiritual pilgrim who brought with him personal questions, and begged God for answers to these questions. In this first visit to Germany as pope, John Paul II considered himself like Luther the pilgrim, paying a spiritual visit to Germany, redolent with Luther's memory and influence.

Ricordo in questo momento che nel 1510-1511 Martin Lutero venne a Roma come pellegrino alle tombe dei principi degli apostoli, ma anche come uno che cercava la risposta ad alcuni suoi interrogativi. Oggi vengo io a voi, all'eredità spirituale di Martin Lutero; vengo da pellegrino, per fare di questo incontro in un mondo mutato un segno di unione nel mistero centrale della nostra fede. (John Paul II, 1980)

("I remember in this moment that in 1510-1511 Martin Luther came to Rome as a pilgrim to the tombs of the princes of the apostles, but also as one who seeks the response to some of his questions. Today I come to you, to the spiritual heirs of Martin Luther; I come as a pilgrim, to make of this encounter in a changed world, a sign of unity in the central mystery of our faith." – *translation mine*)

The Holy Father then referred immediately to a biblical text dear to the Reformer, the Letter of the Apostle Paul to the Romans, the writing that was fully decisive to Martin Luther. Springing from this epistle, the Holy Father discussed the need for conversion; the need to recognize our faults and sins. It is only then that we could see the grace of God grow in our midst. The lessons of this epistle could be a sure guide in our pilgrimage towards spiritual ecumenism.

The Holy Father then mentioned the commentary Luther wrote on Romans, in 1516-17, in which he wrote about believing in Christ and adhering to the things of Christ. The "things of Christ," for Luther, referred to the Church and its authentic teaching. John Paul II explained that for Catholics, these things of Christ are: "the church and her mission, her message, her sacraments, and the ministries assigned to the service of the word and of the sacrament." (*translation mine*) Since Vatican II, these are topics of dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics.

Martin Luther's spiritual pilgrimage invites today's Lutherans and Catholics toward unity in Christ. His spiritual quest for God serves as guide to our own spiritual quest to discover one another.

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b. Message to Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, Pres., Secretariat for the Unity of Christians (later Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity)

This message was occasioned by the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth on November 10, 1983 (born 1483). John Paul II referred to the Reformer as "Doctor Martin Luther from Eisleben," thereby recognizing that he was a theologian who left an impact on the Western world.

Il 10 novembre 1983 ricorre il 500° anniversario della nascita del dottor Martin Lutero da Eisleben. In questa occasione numerosi cristiani, specialmente di confessione evangelico-luterana, ricordano quel teologo che, alla soglia del tempo moderno, ha contribuito in modo sostanziale al radicale cambiamento della realtà ecclesiale e sacrale dell'Occidente. Il nostro mondo fa ancora oggi l'esperienza del suo grande impatto sulla storia. (John Paul II, 1983)

("On Nov 10, 1983 occurs the 500th anniversary of the birth of Doctor Martin Luther from Eisleben. On this occasion, numerous Christians, especially of the Evangelical Lutheran confession, remember this theologian, who, at the dawn of the modern time, had contributed to a substantial and radical change of the ecclesial and sacral reality of the West. Our world still feels today the experience of his great impact on history." – *translation mine*)

The Holy Father stressed that Catholics used to associate the name of Luther to a sorrowful period, to the origin of profound church divisions. But responding to the invitation of Lutherans to celebrate Luther's birthday with a genuine ecumenical spirit, John Paul II agreed on the need for a "deepening and more complete vision of the historical event and a critical reflection on the multiple heredities of Luther." – (*translation mine*)

He then cited the progress achieved in the research of both Lutheran and Catholic scholars that produced a "more complex and more differentiated portrait of the personality of Luther and of the complex thread of historical, social, political, and ecclesial reality of the first half of the 1500's." – (*translation mine*)

The Holy Father extolled the "profound religiosity" of Luther, his "ardent passion for the truth about salvation. He instructed Willebrands' office to engage in more committed dialogue with Lutherans, exerting a double effort, whether in the encounter with the figure of Martin Luther, or in the quest for re-establishing unity. John Paul II considered it important to continue an accurate historical work, motivated by truth, to arrive at a "just image of the Reformer."

c. Visit to Germany, 1996

On this occasion, the Holy Father addressed again a gathering of representatives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Working Group of Christian Churches in Germany. He recalled the celebration of the 450th anniversary of the death of the Reformer (died 1546).

