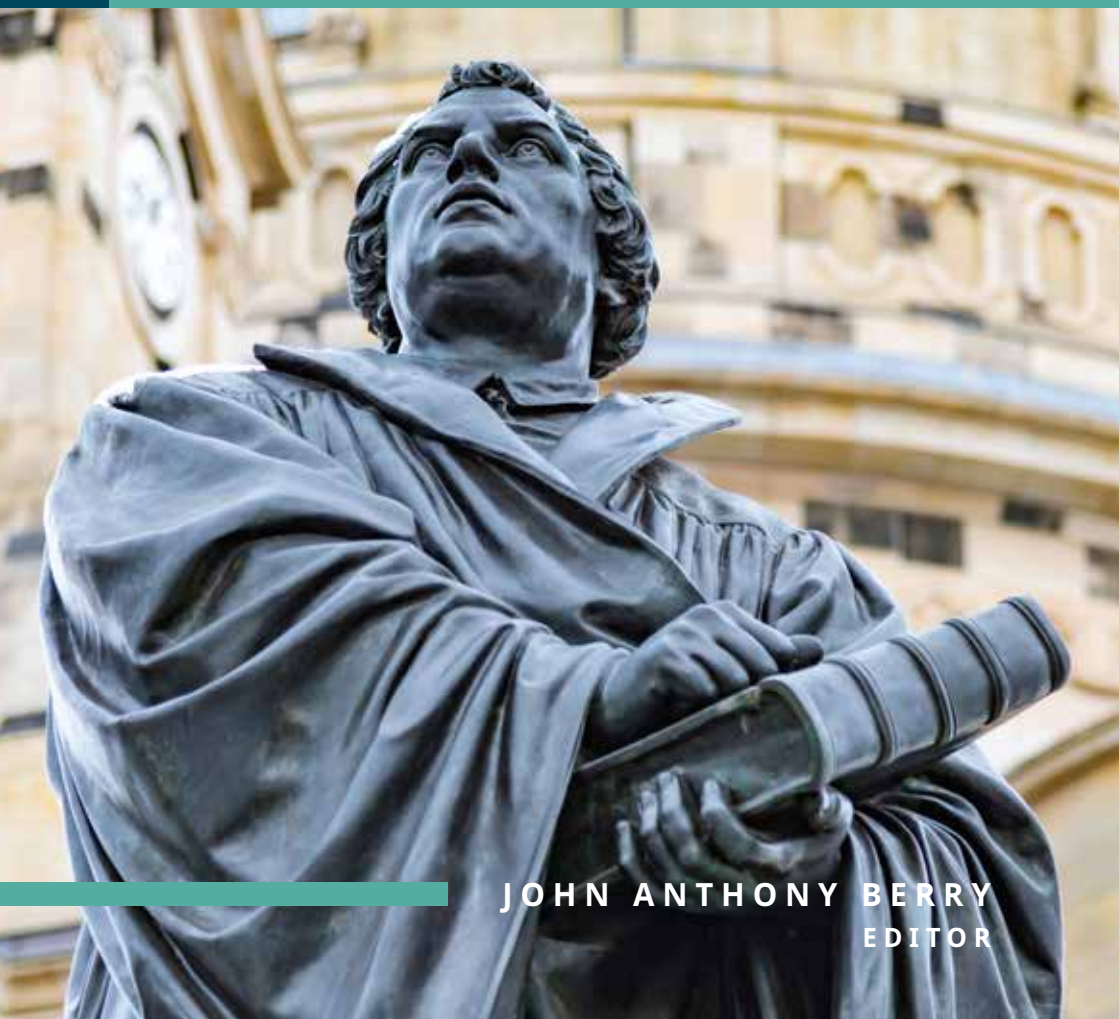


The Spirit of the Reformation

500 YEARS ON

Proceedings of the Malta International Theological Conference II



JOHN ANTHONY BERRY
EDITOR

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Proceedings of the
Malta International Theological Conference
II

John Anthony Berry

Editor



L-Università ta' Malta
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Introduction

The commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation has gone down in history as one of the most important achievements in the ecumenical movement and in the life of the Church at large. Not long ago, the convening of a meeting like this would have been unthinkable. The atmosphere of mutual distrust and rivalry that for almost five centuries marked the relations between Catholics and Protestants has finally been transformed into a spirit of open dialogue and honest commitment to reconciliation.

