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FORGIVENESS AND LUTHER'S NINETY-FIVE THESES

EL PERDÓN Y LAS NOVENTA Y CINCO TESIS DE LUTERO

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Resumen: Parte sustancial del conflicto que ocurre en la Reforma deriva del hecho de que la Iglesia Católica, habiendo pervertido la concepción de perdón anunciada en el Nuevo Testamento, substituya a Dios por funcionarios poderosos que intermediaban la relación entre los humanos y la divinidad.

En la primera parte de este ensayo, discutiremos la idea de perdón y de misericordia a partir del Nuevo Testamento y las consecuencias que derivan de las mismas. ¿De qué forma esta apertura a la posibilidad de remisión, actitud tan diferente a la de los dioses griegos y del Antiguo Testamento, llevó, paradójicamente, a la desaparición de Dios y a la institucionalización y jerarquización de la Iglesia Católica. La segunda parte se ocupará de las 95 tesis de Lutero, enfatizando su concepción de perdón y de gracia y la discusión de la relación entre las obras y la fe, en un contraste crítico con predicaciones y prácticas centradas en el castigo por los pecados.

Palabras clave: Iglesia Católica; indulgencia; Lutero; perdón; poder eclesiástico.

Abstract: The replacement of God by “officers” with the task of mediating the relationship between human beings and the divinity perverted the notion of forgiveness of the New Testament. Part of the conflict that led to the Reformation resulted from this issue.

The first part of this paper will debate the notions of forgiveness and mercy in the New Testament. We will focus in the disappearance of God and on the institutionalisation and growth of the hierarchical power in the Church, which paradoxically results from the possibility of remission – a New Testament perspective different from the vision of the Greek Gods and from God of the Old Testament. The second part will deal with the Ninety-five theses of Luther, emphasising his vision of forgiveness and grace and the debate on the link between deeds and faith – a viewpoint that represented a critical contrast with the sermons and practices focused on the punishment for the sins.

Keywords: Catholic Church; ecclesiastic power; forgiveness; indulgence; Luther.

‘The mountains prove that even the earth
yearns for the sky¹.

Introduction

The celebration of the five hundred years of Martin Luther ‘s thesis gave rise to theological and cultural considerations about the novelty brought by his well-known expression *sola fides, sola scriptura, solus Christus*. The concept of “faith” present in these theological main points clashed against the Catholic Church – the institution that considered itself to be the unique mediator between God and believers.

This text is focused on the rupture between Catholicism and Protestantism. However it will start with an incursion into the possibility of a relationship between Catholicism, ancient Greek paganism and the *Old Testament*.

The aim of this path is to expose how the Church of Rome turns to be an earthly and immanent structure that led to the consideration of Luther as unavoidable schismatic.

The essay has four sections:

The first one starts with a reference to Sophocles’ King Oedipus tragedy. The plot of the tragedy reveals the ways Greek gods were seen and the relationship they established with human beings. It was an asymmetrical relationship that led a virtuous human being (Oedipus) to the worst of all misfortunes.

The second part consists in a reference to the *Old Testament* that – contrary to what happened with Greek gods - emphasizes a reciprocity established by God between himself and the chosen people.

The penultimate section, based on the *New Testament* and on the notion of pardon and mercy – exemplified in the parable of the Prodigal Son – suggests that it was precisely that possibility of redemption given to human beings that was transformed into a venal apparatus organized and justified by the Catholic Church.

The final section discusses Luther’s thesis from the point of view of the immense unease of the German monk with what the Catholic Church turned into. The text ends with a reference to the ecumenical path given by Catholics and Lutherans nowadays, a path in which one of the core topics is precisely the justification by faith.

¹ Persian proverb, in Cruz, Afonso, *Para onde vão os guarda-chuvas*, Lisboa, Alfaguara, 2013

I – Oedipus and the Gods

Oedipus parents were presented with an appalling prophecy: the son shall murder his own father and espouse his mother. This is, indeed, how the events narrated in Sophocles' tragedy, presented in Athens, probably in 427 or 425 BCE, begin.

The shepherd, tasked with the killing of the new-born Oedipus, instead takes pity on him. When we cross paths with Oedipus again he is already an adult, on his way to Thebes. The first infamy takes place: when crossing paths with what he believes to be a group of bandits, Oedipus slays them. Among the victims was his father, Laius.

