

Hermeneutics of the models of ministry in MOE¹

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1. Ministry, ordination and episkopé in ecumenical dialogue

The understanding of ministry and ordination, linked to the question of episkopé, i.e. spiritual leadership of the church, is a core issue in ecumenical dialogue. The progress that can be expected in ecumenism in the coming years depends largely on how this question is answered. Differences in the understanding of ministry exist not only between Protestant churches on the one hand and the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox churches on the other, but also among the churches that emerged from the Reformation. In a broader sense, this also includes the Anglican Church, which sees itself in a middle position between Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church.

Lima, Meissen, Porvoo, Reuilly – these names stand for important bilateral and multilateral dialogues on ministry, ordination and episkopé over the past forty years. However, we are still a long way from reaching an ecumenical consensus. Bilateral rapprochements, for example between Lutheran and Anglican churches, sometimes increase the distance to other churches, and there is still no sign of a breakthrough in the dialogue with Rome. The same picture emerges when one studies the three comprehensive volumes entitled "Das kirchliche Amt in apostolischer Nachfolge" (The Church Ministry in Apostolic Succession), which document several years of work by the Ecumenical Working Group of Protestant and Catholic Theologians on this topic.²

The controversy surrounding the VELKD's 2004 position paper on ordination showed how far Rome and the Protestant churches still have to go to achieve substantial rapprochement.³

¹ Keynote presented at the consultation "Rethinking Ministry in CPCE: Responding to Diversification through Ministry, Ordination, Episkopé", Oslo, 23–25 April 2026. Individual passages are taken from: Ulrich H.J. Körtner, *Kirche des Wortes. Wirkungen und Wirksamkeit des Evangeliums* (Church of the Word: Effects and Effectiveness of the Gospel), Leipzig 2025.

² Theodor Schneider/Gunter Wenz (eds.), *Das kirchliche Amt in apostolischer Nachfolge* (The Church Ministry in Apostolic Succession), Vol. 1: Grundlagen und Grundfragen (Fundamentals and Fundamental Questions) (Dialogue of the Churches 12), Freiburg/Göttingen 2004; D. Sattler/G. Wenz (eds.), *Das kirchliche Amt in apostolischer Nachfolge* (The Church Ministry in Apostolic Succession), Vol. 2: Origins and Transformations (Dialogue of the Churches 13), Freiburg/Göttingen 2006; Dorothee Sattler/Gunter Wenz (eds.), *The Church Office in Apostolic Succession*, Vol. 3: Understandings and Differences (Dialogue of the Churches 14), Freiburg/Göttingen 2008.

³ General Priesthood, Ordination and Commissioning according to Protestant Understanding. A Recommendation of the Bishops' Conference of the VELKD (VELKD Texts 130), Hanover 2004.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, then President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (), accused the Lutheran Bishops' Conference of abandoning the ground covered so far in ecumenical dialogue and burning all bridges with its understanding of ordination and ministry. Criticism was also voiced in the Protestant churches. In a more moderate tone, but in agreement on the substance of the matter, Wolfgang Thönissen, director of the Johann Adam Möhler Institute, spoke of a "heavy burden".⁴ He suspected that with the VELKD paper, on which the other member churches of the EKD were also invited to comment, the Protestant Church in Germany was moving in the direction of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship, which since 2003 has been called the "Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe". "The Catholic Church will not be able to participate in this communion," said Thönissen.⁵ Whether this is actually the case is to be explored by a bilateral commission of the CPCE and the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, established in 2018, whose work is currently on hold.

