

Fifty Years of International Catholic–Lutheran Dialogue: Much Consensus, Little Fellowship?

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Abstract

This article presents an overview and an assessment of the international Catholic–Lutheran dialogue through fifty years. During the process, a theological rapprochement that few had dreamt of when the work began has been manifested. In the text *Facing Unity* (1984), even a detailed plan for a processual realization of Catholic–Lutheran church fellowship is sketched. However, this plan has not been implemented, and the achieved doctrinal convergence has not been transformed into concrete forms of unity. The author also seeks to uncover some of the main causes of this impasse, largely reflecting challenges in contemporary ecumenism.

Keywords

Catholic–Lutheran church fellowship, consensus, convergence, diversity, ecumenical impasse, ecumenism and ecumenical dialogues, reception, unity

Ecumenical dialogues are not construed as merely theoretical ventures. These processes need specific aims that in many cases compare to the classical goal of the ecumenical movement: visible unity, in order that the world shall see and believe. Even if this goal is interpreted differently, it sets the agenda for a wide range of efforts to contribute to church fellowship.¹

Interchurch dialogues thus imply three levels: First, a sustainable consensus and/or convergence must be established—often involving an evaluation of whether previous

1. The visibility of unity basically compares to the visible nature of the church. Regarding this view and its consequences, see Ola Tjørhom, *Visible Church–Visible Unity: Ecumenical Ecclesiology and “The Great Tradition of the Church”* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004).

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doctrinal condemnations still apply. Second, ways to transform achieved agreement into concrete church fellowship must be outlined. And third, a broadly conceived process of ecclesial reception of the dialogue results must be conducted. Even if this last level mainly takes place after the talks are finished, the necessity of reception should be kept in mind throughout the process.

Generally, two pitfalls must be avoided here: on the one hand, the construction of an abstract consensus that is not converted into lived communion; on the other hand, efforts to realize unity that lack sufficient theological foundations. Avoiding these requires both properly balancing of unity and diversity, and preserving a distinction between dividing and nondividing factors.

The international Catholic–Lutheran dialogue marked its fiftieth anniversary in 2017, as a natural and necessary sequel to the celebrations of the Reformation and the Second Vatican Council in 2017 and 2016, respectively. Although passing by mostly unnoticed, this ecumenical anniversary provides an occasion for assessing the dialogue process as a whole.

The chief intention of the considerations presented in this article is to provide an overview of a promising ecumenical enterprise. The dialogue has brought forth a measure of theological consensus that hardly anyone, except perhaps the most obstinate enthusiasts, imagined in advance. It has offered feasible solutions to many of the complex controversies between Catholics and Lutherans—and even submitted, in the innovative text *Facing Unity* (1984), a specific plan of how fellowship between the two churches can be realized.

However, the achieved rapprochement has had limited concrete consequences. Only one of the dialogue statements, *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999), has been formally received and implemented by the churches. Moreover, the proposed scheme for unity has stranded in oblivion. The whole process has shown increasing signs of stagnation.

Limits are clearly necessary in presenting an account of this complex and lengthy ecumenical venture within the scope of a relatively short article. Of these, the most important is that this article deals solely with the international dialogue that has been conducted under the auspices of the Lutheran World Federation and The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, up to its fiftieth anniversary in 2017. Some of the important regional and national initiatives are mentioned briefly, but they are neither fully described nor analyzed here. Furthermore, I consider the second dialogue round from 1973 to 1984 as the most constructive and groundbreaking part of the process. This phase, a highpoint in the golden ecumenical age of the 1970s and 1980s, will be my primary focus. Finally, in accounting for the work during this round I shall proceed descriptively, largely saving analytical observations for the conclusions presented in the final section.

The Background and Context of the Dialogue

Impulses from the Second Vatican Council

The point of departure for Catholic–Lutheran ecumenism was far from ideal. For several centuries neither of the two principal actors in the church divisions of the 16th

century was eager to contribute to efforts to restore unity. For Catholics, participation in ecumenical work was literally forbidden until well into the 1950s. In the same period, considerable segments of the Lutheran tradition were marked by densely confessionalistic or denominationalist attitudes.

Vatican II (1962–65), a rather singular official modernization endeavor of the Catholic Church in modern times, became a turning point.² In *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism, the prohibition against involvement in the ecumenical movement was replaced by an opposite recommendation, which even sounded like a command: “The Sacred Council exhorts all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism” (*UR* 4).³ This shift is anchored in an altered self-understanding. Previously the Catholic Church saw itself as in effect identical with the *Una Sancta*. But in *Lumen Gentium*, the Constitution on the Church, it is stated that the one Church of Christ “subsists in (*subsistit in*) the Catholic Church” (*LG* 8).⁴ The Decree on Ecumenism develops this new and far more flexible position along the following lines:

[T]he separated Churches and Communities as such, though we believe them to be deficient in some respects, have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Church. (*UR* 3)

In my view, this is one of the most essential ecumenical assertions of the Council—one that also reflects the constructive and dynamic potential of pneumatology. When Christ through the Holy Spirit is present in the “separated Churches” and applies them as effective means of salvation, a “recognition” of these churches may at least seem close at hand. Their capacity even derives from “the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Church.”

Vatican II had significant implications on the Lutheran side, too. Among the ecumenical observers at the Council, we find influential theologians like Edmund Schlink, Kristen E. Skydsgaard, and George A. Lindbeck. The renewal of the Catholic Church and its new ecumenical openness was widely welcomed. Many also saw this renewal as a sign of an implicit adaption to parts of the Reformation’s criticism of Catholicism—and rightly so.

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2. On Vatican II and its ecumenical implications, cf. Otto Hermann Pesch, *Das zweite Vatikanische Konzil: Vorgeschichte–Verlauf–Ergebnisse–Nachgeschichte* (Würzburg: Echter, 2000); John O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), and—more implicitly—Yves Congar, *Diversity and Communion* (London: SCM, 1984).
 3. *Unitatis Redintegratio* (promulgated by Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964) 4, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html; hereafter cited as *UR*.
 4. *Lumen Gentium* (promulgated November 21, 1964) 8, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html; hereafter cited as *LG*.

A Network of Ecumenical Dialogues

The ecumenical openness of Vatican II sparked a commitment to active participation in ecumenical dialogues. Hardly any other churches have been involved in as many dialogues as the Catholic Church. Contacts between ecumenical observers and the newly founded Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity during the Council helped pave the way here.

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, a wide-ranging network of ecumenical conversations emerged.⁵ Dialogues were conducted globally and regionally, nationally and locally, on a multilateral as well as bilateral basis. International initiatives often set the agenda. Faith and Order's statement on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*—now, sadly, somewhat forgotten—exercised great influence in providing a solid foundation for the bilateral processes.⁶ This was the case even if the official Catholic response to the text was reserved. Not least in unity initiatives involving Anglicans, Catholics, and Lutherans, *BEM* contributed to a substantial convergence on sacraments as well as on church ministries in their threefold form.