Arriving on Thebes – a city assailed by the Sphinx – Oedipus solves the monster's riddle. The being whom when he is born walks with four legs then two and finally three, is none other than the human being. With the Sphinx bested and gone, the hero weds Jocasta, his mother and Laius' wife.

After the consummation of the second oracular ignominy Oedipus blinds himself. The protagonist, accompanied by his daughters Antigone and Ismene, abandons Thebes after hearing of his mother's suicide by hanging. The Theban Cycle of the classical tragedy does not end here, however – the annihilation of Oedipus' descendants is taken to extremely brutal lengths in later representations.

Hence, we must ask ourselves: what has Oedipus done wrong? Nothing, basically, but the Gods of the time are not interested in errors or disobedience. To us, who live in the overregulated world of today, the issue presented is, to a certain degree, far more complex, and even difficult to understand: the Greek Gods just want to arbitrarily demonstrate to human beings that they and they alone have complete power over the fragile threads of human life. Thus, there is no code of reciprocity (a matter that will be address in the following section): human beings may be subjected to the worst of misfortunes, even if they had done no wrong, even if they practiced good deeds. And Oedipus' last lines are a prime example of this fact:

Ye men of Thebes, behold this Œdipus/ Who knew the famous riddle and was noblest/ Who envied no one's fortune and success. And, lo,! in what a sea of direst woe He now is plunged. From hence the lesson draw/ To reckon no man happy till ye see The closing day; until he pass the bourn Which severs life from death, unscathed by woe. (Sophocles 1914, 1580-1584)

II – The Representation of God in the Pentateuch

In the Old Testament, especially in the Pentateuch (since the Sapiential Books and Prophetic Books show other representations of God), God is pre-

sented as a God who severely punishes human beings who do not obey Him. The logic of punishment is different from that of the Greek divinities. For instance, in the initial episodes of the ‘Deluge’, of the ‘Tower of Babel’, of ‘Sodom’, God strikes those who are either disobedient or at fault.

In the famous passage of the sacrifice of Isaac, God intends to assess Abraham’s unconditional obedience or, especially according to the historical-critical interpretations of the text, tests the obedience to the God of Israel (since the text was written long after the period in which this episode is placed), and not to pagan gods.

Further, in the Old Testament, we can see this very procedure in the episodes concerning the Kings. Saul, chosen to be the first king, disobeys God and the prophet Samuel. He subsequently dies with his offspring in the war against the Philistines.

David, the second and most important king, triumphs over Goliath, takes Jerusalem, founds the capital and projects the temple. Then, enticed by Bathsheba – whom he spies on while she bathes herself² – he commits adultery with the wife of his most loyal officer: Uriah. God is once again present to punish this failing: David’s first son born from this illicit relationship comes deceased into the world. The couple later has a second son, Solomon, who builds the temple.

The most dramatic moment for the Jewish people in the history of the Kings takes place during the reign of the last king. Zedekiah, acting with his own personal interests in mind, disregards the advices of the prophet Jeremiah – advices that come directly from God. By virtue of this, in 587 BCE, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar plunders the city, destroys the temple and – in an unspeakable act – takes the Jewish people into captivity and exile yet again.

Zedekiah himself suffers an abhorrent fate: Nebuchadnezzar beheads the king’s sons in front of him, stating that this was the last thing he would gaze upon. After the deed, the Babylonian king has his enemy’s eyes gouged out and brings him, in chains, to Babylon.

The Edict of Cyrus of Persia, 538 BCE, grants the Jewish people their freedom and they return to Jerusalem. By 515 BCE, the temple was finished. This period marks the beginning of a new covenant with God: a new covenant that calls for obedience and the fulfilment of scrupulous rituals as its cornerstone³.

² See the famous Rembrandt painting housed in the Louvre Museum.

³ The Books of Ezra and of Nehemiah refer to this new start, this new covenant, between God and the peoples of Judah, after the dramatic plundering of Jerusalem by the

Summarising, we can affirm that the Old Testament frequently represents God as a ruthless God towards disobedient human beings but who also rewards those who are loyal to Him. The question that we must ask, and for which we will not provide an answer here, is the following: in this context of reciprocity, what leads the people of God to be recurrently recalcitrant or to interpret the vicissitudes of its history as a divine punishment for their infidelity?