It has been the often unnoticed, hard and sterling work of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, that after four phases (1967–1972; 1973–1984; 1986–1993 and 1995–2006) advanced to a point that such commemoration became possible. Both sides have come to acknowledge that there is more that unites them than divides them: above all, common faith in the Triune God and the revelation through Jesus Christ, as well as recognition of the basic truths of the doctrine of justification. Today, no one would deny that Lutherans and Catholics enjoy a growth in mutual understanding, cooperation, and respect.

The Faculty of Theology at the University of Malta, just like many other academic and ecumenical institutions around the globe, has most fittingly looked back on the events that occurred during Luther's time by placing the Gospel of Jesus Christ at the centre. The Faculty sought to

mark its calendar with an international conference titled “The Spirit of the Reformation: 500 Years On” and held on Friday, 27 and Saturday, 28 October 2017. The event was extraordinary, precisely for the inspiring eagerness of Catholics and Lutherans and even other Christians, both local and foreign, who were willing to commemorate this anniversary for the first time in history “together.” It was a favourable occasion to live such an event ecumenically and to overcome the one-sidedness that has persisted until a few decades ago when grappling with certain theological issues, such as those of justification, authority in the Church, indulgences, spirituality and the sacraments.

Dialogue between Catholic and Protestant theologians is not new at the Faculty of Theology within the University of Malta. Since the time of the Second Vatican Council, the Faculty adopted an ecumenical approach to theology. This has been implemented by introducing a course in ecumenism and by nurturing an ecumenical perspective in teaching and research that exposes students to both Catholic and Protestant theologians. Ecumenical openness is a constitutive dimension of any academic institution in a University. Lecturers in the main disciplines in theology, namely systematic, moral and pastoral theology, biblical and patristic studies, liturgy, canon law and Church history, are familiar with many theologians in both Christian traditions. Moreover, the theological formation at our Faculty reflects an ecumenical approach which cultivates in our students openness to dialogue and respect for truth.

A question that remains fundamental up till our very day is the following: “Does Martin Luther’s lived theology have anything to say to us today?” This led my colleagues René Camilleri and Hector Scerri and I to discuss the possibility of organising an academic event that does justice to a basic truth, namely that Martin Luther was Catholic and had no intention to form a new Church or have one named after him. His concern was with reforming and not re-inventing medieval spirituality.

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Apart from Joseph Lortz (1887–1975), a renowned Reformation historian and ecumenist, who popularised the thesis that Luther must be described as a serious religious person and a conscientious man of prayer, one cannot fail to notice that the positive picture of Luther was also complemented by Pope John Paul II, and more recently by Popes Benedict and Francis.

Pope John Paul emphasised that Luther's wish was to renew the Church. Pope Benedict appreciated the deep passion and intensity with which Luther dedicated his entire life to the search for God; whereas as Pope Francis recently opined, "the past cannot be changed," but "it is possible to engage in a purification of memory," that is, to "tell that history differently." This encouraged us to explore what can be dubbed as Luther's 'provocative theology of existence' in order to discern its relevance to the human struggle of today's Christians who live in a vastly different world to the one we know.

We are grateful to God that the Reform, though it unfortunately ended in a schism in the Roman Catholic Church, has begun to heal after five hundred years. As was proposed by the Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017, what was to be done was a twofold undertaking: to discuss in dialogue the issues and consequences of the Wittenberg Reformation, which mainly centred on the person and thought of Martin Luther, and to develop perspectives for the remembrance and appropriation of the Reformation today.¹

1 In this book, when referring to Luther's writings, either the English version called "Luther's Works" (LW) or the German version known as "Weimarer Ausgabe" (WA) will be used. For further information on these sources, please consult Martin Luther's "Luther's Works," edited by Helmut T. Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. Carl W. Folkemer, published in 55 volumes by American Edition in Philadelphia and St. Louis between 1955 and 1986, or Martin Luther's "D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimarer Ausgabe)," published by Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger in Weimar in 2000.

For this reason, academics and ecumenists from a number of distinguished European Universities as well as from the University of Malta came together to interpret anew the theological gifts received through the Lutheran Reformation in their appropriate historical and ecclesial context. It was an astonishing moment where its participants could reflect together on the impact of Martin Luther's theology and life on the Church, and implicitly on the Europe of his time. Further still, this event was a clear answer to an ever-present wish expressed in the decree on ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio* for different Christian bodies to engage in dialogue.

The conference was a sincere effort to come together, delve into each other's respective research, and to share the deep appreciation of the tradition from which Martin Luther emerged as well as that in which he was thoroughly immersed. Conference participants wanted to understand the spirit of the Reformation and hence live it anew through the celebration of this singular anniversary in an ecumenical and communal spirit. This anniversary was being commemorated both out of an ecumenical duty as well as a clear sign of *une main tendue* for future ecumenical undertakings, particularly in the local ecclesial landscape.