In a lecture he gave in March 2023 at the invitation of the Bishops' Conference of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (VELKD) at Loccum Monastery, Cardinal Koch diagnosed that the goal of the ecumenical movement has "become increasingly less clear over time than it was at its inception"⁶ . He accuses the CPCE of being too one-sided in its fundamental advocacy of diversity and difference. Koch is astonished that the Leuenberg ecumenical model is increasingly being adopted by Catholic theologians in ecumenical dialogues with the churches that emerged from the Reformation as a model for the future, because it is deficient when measured against the basic principles of Catholic ecclesiology.⁷ His judgement is harsh: "To this day, it is not clear how the ecumenical goal of a community of independent churches of different confessions, as set out in the Leuenberg Agreement, can be reconciled with the biblical image of the Church as the one body of Christ."⁸

The problem comes to a head in the question of church ministry or the various ministries in the church, in the question of the understanding of ordination and the different conceptions of church leadership and supervision, in short, of episkopé and its personal or collegial exercise. In 1994, the CPCE – then still called the Leuenberg Church Fellowship – adopted its fundamental document on the Protestant understanding of the church entitled "The Church of Jesus Christ" in Vienna, which for the first time since the Reformation formulates the common

⁴ Wolfgang Thönissen, A Problematic Course Setting. Lutheran Recommendations for Understanding Ordination, in: HerKorr 59 (2005), 136-140.

⁵ Thönissen, Course Setting (see note 4), 140.

⁶ Kurt Koch, What Unity Are We Seeking? Reflections on the Goal of the Ecumenical Movement from a Catholic Perspective, 13 March 2023, 3. The lecture manuscript is available.

⁷ Cf. Koch, Unity (see note 6), 6.

⁸ Koch, Unity (see note 6), 7.

foundations of all churches and confessional traditions that emerged from the Reformation.⁹ The Leuenberg Agreement is expressly referred to in it as an ecumenical model of unity.¹⁰ However, this important document left many questions unanswered with regard to ministry and ordination.

As the study *The Church of Jesus Christ* noted at the time, the member churches of the CPCE were "on the way to consensus" on the question of the understanding of ministry, but such a consensus had not yet been reached. The so-called Tampere Theses are cited as a "helpful impetus for further work on a joint contribution [...] in ecumenical dialogue"¹¹. The document draws the following conclusions from them:

"These important theses highlight both the fundamental agreement and the different views on the understanding of ministry, as well as the diversity of forms in which ministry is exercised. However, it is crucial that these differences do not call into question the communion of the Church in word and sacrament, for the *differences* concern not the foundation but the *form of the Church*."¹² However, the validity of this assertion still had to be proven in order to refute the accusation made, for example, by the Roman Catholic dogmatist Leo Scheffczyk that the Leuenberg ecumenical model propagates unity in irreconcilable diversity at the expense of theological truth.¹³

The understanding of ministry and the understanding of ecumenism are inseparably linked. If the Protestant voice is to be strengthened across the boundaries of individual churches and denominations, the Protestant churches of Europe are challenged to jointly articulate the fundamental convictions that unite them on the question of ministry and to represent them convincingly in ecumenism.

The Leuenberg Agreement of 1973 listed the question of ministry and ordination among the doctrinal differences "that exist within and between the participating churches, without being considered divisive," but which needed to be worked on further.¹⁴ In 2006, the CPCE General Assembly in Budapest recommended that the Council establish a doctrinal dialogue group on "Ministry, Ordination and Episcopé according to Protestant Understanding". The aim of the doctrinal dialogue group was to deepen and develop the consensus that had been reached.

⁹ See Michael Bünker/Martin Friedrich (eds.), *The Church of Jesus Christ. The Reformation's contribution to the ecumenical dialogue on church unity* (LT 1), Leipzig ⁵ 2018.

¹⁰ Ibid. (note 9), chapter III, 4.

¹¹ 42.

¹²45. 45.

¹³46. See Leo Scheffczyk, "Unversöhnte Verschiedenheit" [Unreconciled Diversity]. On the "vote" of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) "on the orderly coexistence of churches of different confessions," in: *Forum Katholische Theologie* 18 (2002), 47–54.

¹⁴46. LK 39.