At first, the dialogues and other forms of doctrinal ecumenism were a predominantly Northern concern. Fortunately, the participation of churches in the South has increased over the years. This has had positive implications, since chiefly African churches have developed in a direction where traditional doctrinal divisions play a less crucial role.

The conversations not only contributed to solutions on individual controversies, but a new perception of ecumenical consensus began to take root.⁷ These insights are fundamental here:

- Unity should never be confused with uniformity; a proper balance between unity and diversity must be preserved and practiced. Unity is the chief goal of ecumenism, but it always includes a substantial measure of enriching diversity.

5. Concerning the significance of dialogues in ecumenical work, see e.g. Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue* (London: Continuum, 2009). Several international dialogue documents are printed in the series *Growth in Agreement: International Dialogue Texts and Agreed Statements*, 1–4 (Geneva: WCC, 1984–2015). Cf. also the website of Centro Pro Unione, <https://www.prounione.it/en/>.

6. Faith and Order Commission, “Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry,” *Faith and Order Paper No. 111* (Geneva: WCC, 1982), <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text>. Also known as the “Lima Text” or *BEM*, this document is frequently quoted in bilateral texts.

7. A discussion on the nature of ecumenical consensus is presented in André Birmelé and Harding Meyer, eds., *Grundkonsens—Grunddifferenz* (Frankfurt am Main: Otto Lembeck, 1992). See further Ola Tjørhom, “A Question of Balance: Unity and Diversity in the Life of the Church,” *Pro Ecclesia* 15 (2006): 186–204, <https://doi.org/10.1177/106385120601500204>.

- A cogent distinction between dividing and nondividing factors is required, suggesting that consensus and convergence are interconnected.
- This points towards a “differentiated consensus” where a fundamental agreement in the core of faith can accommodate remaining differences on other topics.
- Consensus and convergence are attached to “criteria of unity”—especially unity in faith and confession, unity in sacramental life, unity in prayer and liturgical celebration, unity in ministries and services, and unity in mission and charity—which, framed by love, “binds them all together in perfect unity” (Col 3:14, NIV).
- Church fellowship is accomplished within a dynamic process of growth and through successive stages. There is room here for provisional steps towards unity.

Key aspects of the vision of communion have rarely been more fruitfully developed than in the golden age of ecumenical dialogues from the 1970s towards the end of the 1990s. Here the conversations between Catholics and Lutherans were among the most important contributions.

The Catholic–Lutheran Process

During the fall of 1966 and the spring of 1967, the Catholic–Lutheran dialogue was prepared at meetings between the Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). The first session then took place in November 1967. Since its start, the talks have been conducted more or less continually, through five stages or phases so far.⁸

The conversations have official status. All delegates have been appointed by, respectively, the Secretariat—now Pontifical Council—for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) and the LWF. These bodies have also been in charge of secretarial functions. A large number of distinguished theologians and church leaders from several countries

8. With a view to North American literature on the dialogue process as a whole, it will be sufficient to refer to *Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry and Eucharist* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), and Susan Wood and Timothy Wengert, *A Shared Spiritual Journey: Lutherans and Catholics Traveling toward Unity* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2016). While *Declaration on the Way*—itself a dialogue report commissioned by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) Conference of Bishops—contains a most helpful overview of several joint Catholic–Lutheran statements, Wood and Wengert start with the 16th-century Reformation and offer a broader perspective on Catholic–Lutheran ecumenism. Lorelei Fuchs, *Koinonia and the Quest for an Ecumenical Ecclesiology: From Foundations through Dialogue to Symbolic Competence for Communionality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) contains a solid theological basis for exploring this and other ecumenical dialogues.

have been involved. The work has benefitted from a broadened participation in terms of ethnicity and gender. Both before and during the global process, national dialogue groups have been at work. Here the conversations in Germany⁹ and the USA¹⁰ have played particularly vital roles.

So far, the consecutive international Catholic–Lutheran commissions have altogether produced eleven theologically essential and often comprehensive statements.¹¹ All of them are available at open websites.¹² The German editions were the primary ones during the first couple of dialogue rounds. English later became the main working language.

The First Dialogue Round: The Primacy of the Gospel

At the end of the first series of the dialogue, *The Gospel and the Church* (1972), often referred to as the Malta Report (MR), was published.¹³ The work took place from 1967 to 1971. It was chaired by the Norwegian theologian Einar Molland and Walter Kasper, future President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU). Among the members we find Hans Martensen, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Joseph Fitzmyer on the Catholic side; and the Lutherans Hans Conzelmann, George Lindbeck, and Per-Erik Persson.

MR clearly reflects the Catholic renewal at Vatican II and an ensuing ecumenical optimism. This marks the fundamental theological approach of the text, grounded in a dialectical perception of the relationship between the gospel, the church, and the world:

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9. These texts from the German dialogue should be mentioned: *Kirchengemeinschaft in Wort und Sakrament* (1984) and *Communio sanctorum—Die Gemeinschaft der Heiligen* (2000). The so-called *Jaeger–Stählin–Kreis* goes back to 1946 and has contributed substantially to the official processes, in Germany as well as globally. Among several crucial contributions, I refer to four volumes with the title *Lehrverurteilungen—Kirchentrennend?*, published by Herder and Otto Lembeck between 1986 and 1994.
 10. The US conversations first started in 1964 and provided numerous important impulses for the international dialogue through a wide range of statements. See, for example, such innovative texts as *Eucharist and Ministry* (1970), *Scripture and Tradition* (1995), and *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries* (2004).
 11. In the following account, references to the dialogue statements will be given in the main text—in brackets containing an abbreviation of the document title and a paragraph number (e.g. MR 33, that is Malta Report para./no. 33).
 12. See the sites of the LWF (<https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/Lutheran-roman-Catholic-dialogue>) and the PCPCU (<http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/it/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/luterani/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo.html>).
 13. *Report of the Joint Lutheran–Roman Catholic Study Commission: The Gospel and the Church*, 1972, <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/it/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/luterani/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/1972-the-gospel-and-the-church-malta-report/en.html>. On the background and findings of the first dialogue round, cf. Harding Meyer, *Luthertum und Katholizismus im Gespräch: Ergebnisse und Stand der katholisch/lutherischen Dialoge* (Frankfurt am Main: Otto Lembeck, 1973).

