

# **From Conflict to Communion**

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## **Introduction**

I was requested to write an article for the 'Vaigarai' magazine on the Common celebration of the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation initiated unwittingly by Martin Luther on 31st October of 1517. It is a matter of joy as the celebrations have been jointly called for by the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.<sup>1</sup>

This indeed is a remarkable matter for rejoicing all over the Christian world. Luther was excommunicated on 3rd January 1521. This was done because Luther burnt the Papal Bull issued to him on 15th of June 1520 which threatened excommunication if he failed to recant. The Papal Bull was burnt along with the Book of Church Law on 10th Dec. 1520. He was therefore officially excommunicated on 3rd Jan 1521. At this point the Church got decisively divided. However, some princes insisted that the Emperor grant him one more chance. So a Diet was held in Worms.<sup>2</sup>

Luther when asked by the emperor to recant said, "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason, with my conscience captive to the Word of God ... I cannot and will not recant ... to go against conscience is neither safe nor right. God help me, Amen" The oft quoted words, "Here I stand, I can do no other, God help me, amen" has now been shown to be

inauthentic. On Luther's refusal to recant at the Diet of Worms his excommunication was confirmed. Properly speaking this was the time when the break with the Catholic Church really happened.<sup>3</sup>

However, as the occasion of pasting of the 95 theses by Luther on the door of the Wittenberg Church on 31.10.1517 became the starting point which eventually led to the separation. This date has been remembered with bitterness by the Catholic Church and with unworthy recriminations by the Evangelical Lutheran Churches (Protestants). For instance, the first centennial celebration in 1617 brought the Lutherans and other Reformed Churches which were founded by Zwingli and Calvin together with a lot of hateful polemic against the Catholic Church. One pastor by name Barthalamus Ruilich of Augsburg is known to have been the most nasty in his criticism of the Pope and the Catholic Church. Recorded history plays it down considerably.<sup>4</sup>

In 1917 the four hundredth anniversary was celebrated during the first world war. In Germany it was a political occasion for the princedoms to gloat over their liberation from the empire of which the Pope was the head. Elsewhere in Europe the other reformed churches participated in the celebration playing down the fact that Luther was a German. However, the celebrations generated a lot of hatred once again against the Roman Catholic Church. It was turned into a political event to celebrate German nationalism as during the Reformation the many princedoms which were under the empire broke free and joined with Luther. In the light of these occasions which enhanced the hatred the 2017 celebrations being a joint effort for two groups of Christians who wasted a lot of time in the past 500 years each denigrating the other is indeed a matter for thanksgiving and rejoicing.

This very first joint celebration was made possible by the quiet work of God the Holy Spirit using all possible occasions to push the two factions together starting from 1967 the first ever invitation to the Vatican Secretariat

to participate in the 450th anniversary of Reformation was issued by the Lutheran World Federation. A few years earlier however, Pope John the 23rd during the Second Vatican Council had declared that there are more things that unite than divide as for instance the faith in the One Triune God and the Revelation in Jesus the Christ... and had appointed the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Therefore the invitation from the LWF was graciously accepted by Vatican. In the ensuing 50 years there have been a number of joint consultations. Chief among them are The 450th anniversary of Augsburg Confession which was called "Under One Christ" and the Agreed Statement on the Doctrine of Justification in 1999.

In and alongside these theological discussions there were other factors which pushed the two estranged sides together. e.g. The apparently simple matter of many cross denominational marriages resulting in loss of Church membership provided the most mundane secular reason for making the leaders to sit up and begin to discuss how best to forge unity. The growth of Pentecostalism as a movement without loss of membership but loss of revenue as people were attracted by the Charismatic preachers claiming to have special spiritual powers also was a factor common to both. This again prompted a lot of impromptu dialogue. Then as both churches were equally concerned about the unjust globalized economics which provided for industrial production in under developed countries exploiting cheap labour and marketing world-wide making enormous profits encouraged economic disparities to grow fast and wide. It also speeded up environmental degradation. So both Churches recognized that the power of mammon was the common enemy of the people. This was indeed a laudable reason. Such a common concern also provided many occasions to come together.<sup>5</sup> It is not as if socio-cultural concerns and questions of political economy alone prompted efforts at developing better understanding of each other. The Second Vatican Council declared that there are greater things that unite than divide. Faith in the

