The Paradoxical Way of Experiencing Faith through Spiritual Attack (*Anfechtung* – *Tentatio*)

Elisabeth Parmentier

In one of his Table talks, Martin Luther says: “*Sola experientia facit theologum*”: “Yet experience alone makes the theologian.”¹ Far from being an occasional statement, it is a distinctive mark of his theology.

But in this case, does Luther not himself contradict his own struggle against the “enthusiasts,” for whom it was enough to “have the Spirit” without undertaking great biblical and theological explorations? Martin Luther’s affirmation could seduce contemporaries in search of emotions and experiences that can respond to their spiritual quest. The experience would in this case illuminate a path of spirituality authenticated by joy, peace, charisms and the feeling of abundance.

In fact, for the reformer, the experience in this particular case concerns the “*tentatio*,” which he also calls “*Anfechtung*,” a going through trial, a spiritual attack. It was also a concrete struggle lived in certain periods of Luther’s life, especially against diseases or against his doubt about the legitimacy of his struggle. But actually, he interprets this trial, beyond his own situation, as a struggle of the “devil” who disputes his sovereignty with God.

The paradox is that it is precisely this experience of *Anfechtung*, and not joy or peace, that shaped him into a “good” theologian, as he wrote in 1539, near the end of his life. Moreover, he adds that this experience is not only decisive for him, but also a “legitimate” way of doing theology. It is therefore necessary to specify what the concept of experience means for the reformer, what the specific experience of *tentatio* represents, and how it is epistemologically decisive.²

1 Martin Luther, “Value of Knowledge Gained by Experience” (Summer or Fall 1531), Table Talk nr. 46, *LW* 54 (Table Talk), Jaroslav Pelikan & Helmuth T. Lehmann (eds.) (Philadelphia-Saint Louis: Fortress Press-Concordia, 1967), 7 (original German: *WA TR* 1:16, 13, Nr. 46).

2 A recent publication shows that this is not a detail but a major issue: Pierre Bühler et al., eds., *Anfechtung. Versuch der Entmarginalisierung eines Klassikers* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

1 Which Experience? Daily Life and Bodily Life as Means of a Relationship with God

The concept of experience has specific contours, in Martin Luther's thought. For this reason, before focusing on the experience of spiritual trial and struggle, the concept of experience in its positive sense will be explored first.

1.1 *The Experience of God's Gifts through the Body*

One aspect of Luther's approach to spiritual experience is its accessibility through the senses. Much more than other reformers, he insists on the material realities of the world and of the body as means of encounter with God. God's gifts can reach the heart, thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit, when they are made accessible to the senses. External words and material realities (the texts of Scripture, the water of baptism, the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper) are effective in awakening faith, for they proclaim and give Christ himself through the senses. This is the meaning of *promissio* (in German: *Zusage*) that leads to faith: *promissio* is the divine giving "promise" personally addressed to a person (*Zusage*).

For Luther, the sensory process must be taken seriously, and the priority is given to the sense of hearing, because of Rom 10:17: *fides ex auditu*, "faith comes from what we hear." The ear is physically solicited by the proclamation as much as by the contents, because preaching is definitely an active word which touches the person, and finally offers what the word promises. The external word is the mediation that realizes what is announced. Thus the words of institution of the sacrament at the Lord's Supper are not an explanation or a simple historical reminder, but the proclamation of the Gospel, as coming from Christ himself: "This is my body" is Christ in person. This *Zusage-promissio*, in conjunction with faith and by the power of the Holy Spirit, operates what it proclaims. The divine reality to which faith is attached must be "external" to it: "It shall and must be something external, that it may be apprehended by the senses, and understood and thereby be brought into the heart, as indeed the entire Gospel is an external, verbal preaching."³

The reformatory movement was quickly marked by the major conflict of 1529 in Marburg, between Luther and Zwingli but also Karlstadt and Œcolampadius. Against Luther and influenced by Erasmus, they argued that the experience of receiving God's gifts is shared between the Holy Spirit and human spirits. And so, the sacrament is only a "sign" where the material species

3 Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism," Part 4, "Of Baptism," accessed February 2, 2019, <http://www.lutherdansk.dk/Large%20Catechism%20-%20Web/index.htm>.

make no difference. For Luther, on the contrary, the bodily and sensory reality itself will be, just like the word, both spoken and heard, a way of receiving the Gospel which is capable of transforming the person.