The church is permanently bound in its ordering to the gospel which is irrevocably prior to it. . . . The gospel, however, can be the criterion for a concrete church order only in living relationship with contemporary social realities. Therefore, the church must discern the signs of the Holy Spirit in history and in the present, and in faithfulness to the apostolic proclamation consider the restructuring of its orders. (MR 33)

On this basis, possible solutions to historical controversies between Catholics and Lutherans are put in motion. As a key ecclesiological criterion the gospel must be granted decisive significance in realizing fellowship: “The unity of the church can be a unity only in the truth of the gospel” (MR 14). Holy Scripture is “a product of primitive tradition,” but at the same time it has “a normative role for the entire later tradition of the church” (MR 17). Also regarding the doctrine of justification, “a far-reaching consensus is developing” (MR 26). Further, the report proposes that a mutual recognition of ministries should be considered:

The Catholic participants are convinced . . . that the traditional rejection of the validity of the Lutheran ministerial office must be rethought. . . . Therefore, the Catholic members request the appropriate authorities in the Roman Catholic Church to consider whether the ecumenical urgency flowing from Christ’s will for unity does not demand that the Roman Catholic Church examine seriously the question of recognition of the Lutheran ministerial office. (MR 63)

Most importantly, MR proposes a processual realization of eucharistic fellowship:

A process of gradual rapprochement is necessary in which various stages are possible. At present it should be recommended that the church authorities, on the basis of what is already shared in faith and sacrament and as sign and anticipation of the promised and hoped for unity, make possible occasional acts of intercommunion. (MR 73)

MR faced notable difficulties even before its publication. The report was delayed almost one year and was then only made available in a partly revised version. Internally there were tensions, too. This is reflected by four “special statements”; in three of them, Catholic members modified or expressed a distance over against the quoted paragraph 73. Within the Roman Curia the opposition was massive; it was insisted that all measures of eucharistic sharing, including provisional forms, required full ecclesial communion. The Diocese of Strasbourg was one of the very few places where “occasional acts of intercommunion” became a reality, when Bishop Léon Elchinger granted that so-called interchurch families could celebrate the Lord’s Supper together. However, this possibility was soon terminated, while many Lutheran churches practice “open communion” for all baptized believers.

The Malta Report is groundbreaking in its ecumenical openness and exemplary in its determination to build church fellowship. But the text was ahead of its time. Many suggested that MR’s summary account of theological accord was unable to carry its ambitious unity proposals. Clarifications were needed. This was the aim of the continued dialogue process.

The Second Dialogue Round: Theological Rapprochement and Ways to Unity

Texts and Proceedings

I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the second round of the dialogue, more precisely on models and criteria of unity in its texts.¹⁴ As already indicated, this phase in my opinion represents a peak in the Catholic–Lutheran process as well as in view of all ecumenical dialogues. The combination of consensus statements on crucial theological topics and reflections on the nature and realization of church fellowship is particularly fruitful.

The Roman Catholic–Lutheran Joint Commission was productive. From 1973 to 1984 the group published *in toto* six partly comprehensive reports. These can be grouped as follows: *Das Herrenmahl / The Eucharist* (1978) and *Das geistliche Amt in der Kirche / The Ministry in the Church* (1981) discuss central theological topics, generally and with a view to historical controversies. *Wege zur Gemeinschaft / Ways to Community* (1980) and *Einheit vor uns: Modelle, Formen und Phasen katholisch-lutherischer Kirchengemeinschaft / Facing Unity: Models, Forms and Phases of Catholic–Lutheran Church Fellowship* (1984) consider the nature of church fellowship and ways towards its realization. *Alle Unter Einem Christus / All Under One Christ* (1980) and *Martin Luther—Zeuge Jesu Christi / Martin Luther—Witness to Jesus Christ* (1983) relate to the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in 1980 and the 500th anniversary of Luther’s birth in 1983, respectively.¹⁵

Among the commission members we find the Catholic bishops Hans Martensen (cochair) and Paul Werner Scheele; on the Lutheran side the professors George A. Lindbeck and Lars Thunberg. Several prominent advisers made strong contributions to the work, among whom the Lutheran Harding Meyer and the Catholic Hervé Legrand deserve special mention.

Eucharist and Ministry: Theological Convergence

*The Eucharist*¹⁶ (*EUC*) and *The Ministry in the Church*¹⁷ (*MIC*) are the most substantial statements in doctrinal terms. Few ecumenical documents set forth such a solid

14. See Ola Tjørhom, *Church Fellowship—Visible Structured Unity and Essential Ecclesial Diversity: An Analysis of the Concept of Unity in the Documents of the Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Commission from the Second Dialogue Round (1973–1984); with Particular Regard to Models and Criteria of Unity* (Stavanger: MHS, 1992).

15. The German texts were published jointly by Otto Lembeck and Bonifatius, the English versions by LWF. *Ways to Community* and *All Under One Christ* came in a single volume, as did *Facing Unity* and *Martin Luther—Witness to Jesus Christ*. Throughout the second dialogue series, the English translations of the statements of the commission were made publicly available a bit later than the primary German versions.

16. Lutheran/Roman Catholic Joint Commission, *The Eucharist* (Geneva: LWF, 1980), hereafter cited as *EUC*.

17. Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Commission, *The Ministry in the Church* (Geneva: LWF, 1982), hereafter cited as *MIC*.

and coherent convergence on central and complex theological questions as *EUC*. This text can also be read as an excellent introduction to the theology of the Eucharist.

Regarding the real presence, it is underscored that both traditions maintain that Christ is truly present in the bread and wine. This is explained in varying ways: while the Catholic doctrine of “transubstantiation” implies that the elements are “transformed” into the body and blood of Christ, Lutherans often refer to a “consubstantiation” where the eucharistic presence takes place “in, with, and under” the species of bread and wine.¹⁸ However, these nuances in accounting for the “mystery” of the Eucharist are not seen as dividing (cf. *EUC* 48–51). The duration of the sacramental presence is also described differently: Lutherans connect this primarily to the meal and the consummation; Catholics hold that it is permanent. But the “believing reception” of the faithful is seen as the main concern in both cases (*EUC* 52–55).

The “sacrifice of the Mass” remains a difficult question. Some Lutherans argue that this concept undermines the uniqueness of Christ’s offering at the cross, while Catholics hold that the event at Calvary cannot be reduced to a single point in past history. The commission seeks to resolve this tension as follows: “[Christ’s] sacrifice can be neither continued, nor repeated, nor replaced, nor complemented; but rather it can and should become effective ever anew in the midst of the congregation” (*EUC* 56). Here the text refers to the Eucharist as *anamnesis*, that is as a sacramental representation of the sacrifice at the cross. This approach does not only signify that “past events are brought to mind in memory and imagination”; it also implies “the making effective in the present of an event in the past” (*EUC* 36).

In stressing the connection between our celebration of the Eucharist and the world, *EUC* transcends the limits of much traditional or older theology. The elements of bread and wine are gifts taken from creation, and praying for God’s world is an essential part of the eucharistic prayers. Furthermore, through our—not yet fully realized—unity at the Lord’s Table, “the new unity of humankind begins to emerge” (*EUC* 39). Generally, the commission’s interpretation of the Eucharist is renewing as well as unifying, suggesting that we cannot worship in “spirit and truth” unless God’s worldly world is lifted into the space of the church.

Since the work on a document on ecclesial ministries had already started in 1974 and went on parallel to the discussions on the Eucharist, *EUC* does not examine this vital issue. *The Ministry in the Church (MIC)* also outlines consensus and convergence, but this is done in a more restricted manner than in *EUC*—implicitly affirming that the theology of the ministry remains a complex topic between Catholics and Lutherans. *MIC*’s language is “technical rather than pastoral” and conditional statements are often applied: “If such and such a thing is taught in our churches, a consensus . . . is reached” (cf. *MIC*, preface). The chief focus is on “the controversial questions of church orders and structures,” with a particular view to the episcopate

18. Martin Luther rejected “transubstantiation,” partly since he saw it as undermining incarnational theology. But he was also reserved in view of the term “consubstantiation.” To some Lutherans, this concept chiefly functions as a critical alternative to “transubstantiation.”

