



bi-annual Bulletin

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LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS ITS RELEVANCE FOR ECUMENISM

by

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in memoriam matris
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1. INTRODUCTION

The term **theologia crucis** is readily used in modern theology, catholic as well as protestant. It belongs today to the most current christian terminology. An impressive bibliography could easily prove the assertion. The extraordinary synod of bishops of 1985 had a special mention of the theology of the cross in its final report, saying "that in the present difficulties God wishes to teach us more deeply the value, the importance and the centrality of the cross of Jesus Christ".¹ Looking at the facts, however, one soon finds out that the fortune of the expression is quite new and that its origin can easily be retraced. It was, as a matter of fact, Jürgen Moltmann who brought the term into circulation again with his famous book, *Der Gekreuzigte Gott* (1972) / in English translation: *The Crucified God* (1973).² In the wake of its success several other studies were published, reedited or translated, for example the study of the Japanese theologian, Kitamori Kazoh, *Theology of the Pain of God*.

One book deserves special attention in the framework of our lecture: the study of the Lutheran theologian and historian Walther von Loewenich, *Luthers Theologia Crucis*, translated into English as *Luther's Theology of the Cross*.³ It puts us on a track that leads to the origins of the **theologia crucis**. The

study has exercised a decisive influence upon the understanding of this brand of theology in many other studies until now. So in the studies of Professor Brunero Gherardini,⁴ or in the recent study of Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*.⁵ The book still remains a classic. The subtitle of the Italian translation, *Visione teologica di Lutero in una prospettiva ecumenica* ("Luther's theological vision in an ecumenical prospective") does not say anything about von Loewenich's viewpoint, but much about the context of

1. *Final Report II, D, 2: Origins* 15 (1985) 449.

2. Jürgen Moltmann, *Der Gekreuzigte Gott*, München: Kaiser 1972 = *The Crucified God*, New York: Harper & Row 1974.

3. Walther von Loewenich, *Luthers Theologia Crucis*, München: Kaiser 1929; Bielefeld 1982 = *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Tenbury Wells: Fowler Right Books 1977 = *Teologia Crucis* (Nuovi Saggi teologici 6), Bologna: Dehoniane 1975.

4. Brunero Gherardini, *Theologia crucis. L'eredità di Lutero nell'evoluzione teologica della Riforma*, Roma: Paoline 1978.

5. Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Oxford: Blackwell 1985.

the rediscovery in the Sixties. In fact von Loewenich interpreted Luther's **theologia crucis** in 1929 as a contribution to the dialectical theology of Karl Barth and other theologians. Luther's contribution is viewed in a strong epistemologic perspective, as a theology of revelation. So we find it still among many modern interpreters. Says Alister McGrath:

*The theology of the cross, as we have emphasized, is a theology of revelation, and as such, cannot be divorced from the question of the preconditions of revelation...*⁶

The renewed interest in the theology of the cross takes place in a different context. It is linked with the problem of theodicy: How can God be justified before the unbearable sufferings of the world? It echoes the eternal question of Job. "Where is God?", somebody asks confronted with the death of a youth in Auschwitz. Elie Wiesel answers, "Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows..."⁷ The theology of the cross is thus imbedded in the experience of the generation back from the Second World War asking themselves whether theology is still possible after Auschwitz and Hiroshima. It is continued in the reflection upon the experience of the poor, the emarginated, and all who suffer unjustly in this world. Liberation theology reflects upon the link between cross and the concrete sufferings of the poor. The dissertation of the Indonesian protestant theologian, Andreas. A. Yewangoe, *Theologia Crucis in Asia*, carries a programmatic subtitle: *Asian Christian Views on Suffering in the Face of Overwhelming poverty and Multifaceted Religiosity in Asia*.

Crucis here has reference to the Cross of Christ, the incarnated God. It is a symbol of His suffering and death. It also refers to the current suffering of people in this world in various forms.

By using "Cross" to indicate human suffering, we want to stress the fact that this suffering is real, and as such needs to be overcome. Thus, the Cross may not be used to justify human suffering, or as an alibi for ignoring the various crosses borne by people in our world today.⁸

To conclude this sketchy overview of the **theologia crucis** today, I must mention that the "political" approach has been quite extensively criticized by Pierre Bühler in *Kreuz und Eschatologie*.⁹

2. LUTHERS THEOLOGIA CRUCIS

Outdated now, the book of von Loewenich did circulate once again a major concern much more of Martin Luther, than of the Lutheran theology which followed. There can be no christian theology, of course, without admitting the centrality of the cross. This admission however does not yet constitute a theology of the cross in the strict sense. This is true already for the New Testament: the passion and the cross have a predominant place in all the gospels. But only the gospel of Mark could be called a "theology of the cross", because of its dramatic emphasis upon Christ, dying with a loud cry of godforsakenness in extreme and mysterious solitude (Mc 15:33).

