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Martin Luther

Volume I

Martin Luther

A Christian between Reforms and Modernity (1517–2017)

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From Excommunicated to Common Teacher

Luther and the Ecumenical Movement

1 A Stumbling Block

At the beginning of the development of what is now conventionally referred to as the ecumenical movement, the first systematic expressions and manifestations of which go back to the early twentieth century, there are a few stumbling blocks that are hard to ignore.¹ One of these stumbling blocks was certainly Martin Luther, or rather the way in which his character, his action, and his theology had been understood and described for centuries within Catholicism. Similarly problematic was the uncritically apologetic approach toward Luther on the part of the Evangelical churches. This approach had always elicited the hostility of the Church of Rome and, although in a qualitatively different way, of other confessions whose origin was remotely reformed. Moreover, it was also necessary to take into account an unexpected development – the coldness, if not the growing indifference, with which Luther was starting to be met within the new denominations of Protestant churches that were proliferating and spreading, mainly outside of Europe, for which Luther was no longer considered a fixed point of reference, much less a hero of the faith. For them, Luther was a character who had been discarded and repressed even before a shared opinion of him could be formed.²

Apart from these latter circles – which were mostly unknown to the great majority of Western Christianity and likewise ignored by those who were beginning their efforts within the ecumenical movement – it was easy to realize quickly how Luther, even four centuries after his death, was a living character with whom confrontation

Translation from Italian: Antonella Lettieri

¹ On the origins and the development of the ecumenical movement, I will only refer to the classic work edited by R. Rouse and S.C. Neill, *Storia del movimento ecumenico dal 1517 al 1948*, vol. 1, *Dalla Riforma agli inizi dell'Ottocento* (Bologna: EDB, 1973), vol. 2, *Dagli inizi dell'Ottocento alla conferenza di Edinburgo* (Bologna: EDB 1973), vol.3, *Dalla Conferenza di Edinburgo (1910) all'Assemblea Ecumenica di Amsterdam (1948)* (Bologna: EDB 1982), and vol. 4, *L'avanzata ecumenica (1948–1968)*, ed. H.E. Fey (Bologna: EDB 1982); see also H.J. Urban and H. Wagner, eds., *Handbuch der Ökumenik* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1985–1987); and N. Lossky, J.S. Pobee, J.M. Bonino et al., eds., *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991); for a quick introduction, see P. Neuner, *Breve manuale dell'Ecumene* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1986).

² Cf. S. Picciaredda, *Le Chiese indipendenti africane. Una storia religiosa e politica del Novecento* (Roma: Carocci, 2013); S.A. Fatokun, “Historical Sketch of Pentecostal Movements in Nigeria,” *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 28 no. 3 (2007): 609–34.

was still problematic for all the Christians engaged, in different ways, in the creation of opportunities for encounter and dialogue. The reasons for this were manifold and included, in the first place, the nerves touched by Luther's theological thinking; second, there were the effects that such thinking had produced, compelling him to write new "symbols" of the Christian faith (for example, the *Confessio Augustana* or his *Catechisms*) that had irreversibly changed the doctrinal structure of Christianity; third, there was also his way of presenting himself as a reformer, which was drastically different from all previous experiences up to that point in Christian circles. These experiences had traditionally envisaged only two possible outcomes: either a dramatic ending in condemnation for heresy (which, in most cases, permanently extinguished any doctrinal dissent) or a metabolization in canonization.

After the reforming action begun by Luther in the sixteenth century, the Catholic Church had developed and spread a precise picture of him: Luther, guilty of having opposed the supreme authority of the pope, was considered both as someone who had inflicted a deadly wound on the unity of the Church and as the trigger of a series of cascading errors that had progressively opened up a chasm between Church and society and thrown humanity into a spiral of desolation and violence from which humankind could have saved itself only by returning to and carefully heeding the magisterium and authority of Rome. During the century prior to the beginning of the ecumenical movement, it is quite common to see in the pastoral interventions of Catholic bishops the repetition of a very clear interpretive pattern, according to which Luther was portrayed as an immoral character – a monster, a devil, a guzzler, an alcoholic, a kidnapper of nuns, and so on – who had piled up this load of wickedness in the process of the reform he had so obstinately started. Therefore it was logical, perhaps even necessary, to reject any human understanding of – or even the very possibility of reconciliation with – the memory of the man who had not only seriously injured the unity of Christians, but was also responsible for a dramatic involutional spiral: "[W]ith immoral doctrines and immoral teachers, where is the sanctity of the Reformation?"³ asked the cardinal of Imola, Gaetano Baluffi, as late as 1850. The score had not changed much at the time of the fourth centennial of the birth of Luther (1883), when Catholics still insisted on an image of Luther that was irredeemable from all points of view and toward which the only possible attitude was depreciation;⁴ this was even more the case as the idea that the proliferation of socialism and communism was also distantly inspired by Luther was added to the often reiterated grievances about the "revolutionary" effects of the Lutheran controversy in the eighteenth century.

³ Quoted from G. Miccoli, "L'avarizia e l'orgoglio di un frate laido...". Problemi e aspetti dell'interpretazione cattolica di Lutero," in *Lutero in Italia. Studi storici nel V centenario della nascita*, ed. L. Perrone (Casale Monferrato: Marietti, 1983), xiv.

⁴ Cf. H. Jedin, "Mutamenti della interpretazione cattolica della figura di Lutero e loro limiti," *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia* 23 no. 1 (1969): 378–83 (appendix edited by A. Olivieri).

From this perspective, it is important to highlight how even the most influential representatives of Catholic theology and culture in the early twentieth century repeated time and time again – in their interventions as well as in their works – a series of ideas, theories, and clichés that were already centuries old: although perhaps cleansed of their most simplistic or vulgar manifestations, these notions were still intact in their substance.⁵ After all, these ideas had their most authoritative support in the papal magisterium, which – at a time when some non-Catholic Christians were getting ready to meet in Edinburgh (1910) for the conference that was later to be considered the starting point of the contemporary ecumenical movement – had renewed the verdict of Luther's condemnation and thus had suggested that it could not foresee any element that would make it change its opinion on the subject.⁶ According to Pius X, the issue was crystal clear: those who were plagued by the disease of modernism had indeed taken on attitudes and manners already seen in Luther and thus descended from him. This notion was expressed both in the *Pascendi* (1907)⁷ and in the *Editae saepe*, an encyclical meant to distinguish between true and false reform of the Church.⁸ Thus even the mere presence of evangelical or reformed communities in

⁵ Miccoli, "L'avarizia e l'orgoglio," xviii.

⁶ Thus, in his *Catechism* of 1905, Pope Pius X, after mentioning Luther and Calvin as supporters of the "great heresy of Protestantism," qualified Protestantism itself as "the sum of all heresies that existed before it, that existed after it, and that might be born again to slaughter souls," *Compendio della dottrina cristiana prescritto da Sua Santità Papa Pio X alle diocesi della provincia di Roma* (Roma: Tipografia Vaticana, 1905), 326–27.