III – New Testament, Forgiveness and Luther

A father had two sons: one of them claimed his inheritance and left; the other stayed at home to help his parent. Further on, the former – after leading a life of dissipation – returns home and addresses his father in this manner: “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son” (Luke 15-21⁴). Much to the surprise of the elder brother, the father orders his servants to take care of his son and to prepare a feast, saying to the eldest: “For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” (Luke 15-24).

The idea of remission and forgiveness positions the New Testament in a different level than that of either the Old Testament or the Greek Gods. Jesus speaks of a God that, even when faced with a more-or-less grievous fault, adopts a forgiving demeanour. Ironically, this marks the gradual disappearance of Jesus’ own God, as we shall see further on. As Carreira das Neves states, while referring to the parable of the Prodigal Son and to forgiveness:

It is important (...) to look to the parable of the Prodigal Son and know that the «new man» (...) is he who returns to his Father’s fold, after experiencing the consequences of his wantonness. This «new man», whom the Father orders to be attired in a new tunic, in new sandals and to whom he presents the seal of his kingdom for the son to wear on his finger, represents every baptised believer, loved and forgiven by the Father. «Forgiveness» is, in this passage, the identity card of the Christian, Catholic, Lutheran or Evangelical. There can be no Christian faith without forgiveness or forgiveness without the Christian faith. (2014, 454)

Babylonians. Further on, in the Christian era, in the year 73, the city is once again ransacked – this time by the Romans. The temple is razed to the ground – and will remain destroyed hereafter – by the legions commanded by the Roman general Vespasian and his son Titus. Both are crowned Emperors afterwards and build the Coliseum with the spoils they brought from Jerusalem.

⁴ The biblical will all be quoted according to King James Bible’s translation.

The category of forgiveness, of mercy, is, indeed, what distinguishes the New Testament from the Old Testament: the adulterous woman (John 8, 1-11), for instance, is forgiven due to the extraordinary and inapplicable idea according to which someone who has sinned cannot punish those who sin. Hence, her potential executioners, who merely observed the law of the Old Testament, leave and Jesus does not condemn the adulterous woman, instead he recommends her not to sin again.

The random wrath of the Gods (Oedipus) and the wrath of God due to the breach of reciprocity (Old Testament) are replaced by the generic principle of forgiveness embodied by the figure and life of Jesus.

Several centuries later, as the movement created by Jesus begins to gain momentum and coalesce into a powerful institution, the idea of this new “identity card”, in Carreira das Neves’ words, presupposes the mediation of an instance of forgiveness, unlike what happened with the Greek Gods and the God from the Old Testament. It is the Catholic Church, an institution increasingly more rigid and hierarchized (a “Constantinised” Church), that fully assumes this role. In other words, forgiveness, the new paradigm offered by the New Testament, slowly gives way, in a perverse manner, to a veritably earthly, omnipresent authority, that serves as a mediator between man and the divinity. As Nietzsche so brazenly puts it: “Supreme principle: «God forgives those who repent» - in clear terms: *those who submit themselves to the will of the priest.*” (Nietzsche 1997, 41).

It is this ecclesiastic power, drunk on the extreme extents of its principles, and practices, that Luther criticised in 1517⁵.

⁵ It is important to note that, before, during and after Luther, there was a reform movement within the Catholic Church itself – although, to this day, its nature is still debated; that is, it still seems not clear whether this movement was indeed a reformist one or if it was an answer (oftentimes repressive) to Luther’s Reformation (cf. Jean Delumeau, *Le péché et la peur. La culpabilisation en Occident XIII^e-XVIII^e siècles*). On this matter see for instance, Michael Mullet, *A Contra-Reforma: « (...) Contarini [Gasparo Contarini (1483-1542), diplomat, cardinal, theologian, reformer] renounced both the pride of the Renaissance for man as well as the confidence of the pre-Renaissance Church’s capacity for salvation by means of indulgences and penances. Like Luther, Contarini eventually believed that the solution for his problems did not rest on any human or ecclesiastical processes, but on grace, which is the favour of God granted through the merits of Christ on the Cross. This acceptance of saving grace was a common manner of conversion to Christian devotees in the 16th century*” (1985, 19). Carreira das Neves also states the following on Erasmus: “Erasmus desires to redirect the focus of devotion to Christ’s essence and not to the appearance of monastic formalisms, devotion to the saints, war problems, the vanities of a society divided into classes.” (2014, 257). On the other hand, one must keep in mind that the “Catholic Reformation” or “Counter-Reformation” sought to introduce an inhibiting

It is very likely that the issues of purgatory and, of course, of indulgences⁶, are at the core of the main reasons that prompt Luther's harsh criticism.

