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# **Towards New Definitions of Jesus: The Contemporary Significance of Reformation, Dialogue and Pope Francis**

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*Abstract:* After analysing broadly the events leading from reformation, this article looks at its significance in terms of Lutherans and Christians common attempt to come together. While acknowledging that this is a very praiseworthy move, we need to ask some harsh questions about the violence and loss of life it has led to. The dialogue between Christians, symbolised by the words and deeds of Pope Francis, is truly remarkable. At the same time, we need to evolve our definitions of Jesus, which alone can prevent a re-enactment of the harm caused by reformation, while appreciating the positive contributions of this great event.

*Keywords:* Definitions of Jesus, Reformation, dialogue, Pope Francis, Lutheran-Catholic communion.

As we know, Martin Luther, a German monk, started the movement of Reformation in 1517 when he wrote 95 theses criticizing the Catholic Church for corruption, including the buying of ecclesiastical privileges, nepotism, usury and the selling of indulgences.

According to many historians, Luther never intended his 95 theses – which may or may not actually have been nailed

to the church doors to a church door in Wittenburg, Germany – to spark a revolution. “He started by wanting reform. He never planned to split away from the Latin church; that wasn’t where it began,” said Bishop William Kenney, the Catholic co-chair of the international dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics, who accompanied the pope to Sweden in October 2016 (Sherwood 2016).

In this article, I want to focus almost exclusively on the attempt of Catholics and Lutherans to bring about the reconciliation 500 years after the reformation. While talking about “walking ecumenism” initiated by Pope Francis, we also talk of the healing of memories made possible by prayer and works of mercy. This prayer helps us to bring the Word to the world, brining healing and reconciliation. Then we discuss genuine dialogue, which heralds God’s unconditional love for all humans.

Finally, after learning the hard lessons of reformation (including 3-11,000,000 people lost in Thirty Year’s War), we speak of the need to rediscover the definition of Jesus and God for today. The challenge facing us to rediscover this definition in terms an all-embracing and merciful love. That definition will determine our own life and how we look at God, Jesus and our fellow-human beings.

## **1. Walking Ecumenism: Working Together on Social Issues**

“We too must look with love and honesty at our past, recognizing error and seeking forgiveness, for God alone is our judge,” said Pope Francis, in October 2016 in the cathedral of Lund, which was confiscated from Catholics after Lutheranism became the state religion in 16th century (Pullella & PultzNielsen 2016).

In his address during the joint prayer service held in Lund, where the Lutheran World Federation was founded in 1947, Francis acknowledged that some good came from Luther and the Reformation, particularly his emphasis on the Gospel. “With gratitude we acknowledge that the Reformation helped give greater centrality to sacred scripture in the (Catholic) Church’s life,” he said (Pullella & PultzNielsen 2016).

For Gerard O’Connell, Vatican correspondent for the Jesuit magazine *America*, the pope’s participation in commemorating the Reformation is proof of the extraordinary change in Catholic-Lutheran relations.

“A recognition, perhaps, that both sides missed something at the time of the Protestant Reformation,” says O’Connell. “The Catholic Church missed ways of reforming itself. Luther and those around him pressed in a way that just couldn’t be taken on board, so, in a way, both sides misspoke” (Poggioli 2016).

To be honest, there are still some doctrinal disputes. But Pope Francis says that while theologians iron out their differences, the two churches can work together on social issues like caring for the poor, migrants and refugees, and combating persecution of Christians.

This way of Francis, according to Jens-Martin Kruse, pastor of the Lutheran Church in Rome, is “walking ecumenism” (Poggioli 2016). “We are moving together, this is a new experience that we are together on this walk,” Kruse adds. “Walking together, we find that we have lots of things more in [common than] we thought before.” Kruss acknowledges: “today, we are at the point where a lot of these topics from Luther are common for Catholics and Lutherans.”

In June 2015, Pope Francis went so far as to praise Luther as a great reformer. On his flight back to Rome from Armenia, the pope told reporters: “The church was not a role model,

there was corruption, there was worldliness, there was greed, and lust for power. He protested against this. And he was an intelligent man” (Poggioli 2016).

However, a document signed On the eve of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation by dozens of Protestant evangelicals and entitled “Is the Reformation Over?” says that although cooperation between the two traditions should be encouraged in areas of common concern, “the issues that gave birth to the Reformation 500 years ago are still very much alive in the 21st century for the whole church” (Sherwood 2016).