The apostle Paul is the principal warrant to the theologian of the cross. In his letters to the Corinthians, the Galatians and the Philippians he preaches Christ who humbled and emptied himself, as a man dying the death of the slave on the cross: this theology gives the kernel of the Christian message and is contrary to the wisdom of Jews and gentiles: "God forbid that I should boast of anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world is crucified to me and I to the world" (Gal 5:14).

Consciously referring to Paul's theology and forming the term in connection with such others as **verbum crucis** (1 Cor 1:18) or **sapientia crucis**, Martin Luther was the first to use the term and to elaborate it in opposition to a **theologia gloriae**, a theology of self-exaltation, which he identifies with scholastic theology. He saw in it the mark of his teaching: "Istam doctrinam valde bene scitis, quia nostra Theologia est crucis Theologia - You know this doctrine very well, because our theology is a theology of the cross".¹⁰ We would like to present this doctrine in the second part of our paper. We believe indeed

6. A. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, p. 163.

7. J. Moltmann, *The crucified God*, p. 273f., quoting: E. Wiesel, *Night*, 1969, p. 75f.

8. Andreas Anangguru Yewangoe, *Theologia crucis in Asia* (Amsterdam Studies in Theology 6), Amsterdam: Rodopi 1987, p. 7f.

9. Tübingen: Mohr 1981.

10 *In XV Psalmos graduum* (1532-1533): WA 40/3, 123, 6-7.

that Luther's approach is an unavoidable step, when reflecting upon a theology of the cross, without watering it down to a passe-partout discourse on the passion of Christ. We believe also that it may have some ecumenical relevance.

2.1. Some preliminaries

2.1.1. First, the **theologia crucis** is neither a particular tenet of Luther's theology, along with his doctrine on God, his soteriology, christology or anthropology, nor even a particular aspect of his spirituality. The term recapitulates for Luther nothing less than the whole true christian theology. Beside it there is but false theology and spirituality. The theology of the cross embraces the totality of christian thinking and living.

That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened.

*He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.*¹¹

2.1.2. Secondly, in order to understand Luther well, one has to take into account his particular style. His way of theologizing is assertive and polemical, and thus heavily conditioned by the context. Luther never shuns expressing his convictions in an extremely paradoxical and radical way. Using these rhetoric tools he wants to formulate his own convictions and at the same time convince his listeners and readers and bring them to conversion. Such a pastoral prospective is never absent. When writing and even teaching Luther acts as a preacher, feeling responsibility for the salvation of his fellow-christians and looking at the world threatened by devils and standing under God's judgment.

2.1.3. We must also emphasize that Luther does not speak primarily of a **theology** of the cross, but rather of the **theologian** of the cross, the person living according to it. As faith is a personal matter, nobody will be saved through a general faith by knowing **that** there is salvation, but through his special faith, by which salvation is promised to him/her when he/she believes the Word. So theology is rooted in a person's existence and experience. "I do not see that he is a theologian, who knows

great things and teaches much, but he who lives saintly and theologically".¹² And somewhat further in the same *Commentary of the Psalms* we read a famous sentence: "Through living, much more through dying and being tempted one becomes a theologian, not by understanding, lecturing and speculating".¹³ One becomes a good theologian through prayer, meditation and temptation ("Anfechtung"). The last one is "the touchstone which teaches you not only how to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom".¹⁴ The importance of the experiential aspect is one of the major differences between Luther's approach to theology and the scholastic one. Theology touches a person's existence. Thus Luther's approach has some affinity with the medieval tradition of a more spiritual and monastic theology.

2.2. Luther's theology of the cross

2.2.1. Let us now describe the main features of Luther's **theologia crucis**. Every research starts with questions. The one who has no questions, finds nothing. Maybe there is even one dominant question from which other questions flow. Maybe there are many ones, so that the choice remains somewhat arbitrary. Anyway, the starting point will condition all further research.

What is the initial question for the theologian of the cross? What is his deepest concern? What is the theologian looking for when he asks in the *Heidelberg Disputation* what brings a man to righteousness?¹⁵ And the commentator of the Magnificat, when he wants to understand how the Lord acts with the human being and

11. *Heidelberg Disputation*: WA 1, 354, 17-20; *Luther's Works. The American Edition*, St. Louis-Philadelphia: 1955- (= LW) 31, 40.

