THE IMAGE OF THE CHURCH IN MARTIN LUTHER'S THEOLOGY – AN ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE

Wolfgang WÜNSCH*

Abstract: This essay seeks to throw light on central statements about “the church” by Martin Luther, interpreting these statements in terms of Orthodox ecclesiology. This project is motivated by a firm commitment to the Christian faith, opposing any mere half-truths or superstitious claims. It takes issue with modernity’s tendency to relativize truth, especially in the context of pluralist theories of religion. This essay thus rejects the relativizing understanding of truth, affirming instead the notion of God as confessed by the Church. From this vantage point, the core claims defining Martin Luther’s understanding of “church” are laid out. Here the major emphasis is on his “The Councils and the Church” (1539),¹ “Papacy at Rome. An answer to the celebrated romanist at Leipzig” (1520),² his Lenten homilies (Invocavit, from 9 to 16 March, 1522),³ and his famous homily on the consecration of the palace chapel at Torgau (5 October, 1544)⁴. Special attention is paid to Luther’s

* PhD Candidate, Rev., Faculty of Theology, “1 Decembrie 1918” University, Alba Iulia, Romania; PhD (Theology, Humboldt University Berlin, Germany); Dean of Sebeș district of The Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession in Romania.

¹ Martin LUTHER, “Von den Konziliis und Kirchen” (here in after: LUTHER, *Konziliis*), in: id., *Studienausgabe.*, Hans-Ulrich Delius (ed.), vol. 5, Leipzig, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1992.

² Martin LUTHER, “Vom Papsttum zu Rom wider den hochberühmten Romanisten zu Leipzig” (here in after: LUTHER, *Papsttum*) in: Martin LUTHER. *Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 3, Karin Bornkamm/ Gerhard Ebeling (eds.), Frankfurt/Main, Insel Verlag, 1982.

³ Martin LUTHER, Die Invokavitpredigten (Eight Sermons at Wittenberg 1522), esp.: Martin LUTHER, “Von Byldtnysen” [Concerning Images] (here in after: LUTHER, *Byldtnysen*), in: IDEM., *Studienausgabe*, vol. 2, Berlin, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1982.

⁴ Martin LUTHER, “Einweihungspredigt über das Evangelium am siebenzehnten

distinction between a visible and an invisible church, to his ideas about a theology of the image and to the latter's impact on the design of houses of worship. A final section places these results into the perspective of the Orthodox Tradition, thus developing a profounder understanding of the Church.

Keywords: *Martin Luther, visible and invisible Church, picture, church interior, Holy cross, ecclesiology*

The Church has never accepted half-truths or superstitious notions. As Christians, we confess Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn 14:6). We confess Him as our Lord, not only “to some extent”, or “as much as we can”, but from all our heart, with all our soul and with all our power (Dt 6:4). We can never turn away from Him, because we know that He has the words of eternal life. Our religion is not a game. Had it offered nothing beyond empty words, our forefathers would not have been able, when exposed to deportation camps, prisons and communist gulags, to derive from their faith the strength needed in those places, both for living and dying. Many of those forefathers, after all, had found that strength precisely in their Christian faith. In order for that faith to stand fast, it had to be free from any kinds of superstition or half-truth.

Therefore a Christian will not be able to agree with the message about the irremediable vagueness of man's knowledge about God and about the resulting “equal value” of the different religions. Of course one can study other religions with a certain amount of empathy. But that is not sufficient to secure any knowledge about their core. Even more, Christianity claims that Jesus Christ has re-opened humans' access to God, which had been barred by sin. The Greek language describes the mystery of baptism as (φωτισμός) – illumination. Here the one baptized is integrated into the Church as the body of Christ.