Quest'anno celebriamo il 450° anniversario della morte di Martin Lutero. Dopo secoli di dolorosa estraneità e di discussione, il suo ricordo ci permette oggi di riconoscere più chiaramente l'alta importanza della sua richiesta di una teologia vicina alle Sacre Scritture e della sua volontà di un rinnovamento spirituale della Chiesa. Il suo straordinario contributo allo sviluppo della lingua tedesca e la sua eredità culturale sono fuori discussione. La sua attenzione per la Parola di Dio e la sua risolutezza a percorrere il cammino di fede riconosciuto come giusto, non fanno tuttavia certamente ignorare i suoi limiti personali e altrettanto poco il fatto che i problemi fondamentali nel rapporto fra fede, Scrittura e Tradizione e Chiesa, così come li ha visti Lutero, fino ad oggi non sono stati ancora sufficientemente chiariti. (John Paul II, 1996)

(This year we celebrate the 450th anniversary of the death of Martin Luther. After centuries of sorrowful estrangement and of discussions, his memory permits us to recognize more clearly the high importance of his request for a theology near to Sacred Scriptures and of his will for a spiritual renewal of the Church. His extraordinary contribution to the development of the German language and his cultural patrimony are beyond discussion. His attention for the Word of God and his resoluteness to run the path of faith known as just, without certainly ignoring his personal limits and equally making little that the problems in the relations between faith, Scripture and Tradition and Church, as Luther saw them, up to now have not been sufficiently clarified." – *translation mine*)

He then spoke of the great task the ecumenism imposed on Christians to work together to resolve the obstacles to unity.

2. Benedict XVI

Apostolic Journey to His Homeland, 2011

Benedict XVI, the German pope, made a memorable homecoming in September 22-25, 2011. One of the lasting gestures of this event was the meeting with the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (Lutherans). This gathering was significant first, because of the place where it happened. The Holy Father came to Erfurt, to the former Augustinian Convent where many historical events in Luther's life occurred.

As the Bishop of Rome, it is deeply moving for me to be meeting you here in the ancient Augustinian convent in Erfurt. As we have just heard, this is where Luther studied theology. This is where he celebrated his first Mass. (Benedict XVI, 2011)

Benedict XVI praised the quality of Luther's thought saying: "He was not simply concerned with this or that. What constantly exercised him was the question of God, the deep passion and driving force of his whole life's journey. 'How do I receive the grace of God?': this question struck him in the heart and lay at the foundation of all his theological searching and inner struggle. For Luther theology was no

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mere academic pursuit, but the struggle for oneself, which in turn was a struggle for and with God.” (Benedict XVI, 2011)

The question that disturbed Luther, was to the Holy Father, one that had a personal impact on him. “‘How do I receive the grace of God?’ The fact that this question was the driving force of his whole life never ceases to make a deep impression on me. For who is actually concerned about this today – even among Christians? ... The question no longer troubles us.” (Benedict XVI, 2011)

The Holy Father summarized two challenges to present-day believers from the inner struggles of Luther. *The first one was Luther’s main preoccupation*: “The question: what is God’s position towards me, where do I stand before God? – Luther’s burning question must once more, doubtless in a new form, become our question too, not an academic question, but a real one. In my view, this is the first summons we should attend to in our encounter with Martin Luther.” (Benedict XVI, 2011)

The second was Luther’s spirituality: “Another important point: God, the one God, creator of heaven and earth, is no mere philosophical hypothesis regarding the origins of the universe. This God has a face, and he has spoken to us. He became one of us in the man Jesus Christ – who is both true God and true man. Luther’s thinking, his whole spirituality, was thoroughly Christocentric: ‘What promotes Christ’s cause’ was for Luther the decisive hermeneutical criterion for the exegesis of sacred Scripture. This presupposes, however, that Christ is at the heart of our spirituality and that love for him, living in communion with him, is what guides our life.” (Benedict XVI, 2011)

Like John Paul II before him, he connected the lessons of Luther’s life with the present exigencies towards Christian reunion. In the face of strong pressures of the phenomenon of new religious expressions and the challenge to faith of secularism, Christians of all denominations need to keep in mind what unites them in Christ. “For me, the great ecumenical step forward of recent decades is that we have become aware of all this common ground, that we acknowledge it as we pray and sing together, as we make our joint commitment to the Christian ethos in our dealings with the world, as we bear common witness to the God of Jesus Christ in this world as our inalienable, shared foundation.” (Benedict XVI, 2011)

III. Conclusion

This paper has gone through a survey of the various portraits of Martin Luther in the theological and magisterial imagination of the Catholic Church through the centuries. The first thing that is noticeable is the revision, albeit over a long time, in the understanding of the man’s character, influence and legacy. The image of Luther underwent a gradual progressive development both from the ranks of Catholic theologians and from the holders of the papal office.