12. *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519): WA 5, 26, 18; AWA 2, 24, 4-6.

13. *Operationes in Psalmos*: WA 5, 163, 28-29; AWA 2, 296, 10-11.

14. *Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings* (1539): WA 50, 660, 2-4; LW 34, 287. Also: Jos E. Verduyn, "Fede e Carità in Lutero", in: *Credete al Vangelo* (PSV 17), Bologna: 1988, 293-305.

15. Cfr. *Heidelberg Disputation*: WA 1, 355, 30; LW 31, 42.

in an exemplary way with Mary? Or the exegete of the 51st Psalm, when he discovers that God is "nothing but somebody who loves the contrite, the vexed, the troubled and is a God of the humble"?¹⁶ Luther's concern is not theoretic and epistemologic, but practical, personal and existential, **affective**, i.e. the question affects a person in his whole being. His questions have nothing in common with those asked by the scholastic **questionarii**, "curiosi speculatores operum dei" (curious investigators of God's works).¹⁷ Luther often asks what the custom ("mos"), the office ("officium"), the disposition ("voluntas") or the work ("opus") of God is in relation to man. In the great *Commentary to the Galatians* Luther distinguishes between a general and a proper and true knowledge of God. The latter is described as: "What God thinks of us, what He wants to give and to do to deliver us from sin and death and to save us". But this men do not know.¹⁸

2.2.2. The question arises in a situation of **temptation** that serves as an hermeneutical finding place. A personal state of distress, and even despair, urges for a solution. At the root we find Luther's own experience as described in the Autobiographical text of 1545, in which he looks back upon the so called Tower experience ("Turmerlebnis"), he had a thirty years earlier. The discovery of the nature of God's justice arises amidst anger and hatred for the righteous God who punishes persons who cannot be but sinners. "Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience".¹⁹ This experience is understood in the light of the Word of God in the Old and New Testament and of Christ's death on the cross and becomes paradigmatic of God's ways. It is a primary concern of Luther's preaching and teaching to inculcate, not only in a rational-academic way, but foremost in an affective-exhortative way, a deep mistrust towards oneself. Because only in the midst of despair, sin, death and damnation a person looks forward to good news, an **eu-aggelion** of salvation in Christ. He should implore with confidence and in humility the force of Christ alone...²⁰ "The more despicable the nature of a man is, the closer and more present God is".²¹

Luther does not think only of sinfulness. The totality of the human existence with all its suffering, littleness and humiliation is

understood in this light. In the *Commentary to the Magnificat* Mary becomes the example of the person who experiences her insignificance and worthlessness before God. Her humility is **nothing-ness** ("Nichtigkeit"). She is the handmaid:

... whom none looked up to or esteemed. To her neighbors and their daughters she was but a simple maiden, tending the cattle and doing the housework, and doubtless esteemed no more than any poor maidservant today, who does as she is told around the house.²²

God sees better what is little and deep: "the farther one is beneath Him, the better does He see him".²³ In this existential emergency showing how things really stand before God, a person starts to meditate on the Holy Scriptures, trying to understand God's disposition towards him. He discovers that the distressing condition is the result of **God's alien work** ("opus alienum") and does not correspond to God's intimate and proper disposition. God acts thus in function of his proper work ("opus proprium"), his mercy. There he shows who he really is. God works in two ways: he accuses and threatens through the **law** in order to make a person discover the **good news** of salvation.

2.2.3. Let's now take a further step. Having looked at the place from which the question arises, we look now for the place of the answer. Where does one find the answer? How can we appropriate it in a living, particular faith? We saw already how a person understands his negative position in the light of the Word of God. This is true in an eminent way for

16. *Commentary on 51. Psalm*: WA 40/2, 7-8; LW 12, 403.

17. *Operationes in Psalmos*, WA 5, 300, 7; AWA 2, 531, 30.

18. *Lectures on Galatians (1535)*: WA 40/1, 607, 28-32; LW 12, 403.

19. *Preface to Vol. I of the Opera Latina*: WA 54, 179-187; LW 34, 336.

20. *Lectures on Galatians (1519)*: WA 2, 526, 20f.

21. *Operationes in Psalmos*: WA 5, 660, 9-10.

22. *Magnificat*: WA 7, 549, 3-7; LW 21, 301.