Luther himself saw the Reformation as an awakening from the slumber that had been induced by empty words and half-truths. Chiming in with the great movement of Humanism, he saw the Reformation as a

Sonntage nach Trinitatis. Bei der Einweihung der Schloßkirche zu Torgau gehalten”, (here in after: LUTHER, *Einweihungspredigt*) in: id., *Vermischte Predigten*, vol. 2, Joh. Georg Plochmann (ed.), Erlangen, Verlag Carl Heyder, 1828, p. 239-262.

return to the pure springs of salvation. He taught that one should no longer water from the sea, from rivers, but from the pure sources up in the mountains, where pristine purity is still available. He develops this idea in his “The Councils and the Church” (1539)⁵, underscoring the significance of the Holy Scriptures (“sola scriptura”)⁶. Remarkably, his reason for this Scripture principle invokes various letters by Blessed Augustin of Hippo.⁷ In those letters, Augustin discusses issues which have still maintained their relevance today, as for example the frequency of Holy Communion or the rule of fasting from food on Maundy Thursday, when the service takes place only in the evening. In all such questions, the decisive authority is the Holy Scripture and the Tradition, insofar as it agrees with the whole *oikumene*, as established by the Apostles and by the ecumenical councils. Examples discussed here concern the yearly celebration of the suffering, resurrection and ascension of our Lord, the descent of the Holy Spirit as well as all the other observances of the universal Church. All of this, of course, leaves space for local solutions which allow for some diversity. Reform or Reformation in such a context means a return to Holy Scripture as foundational norm. It looks for renovation as based on Scripture. It intends a return to: a) the living God and His word, classified by Luther among the essentials, rather than among mere externalities of the Christian faith, the holy mysteries; b) of baptism and c) of the Altar, i.e. Holy Communion d) the public use of the two keys, cf. Mt18:18, e) the consecration and calling of the servants of the church, i.e. the office of the church. Here Luther offers an in depth discussion of marriage for priests, which, as he makes clear, cannot be prohibited by Rome. Furthermore, he adds f) prayer, and here in particular also public worship, and, last but not least, g) the salvific role of the holy cross,

⁵ LUTHER, *Konziliis*, p 448-617.

⁶ LUTHER, *Konziliis*, p.469.

⁷ Augustin of HIPPO, “Epistulae 54,2,2 ad Ianuarium”; MPL 33, p.200f = CSEL 34 II, p.160; IBIDEM, “Epistulae 55,19,35”; MPL 33, p.221 = CSEL 34 II, p.209f.; cf. Martin LUTHER, “Grund und Ursach aller Artikel, so durch römische Bulle unrechtlich verdammt sind“, in: Martin LUTHER, *Studienausgabe*, vol. 2, Berlin, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1982, p. 310-404, esp. p.319 with note 83, in regard i.a. to Augustin of HIPPO, “Epistulae 82, 1, 3”; MPL 33, p.277 = CSEL34 II, 354, p.4-15.

which signals the presence of a church building⁸.

An important element of Luther's view of the Church is also his distinction of a visible and an invisible church, both of which are inseparably connected but must nevertheless be understood apart from each other:

“St. Paul says (Col 3:3) ‘Our life is not on earth, but hid with Christ in God.’ For if the Church were a bodily assembly, you could tell by looking at the body whether any one were Christian, Turk or Jew; just as you can tell by the body whether a person is a man, woman or child, or whether he is white or black. Again, I can tell whether one is gathered in temporal assembly with others in Leipzig, Wittenberg, or elsewhere; but I cannot tell at all whether he is a believer or not. Whosoever would not go astray should, therefore, hold fast to this, that the Church is a spiritual assembly of souls, in one faith, and that no one is reckoned a Christian for his body's sake; in order that he may know that the true, real, right, essential Church is a spiritual thing, and not anything external or outward, by whatever name it may be called. For one who is not a Christian may have all those other things, and they will never make him a Christian without true faith, which alone makes Christians.”⁹

Here the mystery consists in the fact that the true faith is awakened by means of external objects: word, mysteries of baptism and altar, confession, the servants of the church, the office of the church, prayer and the praise of god, the carrying of one's cross.

These means of salvation, according to Luther, were entrusted to the church in order to stimulate the human heart. For in them Christ Himself is present. By using such means, the church allows Christ Himself to work His graceful healing in man, according to His promise that He will stay with the church until the end of the world. Reform, Reformation thus means a re-orientation exclusively to Christ, and the willingness to allow Him to renew the church and to lead it back to its true calling. All of this, of course, also is to hold for Protestant theology as a whole.

Turning now to the teaching about the saints and to the theology

⁸ LUTHER, *Konziliis*, p. 448 - 617, esp. p. 590 – 617.