Why does Luther insist on the sacraments as inscribed in the body? Certainly against the enthusiasts, but also, and this is particularly interesting for anthropology, because God's gift remains solid even if faith falters, and the faithful can rely upon it:

Were I to be baptized on my own faith, I might tomorrow find myself unbaptized, if faith failed me, or I became worried that I might not yesterday have had the faith rightly. [...] Nothing is lacking in baptism. Always something is lacking in faith. However long our life, always there is enough to learn in regard to faith. It can happen that faith fails, so that it is said, "See, he had faith but has it no more." But one cannot say about baptism, "See, baptism was there but is no longer present." No, it remains [...].⁴

Moreover, this "real" gift of Christ, given to anyone who approaches it, is also underlined as a sharing in community. The sacrament is not reserved for believers, as Calvin will say, precisely because the sacrament "stands" in spite of people's capacity for fidelity. Moreover, for Luther, to stand only by one's own faith is to despise the importance and very meaning of the incarnation of God, who became inseparable from the human destiny. The other reformers rather valued the glorified body of Christ ascended to the Father.

Historian Dorothea Wendebourg notes the fundamental importance of corporality, the senses and materiality in Luther's anthropology.⁵ She emphasizes that faith does not rely on itself but can be developed through an external process. And she shows to what extent Luther conceives the response of faith as a joy of the senses.⁶

The experience is therefore "real" in a double sense: experienced as a real transformation, and received through the material realities of texts, water, bread, and wine. The reformatory reversal therefore resides in the consciousness that believers are beneficiaries and not debtors of God. The Gospel does not depend on virtue and sacrifice, but presents Christ as a gift. Not the faithful are serving God, rather they let God offer God's gifts, so that they can bear fruit

4 Martin Luther, "Concerning Rebaptism" (1528), *LW* 40:253 (WA 26,165,25–166,8).

5 Dorothea Wendebourg, "La Parole, le sacrement et les sens," *Positions luthériennes* 66/1 (2018): 1–19.

6 Wendebourg, "La Parole, le sacrement et les sens," 13–17 and 17–19.

in their commitment to their neighbor. There is therefore a real experience in enjoying the benefits offered by Christ.

1.2 *The Experience of Existential and Ecclesial Transformation by the Sacraments*

Because of this emphasis on the benefits of sharing the sacraments, Luther affirmed also an experience of transformation of the community. For the reception of God's gifts in daily life and in the sacrament is not merely an emotional experience or an aesthetic jubilation, but a profound dynamic of a transformation:

Each grain loses its form and body and acquires the common body of the bread, and as the drops of wine losing their own form become the body of one wine: so should it be with us, and is, indeed, if we use this sacrament aright. Christ with all saints, by His love, takes upon Himself our form, fight with us against sin, death and all evil; this enkindles in us such love that we take His form, rely upon His righteousness, life and blessedness, and through the interchange of His blessings and our misfortunes are one loaf, one bread, one body, one drink, and have all things in common. [...] Again, through this same love, we are to be changed and to make the infirmities of all other Christians our own, take upon ourselves their form and their necessity and makes theirs all the good that is within our power, that they may enjoy it. That is real fellowship and that is the true significance of this sacrament. In this way we are changed into one another and are brought into fellowship with one another by love, without which there can be no such change.⁷

The translation should use “communion” rather than “fellowship,” because the transformation realized in the sacrament incorporates the believers in the communion of saints. This statement truly shows an anthropology marked by *kenosis*. For it does not pursue the affirmation of the tradition that the human being, through the sacrament of union with Christ, would be in a process of divinization. On the contrary, it is a way through which humanity and the conditions of finiteness are assumed. Luther's understanding of transformation envisions a human being who accepts to bear his human infirmities, and

⁷ “A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ and Concerning the Brotherhoods,” *LW* 35, § 14. See also J.J. Schindel's translation, available here (accessed March 1, 2019): <https://www.checkluther.com/wp-content/uploads/1519-A-Treatise-Concerning-the-Blessed-Sacrament-of-the-Holy-and-True-Body-of-Christ-and-Concerning-the-Brotherhoods.pdf>.

moreover also bears the weaknesses of other (poor) people. It is therefore a real, sensory experience, rooted in the five senses as its mediations. But it is also a paradoxical one, through the emphasis of *kenosis* rather than the exaltation of divinization.