Triune God, Justification by faith in God's salvific action in Christ and faith inspired by the Holy Spirit are common to both Churches. Such affirmations of Vatican Second had provided a lot of encouragement to the Catholics to be involved in ecumenical ventures. So from 1967 which was the 450th anniversary of the Reformation some joint dialogue occasions began to happen with both sides participating enthusiastically. Some joint ventures such as producing biblical commentaries had also been initiated. Then came in 1980 the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession to which the LWF had extended an invitation to Vatican. It gave birth to a joint commission coming up with an agreed statement on the Augsburg Confession. The statement declared that the basic intention of the Augsburg Confession was to identify all the things that were common to both Churches with the intention that how unity could be preserved and not how division and separation could be justified.<sup>6</sup> In 1983 came the 500th birth anniversary of Luther. As the Joint commission on Augsburg Confession had sounded a very positive note Vatican had encouraged and a Joint doctrinal statement got signed. The first one was Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification This was signed in the year 1999. Eventually joint declarations on the Eucharist and the Ministry came into being. In the joint agreement on Justification there was agreement on human powerlessness and sin; Justification is to be understood as forgiveness of sin and making righteous; Justification is by faith through grace; the justified continues as a sinner; the justified is assured of salvation; the justified is expected to do good works...<sup>7</sup>

In this essay therefore, we shall first take note of all the reasons for rejoicing. We shall then explore why then do we still remain divided when we have been encouraged to work with earnestness for making the unity more and more visible. Why the movement towards unity has not seeped down to the level of the believing Christians? Should we be satisfied with unity as God's people continue to cherish individual salvation and have their

gaze fixed on getting to heaven? Should not the new openness lead to tracing our steps closer to the teaching of Jesus with its axis on the Kingdom of God on earth? While we could never earn our salvation through works, both Churches, however, are agreed that Christian believers need to do good works as saved and justified people. Should not this sense of grateful response to God's grace encourage us to be in partnership with God to realize God's Kingdom of Justice and Peace? And, if it is not to be dismissed as abhorrently blasphemous, should we not think of mediation of forgiveness through the offended and hurt sections of humanity? We shall try to address these issues one by one.

### **1. Affirmations and declarations which encourage our hearts:**

In 2016 the preparations for the celebrations started in Sweden. Pope Francis traveled to Lund in Sweden and participated in the Common Service of Prayer and preached a homily. He was welcomed by the Bishop of Lund Munib Yuannan the Preident of the Lutheran World Federation. A joint Declaration calling for a common celebration of the Reformation was signed. That gathering began with a confession. A participant declared. "We begged forgiveness for our failures, for the ways in which we Christians have wounded the body of the Lord and offended each other during the five hundred years since the beginning of the Reformation until today."<sup>8</sup> This was indeed the work of the Holy Spirit as thus far only prejudices and hatred had prevailed.

During the Puritan period in 18th century one John Bunyan wrote a book called *The Pilgrim's Progress* in which he made an allusion to the Pope, the Head of the Roman Catholic Church as the one to whom the mysterious number of 666 mentioned in the Book of Revelation pointed to. This is a reference to the Beast the enemy of Christ. This book was fondly

read by many protestant Christians. Pastors did little to correct such blasphemous opinions. To change such a mind set was indeed the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy See have also exhibited a fine gesture of issuing a commemorative postal stamp of 1 euro denomination to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. This stamp depicts Luther at the foot of the Cross of Christ making a clear communication that Luther was inspired by the Cross of Jesus Christ; it is impossible to change the past. But when the past is remembered we can reinterpret the past taking into account all the relevant factors which were responsible for the past. This way a reliving of the past which takes away the unfortunate influence of the past can become a sign of hope to the whole world. Such a reliving of the past is happening and let us rejoice and be thankful.

Pope Francis has said about Luther, "He was looking for a gracious God, but the Church in those days only presented a fierce and angry God" A Catholic Historian Joseph Lortz has said that Luther did not destroy the Church "he brought down a form of Catholicism which was not Catholic" Such statements from the Pope and an eminent historian exhibit an honest admission of the state of the Church as it was in the time of Luther and also an understanding and sympathetic assessment of an angry and impatient Luther.

A discerning self critical look at our history which leads to repentance and reform encouraged and led by the Holy Spirit is needed on both sides. Luther's introduction to the 95 Theses begins "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' He called for entire life of believers to be one of repentance" The dialogue partners admit that this is not self evident in our lives.

Therefore the following five imperatives were agreed upon to make the dialogue fruitful in leading to real unity:

1. All dialogue between Roman Catholics and Lutherans should begin with the perspective of unity.
2. Both...must be continuously transformed by mutual encounter from each other's understanding of faith.
3. Both ... should commit themselves to seek visible unity.
4. Both ... should jointly rediscover the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for our time.
5. Both ... must witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to God.