Taking into account the results of dialogues in which CPCE churches had been involved, such as the documents of Meissen, Porvoo and Reuilly, but also the discussions between the Lutheran and Reformed World Federations, the aim was to examine not only the fundamental understanding of the ministry of public proclamation in the face of current challenges, but also the compatibility of the different forms of episkopé.

The doctrinal dialogue group began its work in 2007. In 2012, the four-part document "Ministry – Ordination – Episkopé" (hereinafter MOE), which had been developed over the following years, was adopted by the 7th General Assembly of the CPCE in Florence. However, it should be noted that not all parts of this groundbreaking document have been given the same status. It consists of an introduction, section 1.5 focusing on the hermeneutical foundations of the doctrinal dialogue, the actual declaration (part 2), recommendations (part 3) and a collection of study materials (part 4). While the declaration (Part 2) and the recommendations (Part 3) achieved the level of assent, the study material (Part 4) was only recommended for consideration.

MOE plays an important role in current discussions, both in internal debates among Protestant churches and in dialogue with ecumenical partners, although it has not yet received the attention it deserves in academic theology.¹⁵ Our consultation here in Oslo underlines the importance of the document, whose basic statements need to be reconsidered in light of new challenges facing the member churches of the CPCE. These include, as stated in the invitation letter, a shortage of pastors, new types of applicants, collective leadership, diversification of ministries, and ongoing structural and ethical debates.

My task now is to comment on the hermeneutical foundations of the doctrinal dialogue document, which are set out in section 1.5 of the introduction. I also understand these as the basis for further discussion among the member churches of the CPCE in view of the current challenges mentioned above.

2. The hermeneutical foundations of the doctrinal dialogue on ministry, ordination and episkopé

The introduction to MOE not only explains, as is customary in such documents, the status of the discussion, the intention and the structure of the present doctrinal dialogue text, but also

¹⁵ See, however, Ulrich H.J. Körtner, *Dogmatik (LETh 5)*, study edition 2020, 598f.

presents a series of hermeneutical considerations that are of fundamental importance for the work of the CPCE beyond the specific topic. They first tie in with the statements on the basis, form and purpose of the church according to Protestant understanding, which were made in the Leuenberg Agreement and later, decisively, in the doctrinal dialogue text *The Church of Jesus Christ*. The CPCE sees itself as a community of churches that is more than just a working group of churches, such as those that exist as national bodies in individual countries. However, it also differs from a transnational body such as the Conference of European Churches and also from the World Council of Churches based in Geneva. In these organisations, not all churches recognise each other as churches in the full sense of the word, meaning that they do not always have pulpit and communion fellowship with each other, but respect each other as churches according to the respective self-understanding of the partner church. As is well known, this is different in the CPCE. As a community of churches, it has ecclesial quality, which is defined as unity in reconciled diversity.

What is new compared to previous doctrinal discussions, however, is that MOE recognises the need to reflect on the limits of diversity and to define these theologically. Incidentally, the necessity of limits to diversity is now also recognised in the field of ethics. For example, the CPCE's guidance on ethical issues in reproductive medicine (2017) speaks of a "corridor" within whose boundaries Protestant positions on medical ethics issues move.¹⁶

Determining the limits of diversity is, of course, a hermeneutical task, since the Leuenberg Agreement already distinguishes "the fundamental testimony of the Reformation confessions from their historically conditioned ways of thinking".¹⁷ According to MOE, the common understanding of the basis, form and purpose of the church allows for a certain plurality of forms of church offices and structures, the boundaries of which, however, must be determined hermeneutically. Agreement in the choice of words does not always mean agreement on the matter itself. Differences in linguistic expression and form, on the other hand, can certainly go hand in hand with agreement on the matter itself. However, in order to be able to precisely determine the common ground in basic understanding and the limits of diversity, it is necessary to make a further hermeneutical distinction between understanding and comprehension. The following remarks therefore go beyond the introduction to MOE.