The speakers at the conference delved deep into historical and theological issues in order to explore the profound changes in understanding that have evolved over the past decades of theological dialogue. The purification of past memories and the healing of wounds have now turned theological conflicts into an occasion for growth in communion. "An attentive and rigorous study, free of prejudice and polemics" is the correct way to find "all that was positive and legitimate in the Reformation." With these words, Pope Francis exhorted the participants at the conference on Luther: 500 Years Later, held on 31 March 2017 by the Pontifical Committee of Historical Sciences, to understand better what happened at the onset of the Reformation in order to be messengers of truth, rather than judges of history.

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Martin Luther was an orator, a scholar and a public figure. However, above all, he was a man of faith and a theologian, and if anyone today wants to understand his continuous appeal for renewal, then one needs to immerse oneself into Luther's mind with an open attitude. This is what the conference speakers sought to do, that is to acquaint themselves with his theological insights in order to approach any discussion and consequent deliberations throughout this conference more fruitfully. Luther was never tired of saying that only experience makes a theologian. "I did not learn my theology all at once," he said, "but I had to search deeper for it ... not understanding, reading, or speculation, but living ... make(s) a theologian."

People can understand Luther's theological challenge for the Church today, when they first distinguish that which is polemical from the theological insights of the Reformation. It is through dialogue and shared witness that Catholics and Lutherans do not remain strangers. A commitment to theological dialogue involves both listening and replying, seeking both to understand and to be understood. It is a readiness to put questions and to be questioned again. This conference should also be seen as a modest attempt in doing justice to the past as service to the future. There are three remarks I wish to include here.

First, ours was a commitment to narrate the story in a different way. The past does not change, but what actually changes is what is remembered about it and how it is remembered. We looked for what is common in the context of differences, or even contrasts, and in this way worked towards overcoming the differences that separate the Churches. The Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Reformation, the latter of which had one of its driving forces in the Council of Trent, both constituted, in parallel, a break with respect to the ecclesial tradition of the Middle Ages. Michel de Certeau (1925–1986) referred to this phenomenon as a "rupture establishing tradition." The reform processes have acted, in both ecclesial realities, as real factors of ecclesiogenesis.

Luther's reforming action brought about an unwanted outcome as a result of political and, not least, economic reasons. Today, we are able to go beyond emotional and identity factors that prevented the construction of a common and reconciled memory of these events. This journeying progressed so far that a consensus between the two Churches was reached with the 1999 Joint Declaration on the doctrine of justification, hailed as a strong pillar of the authentic, albeit still imperfect, communion between Catholics and Lutherans.

Second, we wanted to answer a basic question: "Can a Catholic celebrate 500 years of the division of the Western Church?" In other words, should the Reformation of 1517 be merely commemorated or also celebrated? Certainly, there is very little to celebrate if we talk of the division of the body of Christ, however, the return to the sources of the Christian faith has actually produced a process of regeneration of the faith both for Lutherans and for Catholics. When we speak about the spirit of the reformation, we wish to emphasise that a constant reform of the Church is a factor that keeps her true to herself, while never forgetting that human beings can pose an obstacle to the action of the Spirit, both individually and collectively.

Third, we wished to underline the fact that, while visible unity between the Churches is not yet possible, mutual recognition can never be underestimated. Recognition that each Church is a manifestation of the Church of Jesus Christ is certainly always in need of conversion and purification. Recognition is a process, often a slow process, but an indispensable one in tracing a common belonging while acknowledging a historical difference. We speak of a "reconciled diversity" that inspires us to move forward in working for Christianity unity. The conference was divided in three parts: the exploration of the historical context, major theological issues within that context, and an appraisal of the spirit of the reformation today.

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The first two contributions set the historic context. Dominic Fenech (University of Malta) appraises the Reformation's historical impact by locating its place in the long-range history of the wider Euro-Mediterranean area. He opines that while the Reformation is anything but a Mediterranean affair, it coincided and interacted with the onset of that decided shift, from the South to the North, of the centre of gravity of international relations. On her part, Ute Gause (Ruhr-Universität Bochum) avers that any historical reading of a "triumphalist Luther and his Reformation" has to be dismissed. She argues that the theological impulses of renewal that Luther pursued and the "Theology of Reformation" cannot be understood as a mere reform among reforms. The message of the Reformation remains even today revelatory of Luther's thought about Church renewal.