This may seem very strange, because how can this way of *kenosis*, which is certainly closer to Jesus of Nazareth, but far from the jubilation of Easter, be the right understanding of theology, even of the best of theologies? And how can the daily, sad experience of the trial, by diseases, misfortunes, death and unpredictable contingencies, relate to God?

2 The Paradoxical Experience of the Attack

Let us specify how Luther sees *Anfechtung*, the experience of God through the trial of his abandonment. Some translations prefer the term “attack,” because Luther is talking about real assaults, a spiritual struggle that leaves someone in disarray, with the question: has God’s promise any reliability? But an even greater subtlety lies in the other facet of temptation: according to Luther’s logic, when joy and success triumph, the risk would be even greater, for this ease would suggest that it is the result of one’s own efforts of virtue.

The central document for this problem is a late writing: the Preface to the publication of his German writings in Wittenberg in 1539.⁸ Luther emphasizes that he takes into account the works of the Fathers and councils, but that like saint Augustine, he wants to be “subject only to Scripture,” the other writings need to be valued but with freedom: “[...] It behooves us to let the prophets and the apostles stand at the professor’s lectern, while we, down below at their feet, listen to what they say. It is not they who must hear what we say.”⁹

2.1 The Three Rules

Even before the reformers began their work, they entrusted theologians with this central exhortation:

Firstly, you should know that the Holy Scriptures constitute a book that turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness, because not one teaches about eternal life except this one alone. Therefore you should

8 Martin Luther, “Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings,” accessed February 21, 2019, https://www.wls.wels.net/rmdevser_wls/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Helpful-Articles-Luthers-Preface-to-the-Wittenberg-Edition-of-His-German-Writings-Luther.pdf.

9 Luther, “Preface to the Wittenberg Edition.”

straightway despair of your reason and understanding. With them you will not attain eternal life, but, on the contrary, your presumptuousness will plunge you and others with you out of heaven (as happened to Lucifer) into the abyss of hell. But kneel down in your little room [Matt 6:6] and pray to God with real humility and earnestness, that he through his dear Son may give you his Holy Spirit, who will enlighten you, lead you and give you understanding.¹⁰

This clearly shows that, in Luther's anthropology, reason must be submitted to the "master of Scripture." But how do we know that it is the Holy Spirit who speaks, and not the human spirit?

For this discernment, Luther orients the study of the Bible according to three "rules" drawn from Psalm 119, which he still attributes, according to the tradition of his time, to King David: *oratio*, *meditatio*, *tentatio*, which do not form juxtaposed poles but a dynamic interrelation.

Oratio, prayer, the first step in the journey of studying the Scriptures, is an expectation and openness to the Word of God, an availability rather than an act of prayer:

Although he [David] well knew and daily heard the text of Moses and other books besides, still he wants to lay hold of the real teacher of the Scriptures himself, so that he may not seize upon them pell-mell with his reason and become his own teacher. For such practice gives rise to factious spirits who allow themselves to nurture the delusion that the Scriptures are subject to them and can be easily grasped with their reason, as if they were Markolf or Aesop's Fables, for which no Holy Spirit and no prayers are needed.¹¹

The call for the help of the Holy Spirit is not of a charismatic type, in the sense of an additional gift or signs of evidence, but rather it shows the interpreter how one, as a reader of the text, is already interpreted by the text! Despairing of one's reason and understanding, and invoking the Holy Spirit, one avoids assuming the prerogatives of the true master, one allows the text to be the true master as a reliable place for the Word of God.