¹⁶ Cf. "Before I formed you in the womb ...". A guide to ethical issues in reproductive medicine by the Council of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE); Vienna 2017, 22. Cf. also *ibid.*, 178.

¹⁷ LK 5.

2.1 Common understanding and limits of diversity within the CPCE

The foundation and mission of the Church of the Word is the message of God's free grace (Barmen VI), which is referred to as the Gospel in the New Testament. Its revelation and proclamation are to be understood as an eschatological event, that is, as God's final and liberating word, through which the world is to be fundamentally renewed. The churches that emerged from the Reformation agree on this.

Historically, however, there have been profound differences of opinion about how this final and definitive word of God is to be understood, which have divided not only the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Reformation, but also the latter among themselves. It was not until the Leuenberg Agreement of 1973 that the Reformation churches succeeded in formulating a common understanding of the Gospel, thereby overcoming the mutual condemnations of the 16th century. What this common understanding of the Gospel consists of will be examined in detail below.

When analysing the relevant statements of the Leuenberg Agreement and other doctrinal texts developed since then by the Community of European Churches in Europe (CECE), it is important to make a hermeneutical distinction between comprehension and understanding. This distinction is more difficult to make in English than in German, because both the word *Verstehen* and the expression *Verständnis* are translated as *understanding*. However, while understanding is an ongoing process, comprehension is the result of the process of understanding, even though any comprehension is always only a preliminary result and in turn becomes the subject of a new process of understanding. Common *comprehension* can be expressed in a written text such as the Leuenberg Agreement's " " (*Common Understanding*), but common *understanding* cannot. Furthermore, every common understanding is always based to a certain extent on a different understanding, and in turn, the understanding that is the subject and starting point of a new or continued process of understanding, which is articulated linguistically, will be a continued different understanding, which may in turn be the linguistic fixation of a new or deepened common understanding of what one believes to have been commonly understood in the past.

This is precisely the dynamic of ongoing doctrinal discussions in the Leuenberg Church Fellowship – today the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe – which is already explicitly laid out in the Leuenberg Agreement itself. It is also inevitable and inconclusive because most of the real people who once agreed on a common understanding of the Gospel are no longer alive. Those who today – 50 years after its signing – engage with the Leuenberg

Agreement as an expression of a common understanding of the Gospel are completely different people. They belong to a different generation and a different time. Thus, every new interpretation, application and continuation of the 1973 text is a different understanding.

When we speak of a common understanding and comprehension of the Gospel, i.e. of understanding within the community, the question arises as to the ecclesiological implications and consequences. The community of tradition, interpretation and listening that we are concerned with here is the Church, or more precisely, a community of churches whose ecclesial character is the subject of systematic theological reflection as well as doctrinal discussions within the CPCE. In addition to *The Church of Jesus Christ* and MOE, the later study *Church Community* from 2018 should also be mentioned here.¹⁸

We speak of the Church as a community of tradition, interpretation and listening. According to the Reformation understanding, it is the community or assembly of all believers – in Latin: the *congregatio sanctorum* – "in which the Gospel is preached purely and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel" (CA VII)¹⁹. LC 2 refers to this definition of the church, and CA VII is consistently cited in CPCE documents as the basis for its own understanding of the church.

Now, the assembly of all believers is an assembly of individuals. However, the CPCE is not merely the sum of individual churches, each of which is an assembly of believers around the Word and the sacraments, but a community (*communio*; English *communion*, French *communion*) of churches. But what does it mean for the hermeneutics of the Gospel when we have to think about *churches* as collective subjects of common understanding and common comprehension of the Gospel?

According to LK 34, the churches participating in the Leuenberg Agreement are "convinced that they share in the one Church of Jesus Christ". The one Church of Jesus Christ apparently consists not only of individual baptised believers, but also of churches, which can be described using a term familiar from Roman Catholic usage as "particular churches". But what does it mean for a hermeneutical theory of common understanding and comprehension of the church-founding gospel when not only individuals but also churches as communities – and that always means, in modern terms, as institutions and organisations – appear as subjects of processes of interpretation and reception? And what does it mean when the common understanding of the *churches* is always also a *collective* different understanding?