⁷ "This becomes still clearer to anybody who studies the conduct of modernists [...]. Again, when they write history, they pay no heed to the Fathers and the Councils, but when they catechize the people, they cite them respectfully. In the same way, they draw their distinctions between theological and pastoral exegesis and scientific and historical exegesis. So, too, acting on the principle that science in no way depends upon faith, when they treat philosophy, history, criticism, feeling no horror at treading in the footsteps of Luther (Prop. 29, condemned by Leo X, "Exsurge Domine," May 15, 1520: 'A way has been made for us for weakening the authority of councils, and for freely contradicting their actions, and judging their decrees, and boldly confessing whatever seems true, whether it has been approved or disapproved by any council whatsoever'), they are wont to display a certain contempt for Catholic doctrines, or the Holy Fathers, for the Ecumenical Councils, for the ecclesiastical magisterium; and should they be rebuked for this, they complain that they are being deprived of their liberty." *Encyclical Pascendi Dominici gregis of Pope Pius X on the doctrines of the modernists*, September 8, 1907, available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_px_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis.html.

⁸ "[...] those proud and rebellious men came on the scene [...]. These men were not concerned with correcting morals, but only with denying dogmas. Thus they increased the chaos. They dropped the reins of law, and unbridled licentiousness ran wild. They despised the authoritative guidance of the Church and pandered to the whims of the dissolute princes and people. They tried to destroy the Church's doctrine, constitution, and discipline. [...] They called this rebellious riot and perversion of faith and morals a reformation, and themselves reformers. In reality, they were corrupters. In undermining the strength of Europe through wars and dissensions, they paved the way for those modern rebellions and apostasy." *Encyclical Editae saepe of Pope Pius X on St. Charles Borromeo*, May 26, 1910, available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_px_en-c_26051910_editae-saepe.html.

Rome was unacceptable in the eyes of the Holy See. Theodore Roosevelt, the former president of the United States, experienced this attitude firsthand when, passing through Rome in 1910 and having requested an audience with the pope, he was told that the audience would be granted on the condition that he renounced his planned visit to the Methodist community in Rome.⁹ Benedict XV was similarly clear and consistent when, five years later, he deplored “the damage that would be caused to this holy city, and the scandal that would be caused to the Catholic world, if Luther and Calvin were to pitch their tents permanently in the city of the popes.”¹⁰

The unionist choice reaffirmed by Pius XI with his *Mortalium animos* in 1928 was, in its own way (although this would be understood only much later), an extreme effort to contain the novelty represented by the ecumenical movement and its attempts to approach Rome.¹¹ Although some at that time (such as Yves Congar or Paul Courtier) would choose to ignore such prescriptions and devote themselves to the ecumenical effort while leaving behind the logic of absorption,¹² almost all of the Catholic intellectuals of the day fell in line with the directives of the Holy See, reasserting them according to their respective potentials and sensitivities. Already in 1925, Jacques Maritain, in his *Trois réformateurs*, had reiterated the most classic image of Luther as someone who, “[u]nable to conquer himself, [...] transforms his necessities into theological truths, and his own actual case into a universal law” and found him guilty of “metaphysical egoism.”¹³ Igino Giordani,¹⁴ the future director of the ecumenism branch of the Focolare Movement he co-founded with Chiara Lubich,

⁹ Cf. R. Aubert, “Pio X tra restaurazione e riforma,” in *Storia della Chiesa*, vol. 22.1, *La Chiesa e la società industriale (1878–1922)*, eds. E. Guerriero and A. Zambarbieri (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo Editrice, 1990) 123–24.

¹⁰ *Discorso del Santo Padre Benedetto XV al cardinale vicario Basilio Pompili, presidente dell’Opera della Preservazione della Fede in Roma*, November 21, 1915, available at: https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/it/speeches/documents/hf_ben-xv_spe_19151121_card-pompili.html. At the time, there was a rumor that, in anticipation of the fourth centennial of the beginning of the Reformation, there was a plan to build in Rome an Evangelical church that would compete in size with St. Peter’s Basilica.

¹¹ M. Barbolla, “La genesi della *Mortalium animos* attraverso lo spoglio degli Archivi Vaticani,” *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia* 66 no. 2 (2012): 495–538.

¹² Cf. É. Fouilloux, *Les catholiques et l’unité chrétienne du XIX^e siècle. Itinéraires européens d’expression française* (Paris: Persée, 1982).

¹³ Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (New York: Thomas V. Cromwell, 1929), 10–11 and 14.

¹⁴ According to Giordani, since 1521 there had emerged a “rather well-defined [Luther]: two-faced, devious, thirsty for blood, inconsistent, more Teutonic than Catholic;” and again, it was Luther who had “derived the greatest number of terms for excrements and such. It was he, already in 1521, who called marriage ‘a shitty sacrament’. It was he who, with the reformed language, called the theologians of Leuven, guilty of having condemned his theses, ‘rustic asses, cursed whores, wretched scroungers, blasphemous bowels, blood-thirsty arsonists, fratricides, coarse swine, silent pigs, heretical and idolatrous, vain braggarts, damned heathens, stagnant waters’, and so on;” see I. Giordani, *I protestanti alla conquista d’Italia* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1931), 80n69.

had an even gloomier approach: Giordani professed his belief that evangelicalism had been born out of “a scriptural *lapsus* by Luther” that did not hold in the face of modern exegetical criticism. Furthermore, he added:

Luther could not restrain his flesh and, anguished by remorse and doubts in his heart and by ghosts and lusts in his limbs, believed that he had found what he needed in a passage of the Letter to the Romans in which Paul would have allegedly asserted the justification by faith *only*. [...] Since Luther believed that he could not avoid sin, he deemed that no one else could.

And again, according to Giordani:

Luther’s personality as the head of the Reformation has been exalted and ridiculed, but particularly exalted. For the Reformation, i.e., the downgrading of Christianity to a national and bourgeois religion, more was done by the Elector of Saxony than by Friar Martin. He acted as a front and, mostly, theologized the pretexts.

In the end, Giordani argued, Luther had achieved not a reform, but rather a revolt, “and in the Church, revolts are inspired – we feel sorry for our Dearest – not by God but by Satan.”¹⁵

2 The Reciprocal Damnation

Therefore, not even the proliferation of new perspectives on and methods of historical research – it is important to remember, for example, that the publication of the works by Calvin, Melanchthon, and Zwingli within the *Corpus reformatorum* had started in 1834 and that the publication of the *Weimarer Ausgabe*, offering the Lutheran sources in a critical edition, had begun in 1883; this list should also include the fundamental commentary of 1908 on Luther’s *Lecture on Romans*, which had previously been considered irremediably lost – was able to change the basic framework of the Catholic understanding of the figure of Luther.¹⁶ This could indeed be explained by a deep resentment – which had, by that time, become an identity trait for the Church of Rome – toward the man who, with his choices, had violated an order strengthened over centuries and called into question the theological and doctrinal bedrock on which Catholicism’s claim to supremacy was founded.