## **2. The Factors that continue to divide us**

Only on few occasions there are common acts of worship. For example there are always Common Ecumenical services of worship during Christmas in urban centres. There are some sensitive priests who organize ecumenical events during the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity 18-25 January each year. But even if these are but small gestures of expression of unity it does not signify full unity as there is no Eucharistic celebration of the Mass in which there is an invitation for all those who believe in Christ as Lord and Saviour to receive the Sacrament as members of the united Body of the Lord. Some radical Roman Catholic priests have taken the courageous initiative in inviting ordained priests from other Churches to concelebrate the Holy Communion. The present writer remembers with joy the few occasions which he has been invited to be a co-celebrant and participate in Communion.

There are some theological difficulties, Yes. Such as the understanding of the Mass as a sacrifice. And, the unworthiness of those who had not been to confession and had received absolution to draw near to the Lord's Table

is yet another obstacle. Neither are insurmountable obstacles. Let us consider them one by one.

The first one is really not an insurmountable obstacle because Protestants pride in commemorating Christ's Cross as an empty cross as a sign of the 'once-for-allness' of the death of Christ. Christ who died once does not die anymore. This cannot be considered as the only Biblical witness to the Cross. The doctrine of the "Finished Work of Christ" though accepted by Luther, he denied any definitive meaning to the imaginative and figurative depiction of Christ seated on the right hand of the Father. In fact the Risen Lord is ubiquitously present everywhere as he could appear and disappear at will. That is why Luther argued strongly that Christ is present in the Bread and the Wine because of the Proclamation of Christ's Word.

So the Protestants disapprove of the The Roman Catholic practice of commemorating the Cross through a Crucifix. They believe theirs is the biblically correct understanding. We should always remember that the claim that the Bible is the supreme authority in matters of faith and doctrine should be qualified by the understanding that a lot depends not just on the text but as it is interpreted in resonance with the Gospel. Again, their position is dependent on how we choose texts to derive doctrinal convictions. In this particular case it needs to be remembered that Christ is depicted as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world in Rev. 13:8. Also a careful reading of the references in John's Gospel to the Lifting up of the Son of Man as the occasion when the ruler of the world is cast out (Jn 12: 31-36) and the occasion when he is revealed as the I AM (Jn 8:27) seem to point to a diachronic nature of the Cross and not just one specific event that happened on the Good Friday of history only.

Here we have to be satisfied with just these passing observations and not get involved in a full length argument.

There could however, still be the question whether Christ is repeatedly sacrificed to atone for sins. For the present writer the whole question of atonement for sin needs a radical new look. Luther's argument that Christ being really present comes to the believing receiver and offers himself does seem to commend itself more than the understanding The Bread and Wine now become the Body of Christ is yet again offered as sacrifice for atoning temporal sins.

All pious believers, whether Catholic or Protestant, do believe that they had received the Lord with assurance that their sins had been forgiven. They do not spend time in a hair splitting manner such as we theologians do. Therefore one way of making our unity visible would be to celebrate the Mass during ecumenical events and issue an invitation to all believing Christians to participate. That we have to wait with pain until organic unity is achieved seems contrary to all the agreements reached over the last fifty years.

With regard to the second problem that an open invitation may allow people to receive the Holy Communion in an unworthy state of relationship with God: Leonardo Boff the Latin American liberation theologian narrates an incident of a poor woman who had had nothing to eat rushed to the Church but the worship service had already started and so she could not go for confession, but she was so hungry she went forward and received the Bread more so to appease her hunger than to have communion with God. But she was remorse stricken and confessed to the Priest that she had received communion without first getting absolved. The Priest was shocked but kindly enquired what made her so bold. Then when the poor woman told him the reason he became speechless\*. Let us also remember that our Lord offered the bread to Judas Iscariot at the Last Supper. Judas left the room only after receiving the Bread. While it is pastorally correct to prepare each participant to be in right relationship with neighbour and God before

approaching the Table of the Lord, the assumption that only those who had been to confession and had been absolved could be considered as worthy, however, is not right. God justifies even those who do not really believe. God would justify at the point of their turning to God in faith; says Paul in an enigmatic sentence in Rom 4:5 because he wanted to emphasize that no one can merit salvation. It is always a free gift of the gracious God.

I would therefore like to make a strong recommendation that we create many occasions of ecumenically celebrating the Eucharist and also special orders of worship taking into consideration the different perspectives on the Eucharist without however, compromising on the firm faith that in the Eucharist Christ is really present.