¹⁸ See Mario Fischer/Martin Friedrich (eds.), Kirchengemeinschaft. Grundlagen und Perspektiven (LT 16), Leipzig 2019.

¹⁹ The Confessional Writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (=BSLK). Göttingen, 5th edition 1963, 61.5–7.

To what extent, for example, do bilateral ecumenical dialogues and agreements concluded by member churches of the CPCE affect the common understanding of the gospel fundamentally articulated in the Leuenberg Agreement? To what extent is the question always present in such dialogues as to what possible consequences these may have for the Leuenberg Church Fellowship – I am deliberately using the former name of the CPCE here for systematic reasons? To what extent are subsequent doctrinal discussions and their results, which express, clarify, deepen or possibly even correct the common understanding of the Gospel in new ways under changed conditions and questions, constitutively considered and also explicitly named in bi- or multi-confessional dialogues that transcend the boundaries of the CPCE church community? Such questions are addressed in the study *Church Community* (2018) with regard to the Porvoo Community (No. 129) and the confessional world federations (No. 130). However, they undoubtedly require further clarification.

As MOE 18 states in accordance with *The Church of Jesus Christ*, existing differences in the understanding of ministry and in the various forms of the office and ministry of episkopé do not affect the foundation, but only the form of the Church. For the diversity of structures and church offices and their forms is not unlimited. The existing diversity should "neither obscure the reason nor contradict its ecumenical purpose" (No. 19). The limits of diversity are reached "where the mission of the Church or its unity is endangered and where its foundation can hardly be recognised" (No. 19). In order to determine the limits, clear criteria, which must be defined theologically, are needed in the ongoing dialogue. According to MOE, these are the criteria of scripturality and reality.

2.2 Unity in reconciled diversity

The basis of the hermeneutics underlying the MOE is the believed and experienced reality of unity in reconciled diversity. Although the formula of unity in reconciled diversity did not originate in the CPCE itself, it is used programmatically in the 1994 doctrinal study *The Church of Jesus Christ*. "The churches united by the Leuenberg Agreement live in such unity," it says there.²⁰

In English, the term "unity in reconciled diversity" is used. *Diversity* can be translated into German as both difference and variety. Compared to the early days of the CPCE, the term

²⁰ The Church of Jesus Christ. *The Reformation's contribution to the ecumenical dialogue on church unity* (LT 1), ed. by Michael Bünker and Martin Friedrich, Leipzig 2018, 71.

diversity is now preferred to the term difference in the German-speaking member churches. In ecumenism, the formula of unity in diversity and diversity in unity has become established, although it is understood in different ways.²¹ Diversity – in German Vielfalt, in French Diversité – is now widely regarded as a positive term. The foreign word Diversität is also often used. However, diversity as such is by no means always a positive value. There are also destructive forms of diversity. That is precisely why, when speaking of reconciled diversity instead of reconciled difference, we must also reflect on the phenomenon of difference and its ambiguities. Difference is a term that also needs to be thoroughly considered in the context of ecumenical theology.

As MOE 21 states, it is important "that the fundamental agreement on the understanding of ministry, ordination and episkopé is not only asserted, but can also be proven to be theologically well-founded". MOE now advocates an *ecumenical* hermeneutic of unity in reconciled diversity or variety, which not only contributes to deepening the existing common understanding of ministry, ordination and episkopé among the member churches of the GEK (), but also contributes to ecumenical dialogue with other churches. However, the intended ecumenical hermeneutics "does not aim at comprehensive church unity, but at overcoming divisive differences, thereby contributing to greater visibility of unity" (MOE 21). Existing church divisions cannot, of course, be overcome by hermeneutics alone. As the question of ministry shows, they are always the result of decisions made by churches and their leaders and can ultimately only be overcome by new decisions made by the churches. MOE does not represent a static but a dynamic understanding of confessionality, which trusts in the work of the Holy Spirit and consequently reckons with the historical development of identities.