In this sense, Luther was not so much or not only one of the many “dissenters” that had stirred against the ecclesiastical institution over the centuries: he represent-

¹⁵ Giordani, *I protestanti alla conquista*, 63–65, 73.

¹⁶ On this subject, Miccoli has argued that “the cultural coordinates that come into play when expressing the Catholic verdict on Luther reveal a depth and a perseverance that cannot be explained with an erroneous or unscrupulous or instrumental use of the methods of their discipline [...], or with the lack of interaction between specific researches and general frameworks of historical comprehension;” see “L’avarizia e l’orgoglio,” xxvi.

ed something more, something different, and, to the quality of the challenge he brought forward, Catholicism had replied by creating a transgenerational attitude in which were mixed theological hatred, personal depreciation, cultural trivialization, and – as the most common but not least enduring component – interconfessional conflict. Thus, for clerics preparing for the priesthood, Luther was ordinarily the touchstone used when teaching theology in seminaries in order to demonstrate doctrinal mistakes and how to react to them.¹⁷ Precisely since this was such a deeply rooted phenomenon, anti-Lutheranism over time became undisputed: it was absolutely natural to depict Luther in a certain way, and the strength of these images of “cold damnation,” accepted without any particular traumas or decisive choices by the Catholic clergy, would find a way to emerge until the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, and even during its very celebration. This was especially true in episcopal pastoral interventions, which were mostly attempts to copy – more or less successfully – the pontifical magisterium. Speaking and writing about Luther in a certain way was a given, just as it was also a given for every bishop with the duty of the care of souls to exalt the image and the teaching of the pope, condemn socialism and communism, deprecate the proliferation of secularism and naturalism, and heap expressions of veneration on the Virgin Mary, while perhaps seasoning it all with a sprinkle of anti-Semitism. What is certain, however, is the fact that developments in historical research had the effect of starting to soften the sharpest corners of the Catholic anti-Lutheran controversy.¹⁸ From this perspective, the turning point marked by Joseph Lortz’s research is well acknowledged;¹⁹ even prior to that, however, it is possible to register a noticeable change of tone in the work of Konrad Algermissen, whose reservations on the character and work of Luther, however, remained nonetheless intact.²⁰

17 Alberto Bellini, reflecting on the Italian case, comes to the conclusion that “modern Italian textbook theology did not tackle – neither directly nor seriously, from the inside – Luther’s theology. It is mostly critical and apologetic: rather than being concerned with understanding what Luther meant, it focuses on presenting Luther in a light that makes him more easily confutable and highlights better, through his irrationality, the Catholic truth;” see “Lutero nella teologia cattolica moderna. Dalla confutazione polemica al confronto ecumenico,” in *Lutero in Italia*, 247.

18 In order to find a bearing within the immense bibliography available on Luther and to be introduced to the fundamental hermeneutic developments that have occurred since the nineteenth century, it is advisable to refer to O.H. Pesch, *Martin Lutero. Introduzione storica e teologica* (Brescia: Queriniana, 2007); for the most recent bibliographical updates, see H. Schilling, *Martin Luther. Rebell in einer Zeit des Umbruchs* (München: C.H. Beck, 2013); and G. Dall’Olio, *Martin Lutero* (Roma: Carocci, 2013).

19 J. Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1939–1940).

20 “Now, Luther had a pessimistic vision of man, believing him to be only sin and corruption, even denying him any collaboration to the divine grace; he did not understand Christ, who saw in man the chance for a collaboration with grace, in the Decalogue not the oppression but the liberation of man, in God not only the one who forgives but also the one who judges and punishes; he did not even understand Paul and his doctrine on the law and the gospel. He only dealt with singular problems and not, instead, with the great external tasks of the kingdom of God. [...] Luther is so concerned

Although summarized in brief, the above considerations represent part of the context in which reflection on Luther took place within the ecumenical circle. From the opposite point of view, it is also necessary to take into account the sedimentation of anti-Roman and anti-papal feelings that had been a fundamental cornerstone of Luther's preaching and theology. This is a hostility that, among other things, took form at an incredible speed, to the point that – even at the time of Luther's excommunication in 1521 – it had already reached the point of no return. It had been only four years since the beginning of the debate on Luther's theses on indulgences – which, incidentally, shows how Luther considered it absolutely natural to engage in dialogue with the pope and his legates – and, in a short time, a perfect equivalence between Rome and the devil had already been established in Luther's eyes. According to Luther, Leo X was no longer simply a challenger, but the antichrist himself.²¹ This was an idea that – as is well known, and as would be reiterated during the course of the twentieth century again and again by some of the participants in the ecumenical movement²² – was perfectly in line with the eschatological imagery of the time, to which Luther had spontaneously and decisively subscribed.²³ It was this very struggle with the antichrist, which was to be conducted unquestioningly

with the salvation of individuals that he even forgets the Christianization of social life;" see C. Algermissen, *La Chiesa e le chiese* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1944), 762 (or. ed. *Konfessionskunde. Ein Handbuch der christlichen Kirchen- und Sektenkunde der Gegenwart* [Hannover: J. Giesel, 1930]).

21 It has been noted how "[t]he attack on the papacy as the Antichrist was not the center of Luther's reformation protest. The center, as we know, was his proclamation of the good news that man is justified solely by faith in Christ and solely by the grace of Jesus Christ, through no merits of his own. It was primarily because Luther believed that the Pope was denying the Gospel or prohibiting him to preach it that he came to the conclusion that the Pope was the Antichrist;" see H.J. McSorley, "Luther's Ecclesiological Significance for the Twentieth-century Ecumenical Movement," *The Springfielder* 34 no. 2 (1970): 131–39, here 137.

22 See also, for example: Gruppo di lavoro bilaterale della Conferenza episcopale tedesca e della Chiesa unita evangelica luterana di Germania, "Comunione ecclesiale nella Parola e nel sacramento (1984)," in *Enchiridion Ecumenicum*, vol. 2, *Documenti del dialogo teologico interconfessionale. Dialoghi locali, 1965–1987*, eds. G. Cereti and S.J. Voicu (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniani, 1988), 660–61; Gruppo di Dombes, "Per la conversione delle chiese (1990)," in *Enchiridion Ecumenicum*, vol. 4, *Documenti del dialogo teologico interconfessionale. Dialoghi locali, 1988–1994*, eds. G. Cereti and J.F. Puglisi (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniani, 1996), 350; Gruppo di lavoro bilaterale della Conferenza episcopale tedesca e della Chiesa evangelica luterana unita in Germania, "Communio sanctorum. La chiesa come comunione dei santi (2000)," in *Enchiridion Ecumenicum*, vol. 8, *Documenti del dialogo teologico interconfessionale. Dialoghi locali, 1995–2001*, a cura di G. Cereti, J.F. Puglisi (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniani, 2007), 825 and 827; Dialogo luterano-cattolico negli USA, "La chiesa come "koinônia" di salvezza: Strutture e ministeri (2004)," in *Enchiridion Ecumenicum*, vol. 10, *Documenti del dialogo teologico interconfessionale. Dialoghi locali, 2002–2005*, eds. G. Cereti and J.F. Puglisi (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniani, 2010), 964–65.