(MIC 2). Neither the papal office nor the diaconate is discussed in detail here, and ordination of women is primarily addressed in an appendix.¹⁹

MIC initially affirms that the so-called “common priesthood”—or, more precisely, “the common priesthood of all the baptized”—is a shared starting-point for the two churches (MIC 13). However, the ministry is “not simply a delegation ‘from below,’ but . . . instituted by Jesus Christ,” and it is endowed with a special authority (MIC 20). Yet, this authority is not “an individual possession of the minister, but . . . rather an authority with a commission to serve in and for the community” (MIC 24). Concerning the sacramentality of ordination, the dialogue commission suggests that a potential convergence in practice is at hand:

[When] it is taught that through the act of ordination the Holy Spirit gives grace strengthening the ordained person for the life-time ministry of word and sacrament, it must be asked if differences which previously divided the churches on this question have not been overcome. (MIC 33)²⁰

It is further stressed that the service of the apostles is “unique and cannot be transferred.” However, the concept of apostolic succession actualizes “the permanently normative character of the apostolic origin while . . . [insisting] on the continuance of the missionary task” (MIC 18). The text also demonstrates considerable flexibility in view of ministerial structures; the so-called threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter, and deacon is only mentioned once (cf. MIC 41). And while “the existence of a special ministry is abidingly constitutive for the church, its concrete form must always remain open to new actualizations” (MIC 18).

The group accounts broadly for discrepancies in the perception of the relationship between the episcopal and priestly office. But here there is also a possibility of convergence:

If both churches acknowledge that for faith [the] historical development of the one apostolic ministry into a more local and a more regional ministry has taken place with the help of the Holy Spirit and to this degree constitutes something essential for the church, then a high degree of agreement has been reached. (MIC 49)

Bishops shall serve unity “within their local churches and between the local churches” (MIC 68). Seen from a Catholic point of view, this is done in communion with the Bishop of Rome.

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19. Regarding the quite comprehensive appendix on the ordination of women, see *Die Ordination von Frauen: Eine Frage, die weit über die Theologie des Amtes hinausreicht* (in *Das geistliche Amt in der Kirche*, pp. 102–26). The text was penned by Professor Hervé Legrand, OP and then Archbishop John Vikström of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. In EUC as well as MIC, relevant liturgical texts from both traditions are printed in separate chapters/appendices, but these are not included in the electronic versions. Moreover, MIC 15 is missing in the web versions, leading to a displacement of numbers in the subsequent paragraphs.
20. In addition, it should be recalled here that Philip Melanchthon in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession grants that ordination can be seen as a sacrament or a sacramental act (*Ap.* XIII).

Theological approximation is reflected in *EUC* as well as *MIC*. Yet, these documents are quite reserved and vague when it comes to concrete steps towards unity. Concerning the burning topic of intercommunion, one settles with describing the opposite positions of the dialogue partners (cf. *EUC* 69–73), stressing rather briskly that “a joint celebration of the Eucharist is forbidden” in the Catholic Church (*EUC* 72). The Malta Report’s proposal of “occasional acts of intercommunion” is, surprisingly, not mentioned.

In *MIC*, the Catholic notion of a *defectus ordinis*, “a defectus in the sacrament of orders in the churches stemming from the Reformation” (*MIC* 75), is a huge stumbling block. The alleged defect has been interpreted as “a partial lack rather than a complete absence,” but this is only mentioned as a possible option here (cf. *MIC* 76f.). Accordingly, traditional Catholic views and reservations emerge as decisive obstacles.²¹ The text concludes with unspecified wishes for a future ministerial recognition, without referring to the call for a fresh consideration of the validity of the Lutheran ministry in *The Gospel and the Church*.

EUC and *MIC* surpass the Malta Report in terms of consensus, but fall significantly behind the statement from the first dialogue round in regard to concrete efforts to transform achieved accord into fellowship. However, the commission published two documents on the nature, contents, and structure of unity. Here realization of communion is the key issue.

The Nature and Form of Unity

*Ways to Community*²² (*WTC*) and *Facing Unity: Models, Forms and Phases of Catholic–Lutheran Church Fellowship*²³ (*FCU*) are clearly innovative ecumenical contributions, not the least because they are the first (and so far only?) bilateral statements that are devoted entirely to reflections on the concept of unity and the realization of communion. *WTC* focuses chiefly on the foundation of fellowship and the balance between unity and diversity. Here the group starts out with the Malta Report’s proposal of “a process of gradual rapprochement in which various stages are possible” (MR 73, quoted in *WTC*’s preface). This process aims at visible unity: “[A]n outward, visible unity which is becoming historically manifest in the life of the churches” and shall be “recognizable to the world, that it may believe” (*WTC* 33f.).

However, the visibility of church fellowship does not imply uniformity:

[L]iving unity in Christ is essentially manifold and dynamic. [It] does not exist despite and in opposition to diversity, but is given with and in diversity. The work of the one unifying Spirit of God does not begin with the uniting of the already separated, but rather creates and maintains diverse realities precisely in order to lead them into the unity of love. (*WTC* 33f.)

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21. Concerning the claim of a *defectus ordinis*, one of the most complicated ecumenical challenges in the Vatican II documents, cf. *UR* 22.
 22. Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Commission, *Ways to Community* (Geneva: LWF, 1981); hereafter cited as *WTC*.
 23. Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Commission, *Facing Unity: Models, Forms and Phases of Catholic–Lutheran Church Fellowship* (Geneva: LWF, 1985); hereafter cited as *FCU*.

Pneumatology plays a major role when the relationship between unity and diversity is explored. The Holy Spirit creates and sustains a lasting ecclesial diversity. But this diversity is not static. Through the work of “the unifying Spirit,” it is directed towards an overarching “unity of love” (*WTC* 34). This growth in unity takes place within a dynamic process: “[T]he unity in Christ exists in a process of becoming; as living reality, it is directed towards growing and bearing fruit” (*WTC* 38). And here there is ample space for “intermediate goals” (*WTC* 54).

In addition to this, a basic unity that already exists in Christ is underlined: “The goal of unity is given to us beforehand. It is not constructed or manipulated, but . . . received” (*WTC* 4). The ecumenical task is to make this given unity outwardly visible. Moreover, our unity in Christ shall serve as an effective “sign of the coming unity of humankind” (*WTC* 50).

The first part of *WTC* (§§ 4–52) offers a valuable account of “unity as goal,” emphasizing the key aspects of the concept of communion. Brimming with biblical references and quotes from official doctrinal statements of the participating churches, it acquires an authoritative significance. *WTC*’s second part (§§ 53–96) on “unity as goal” has a more preliminary character, mainly containing suggestions that need further development.