In the 16th century, Pope Leo X, in two papal bulls, painted a somber portrait of Luther as an enemy of the faith, a heretic, a prodigal son and a person with a depraved mind. The pope’s description coincided with the way theologians and preachers of his time perceived Luther to be.

The implication of this negative portrait was clear. Luther lived in error and sin, and the only way for him to be rehabilitated was to humbly invoke the pope’s merciful and reconciling benediction. Luther and his followers vehemently rejected the pope’s overtures, resulting in Rome’s hardened position against his demands.

Many centuries later, the derogatory name-calling of Luther came to a halt and a re-assessment of the person produced some positive results. The fresh look at Luther by two important popes of recent times yielded a positive result, redolent of the renewed spirit of Vatican II.

Pope John Paul II, in sporadic addresses to ecumenical partners and to Catholic leaders, referred to Luther as a spiritual pilgrim, a doctor of theology, a man of profound religiosity, and a man with a positive impact to religious life and culture in Europe. Pope Benedict XVI, in a visit to his and Luther’s homeland, gave a more systematic treatment of the Reformer as he described him as a man in sincere search for the face of God, and as a believer with a deep, Christ-centered spirituality.

These crucial statements from the popes re-position Luther as more than just a protester of anomalous practices in the church, an antagonist of established authority and a sower of dissent among the faithful. This is an invitation to cast a second look at Luther as a man whose life and work are worthy of reflection, whose example calls for emulation and whose faith offer inspiration to Christians from all traditions.

Among the many implications of this progress, this paper reflects on two promising aspects of the Catholic revisiting of Luther’s person and message, in light of the coming 500th anniversary of the Reformation and the recent celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council.

First, the spirituality of Luther as a source of inspiration to the contemporary believer who desires unity. John Paul II, himself a very spiritual religious leader and now a canonized saint, was quick to notice the spiritual side of Luther. Aside from his crucial influence on church history, European society and thought, Luther was above all a pilgrim, a man who embarked on a journey of faith. He lived a deep religiosity that was a fruit of his adherence to the Word of God. Benedict XVI too, realized that the core of Luther’s life was his unwavering focus on Christ. Thus he accorded to him a Christo-centric spirituality.

Christians today can only realize the unity of the divided church if they are imbued with an authentic and deep spirituality. In the ecumenical movement, dialogue is important.

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Study is crucial. Reform of structures is necessary. But without spirituality, unity will not materialize.

The Second Vatican Council insists that spiritual ecumenism, consisting of change of heart, holiness of life, and common prayer, is the “soul of the ecumenical movement” (Second Vatican Council, *Decree on Ecumenism*, n. 8). In many cases, this aspect is the most feasible expression of our desire for unity. When Christians embrace a change of heart, renewal of mind, self-denial and love, the desire for unity develops and matures. (cf. Second Vatican Council, *Decree on Ecumenism*, n. 7)

The papal statements offer to us the spirituality of Luther as a motivation for Christians to take their faith seriously, in the midst of a society enveloped in a culture that doubts or rejects faith in Jesus Christ and in his church.


Second, the positive attitude to Luther as an invitation to behold the other as a brother/ sister in faith. The surrender of polemically colored images of Luther does not serve to profit the memory of the Reformer alone. The surprising papal comments on Luther revived hopes that his excommunication would be lifted or that his rehabilitation in history is imminent. Both Protestant and Catholic theologians are aware though that Luther was not perfect and had a share of limitations and defects. (Joint Roman Catholic – Lutheran Commission, *Martin Luther – Witness to Jesus Christ*, 1983, p. 11)

More than these hopes however, the figure of Luther calls attention to the other church/es around us, to appreciate their way of witnessing to Christ and to give up our long-held prejudices against other Christians. (Joint Roman Catholic – Lutheran Commission, *Martin Luther – Witness to Jesus Christ*, 1983, p. 8)

No wonder then that the papal addresses touching on Luther always ended with the imperative of pursuing unity among Protestants and Catholics. John Paul II felt that Luther’s pilgrimage envisages our own present journey to find one another in the communion of faith. Benedict XVI saw that familiarity with Luther’s spirituality and theology invites Protestants and Catholics together to embark on a joint commitment to the Christian life and a joint witness to Jesus Christ and his message in the midst of a world fraught with many challenges.