1. Closely allied with the understanding of how God acts graciously through the act of anamnesis which we perform out of deference for the Word of Christ, is the problem of understanding the nature of Christian Ministry. Contrary to a common and prevalent misunderstanding that Luther did not see the need for an order of ministers commissioned (ordained) for the Ministry of the Word and Sacrament, the Augsburg Confession declares that Luther approved of the need for a separate order of ministry of Word and Sacrament. The difference, however, lies in understanding the full extent of the nature of the Ministry. In the Catholic Church it is believed that the priest offers the Body and Blood of Christ as a sacrifice to atone for sins not just of the believer participant present at the Mass only but also for remission of sins in the purgatory. This was a strong point of contention between Luther and the Catholic Church. However, Luther emphasizes the need for the separate order of Ministry for Preaching the Word and for officiating at the Eucharist. His concept of the Priesthood of All Believers is to be applied to other forms of service and to point out that there is no difference in status between the two.

It is significant out of a conscious decision to reduce the gap in status between the Lay and the Clerical orders the practice of referring to the Priest as Rev. Fr. the practice of referring to the ordained priests as Arutpaniyar has been brought into vogue. But theologically the priestly role of one who offers sacrifice has not been changed. As long as the members of the Church believe that the priest has the power to release souls from the Purgatory the extra deference shown to them cannot be changed by mere altering of the nomenclature. It must be said that the ordained pastors in the Protestant denominations also have gradually assumed that God's forgiveness could be mediated only through them and the simple members have accepted this move upwards. So it is best that one way or other the different status consciousness is overcome.

2. Another important factor that make visible organic unity a near impossibility is the institutional nature of our Churches. It has been quite difficult to bring about organic union even after doctrinal agreements had been reached. Both leaders and members of different denominations, especially the smaller ones are wary of uniting with a more powerful and larger denomination. This is because those who are holding positions of leadership in the smaller of the two are likely to lose them in the emerging larger entity. Such a consideration gains strength if the caste-wise strength of respective denominations is likely to pose a threat to a minority caste from another denomination. Yet again, foreign patronage of different denominations also acts as a deterrent. For a denomination which enjoys greater patronage from a foreign parent body would not want to merge with a denomination whose patronage sources have shrunk. So non theological factors play a major role in creating visible organic unions, i.e. among Protestant denominations. This is why for example there are three Lutheran denominations with little amity among them!

As there have been dissensions about moving away from Latin Mass to vernacular Mass in the history of the Catholic Church so too people used to a liturgical tradition find it hard to worship in a new liturgical worship service.

Pentecostalism, especially those who belong to so called independent groups led by individual charismatic leaders accountable to no one is growing every day because the Gospel that is preached is gospel of prosperity and well being and no demands of obedience to God are made.

During the many dialogues between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation it has been observed that the nature of sin is defiance against God. This is seldom realized among most Christians. moral violations of widely recognized follies only are acknowledged as sin. Our preaching has rarely tried to move people to the higher plane of relationship with God. Therefore a lack of love for God, not seeking to do the will of God and such other spiritual failures are not considered as sin by most Christians. Therefore even when reminded of our Lord's high priestly prayer in which he prays that his disciples and those who listen to their proclamation and become believers should seek to live in unity which resonates with the unity of the Father and Son it provokes little positive response. All Christians know that true unity among believers alone would evoke a faith response in the divided world. Yet, as that is not the chief concern but as individuals being saved from damnation is the dominant concern people are seldom interested in seeking visible organic unity which would attract attention of the people of the world.

We now come to the most difficult part of this article. The difficulty does not lie with any particular doctrine but rather with the way we have envisioned God. This is the opinion of the present writer. We are called in the five imperatives mentioned above that we should think together to

rediscover the Gospel for our time. let us spend a few moments in searching for the contemporary relevance of the Gospel.

Is escape from death and damnation and receiving eternal life from God the essence of the Gospel? Do the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist guarantee that expectation? Rightly speaking God's love is inclusive and it is impossible for God to exclude anyone from Heaven. As according to Jesus God is non retributive. There are most certainly warnings of our Lord himself that some stood the danger of getting excluded. But those who are likely to get excluded in fact, would exclude themselves because they could not live with God who is inclusive and hob nobs with the undesirables in their opinion. If they went along with the ways of God they would find themselves in the company of those whom they despised and exploited. So they prefer the outer darkness of hatred generated by their supremacist attitude common treatment with those whom they hated and despised.