23. *Magnificat*: WA 7, 547, 16; LW 21, 300.

the answer. Nobody finds salvation within oneself: it comes from outside, without any condition from our part, without any merit, gratuitously and freely granted in the preaching of the Word of God and the administration of the Sacraments. They convey the merits of Christ to us:

*If we were not sprinkled with the preaching, the application of the blood would not come to me. For He comes to me through the Word and is received through the Word and faith.*²⁴

God's Word is a creative word. But it is at the same time rooted in history, having a concrete anchorage and a definite content. It is superfluous to emphasize the christological concentration of Luther's theology:

*All ascent to know God is dangerous except the one through Christ's humanity, for that is the ladder of Jacob, by which one has to ascend.*²⁵

God came down to us in his merciful condescendence. But Luther concentrates his christocentrism still more. He points forcefully to the cross, the image of God's son.²⁶ A theologian of the cross, the only true theologian, speaks "of the crucified and hidden God".²⁷ In the *Heidelberg Disputation* we find the well known programmatic sentence: "In Christo crucifixo est vera Theologia et cognitio Dei - In the crucified Christ is true theology and recognition of God".²⁸ In the *Operationes in Psalmos* we read:

*To know Christ is to know the cross and understand God under the crucified flesh. That in fact God wills. That is God's will, nay that is rather God self.*²⁹

This view has ramifications for the totality of Luther's theology, in his doctrine of God and the human person, but particularly for his doctrine of salvation and its application as a sacrament to the individual person by which the believer participates in Christ's merits and is justified. Through a "sweet exchange" ("dulcis commercium") and a royal marriage, God takes upon himself our humanity with all its weakness, temptation and sinfulness and makes us share in God's justice, grace and life.³⁰ Christ crucified is the hinge in the relation between God and humankind. He is the only mediator. In the cross many rays gather. The theology of the cross and Christology cannot be identified. Luther includes in his theology of the cross the different moments of the history of human suffering. A privileged moment therein is one's own

experience of temptation and suffering. The focus of all understanding is the cross of Christ. There is a real continuity and a theological concatenation in which the various moments can be differently accentuated or elaborated according to the varying contexts, without mentioning explicitly the cross of Christ. When he speaks of the **theologia crucis**, for example in the commentary of the 9th Psalm in the *Operationes in Psalmos*, he relates it, in an attack against scholastic theology and its false security granted through indulgences, to the acceptance of God's judgement in the confession of our sins and the consequent penance and sorrow.³¹ In order to understand Luther's theology of the cross rightly, we must maintain that when he speaks of the cross, he does not think only of the historical cross of the Lord, but in continuity with it, of the preaching of the Cross and of its consequences in the life of the believer. That it is **cross**, he knows only because it is linked with **Jesus' cross** through the preaching of the Word about it. God's working for us is met not in the historical cross but in its "usus", i.e. actualization in our cross, here and yet.

2.2.4. But **how does God work?** What is his proper way of acting according to the theology of the cross? How does he reveal himself? How does he bring us to justification? These questions are related. They are also linked to a proper understanding of what **faith** is. Only through faith do we know how God acts. God's Word and man's faith are related to one another as the address is to the addressee

24. *Lectures on 1. John*: WA 20, 778, 1-3; LW 30, 315.

25. *Sermo de assumptione BMV*: WA 4, 647, 19-21.

26. *Resolutiones*: Concl. 23: WA 1, 571, 35; LW 31, 153; Concl. 58: WA 1, 613, 18-20; LW 31, 225.

27. *Resolutiones*: WA 1, 613, 23-24; LW 31, 225.

28. *Heidelberg Disputation*: WA 1, 362, 18-19; LW 31, 53.

29. *Operationes in Psalmos*: WA 5, 108, 9; AWA 2, 180, 7.

30. See e.g. *de Libertate Christiana*, WA 7, 54f.; LW 31, 351f.

31. *Operationes in Psalmos*: WA 5, 299, 20-301, 3; AWA 2, 531, 1-533, 13.

and as speaking is to listening. Two propositions can summarize God's way of working. **First**, God acts in a way, **contrary** to what we expect according to his divine nature. He acts "sub contrario", under an appearance opposite to what he is really doing: the death on the cross is actually life. Secondly, God is **hidden in the Crucified** and in every cross, but at the same time he **reveals** himself to the believer who understands and grasps within and beyond the concealment God's presence. **For Luther, revealing the contrary is the proper way of being hidden.** The believer must have purified eyes, as the good thief crucified with Jesus:

*All that is weak in Christ he does not look at; he sees what is not apparent: that is, that Jesus is a king and has a reign, wherein one should live.*³²

In his *Lectures on Romans* Luther explained:

*What is good for us is hidden, and that so deeply that it is hidden under its opposite. Thus our life is hidden under death, love for ourselves under hate for ourselves, glory under ignominy, salvation under damnation, our kingship under exile, heaven under hell, wisdom under foolishness, righteousness under sin, power under weakness. And universally, our every assertion of any thing good is hidden under the denial of it, so that faith may have its place in God...*³³

In *de Servo Arbitrio* (1525) Luther has expressed the same idea in a famous description of what faith is according to Hebr. 11:1:

*In order that there may be room for faith, it is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden. It cannot, however, be more deeply hidden than under an object, perception, or experience which is contrary to it...*³⁴

How these opposites can be conjoined in various ways is shown in the third and fourth thesis of the *Heidelberg Disputation*. The two propositions do not only oppose man's and God's way of working, but within each thesis one finds another opposition between the appearance and the inner reality with regard to salvation, i.e. sin versus merit, death versus eternal life.

The works of man, though they are always good-looking and seem good, can be assumed to be mortal sins.

*The works of God, though they are always deformed and seem bad, are yet really works of eternal merit.*³⁵

Only the theologian of the cross is capable to see what the things are in the light of eternity: they are not what they seem to be.

2.2.5. The working of God "sub contrario" and "in abscondito" is explained by Luther with different theological patterns. Let us look at some of them.

Next to the nature of the act of faith as a knowledge of what is not seen, we have just mentioned, Luther refers also to a set of bible texts. Among them first of all the song of Hanna in 1 Samuel 2:6:

*The Lord kills and he gives life,
he sends down to sheol,
he can bring the dead up again.
The Lord makes a man poor,
he makes him rich,
he brings down and he raises up...*

In this verse and in similar passages, as e.g. Deuteronomy 32:39 and the *Magnificat*, expressing the reversal of the situation, Luther perceives the principle of God's working. For Luther they express God's working in one and the same subject. They are the two poles of one purposive action: the negative work of the "opus alienum" brings to the "opus proprium", in which God shows his mercy. In doing so God brings the man to salvation. In a paradoxical way Luther states in the *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute*:

*When God begins to justify a man, he first of all condemns him; him whom he wishes to raise up, he first of all destroys; him whom he wishes to heal, he smites, and the one to whom he wishes to give life, he kills.*³⁶

These two interventions are not seen so much as succeeding in time as much as being innerly connected. The believer perceives them at the same moment. The desperate situation

32. *Sermon on Lc 23:39*: WA 29, 245, 14-16.

33. *Lectures on Romans*: WA 56, 392, 28-33; LW 25, 382f.

34. *De servo arbitrio*: WA 18, 633, 7-9; LW 33, 62.

35. *Heidelberg Disputation*: WA 1, 353, 19-22; LW 31, 39.

36. *Resolutiones*: WA 1, 540, 8-10; LW 31, 99.

is turned into one full of hope and life. In the cross he perceives God's comforting action.

Another model is the **creation out of nothing**. A quote from the *Operationes in Psalmos* may serve as a motto: "There is no difference between the creation and the re-creation, because God worked both out of nothing".³⁷ "Es gefelt im die weis, ut ex nihilo faciat aliquid" ("God likes to make something out of nothing") says Luther.³⁸ The alien work of God destroys human pride, glory and self-flattery through the awareness of sinfulness, weakness and humiliation: so we are reduced to an affective nothingness. It is the **redactio in nihilum**. Nothing is left upon which to glorify oneself. **Nothingness** is not primarily used in its metaphysical meaning of **not-being** as opposed to **being**, but rather evokes experience, by summing up the many situations of a psychologic, social and theological nature in which a person experiences his existence as humble, weak, endangered and worthless before God, as they really are for a theologian of the cross. This connection between humility and nothingness has been described by Luther at the beginning of his *Commentary to the Magnificat*.

*Just as God in the beginning of creation made the world out of nothing, whence He is called the Creator and the Almighty, so His manner of working continues unchanged. Even now and to the end of the world, all his works are such that out of that which is nothing, worthless, despised, wretched, and dead, He makes that which is something, precious, honorable, blessed and living. On the other hand, whatever is something, precious, honorable, blessed, and living, He makes to be nothing, worthless, despised, wretched, and dying. In this manner no creature can work; no creature can produce anything out of nothing.*³⁹

The best way to translate the biblical meaning of "humilitas" into German is "nichtigkeit" ("nothingness").