In broad terms, the Purgatory is established by the Catholic Church in the transition from the 12th to the 13th century – but not without serious internal struggles⁷.

During this time, religious thought (as well as social dynamics) changes from a dual system – Heaven and Earth – and an apocalyptic vision (the end of the world) into a ternary one – Heaven, Purgatory and Hell - and into a religious cosmivision that postpones the Last Judgement and instead starts to concern itself with the life and death of human beings.

Hence, this presents a new, pivotal question: what happens to people in the interim period between individual death and the Last Judgement?

The Church's answer is an extraordinary and decisive one to its institutional consolidation: in plain terms, those who have been extremely good go to Heaven, those who have been extremely evil are condemned to Hell and those who have neither been extremely righteous nor pernicious – that is, the majority of people – find themselves in Purgatory after death. The latter is the intermediate sphere that expands the power of the Church over the departed and over the living, since there are only two ways of releasing the souls of Purgatory from their venial sins: through the suffrages of the living and through indulgences granted to those souls by the Church itself.

Among these suffrages are, as Le Goff explains and still occurs today in some instances, alms, piteous charity, masses, pilgrimages, crusades, the giving of goods acquired through unjust means by the repentant to the Church. Hence, since the time spent by souls in Purgatory depends on suffrages, or on indulgences, we stand before the establishment of an accountancy, or trade, of souls.

discipline of adherence to Luther's – and the rest of the reformers' – ideas (See, for instance, the Council of Trent and the Society of Jesus' initial objectives, under the leadership of Ignatius of Loyola). Regardless of these and other reformist aspirations it is particularly curious that, nowadays, as Rádio Renascença reports, there are still people paying promises, a practice that is "aided by priests" but which "the Sanctuary of Fátima does not approve". "In addition to the 2.500 euros payed for the pilgrimage, pray the rosary also has its price: 250 euros. Even to light a candle costs 25 euros (...)". http://rr.sapo.pt/noticia/83071/pagadores_de_promessas_caminhar_ate_fatima_a_troco_de_2500_euros

⁶ Carreira das Neves affirms that: "It was not the Bible nor was faith that determined the religious life concerning sin and earthly penalty, but instead the fear of eternal doom or of the Purgatory smothered by indulgences. This practice was dubbed «the holy commerce»" (2014, 131).

⁷ A substantial part of our arguments stem from the reading of Jacques Le Goff's remarkable *opus*, titled *The Birth of Purgatory*.

However, the invention of Purgatory by the Church brings us to an even more complex issue: while this location is the place for the remission of venial sins, this intermediate level soon assumes a different proportion. It starts being possible, for instance, for a miser's widow to contribute to redeem in Purgatory the terrible sin of her husband's greed⁸, as long as she is lavishly generous towards the institution that is the Church.

The indulgences, the crucial point of the reformers' criticism (even of those who did not ultimately become dissidents), start gaining ground. In 1300, Pope Boniface VIII granted full indulgence (total remission of sins) to pilgrims who travel to Rome, during the Jubilee year. These indulgencies were extended for the first time, to the souls in Purgatory.

As Le Goff states:

(...) the Church, in the ecclesiastic, clerical sense, derives great power from the new system of afterlife. It administers or controls prayers, alms, masses, all sorts of offerings made by the living in favour of their departed loved ones and reaps benefits from all these contributions. Thanks to the Purgatory, the Church develops a system of indulgences, a source of great revenue, of power and money (...) (1995, 295).

Summarising, God was pushed aside. God, from his absolute and arbitrary power (Oedipus), to his contractual power in the Old Testament, and, above all, from Purgatory is absorbed by The Church. It is the institution – through its special, hierarchized demiurges, who, naturally, speak on behalf of God – that negotiates forgiveness, redemption, punishment and everything else. It is to this logic that Luther opposes his Ninety-five Theses, which theology he will develop in other works, progressively focusing on the renowned adage: *sola fides, sola scriptura, solus Christus*.

IV – Luther's Theses

Although there is no absolute certainty that Luther's famous Ninety-five Theses⁹ were actually nailed to the door of the Wittenberg church, what is relevant is, of course its contents. From a theological stand point what is at stake is the dubbed "doctrine of justification". This doctrine will play a fun-

⁸ The sins of greed and pride are alternately regarded as the worst of sins over time.