The Second Vatican Council imposes on every Catholic the duty “to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism” (Second Vatican Council, *Decree on Ecumenism*, n. 4). This means basically that Catholics are to regard as brothers and sisters in faith all those who believe in Christ and have been truly baptized for they are in communion with the Catholic Church although this communion is imperfect. (Second Vatican Council, *Decree on Ecumenism*, n. 3)

Indeed there are still many obstacles on the road to unity, but this cannot undermine the basic unity in Christ that come through the mystery of Baptism, which incorporates a believer into the living Body of Christ. Protestants and other Christians who are committed to work for unity share the same spiritual sentiments and the happy burden to labor for Christian unity as a compelling testimony to the world.

The new attitude to Luther expressed by both theologians and popes of recent memory tells us that it is possible to learn from Luther, not separately but together as brothers and sisters in search of the God who for him was always the Lord, to whom alone are due humanity’s absolute trust and adoration. 

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Momentum Builds for Eucharistic Sharing From the 2015 Synod on the Family to the 500th Anniversary of Luther's Theses, 2017

By Harry Winter, OMI

The 2015 Synod on the Family showed an increased concern for Protestants sharing in the Eucharist, as part of the Mission of Families.¹ The key text is the lapidary statement: “The family of the baptized is by its nature missionary” (#93).² Do we remember the statement of the Second Vatican Council’s *Decree on Missionary Activity*: “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature”?³

Sometime between the conclusion of the 2014 Synod on the Family Final Report, and the conclusion of the 2015 Synod on the Family Final Report, someone decided to insert that statement. So it is the theme of the entire 2015 report: The Mission of the Church and the Mission of the Family are inextricably linked.

Since the Eucharist is the principal source of the strength of the family, concern for those who currently cannot share the Eucharist became a main interest of the Synod. While access to the Eucharist for those in homosexual unions and for the divorced and remarried captured the attention of the secular media, I will limit my attention here to those Protestants who want to share the Eucharist when they attend Mass with their Catholic spouses, children, relatives and friends.

Pope Francis’ visit on Nov. 15 to the Lutheran Church in Rome has made this concern even stronger.

I. The Mission of the Church and the Mission of the Family

The 2014 Final Report began with the requirement that “the family needs to be rediscovered as the essential agent in the work of evangelization” (#2). The 2015 Report strengthened this paragraph: “The families of today are called to be ‘missionary disciples.’ It is in this sense necessary that the family is rediscovered as an indispensable subject for evangelization” (#2). We shall see below that the family is, of course, the object of evangelization too, but here we have the startling emphasis that the family is the main or chief agent of evangelization. Missionary communities of priests, brothers and sisters are put on notice that they need to refocus their energies.

In 2014, in reviewing the situation of families all over the world (5-11), the report noted “In countries where Catholicism is in the minority, many mixed and interreligious marriages take place, all with their inherent difficulties in faith.” After listing some of those difficulties, it was quickly added: “But there can also be the possibility of fostering the spirit of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue in a living together of diverse communities in the same place”

(#7, see also 25). The 2015 report strengthened this by adding to the possibility of furthering an ecumenical spirit and interreligious dialogue “in a harmonious life” in common within a community which live in the one place (25).

For a very thorough analysis of the way interchurch families requested from the 2015 Synod an understandable terminology for mixed marriage, disparity of cult, interreligious marriages, etc. I recommend Dr. Ruth Reardon’s presentation in the November Association of Interchurch Families Newsletter.⁴

It should be underlined that both the 2014 and 2015 reports speaks repeatedly of Christian Families, especially those in the Middle East, as relating to all families which include a baptized husband and wife. When the report is addressing only Catholic families, it clearly distinguishes the fact.