## **2. Healing of Memories: Shifting towards Prayer and the Works of Mercy**

In a rare gesture of unity among Christians, on Oct. 31, 2016, Pope Francis traveled to Sweden to mark the start of commemorations for the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformations and the split between Catholics and Lutherans. It was held in southern Swedish city of Lund (le Miere 2016). The Pope was welcomed by Sweden’s Prime Minister Stefan Lofven.

“It will not be easy to go forward because of the different ways of understanding some theological questions,” Francis told the Jesuit Journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*. He added: “Personally, I believe that enthusiasm must shift towards common prayer and the works of mercy – work done together to help the sick, the poor, and the imprisoned. To do something together is a high and effective form of dialogue” (le Miere 2016).

One of the terrible Consequences of this reformation is the Thirty Years’ War in 1618, which took place mainly in Germany and by some estimates cost the country up to 40 percent of its population. It also impacted much of Europe.

The signing of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 effectively ended the Roman Catholic Church's claim to authority across the continent. We will have more to say on it in the Conclusion.

It is sad to note that healing of memories was attempted only in the 1960s when moves were afoot to bring about greater Christian unity with the beginning of ecumenical dialogue. That continued with the Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification in 1999 and, in 2013, the joint publication by the Catholic and Lutheran church of a document entitled "From Conflict to Reformation" (le Miere 2016).

### **3. Praying Together: Bringing His WORD to the World**

Francis delivered the homily at the ecumenical prayer service at Lund in Sweden on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2016 (Francis 2016), on the theme: "Abide in me as I abide in you" (Jn 15:4). The following is a summary of Pope's reflections at this ecumenical prayer service, which has great lessons for Lutheran-Catholic relationship and the relevance of reformation for today.

The Pope said that the words, spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper, allow us to peer into the heart of Christ just before his ultimate sacrifice on the cross. We can feel his heart beating with love for us and his desire for the unity of all who believe in him. He tells us that he is the true vine and that we are the branches, that just as he is one with the Father, so we must be one with him if we wish to bear fruit.

The Pope wished to manifest our shared desire to remain one with Christ, so that we may have life. The Pope went on: "We ask him, 'Lord, help us by your grace to be more closely united to you and thus, together, to bear a more effective witness of faith, hope and love'. This is also a moment to thank God for the efforts of our many brothers and sisters from different ecclesial communities who refused to be resigned

to division, but instead kept alive the hope of reconciliation among all who believe in the one Lord” (Francis 2016).

He reminded both Catholics and Lutherans, that we have undertaken a common journey of reconciliation. Now, in the context of the commemoration of the Reformation, we have a new opportunity to accept a common path, one that has taken shape over the past fifty years in the ecumenical dialogue between the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church. Nor can we be resigned to the division and distance that our separation has created between us. We have the opportunity to mend a critical moment of our history by moving beyond the controversies and disagreements that have often prevented us from understanding one another.

Jesus tells us that the Father is the “vinedresser” who tends and prunes the vine in order to make it bear more fruit. The Father is constantly concerned for our relationship with Jesus, to see if we are truly one with him. He watches over us, and his gaze of love inspires us to purify our past and to work in the present to bring about the future of unity that he so greatly desires (Francis 2016).

Pope Francis urges us to look with love and honesty at our past, recognizing error and seeking forgiveness, for God alone is our judge. So the Pope pleaded.

We ought to recognize with the same honesty and love that our division distanced us from the primordial intuition of God's people, who naturally yearn to be one, and that it was perpetuated historically by the powerful of this world rather than the faithful people, which always and everywhere needs to be guided surely and lovingly by its Good Shepherd. Certainly, there was a sincere will on the part of both sides to profess and uphold the true faith, but at the same time we realize that we closed in on ourselves out of fear or bias with regard to the faith which others profess with a different accent and language.

Then he quoted Pope John Paul II: “We must not allow ourselves to be guided by the intention of setting ourselves up as judges of history but solely by the motive of understanding better what happened and of becoming messengers of truth.” God is the vinedresser, who with immense love tends and protects the vine; let us be moved by his watchful gaze. The one thing he desires is for us to abide like living branches in his Son Jesus. With this new look at the past, we do not claim to realize an impracticable correction of what took place, but “to tell that history differently,” said the Pope citing “Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity,” 2013.

The Pope recalled the words of Jesus: “Apart from me, you can do nothing.” He is the one who sustains us and spurs us on to find ways to make our unity ever more visible. Certainly, our separation has been an immense source of suffering and misunderstanding, yet it has also led us to recognize honestly that without him we can do nothing; in this way it has enabled us to understand better some aspects of our faith. With gratitude we acknowledge that the Reformation helped give greater centrality to sacred Scripture in the Church’s life. Through shared hearing of the word of God in the Scriptures, important steps forward have been taken in the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, whose fiftieth anniversary we are presently celebrating. Let us ask the Lord that his word may keep us united, for it is a source of nourishment and life; without its inspiration we can do nothing.