The Gospel indeed is the Good News of a gracious God who does not know what it is to get angry and punish anyone. God indeed is hurt deeply when individual, national, religious,...capitalist ...arrogance inflict pain on the powerless; who may be called the Abel-Hagar collective of victims. God in Jesus the Son of Man represents this group and suffers together with them because of his expressed solidarity with them and dies crying echoing their cry "My God! My God! Why have you abandoned me? God responds to this cry by raising Jesus from the dead. But even before that in this person crying the cry of dereliction of the oppressed, the Roman Centurion, the executioner of the regime of pomp and tyranny, recognizes Jesus to be truly king for he had also been listening to Jesus' prayer for forgiveness.

So forgiveness is not offered because the price for sin had been paid. But because the victim collective prays for forgiveness in and through their companion and representative Christ the Son of Man. Only if this is recognized a way for true human unity to emerge would be opened. Only then a new

humanity would be born. So, God defying arrogance and trampling upon the powerless and the vulnerable need to be forgiven only through those who are the victims. Jesus the Son of God and Son of Man makes this possible by becoming the co-sufferer. This is the meaning of Jesus' self understanding that the Son of Man must be rejected by the world of religion, the world of politics, the corporate world of business enterprises and of course by all forms of domination endorsing human cultures. The most decent and non oppressive culture of "give and take" is also not acceptable to God. As the latter precludes giving to those who could not pay back. But it is assumed to be an apparently innocuous way of living in harmony.

I am sure the objection to the above thesis would be vehement as it seems to go against the grain of Scripture and Tradition. But please remember that the traditional interpretations of the meaning of the Incarnation and the Cross have by passed the self understanding of Jesus and have depended on the Pauline understanding. Also the traditional understanding of God within Scripture as with the Christian Tradition is to understand God as fundamentally retributive and only secondarily gracious. In order to satisfy the demands of his righteousness God acts graciously through a legal fiction of an atoning sacrifice of His own Son. But once we envisage God as totally inclusive in love and utterly gracious and anger as an unknown attribute of God then also take seriously the way Jesus understood himself and his Mission we will also begin to see differently. Probably this way of envisioning the Gospel may trigger a movement for making all people really human and so usher in the New Creation where God may dwell with people.

## End Notes

1. The joint declaration was signed by Pope Francis and Bishop Munib Yunan President of Lutheran World Federation in Lund, Sweden exactly one year before the anniversary on 2016/10/31 at the occasion of the Special Prayer Event in which Pope Francis delivered the Homily. See Catholic Herald of 2016/10/31.

2. *see* [www.Luther.de/en/Worms.html](http://www.Luther.de/en/Worms.html)
3. [www.Luther.de/en/Worms.html](http://www.Luther.de/en/Worms.html)
4. <https://wikipedi.org/wiki/Reformationstag>
5. see a detailed summary of the final document on Conflict to Communion written by Cardinal Kurt Kock "From Conflict to Communion - Principles and Possibilities for the Ongoing Ecumenical Process" - the on line link: [www.vatican.va/roman.curia/pontifical\\_councils/christunity/lutheran-ted-docs](http://www.vatican.va/roman.curia/pontifical_councils/christunity/lutheran-ted-docs)
6. At the behest of Emperor Charles, and due to the initiative of some princes The Augsburg Confession consisting 28 points of which on 21 complete accord already existed between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church. On the remaining seven it was agreed to continue dialogue Because the basic intention was to find points of agreement than to find reasons for divisions in 1980 the 450th anniversary of the commemoration of the Augsburg Confession the LWF invited the R. Catholic Church to participate in the celebrations. At the end of the celebrations came the Statement "Under One Christ" which was signed by Bp Hans L. Martensen of Denmark on behalf of Vatican and Prof George Lindbeck of Yale University it was stated "The purpose of the Augsburg Confession is to bear witness to the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church" The statement also said that there were still differences regard to the Lord's Supper but there was a profound accord in our witness to the Lord's Supper should be liturgically celebrated. *See detailed report in wikipedia article on Augsburg Confession.*
7. see for a fuller explication- [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/documents/rc\\_pc\\_christiuni\\_doc](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/documents/rc_pc_christiuni_doc)
8. see Catholic Herald dated 2016/10/31
9. Leonardo Goff & Clodavis Boff, *Introducing Libration Theology*, Maryknoll 1987

Final End Note: *There are extensive and fully spelt out documents which we can find in the internet under the head: The Vatican Decision to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther Reformation; on Augsburg Confession and a declaration by the Vatican delegation to the 500th anniversary of the submission of the Confession to Emperor Charles V on his demand as to how they find that the Confession's basic intention to find common ground in the section I-XXI whereas sections XXII - XXVIII talk about desirable changes. A response to this section also is on record. This section talks about the mandate of celibacy, on the sacrament of penance...The response states in a gentle manner the difficulties involved in effecting the changes while providing a defense...*