Editorial

What to do about 2017?
The Ecumenical Challenge of a Centenary

The 31st of October 1517 has become a symbol of the Reformation of the sixteenth century. In 2017, the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation will be commemorated and celebrated. Already now, looking forward to this year creates a big ecumenical challenge since Protestants and Roman Catholics have very different conceptions and connotations of ‘Reformation’. In most cases, Protestants would connect ‘Reformation’ with regaining a fresh understanding of the gospel and assurance of faith and freedom, while Roman Catholics would associate it with the split of the Western Church. Anniversaries and especially centenaries have been occasions when churches have retold the history of the Reformation. We recount history, since it is by knowing where we come from that we can understand who we are. But Protestant and Roman Catholic narratives of the Reformation have been different or even opposed. Moreover, these narratives have served to legitimize or delegitimize the existence of Protestant churches, and likewise for the Roman Catholic Church. But now we have a new situation, since the 2017 centenary will take place for the first time in an ecumenical age. 2017 will not only see 500 years of Reformation but also fifty years of Roman Catholic – Lutheran dialogue. Thus Protestants do not wish to observe this event without Roman Catholics, and Catholics wish to join the Protestants in – well, what do they wish to do jointly with Protestants in 2017? This is a matter of debate. Can Roman Catholics merely commemorate 500 years of the Reformation together with Protestants, or can they also actually celebrate together with them? Of course, nobody wishes to celebrate the split of the Church!

But what does celebration presuppose? A celebration presupposes that something good has happened to people and that they are thankful for it.
Celebration is the expression of thankfulness for something good that people have received or experienced. Thus the question is whether Roman Catholics can see anything good in the Reformation and the Protestant churches – something that is good for the Church as a whole and thus also for Catholics. Conversely one can say: If Roman Catholics cannot celebrate 2017 together with Protestants, they reveal that they cannot see anything good in the Reformation and the Protestant churches, because if anything good were there, they would also have the desire to jointly celebrate it. Thus in dealing with the ecumenical celebration of 2017, nothing less than Roman Catholic-Lutheran ecumenism is at stake.

But what exactly is the good that Roman Catholics and Protestants could celebrate together in 2017? Here the documents of the Second Vatican Council are seminal. *Unitatis redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism, states: ‘Some, and even most, of the significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the holy Spirit, and visible elements too’ (UR 1.3). And ‘Our separated brothers and sisters also celebrate many sacred actions of the Christian religion. These most certainly can truly engender a life of grace in ways that vary according to the conditions of each church or community, and must be held capable of giving access to that communion in which is salvation’ (ibid.). But there are not only single elements of truth and sanctification to be acknowledged outside the Catholic church. Rather the Council offers something like a sacramental description of those communities: ‘It follows that the separated churches and communities as such, though we believe them to be deficient in some respects, have by no means been 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 [...]’ (ibid.).

The ecumenical dialogues of the Roman Catholic Church that were made possible by the Council’s decisions substantiated what the Council expressed in the quoted statements. I would like to mention only the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation (1999). This is an official doctrinal statement that was prepared by more than forty years of ecumenical