The following five contributions made up the second part of the conference concerning theological issues. Paul Sciberras (University of Malta) addressed the issue of justification by faith in Paul's *Letter to the Romans*. He argues that the pauline doctrine of justification *sola fide* is to be seen as essential (inasmuch as it expresses relationships that others cannot enunciate), but insufficient (inasmuch as it does not include in itself the means chosen by God to justify man). Beate Bengard (University of Basel) studies the interpretation of *imago Dei* as a central element in Luther's theology. For Luther, she explains, it is not reason that constitutes human nature in the proper sense, but one's relation to God. She proceeds by explaining that the restoration of God's image is in progress.

Piotr Roszak and Damian Dorocki (Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń) highlight the issue of "merit" and how this is understood by both Luther and Aquinas. They contend that the differences between these two thinkers result from a different approach to theological themes. Aquinas is characterised by the *sapiential* approach, whereas Luther reflects the *existential* one. Taking her cue from Luther's interest in the sacraments, Anne Kull (University of Tartu) investigates his understanding of baptism and its inference on girls' education and women's ordination. She argues

that the *ecclesia semper reformanda* essentially touches present issues including climate change, loving one's enemy, and others. Hector Scerri (University of Malta) focuses on the common understandings of ministry in Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue with emphasis on the common priesthood of all the baptised, the ministry of word and sacrament, and the exercise of service to the community. His contribution treats aspects of the differences in the understanding of ministry between the two Churches.

The third part of the conference sought to interpret the spirit of the reformation today. René Camilleri (University of Malta) dwells particularly on the anguish, authenticity, and spirituality that shaped the man Luther. By exploring the labyrinth of Luther's heart, mind, and soul, Camilleri seeks to understand today's position on the issues of justification and God's mercy. Charló Camilleri (University of Malta) explains the difference and interplay between *reformatio* and *renovatio*. He explains that Luther's reform is in line with the *reformatio* movement coming down from the Middle Ages as an ideal of "changing a bad present situation by returning to the good and better times of the past." Christ, the core of the Trinitarian Counsel and the one at the heart of the Church and humanity, emerges as uniquely central to both Luther and Magdalena de' Pazzi.

Oleh Kindiy (Ukrainian Catholic University) studies the apocalyptic rhetoric used by both Catholic and Lutheran authors to interpret the ecological crisis as a definite sign of the second coming of Christ. The Catholic eschatological perspective, in contrast to the Lutheran one, is more of the transformative type. Kindiy distinguishes between a new society brought about by the second coming of Christ and the idea of total annihilation derived from the theology of the sixteenth century Lutheran preachers. Pauline Dimech (University of Malta) examines the concept of the *communio sanctorum* by providing a quick glance at a limited selection of the writings of Martin Luther and of Hans Urs von Balthasar. She explains that a re-appropriation of the theological concept of the

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communio sanctorum is essential, that such a re-appropriation requires a clarification of what the *communio sanctorum* stands for, and that an ecumenical venture is required for a proper hermeneutic of the term.

By way of conclusion, George Grima (University of Malta) explained that ours was an individual and collective effort to understand afresh the significance of an event that marked so deeply not only the history of Christianity but also so many cultural, economic, political and other social aspects of our life in the past 500 years. Whatever its impact on history, the Reformation remains meaningful, first and foremost as a spiritual event focusing on the relationship of the self with God, as an opportunity to bring out the riches in both traditions, as well as a reminder that dialogue opens up fresh avenues of thought.

A special word of gratitude goes to my predecessor Emmanuel Agius, then Dean of the Faculty of Theology, to the administrative staff members and academic colleagues of the Faculty, the International and Erasmus Office, Rev. Dr Kevin Schembri, and the GhST committee members who supported this event. Moreover, a word of appreciation also goes to sponsors and collaborators, namely the Archdiocese of Malta, APS Bank, the Diocesan Commission for Interreligious Dialogue, the harpist Jacob Portelli, Rev. Christopher Caruana O.P., Rev. Kim Hurst, Chris Schinas, John and Alda Anastasi, Karen Booker, Dr Dorianne Buttigieg, Anna Farrugia and Dr Rebecca Janelle Wellman.

To conclude, by focusing on the context of the Reformation, the theological issues it raised and its continuing relevance for today, this international conference was a humble contribution to foster unity among Christians through an open and honest theological debate that is the only way forward to build bridges which lead to deeper mutual understanding and respect.

John Anthony Berry
Editor