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Seminar: The Problem of Church Authority in Ecumenical Dialog

**The Question of the Petrine Office
in Catholic – Lutheran Dialogues**

by
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INTRODUCTION

When we, in the beginning of this semester, were given the topic for our papers, my first reaction when I saw the title: “The Question of the Petrine Office in Catholic – Lutheran Dialogues”, was that the title was too narrow. “How can I write about a dialogue that hasn’t started yet?” I wondered; it would be better to write about the more general topic of Ministry in these dialogues, since I knew that issue had been discussed quite a bit.

I soon understood that I had been ignorant about several Catholic-Lutheran dialogues around the world that had discussed the issue of the Petrine office, but my first reaction also shows something important; on the question about the pope, Lutherans and Catholics have very different views, and any possible agreement seems to be far away. This is in contrast to the issue of justification and the agreement reached between Lutherans and Catholics on that topic in 1999. Justification had ceased to be a divisive issue between Lutherans and Catholics in many countries and churches several years before the “Joint Declaration on Justification” was signed in Augsburg October 31, 1999.

Defining my task

In this paper I will try to find out how the question of the Petrine office has been treated in the Catholic-Lutheran dialogues over the last 40 years. I will also look briefly at the controversy over the same issue at the time of the reformation, but I will not discuss the development or history of the Petrine office in general.

I will look at the international Catholic-Lutheran dialogues, as well as selected national ones, and see how they have treated my topic, starting with early dialogues, where I expect this issue has not been treated very thoroughly, then move towards more developed treatments of it in some later dialogues. I will also look in some detail at two papers given by George A. Lindbeck and Harding Meyer on this issue, to see how they describe events of the reformation and summarize the Catholic-Lutheran dialogues on this issue. Finally, I will mention briefly a recent lecture on this topic by William Rusch.

THE INTERNATIONAL CATHOLIC – LUTHERAN DIALOGUES

The dialogues between Lutherans and Catholics have gone through four distinct phases. The **first phase** lasted from 1966 – 1972. At the beginning of that first phase, there were some introductory meetings and a report issued before the dialogues really started. In this introductory, “First Official Report of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation”, from 1966, we read the following:

The discussions have convinced the two delegations that the traditional theological problems between Roman Catholics and Lutherans are still with us. Through the emergence of the modern world, however, they now appear in different perspective.

A number of topics for future discussion emerged from the deliberations, centering on the following themes:

- I The Word of God.
- II The Presence of Christ in the Church.
- III Christology.
- IV Pneumatology.
- V Justification and Sanctification.
- VI Renewal and Reformation.
- VII Missionary and Pastoral Problems. ¹

Under point II above we find the following subheadings: Baptism – Eucharist - Priesthood of Believers - Authority and Ministry in the Church - The Purity of the Gospel and the Fullness of the Church. *Authority and Ministry in the Church* is as close as we get to the Petrine office in this first short report – maybe that question was too difficult to even put on the list of issues to be discussed in the near future?

Commission on The Gospel and the Church, 1972 (“Malta Report”)

In the Malta Report, the first (real) report from the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue, we find a slightly different attitude than in the introductory report. The introduction here says that the last issues they dealt with were “questions of papal primacy and intercommunion”. ² What follows is extracted from the last section of the document, called *The Gospel and the Unity of the Church*:

65 The commission was unable to deal with the problem of the unity of the church in a comprehensive way. It limited itself to a few aspects which appeared important in the context of its theme.

A) The question of papal primacy

66 In this connection the question of papal primacy emerges as a special problem for the relationship between Lutherans and Catholics. Catholics pointed to the beginning of this doctrine in the Biblical witness concerning the special position of Peter and also to the differences in the understanding of primacy in the first and second millennia. The office of the papacy also includes the task of caring for legitimate diversity among local churches. The concrete shape of this office may vary greatly in accordance with changing historical conditions. It was recognized on the Lutheran side that no local church should exist in isolation since it is a manifestation of the universal church. In this sense the importance of a ministerial service of the communion of churches was acknowledged and at the same time reference was made to the problem raised for Lutherans by their lack of such an effective service of unity. ...