Meditatio is not meditation in the sense of postmodernity. It is not oriented towards spirituality, in expectation of the immediacy of the Holy Spirit. Rather, it concentrates on the rumination of the text in the search for a living word to

10 Luther, "Preface to the Wittenberg Edition."

11 Luther, "Preface to the Wittenberg Edition." See also Philip D. Krey, ed., *Luther's Spirituality*, trans. Peter D. Krey (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 119s.

be discerned in the written text, through the passage from the letter and the literal meaning to the living Word:

[...] you should meditate [...] by actually repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them. And take care that you do not grow weary or think that you have done enough when you have read, heard and spoken once or twice, and that you then have complete understanding.¹²

Such an experience is different from mystical union, even if it uses the same categories of union with Christ. The total dependence on Christ is not an illumination that leads to celestial properties. The process is an experience of physical discipline, based on the exteriority of the formulated word, since it involves stirring up the words, giving them voice, so that they will touch. To meditate is to be (completely) driven by the Word of God.¹³ Because “God will not give you his Spirit without the external word.”¹⁴

Tentatio, “tribulation” or trial, had the meaning of “attack” in *Mittelhochdeutsch*, the *Anfechtung* was a sort of physical fight against another person. Thus, it is not only a question of the reality of disease or misfortune, but also of evil and, as Luther points out, of the devil. This trial at the limit of human forces lies on a different plane than doubt or trial as Thomas Aquinas conceived it, for it is truly the experience of what is opposed to faith, and the feeling of God’s abandonment.

How then is it conceivable that this experience may be beneficial?

2.2 *Tentatio as Real Maturity*

Luther’s original contribution lies in this third term *tentatio*, because the triad beginning with *oratio* and *meditatio* was known to the Fathers, but it culminated in *illuminatio* or *contemplatio*. The challenge which comes from the link with experience lies precisely in replacing *illuminatio* by *tentatio*: “Thirdly, there is *tentatio*, *Anfechtung*. This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God’s Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom.”¹⁵

12 Luther, “Preface to the Wittenberg Edition.”

13 Luther, “Preface to the Wittenberg Edition.”

14 Luther, “Preface to the Wittenberg Edition.”

15 Luther, “Preface to the Wittenberg Edition.”

In order to understand this paradox, Luther relies directly on the example of King David, whom he shows in the grip of enemies – a parallel image of the “good theologian”:

For as soon as God's Word takes roots and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor of you and by his assaults will teach you to seek and love God's Word. I myself (if you will permit me, mere mouse-dirt, to be mingled with pepper) am deeply indebted to my papists that through the devil's raging they have beaten, oppressed and distressed me so much. That is to say, they have made a fairly good theologian of me, which I would not have become otherwise.¹⁶

But why a *good* theologian? Because the test of God's abandonment allows him to find his true, reliable manifestations: Christ proclaimed in Scripture and received in the sacraments, God speaking and acting. Reason cannot as such be used to understand that these are the reliable places of God's proximity and gifts, for otherwise human wisdom would have proven sufficient. We need the gift of the Spirit who reveals it and allows it to be grasped by faith.

3 The Extreme Test: Facing Death

Scholars underline the importance of Psalm 119 in Luther's life, giving him courage in resisting prosecutions, and enabling him to endure the Pope's refusal to comply with his requests. He stood by the Word of God, which he transmitted by abandoning all sovereignty to it. The novelty of Luther's taking into account of his ordeal found wide resonance in many events of his life. He was particularly affected by his spiritual experience, which he described in 1545, a year before his death, in the Preface to the first volume of the edition of the Latin writings: it was through incessant rumination and suffering before God that he had been able to gain another understanding of the divine justice offered by grace.¹⁷

But this biblical rumination, in which the human being discovers himself interpreted and beneficiary of the Word of God, seems to us to be tested in the way Luther reflects, in his sermons, on the experience of the supreme *tentatio*, namely the confrontation with death.

¹⁶ LW 34:286–87.

¹⁷ “Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings” (1545), LW 34:336–37 (the “tower experience”).