23 For an explanation of this worldview, see the most recent edition of the classic by William of Ockham, *Dialogo sul papa eretico*, ed. A. Salerno (Milano: Bompiani, 2015); on the canonical implications, cf. L. Fonbaustier, *La déposition du pape hérétique. Une origine du constitutionnalisme?* (Paris: Mare & Martin, 2016).

and on every level, that justified the tones of the controversy and that, more importantly, prevented and made unrealistic any chance of confrontation or reconciliation:²⁴ from this point of view, the developments of Luther's later journey were already implied in the very first stages of his path to reform.

Luther's works from 1520, and especially the plea *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, in fact already postulated the incapacity of the Catholic episcopate to fulfill the action of reform that Luther had started to sketch out: this was just the first stage of a complex journey that, after Luther's death, would bequeath to his heirs an alternative Christian confession, structured over a vast territory and capable of involving a growing number of the faithful. Mirroring what had happened within Catholicism, the demonization of the opponent represented and continued to represent an essential element of cohesion, also for those who had subscribed to the new Evangelical belief. Just as the very first Catholic biographers, such as Johann Cochlaeus or Johann Pistorius,²⁵ had described Luther as someone who had given in to the flattery of Satan, Luther had similarly taken on angelical traits for the coeval biographers of Evangelical inspiration, such as Johannes Aurifaber or Johannes Mathesius: he was a prophet, and maybe even a saint.²⁶ This is a configuration that would dominate *Lutherforschung* at great depth and length, and it was only between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, in a timeframe bracketed by Leopold von Ranke's and Karl Holl's respective works, that scholars would begin to rethink many elements that had been well-established as "canonical" since the dawn of the Reformation – starting, for example, to distinguish between the different stages of Luther's life and focusing especially on his youth.²⁷

24 It is well known how, in the illustrations for the Bibles that Luther licensed for printing, the whore dressed in scarlet and purple and riding the beast with seven heads and ten horns, mentioned in chapter 17 of the book of Revelation, was crowned with the papal tiara; *Biblia, das ist, die gantze Heilige Schrift Deudsche Mart. Luth. Wittemberg, Begnadet mit Kürfürstlicher zu Sachsen freiheit*, vol. 2, *Die Propheten alle Deudsche. D. Mar. Luth.* (Wittemberg: Hans Lufft, 1533; repr. Köln: Taschen, 2016), 195.

25 J. Cochlaeus, *Commentaria Ioannis Cochlaei, de actis et scriptis Martini Lutheri Saxonis, Chronographice, Ex ordine ab Anno Domini M.D.XVII usque ad Annum M.D.XLVI inclusive, fideliter conscripta*, Apud S. Victorem prope Moguntiam, ex officina Francisci Behem Typographi, 1549; J. Pistorius, *Anatomia Lutheri* (Köln: Arnoldum Quentel, 1595–1598).

26 J. Aurifaber, *Tischreden oder Colloquia Doct. Mart. Luthers* (Eisleben: Urban Gaubisch, 1566); J. Mathesius, *Historien von des ehrwirdigen in Gott seligen thewren Manns Gottes Doctoris Martini Luthers Anfang, Lehr, Leben und Sterben* (Nürnberg: Ulrich Neuber, 1566).

27 This was the choice made by, among others, Gottfried Arnold (*Gottfried Arnold Kirchen- und Ketzer-Historie* [Frankfurt am Main, 1699]) and Giovanni Miegge (*Lutero. L'uomo e il pensiero fino alla Dieta di Worms, 1483–1521* [Torino: Claudiana, 1946]), who tried to find the original and constant core in Luther's thinking and theology before it became "encrusted" by the choices made in his mature age: not so much, evidently, the decision regarding the Reformation, but the choices regarding some aspects connected to it, such as his fiery anti-Semitism, the condemnation of the Peasants' Revolt and of the Anabaptists, and also the increasingly violent controversies with the Church of Rome.

3 A Long Dawn of Change

There is no doubt, therefore, that the redefinition of Luther's character within the activities and debates promoted by the ecumenical movement found a pillar and a fundamental incentive precisely in the process of historiographical revision that, although with different timings and qualitative analyses,²⁸ had been developing since the second half of the nineteenth century. It is also important to point out how an investigation of the official documents connected to the ecumenical debate highlights the importance given to historical considerations, thus underlining how the understanding of Luther in his precise scope and potential required first and foremost a focus on the contexts, the mindsets, and the theologies that had actively come up against each other in the field once Luther had started his process of reform. Thus the confrontational tones used for centuries were put to one side, and a path of understanding of the event was chosen instead, which was indeed typically historiographical.²⁹

Thus in 1927, while the Holy See was preparing the publication of the *Mortalium animos*, Eugène Choisy, a member of the *Faith and Order* commission and a reformed minister from Geneva, insisted on the fact that it had certainly not been

light-heartedly or with pleasure that Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers had broken all relationships with the hierarchy and had split from the traditional Church. When obliged to choose between loyalty to Christ the Savior – the only head of the Church – and submission to the demands of clerics who claimed to be the only legitimate interpreters of the divine truth, they could not sacrifice the rights of the Master who is the truth, the Savior in whom they confided for their justification.

In the same context, the Lutheran archbishop of Uppsala, Nathan Söderblom, an extremely prominent figure in the budding ecumenical movement, pointed out that when Luther,

a passionately devoted son of the Church, was expelled by the papal institution, he was forced, together with his friends, to organize, *against* his and their will and intention, an autonomous

²⁸ Yet we must mention how, in the early twentieth century, on the Catholic side, Heinrich Suso Denifle on the one hand and Hartmann Grisar on the other revamped an image of Luther as a degenerate and a psychopath.

