



**Reception Twin Consultation  
Halle (Saale), May 18, 2016**

2017 is the 500th anniversary of the publication of Luther's theses in Wittenberg. From a historical viewpoint it is questionable whether Luther actually nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church, whether it was somebody else or whether they were only distributed in printed copies. But these theses, which categorically denounced the Church's practice of granting indulgences, have been regarded ever since as the starting point of all the various happenings which are gathered together under the heading of the "Reformation".

A few years ago, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) decided, in co-operation with public bodies and tourist associations, to launch a Luther Decade from 2008 to 2016, leading up to the Reformation anniversary and making preparations for it. 2008 saw the opening of the Decade by Bishop Wolfgang Huber. In his inaugural speech on 21 September he stated: "As much as we value Luther's contribution to German culture, especially his impact on the formation of the German language, we have all the less reason to repeat the claims to superiority in which Martin Luther is associated with a supposed 'German identity'. For a long time the figure of Luther was used to mislead Germans both at home and abroad into confusing patriotism with nationalism."

This has given an important signal. Because anniversaries of the Reformation have always been indicators of the times in which they were celebrated. In 1617 the jubilee served as confessional self-reassurance. In 1717 Luther was stylised, on the one hand, as the godly, devout man of the Pietists and, on the other, as an early Enlightenment figure speaking out against medieval superstition. 1817 was orchestrated as a religio-nationalist festival in memory of the Battle of the Nations near Leipzig in 1813, and Luther became a national German hero. In 1883, with the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, Luther was promoted to being the founding father of the German Empire and in 1917, along with Hindenburg, he became the Saviour of the Germans in a time of great adversity. In 1933, the year when the National Socialists seized power, Luther was surrounded on his 450<sup>th</sup> birthday with the aura of the God-given great Führer who was followed only by one greater "Führer" named Adolf Hitler. And then on the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death he was seen as the comforter of the German people - in 1946 when comfort was bitterly needed. In 1983 on his 500<sup>th</sup> birthday there was a kind of competition over Luther's legacy in East and West. In the German Democratic Republic Luther was no longer the servant of princes but the representative of early bourgeois revolution.

Looking back like this must make us sensitive to the fact that Reformation anniversaries are tricky points in time. How will the generations that follow us judge the events of 2017? Will they say that the Protestants wanted to raise their profile at the cost of others? Will it be seen as an attempt to gain publicity for the Christian faith? Or will it be clear that this was an occasion when we grappled with our own heritage critically and constructively, as good Protestants should do?

I am convinced that there will be no 'Luther cult', as is feared by many. Protestantism in Germany and Lutheranism worldwide are confident enough not to gloss over the dark side of their great role model and above all not to limit the Reformation to him and his own persona. It is evident that the Reformation was a movement that covered several decades. 1517 is a symbolic date. And the Reformation was driven by many people; Martin Luther is just the symbolic figure. This is demonstrated beautifully in an altarpiece by the Italian artist Gabriele Mucchi, which can be seen in the little church of Alt-Staaken in the outskirts of Berlin. Below the image of the crucified Christ in this wall painting there are gathered 12 historical figures who played an important role in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the renewal of the church and of our view of the world: Nicholas Copernicus, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, Ignatius Loyola, Thomas More, Katharina von Bora, Martin Luther, Thomas Müntzer, Johannes Bugenhagen, Philipp Melanchthon, Lucas Cranach, Erasmus of Rotterdam. That is a splendid symbol of this being a widespread movement, an enormous breakthrough. I find it very moving that in this picture they are all reconciled beneath the cross. So for me it is also particularly important that I am a special envoy not for Luther but for the Reformation anniversary! We must make it clear that this was a diverse movement that changed both state and church, and is still having an effect up to today.

It will be important to be open to a critical look back and to appreciate the Reformation as an overall event. We cannot but celebrate in a global context and an ecumenical dimension! In this brief greeting let me give three examples:

### **Ecumenism**

This is the first anniversary following 100 years of the ecumenical movement. On the one hand that involves Roman Catholicism. The churches of the Reformation regard themselves - just as much as the Roman Catholic Church - as the inheritors of the ancient church (Luther, *Against Hans Worst* 1541) and it is therefore a matter of our common history. The Reformation era changed everything. The Roman Catholic Church of today is not the same as the church with which Luther and the other Reformers came into such deep conflict in the 16th century. For example, a century after Luther the Council of Trent (1645-63) said farewell to the practice of selling indulgences for money and in the 20th century the Second Vatican Council introduced the saying of the Mass in the vernacular. Of course, many of the questions raised in the Reformation about the papacy, the veneration of the saints and the understanding of ministerial office still remain in force today. But Martin Luther wanted to reform his own church and not to split it. So for Protestants to set themselves apart in commemorating the Reformation would not make any sense.