The Pope again called to mind the challenges posed by Martin Luther: “The spiritual experience of Martin Luther challenges us to remember that apart from God we can do nothing. ‘How can I get a propitious God?’ This is the question that haunted Luther. In effect, the question of a just relationship with God is the decisive question for our lives.” Pope Francis said that Luther encountered that propitious God

in the Good News of Jesus, incarnate, dead and risen. With the concept “by grace alone,” he reminds us that God always takes the initiative, prior to any human response, even as he seeks to awaken that response. “The doctrine of justification thus expresses the essence of human existence before God,” he affirmed.

Jesus intercedes for us as our mediator before the Father; he asks him that his disciples may be one, “so that the world may believe” (Jn 17:21). This is what comforts us and inspires us to be one with Jesus, and thus to pray: “Grant us the gift of unity, so that the world may believe in the power of your mercy”. This is the testimony the world expects from us. He added: “We Christians will be credible witnesses of mercy to the extent that forgiveness, renewal and reconciliation are daily experienced in our midst. Together we can proclaim and manifest God’s mercy, concretely and joyfully, by upholding and promoting the dignity of every person. Without this service to the world and in the world, Christian faith is incomplete.”

As Lutherans and Catholics, we pray together, “conscious that without God we can do nothing. We ask his help, so that we can be living members, abiding in him, ever in need of his grace, so that together we may bring his Word to the world, which so greatly needs his tender love and mercy” (Francis 2016).

He went on: ‘We have the opportunity to mend a critical moment of our history by moving beyond the controversies and disagreements that have often prevented us from understanding one another.’ Then again: “We too must look with love and honesty at our past, recognizing error and seeking forgiveness, for God alone is our judge.”

In a symbolic gesture, after the Lund event, the Vatican and Lutheran delegations rode together on a bus to attend an event



highlighting both churches' peace-making and humanitarian efforts.

#### **4. Dialoguing With: Heralding God's Boundless Love for All Humanity**

In keeping with this dialogical approach, in 2013, a joint publication by the Catholic and Lutheran church of a document entitled "From Conflict to Reformation" was released (Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission On Unity 2013). Later Pope Francis and Bishop Munib Yunan, president of the Lutheran World Federation, signed the Joint Declaration at the Lutheran Cathedral of Lund, Sweden (Joint Statement 2016). Below we go through some of the salient features of this common document.

##### ***With Thankful Hearts***

With this Joint Statement, the Lutherans and Catholics express joyful gratitude to God, as we begin the year commemorating the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. Fifty years of sustained and fruitful ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans have helped us to overcome many differences, and have deepened our mutual understanding and trust. At the same time, we have drawn closer to one another through joint service to our neighbours – often in circumstances of suffering and persecution. "Through dialogue and shared witness we are no longer strangers. Rather, we have learned that what unites us is greater than what divides us" (Joint Statement 2016).

##### ***Moving from Conflict to Communion***

While we are profoundly thankful for the spiritual and theological gifts received through the Reformation, we also confess and lament before Christ that Lutherans and Catholics

have wounded the visible unity of the Church. Theological differences were accompanied by prejudice and conflicts, and religion was instrumentalized for political ends. Our common faith in Jesus Christ and our baptism demand of us a daily conversion, by which we cast off the historical disagreements and conflicts that impede the ministry of reconciliation. They also acknowledge: “While the past cannot be changed, what is remembered and how it is remembered can be transformed. We pray for the healing of our wounds and of the memories that cloud our view of one another. We emphatically reject all hatred and violence, past and present, especially that expressed in the name of religion. Today, we hear God’s command to set aside all conflict. We recognize that we are freed by grace to move towards the communion to which God continually calls us’ (Joint Statement 2016).

### ***Our Commitment to Common Witness***

The document holds that as we move beyond those episodes in history that burden us, “we pledge to witness together to God’s merciful grace, made visible in the crucified and risen Christ.” Aware that the way we relate to one another shapes our witness to the Gospel, we commit ourselves to further growth in communion rooted in Baptism, as we seek to remove the remaining obstacles that hinder us from attaining full unity. Christ desires that we be one, so that the world may believe (cf. John 17:21).

Regarding the common Eucharistic fellowship the document says: Many members of our communities yearn to receive the Eucharist at one table, as the concrete expression of full unity. We experience the pain of those who share their whole lives, but cannot share God’s redeeming presence at the Eucharistic table. We acknowledge our joint pastoral responsibility to respond to the spiritual thirst and hunger of

our people to be one in Christ. We long for this wound in the Body of Christ to be healed. This is the goal of our ecumenical endeavours, which we wish to advance, also by renewing our commitment to theological dialogue.