⁹ Luther's Thesis will be quoted according to the English version of the Stiftung Luthergedenkstätten in Sachsen-Anhalt

damental role both in the controversy that would result in a rupture between Luther and the Catholic Church, as well as, after the Second Vatican Council, in the talks in theological commissions of dialogue at the highest level between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church. The great issue of the “doctrine of justification” can be summarised in the following questions: what saves the believer? What justifies him, in the sense of “becoming righteous” and, therefore, “redeemed”: the works or faith? And who “justifies” the believer: his works, his faith or God’s grace? The document titled “From conflict to communion”, about the Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation and jointly penned by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation summarises the answer to all these questions in the following manner:

God’s own initiative establishes a saving relation to the human being; thus salvation happens by grace. The gift of grace can only be received, and since this gift is mediated by a divine promise, it cannot be received except by faith, and not by works. Salvation takes place by *grace alone*. Nevertheless, Luther constantly emphasised that the justified person would do good works in the Spirit.¹⁰

This notion of God as the one who saves, and not the notion of “good works” drives Luther to be radically critical towards the underlying logic of indulgences as a traffic of God’s forgiveness by the hierarchy of the Church. The Church understood indulgencies in the already mentioned historical context, as “investments capable of ensuring salvation” or, at the very least, a less tortuous and transitory stay in Purgatory. However, the concept of “pay-to-be-saved”, so to speak, underlying Luther’s criticism is not his unique target. Luther also targets the Church’s strategy to generate immense amounts of wealth by exploiting the fears and the religious illiteracy of the believers (one must keep in mind the impact of the Lutheran translation of the Bible to German. Most believers were illiterate. This illiteracy led to their unfamiliarity with the biblical texts. The interpretation of these texts was the exclusive domain of the clergy).

¹⁰ Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity Common Statements, From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017, nr. 106 http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/lutheran-fed-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_2013_dal-conflitto-alla-comunione_en.html#Justification_. From now on only LRCC

Luther begins by affirming that Jesus Christ called all believers to repent, that is, to adopt an attitude of repentance (Thesis 1.): yet, that repentance must not be solely inward (Thesis 3.), but also outward in character, that is, it must translate itself into “various outward mortifications of the flesh” (*idem*). Luther emphasized that he does not disavow the need for a life of constant conversion to God understood as a path that accompanies the devotees throughout their lives. He argues that the Pope cannot remit any penalties other than those imposed by the Pope himself (Thesis 5.). In other words, the Pope may declare that guilt “has been remitted by God”, but he cannot take God’s place in forgiving sinners (see Thesis 6.). Consequently, “those indulgence preachers are in error who say that a man is absolved from every penalty and saved by papal indulgences.” (Thesis 21.). It is God who forgives and there is no human business that can ensure His forgiveness; as Luther affirms: “It is certain that when money clinks in the money chest, greed and avarice can be increased; but when the church intercedes, the result is in the hands of God alone” (Thesis 28.).

Indeed, Luther does not intend to portray God as an arbitrary and unmerciful deity, whose whim would lead Him to forgive some and to save others (the doctrine of predestination, which will be developed by Calvin, does not coincide with Luther’s own perspective). On the contrary, Luther aims to make clear that “Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers” (Thesis 32.). As such, those who teach “contrition is not necessary on the part of those who intend to buy souls out of purgatory or to buy confessional privileges preach unchristian doctrine” (Thesis 35.) are wrong. Indulgences are unnecessary to forgiveness of the devotees, for the power to forgive rests solely on God. Furthermore, it is a falsehood conceived by men, that “as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory” (Thesis 27.). Martin Luther, aware of the terrors of Hell and of Purgatory that were instilled in the believers as a means to force them to pay indulgences, clarifies that “the penitential canons are imposed only on the living” and not on the dying (Thesis 8.).

In addition, indulgences may mislead one to believe that charity deeds are unnecessary endeavours (see Thesis 41.): it is quite impossible for one to attain forgiveness by indulgences while disregarding the practice of works of mercy (Thesis 42.). “Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences.” (Thesis 43). “Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but God’s wrath” (Thesis 45.).