67 The question, however, which remains controversial between Catholics and Lutherans is whether the primacy of the pope is necessary for the church, or whether it represents only a fundamentally possible function. ³

It is interesting to notice how the dialogue-partners limit themselves to a discussion of only some “aspects” of the Petrine office, since this question is quite complicated and controversial (that is my reading of no. 65 above). The statements about the pope’s function are mostly descriptive, stating what the two churches believe, not so much trying to see what they agree on. It is interesting to notice that they single out one question as more controversial in this discussion than all others; That

¹ First Official Report, § 5.

² Malta report, § 5.

³ Ibid., § 65-67.

is if the Petrine office is **necessary** for the Church (the Catholic view), or only one possibility for how to organize the Church (the Lutheran view).

Second phase 1973 – 1984

In this second phase of dialogues, the document “The Ministry in the Church” (1982) is one of several documents, but really the only one to deal with our question. I want to quote one paragraph from it that shows us how difficult the issue of the Petrine office was perceived to be:

.... It was possible to deal with fundamental christological and pneumatological questions quickly as here there are no major controversies between the two churches. The same is not the case with respect to the theme of the papal office, which represents a serious problem between our churches. In view of the complexity of the exegetical and historical problems connected with this theme, a separate study needs to be devoted to it. ... ⁴

The **third phase** of these dialogues, from 1986 to 1993, dealt with the issue of Justification, and came to a very happy conclusion with the signing of the Joint Declaration in 1999, but it did not touch on the issue of the papacy.

The **fourth phase** of the dialogues, begun in 1995, is still underway. It deals primarily with questions about apostolicity and ministry and has been given the name “Lutheran-Catholic Commission on Unity”. Some analysts say that these dialogues have taken so long because the questions they deal with are so difficult, others say that this is a normal time span. Meanwhile, the talks seem to have finished and the final report is due to be published at the end of this year, ⁵ but, as I also understand, the question of the Petrine office is not dealt with in any detailed way.

NATIONAL DIALOGUES

In addition to these international dialogues, there have also been national dialogues between the two churches in several countries. I will limit myself to mentioning the results of the dialogues in Norway and the United States.

The dialogues in **Norway** (my country) are exemplary for how little has been achieved concerning a common understanding of the Petrine office. About 90% of the Norwegian population belongs to the Lutheran church and just over 1 % to the Catholic Church. There have been three rounds of dialogues between the two churches from 1979 until 1991, and three papers have been published with the results of the dialogues: The Eucharist (1982), Ministry (1986) and Justification (1991). But when it comes to the issues of Ministry, which touches on the issue of the Petrine office, what follows is an expression, it seems to me, of how much Lutherans and Catholics still disagree:

⁴ *The Ministry in the Church*, § 3.

⁵ I heard this here in Rome from Turid Karlsen Seim, a Norwegian member of the International Commission.

The Office of Bishops and the Petrine Office

Common for both churches is that they in addition to the office of presbyters also have an office of bishops. But the relationship between these two offices is perceived in a very different way. The same is true about the so-called Petrine office.

.... (Then the Catholic understanding of these offices is described, and the document goes on.)

According to the Lutheran view the differences between bishop and presbyter rely solely on human right. It is a question of order. The office of bishops was introduced because such an office was deemed helpful, it is a practical, not an issue of principle. The bishop's office is a special kind of priestly office, but not over it. That is: The church is not hierarchically structured.

.... The Lutheran reformation always kept the notion that an ecumenical council would be a helpful forum to discuss issues that threatened the unity of the church, but it should be a council without formal teaching authority. The road towards such a council seems long ... and seen from the Lutheran teaching about the church it would be impossible to imagine a council that depended on an acceptance of the pope's teaching authority.⁶

In the **United States**, on the other hand, the eleven (!) rounds of Catholic-Lutheran dialogues have rendered much more spectacular results. For example, it seems that the report from round seven in these dialogues, *Justification by Faith*, 1983, was the first major step towards the international Joint Declaration of Justification, signed in 1999.

