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## Center of expertise for Lutheran ecumenism. A Lutheran Think Tank institute.

Personal reflections about the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg

### **Why Strasbourg?**

My affection for the Ecumenical Institute in Strasbourg dates back to 1971.

As a young editor of a Finnish Christian student newspaper, I had passionately criticized the ecumenical efforts of my own church, with youthful enthusiasm. Archbishop Martti Simojoki, who at that time was Vice President of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), had ordained me in the previous year. After reading my critical notes, he invited me to his high residence, scrutinized me with piercing eyes, and gently reprimanded me. Following an open discussion, he decided to send me to the summer seminar at the Institute in Strasbourg. Was this his way of disciplining a young critic?

At that time, I was an assistant at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Helsinki and was beginning my dissertation on modern Catholic theology, focusing on the work of Hans Küng. The tumultuous atmosphere of the late 1960s compelled me to reflect on what truly matters in the Christian faith.

The political activism of that era did not bring me satisfaction. In my view, the left-leaning orientation of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) and its General Secretary, Richard Shaull, was rather superficial and theologically lax. I felt it was crucial to address deeper challenges.

What stood out in my memory was a remark from an old Finnish communist during 1968. This independent thinker and courageous individual advised his peers with the following words: "We face hard times ahead. It is no longer sufficient to merely wave around colorful books; now we must actually read them."

My desire to understand both the world and the Christian faith intensified. Theology began to capture my interest more profoundly.

A pivotal moment in this journey was my participation in the summer seminar in Strasbourg. I felt as if the topic of the seminar was tailored just for me: "Theology and the Church between Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy." It was a cleverly chosen, timely subject. How do we take both ethics and faith seriously? How do Orthopraxy and Orthodoxy coexist?

I remain convinced that living righteously and sound doctrine both hold significant importance. If we focus solely on justice, we may lose the grace of God; conversely, if we limit ourselves only to spiritual piety, we may neglect our love for our neighbors. Orthopraxy and orthodoxy must go hand in hand. This interconnection is also a hallmark of Lutheranism; law and gospel belong together.

### **What kind of Institute?**

But let's return to Strasbourg.

I was filled with excitement about my first ecumenical trip abroad, so I took the time to learn what the Strasbourg Institute was all about. I read documents from the General Assemblies of the Lutheran World Federation as well as volumes of the *Lutherische Rundschau* from the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In the 1960s, we young theologians in Helsinki were deeply inspired by the ecumenical movement. The direction was shown by our teacher, Professor of dogmatics Seppo A. Teinonen. He held the flag up high.

Teinonen was actively involved in the ecumenical movement, particularly in fostering relationships between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches. Alongside his Danish colleague, Kristen Ejnar Skydsgaard, Teinonen served as an observer for the Lutheran World Federation at the Second Vatican Council, which made him also well-acquainted with the early developments of the Strasbourg Institute.

Little did I know that twenty years later, in the late 1980s, I would become his successor at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Helsinki.

As early as 1957, the Third Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation held in Minneapolis highlighted the significance of ecumenical research. Shortly after the assembly, a special committee for ecumenical research was established under the auspices of the LWF Executive Committee, and Skydsgaard was appointed as its first research professor in 1960.

The Fourth General Assembly of the LWF convened in Helsinki in 1963. As a young student and an officer in the Finnish army, I had the opportunity to attend the grand closing ceremony at the Helsinki Olympic Stadium.

I must admit that at under 20 years old, I was not yet interested in the doctrine of justification or other theological issues. My focus was more on my military service as an anti-tank officer and some charming girls of Helsinki. Nevertheless, it was an incredible experience to see 50,000 Lutherans filling the stadium.

It was only later that I learned that the resolution finally leading to the establishment of the Strasbourg Institute was passed in my hometown on August 10, 1963. The General Assembly established a foundation — the Lutheran Foundation for Ecumenical Research — with the task of setting up an Institute in Strasbourg. The Institute began its work on February 1, 1965.

The establishment of the Strasbourg Institute in the early 1960s was influenced by significant changes in the ecumenical movement. At the World Council of Churches' General Assembly in New Delhi in 1961, the constitution of the organization was theologically deepened in alignment with Trinitarian doctrine. Orthodox Churches became members of the Council, and the Catholic Church participated through its observers, especially in the Faith and Order work.