In this manner, Luther demonstrates the degree to which believers were explored and deprived when firmly believing in the effectiveness of indulgences; they squander on them that which they need to survive (see Thesis 46.). In fact, the theologian states: “the treasures of indulgences are nets with which one now fishes for the wealth of men.” (Thesis 66). Luther further affirms: “if the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence preachers, he would rather that the basilica of St. Peter¹¹ were burned to ashes than built up with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep” (Thesis 50.). “The pope would and should wish to give of his own money, even though he had to sell the basilica of St. Peter, to many of those from whom certain hawkers of indulgences cajole money.” (Thesis 51.). The theologian also asks, “Why does not the pope, whose wealth is today greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build this one basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers?” (Thesis 86.). This criticism was directed to the wealth amassed by a Church that, through the exchange of forgiveness for indulgences, calls into question the true wealth of the Church, in Martin Luther’s perspective. In fact, according to the gospel, “the last are to be the first”. However, according to the logic of indulgences, those considered “the first” are not poor people, but those believers who were enough rich to pay indulgences (see Thesis 62, 63 e 64)

Luther’s Ninety-five Theses are not exclusively about the issue of indulgences. They articulate a vision of the Church and a critique directed at its structures and its logics of power. Under the tip of the iceberg that were the indulgences was, after all, an enormous iceberg composed of theological arguments that, more often than not, adhered to the *status quo* of a Church that organised itself in the form of a sieve to the access to salvation. For this reason, the theological issue of justification – in the context of the practice of indulgences – would swiftly lead to the clash between Martin Luther and the religious authorities; the latter of whom Luther no longer recognised as such because they placed their power above the power of the Scriptures, contradicting them. The great rupture was not merely limited to Luther’s desertion of the Church. On the contrary, the cornerstone of this rupture was the demystification of an authority that regarded itself as the mediator between Heaven and Earth, as well as the progressive direct access of believers to the Word of God. Nevertheless, one also finds the negative consequences of the inability of the Church in understanding the renewing impulse brought

¹¹ Indulgences’ money was used to build St. Peter’s Basilica, in Rome.

about by Luther and supported (it must be stated) by the princes ruling over territories that now belong to the German space. Those princes were eager to attain political and financial independence from Rome. The rupture brought about by the reformers and the temporal powers that either aided or fiercely battled them had a direct impact in the configuration of Europe and in the territorialisation and confessionalisation of the Christian identities, marked by the “wars of religion” between Catholics and Protestants. Half a millennium would have to go by before the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church both recognised their guilt in the (bloody, more often than not) divisions that resulted from losing sight of what united Christians (precisely, the faith in a merciful God) and from the lust for power. In a joint statement released in 2017, both Churches affirm the following:

The true unity of the church can only exist as unity in the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The fact that the struggle for this truth in the sixteenth century led to the loss of unity in Western Christendom belongs to the dark pages of church history. In 2017, we must confess openly that we have been guilty before Christ of damaging the unity of the church. This commemorative year presents us with two challenges: the purification and healing of memories, and the restoration of Christian unity in accordance with the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ (LRCC).

In fact, the document of the Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation issued in 2017 recognizes right from the beginning that Christians “repeatedly (...) have stood in the way of the good news of the mercy of God” (LRCC) and that it is necessary to re-read the history of the conflict between both Churches in order to be able to make steps towards a unity that was lost five hundred years ago. At the same time, the document states that what unites both Churches is more relevant than what divides them. The document quotes abundantly the “Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification”, issued in 1999, a document received by the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation.¹² The 1999 document already asserted that biblical studies, modern history of theology and of dogma, as well as the dialogue led after the II Vatican Council opened the way to a “notable convergence concerning justification” (LWFCC, 13). This consen-

¹² Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. By the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, 1999 (From now on only LWFCC).

sus opens the way to an assertion that was impossible in the eye of the storm of Luther's Reformation: the document literally says that "the corresponding doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to today's partner" (LWFCC, 13). However, even if this document is at the root of the document issued in 2017, the last one should be considered a step further, since it was issued to a common commemoration of the fifth century of the Reformation by the Lutheran and the Catholic Churches. One of the core topics of both documents, as already mentioned, is precisely what led Luther to leave the Church: the doctrine of justification. Both texts establish a dialogue between Lutheran and Catholic understanding of this doctrine, even if 1999 document considers the topic as an "ecumenical problem" (LWFCC, 14) and 2017 document says that "Catholics, however, had found some of Luther's positions troubling" (LRCC).