The fifth round, *Differing Attitudes Toward Papal Primacy*, 1973, is one of the very few dialogues to deal extensively and directly with the question of the Petrine office. In the introduction of the report the dialogues partners state what they have achieved:

In these sessions, we have once again found common ground. There is a growing awareness among Lutherans of the necessity of a specific Ministry to serve the church's unity and universal mission, while Catholics increasingly see the need for a more nuanced understanding of the role of the papacy within the universal church.⁷

In the report, some statements are common, held by both sides, while others are separate Lutheran and Catholic Perspectives. This is what the Catholics say:

(26) The church's teaching office is not above God's word, it rather serves the Word. Indeed this is true of all ecclesiastical authority. The gospel may require that church offices be exercised in very different ways to meet the needs of various regions and periods. New means of exercising authority may have to be discovered to fit the cultural patterns arising from the changing forms of education, communications ...

(27) Further, it is an important political principle that authority in any society should use only the amount of power necessary to reach its assigned goal. This applies also to the papal office. ... Thus one may foresee that voluntary limitations by the pope of the exercise of his jurisdiction will accompany the growing vitality of the organs of collegial government, ...⁸

After the common report, the Lutheran and the Catholic participants of the dialogue wrote separate additions. This is what the Lutherans wrote:

Many Lutherans as well as Roman Catholics will be startled by the convergence on papal primacy recorded in the preceding joint statement. This issue is both more sensitive and more difficult than any of those previously dealt with ... It is doubly necessary, therefore, that the Lutheran participants explain ...

(1) why we have dealt with this issue, (2) what seems to us the positions of the Lutheran tradition on this

⁶ Catholic-Lutheran dialogue in Norway, *Ministry*, 1986, §5.

⁷ *Differing Attitudes Toward Papal Primacy*, p. 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20-21.

matter, and (3) why we believe the time has now come for our churches to consider seriously the possibility of a role for the papacy ...⁹

It is interesting to notice that the Lutheran participants in the dialogue find it necessary to explain why they were even willing to discuss this difficult topic! We also see in this report that the Catholics are willing to, and find it necessary to, discuss how Papal authority should be expressed in the church, while the Lutherans are willing to see the pope's ministry as a possible good for the unity of the church, but not necessary in the way Catholics see his role.

The book wherein the report of the dialogue is published also gives us some of the background material used by the commission in their work. I will discuss one of these papers on page 6.

Round ten in this series of dialogues finished in 2004, with the report: "The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries". This is quite a comprehensive report, and it deals also with the question of the Petrine office.

The fifth of seven main headings in the document is called "The bishop's office and the Petrine office". Here the Lutheran view of only one ministerial office (the presbyter) is presented; in the Lutheran church the bishop is a priest with some extra responsibility. The Catholic view of the threefold office is also presented, the difference is noticed, and then they go on to discuss the universal office of the pope. I find it interesting (and a bit discouraging) to note that the dialogue partners have not come closer to a resolution of this problem in the many years from 1973 to 2004. The Lutherans see a certain need of a unifying ecclesial office, and the Catholics are willing to discuss how the Petrine ministry is exercised, but has anything more been achieved? This lack of progress may be adduced from the following quote:

114. In relation to a universal ministry at the service of the unity of the universal church, this dialogue is far less ready to propose any official actions. The bishop of Rome, the only historically plausible candidate for such a universal ministry, remains a sign of unity and a sign of division among us.

1. Catholic Reflections on Universal Ministry

115. Pope John Paul II in *Ut unum sint* (1995) emphasized the bishop of Rome's responsibility to serve the unity and communion of the church. With the power and authority without which such an office would be illusory, the Bishop of Rome must ensure the communion of all the Churches. ...

117. We recommend that Catholics explore how the universal ministry of the bishop of Rome can be reformed to manifest more visibly its subjection to the gospel in service to the koinonia of salvation.