This is the aim in *FCU*, the final outcome of the second dialogue round. Here the commission proceeds more concretely, starting with a programmatic definition of unity:

The unity of the church given in Christ and rooted in the Triune God is realized in our unity in the proclaimed word, the sacraments and the ministry instituted by God and conferred through ordination. It is lived both in the unity of the faith to which we jointly witness, and which together we confess and teach, and in the unity of hope and love which leads us to unite in fully committed fellowship. Unity needs a visible outward form which is able to encompass the element of inner differentiation and spiritual diversity as well as the element of historical change and development. This is the unity of a fellowship which covers all times and places and is summoned to witness and serve the world. (*FCU* 3)

Subsequently, a description of the most common “models of unity” is given: Organic union, corporate union, church fellowship through agreement or concord, conciliar fellowship and “unity in reconciled diversity” (cf. *FCU* 13–34)—together with the similar concepts of communion between “ecclesial ‘types’” and “sister churches” (*FCU* 41–45).²⁴ Then the chief concern of the text follows—a plan for a processual or step-by-step accomplishment of Catholic–Lutheran church fellowship, theologically grounded in the previous statements from the second dialogue round.²⁵ The following are the three fundamental stages of the *FCU* plan.

24. Regarding the unity models, see Harding Meyer, *That All May Be One: Perceptions and Models of Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). As one of the most important advisers of the commission, Meyer (1928–2018), was a main architect of the *FCU* plan.

25. The so-called *Fries/Rahner Plan* has some common features with *FCU*, cf. Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner, *Einigung der Kirchen—reale Möglichkeit* (Freiburg: Herder, 1985).

First, the envisioned fellowship presupposes a “unity of faith” (cf. *FCU* 55–69). This unity comprises three levels: “(1) bearing joint witness to [the one apostolic] faith, (2) taking account of legitimate differences, and (3) overcoming the obstacles raised by earlier mutual condemnations” (*FCU* 55). The commission argues that a fundamental unity in the core of faith “is already under way” (*FCU* 57). Here the text refers to a common foundation in Holy Scripture and the symbols of the Old Church. Also in regard to the church and its ministry, “a basic though not yet complete consensus” has been developed (*FCU* 57).

Thus, Catholics and Lutherans can already “discover not simply a partial consensus on some truths, but rather a full accord on fundamental and central truths” (*FCU* 58). Within this framework, a rich diversity of faith expressions is not only acceptable, but also beneficial, provided that remaining differences are recognized as “specific and legitimate forms of the one, common Christian faith” (*FCU* 63). Mutual condemnations, especially from the time of the Reformation, must be rescinded. But since these condemnations “are no longer applicable” to the dialogue partners’ teaching, such a withdrawal is possible (*FCU* 69).

The second stage of the unity scheme is attached to a “community in sacraments” (cf. *FCU* 70–85). Here it is stated that both churches have experienced “a growth in sacramental life” in recent years (*FCU* 71–74). Further, it is pointed out that a mutual recognition of baptism already exists; that particularly *EUC* establishes a substantial agreement on the Eucharist; and that Lutherans are prepared to interpret ordination as a sacrament. Even if it is not said explicitly, there is much in evidence that the difference regarding the number of sacraments is seen as dependent on Catholics applying a wider concept of sacrament than Lutherans (cf. *FCU* 75ff.). Remaining “open questions” in this field require continued dialogue, but these questions do not have dividing implications any more (*FCU* 83–85).

The third and decisive stage of the plan is described as a “community in service” (cf. *FCU* 86–149). If the claimed unity in faith and sacraments is affirmed and formally received, the two churches are “entitled and obliged to enter into structured fellowship with each other” (*FCU* 87). Even if the commission here refers to God’s people as a whole and ecclesial life in a wide sense, the “structured fellowship” is primarily associated with the ministries of the church. And at this point, a mere recognition is insufficient: “The coexistence of ministries mutually recognized must be transformed into a common exercise of ordained ministry,” with special regard to episcopacy (*FCU* 92). The reasons for this contention are that the Catholic notion of a *defectus ordinis* is blocking a recognition of the Lutheran ministry; that there is an “asymmetry” in the understanding of the ecclesial significance of apostolic succession and the historic episcopate; and divergent views on the papal office (*FCU* 94ff.). All these factors reflect traditional Catholic concerns. In trying to solve the listed problems, impulses from the Early Church play a crucial role.²⁶ Here five specific steps towards unity are offered:

26. *FCU* only contains one appendix, a brief reflection on “The Practice of Ordination in the Early Church” by Hervé Legrand. Legrand was the most central Catholic adviser of the commission and contributed substantially to *FCU*’s unity plan, together with Harding Meyer.

- “Preliminary forms of the joint exercise of episcopé,” connected to e.g. “local Christian councils” and national or regional “conciliar organs” (*FCU* 120–22).
- “[An] initial act of recognition” (*FCU* 123–26) that entails “a mutual recognition that in the other church the church of Jesus Christ is actualized” (*FCU* 124).
- “[A] single episcopé in collegial form” (cf. *FCU* 127–31)—or, more precisely, a common exercise of episcopacy “without merging the two episcopates” (*FCU* 127).
- “Transition from joint exercise of episcopé to a common ordained ministry” (*FCU* 132–41). A unified ministry is accomplished gradually, through a period of mutual ordinations. While Catholic as well as Lutheran bishops partake in the act, the main concern here is to secure apostolic succession—which primarily requires Catholic participation.
- The ensuing “exercise of the common ordained ministry” can have varying shapes: “[A] single episcopé in collegial form,” “a single bishop for differently structured parishes,” or “[a] merged church . . . [with] a single bishop” (cf. *FCU* 142–45).

The text concludes with a brief concession that “many questions . . . remain open.” These must be addressed within a joint process. Yet, unity remains “a blessing of the Triune God, a work which he accomplishes, by means he chooses, in ways he determines” (*FCU* 149).

Some aspects of the *FCU* and its unity plan would benefit from further elaboration. However, the report’s commitment to building and implementing communion sets a standard for future ecumenical endeavors. Thus seen, *FCU* remains highly relevant.

No Reception of the Unity Plan

Despite the groundbreaking ecumenical contents of *FCU* and *WTC*, none of them—and certainly not the unity scheme of the former—has attained official reception. Accordingly, they share the destiny of the Malta Report. Features of the dialogue process as well as of the contents of the documents from the conversations complicate the reception process.²⁷ Many controversial topics were examined repeatedly, with somewhat varying results. In my view, it would have been advantageous if the texts on the nature and form of unity had been presented first, offering a fruitful framework for the subsequent work. Both the processual approach and the dialectics between unity and diversity could have lowered the threshold for acknowledging consensus. Generally, the implementation of the results of the conversations has been hampered by a rather arbitrary attitude to reception. Agreed statements were merely passed on to the churches’ leadership, where in some cases they were left to collect dust. This suggests that both the commission and its sponsors failed to see that ecumenical reception requires committed preparations; it must be conducted mutually and broadly.