2.3 Scripturality and reality

The two theological criteria of ecumenical hermeneutics in MOE are scripturality and reality. Lutheran and Reformed churches mostly use the formula "Scripture and confession," whereby the confessions of the Reformation are given a normativity derived from Scripture. According to Protestant understanding, the reference to the confessions of the Reformation, which is also decisive for the Leuenberg Agreement, does not call into question the sole validity of Scripture in the sense of the Reformation's *sola scriptura*.

²¹ See Hermann Barth, *Unity in Diversity and Diversity in Unity, On the Different Understanding of a Common Formula*, in: *ZThK* 103 (2006), 443–460.

Lutheranism distinguishes between Scripture as *norma normans* and the confessional writings compiled in the Book of Concord of 1580 as *norma normata*. The validity of the confessions can be justified in two ways. According to a weak interpretation, the confessional writings are valid in the church *insofar as* they are in harmony with Holy Scripture. According to a strong interpretation, they have normative status *because* they agree with Scripture. It is well known that there is a difference between Lutheran and Reformed churches with regard to the formation of confessions and commitment to them, in that the formation of confessions is incomplete for the Reformed churches. Texts from the post-Reformation period and up to the present day have also attained the status of confessions, although not all confessions are valid in all Reformed churches. The Leuenberg Agreement has a special status. It bears the title " " ("Concord of Reformed Churches in Europe"), but expressly emphasises in LK 37 that it does not see itself as a new confession. If the confessions of the Reformation understood themselves as a hermeneutical key to Holy Scripture, they must now, in turn, be interpreted historically and theologically-hermeneutically from a historical distance of several hundred years. Scriptural hermeneutics is complemented by confessional hermeneutics, as exemplified by Friedrich Schleiermacher's doctrine of faith. Today, the CPCE also includes churches that do not have confessional writings comparable to those of the Lutheran and Reformed churches. MOE takes this into account theologically and hermeneutically.

The distinction made in MOE 23 between criteria and sources is significant for understanding MOE. According to MOE 23, "the *sources* of the various forms of ministry, ordination and episkopé, as well as their theological justification, are Scripture, tradition, reason and experience." MOE includes in tradition not only the confessional writings of the Reformation period "and Protestant confessions from later periods, but also pre-Reformation traditions, liturgy including the various orders for ordination, vocation, commissioning or installation in a church leadership office" as well as "ecumenical texts and commitments," which include in particular earlier documents of the CPCE (MOE 24).

As MOE 25 explains, the criterion of scripturality "should not be confused with a formalistic use of the Bible"; a theological distinction must be made between Scripture and the Word of God. According to MOE 27, "the criterion of Protestant, i.e. gospel-based theology is the extent to which contemporary church life and religious consciousness are determined by Scripture applied to the present time and not, conversely, by the interpretation of Scripture through the general religious or political spirit of the times." As MOE 27 adds, this applies "in particular to the understanding of ministry, ordination and episkopé".

The criterion of reality-basedness put forward by MOE "refers to human experience in its various forms" (MOE 29), whereby theologically one should think of faith experience, understood as experience with experience, as discussed by Eberhard Jüngel and Gerhard Ebeling. Thus, church structures and offices are embedded in different socio-cultural and political contexts and are also geared to the practical requirements and possibilities in a concrete historical situation. However, MOE is concerned with the distinction between facticity and validity. According to MOE 29, realism means "not unquestioning adaptation to existing conditions, as these can certainly be changed and must be shaped independently".