²⁹ Reflecting on Luther's *Catechisms*, the chairman of the German Bishops' Conference noted how "the transformation of the image of Luther in Catholic theology represents, however, the silent triumph of thorough scientific research able to contribute to the overcoming of deeply-rooted prejudices, thanks to a careful task of specific research, to the courage of historical research, but also to the patience of the ecumenical renewal;" see K. Lehmann, "Martin Lutero. Nostro maestro comune," *Il Regno-Attualità* 6 (1998): 202–09, here 205; some ideas on the research paths followed within the Catholic circle are illustrated by M. Lienhard, "Luther en perspective catholique. Quelques observations," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 63 no. 1–2 (1983): 167–77.

community. However, they never believed and never accepted that the action of the pope excluded them from the Church – one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.³⁰

The change of perspective on Luther, however, also went through the trauma of war and the acknowledgement, on the Catholic side, that a fundamental experience of resistance to Nazism – such as the *Bekennende Kirche*, guided by the pastor Martin Niemöller, which would become even more famous after the “discovery” of the figure and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer – found its beating heart explicitly in a closer acceptance of Luther’s teachings and example.³¹

At any rate, it is the Second Vatican Council that marks a turning point, at least on the Catholic side, in the rediscovery of Luther. This is so because – beyond what some despairing, continuist interpretations attempted to represent – the Second Vatican Council marked a clear departure from the long historical era that had been distinguished by the reception, which mostly means the mythologization, of the Council of Trent.³² Anti-Lutheran reaction was a fundamental cultural trait of this era. Therefore, only an event capable of marking the beginning of a new cultural paradigm – and specifically, a revision in the Catholic attitude toward modernity, which was also opposed because it was perceived as a product of the Reformation – could enable the opening of a new perspective on Luther. The liberating effects of the council would soon become evident in those who had already – decades earlier – shown themselves to be open to ecumenical issues. Thus, at a conference held in 1963, Congar said that he was aware of how Luther

a encore aujourd’hui un très mauvais renom chez les catholiques, sauf peut-être en Allemagne.
Je sais qu'il y a en lui de quoi justifier ce renom. Je sais aussi qu'on ne rende justice, ainsi, ni à

30 “I Conferenza Mondiale di Fede e Costituzione (1927),” in *Enchiridion Ecumenicum*, vol. 6, *Fede e Costituzione. Conferenze mondiali, 1927–1993*, eds. S. Rosso and E. Turco (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniani, 2005), 302.

31 Cf. P. Foresta, *La resistenza tedesca tra testimonianza e martirio: il sinodo di Barmen (29–31 maggio 1934)*, forthcoming.

32 Cf. G. Alberigo, “Du Concile de Trente au tridentinisme,” *Irénikon* 54 no. 2 (1981): 192–210; and P. Prodi, *Il paradigma tridentino. Un’epoca della storia della Chiesa* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2010); on the consequences of this process in the long term, reflections of great depth are to be found in I. Illich, *Pervertimento del cristianesimo. Conversazioni con David Cayley su vangelo, chiesa, modernità*, ed. F. Milana (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2008). Also meaningful are the considerations by the Dombes Group, according to which “[a]nother caveat is also essential: the Council of Trent should not be confused with Tridentinism. The council was a reaction, often oversensitive though well considered, within a Western Church that was becoming aware of a division whose effects it had not yet evaluated. Tridentinism, by contrast, was both a systematic organization of doctrine carried out on the basis of the council’s documents, regarded as almost self-sufficient, and the establishment of institutions that would leave a considerable mark on Roman Catholicism;” see Groupe des Dombes, “For the Conversion of the Churches,” in *For the Communion of the Churches: The Contribution of the Groupe Des Dombes*, ed. Catherine E. Clifford, trans. James Grieg (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 149–223, here 181.

son intention foncière, ni même à sa pensée religieuse. Je sais enfin que rien de tout à fait sérieux ne sera fait de notre part vers le protestantisme tant qu'on n'aura pas accompli la démarche de comprendre vraiment Luther et de lui rendre historiquement justice, au lieu de simplement le condamner. Pour cette conviction, qui est mienne, je serais prêt à donner joyeusement ma vie.³³

The experience of what already amounted to a half-century of ecumenical movement and this unexpected conciliar opening thus outlined the possibility – and the legitimacy – of a new way to approach Luther, a path devoid of political calculations and anachronistic attempts to reconsecrate him by those who, until recently, had looked at him as a die-hard enemy (and not just within Catholicism). However, it was also necessary to avoid the error of depicting – forcibly and much against his will – Luther as a Catholic,³⁴ just as it was impossible to hide the vast expanses that had been opened with the Church of Rome, and also among the other reformed churches.

Therefore, it became increasingly clear that Luther ought to be approached and understood as a man of his time; he was part of a certain historical context and was driven especially by a concern quite common at his time – a time that, on the other hand, had been the origin of a multitude of experiences of renewal – that is, a concern about his own personal salvation, which he considered no longer safeguarded by the very ecclesiastical authority that traditionally had been in charge of it. Albeit in vehement and polemical tones, Luther had indeed raised the most important of all questions: “the question of God.”³⁵ In hindsight, Luther emerged as a Christian on a historical ridge. Many scholars have remarked already on the ambivalence of a man who appeared to have a typically medieval cultural approach³⁶ and who, nevertheless, would end up being perceived and described for a great many years as the interrupter who had introduced humanity to a new era – the modern era. However, it was Luther’s time that was fundamentally thick with entanglements and permeations between an old and a new order; it was a time of reforms, in the broadest sense of the word, in which, together with the many elements of crisis and corruption, there were also important seeds of renewal.³⁷

³³ Y.M.-J. Congar, *Chrétiens en dialogue. Contributions catholiques à l’Ecuménisme* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1964), 126. And, meaningfully, at the end of a ceremony that had taken place in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls on December 4, 1965, Congar wanted to stop to pray at St. Paul’s tomb: “Je lui parle de Luther, qui a voulu réaffirmer ‘l’Évangile’ pour lequel Paul a lutté,” see Congar, *Mon journal du concile*, ed. E. Mahieu (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2002), 2:503.

³⁴ Erwin Iserloh, in particular, insisted on the idea that, in his dialogue with Augustine and Ockham, Luther had distanced himself from a Catholicism that was fundamentally no longer such; see *Kirche – Ereignis und Institution. Aufsätze und Vorträge* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1985), 2:145–55.

³⁵ Thus it is defined by W. Kasper, *Martin Lutero. Una prospettiva ecumenica* (Brescia: Queriniana, 2016), 23.

³⁶ More recently, the issue has been tackled again in the widely debated biography by V. Leppin, *Martin Luther* (Darmstadt: Primus, 2006, 2nd ed. 2010).

³⁷ On this subject, Walter Kasper mentions the celebration of the national council of Seville in 1478, which aimed precisely at getting rid of some abuses; the publication of the Complutensian Polyglot

4 The Fruits of the Dialogue

Therefore, the Second Vatican Council – and, even earlier, its announcement –not only promoted a new attitude toward Luther, but also had critical effects on the level of direct dialogue between the representatives of the different Christian churches, fostering meetings, exchanges, and especially the creation of mixed working groups that – among the several themes studied – dealt directly with Luther and thus forced the parties to go beyond pleasantries.³⁸ Ecumenical developments, which were surely also due to the phase of enthusiasm that characterized the first post-conciliar period and that Paul VI himself would later be forced to bridle,³⁹ were clearly perceivable. One proof of this was the speech given by Cardinal Johannes Willebrands during the Fifth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in July 1970, when he acknowledged that, over the centuries,

Martin Luther has not always been considered according to his real value by the Catholics, and his theology has not always been illustrated correctly. This circumstance furthered neither truth nor love, and, therefore, it did not serve the purpose of unity that we are striving to achieve between you and the Catholic Church.