Thus, as early as 1519, when he had not yet formalized his reflections on *tentatio*, aspects of it could be seen in his *Sermon on Preparing to Die* (1519). This sermon reveals a completely new profile, when compared to the tradition of the *artes moriendi* found in spiritual texts of the Middle Ages. These “arts of dying” called for familiarizing oneself with death by meditating on one’s life and death, by ruminating on one’s shortcomings and failures. This is not far from a genre of contemporary “wisdom of death” literature that advises to pacify oneself, to become reconciled with oneself and with others.

Luther brings the opposite orientation to his sermon, whose radicality is based on his experience with Scripture. In this extreme situation, it is necessary to arrange temporal matters, to apologize to detractors, and take leave of the entourage. Then Luther recommends turning resolutely and confidently to God in trust, and to no longer look to sin, death and the devil! Moreover, we must look at how “death is strangled and overcome by life” in Christ. He transforms the situation of spiritual anguish by recommending not to ruminate on one’s own incapacities but to pray and to see oneself sheltered in the communion of the whole Church. The person in fear of imminent death is encouraged to say this:

God promised and in his sacraments he gave me a sure sign of his grace that Christ’s life overcame my death in his death, that his obedience blotted out my sin in his suffering, that his love destroyed my hell in his forsakenness. This sign and promise of my salvation will not lie to me or deceive me. It is God who has promised it, and he cannot lie either by words or in deeds.¹⁸

The knowledge of this promise comes from Scripture, which the Spirit enables us to interpret. Luther still insists that doubting is similar to making God into a liar. Likewise, for those who scrutinize their own dignity, he says that the only dignity is faith:

The evil spirit brings up the question of worthiness and unworthiness to stir doubts within you, thus nullifying the sacraments with their benefits and making God a liar in what he says. God gives you nothing because of your worthiness, nor does he build his Word and sacraments on your worthiness, but out of sheer grace he establishes you, unworthy one, on the foundation of his Word and signs.¹⁹

18 “A Sermon on Preparing to Die,” § 15, *LW* 42:109.

19 “A Sermon on Preparing to Die,” § 16, *LW* 42:110.

It is the help offered in Christ, given in the sacraments, but also by the entourage of the whole communion of saints, that comes to the aid of the person, who is not alone and above all has nothing to achieve by her own strength. The trial is mentioned again at the end of the sermon, where it is presented not as an insurmountable struggle, but as a test that shows the extent of all the benefits received and the ultimate power of God: "Why then should he not impose something big upon you (such as dying), as long as he adds to it great benefits, help, and strength, and thereby wants to test the power of his grace?"²⁰

4 What Is the Particularity of This Experience?

We note, after this survey, that the experience presented by the reformer does not meet the expectations of contemporaries in search of extraordinary spiritual experiences, because ultimately it is above all an experience with Scripture.²¹ And moreover, does not the link, which is so specific to Luther's life, imply that the experience may not be transferable, or even relevant for other people at other times?

4.1 An "Apocalyptic" Anthropology

Oswald Bayer, a specialist of Martin Luther, stresses that this concept of experience offered by the mediation of Scripture is broader than the individual human subject.²² Far from limiting it to a kind of personal mysticism, Luther extends it to an ecclesiological orientation of the Church that suffers for the Gospel. Moreover, his reading is not only existential but eschatological: suffering for the true Word of God is part of one's self-abandonment to its sovereignty.

Bayer considers that this anthropology, which is guided by the experience of tribulation, appears as early as Luther's treatise *On the Freedom of the Christian* (1520). He notes that the terms "experience" (*experimentum*), "test" (*probare*), "tribulations" (*tribulationes*), "temptations" (*tentationes*) appear there, and that all these patterns are set within an "apocalyptic" understanding.²³ It is a real fight – not only an inner struggle of the individual, but a global/communal one. It concerns the very priority of the first commandment: everything which is not taken over by God in life and the world is ruled by other idols. Therefore,

20 "A Sermon on Preparing to Die," § 20, LW 42:114.

21 Timothy J. Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther. An Introductory Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

22 Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 38s.

