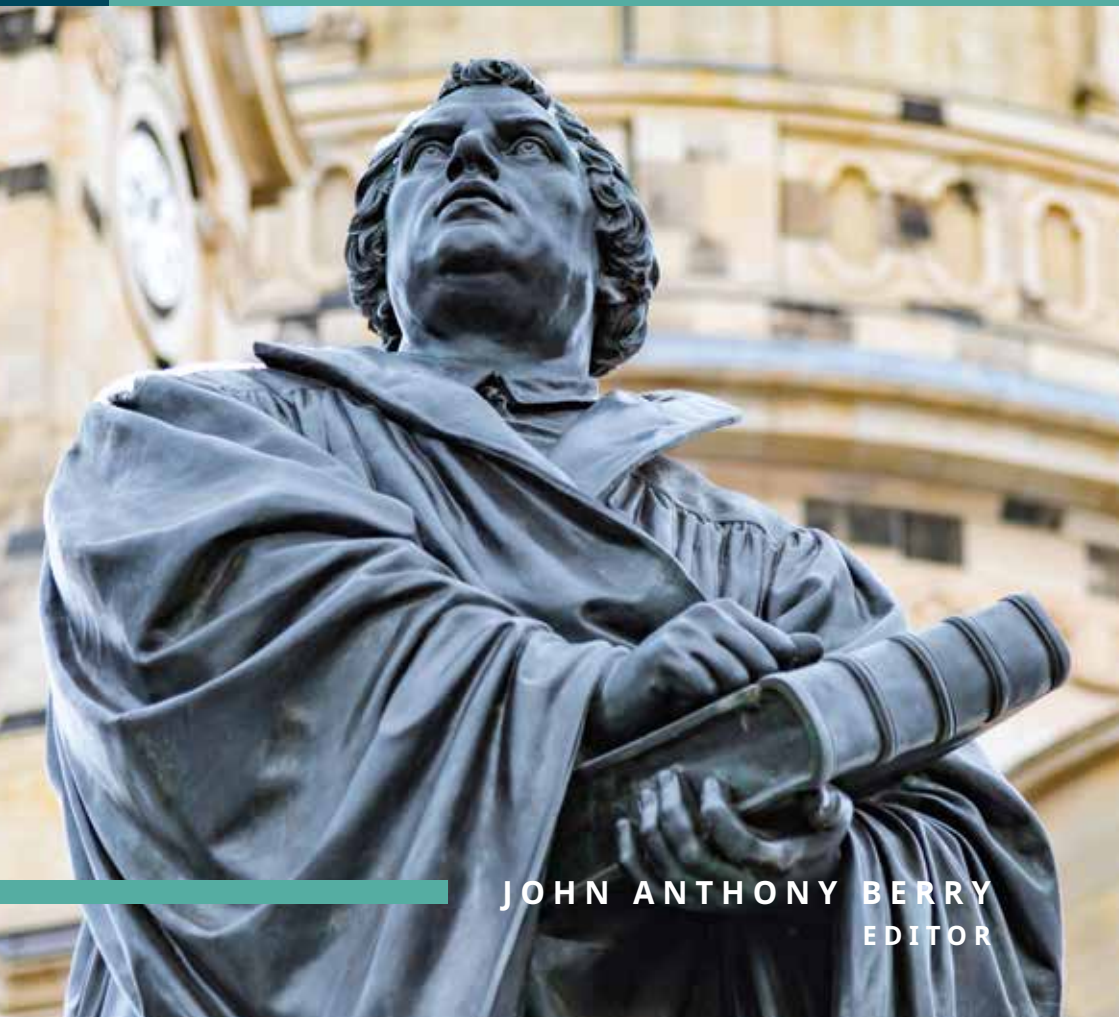


The Spirit of the Reformation

500 YEARS ON

Proceedings of the Malta International Theological Conference II



JOHN ANTHONY BERRY
EDITOR

**The Spirit
of the Reformation**

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Proceedings of the
Malta International Theological Conference
II

John Anthony Berry

Editor



L-Università ta' Malta
Faculty of Theology

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Concluding Reflections

GEORGE GRIMA

After listening to the conference papers, with some discussion in between, there is place only for some general remarks. A rather obvious remark is that whatever reflections we may share with each other at the close of any conference, especially a conference like the one we have just had, can never be final. Our reflections and discussions can perhaps be best understood as a small part of our 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.

The programme of this conference has focused on the context of the Reformation, the theological issues it raised and its spirit or continuing relevance for today. I wish to make a very brief remark on these three objectives that have been set for this conference.

There is, first of all, the context. How the Reformation fits within the big historical changes, especially within the political sphere at the time, is a matter of debate. It may not have brought about those changes by itself alone, but it could well have acted as a catalyst. Whatever its impact on history, the Reformation is meaningful, first and foremost,

as a spiritual event focusing on the relationship of the self with God at every moment of his or her life and, particularly, at the moment of death. It is precisely faith as trust in a merciful God that Martin Luther sought to bring back to the centre of Christian life.

‘Meaning’ is shaped and sometimes distorted, depending on the mode we try to seek it. It is natural to try to defend yourself in the presence of a situation that you perceive as a threat to what you believe in perhaps so strongly. The outcome of this mode of seeking has been the Counter-Reformation that drew the line between Catholic doctrine and Lutheran teaching or orthodox and heretical belief. The Report of the Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation this year reflects the journey that we have made in the course of the last 500 years. We started from ‘conflict’ and are slowly moving toward ‘communion.’

This conference has an important significance for the history of ecumenism here in Malta. In fact, Malta has been the venue for a meeting in February 1971 at which the Joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic Study Commission on “The Gospel and the Church” finalised its report on the progress made in the previous five years in clarifying further the theological questions and improving relationships between the Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church. As far as I know, Malta’s contribution to this important milestone in the history of ecumenism was simply that it provided a venue for the meeting and, I would assume, a hospitable environment. I am sure that what we have not done in 1971 we have been trying to do, at least partially, yesterday evening and today. We too placed on the table some of the traditionally disputed theological issues between Catholic and Lutherans and considered how we can move forward in better understanding ourselves and each other.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

This brings me to my second remark, namely, the particular theological issues we brought up for consideration and discussion. We have actually touched on some of the core theological issues between Catholics and Lutherans. We have tried to recover aspects of the Christian tradition that need to be seen as 'both and' rather than 'either or': justified by faith and called to be God's humble servants; sinners and yet men and women created in the image of God; salvation as a gift offered by a gracious God to everyone and salvation that we can only deserve by letting God help us not to reject it; baptism as the sacrament of initiation in the Church and as a vocation to contribute to its ongoing reformation; the hierarchical priesthood and the priesthood of the laity. As we have seen, in trying to do justice to both sides implied in each one of these theological issues, while taking into account the particular convictions of the Lutheran churches and the Catholic Church, we have been seeking to bring out the riches in both traditions.

The last section has been rightly devoted to the spirit of the reformation today. The Reformation was a historical event that initiated a tradition which embodies more than an ongoing argument. It can be fully understood, if Luther is seen as a figure, surely a prominent one, among so many other figures that worked for the reform of Christian practices and Church institutions. One of the ways in which the spirit of the Reformation can be kept alive is to present Luther in dialogue with contemporary theologians and spiritual writers who have themselves sought to open up fresh avenues of thought. And in view of the contemporary ecological concerns, it is certainly important to try to uncover how differences in belief of Lutherans and Catholics about the destiny of the world can strengthen our common response to a world that is crying for justice and salvation. I have been on the receiving end at this conference.

Let me just say that I am thankful to what I have received from the speakers and the other participants.