Then Willebrands asked:

Bible; the spread of an Italian Evangelism that counted, among others, participants of curial rank such as Gasparo Contarini and Reginald Pole; and at the same time, he also mentions the importance of characters such as the mystic Johannes Tauler; see Kasper, *Martin Lutero*, 16–17.

38 At the time of the 450th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, there had been an exchange of letters between Cardinal Augustin Bea and the president of the Lutheran World Federation, Fredrik A. Schiotz, in which the latter had acknowledged that “sometimes we are tempted to celebrate almost with some triumph our commemorative manifestations of the Reformation. Let us pray that, in the important celebrations planned for this year around the whole world, this temptation might be overcome;” see S. Schmidt, *Agostino Bea, il cardinale dell’unità* (Roma: Città Nuova, 1987), 744. For an introductory understanding of the activities undertaken by the mixed Lutheran-Catholic working group, see J.A. Radano, *Lutheran and Catholic Reconciliation on Justification. A Chronology of the Holy See’s Contributions, 1961–1999, to a New Relationship between Lutheran & Catholics and to Steps Leading to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI:Eerdmans, 2009).

39 “Ce n'est pas que ce cheminement œcuménique soit sans difficultés. [...] On ne résorbe pas en quelques années une incompréhension et une opposition qui ont duré pendant des siècles. La patience est une vertu œcuménique. La maturation psychologique n'est pas moins lente ni moins difficile que la discussion théologique. La seule éventualité de devoir abandonner de vieilles positions, durcies pas d'anciens souvenirs, mêlés à des questions de prestige et à de subtiles polémiques, éveille des réactions qui tendent à se présenter comme des affirmations de principes, sur lesquelles il paraît impossible de transiger. [...] Chacun reprend conscience de soi, résiste, se révolte: l'œcuménisme s'arrête.” *Discours du Pape Paul VI aux membres du Secrétariat pour l'union des chrétiens*, April 28, 1967, available at: [https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/fr/speeches/1967/april/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19670428_u-nione-cristiani.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/fr/speeches/1967/april/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19670428_union-cristiani.html).

[T]oday, who would dare to deny that Martin Luther was a deeply religious personality who looked honestly and with self-sacrifice for the message of the gospel? Who could deny that – despite the torments that he inflicted on the Catholic Church and the Holy See (this, indeed, must not be hushed up) – he preserved a substantial quantity of the riches of the ancient Catholic faith? Has the Second Vatican Council not embraced the needs that were articulated, among others, by Luther, and through which many aspects of the Christian faith and the Christian life are expressed better now than before?

Finally Willebrands did not avoid the issue of justification and showed an important openness that undoubtedly represented a first synthesis of the discussions that had taken place between Catholics and Evangelicals; thus, he stated that the “common research” on this topic

has shown that the word *faith*, in Luther’s sense, is far from excluding deeds, love, and hope. Therefore, it can indeed be said that the notion of faith in Luther, if considered in its entirety, does not mean anything other than what the Catholic Church calls love.

He then concluded by saying that it was

a good thing to reflect on a man for whom the doctrine of justification represented the *articulus stantis aut cadentis ecclesiae*. He can be our common teacher in this field when he says that God ought to always remain the Lord and that our most essential human response ought to be absolute trust and adoration of God.⁴⁰

Some signals of an opportunity to rethink Luther’s role were also arriving from the Evangelicals, who recognized how the controversy championed by the reformers, “particularly by Luther, does not do justice to the Catholic part, especially when it overlaps the opposed notions with the Catholic position and does not acknowledge or overlooks the multi-faceted claims of Catholic theologians;” thus, “regarding the situation after the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council, Luther’s words on the ‘horror’ of the mass no longer apply.”⁴¹

5 Toward a New Ecumenical Synthesis

Understandably, the fifth centennial of Luther’s birth, celebrated in 1983, was a perfect opportunity to create a new ecumenical synthesis of the different positions. By then, it was possible to consider as a given the progress that had been made, especially during the post-council phase, but at the same time, it was not hard to find signs of a certain slowing down when it came to furthering understanding of Luther’s

⁴⁰ J. Willebrands, “Lutero, nostro maestro comune,” *Il Regno-Documentazione* 16 (1970): 354–55.

⁴¹ Commissione congiunta cattolico romana-evangelica luterana, “L’eucaristia (1978),” in *Enchiridion Ecumenicum*, vol. 1, *Documenti del dialogo teologico interconfessionale. Dialoghi internazionali, 1931–1984*, eds. S.J. Voicu and G. Cereti (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniani, 1986), 643–44.

role and work. On the Catholic side, the appointment of Joseph Ratzinger as the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and, at the same time, the expansion of the role of this institution within Wojtyła's Curia meant, from an ecumenical point of view, the adoption of a decidedly more cautious approach, due to Ratzinger's ancient and well-rooted reservations about the many Luthers that the Catholics had created over time.⁴² Moreover, another addition to these reservations was the belief that Luther's positions on the notion of tradition were irrecoverably incompatible with Catholic ones.⁴³ For his part, John Paul II declared that, for Catholics, "the name of Martin Luther is linked, through the centuries, to the memory of a painful time and, in particular, to the experience of the origin of deep ecclesial divisions;" he recognized that the historical research carried out up to that point had allowed for the achievement of "remarkable points of convergence;" however, it was necessary to carry on with this study for the purpose of "arriving, through an investigation without prejudices and motivated only by the search for truth, at a just representation of the reformer, of the entire era of the Reformation, and of the people that were involved in it."⁴⁴

This approach was mirrored on the Evangelical side, where it was stated that:

as much as Luther's name has been linked for some time to the idea of the division of Christianity, today we recognize that, after all, the divergent paths have not destroyed the communion of the faith and that, regardless of all divisions, the idea of a common belonging of all Christians is still alive. Luther does not belong to just one confession. He has a vocation for the whole of Christianity [...] If he were to enter again into the conscience of our time like a witness of the

42 Ratzinger noted that "[f]irst, there is the Luther of the Catechisms, the hymns and the liturgical reforms: and this Luther can be received by Catholics whose own biblical and liturgical revivals in this century reproduce many of Luther's own criticisms of the late medieval Church. But besides this Luther there is also another: the radical theologian and polemicist whose particular version of the doctrine of justification by faith is incompatible with the Catholic understanding of faith as a co-believing with the whole Church, within a Christian existence composed equally by faith, hope and charity;" see A. Nichols, *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI New Edition: An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 195.

43 Benedetto XVI and V. Messori, *Rapporto sulla fede. Vittorio Messori a colloquio con il cardinale Joseph Ratzinger* (Cinisello Balsamo: Mondadori, 1985), 166.