⁹ LUTHER, *Papsttum*, p. 23f.

of images, as affirmed by Luther and the other Reformation theologians, it is necessary to consider a historical setting in which the saints had degenerated into a sort of emergency help. They would be called upon in all kinds of difficulties, but this happened in a way which obfuscated to a certain extent their inner link with Christ and His church¹⁰. It was this misuse of the veneration of the saints which quite legitimately raised worries about a new pagan idolatry in Luther and those of kindred spirit¹¹. This is why his comments on issues like the theology of images must be considered as merely preliminary. These comments were made in response to iconoclasm incidents during his stay on the Wartburg during Lent of 1522, and thus to events which made it necessary for him to travel to Wittenberg in order to calm things down. These events are discussed in the eight Lenten homilies which Luther delivered in the week after Invocavit Sunday, from 9 to 16 March 1522 in Wittenberg. For our subject today, the homily on Wednesday, 11 March on the subject of images is most important¹². Even though Luther here refers to the iconoclasms of the old church¹³, he obviously does not know the theology of images as proclaimed by the Church. Nevertheless, he does touch on issues which also surface in Father Dumitru Stăniloae's justification of icon veneration.¹⁴ Luther here takes issue with the way in which the enemies of images invoke the prohibition of image worship in the Old Testament: Against such opponents, he recalls the altars which Noah (Gn 8:20), Abraham (Gn 12:7; 13:18), and Jakob (Gn 33:20) had erected to the honor of God,¹⁵ as well as the raising of the serpent by

¹⁰ Cf. "Augsburgische Konfession", Art. XXI: Vom Dienst der Heiligen (De cultu sanctorum), in: *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche. Herausgegeben im Gedenkjahr der Augsburgischen Konfession*, rev. ed., Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956, p.83b-83c; "Apologie der Konfession, Art. XXI: De Invocatione Sanctorum (Vom Anrufen der Heiligen)", in: *IBIDEM*, p.316-326.

¹¹ Cf. Dumitru STĂNILOAE: "If one would venerate an icon in a way which differs from the veneration of Christ, he would make a kind of idol of it. *Spiritualitate și Comuniune în Liturgia Ortodoxă* (here in after: STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate*), 2nd ed., București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2004, p.106.

¹² LUTHER, *Byldtnyssen*, p. 520-538, esp. p. 541-543.

¹³ LUTHER, *Byldtnyssen*, p. 541.

¹⁴ STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate*, p. 90-134.

¹⁵ LUTHER, *Byldtnyssen*, p. 542.

Moses (Nb 21:4-9, esp. 21:9). Luther asks: “How than can you say that Moses forbade the making of images when he himself made one?”¹⁶

Luther also mentions the throne of grace (*propitiatory*, Ex 25:17-22; 37:6-9) and summarizes his position: “Here we must admit that we may have images and make images, but we must not worship them, and if they are worshipped, they should be put away and destroyed, just as King Hezekiah broke in pieces the bronze serpent erected by Moses [2 K 18:4].”¹⁷ One can have images, but one should refrain from falling for pagan idolatry by worshipping them. Beyond that, Luther recommends considerate lenience in view of those who (still) have images and use them. There is no indication of any awareness of the link between religious images and the incarnation of God. The reason is that Luther is here confronting radical iconoclasts. He had never encountered any clear and balanced theological account of religious images.

In what concerns Luther’s views about church building and church architecture, we can refer to his famous homily of the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, on 5 October 1544, delivered at the occasion of the consecration of the palace chapel in Torgau.¹⁸ Here he starts out with emphasising that the church must be blessed and consecrated in order that “our LORD Himself may speak to us through His holy word, so that we in turn can speak to him through our prayer and praise”¹⁹. Luther takes up Lk 14:1-11, the passage about the healing of a man with dropsy on Sabbath. Christ criticizes a merely self-interested way of dealing with Holy Scripture: Everyone will surely save his own ox, if it has fallen into a well, despite its being a feast day. But a sick human being, so the rulers and Pharisees decree, cannot be healed. Luther cites this incident in order to support his own claim that a correct exegesis of Scripture imposes liberating oneself of such misguided passions.²⁰

¹⁶ LUTHER, *Byldtnyssen*, S. 542.