2. Lutheran Reflections on Universal Ministry

118. In light of *Ut unum sint* and other Catholic and ecumenical statements on papacy, Lutherans have been involved in considerable discussion of universal ministry. If the interdependence of assembly and ordained ministry is typical of the structure of the church at the local, regional, and national level, then why should such an interdependence not also be found at the universal level?

119. Lutherans have been concerned with whether the papal office is necessary for salvation. ... To what extent may such an office of universal ministry be needed for the unity of the church in a koinonia of salvation? ...

⁹ Ibid., p. 23-24.

120. We recommend that Lutherans explore whether the worldwide koinonia of the church calls for a worldwide minister of unity and what form such a ministry might take to be truly evangelical. ¹⁰

LECTURES ON THE PETRINE OFFICE

Now I want to present three lectures given by well-known Lutheran ecumenists on the Petrine office, the first lecture given in 1972, the second one given in 1997 and the last one in 2006. It will be interesting to see how they understand the possibility of Lutherans accepting the Petrine office, under which conditions, and how the Lutheran view has developed over 34 years.

George A. Lindbeck, Papacy and Ius Divinum: A Lutheran View

Lindbeck's paper is based on a lecture delivered at the February 1972 meeting of the US Catholic-Lutheran commission. Lindbeck says in the beginning of his paper that "the main purpose of this paper is to explore possible Lutheran response to newer Roman Catholic thinking on *ius divinum* especially as this applies to papal primacy." ¹¹ Lindbeck then points out that in the Malta Report "there is in some circles a remarkable convergence in the structure of Catholic and Lutheran thinking about the papacy." ¹²

Lindbeck then puts forth five propositions that describe the Lutheran attitude to the question of the papacy:

1. Lutherans recognize the importance of what I shall call "the Petrine function" ...
 2. They are open to the possibility that this needs to be more effectively institutionalised than has been true in Lutheranism until now.
 3. They do not exclude the possibility that the papacy could rightly exercise this function.
 4. In order to do this, however, it must be reformed theologically and practically in order to make clear its subordination to the primacy of the gospel.
 5. Even if this were to happen, however, Lutherans do not agree that the papacy is the necessary institutionalisation of the Petrine function.
- ... (about the present time he adds) "Only the fifth thesis is said to be a matter of controversy." ¹³

The next question is then; what does it mean that the Petrine function is necessary? First Lindbeck describes what he sees as two different Catholic answers of the question:

As far as I can see, there are now two major ways of answering this question. One is exclusively functional. Here *ius divinum* adds nothing to the historically and functionally conditioned necessity which we have suggested Lutherans can also attribute to papal primacy. The other way ... appears to go farther. A *de iure divino* structure must be irreversible or permanent. There are some post-biblical developments, such as papal primacy, which are irreversible and therefore qualify as *de iure divino*. Lutherans ... deny that the papacy is *de iure divino* in this second sense. In contrast, they have no difficulty with the functionalist interpretation of the *ius divinum* character of certain post-biblical developments. ¹⁴

¹⁰ *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation*, § 114-120.

¹¹ Lindbeck *Papacy and Ius Divinum: A Lutheran View*, p. 193.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 195-196.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

Lindbeck goes on to say that “not only Lutherans, but also some Catholics espouse the functionalist view, and the Malta Report does not go beyond it”,¹⁵ and if this view prevails, the whole problem would really be solved.

Harding Meyer’s lecture on Lutherans and the Petrine Office

Harding Meyer’s paper is called “*Suprema auctoritas ideo ab omne errore immunis*”: The Lutheran Approach to Primacy” and was given here at the Angelicum in December 1997 at a symposium called “The Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church” with theologians from several churches.