We pray to God that Catholics and Lutherans will be able to witness together to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, inviting humanity to hear and receive the good news of God's redeeming action. We pray to God for inspiration, encouragement and strength so that we may stand together in service, upholding human dignity and rights, especially for the poor, working for justice, and rejecting all forms of violence. God summons us to be close to all those who yearn for dignity, justice, peace and reconciliation. Today in particular, we raise our voices for an end to the violence and extremism which affect so many countries and communities, and countless sisters and brothers in Christ. So Lutherans and Catholics are urged to work together "to welcome the stranger, to come to the aid of those forced to flee because of war and persecution, and to defend the rights of refugees and those who seek asylum."

It adds: "We realize that our joint service in this world must extend to God's creation, which suffers exploitation and the effects of insatiable greed. We recognize the right of future generations to enjoy God's world in all its potential and beauty. We pray for a change of hearts and minds that leads to a loving and responsible way to care for creation."

They also make a fervent plea to all Christians all over the world, on this auspicious occasion (Joint Statement 2016):

As we recommit ourselves to move from conflict to communion, we do so as part of the one Body of Christ, into which we are incorporated through Baptism. We invite our ecumenical partners to remind us of our commitments and to encourage us. We ask them to continue to pray for us, to walk with us, to support us in living out the prayerful commitments we express today.

The Reformation is one of the great and dramatic instances of definitions of human beings and human difference: Christians in the sixteenth did not agree on what the word meant, what it entailed for a person trying to live it, and sadly they killed one another over the content of the word. Christian might mean refusing to take oaths and being baptized as an adult; Christian might mean infant baptism and a collective commemoration of the Last Supper; Christian might mean infant baptism and the Mass as collective worship. Many images capture the emotional power of the growing distance between fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, husbands and wives: the shattering of a glass vessel, the sundering of a tree, the shredding of a tapestry. Those images point toward the emotional power of the experience of difference. But in those same years, Christians told stories in which one group was God's instrument, another, the Devil's; one position was not simply right for a group of people, it was divine and true (Wandel 2016). The power of those stories abide to this day and we are collectively living it.

Today our stories are different. For example, the Holy Week reminds us of a model for how we might speak of wrenching, harrowing human difference - not the kind of difference we think about, but the kind of difference we feel, experience viscerally, as those Europeans did now five hundred years ago. According to journalist Lee Palmer Wendel, "That story begins by taking God out of it. This is a human story, not a divine story. There are no divine instruments. It is a question of perspective: God alone knows who God's instruments are. Our work is to tell a story of human beings, from our perspective" (Wendel 2016).

The story of reformation and the present attempts at dialoge revolve around the core mystery of Christianity: the Incarnation. All Christians share the belief that, in the words of the ancient Nicene Creed, Jesus Christ was "begotten, not

Finally, the document calls upon Catholics and Lutherans worldwide “to be bold and creative, joyful and hopeful in their commitment to continue the great journey ahead of us. Rather than conflicts of the past, God’s gift of unity among us shall guide cooperation and deepen our solidarity.” Further, it goes on: “By drawing close in faith to Christ, by praying together, by listening to one another, by living Christ’s love in our relationships, we, Catholics and Lutherans, open ourselves to the power of the Triune God. Rooted in Christ and witnessing to him, we renew our determination to be faithful heralds of God’s boundless love for all humanity” (Joint Statement 2016).

## **5. Conclusion: Dialogue as Way of Life**

In conclusion, I want to talk about three aspects. First, why the story of reformation and the attempts at rapprochement after 500 years is significant for us today. Then I look on one of the tragic aspects of the reformation, that has stolen millions of years. Finally, as a symbol of reconciliation and dialogue, we refer to Martin Luther’s plaza. This leads to the possible future for Christianity and humanity based on common experience of Jesus, dialogue with one another and also the reduction and elimination of evil and violence.

### ***5.1 The Definition of Jesus: Significance of the Story of Reformation for Today***

Why does it matter how anyone tells the story of the Reformation? Sixteenth-century chroniclers, contemporaries of Martin Luther, drew on the Bible for the structuring of their narrative; Luther and Calvin were cast as instruments of divine revelation, embedded in the playing out of divine will in human time. That model, of divine revelation realized through individual human lives, did not end with the sixteenth century (Wandel 2016). It is relevant even for today.

made,” the Son of God, at once divine and human. But what is it, to be “human”? In the sixteenth century, that question acquired terrible force; in the early years of the century, it was already troubling. It was an ancient question - the Greeks had asked in many different forms - but with the proliferation of humanist texts in the fifteenth century and, at the end of that century, Columbus’s landing on an island populated with persons no European had seen before, the question was no longer one of self-reflection. It was one of definition: definition of who God and Jesus are (Wandel 2016). Today, like the time of reformation, we also need new definition for Jesus for our collective self-understanding. Such a definition or story can enable us to live together as brother and sisters, even with non-Christians and atheists.