The Joint Declaration of 1999 establishes the possibility of a common basic understanding of the doctrine of justification. What lies behind Luther's critique of the indulgences is the following question: what justifies believers? What is the source of forgiveness of sins: faith or good deeds? This question is strongly connected with the understanding of what justification (in the sense of salvation) means. The 1999 common declaration states: "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works." (LWFCC, 15). Redemption comes from a forgiving and merciful God: it is a gift, and not a reward for good deeds of a sinner or of someone commissioned to pay the sins of someone else (as it happened according to the logic of indulgences): "When Catholics say that persons 'cooperate' in preparing for and accepting justification by consenting to God's justifying action, they see such personal consent as itself an effect of grace, not as an action arising from innate human abilities." (LWFCC, 20). That does not mean that deeds are of no importance, since faith without deeds is a dead faith (see James 2, 14-26).

Nevertheless the document issued in 2017 (as well as the document from 1999) emphasizes a topic that, according to both declarations, results from Luther's critique of indulgences. According to the 2017 document the "conflict concerning indulgences quickly developed into a conflict concerning authority". (LWFCC, 52). In fact, the already mentioned adage *sola fides, sola scriptura, solus Christus* excludes the central place occupied by the church in the relationship between God and believers. This role did not only have to do with penitence – it also had to do with "the proper interpretation of Scripture" (LWFCC, 52), an interpretation that was also issued by the

church. So, according to the document, the problem was not as much with “the supremacy of Scripture” asserted by Luther as it was with the erasing of the role of authority the Catholic Church had in this interpretation. Even more, Luther came to the point of considering the pope as the “Antichrist”, since he saw no link between the Bible and Rome’s statements, while the pope “claimed that his office was instituted *iure divino* (“by divine right”).” (LWFCC, 53). The Council of Trent (1545-1563) emphasized the authority of the Church in the interpretation of the Scriptures as well as the unbreakable link between the Scriptures and “apostolic tradition”, both “preserved in the Catholic Church”.¹³

1999 document also emphasizes the relevance of Trent doctrine about the sacraments as “the ordinary means by which »all true justice either begins, or once received gains strength, or, if lost, is restored”.¹⁴ The council emphasized that Christ instituted seven sacraments, including the ordination, and the sacrament of penitence.

The Joint Declaration of 2017 recognizes that the Council of Trent “shaped a polemical environment between Protestants and Catholics” (LRCC, 88) that lasted until the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). However, a close reading of this Council’s documents on the relationship with other Churches still reveals the undeniable difficulty the Catholic Church has in recognizing that she should have the status of a Church *inter pares*: on one hand, *Unitates Redintegratio*¹⁵ says that “Catholics are in a real, if imperfect, communion with all who confess Jesus Christ and are baptized”, while *Lumen gentium* asserts that the “Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church”.¹⁶

This ecumenical problem, in spite of the steps given in the common commemoration of the Reformation, is still to see both in the 1999 document (quoted by the document of 2017) and in the 2017 document. The Catholic Church seems to keep struggling with a wound opened by the Reformation and visible in the role she assigns herself in the process of forgiving. Maybe the fact of having nowadays a Pope that puts mercy at the core of the Church’s heart will open the possibility of reconsidering the Catholic Church not as a “sieve” (namely, in the sacrament of penance) through

¹³ Council of Trent, Fourth Session, 8 April 1546, Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures.

¹⁴ Council of Trent, Seventh Session, 3 March 1547, Foreword.

¹⁵ Decree on Ecumenism. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 2.

¹⁶ Dogmatic Constitution on The Church. *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

which sinners have to pass, but as a sign that forgiveness is granted by God and accessible to all, since it is God who forgives and “confessional must not be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with the Lord’s mercy which spurs us on to do our best”.¹⁷

Conclusion:

This essay tried to analyse and to debate some of the decisive topics that resulted in a rupture between Luther and the Catholic Church. In order to achieve this, we have started with the Greek gods, went through the *Old* and the *New Testament*, and finally, through Luther’s Thesis.

The way we went through brought us to the current ecumenical proposals resulting from the dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans and consolidated in documents written by both Churches. This approach, after such a long time separation, invokes an understanding of God as a God that cannot be neither manipulated by finite and contingent human beings nor used as an argument to turn them dependent from a “sieve of faith” established by entities that put themselves in the position of “managers of redemption”, that is of managers of the possibility of being “justified” by God.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 44.

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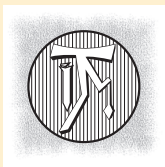
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