Meyer starts his lecture by describing how the Lutheran reformers reacted against the pope, so far as to calling him the anti-Christ. First of all they criticized him for setting himself above the Scriptures,¹⁶ and, even though they did not in principle rule out the possibility of the papal office - by human right, seeing that it could possibly be good for the unity of the church etc. - they would not accept that the Petrine office would be there by divine right.¹⁷ Melanchton for example would gladly give the pope first place in the church if he would ‘allow the Gospel’.¹⁸ This criterion is of utmost importance for the Lutheran reformers and means more or less that righteousness by faith would be taught pure and sound.¹⁹

After the reformation there was not much movement in the Lutherans’ view of the papacy²⁰ until Vatican I and *Pastor aeternus* – which made it even harder for Lutherans to accept the papacy. But with the more balanced view of the relationship between bishops and the pope and the general ecumenical opening taught by Vatican II, the question of the Petrine office is again as open as it was in the 16th century, according to Meyer.²¹

The Lutheran “conditional openness” to the papacy is very much at the centre of Meyer’s lecture, as is the expression “ministry of unity”²² when it comes to describing what good the pope can do for the church as a whole. The conditions the pope must fulfil are clearly seen in the Catholic-Lutheran dialogues we have had thus far. Meyer quotes the Malta Report, §66: “The office of the papacy as a visible sign of the unity of the churches was therefore not excluded insofar as it is subordinated to the primacy of the gospel ..” From the fifth Catholic-Lutheran dialogue in the US, § 28, he quotes

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 204.

¹⁶ Harding Meyer, “*Suprema auctoritas*”: *The Lutheran Approach to Primacy*, p. 16.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 17-18.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 20.

²¹ Ibid., p. 21.

²² Ibid., p. 21.

that the pope 1) should serve the gospel, 2) serve unity and 3) not subvert Christian freedom.²³

Meyer goes on²⁴ to focus on questions of the papacy's structural and juridical aspects. These questions, related to the primacy of jurisdiction, are particularly difficult for Lutherans to accept. In this area Lutherans will expect a voluntary self-limitation from the pope and an openness to cooperation.²⁵ But even this is not enough; Lutherans have even more deep-seated and theological questions to the role of the pope: that his office should be instituted by God and that under certain situations his teaching will be infallible.²⁶ Meyer tries to find out in what way it could be possible for Lutherans to accept that the pope has his role by divine right; in the sense that it in practice is necessary for the church, which could be acceptable for Lutherans, or in such a way that it questions the ecclesial status of today's Lutheran churches, which would not be acceptable.²⁷

The final problem Meyer tackles is the issue of infallibility, and he starts by bringing up examples²⁸ from the time of the reformation: What if the pope or the bishops err, by acting against God's will? The reformers often talked about ecumenical councils to sort out the disagreements, but on the other hand they admitted that even the councils could err – Melancton uses examples from the Old Testament to illustrate his point, that Israel often sinned against God. According to Meyer, Lutherans agree with Catholics²⁹ that “ecclesia non potest errare”, but they see this guarantee somehow different from the Catholics. Catholics believe that the Magisterium, all the world's bishops with the pope as their head, can not err when they define doctrinal matters, Lutherans place this assurance with the whole people of God.

The Lutheran reformation itself is an example of this safety device, that the whole people of God had to protest against the false teaching of the Magisterium, and Lutherans need the same assurance today;³⁰ if the Magisterium teaches anything against the Bible/Gospel, then their decisions will have to be annulled. How this Lutheran view of the Magisterium can be resolved with the Catholic understanding remains to be seen.

At the end of the symposium about Petrine primacy in 1997, Jean-Marie Tillard summed up all the lectures and the discussion, and said something that applies to Meyers point here.

Allow me to underline the agreement here with the great principle of discernment that, at least since

²³ Ibid., p. 24.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 16-17.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 30.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 31.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln (around 1250), and Tomas Aquinas, is found throughout the West: the primacy only exists *ad aedificationem, non ad destructionem Ecclesiae*. ... this principle will inform Reformation theology, and will re-emerge at Vatican I ...