With reference to the sixth of the Tampere Theses (cf. MOE 30), MOE understands the shaping of the church and its offices "as an ongoing task [...] for which all members of the church bear responsibility in the sense of the priesthood of all believers. However, the criteria for the concrete shaping of church structures and offices are the foundation of the church and its purpose," as already stated in MOE 16. According to MOE, the purpose of the Church must be continually redefined in a hermeneutic circle with the two poles of interpretation of Scripture and "a true and sincere acceptance of reality" (MOE 31), whereby the criterion of reality is subordinate to that of scripturality.

3. Outlook

The study *Kirchengemeinschaft* (2018) distinguishes between tradition and reception. Reception, however, is defined as an act of approval, but above all as the spiritual acceptance and adoption of what is to be received (No. 76), whereby the document focuses not on biblical texts but on the results of doctrinal discussions and ecumenical dialogues. It is striking, however, that the word field "interpret/interpretation" does not appear anywhere in the text. Only in one place is there a casual reference to "conflicts in questions of interpretation" (No. 63). I would consider it desirable to deepen the discussion in the CPCE on hermeneutics and ecclesiology, to which MOE has made an important contribution in the introduction.

It is the common understanding of the Gospel, as set out in the Leuenberg Agreement, that has made church fellowship possible in the sense of pulpit and table fellowship. In the common understanding and the jointly articulated understanding, church fellowship, i.e. being church together, is recognised as already given in Christ. Granting each other church fellowship (LK 29) is therefore not an arbitrary decision, but the fulfilment of what has been discovered as a gift in the common understanding. Realising church fellowship (LK 35) means that the process

of common happening is continued. The deepening of existing church fellowship and the progress made along this path are at the same time a *remaining* in this church fellowship, understood as a community of tradition, interpretation and , entirely in the spirit of Acts 2:42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

At the beginning, I quoted Cardinal Kurt Koch, who sees an irresolvable contradiction between Catholic ecclesiology and the concept of ecumenism and the ecumenical model of unity in reconciled diversity. His ecumenical vision is to develop a Joint Declaration on the Church, the Eucharist and Ministry, analogous to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, which addresses the three themes in their inseparable unity.²² In Koch's view, ecumenism faces the decision "whether the basis for further ecumenical discussions with the Reformation churches should be the model of connection represented by the Leuenberg Agreement or the sacramentally understood concept of visible unity, as proposed in the document of the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue in Finland"²³ .

However, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is not a member church of the CPCE. Although it participates in the work of the CPCE, it has not signed the Leuenberg Agreement. A sacramental understanding of visible unity, as shared by the Finnish Church, is indeed at odds with the concept of unity in reconciled diversity as advocated by the CPCE. In my view, Koch's remarks are to be welcomed insofar as they provide greater clarity regarding the tasks, challenges and obstacles in the dialogue between the CPCE and the Roman Catholic Church.

The German Bishops' Conference (DBK) and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) apparently see things differently, having published a joint statement on the state of ecumenism in spring 2024 entitled "More visibility in unity and more reconciliation in diversity". Both churches advocate a process-oriented model of ecumenism, in which the path to full unity is, in a sense, already the goal. In contrast to Cardinal Koch, the authors of the joint statement believe that "the hope for visible unity and the ideal of unity in reconciled diversity [...] are by no means mutually exclusive positions"²⁴ , even if one does not wish to deny the existing differences.

With their procedurally conceived formula "more visibility in unity and more reconciliation in diversity", the participants seek to identify the existing contradiction in ecumenical objectives. It means "no (alternative) juxtaposition of unity or diversity, nor an abrupt

²² See Koch, Unity (see note 6), 8.

²³ Koch, Unity (see note 6), 12.