¹⁷ LUTHER, *Byldtnyssen*, p. 542. Jn 3:14f is important in this context, because here the relation between the serpent and Christ is restored: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

¹⁸ LUTHER, *Einweihungspredigt*, p. 239-262.

¹⁹ LUTHER, *Einweihungspredigt*, p. 239. Translation of quotations from this homily by the translator of this essay.

²⁰ STĂNILAOE, *Spiritualitate*, p. 99.

He then turns to the requirement, at every hour and in every place, to give God the honor. He concedes that the prayer of each individual is important, and supports this fact by reference to Abraham (cf. Gn 18:23ff.) praying even for the people of Sodom and the neighboring cities.²¹ But, as Luther insists, such private prayer and attention to the word of God is not the same as praying and listening with others. For “prayer is never so powerful and strong, as when the whole crowd is of one mind in praying together.”²² This very thought was also carefully developed and emphasized by Father Dumitru Stăniloae in his book “*Spiritualitate și Comuniune în Liturgia Ortodoxă*”.²³ To be sure, Christ Himself has promised to be present wherever two or three are assembled in His name in oneness of mind (cf. Mt 18:20), and that He will fulfill their wish. Here, as Luther also makes clear, asking for something in the name of Christ is not the same as pursuing one’s private, egoistic interests. In fact, so he points out, the very fact that two or three come together to ask in the name of Christ for something in oneness of mind should already be considered a rich fruit, because it indicates Christ’s presence among them. In such a community, so Luther concludes, “there surely God the Father and the Holy Spirit will not remain outside, and the holy angels will not keep their distance; the devil however, and with him his hellish bands will avoid to come close to such a gathering.”²⁴ While thus conceding that time and place for such prayer can be freely chosen, Luther also insists on the importance of many, of an assembly worshiping publicly. Christian worship, after all, cannot remain limited to the hidden chamber:

“For, if everyone would do something new on his own, according to his pleasure, choosing the day, hour and place, that would not be right: rather in this thing all should be one and meet at a proper time and be prepared to listen to the word of God and to answer him all together and pray about all kinds of need, and to thank him for the blessings received. If there is no dwelling or church, this can be done on any space, under the sky, wherever there is place for all. As St. Paul prayed near the sea

²¹ LUTHER, *Einweihungspredigt*, p. 244.

²² LUTHER, *Einweihungspredigt*, p. 244.

²³ STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitate*, p. 7-20.

²⁴ LUTHER, *Einweihungspredigt*, S. 244.

at Philippis, Acts 16:15²⁵ and at Troada, Acts 20:16²⁶ in a hall. But all of this ought to happen as a proper, honest assembly; whenever there is no place or dwelling readily available, one should not meet in secrecy, in order to hide from view, as the Anabaptists do... ”²⁷

Luther here invokes *Ps* 42:5²⁸:

“...for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday’. Indeed that same crowd must have its own space, and its days and hours, as settled for the convenience of the listeners: This is why God has decreed and commanded that the holy sacraments were instituted as a common task of the assembly, and in a specific space where we come together to pray and to offer thanksgiving to God. Likewise, after all, the secular Lords proceed, whenever something concerns the whole community. Much more does this hold where God’s word must be heard.”²⁹

Thus, if the assembly of many requires the setting of certain times and places, then one these places for public worship is the Torgau palace chapel. Here it is important to see that Luther’s concept of church is much more extensive and profound than a merely pragmatic statement on the need for concrete conditions facilitating mutual agreements about when and where one should meet for worship. From the very beginning, after all, the significance of specific places for Christian church worship was recognized (cf. the ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό, Ac 2:1). Luther also underscores that the Christian worship is importantly designed to help participants to notice their neighbors and to recognize them as “created after the image of God, and thus, according to God’s command, as precious for one another and to be loved, as stated by Mt 22:39: ‘Thou should love thy neighbor as thyself.’”³⁰ Accordingly, the Divine command that one should sanctify holy feast days is rightly understood only if one keeps in mind “that one ought to hear the word of God and learn how one should

²⁵ Ac 16:13.

²⁶ Ac 20:8.

²⁷ LUTHER, *Einweihungspredigt*, p. 242f.

²⁸ KING JAMES BIBLE: Ps 42:4.