44 *Messaggio di Giovanni Paolo II al cardinale Giovanni Willebrands, presidente del Segretariato per l'unione dei cristiani*, October 31, 1983, available at: https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/letters/1983/documents/hf_jp_ii_let_19831031_card-willebrands.html. In a speech given three years prior to this in Mainz, to the Council of the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, John Paul II, overturning the approach expressed by John XXIII in his address to the crowd on the evening of October 11, 1962, had already stated that "all the gratitude for what is left in common and that unites us cannot make us blind to what still divides us;" see *Discorso di Giovanni Paolo II al Consiglio della Chiesa Evangelica*, November 17, 1980, available at: https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1980/november/documents/hf_jp_ii_spe_19801117_chiesa-evangelica.html.

gospel, men could be more aware of their faith and be thus liberated both from their uncertainties and from their absurd certainties.⁴⁵

The document prepared during the same months by the mixed Catholic-Evangelical committee represented an effective mediation among the multi-faceted positions that had emerged up to that point and, with a calm approach overall, claimed that, both on the Catholic side and on the Evangelical side, “outdated, polemically colored images of Luther” were on the way out and that Luther was starting “to be honored in common as a witness to the gospel, a teacher in the faith, and a herald of spiritual renewal;” Luther, therefore, was a character whose modernity was intact, since his plea “for church reform, a call to repentance, is still relevant for us. He summons us to listen anew to the gospel, to recognize our own unfaithfulness to the gospel, and to witness credibly to it.”⁴⁶ At any rate, the Evangelical churches declared their awareness of

his limitations in person and work, and of certain negative effects of his actions. They cannot approve his polemical excesses; they are aghast at the anti-Jewish writings of his old age; they see that his apocalyptic outlook led him to judgments which they cannot approve, e.g., on the papacy, the Anabaptist movement, and the Peasants’ Revolt.⁴⁷

Giuseppe Alberigo’s reflections must also, once again, be read within the context of the fourth/fifth centennial and clearly from an ecumenical perspective. In a lecture to the Waldensian Faculty in Rome, although operating within the context of a historical understanding of the figure of Luther, Alberigo postulated some methodological suggestions that could also be accepted by those who were more exposed on the level of ecumenical relationships. According to Alberigo, therefore, the importance of Luther for all of Christianity was to be looked for in the appropriate perspective and not while looking backwards: it was not possible, through the census of all the elements that were suitable to “re-Catholicizing” Luther, to forcibly abstract him from his time and pretend that the rift of the sixteenth century had not happened. It was necessary to adhere to facts, and the first of these facts was the consideration that, historically, there existed new churches that were the fruit of the Reformation and that held, not in a smaller measure than the Catholic Church, a distinct

⁴⁵ These are the thoughts expressed by the Evangelical bishop Eduard Lohse, chairman of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, in a message dated January 1, 1983: “Attualità di Martin Lutero,” *Il Regno-Dокументi*, 15 (1983): 469–70, here 470.

⁴⁶ Commissione congiunta cattolico romana-evangelica luterana, “Martin Lutero testimone di Gesù Cristo. Dichiarazione (1983),” in *Enchiridion Ecumenicum*, 1:744.

⁴⁷ Commissione congiunta, “Martin Lutero testimone di Gesù Cristo. Dichiarazione (1983),” in *Enchiridion Ecumenicum*, 1:748–49. The opinion just mentioned was clearly shared both in the above-quoted message by Lohse (*Attualità di Martin Lutero*) and in the message penned by the bishop Werner Leich, who was chairman of the Luther Committee of the Evangelical Churches of the German Democratic Republic, “Rischiare con Dio,” *Il Regno-Dокументi* 15 (1983): 472–73.

wealth of doctrine and culture that should not be wasted. Certainly, as Alberigo granted, in Luther's time there had been many voices that had supported a reform, but only Luther's had been able to impose on Catholicism a process of self-reform "to the point that it can be said today that, without Luther, modern Catholicism would have been completely different and hardly better."⁴⁸

However, it is also important to point out that major importance was granted to an in-depth historical analysis only in the case of the ecumenical debate between Evangelicals and Catholics.⁴⁹ In other circles, the preference had been, and still was, for insisting on a permanent and fundamentally uncritical modernization of Luther as a reassurance of the existence of common elements among the different Christian confessions or denominations. This could be verified, first of all, in the document agreed in 1984 between Evangelicals and Methodists.⁵⁰ The Anglican-Catholic mixed committee, in contrast, had later turned to Luther to ratify that baptism on its own was not enough to exercise an office within the Church.⁵¹ Even more representative of this approach was the document subscribed to by the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Lutheran World Federation, in which was stated, "[w]e came with questions, we parted with appreciation. While significant doctrinal differences remain, we found much in common: a love for the word of God, a shared heritage from the Reformation, a deep appreciation for the work and teachings of Martin Luther;" these conversations had finally clarified that "both Lutherans and Adventists unconditionally affirm the interrelated principles of the Reformation: *sola scriptura; solus Christus; sola fide; sola gratia*. Both churches regard themselves as heirs of the Protestant Reformation and as children of Luther."⁵² Evangelicals and Orthodox

48 G. Alberigo, "Cosa rappresenta Lutero nella coscienza cattolica contemporanea," in *Lutero nel suo e nel nostro tempo. Studi e conferenze per il 5º centenario della nascita di M. Lutero* (Torino: Claudio, 1983), 29–38, here 35.

49 An exception, although still referring to discussions with Catholic participation, was represented by the observations of the Jesuit ecumenist Jos Vercruyse in the document agreed between the Church of Rome and the Mennonites, where he claimed that a "revision in the light of modern historiography, of the complex history of the so-called 'Left Wing of the Reformation' or 'Radical Reformation', which Luther already unjustly collected under the term *Schwärmertum*, could enhance a better mutual understanding. The proposal to study the common experience of martyrdom together deserves special attention;" cf. the "Commento a Chiesa cattolica-Conferenza mennonita mondiale, Chiamati a essere insieme operatori di pace. Rapporto 1998–2003," in *Enchiridion Ecumenicum*, vol. 7, *Documenti del dialogo teologico interconfessionale. Dialoghi internazionali, 1995–2005*, eds. G. Cereti and J.F. Puglisi (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniani, 2006), 1034.

50 Commissione congiunta Federazione luterana mondiale-Concilio metodista mondiale, "La chiesa comunità di grazia, Rapporto sul dialogo 1979–1984," in *Enchiridion Ecumenicum*, 1:1143–1186.

51 Commissione internazionale anglicana-cattolico romana, "Il diaconato come opportunità ecumenica. Rapporto di Hannover (1995)," in *Enchiridion Ecumenicum*, 7:208.

52 Confederazione generale degli Avventisti del Settimo giorno e Federazione luterana mondiale, "Rapporto delle conversazioni bilaterali 1994–1998 (1998)," in *Enchiridion Ecumenicum*, 7:380–81; later in the document, it is also stated: "Adventists have a high appreciation for the Reformation.