In Scriptural usage, "to humble" ("humiliare") means "to bring down" ("nydrigen") or to "bring to naught" ("zu nicht machen"). Hence in the Scriptures, Christians are frequently called poor, afflicted, despised... Humility, therefore, is nothing else than a disregarded, despised, and lowly estate, such as that of men who are

*poor, sick, hungry, thirsty, in prison, suffering, and dying.*⁴⁰

The theology of the cross and the doctrine of creation out of nothing are linked together. On the cross the Son has been reduced by God into nothingness. It would be interesting to analyze in this regard Luther's explanation of the **kenosis** in Philippians 2:5-11. Through the incarnation Christ becomes one of us, poor, weak, little, taking upon himself our sinfulness in order to carry us with him through a wondrous exchange. The relation between creation and cross opens also a perspective into the theology of the word. God, as a matter of fact, creates out of nothing through his Word, spoken to us in various ways.

Several other patterns could be examined. The meditation of Christ's passion brings a man to fear. In the cross God shows his condescension. After the Fall, God returns mercifully to humankind in the form of the crucified, hiding his glory for a time.

*Because men put to wrong use their knowledge of God which they had gained from his works God determined on the contrary to be known from sufferings.*⁴¹

Let me mention also the paradoxical reversal of the **analogia entis**. If the scholastic theology and the mystical language used analogy to express the resemblance and the greater and radical diversity between God and creation, Luther reversed the picture: resemblance is radically turned into diversity "sub contrario". All progress presupposes receding into nothingness and cross. This the world cannot understand: it is folly to the world.⁴² This new grammar of faith, inspired by experience and the meditation of the Holy Scriptures, has consequences for the behavior of the believer. That which looks deformed and ugly

37. *Operationes in Psalmos*: WA 5, 544, 9.

38. WATi 5, 182, 4f nr. 5485.

39. *Magnificat*: WA 7, 547, 1-7; LW 21, 299.

40. *Ibid.*: WA 7, 560, 16-19; LW 21, 313.

41. *Heidelberg Disputation*: WA 1, 362, 5-7; LW 31, 52.

42. See *Heidelberg Disputation*: WA 1, 363, 13-14; LW 31, 54.

is in fact a hiding place of God's presence and reveals his eternity.

2.2.6. What are these **consequences**? What is the answer to the theology of the cross? It can be summarized adequately with two words: faith and charity. They are the answer to God's working as **sacrament** and as **example**. So it is worked out in the two parts of the *Treatise on Christian Liberty*. So it is summarized in a dense sentence of the *Heidelberg Disputation*: "Thus deeds of mercy are aroused by the works through which he has saved us".⁴³

The foundation is faith, by which we accept and put our trust in the great work of mercy "he did and by which he saved us". But he did it through the mediation of a reality totally contrary to his glory, i.e. through his cross and death, where he took up all our sufferings, weakness and sins and in this happy exchange justified us in a sacramental way, i.e. making us participate in it, gratuitously. To grasp this is the content of faith.

But faith cannot remain inoperative. The mercy we have experienced incites us to be merciful in turn. Following the example of Christ, works of mercy are called forth. In the *Preface to the New Testament* Luther writes:

*If faith is there he cannot hold back; he proves himself, breaks out into good works, confesses and teaches this gospel before the people, and stakes his life on it. Everything that he lives and does is directed to his neighbor's profit, in order to help him - not only to the attainment of this grace, but also in body, property, and honor. Seeing that Christ has done this for him, he thus follows Christ's example.*⁴⁴

As a matter of fact, Luther has never questioned the necessity of good works. On the contrary...! But right order must be kept. Only faith justifies, not our works. Faith is the headmaster and it requires the obedience of charity!

Luther emphasizes further the need of trust and perseverance amidst the many sufferings and misfortunes of life. In later years he also looks at the persecution of Lutherans by Papists and Spritualists in the light of the cross. The last theses of Luther's *Ninety-five Theses on the Indulgences* contain

in fact a programme for the theologian of the cross:

Away then with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, "Peace, peace," and there is no peace.

Blessed be all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, "Cross, cross," and there is no cross.

Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their head, through penalties, death and hell;

*And thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace.*⁴⁵

The theology of the cross, however, is not restricted to the area of personal faith. Luther, as a matter of fact, has elaborated it most explicitly in the context of the matter of indulgences. This link shows its potential for criticism of christian and ecclesiastical life. The most striking point of this criticism, seen in the light of the **theologia crucis**, is the rejection of "cheap grace". In Luther's view indulgences and many rites and customs, pious works of all kind, aim at emptying the seriousness of christian life, giving people false security because of their trust in void practices. The theology of the cross is an aspect of preaching the hard reality of penance. One should not flee the hardship of the cross by looking for cheap substitutes. The cross is primarily obedience to the concrete calling and sufferings it brings with it. We carry them because we believe that Christ - who is our example in carrying the cross - justifies us sacramentally and will forgive when we fail.