27. On reception of ecumenical statements or proposals and the reception process, see William G. Rush, *Reception: An Ecumenical Opportunity* (Geneva: LWF, 1988).

However, reserved and negative external reactions were the main causes of the missing reception. Some Lutherans argued that the unity scheme of *FCU* exhibited a Catholic bias, primarily by approving a ministerial integration in accordance with particular Roman doctrines. In my view, such claims are at least partly misplaced. First, the papal office is hardly mentioned in the plan. When it does occur, the point is quite self-evident—the proposed steps towards unity must be completed “in cooperation with the Pope” (*FCU* 126). Furthermore, the processual approach to communion deviates from the customary Catholic insistence that unity at the Lord’s Table and in ecclesial ministries are not stages on the way towards church fellowship, but components of an already accomplished fellowship.

Among Catholics and especially in the Roman Curia, the *FCU* plan was met with a mix of silence and traditionally grounded, sometimes harsh, objections. First, the notion of a *defectus* in the sacrament of orders means that all forms of unity in the ministry only are possible when the up-to-now barred recognition of the Lutheran office can be granted. Second, an apparently unbreakable circle emerges here and partly in some dialogue texts as well: eucharistic fellowship, including all preliminary steps towards this goal, demands full recognition of ministries, which in turn both presupposes realized church unity and implies communion with the Bishop of Rome. Third, a rigid ecclesiology with a self-affirming effect blocks the accord achieved on other issues. Seen against this background, it is difficult to speak of a dialogue between equals here. When the reception of *FCU* failed, Catholic reservations were a primary reason.

Texts Associated with Reformation Anniversaries

The two remaining documents from the second dialogue round, *All Under One Christ*²⁸ (*AOC*) and *Martin Luther—Witness to Jesus Christ*²⁹ (*MLW*), relate to the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in 1980 and the 500th anniversary of Luther’s birth in 1983, respectively. Both contributions are intended as short commentaries on or markings of essential historical events. In this context, these statements will only be considered briefly.

AOC actualizes the possibility of an ecumenical reading of *Confessio Augustana*, in correspondence with its original intention: “Reflecting on the Augsburg Confession . . . Catholics and Lutherans have discovered that they have a common mind on basic doctrinal truths which points to Jesus Christ, the living center of our faith” (*AOC* 17). In the Luther statement, it is underscored that the dialogue partners have moved “from conflict to reconciliation” in their interpretations of the Reformation (*MLW* 1ff., subtitle). Additionally, “Luther’s call for church reform, a call to repentance, is still relevant for us” (*MLW* 6).

28. Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Commission, *All Under One Christ*, published in *Ways to Community* (Geneva: LWF, 1981); hereafter cited as *AOC*. The text’s title is a quote from *Confessio Augustana*.

29. Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Commission, *Martin Luther—Witness to Jesus Christ*, published together with *Facing Unity* (Geneva: LWF, 1985); hereafter cited as *MLW*.

The most vital asset of *AOC* and *MLW* is their affirmation that the Reformation today is not associated solely with dividing positions. This crucial event has an ecumenical dimension and relevance. Catholic Reformation research, in the wake of Joseph Lortz's classical two-volume study *Die Reformation in Deutschland*,³⁰ contributed effectively to this shift. Several of the Catholic dialogue participants were influenced by Lortz. Admittedly, a proposed Catholic "recognition" of the Augsburg Confession was not accomplished, chiefly because it was unclear what such a recognition would entail. But a common interpretation of this essential Lutheran confessional writing was initiated at the occasion of the 1980 anniversary.³¹

The Continued Dialogue: Progress and Stagnation

Church and Justification: One Step Forward and Two Backward?

The third dialogue round took place from 1986 to 1993. One wide-ranging document was published at the end of this phase—*Church and Justification: Understanding the Church in Light of the Doctrine of Justification (CAJ)*.³² Throughout the previous dialogue process, it had been asserted—frequently, explicitly as well as implicitly—that a basic consensus between Catholics and Lutherans on justification had been reached. The intention of *CAJ*, however, is to link soteriology and ecclesiology. Then things become more complicated.

The challenges are identified in the preface of the text. The chief focus is on "the role of the Church in salvation." The aim is still realization of visible unity. However, a recent and rather intense debate—primarily among Protestants—on an alleged "fundamental difference" between Protestantism and Catholicism" introduced new premises for the work of the commission.³³ Simultaneously, ecclesiology became a dominating concern: "Ecclesiological themes not originally part of the schema required attention" (*CAJ*, preface).

30. Cf. Joseph Lortz, *The Reformation in Germany*, vols. I and II (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968).

31. Central dialogue participants also contributed in two volumes that develop aspects of *AOC* and *MLW* further; see respectively Harding Meyer and Heinz Schütte, eds., *Confessio Augustana: Bekenntnis des einen Glaubens* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1980), and Peter Manns and Harding Meyer, eds., *Ökumenische Erschliessung Martin Luthers* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1983). The first book contains a fine interpretation of *CA*; the latter was, unjustly, referred to as *Ökumenische Erschiessung Martin Luthers*. The proposal of a Catholic "recognition" of the Augsburg Confession is discussed in Harding Meyer, Heinz Schütte, and Hans-Joachim Mund, eds., *Katholische Anerkennung des Augsbургischen Bekenntnisses? Ein Vorstoss zur Einheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Otto Lembeck, 1977).

32. Lutheran/Roman Catholic Joint Commission, *Church and Justification: Understanding the Church in Light of the Doctrine of Justification* (Geneva: LWF, 1994); hereafter cited as *CAJ*.

33. Eilert Herms is an eager proponent of a Catholic–Lutheran *Grunddissens*; cf. Eilert Herms, *Einheit der Christen in der Gemeinschaft der Kirchen: Die ökumenische Bewegung der römischen Kirche im Lichte der reformatorischen Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1997). On this topic, see also Birmelé and Meyer, *Grundkonzenz—Grunddifferenz*, 1992.

The outline of the statement is, briefly, as follows: After a general introduction, a concise account of central ecclesiological questions is given in chapters 2 and 3. Here a nuance in the understanding of the local church is noted: “For Lutherans the local congregation is church in the full sense; for Catholics it is the local church led by its bishop” (*CAJ* 84). However, the tensions increase when “the church as recipient and mediator of salvation” is discussed in chapter 4, *CAJ*’s main section. The commission sets out by referring to discrepancies on the sacramentality of the church, its visible nature, and the relationship between its holiness and sinfulness. Under the title “The Significance of the Doctrine of Justification for the Understanding of the Church” (subchapter 4.5), several inconsistencies in the interpretation of the dialectics between soteriology and ecclesiology emerge. At this point, the text even speaks of “the original consensus” as a “problem”:

Catholics ask whether the Lutheran understanding of justification does not diminish the reality of the church; Lutherans ask whether the Catholic understanding of church does not obscure the gospel as the doctrine of justification explicates it (*CAJ* 166).