## ***5.2 The Terrible Consequence: The Thirty Year War***

The Thirty Years’ War was fought between 1618 and 1648, principally on the territory of today’s Germany, and involved most of the major European continental powers. Although it was ostensibly a religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics, the rivalry between the Habsburg dynasty and other powers was a more central motive, as shown by the fact that Catholic France under the de facto rule of Cardinal Richelieu supported the Protestant side in order to weaken the Habsburgs, thereby furthering France’s position as the pre-eminent European power (Thirty Years’ War n.d.). This increased the France-Habsburg rivalry which led later to direct war between France and Spain. The major impact of the Thirty Years’ War, in which mercenary armies were extensively used, was the devastation of entire regions scavenged bare by the foraging armies. Episodes of widespread famine and disease (a starving body has little resistance to illnesses) devastated the population of the German states and, to a lesser extent, the Low Countries and Italy, while bankrupting many of the

powers involved. The war may have lasted for 30 years, but the conflicts that triggered it continued unresolved for a much longer time. The war ended with the Treaty of Münster, a part of the wider Peace of Westphalia (Thirty Years' War n.d.).

During the war, Germany's population was reduced by 30 percent on average; in the territory of Brandenburg, the losses had amounted to half, while in some areas an estimated two thirds of the population died. Germany's male population was reduced by almost half. The population of the Czech lands declined by a third. The Swedish armies alone destroyed 2,000 castles, 18,000 villages and 1,500 towns in Germany, one-third of all German towns (Thirty Years' War n.d.). The edicts agreed upon during the signing of the Peace of Westphalia were instrumental in laying the foundations for what are even today considered the basic tenets of the sovereign nation-state. In addition to establishing fixed territorial boundaries for many of the countries involved in the ordeal, the Peace of Westphalia changed the relationship of subjects to their rulers. In earlier times, people had tended to have overlapping political and religious loyalties. Now, it was agreed that the citizenry of a respective nation were subjected first and foremost to the laws and whims of their own respective government rather than to those of neighbouring powers, be they religious or secular. As a result of this religiously sanctioned conflict, some began to advocate that no religion should enjoy a privileged relationship with the state but that apart from allowing citizens their religious liberty, religion ought to be a matter for each individual's conscience (Thirty Years' War n.d.).

It is estimated that 3,000,000 to 11,500,000 people lost their lives due to this long-drawn war. A truly tragic consequence of a story lived, shared and fought together. The terrible and tragic power of a story being enacted!

### **5.3 The Symbolic Reconciliation: Piazza Martin Lutero**

As we know Luther was excommunicated in 1521 and was never allowed to return to the Catholic Church. Today Vatican's views have changed, both symbolically and significantly. So hilltop square in Rome is due to be named Piazza Martin Lutero, in memory of Luther's achievements. The site chosen is the Oppian Hill, a park area that overlooks the Colosseum.

The move has been six years in a making, said an Italian daily *La Repubblica*. The original plan was to inaugurate the square in time for the 500th anniversary of Luther's historic trip to Rome in 2010. City officials were not able to discuss the process behind naming the square or the reason for the holdup. The move contrasts sharply from views held by Luther around the time of his visit to Rome, when he asserted repeatedly: "If there is a hell, Rome is built over it."

The creative dialogue that has enabled both Catholics and Lutherans to come together is truly welcome. Their desire to forget the past and work for a better definition of Jesus (and God), hopefully, will enable humanity to enter a better world of dialogue and reconciliation. That definition of Jesus is given by Pope Francis when he talks of Jesus as God's Unconditional Love and Mercy for the whole of humanity.

May be such a reconciliation will make war useless and violence superfluous! Inspired by Reformation and challenged by Pope Francis, can we collectively dream of a new humanity of peace, justice and dialogue? Can we formulate new definitions of Jesus, new collective stories, which alone can prevent further bloodshed and violence, in his very name? Can we Christians come together, share our stories, our understanding of Jesus and God, enabling us to live and work for peace and harmony in the world?



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Article received: Jan 27, 2017

Article approved: Apr 2, 2017

No of words: 5047