The 2014 report stated: “Without the joyous testimony of married people and families, domestic churches, proclamation, even if done in its proper way, risks being misunderstood or lost in a flurry of words that is characteristic of society today.” So there must be a “missionary conversion by everyone in the Church, that is, not stopping at proclaiming a merely theoretical message with no connection to people’s real problems” (#30). Now the 2015 report elaborated: “This vocation (of the family) receives its ecclesial and missionary form from the sacramental bond which consecrates the indissoluble conjugal relationship between the spouses. ...Their union becomes therefore, throughout the whole of their lives, a wellspring of countless graces: of fruitfulness and witness, of healing and forgiveness. Marriage realizes itself within a community of life and love, and the family becomes evangelizing (36).

It would be surprising if Paul VI’s great exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (*Evangelization in the Modern World*) contained nothing regarding the family’s role in evangelization, so the most relevant passage is cited (43). Pope Francis most explicit comments are in #56. Along with #93 above, these are the high points of a profound and exciting spirituality of Evangelization and the Family.

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Of course, to be the agent of evangelization, the family must also be an object of evangelization. One of the very new and creative sections of the 2015 report deals with affective maturity, not only for families, but for every Christian (30). Then there are sections on the Divine Pedagogy of the Family (37), the Trinity and the Family (38) and Preparation for Marriage, underlining the role of experienced couples in that preparation (57-58). Noting that many candidates for the priesthood today (at least in Europe and North America) come from dysfunctional families, the report requires seminarians to spend some time in a normal family (61).

Of course, to be the agent of evangelization, the family must also be an object of evangelization.

II. The Challenge of Eucharistic Sharing with Protestants, Synod Report

Dr. Reardon documents the fact that in the first report of the second of the four English speaking groups of synod members, “bishops had shared reflections from their own family experiences: ‘Many of our families are of mixed confession or religion, but in all we learned an ability to pray and to reflect upon how the family is central to the transmission of faith in a multiplicity of situations’ (9 Oct).”⁵

The English section of Vatican News gave extensive coverage to the address of one of the 14 fraternal delegates from other Christian Churches, Dr. Robert K. Welsh, ecumenical officer of the Disciples of Christ, USA. Dr. Welsh asked Pope Francis to consider the coming Year of Mercy as a “sign of hope and healing,” by allowing all Christians to “share in the one Eucharist.” He based this on “the volumes of emerging theological agreements that have been produced through ecumenical dialogue and encounter over the years since the Second Vatican Council.”⁶ Probably the foundation of these volumes is the World Council of Churches 1982 document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, popularly known as *BEM*.⁷

It seems particularly appropriate that it was a Disciple of Christ who made this request. Formed on the USA frontier in the early 1800s, the Disciples have distinguished themselves over the years by holding the Lord’s Supper as their only Sunday service, and every other time this Church gathers. *BEM* has enabled not only the Disciples, but every Protestant Church, to develop a more solid theology of the Lord’s Supper.

Dr. Welsh then told the members of the synod of his heartbreak by not being able to share Communion with his Catholic wife and grandchildren.⁸ There is no doubt that his

intervention led to the first time that a synod of bishops has spoken of Eucharistic Hospitality. Its omission in the 2014 report is now corrected. So #72 states:

On the question of Eucharistic sharing it is recalled that “the decision to admit or not the non-Catholic party to Eucharistic communion should be taken in accordance with the prevailing general norms, both for Eastern Christians and other Christians, and taking into account this particular situation, that those who receive the sacrament of marriage are two baptized Christians. Even if the spouses of a mixed marriage have the sacraments of baptism and marriage in common, the sharing of the Eucharist cannot be but exceptional,” the quotation from the norms of the Pontifical Council for the Unity of Christians, Directory of March 25, 1993, 159-60.

Dr. Reardon stresses that, in addition to Eucharistic Hospitality being mentioned for the first time in a synod report, “the tone is altogether more positive than that of the earlier documents... The door is open to further advance... We can say that there has been real progress between the *Lineamenta* (the preparatory document) and the Final Report.”⁹

III. Lutheran Challenges toward Eucharistic Hospitality

Dr. Reardon proved herself a prophet when she concluded her article: “The Synod was concerned with mission. Its climate was one in which it was easy to speak openly and freely. Its ecumenical approach was very clear. It is the beginning of a process, not an end.”¹⁰ On Nov. 15, three weeks after the synod ended, Pope Francis paid a visit to Christuskirche, a parish of the German Evangelical Lutheran Church in Rome. During a question period, he was asked by a Lutheran woman married to a Catholic man what she and her husband could do to receive Communion together. The beginning of the process described by Dr. Reardon now enters into its middle phase.