Christians had turned to Luther's *Small Catechism* to state their common belief that only inspiration by the Holy Spirit could allow the readers of the Bible to comprehend it fully:

The Orthodox believe that such authentic interpretation is the service of the fathers of the Church, especially expressed in the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils. Lutherans agree in principle. Lutheran confessional writings affirm that no one can believe in Jesus Christ by one's own reason or abilities, but that it is the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, and illuminates believers through the gospel even as he calls, gathers, and enlightens the whole Church on earth, keeping it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.⁵³

The agreement on justification among Catholics and Evangelicals, which was reached between 1998 and 1999 after decades of challenging negotiations (which are well reflected by the unresolved complexity of the final agreement), was important in itself; so too, however, was the formal requalification that ratified Luther's role outside of the Evangelical and Reformed churches.⁵⁴ The era of the *damnatio memoriae* was definitely over, but this only served to highlight once again the problem of defining an understanding of Luther that would be, from an ecclesial and theological point of view, shared as much as possible. Historiographical research, although occasionally naïve or anachronistic,⁵⁵ made an important contribution on this topic; however, it evidently could not untangle issues that were not historiographical in nature. There was, in fact, a line that, as Hubert Jedin had already said, was impossible to cross: "we must exercise toward Luther a full historical justice; we must try to understand him, and we can learn from him, making our own the great values that are contained in his works." However, for Jedin, it was also necessary to be similarly clear that it would be "impossible to integrate all of Luther, all of his personality, all of his theology in the Catholic Church."⁵⁶ It was also obvious that a new synthesis on Luther, prompted also by the upcoming fifth centennial of the beginning of the Reformation, ought to derive from a sincere metabolization of the steps forward that were made in the ecumenical debate that began in the early 1960s. As Benedict XVI, Ratzinger, the former prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, had to put aside the overlap between the Reformation and mod-

They see themselves as heirs of Luther and other Reformers, especially in their adherence to the great principles of *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, *solo Christo*;" see p. 393.

⁵³ Commissione internazionale mista per il dialogo teologico luterano-ortodosso, "Il canone e l'ispirazione. Dichiarazione comune (1989)," in *Enchiridion Ecumenicum*, vol. 3, *Documenti del dialogo teologico interconfessionale. Dialoghi internazionali, 1985–1994*, eds. G. Cereti and J.F. Puglisi (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniani, 1995), 1067–1068.

⁵⁴ See the text in *Enchiridion Ecumenicum*, 7: 885–918.

⁵⁵ On this subject, it is possible to mention, for example, the dramatic tones with which Luther's anti-Semitism has been recently reconstructed – an anti-Semitism that had quite a different interpretation after the celebration of the fourth centennial of the beginning of the Reformation; on this topic, see T. Kaufmann, *Gli ebrei di Lutero* (Torino: Claudiana, 2016).

⁵⁶ Jedin, *Mutamenti della interpretazione cattolica*, 370.

ernity that he had always considered as doomed to fail and admit that, at the very least, the questions Luther asked were correct;⁵⁷ on the Evangelical side, it seemed necessary to renew once again the *mea culpa* for those aspects of Luther that appeared to be completely unacceptable.⁵⁸

What has become increasingly evident is the fact that, from an ecumenical point of view, Luther was and still is destined to remain – as was anticipated at the beginning of this study – a stumbling block: in a way, the “*hier stehe ich*” that, according to the tradition, he uttered in Worms has become a permanent challenge to understanding him for the Christians of following generations. This is a challenge that the participants in the ecumenical movement took on more or less wittingly and instrumentally; a challenge that sometimes has been circumvented, aiming at a confrontation more focused on the theologies of the different Christian confessions than on those of their respective founders; or a challenge that has been rejected as a never-ending process.⁵⁹ As time went on, the courage underlying Willebrands’ statements from

⁵⁷ Cf. *Incontro con i rappresentanti del Consiglio della “Chiesa Evangelica in Germania”. Discorso del Santo Padre Benedetto XVI*, September 23, 2011, available at: https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/it/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110923_evangelical-church-erfurt.html. Francis put himself in the same wake when he declared it “important that the Catholic Church courageously carry forward a careful and honest reevaluation of the intentions of the Reformation and of the figure of Martin Luther, in the sense of ‘Ecclesia semper reformanda’, in the broad wake traced by the Councils, as well as by men and women, enlivened by the light and power of the Holy Spirit;” see *Visit to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Rome, Address of His Holiness Pope Francis*, November 15, 2015, available at: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151115_chiesa-evangelica-luterana.html.

⁵⁸ “On this occasion, Lutherans will also remember the vicious and degrading statements that Martin Luther made against the Jews. They are ashamed of them and deeply deplore them. Lutherans have come to recognize with a deep sense of regret the persecution of Anabaptists by Lutheran authorities and the fact that Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon theologically supported this persecution. They deplore Luther’s violent attacks against the peasants during the Peasants’ War. The awareness of the dark sides of Luther and the Reformation has prompted a critical and self-critical attitude of Lutheran theologians towards Luther and the Wittenberg Reformation. Even though they agree in part with Luther’s criticism of the papacy, nevertheless Lutherans today reject Luther’s identification of the pope with the antichrist,” Commissione luterana-cattolica sull’unità e la commemorazione comune della Riforma nel 2017, “*Dal conflitto alla comunione*,” supplement to *Il Regno-Dокументi* 11 (2013): 382.

⁵⁹ From this perspective, Francis’ off-the-cuff words are exemplary, when he declared that he believed that “Martin Luther’s intentions were not mistaken; he was a reformer. Perhaps some of his methods were not right, although at that time [...] we see that the Church was not exactly a model to emulate. There was corruption and worldliness in the Church; attachment to money and power. That was the basis of his protest. He was also intelligent, and he went ahead, justifying his reasons for it. Nowadays, Lutherans and Catholics, and all Protestants, are in agreement on the doctrine of justification: on this very important point he was not mistaken. [...] Today, the dialogue is very good, and I believe that the document on justification is one of the richest ecumenical documents, one of the richest and most profound. [...] There are divisions, but they also depend on the churches. [...] Differences have perhaps done the greatest harm to each of us, and today we are looking to take up again the path of encounter after five hundred years. [...] And for theologians to study together,

1970 on Luther as a “common teacher” became even more evident: no one, in fact, had missed the analogy with the “*doctor communis*” par excellence, Thomas Aquinas. Willebrands’ courage still has not found any imitators, at least in its most explicit formulations.

searching... One time I said, jokingly, ‘I know when the day of full unity will be!’ ‘When?’ ‘The day after the coming of the Son of Man!’ Because we do not know... The Holy Spirit will grant us this grace;” see *In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Armenia to Rome*, June 26, 2016, available at: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/june/documents/papa-francesco_20160626_armenia-conferenza-stampa.html.