23 Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 62.

the trial is salutary, because the spiritual attack is what teaches us to stand by the Word of God and not by idols. This is summarized by Bayer in an article in which he tries to convey the essence of Luther's teaching in twenty questions, based on statements made by the reformer. Question 16 alludes to the importance of *tentatio*:

Is your theological existence determined by prayer (*oratio*), meditation (*meditatio*), and attack (*tentatio*); that is, by the fact that, driven as you are by *Anfechtung*, you enter prayerfully into Holy Scripture and are interpreted by it in order that you can interpret it for others who are under spiritual attack, so that they too enter prayerfully into Holy Scripture and are interpreted by it?²⁴

So Scripture and experience are not parallel or complementary paths. Instead, one will be able to experience what the Word of God does through Scripture: "What makes the theologian is not experience as such, but the experience of scripture [...]. It means letting the author, the triune God, work in me through the scriptures. That is the passivity that is unique to the experience of faith."²⁵

But here again, however, it is necessary to avoid the misunderstanding of a literalistic conception of this passivity of the believer's life, as if the experience amounts simply to endure misery. On the contrary, preaching and the proclamation of the Word of God show the other dimension of experience: the dimension which manifests how good the Lord is. This leads to the sensory experience, already mentioned at the outset, of receiving Christ through the five senses in the preaching and the sacraments.

4.2 *The Epistemological Value of Anfechtung*

This statement from the Preface to the publication of his German writings in Wittenberg is worth noting: "Moreover I want to point out to you a correct way of studying theology, for I have had practice in that. If you keep to it, you will become so learned that you yourself could (if it were necessary) write books just as good as those of the fathers and councils."²⁶

Why is the experience of *tentatio* so important, not only for Luther and the believers, but also for theology? Luther was not the first to value experience as

24 Oswald Bayer, "Twenty Questions on the Relevance of Luther for Today," *Lutheran Quarterly* 29 (2015): 442 (available online, consulted December 27, 2018: <http://www.lutheranquarterly.com/uploads/7/4/0/1/7401289/bayer20points.pdf>).

25 Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 63–64.

26 Luther, *Preface*.

a fertile ground for theology, and the same could be said of many theological endeavors. As Gerhard Ebeling recalls, saint Augustine developed a theology where experience permeates everything. It is therefore not surprising that the semantic field of experience recurs throughout Luther's works. But it is not only about statistics. Rather, it is about how to take experience into account: "For his part, Luther occupies a special place in the history of theology because, in his thinking, experience not only condenses in an original way, but for the first time becomes explicitly the subject of constant reflection about its constitutive meaning for theology."²⁷

Experience is necessary for, and even an integral part of, understanding theology itself. For the reformer, theology is not the construction of the multidisciplinary system developed in the 18th century, but above all the study of Scripture. Thus it is not an acquisition of knowledge, as we imagine it today when one easily opposes academic theology and religious life, personal faith experience and scientific theology. Rather, it is a journey through biblical confrontation and the resulting crisis.

Experience is a test that teaches dependence on Christ, it is not a knowledge or a discourse about experience. The way in which experience is a source of theology implies the posture of being involved as a theologian in what one is teaching. In this respect, it is not a controlled and controllable experience. The perception of the experience itself is transformed.²⁸ It is a theology that allows itself to be contradicted and thwarted by the way God reveals Godself and gives life, a theology that does not seek to control God.

5 A Fruitfulness for Ecumenical Dialogues?

How can this Lutheran accent be received in ecumenical dialogues? Would this promote dialogue with Churches that insist on experience rather than doctrine, such as the Orthodox Church, but also charismatic Churches?

An undeniable contribution would be the insistence on the need to value methods of dialogue that are not only conceptual and doctrinal but also benefit from spiritual experience, in order to build a common foundation on the shared affirmation of salvation in Christ. This intuition of a possible sharing

27 Gerhard Ebeling, "Die Klage über das Erfahrungsdefizit in der Theologie als Frage nach ihrer Sache," in *Wort und Glaube*, vol. 3. Beiträge zur Fundamentaltheologie, Soteriologie und Ekklesiologie (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1972), 6–7 (my translation).