This is a rather strong retraction, implying that the proclaimed consensus must be “tested” again in light of “the critical significance of the doctrine of justification for all church doctrine, order and practice” *CAJ* 168). The previous agreement is not flatly annulled, but several new “areas of controversy” are identified:

[T]he institutional continuity of the church; ordained ministry as institution of the church; binding church doctrine and the teaching function of the ministry; church jurisdiction and the jurisdictional function of the ministry (discussed in *CAJ* 173–241).

Even if there is no conclusion that a “basic difference” remains here, the commission is unable to present joint solutions to these problems.

The third dialogue round demonstrates what happens when a maximalist (Lutheran) doctrine of justification clashes with a similarly maximalist (Catholic) ecclesiology. At this point, Lutheran reservations are doubtlessly most evident. *CAJ* also serves as an additional reminder of the controversial status of ecclesiology in ecumenical work. In the final instance, these tensions even led to a point that the formerly achieved accord on justification was questioned. Thus, this phase of the dialogue can be characterized as one step forward and two steps backward.

The Joint Declaration on Justification: A Breakthrough with Reservations

The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*³⁴ (*JD*) was signed in a festive worship service in Augsburg on Reformation Day, October 31, 1999, by leaders of the LWF and the PCPCU. Since at that time I served as research professor at the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, I had the fortune of participating in this great

34. The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); hereafter cited as *JD*.

event, and I shared the ecumenical excitement that was expressed at the occasion. I still do. But this moment of joy also contained elements of gloom, especially in view of the process before the signing.³⁵

Earlier drafts and versions of *JD* were prepared by a “special commission”—formally within the fourth round, but parallel to and somewhat separated from the rest of the dialogue. The final proposal encountered critical reactions, partly from a group of Protestant university professors—chiefly in Germany, and partly from the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—including the then-Prefect, Joseph Ratzinger. The opponents joined in a shared discontent with the proposed text, though based on contrary premises. The situation became complicated, and hopes for a joint signing began to vanish. When the initiative was rescued, it had its costs. Together with the ultimate *JD*-version, several supplements were issued. A brief “Official Common Statement” was to be formally signed by leaders of the two churches. There was also an “Annex to the Official Common Statement” where some crucial concerns were further developed. In the attachment “Resources to the Joint Declaration”, the main sources of the venture were listed. Some saw these additional texts as necessary clarifications, others read especially the “Annex” as a more restrictive input that obscured the original intention of *JD*.

The finally approved statement expresses a broad and substantial theological convergence on the interpretation of salvation. Even if it is admitted that the declaration does not cover everything the churches teach in this area, it reveals “a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences . . . are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations” (*JD* 5). This convergence is anchored in and reflects an awareness that the forensic perspective, Jesus’s work *for* us, and the effective perspective, Jesus’s work *in* us, are complementary and not contrasting concerns. The Reformation principles *sola fide* and *sola gratia* are linked to the justified person’s continued growth in holiness.

It should be noted, however, that the quoted convergence is limited to “basic truths” and not described as “sufficient”—let alone as “full.” Moreover, the ecclesiological problems that are listed in *CAJ* remain unsolved. And most significantly, even if former “doctrinal condemnations” now can be suspended, church fellowship seems to be put on hold:

Our consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification must . . . influence the life and teachings of our churches. Here it must prove itself. In this respect, there are still questions of varying importance which need further clarification. . . . The Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church will continue to strive together to deepen this common understanding of justification and to make it bear fruit in the life and teaching of the churches. (*JD* 43)

35. Since much has been written on the *Joint Declaration*, my account here will be brief. On the background, preparation and follow-up of the statement, cf. Friedrich Hauschildt, *Die Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre: Dokumentation des Entstehungs- und Rezeptionsprozessen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 2009) and John Radano, *Lutheran and Catholic Reconciliation on Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

36. In addition to the PCPCU and the LWF, *JD* was later cosigned by leaders of the Anglican Communion, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and the World Methodist Council.

As already mentioned, *JD* is the only text from the Catholic–Lutheran dialogue that has been formally received by the churches—this may well be its foremost asset.³⁶ Simultaneously, the statement contains several essential insights. It should, therefore, be valued as a most vital step forward. However, *JD* settles with a partial consensus which requires further development and is, thus, more easily embraced. And it places realized communion as a future goal. In my view, this suggests that the *Joint Declaration* not only needs further theological clarification; it must also be accommodated to *Facing Unity* and its plan for realizing communion.

Here achieved consensus once more appears to be blocked by ecclesiological dissent. And this time, the dissent to a significant degree stems from a certain “possessiveness” in regard to the doctrine of justification on the Lutheran side. Surely, there is an interconnection between soteriology and ecclesiology that must be accounted for. But it should be explored if the line of argument can be turned upside-down at this point: unity in our discernment of salvation—to which the ecclesial body is called to serve as a sign and means—can carry remaining differences in our interpretation of the nature and service of the church.

Fourth and Fifth Dialogue Rounds: More Clarifications than Progress in Fellowship

At the end of the fourth dialogue series between 1995 and 2006, a statement on *The Apostolicity of the Church* was presented.³⁷ Even if also this document reflects a notable rapprochement on central topics, it can hardly be characterized as a breakthrough in efforts to accomplish communion.³⁸ During the still ongoing fifth phase of the talks, *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran–Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* has been published.³⁹ This more practical report discusses central aspects of the Reformation and recommends joint ventures in marking its 500th anniversary. But as in the apostolicity text, the realization of fellowship in line with *FCU* is not a primary topic here. After assuming the ambitious name “commission on unity,” far fewer concrete steps towards unity have been presented than in the statements of the first “study commission” and the succeeding “joint commission.”

37. Lutheran/Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, *The Apostolicity of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007). The commission finished its work on this text in 2006.

38. In my opinion, the *Porvoo Common Statement* (1992/96) from the dialogue between the Anglican churches in Great Britain and Ireland and Lutheran churches in the Nordic and Baltic nations offers a more constructive approach to how convergence on apostolicity and apostolic succession can be achieved and implemented. The Porvoo text is available at https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/102178/porvoo_common_statement.pdf. On this, see Ola Tjørhom, “Better Together: Apostolicity and Apostolic Succession in Light of an Ecumenical Ecclesiology,” *Pro Ecclesia* 23 (2014): 282–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/106385121402300306>.

39. Lutheran/Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran–Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* (Leipzig: Evang. Verlagsanstalt, 2013).

Conclusions

This brings me to the conclusions that can be drawn from my effort to account for aspects of the Catholic–Lutheran dialogue. I shall present my findings in five brief theses. The following observations also aim at the process ahead, in that they suggest how stagnation and setbacks may be avoided.