The criteria for judgment are therefore the same. But, whereas (Roman) Catholic tradition tends to apply them mainly in particular cases, to judge the authenticity of one or another decision, the value of one or another Pontificate ... the Reformation uses them to judge, at one and the same time, the forms taken by the primacy and the primacy *as such*.³¹

William Rusch's lecture at the Centro pro unione, March 2006

Several people in our class were present at the lecture of professor Rusch, where he started out by saying that his presentation was only one of several Lutheran views on the topic.³² He then went on to give a detailed description of the attitudes of the Lutherans on the Petrine office at the time of the reformation. Even if Melanchton and (particularly) Luther attacked the Papacy very strongly, this was because of the abuses, but was not in principle a rejection of the papal office. The reformers indicate that it could be possible, even good, for the church to have such a papal office of unity.

Rusch went on to say that this Lutheran (potential) openness to the papacy was retained through the centuries – at least it was regained after Vatican II, after the problems created by Vatican I and the new Marian dogmas. After the Second Vatican Council the question of the papacy was discussed in several Catholic-Lutheran dialogues, and Rusch quoted from § 66 of the Malta report (see earlier in my paper).

Dialogues in the US have also dealt with this issue quite thoroughly and Rusch mentioned dialogue round V, *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church*, 1973 and VI, *Teaching Authority & Infallibility in the Church*, 1978. He quoted from the document published after round VI, where the Catholics speak about the papacy as an obstacle: “*Aware as the Catholic church is that the papacy remains to this day for many Christians one of the greatest obstacles on the road to unity of the churches, it nevertheless hopes that as it is structurally renewed in the light of Holy Scripture and the tradition, it may more and more in the future provide an important service to unity.*” And the Lutheran members of the dialogue also say: “*the possibility begins to emerge that the Petrine office of the Bishop of Rome also need not be excluded by Lutherans as a visible sign of the unity of the church as a whole, insofar as [this office] is subordinated to the primacy of the gospel.*”

The new proposals in professor Rusch’s lecture came when he started to look at how we in practice can come closer to a resolution of this difficult issue. He spoke about the concept **differentiated consensus**, which has been used in ecumenical dialogues the last few years, after which he introduced a newer concept, that possibly can help us deal with the problems of the Petrine office.

³¹ Tillard, *The Ecumenical Kairos and the Primacy*, p. 187.

³² What I write here is based on my own notes from the lecture.

The new concept is **differentiated participation**, and it suggests how churches can live together even though not all differences and disagreements have yet been dealt with.

Rusch suggested, for example, that Lutherans should abstain from all polemics against the pope (of the kind that belongs to the reformation period) and they should admit their lack of a universal and unifying leader. What the Catholics should do to accomplish this unifying practice he left up to them to decide. First however, the two churches need to have serious dialogues about the pope's place in the universal church, secondly, based upon achieved agreements, they should have to find structures that gradually could lead to the development of a more common life.

Rusch ended his lecture with the famous quote from Cardinal Ratzinger from 1976, that Catholics dialoguing with the Orthodox about the papacy should not demand from the Orthodox more than what they agreed on the first 1000 years. Catholics would have to show a similar generosity towards the Lutherans, Rusch said, "but only hard work and the guidance of the Holy Spirit could lead the two churches to a resolution of this difficult issue."

CONCLUSION

My conclusion is limited to five short observations:

- The issue of the Petrine office has been considered a very difficult problem in the Catholic-Lutheran dialogues.
- Lutherans have not quite ruled out the possibility of the Petrine office – even though they at one point called the pope the anti-Christ. Some Lutherans see the need of a unifying office in the church, though they are not really sure this office should be set up.
- There still seems to be two very important questions/problems between Lutherans and Catholics when they talk about this issue: a) Is the Petrine office necessary for the church and b) how should it be exercised?
- I have noticed a certain imbalance in this dialogue; the Lutherans seem to need to change a lot to accept the papacy, while for Catholics it is more a matter of presenting the papacy in a more open way.
- There is a certain openness among some Lutherans to accept the Petrine office, yet after the last 30-40 years of dialogue, this potential solution has remained just that; potential. And it is really very hard to say if or when Lutherans and Catholics will come closer to an agreement on the Petrine office.

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