Pope Francis replied humorously and honestly. Glancing towards the former head of the Pontifical Council for the Unity of Christians, Cardinal Walter Kasper, who was in the front pew, the pope replied that the presence of a theologian like Cardinal Kasper made him “afraid.” Then he presented the tension between all Christians sharing the Eucharist as the aim of their journey, the banquet in heaven, or as necessary as viaticum on the journey – provisions and nourishment for the journey. The pope then referred to the fact that Lutherans and Catholics share the same baptism, which demands “we must walk together.”

A pastor friend once told the pope “We believe the Lord is present there. He is present. You believe the Lord is present.” And the pope asked the pastor “So what is the difference?” And his friend responded: “Well, there are explanations,

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interpretations.” The pope concluded his response to the Lutheran woman: “Speak with the Lord and move forward. I won’t say anything more.”¹¹

The same report carried by Catholic News Service on the internet and in many diocesan newspapers also alerted its readers that the USA Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue recently released its summary of 50 years of discussion, which of course included convergence on the Eucharist among its 32 statements of agreement. The editors of the national Catholic weekly *America* stated: “Among its recommendations is ‘the expansion of opportunities for Catholics and Lutherans to receive Holy Communion together.’ Bishop Denis Madden, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Baltimore and co-chair of the declaration’s task force, said there are already accepted provisions for ecumenical gatherings at which ‘both Lutherans and Catholics can come together at the communion table.’ He hoped the declaration would encourage pastors from both denominations to ‘take advantages of those provisions and how they might be widened.’”¹²

The pope concluded his response to the Lutheran woman: “Speak with the Lord and move forward. I won’t say anything more.”


With Pope Francis’ leadership, the approaching Lutheran-RC observance of the 500th anniversary of Luther’s posting of his 95 theses on Oct. 31, 1517 might be the wedge to enable more Christians to share in Eucharistic Hospitality.

Conclusion

By examining the responses to *BEM*, one can see that appreciation for the Lord’s Supper is growing in all Protestant Churches, especially those belonging to the World Council of Churches.¹³ Episcopalians and Lutherans have the Lord’s Supper as the principal Sunday service. Presbyterian/Reformed and Methodists are moving from a monthly celebration to at least several times a month.

But if one looks at the total number of Protestants throughout the world, especially Evangelical and Pentecostals, a majority still do not believe that Communion and the Lord’s Supper are the necessary Sunday service. We must hold to the first of the two principles regarding Eucharistic Hospitality. Since the Eucharist is a sign of unity, we tend towards closed Communion (Code of Canon Law, #844, 1).

However, looking at the increasing plurality of Protestants who request Communion, it is evident that the second principle, the Eucharist as the cause of unity, must be explained more and offered more. We need to push the second principle, which edges us toward open Communion (Code of Canon Law, #844,4).¹⁴

The Year of Mercy begins Dec. 8, 2015 and extends until Nov. 20, 2016. During this time, Lutherans and Catholics especially will be preparing for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, Oct. 31, 2017. As the Roman Catholic Church and many other Christian Churches focus on the family as the primary agent of evangelization, extending Eucharistic Hospitality for those who seek this strength can only benefit evangelization and ecumenism. 

Notes:

1. Eucharistic Hospitality for the “members of the Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National Church” is described by the USA Bishops in the instruction placed in missalettes as far more open than for Protestants.
2. I am using the “Working English Translation,” by Bishop Michael G. Campbell, OSA, Lancaster, England, Nov. 7, 2015: www.acalltoaction.org.uk/documents/synod-2015/219-synod-2015-final-relation-of-father-francis-24th-october-2015/file. The official translation in English is unavailable as of Dec. 1, 2015.
3. Walter M. Abbott, SJ, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*, “The Decree on Missionary Activity,” (Crossroad, Herder, 1966), #2.
4. Dr. Ruth Reardon, “Synod on the Family, 4-25 Oct. 2015,” *AIF News* (Association of Interchurch Families, England), Nov. 2015.
5. Dr. Reardon, *Ibid*.
6. www.news.va/en/news/disciples-of-christ-urge-synod-to-consider.
7. See Thomas Ryan, CSP, *Christian Unity, How You Can Make a Difference* (NY: Paulist Press, 2015), p. 26, for this document’s importance. Ryan also reports on the insight regarding interchurch families by the late Anglican Canon, and first General Secretary of Churches Together in England, Rev. Martin Reardon, Dr. Reardon’s husband: pp. 78-79.
8. www.news.va/en/news/disciples-of-christ-urge-synod-to-consider.
9. Dr. Reardon, *AIF News*, Nov. 2015.
10. Dr. Reardon, *Ibid*.
11. Cindy Wooden: www.catholicnews.com/services/english-news/.../pray-study-listen.
12. “Signs of the Times,” *America*, Nov. 23, 2015, p. 10.
13. See especially John Gibaut, “The Work of Faith and Order Thirty Years after *BEM*,” 4 July, 2011, 13 pp., available on the internet.
14. For the tension of the two principles, see the page “Eucharistic Hospitality,” www.harrywinter.org. Dr. Reardon has published a thorough history of the 1998 document *One Bread, One Body*, issued by the Bishops of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, on Eucharistic Hospitality: “One Bread One Body, a Commentary from an Interchurch Family Point of View,” *One in Christ* 35 (1999, #2): 109-30.

Reflections on the Visit of Pope Francis

By Members of the Roman Catholic-Reformed Dialogue in the United States

As Reformed and Catholic participants in a long-standing official theological dialogue, we have been inspired by the ecumenical promise seen in the recent visit of Pope Francis to the United States. While the role of the Bishop of Rome has historically been a matter of contention between Reformed and Catholic communions, we affirm the manner in which Pope Francis modeled a service of unity for the whole church and its ministry. In his intentional compassion for those on society's margins, his pastoral visits with prisoners, his identification with immigrants, his care for the integrity of God's creation, and his public testimony to the values of the gospel, he gave voice and witness to aspirations of the wider Christian community. His servant heart gives hope for further developments along the road toward Christian unity, a journey that we trace to the Second Vatican Council and continue through our dialogue. Although we recognize that significant differences remain between us, we trust that the visit of Pope Francis will prompt further, honest dialogue – between our communions and others – in our search for a full expression of our unity in Christ.

Adopted on October 6, 2015, at the 6th meeting of Round VIII of the official Roman Catholic-Reformed Dialogue in the United States, meeting at New Brunswick Seminary to discuss the topic of ecclesiology.

Signatories:

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Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2016

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Homily “Say Yes”

By Nikki Mathis

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:2-4, NRSV)

On the morning of that first Pentecost, why would the breath of God show up so forcefully? Why would the raw power of God be spread so visibly? Scripture doesn't give us the reason, but it's clear that the Divine determined that power, described in terms of wind and flame, was essential at that moment in the life of the infant church. The gift given to the disciples to aid them in spreading the gospel of love was the Holy Spirit which pushes and empowers, rather than the one that counsels and comforts. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. noted that such power was indispensable in the action of love, "...power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."

It is this kind of power that these few disciples, forming the whole of the church, required for the daunting task ahead. Not only were they to continue the work of Jesus by telling the good news to all, offering hope and healing to the whole world; they had to do it in languages that are not their own. This little tiny, baby church was pushed out of its safe little room, out into the wide, wide multicultural world that is Jerusalem at the time of a Jewish festival.

And even as they go out to do what God has given them to do, there is apparently so much chaos and confusion, so much that is unfamiliar and miraculous, that some people simply can't accept it. While others are taking in the miracle, still others are ridiculing the believers, proclaiming them to be drunk.

But why couldn't everything be done "decently and in order"? Why wouldn't God have the disciples engage in a way that's organized and controlled, perhaps scheduling a conference, offering an introductory course, or at the very least, simply hiring some interpreters?

You may remember some years ago when General Motors was trying to sell the Chevy Nova in South America. Those sales didn't go so well, because in Spanish "nova" means "it won't go." A similar occurrence took place when Kentucky Fried Chicken opened restaurants in China, and discovered

that, the translation of their signature slogan "finger lickin' good" actually read as "eat your fingers off."