3. CONCLUSION: ECUMENICAL RELEVANCE

At the beginning of our conference we stated that Luther's theology of the cross had gained a new actuality, in a time, when various currents of christian theology permeate one another across the borders of the confessions. Jürgen Moltmann's book on the *Crucified God* is one of the most influential

43. *Heidelberg Disputation*: WA 1, 364, 34-35; LW 31, 57.

44. *Preface to the New Testament*: WADB 6, 9, 29-34; LW 35, 361.

45. *Ninety-five Theses*: WA 1, 238, 14-21; LW 31, 33.

theological works of the last twenty five years. This fact shows the ecumenical relevancy of the **theologia crucis**. Without claiming that it is the only approach possible and being well aware of some of its limits, I think that it has something to say to present ecumenical endeavours. In conclusion, I would now like to open up a few of these prospective elements.

3.1.

The final report of the *Third World Conference on Faith and Order* in Lund (1952) contains a much quoted sentence: "Once again - the Conference says - it has been proved true that as we seek to draw closer to Christ we come closer to one another".⁴⁶ When speaking of a "hierarchy of truths" we have to refer to the cross as the foundation of the Christian Faith. Luther's theology of the cross draws our attention in a most radical and dramatic way to the center of our common christian faith: Christ crucified. Indeed: "CRUX sola est nostra theologia".⁴⁷

3.2.

Luther does not present us a triumphus crucis or an exaltation of the cross. He is struck by its humble and naked reality. In line with the many crosses, temptations and humiliations of all throughout the world, men and women are confronted with the bitter hardship and misery of the cross. Suffering is however not an aim in itself. It is at the same time the hiding and meeting place of God. In listening to the Word of God, the hiddenness is opened and God's presence revealed. In a pregnant sense Luther speaks in the *Commentary of the 50th Psalm* of the "Deus pauperum / Deus humilium", the God of the poor and the humble. It expresses the solidarity of God with the humble and the poor, who are aware that they are nothing before God. And Luther does not think only of the sinners, but also of the socially poor, despised, and persecuted, and indeed of all who understand who God is. Christ came to seek and to save what was lost (Lk 19:10). We should certainly not convert Luther's theology into a modern Liberation theology. But it expresses God's preference and sympathy for all the little ones and it invites all to have the same bearing as was in Christ Jesus (Phil 2:5). "The farther one is beneath Him, the better does He see him".⁴⁸ Meditating on the **theologia crucis** and looking at the cross can inspire in the churches the humility needed

to recover their unity in Christ. The recovering of christian unity is as a matter of fact intimately linked to humility, not only of individual christians but also of institutions. All must confess that they daily need God's grace and mercy. No church "possesses" God's gifts and truth as its own good. All have received them and must accept them in thanksgiving and obedience. Only when the churches will be in a constant attitude of listening to the Word, will they be able to listen humbly to one another. Only then will they also discover that they all equally live by God's grace and must forgive and be reconciled to one another. "Listen to others, listen to everybody, listen to the utmost, further than what they are able to express... It is the attitude of the poor of Jesus, who is listening attentively to what the Spirit wants to say" (Georges Neefs).⁴⁹

3.3.

The theology of the cross can help to clarify one of the most difficult problems in the dialogue between the Catholic and the Protestant tradition, the question namely of sacramental mediations and of what has been called "synergism" between God and human beings in the order of salvation. In several dialogues the sacramentality of the church and the meaning of "sacrament" have been put on the agenda. It is one of the topics, to be examined in the aftermath of the BEM-process.

The **theologia crucis** expresses Luther's suspicion about all that inclines to a justification and exaltation of human person before God. With his intransigent preaching against all kinds of mediation, resting upon human possibilities, reason and works, Luther wanted to build up a bulwark around man's native pride and burn down all strivings, that inevitably lead to idle pretensions. In a passionate manner Luther witnesses to God's absolute sovereignty. The mediations that were explicitly and formally

46. *A Documentary History of the Faith and Order Movement*, ed. by Lukas Vischer, St. Louis: 1963, p. 85.

47. *Operationes in Psalmos*: WA 5, 176, 32f.; AWA 2, 319, 3.

48. *Magnificat*: WA 7, 547, 16; LW 21, 300.

49. *In Memoriam... P. Georges Neefs*, *Jeziüeten* 42 (1984) 171f.

instituted by Christ are the only acceptable ones, i. e. the Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. Although Luther did not encourage iconoclasm, there is something iconoclastic in his theological approach. In the line of western mysticism he seeks God in the "cloud of unknowing". But the cloud is not to be looked for "high up", but "below", in the contrariety of suffering, death and damnation. God does not give himself graciously at the height of mystical ascension, but in the humiliation of his most extreme condescendence, on the cross, sub contrario.

