

From Conflict to Communion: **Why not rescind the 1521 excommunication of Luther?**

The point of lifting personal excommunications posthumously is not for the repose of the souls of the excommunicated. It is to take away the public rejection of that person and the scandal caused by the condemnation.

The following material is a chapter from the article, “*From Conflict to Communion: Going Home to Rome,*” which addresses various issues in the LWF/Vatican report *From Conflict to Communion* (C2C). C2C purports to be a candid look at where things stand between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. In fact **C2C** has an agenda: It directs Lutherans to be **PC** so that in time they can be **RC**.

The full article includes the following chapters:

1. Lutherans and Catholics agree/disagree on baptism.
2. C2C declares JDDJ has the “highest level of authority.” (¶197)
3. Justification must decrease so that unity may increase.
4. C2C conceals the Catholic rejection of “faith alone.”
5. C2C’s focus on “Luther’s theology” disguises a caricature of Luther.
- 6. Why not rescind the 1521 excommunication of Luther?**
7. C2C creates a caricature of Luther on scripture by omitting its gospel center.
8. C2C hides the Vatican view: Lutherans are not really, truly “Church.”
9. C2C assumes papal primacy and infallibility are inevitable.
10. Mary, Mary, why are they hiding you?
11. C2C glides over the ordination of women.
12. C2C kicks the can down the road: Lutherans must concede to unity on Rome’s terms.

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6. Why not rescind the 1521 excommunication of Luther?

On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo X issued his bull, *Exsurge Domine* (“Arise, O Lord, and judge your cause....The wild boar from the forest seeks to destroy [the vineyard]”), threatening Luther, “the wild boar,” with excommunication.

The actual bull of excommunication, *Decet Romanum Pontificem*, which denounced Luther as “the slave of a depraved mind” and his followers as “a pernicious and heretical sect,” was issued **January 3, 1521**.⁸

In 2009 Lutheran ecumenist Günther Gassmann called on the Vatican to rescind its 1521 excommunication of Luther: “It would be a remarkable step and a sign of hope and

⁸ Pope Leo X, bull of excommunication, *Decet Romanum Pontificem*, January 3, 1521, ¶12. Available at www.vatican.va.

encouragement,” said Gassmann, former director of the World Council of Churches’ Faith and Order Commission from 1984-1995 and an ardent supporter of JDDJ.⁹

Lutherans, for their part, have long rejected “Luther’s identification of the Pope with the Antichrist,” as C2C acknowledges (¶229).¹⁰ If, as C2C declares, “the reasons for mutually condemning each other’s faith have fallen by the wayside” (¶238), is it not also time for the Vatican to lift its condemnation of Luther?

The Vatican **could lift** its excommunication of Luther. After all, there are Vatican precedents for lifting **personal condemnations**. In 1054 Pope Leo IX excommunicated personally Michael Cerularius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, who, in turn, excommunicated personally Pope Leo IX, thereby initiating the East-West schism of the church.¹¹ On December 7, 1965, a *Joint Catholic-Orthodox Declaration* lifting these **personal excommunications** was read simultaneously by Pope Paul VI at a closing session of Vatican II in Rome and by Patriarch Athenagoras I, Archbishop of Istanbul, in a special ceremony in Constantinople.¹²

When asked in 1999 about lifting the excommunication of Luther, Cardinal Edward Cassidy, then head of the Vatican’s *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*, said: “One cannot now do anything for Martin Luther because Martin Luther, wherever he is, is not worried about these condemnations.”¹³

But the point of lifting personal excommunications posthumously is not for the repose of the souls of the excommunicated. It is to take away the public rejection of that person and the scandal caused by the condemnation. For example, Joan of Arc was excommunicated in 1431; in 1456 Pope Callixtus III lifted her excommunication, nullifying her condemnation.

⁹ “Catholic Church called on to revoke Luther’s excommunication,” *Ecumenical News International* (March, 30, 2009).

¹⁰ “This is a powerful demonstration that the pope is the real Antichrist...;” “...we cannot suffer his [the devil’s] apostle, the pope or Antichrist, to govern us.” (*Smalcald Articles* 2.4:10, 14; Tappert 300-301. Cf. Melancthon in *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* 39-42; Tappert 327-28; Ap 7-8:24; Tappert 172; Ap 15:18-19; Tappert 217-18.)