1. During its fifty years of existence, there has been a gradual loss of dynamic force and drive in this venture of interconfessional dialogue—especially in its more recent phases. Even if the previous rapprochement remains, topics where a basic consensus has been proclaimed have been reopened over and over again. This is not least due to ecclesiological problems, or clashes between a “maximalist” and a “minimalist” ecclesiology, that block the transformation of consensus into realized fellowship. And, most importantly, the constructive and bold unity proposals of the Malta Report and *Facing Unity* have disappeared from the scene—together with the previously favored and highly advantageous processual advance towards unity through successive steps. As already indicated, the present “commission on unity” has, somewhat paradoxically, contributed notably fewer suggestions than its predecessors about how the agreement that has been achieved can be converted into concrete and lived communion. Accordingly, it can be argued that the goal of unity is more distant today than in the earlier dialogue rounds—or, as the title of this article suggests, we have a situation of much consensus, but little fellowship.
2. On the Lutheran side, the chief problem in terms of ecumenical progress is that a static concept of diversity has gained ground at the expense of efforts to realize the goal of visible unity. Today, Protestants speak of an *Ökumene in Gegensätzen* (ecumenism of contradictions); *ein geordnetes Miteinander bekenntnisverschiedener Kirchen* (an ordered coexistence of churches that preserve different confessions); and *Kirchen, die Kirchen bleiben und eine Kirche werden* (churches that remain separate churches and yet become one church). I have elsewhere characterized these attitudes as expressions of a “reconciled denominationalism.”⁴⁰ A bit surprisingly, the last dictum is an early quote from Joseph Ratzinger.⁴¹ His views deviate clearly from the Protestant positions in contents, but the outcome is the same: The accomplishment of fellowship is deferred to a remote future. Surely, diversity is indispensable—in the life of the church and in a world where oppressive intolerance advances. However, fruitful diversity is never static, but grows towards an ever more committed unity in solidarity—in the church as well as the world.
3. On the Catholic side, a development with opposite implications can be traced. So-called “return ecumenism”—claiming that communion requires that “the

40. Cf. a more detailed account of these points in Tjørhom, “A Question of Balance.”

41. See Joseph Ratzinger, “Die Kirche und die Kirchen,” *Reformatio* 14 (1964): 85–108, at 105.

separated brethren” return to the Roman mother church—ceased to be more or less official doctrine after Vatican II. Yet, this idea has been preserved among conservative and traditionalist Catholics, while the essential ecumenical impulses from the Council have been consistently marginalized—at disastrous costs for Catholic ecumenism.⁴² From the late 1970s up until the present, we have witnessed signs that “return ecumenism” is returning. Occasionally, this is also reflected—if implicitly—in the dialogue texts through what I have described as an apparently unbreakable circle argumentation: All steps towards fellowship at the Lord’s Table presuppose a recognition of the validity of the Lutheran ministry in compliance with the notion of a *defectus ordinis*, and both these measures require realized church fellowship. As far as I can see, this line of reasoning may point towards a merger on Roman premises—meaning structural integration.

A recent case from Germany shows what this shift entails. In a pastoral statement, a majority within the German Bishops Conference consented that members of interchurch families should be allowed to celebrate the Eucharist together at some occasions. However, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, with the knowledge of Pope Francis, instructed the bishops to abstain from putting this proposal into practice and publishing their report on the topic.⁴³ Thus, even modest steps towards intercommunion are excluded, despite the broad accord on eucharistic faith and practice that is unfolded in *The Eucharist* and other ecumenical text. Within such a framework, there is no room for a processual approach to eucharistic fellowship.

4. The trends sketched here in both churches reflect and add up to significant problems, perhaps even a crisis, in current doctrinal ecumenism. Endless dialogues are conducted—occasionally on less relevant issues, turning the path towards unity into a goal in itself. Attempts to build communion are squeezed between a minimalist “too little” and a maximalist “too much.” Moreover, reception is absent, partly because there has been little to receive lately. I cannot go into these challenges in detail here. In my view, however, a renewal of doctrinal ecumenism requires a reinvigorated commitment to the classical goal of the ecumenical movement: A unity that is visible, outwardly perceptible to the world.⁴⁴

42. Cf. further explications in Ola Tjørhom, “An ‘Ecumenical Winter’? Challenges in Contemporary Catholic Ecumenism,” *The Heythrop Journal* 49 (2006): 841–51, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.2008.00380.x>.

43. For coverage of these discouraging events, see issues of the German magazine *Publik-Forum* throughout the spring of 2018; a critical petition to Pope Francis on the matter was even organized. The curial response to the bishops’ proposal came in a letter (marked “streng vertraulich”) from the CDF-Prefect, then Archbishop Luis Ladaria Ferrer, dated April 10, 2018.

44. These factors are further explored in view of recent setbacks in the Anglican–Lutheran Porvoo process in Ola Tjørhom, “The Demise of Visible Unity: Challenges in the Implementation of the Anglican–Lutheran Porvoo Statement,” *Pro Ecclesia* 27 (2018): 70–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/106385121802700109>.

At this point, *Facing Unity* is, if not definite, then at least exemplary. On the one hand, *FCU* and its unity plan advances clearly beyond static interpretations of “reconciled diversity” at the level of a “reconciled denominationalism.” On the other hand, it does not presuppose a total structural integration and deviates substantially from statically uniform ideas of a “return” to Rome. As I read *FCU*, it aims at and succeeds in locating an intermediate path between these two ditches that is congruent with the goal of a visible, structured communion. This suggests a feasible way out of the pending crisis of doctrinal ecumenism.

5. Developments in the Catholic–Lutheran dialogue as well as in ecumenism in general reflect serious challenges: Are Lutheran churches really able to receive proposals that take us beyond static coexistence? And is the Catholic Church ready to implement concepts of unity that embrace a lasting diversity? Trying to solve this quandary, we should look back at the earlier rounds of the dialogue process—with particular regard to these concerns:
 - A properly balanced and mutually agreed perception of the relationship between unity and diversity must be maintained, including a distinction between dividing and nondividing factors. Here the practice of the Old Church is essential: Consensus on the christological and trinitarian foundations of faith can carry remaining differences in other areas. Regrettably, we have turned this practice upside-down—often possessing a basic convergence on the foundation, but pressing for uniformity on other topics.
 - Concrete plans for the fulfilment of church fellowship must be developed. Here a processual approach should be applied, one that realizes that unity is accomplished through successive stages and that provides space for preliminary or interim steps that move toward achieving consensus. Without such an approach, communion will remain a distant goal that appears as largely unattainable. Basically, all ecumenical schemes must focus on the church’s calling to serve as an effective sign of unity in a tragically divided world.
 - A goal-oriented reception process must be prepared at an early stage and completed in the wake of the talks. Since this crucial challenge necessitates the active participation of the faithful, it must be encountered in ways that accord with the *sensus fidelium* principle—aiming at a recognition of features of our own faith in the witness of our sister churches. Seen in this perspective, reception becomes an inclusive and dynamic endeavor which cannot be confined to the levels of church leaders and canon law.

Throughout this process the churches must increasingly act together, as one body. At the core of the whole venture, there must be an awareness that the reunited church lies beyond all past and present ecclesial realities.⁴⁵ For realized unity does not only

45. Here I partly quote René Beaupère, “What Sort of Unity? The Decree of Ecumenism Ten Years Later,” in *What Kind of Unity?*, Faith and Order Paper 69 (Geneva: WCC, 1974), 32ff.

confirm what already exists. It rather transforms us by renewing us, when we grow towards Christ together.

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