When discussing the sacramental nature of the Church the Catholic tradition must ask the Protestant partner, whether it sufficiently takes into account the creational and incarnational consequences in human reality. Out of a justified fear for an always rampant pride, one could well obscure the truth that the whole creation remains also - "simul" - God's good creation, a reality in God's hand, remaining **sign** and **icon** of his presence. But the catholic tradition should remain sensitive for the Protestant **protest**: too often and too ingenuously Catholics have boasted with ambiguous baroque exaltation and splendor about what has been granted graciously and mercifully by God to human beings; who remain pardoned sinners, weak and vulnerable. The golden splendor of the monstrance easily obscures the humility of the gift, bread and wine, Christ's body and blood among us, a memorial of his passion and death. The problem of **synergism** can only be solved in the light of this paradoxical humility - and not as a competition between God and creatures in need of claiming their rights and merits before their Creator. The cross is a paradoxical icon of God, always greater, always smaller, humble... hidden: God beyond all! (Gregory of Nazianzus).

3.4.

Because of its **existential** and **practical** character, coupled with an outspoken criticism of a merely rationalistic approach, a **theologia crucis** reminds one of another aspect of ecumenical endeavours. There is in fact a danger to give privilege onesidedly to ecumenical efforts focused on increasingly refined and sophisticated theological dialogues. They are supposed to lead to ever clearer, more precise and unambiguous statements. By saying this I have no intention to belittle the dialogues: they are a necessary instrument in the ecumenical venture and should be conducted

with the greatest possible competence and openness. But we must be aware of their inherent limits. Their protraction and a certain theological rigorism could well serve as an alibi for avoiding decision. It is my conviction that unity will never be the logical conclusion of such indispensable dialogues. Unity calls for a **change in quality**. There is no reconciliation without **conversion**. Christians and their churches must convert to one another and recognize one another, as one in faith and charity. This they should confess by forgiving and by trusting in a future that rests with God. This step goes beyond dialogue. The recognition happens on the way, while speaking and working together, but lies on a deeper level. After the conversation along the road home, the disciples of Emmaus recognized the Lord in the breaking of the bread, at home. That brings us back to the cross. As we seek to draw closer to Christ we come closer to one another, as the already quoted world conference of Lund said. The sentence contains an invitation to pray, and not only **for** unity, but much more yet to pray **together**: becoming aware in **silence**, that notwithstanding the separations, all christians are already unanimous around the crucified Lord, their Saviour. Therefore they cannot and may not remain separated. The walls are not reaching into heaven. Men and women have built them. Christ - our peace - pulled the dividing wall down on the cross, killing the existing enmity (Eph 2:14).

Experience has taught that during persecution and in emergency situations, when they were forced to give up their power and pretensions, christians of various confessions came closer to one another. Vladimir Soloviev has pictured this recognition in a prophetic parable, called *The Last Pope and the Antichrist*. Pope Peter II, the "staretz" John and the protestant Professor Pauli refuse to deny their faith and recognize the great philanthropist and emperor, presenting himself in a world council, as their religious leader and Antichrist. Consequently the pope and the staretz are killed. The professor and the faithful people leave Jerusalem, carrying with them the bodies. In the deserted highland around Jericho they pray and fast. Suddenly however the spirit re-enters the deceased bodies. They recognize one another in their faithfulness to Christ and recognize the pope as the bearer of the evangelic promise about

(continued on p. 19)

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Peter: "You are Peter..." (Mt 16:18). Unity ripens as a fruit of the faithful confession of faith and the humble martyrdom:

Then said staretz John: "Ah my dear ones, we have not parted after all! I will tell you this: it is time that we carried out the last prayer of God about His disciples - that they should all be one, even as He Himself is one with the Father. For this unity in Christ let us honour our beloved brother Peter. Let him at last pasture the flocks of Christ. There it is, brother!" He put his arms around Peter. Professor Pauli approached, exclaiming: "Tu es Petrus.

Jetzt ist es ja gründlich erwiesen und ausser jeden Zweifel gesetzt", and he seized the Pope's hand while offering the left one to staretz John saying: "At last, Father, now we are one in Christ".

In this manner the unification of the Churches took place in the midst of a dark night, on a high and lonely place.⁵⁰
under the cross!

50. Wladimir Solovjev, *De Laatste Paus en de Antichrist*, Tielt: Lannoo, 1953, 45.