28 Gerhard Ebeling and Eberhard Jüngel spoke of an "experience with the experience" (*die Erfahrung mit der Erfahrung*).

and a deepening of bonds through the experience of faith is already proven in dialogue committees which practice liturgical sharing or dialogues of spirituality, such as those that exist notably between monastic or religious communities. Conversations with Churches of the Pentecostal or evangelical movement have also developed a method of mutual learning through the narrative of the experience of faith, especially in the methods of the meetings in the *Global Christian Forum*. These spaces for dialogue are important also insofar as they help participants realize that the “other Church” is also faithful. They contribute to overcoming the logic of missionary competition.

Experience as a common starting point can also help to re-center the search for the unity of the churches in the affirmation of the basic gift of life received in Christ, which is at the heart of the whole Christian celebration. This core aspect relativizes a number of more difficult issues. It is noteworthy that one of the first texts of ecumenical agreements between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church, *The Mystery of the Church and the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity* (1982), focuses on the theology of God’s gift in Christ, and the purpose is indeed to rest upon a shared basis: “In composing this document we want to show that in doing so we express together a faith which is the continuation of that of the Apostles.”²⁹

The question has often been asked in ecumenism if anthropological conceptions are not implicitly at the root of many divergences. This assertion cannot be completely proven, even if the different traditions have different perceptions of the human being, and therefore also of the relationship with God. The Orthodox tradition, which more than the Western Churches values God’s good creation, and therefore also a more positive understanding of human nature, nevertheless knows through the Fathers the spiritual experience of *tentatio* and spiritual struggle. And yet the Lutheran tradition, which could have been presumed to be suspicious of the body because of its anthropological pessimism, has nevertheless expressed confidence in the capacities of the five senses, thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit, to receive Christ’s gifts in a corporeal way, and the readiness to be able to rejoice in them. It is therefore necessary to avoid excessively harsh anthropological diagnoses.

Moreover, the two stakes in the background of anthropology are ecclesiology and ethics, so it is necessary to return from these places to what motivates disputes/disagreements.

29 Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, “The Mystery of the Church and the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity (Munich, 1982),” accessed December 19, 2018, <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/ristosaarinen/lutheran-orthodox-dialogue/>.

The present contribution aims above all to distinguish a commonly expected experience of the Christian faith: the good feelings, joy and enthusiasm, from the paradoxical experience as experienced by the Church Fathers and mystics, which seems to take place in the night and in the struggle. Thus, it is important for any Church to encourage the mediation of the senses, corporality and material realities (and not just reason) as tangible bridges for God's quest. But Martin Luther provides a very helpful safeguard by teaching not to be attached to visible positive signs (success, joy, accomplishment), which would be what he calls a "theology of glory."

Today, Luther would certainly be in clear opposition to the "Prosperity Gospel," a dazzling development especially in the countries of the global South, including Lutheran churches, which seeks to offer visible evidence and signs of God's blessing, even affirming that those who do not benefit from it doubt God. These movements consider it to be a lack of faith in God's promise, if healings, miracles, life changes and moral progress are not actively pursued. Yet the apostle Paul, who benefited from many charisms and even spiritual experiences, made a point of warning the Galatians and other "super-Christians." This highlights Luther's concern not to abandon the biblical text that provides us with "safeguards."

For the Fathers, temptation is a way for God – or the devil – to test the strength of faith, and thus it allows the believer to come out of it victorious by the strength of his resistance in faith. For Luther, the movement is the opposite: he abandons courage, strength and resistance in order to let himself be carried entirely by Christ. This emphasis certainly distinguishes Luther from other theological schools by his paradoxical interpretation of the *Anfechtung*. There is no force to be proved, nothing to be conquered by merit, and therefore the posture of the theologian laminated by the trial is not the excellence of the victorious faith, but the abandonment of all mastery to Christ. It is perhaps because of this extreme that Luther's point about the *Anfechtung* is hardly understood, or understood on the contrary as a lazy passivity. The point is rather the radical passivity of trust – This is faith!

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