When we choose *not* to step outside of ourselves to meet and understand the "other" exactly where they are, there is so much that can be lost in translation. And apparently, for God, the stakes were too high... this was about life and death, after all, and the need of the world was too great, so many were hurting... that I imagine there wasn't room for those kind of mistakes in the delivery of the good news. I believe it was vitally important that the Holy Spirit made it possible for this tiny, fledgling church to speak accurately and convincingly in the language of the "other," with all the attendant idioms and rhythms, and cultural overtones, of every listener's very own language.

It makes sense to me that the Holy Spirit enables the church, to, as its first action, be a model for outreach, a model for mission, a model for the church's purpose of reconciling the world to God and one another, using the vehicle of difference.

And use of that vehicle isn't easy. That's why it required such a show of power through the life-giving breath of God and the all-consuming might of God. Sharing, connecting, loving in the vehicle of difference can be very uncomfortable, both for those who are doing the work, as well as those who are witness to the work. It's uncomfortable for some who witness God's work when it doesn't look like what they think it should look like, or doesn't fit the notion of a God they've imagined in their own image, so they call disciples drunk when they reach out to those who are different.

And it's hard to deal with the discomfort of difference for us who are doing the work, because we are loving people who don't want to do or say the wrong thing, we don't want to hurt or offend, and we certainly don't want to sound like we subscribe to any of those ugly words that end in "ism" or "obia."

That's exactly why we describe the openness and generosity of spirit in our children, by saying things like "they don't see difference, they just see people." But children *do* see difference. It's why they say things like, "Pete has two

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mommies... he's so lucky!' or "Rev. Martha, can you braid my hair like yours?" Children see all of the differences, and they are honest about it, these beautiful and God-given varieties in humanity, and like God, it would never occur to them to use any of those differences to make comparative determinations of a person's worth. That's what we actually mean when we say our children "just see people." And it's what we're actually trying to get to when we say things like "I don't see sexual orientation or race or gender," or some variation thereof.

Even though that phrasing may be well-intentioned, at best it sounds naïve and at worst, dishonest. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity." Unwittingly, we have just said to somebody, to the "other," whoever the other is, that we are choosing to, on some level, ignore their heritage, their same-sex partner, their physical or developmental challenges, and therefore exercise the privilege of disengaging from both the beauty and the struggle that this difference adds to an individual's or group's life because it is uncomfortable and inconvenient. Choosing, even unintentionally, to disavow the wide array of differences that display the glorious image of God is to cheat ourselves out of an adventure the Holy Spirit offered the disciples at the church's first Pentecost, and the adventure that's still offered to us today.


As with all adventure, not only is there difficulty, but there is also danger in the journey. When we say yes to that adventure, that's when the fire of the Spirit pries us away from the pressure of those who demand that we remain the same as they are or the same way we've always been, and it moves us toward the vulnerability of learning new ways of listening and understanding the world we see. It also when the wind of the Spirit pushes us to bring change into those

hard places in people, and systems, and structures that are designed to maintain the status quo, to keep us comfortable and unaware. This can bring some very real loss to our lives... such as loss of friends and associates, loss of social standing, or even loss of financial or physical security.

But saying "yes" to the Holy Spirit, saying "yes" to that adventure, is also when we can be who we were created to be in the kingdom, and there is no greater joy than that. As Dr. King tells us, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

And the reward can be great, when we say "yes," to the adventure, to the challenge and controversy. Those disciples, empowered by the Spirit, were very effective on that first Pentecost. They were so effective, in fact, that the brand new infant church grew by 3,000 that day. Not 30, not 300... 3000! That day 3,000 heard the language of the love of God, and *nothing* was lost in translation.

There are still countless others, ... in our world, in our nation, from Syria to Ferguson, who need to hear the same... the language of God's fathomless acceptance and unconditional love in a world that practices the brutality of hate, the endless reach of God's invitation in a world that rewards the cruelty of exclusion, and the almighty goodness of God's power in a world where other powers perform acts of unimaginable evil. The good news is still a matter of life and death in places where refugees can be turned away, and where systemic sexism, racism, ableism, produce an uneven and often perilous playing field.

The Holy Spirit that came as a gift on that first Pentecost is the same Holy Spirit that is given to us with each brand new day, so that we too may have the power to do what love requires us to do. Jesus is simply waiting on us to accept, to just say "yes" to that wild wind and holy flame. 

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