²⁹ LUTHER, *Einweihungspredigt*., p. 243.

³⁰ LUTHER, *Einweihungspredigt*., p. 246.

keep all the other commandments both in view of God and in view of the neighbor, and how one should serve and help one another in a spirit of love.”³¹ Sanctifying holy days thus precisely does not reduce to

“sitting around idly not doing anything. Rather, first of all, one should do something that contributes to there being a holy work, which is God’s doing, namely that, first and foremost, one proclaims the word of God with integrity and in a holy way, not like those scribes and Pharisees, who distorted the command of God and turned it upside down, considering an ox or other cattle for more valuable than a human. Likewise one should make sure that others hear the word of God and learn it, and help towards making sure that it is proclaimed with, and maintained in all its purity. This is what keeping the feast day means, and what it means to consecrate or sanctify the place or church, just as we today (praised be God) consecrate this house...”³²

Preaching is thus ultimately designed to help Christians to lead their life properly, to apply the correct criteria, to rightly honor God and serve one’s neighbor:

“Therefore we are obliged to praise God and thank him, that we can hear his word in purity and integrity and maintain it, that we know how we should deal with God and the neighbor, how we should rightly worship and lead our whole life in all respects properly. And we must also with great urgency call upon God and ask Him that He may keep us on this path, so that we can remain with His word, in the right faith and truly sanctify the Sabbath.”³³

From the Orthodox perspective, several commentaries can be made. Firstly, the faith proclaimed Luther, ever since the Reformation, has provided many generations with a foundation for their life, allowing them to live and die in that faith. We should not haughtily dismiss those past generations. Many elements of that faith are shared by both Protestants and Orthodox Christians. As mentioned at the outset, Luther saw his Reformation as an awakening and a return to the pure springs of salvation. In my opinion, the generation of today confronts the task to combine their respect for their forefathers with a new receptivity for

³¹ LUTHER, *Einweihungspredigt.*, p. 248.

³² LUTHER, *Einweihungspredigt.*, p. 249.

³³ LUTHER, *Einweihungspredigt.*, p. 253.

experiences and understandings about the one holy apostolic and catholic Church, which were unavailable for Protestants in the past, but which now confront their own vision of the church with new challenges.

The main challenge here is to develop a deepened understanding of the fact that the Church is a unique, unchanging community, spanning all times and spaces. This understanding must also extend to the meaning of the incarnation of the Word of God, of the saints in the Church³⁴, of monasticism for the Church, of the dynamics of a rightly oriented spiritual life, of the likeness of man to the image of God, of the relationship between matter and spirit, as present in icons, and, last not least, to how that faith must be communicated to others. Luther was glad and proud to have left behind the disingenuous ‘mathematics’ of the Medieval Roman church. But it must be acknowledged as legitimate, even among Protestants, that today we should put the Reformation into its proper context. It must be possible to step back and identify areas in which clarification and renovation are necessary. These should be boldly implemented. I am convinced that God remains in charge and that He shows even us latecomers the way onto which He wants to guide us.³⁵

References:

1. AUGUSTIN OF HIPPO, in: Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologia cursus completus. Seria Latina*, vol. 33, Paris, 1857-66.
2. *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche. Herausgegeben im Gedenkjahr der Augsburgerischen Konfession*, 3rd rev. ed., Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956.
3. Martin LUTHER, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, Karin Bornkamm/ Gerhard Ebeling (ed.), vol. 1-5, Frankfurt/ Main, Insel Verlag, 2nd ed., 1983.
4. Martin LUTHER, *Studienausgabe*, vol. 2, Hans-Ulrich Delius (ed.), Berlin, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1982.
5. Martin LUTHER, *Studienausgabe*, vol. 5, Hans-Ulrich Delius (ed.), Leipzig, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1992.
6. Martin LUTHER, *Vermischte Predigten*, vol. 2, Joh. Georg Plochmann

³⁴ For instance, in the Lutheran Church saints are merely seen as examples of Christian life.

³⁵ Special thanks to Cornelia Hayes, who translated this paper.

(ed.), Erlangen, Verlag Carl Heyder, 1828.

7. Dumitru STANILOAE, *Spiritualitate și Comuniune în Liturgia Ortodoxă*, 2nd ed., București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2004.