²⁴ German Bishops' Conference/Evangelical Church in Germany, Greater Visibility in Unity and Greater Reconciliation in Diversity. On the Opportunities of a Process-Oriented Ecumenism (Joint Texts 30), Bonn/Hanover 2024 17.

coexistence of two supposedly denomination-specific alternative objectives. The 'more' that should characterise the ecumenical process is a qualitative 'more': it stands for more intense bonds, more convincing community, credible reconciliation and enriching diversity in the one Church of Jesus Christ. 'More visibility in unity and more reconciliation in diversity' is reflected in communicative solidarity, relational richness and cultivated diversity."²⁵

As appealing as a procedural understanding of ecumenism may sound, the model presented suffers from theoretical weaknesses that are already apparent in the comparative formulas. In terms of visibility, an increase may be conceivable, but in terms of reconciliation, it is not. It is true that the path to reconciliation is a process. But reconciliation as such either exists or it does not. The reconciliation that has been achieved may be deepened and filled with life, as is the case, for example, in the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe. But as such, reconciliation cannot be increased. Nor can one speak of partial reconciliation. Only partial reconciliation is not yet true reconciliation worthy of the name.

My thesis is that there are not only differences between Roman Catholic and Reformation ecclesiology in the interpretation of common basic beliefs, but also fundamental contradictions that are essentially linked to continuing differences in the doctrine of justification and its ecclesiological consequences. This does not, of course, put an end to the ecumenical hermeneutics envisaged by MOE on the question of ministry. Such remarks in no way preclude consensus and new forms of common confession. The "consentire" in the basic principles of proclaiming the Gospel and administering the sacraments remains necessary and sufficient for church fellowship according to Protestant understanding.²⁶ In view of the diversity of linguistic and liturgical forms of expression, however, the *consentire* must obviously be redefined,²⁷ namely as the coherence of the irrevocably different.²⁸

Hermeneutical criteria still need to be developed to determine such coherence. In any case, theological progress can only be expected if the hermeneutics of accommodation practised in the ecumenical consensus to date is supplemented and relativised by a hermeneutics of objection, which forces ecumenical dialogue partners to examine themselves and define their

²⁵ Ibid. (note 24), 51f.

²⁶ Cf. CA VII.

²⁷ See Anton Houtepen, *Koinonia. Koinonia and Consensus. On the Way to Community in One Faith*, in: Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz (ed.), *Bangalore 1978. Meeting of the Commission on Faith and Order. Reports, Speeches, Documents (ÖR.B 35)*, 1979, 201–204.

²⁸ See Konrad Raiser, *Beyond Tradition and Context. On the Problem of Ecumenical Hermeneutics*, in: *ÖR 40* (1991), 425–435, here 431.

profiles – based on the common understanding that they need each other as permanently different, because the truth of faith only appears in irrevocable plurality.²⁹

The churches are mutually dependent on external objection. Such objection may prove necessary in some cases, but not necessarily in all matters. The community of churches must therefore not exhaust itself in mutual opposition, but can – *ubi et quando visum est Deo!* – also lead to a doctrine of faith that "*is equally clear to all churches*"³⁰, resulting in a completely new *common* confession, teaching and celebration. However, this hope can only be justified pneumatologically, since it is not human will but solely the Spirit of God that leads us to a new understanding of the truth.

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²⁹ See also Richard Schenk, *An Ecumenism of Dissent. Systematic Reflections on the Contemporary Ecumenical Process from a Roman Catholic Perspective*, in: Hans Otte/Richard Schenk (eds.), *The Reunion Talks in Lower Saxony in the 17th Century. Royas y Spinola – Molan – Leibniz (SKGNS 37)*, 1999, 225–250, here 247: "According to the hierarchy of practical truths, the most urgent task of ecumenism today is not so much mutual rapprochement as the recognition that we need each other in order to achieve wholeness; this mutual necessity and necessity for the whole is an outstanding feature of ecclesial significance and ecclesial independence."

³⁰ Eberhard Jüngel, *For God's sake – clarity! Critical remarks on the trivialisation of the criteriological function of the article on justification – on the occasion of an ecumenical "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification"*, in: *ZThK* 94 (1997), 394–406, here 406.