See *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church*. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VI, Eds. Paul C. Empie, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 67-68: “Concrete steps need to be taken to right old wrongs and to prepare for new directions at this crucial point in the history of our churches. Thus we recommend to our churches: a) that they officially declare that the Lutheran commitment to the Confessions does not involve the assertion that the pope or the papacy in our day is the antichrist; in this way our churches would publicly affirm that antipapal polemics should be replaced by an attitude of respect and love.”

¹¹ Carl D. Mirbt, *Quellen zur Geschichte des Papsttums and des römischen Katholizismus* (Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1911) ¶¶ 179-180, pp. 95-97.

¹² *Joint Catholic-Orthodox Declaration of His Holiness Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I*. Available at www.vatican.va.

¹³ Stephen Brown, “Lutherans and Catholics to sign away justification dispute on 31 October,” *Ecumenical News International* (June 11, 1999).

C2C first affirms, then subverts, Luther's status. Ever so artfully C2C notes: "Implicit rapprochement with Luther's concerns has led to a new evaluation of his catholicity ... a new ecumenical understanding of Luther as a 'witness to the gospel'" (§129). This phrase, "witness to the gospel," conveys less recognition and esteem than do other honorifics.

On the one hand, prominent Catholic leaders have had the highest praise for Luther.¹⁴ A striking example: Cardinal Jan Willebrands, in his speech to the 1970 LWF Assembly, praised Luther with the classic Roman Catholic honorific "*doctor communis*" ("doctor of the church" or "our common doctor"). Catholics reserve this title for those few theologians who have made contributions of far-reaching importance to the church.

On the other hand, C2C does not even mention Willebrands' praise for Luther as *doctor communis* even though C2C **twice** refers to his 1970 address to the LWF Assembly.¹⁵

By suppressing the high praise Catholic leaders have had for Luther, C2C exposes the pretense of its imperative to "always begin from a perspective of unity" (§1239). High praise for Luther from Catholics conflicts with the caricature of Luther C2C creates.

Furthermore, C2C one-sidedly and specifically identifies "the dark sides of Luther and the Reformation" (§1229) while overlooking "the dark sides" of the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century.¹⁶ Note the following inequities in C2C:

- a. **Lutherans and Catholics both persecuted the Jews.** C2C lifts up "the vicious and degrading statements that Martin Luther made against the Jews" (§1229) but is silent about vicious statements made by Catholics as well as their persecution, exiling, and execution of Jews under the Spanish, Portuguese, and Roman Inquisitions, which occurred before, during, and after Luther's lifetime.
- b. **Lutherans and Catholics both persecuted the Anabaptists.** C2C lifts up Lutheran persecution of Anabaptists (§1229) but is silent about how Catholics also drowned, burned, and exiled thousands of Anabaptists in the sixteenth century.

¹⁴ See Eero Huovinen, "*Doctor Communis*," regarding Cardinal (then Bishop) Karl Lehmann's reference to Luther as "Teacher of the Faith," in footnote 34 above. See also Catholic ecumenist, Peter Manns: "A step beyond Lortz seems first of all to be visible in my move in the last years, to the amazement of not only my Catholic friends, to characterize Luther as a 'father in the faith,'" in "The Catholicity and Theological-Ecumenical Usefulness of the Lortzian Position on the 'Catholic Luther,'" *Luther's Ecumenical Significance. An Interconfessional Consultation*, Eds Peter Manns and Harding Meyer in collaboration with Carter Lindberg and Harry McSorley (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 3-26, here 20.

¹⁵ §129. fn 7 and §1236.

¹⁶ C2C indirectly acknowledges Catholic persecution when it lifts up an ambiguous papal apology from 1522: "Pope Hadrian VI complained of abuses and trespasses, sins and errors insofar as church authorities had committed them" (§1234).

C2C omits Catholic persecution of Luther and Lutherans. C2C omits Rome’s persecution of Luther and Lutherans and ignores the modern Lutheran concern and request to rescind the excommunication of Luther.¹⁷

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¹⁷ See C2C “Reasons to regret and lament,” ¶¶ 228, 229.