

**Bishop em. Eero Huovinen**

*LWF Council, 17th June 2013, Geneva*

Dear sisters and brothers in the one body of Christ,  
dear friends in the Lutheran, Catholic and all other church families

It is a joy to officially present to you the new theological document of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity. I also bring to you warm greetings from all the members, consultants and secretaries of the Commission.

The title of the document says, what is essential: From Conflict to Communion. When we as Lutherans and Catholics plan to commemorate the forth coming year 2017, we want to do that together in an ecumenical spirit. In other words, we want to commemorate it in a different manner than what was done during the other centennials. We want to leave the conflicts behind us and seek the unity of the church in the spirit of shared faith and mutual love.

Let me use a picture. Let's imagine a couple who has been married 15 years, but then, after many conflicts, unfortunately divorce. After 5 years they find each other again, notice how much they have in common and want to continue together, as a couple. What shall they do?

I'm not a family counselor, so let me be simple. Two things are needed. Firstly, they have to rediscover their original love, the very beginning of their marriage. Secondly, they have to deal with the wounds they have inflicted to their partner during the time of separation and split.

The intention of our document has been twofold. Firstly we have tried look back to the origin of our Christian faith, to the precious heritage we have in common in the gospel of Jesus Christ and in the faith in the triune God. Together we can rejoice in the core of our common faith.

Secondly we, both Lutherans and Catholics, have to look critically at ourselves and ask in which way we are responsible to the split and division of the church. The loss of the unity in the Christendom in the time of the Reformation belongs to the dark pages of church history. We all need to repent and reform. We Lutherans and Catholics want to direct our critical glance first at ourselves, not at the other one.

An open and fair interpretation of the history is not an easy matter. Like in all struggles between people it is a difficult and challenging task to look jointly back to the time of division 500 years ago and to the history following it. Why have we so long kept looking more at the mutual misunderstandings than to how much we have in common?

I can assure to you, dear sisters and brothers, that it has not been an easy process to describe together the history of conflicts. I'm sure that you will understand, how much we have needed and still need hard, deep-going, open, careful and sober theological reflection in the issues where we have differences. We have had and we all have in front of us a challenging learning process in facing the obstacles on the way to a full visible unity between the churches.

But let us consider and concentrate in how much we have in common in those theological issues, which were central to both Martin Luther and the Catholic faith, but which in the past have separated us. They are the issues of justification, eucharist, ministry, scripture and tradition and last but not least the ecclesiology.

Many members of our churches often ask why we theologians discuss and handle the doctrinal questions in such a complicated and sophisticated way. I can fully share this concern. We have to keep in our minds that the gospel is proclaimed to all people, not only to an academic audience.

At the same time we have to remember that the time of a separate history has been long. We have to be impatient and patient at the same time. We have to know better the tradition of the others. None of us can alone decide how to build unity. We have other sisters and brothers on the same road. We need profound and sound theological work.

Three weeks ago I had the opportunity to meet briefly the bishop of Rome. His encouraging words were short and to the point: "Arbeiten sie stark für die Einheit", "work hard for the unity".

The year 2017 is not only a year of commemorating the Reformation, but also a year of 50th anniversary of ecumenical dialogue between the Lutheran churches and the Catholic church. This has been a fruitful road. It is good to remember where we started 50 years ago before our common dialogue process began and compare that to the present situation. The progress during these 50 years has been considerable. In the beginning of this process the words of John XXIII were often quoted: "The things that unite us are greater than those that divide us." These words can also be seen as a motto to our document.

Dear sisters and brothers. Please, kindly accept the document and read it. Start with the foreword and the five imperatives at the end of the paper. And, if they speak to your heart, do read - slowly - the whole document. It is not as easy reading as many cartoons are, but hopefully it can help all of us in finding new steps on the way to a more visible unity of the church of Christ.