Suffragan Bishop Jaschke of Hamburg has declared that today Luther's 95 theses would also be accepted from the Roman Catholic side and said that he shares Luther's criticism of the trade in indulgences at that time.<sup>1</sup> And in Augsburg in 1999 the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. They asserted that the condemnations issued by the two churches in the 16<sup>th</sup> century do not apply to their teaching today. The signing of the Official Common Statement on the Joint Declaration in Augsburg on 31 October was an occasion for celebration. It did not mean – as was clear to all those who took part – that from now on the theoretical teachings of the different traditions would be based on exactly the same understanding. But the signing was welcomed as a step on a necessary path towards convergence. A breakthrough seemed close, meaning: this declaration will not eliminate our differences, but will hopefully lead to the possibility of being able to invite one another as guests to Communion. We can be grateful that it at least succeeded in finding common wording on a theological question which was once the cause of unity being broken.

In this respect there is now a chance to give a clear ecumenical dimension to the Reformation anniversary. It is crystal clear that whatever the differences and whatever the nature of our own profiles, there is more that binds us together than separates us. And also: in a secularised society the common witness of Christians is of great significance; the more strongly we speak out together, the more we will be heard. So in Lent 2017 we plan a central ecumenical worship service "Healing of memories". The liturgy will be open for all parishes to worship at local level. So we hope this will set the "tone" for a reformation jubilee in an ecumenical perspective.

But this is also a matter of world-wide ecumenism, which has existed as a movement since 1910 and has been institutionalised since 1948 with the World Council of Churches, as well as having a voice through the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). How about links to the churches in the wider world? What contribution is offered by Protestants? What does this anniversary mean in Brazil, in South Africa, in Tanzania? For this reason there are good contacts with the World Christian families, with the LWF and the WCRC as well as the World Council of Churches.

➤ 2017 will be a Reformation anniversary with an ecumenical dimension.

### **Dialogue of religions**

2017 is the first anniversary of the publication of the 95 Theses since the Holocaust. The failure of Christians in regard to the Jews in the National-Socialist era has triggered a learning process. Especially in the year headed "Reformation and Tolerance" we confronted ourselves with Luther's antijudaism, especially in his writing of 1543. Some historians say, we even have to see him as an anti-semitist. "Simul iustus and peccator" – that is a theological insight which also has meaning for Luther himself. His hatred against Jews especially in his old days had its source in his anger that Jews wouldn't read the Hebrew part of the bible as pointing towards Jesus as the Messiah. That is an explanation, but not an excuse. So it was

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<sup>1</sup> Cf: Suffragan Bishop criticises the trade in indulgences at the time of Luther – Jaschke: Catholics accept Luther's theses, in: Protestant Press Service (epd) central edition 212/31.10.2008, p11ff.

important that before starting to celebrate reformation our church confronted itself with this terrible heritage that has been used by the Nazis to argue for their murder of Jews.

Today the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) says: whoever attacks Jews, attacks us. After sixty years of Jewish-Christian dialogue we can see that the Reformation church is capable of dialogue. The Reformers themselves said that the church must always be reforming itself and this is a decisive point which has proved true in the learning process.

That also holds true with respect to Muslims. Although Luther may have ranted against the Turks, today we are living together in the same country. At the same time, Christians throughout the world are the most persecuted religious community. We need dialogue and it must be grounded in theology.

A learning process is also revealed by looking at social movements and the dispute between Luther and Thomas Müntzer. The question of the conflict between the command to be subject to authority and the command to obey God rather than human beings has been hotly debated ever since the time of the so-called Third Reich.

And with respect to those who were persecuted as Anabaptists and Enthusiasts in the Reformation era, the 2010 LWF Assembly featured an act of repentance and plea for reconciliation with the Mennonites, as their spiritual heirs. For the Reformation anniversary in 2017 religious dialogue must prove to be a major concern for Protestantism.

### **Global Perspective**

2017 will be the first Reformation anniversary celebrated in a global perspective. We live in a globalised world. But that was already the case in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Anyone who closely examines the records of the Imperial Diet of Worms in 1521<sup>2</sup> will realise that Luther's appearance there, while important, was only one of the topics dealt with. The Emperor Charles V was striving for a reform of the empire. Belgrade had been conquered by Sultan Suleiman I and the supposed "Turkish threat" was high on the agenda. Securing sovereignty in the region of Spain was also an urgent matter, with an eye to the colonies. Movements for social revolution had arisen in the kingdom of Valencia. Britain, France and Italy were also on the scene. We can see that, in the face of European expansion, particularly in the direction of Spanish and Portuguese colonies, Luther himself had a very restricted view of the world. Heinz Schilling writes in his new biography: "The world view of the Reformer remained a continental one to his death, and was rarely touched by the emerging new worlds."<sup>3</sup> And yet the Reformation was a European event which very soon took on international proportions.

The Reformation anniversary in 2017 must be seen in a global perspective. I have visited many countries the last three years.

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<sup>2</sup> Der Reichstag zu Worms von 1521, edited by Fritz Reuter, Worms, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Heinz Schilling, Martin Luther, Munich, 2012 p26.