However, the greatest challenge for Lutherans was the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which represented a radical opening of the Roman Catholic Church towards other Christian denominations. Lutherans could not ignore the changing ecumenical climate.

Behind the foundation of the Strasbourg Institute were influential figures in Lutheran ecumenism, particularly Prof. Skydsgaard and the Bavarian Bishop Hermann Dietzfelbinger. Along with other supporters, they were convinced that the Lutheran churches and the Lutheran World Federation needed an independent and critical research institute dedicated to addressing ecumenical questions related to faith and church order.

According to the statutes, the Institute's mission is “to conduct appropriate and critical theological research, both historical and systematic, in areas where Christian churches are divided over matters of doctrine and church order, and where theological controversies exist.”

Interestingly, these statutes indicate that the research focus appears to be on areas of doctrinal differences and theological disputes among Christian churches. It seems that there was a greater emphasis on what divides the churches rather than on their commonalities. As we today move “from conflict to communion,” I would suggest that if the Institute were being established now, there would likely be more emphasis on what unites Christians, despite their differing perspectives.

In 2013, when the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity published its document *From Conflict to Communion*, the most important imperative diverged significantly from the spirit of the founding document of the Institute. It reads:

“Catholics and Lutherans should always begin from the perspective of unity and not from the point of view of division in order to strengthen what is held in common, even

though the differences are more easily seen and experienced.” The Institute contributed a lot to this change of perspectives.

However, in 1965, the focus on doctrinal differences was not indicative of hostility between churches. Instead, it aimed to achieve a true understanding of the doctrines and ecclesial practices of other traditions. "Critical theological research" encompasses studies of both other churches and one's own. Only through critical engagement can theological research eliminate prejudices and misunderstandings, providing an accurate portrayal of church relations. Such critical inquiry also prevents excessive complacency.

Genuine ecumenism can only grow if we are open and honest with each other and with ourselves. I believe that this spirit of critical inquiry is crucial also in the current ecumenical landscape.

Moreover, I maintain that an independent and autonomous research institute is — and can be — a tremendous asset to the Lutheran World Federation as a whole and to its member churches. Over the decades, the Strasbourg Institute has shouldered the responsibility of laying the groundwork for ecumenical relations, consistently striving to ensure that the unity of the churches remains a central goal.

Basic ecumenical concepts such as “differentiated consensus” and “unity in reconciled diversity” were developed in the Institute, mainly by its research professor Harding Meyer. The formula “unity in diversity” did not simply fall from heaven, rather there was serious theological work behind it, and a conflict with the World Council of Churches’ concept of “organic unity,” a conflict between the two great ecumenists Harding Meyer und Lukas Vischer. “Unity in reconciled diversity” has become part of the LWF’s self-understanding of its ecumenical work, which remains valid to this day.

### **Back to September 1971**

When I set off for Strasbourg in September 1971, I felt I was heading to the very heart of Lutheran ecumenism. A few days before the seminar began, I flew on a beautiful Finnair Caravelle airplane from Helsinki to Frankfurt, where I first visited a friend of my father, Professor Heinrich Bornkamm, in Heidelberg. From there, I continued my journey to Strasbourg.

On the evening of September 13, 1971, I found myself at Rue Gustave Klotz number 8, standing before the door of a house that would become familiar to me. We were about 70 young students from around the world, representing various Christian denominations, with most of us being Lutherans, including e.g. Rudolf Hinz, who would later be elected head of the World Service department of the Lutheran World Federation.

We were warmly welcomed by the Institute's first director, Vilmos Vajta, a highly respected and gracious man known for his books and articles, with a background in Hungary. The institute's research professors — Günther Gassmann, Marc Lienhard, and Harding Meyer — were prominent figures in the field, making it a privilege to hear from them all.

The atmosphere was one of hospitality and friendliness. We lived in the Catholic dormitory, where prayers were held in the chapel, and Holy Communion was celebrated. Even then, it was painful for us to realize that we could not all partake in the sacrament of the altar together.

The mornings were filled with theological insights, featuring lectures from noted ecumenical leaders. Keynote speakers included Marc Lienhard, H. von Mallinckrodt, Ambroise Monod, Gerhard Pedersen, Georg Strecker, George Tavard, C. A. van Peursen, and Damaskinos Papandreou.

At the opening session, Vilmos Vajta emphasized that in ecumenical theology, it is not sufficient to merely read books; rather, engaging with diverse perspectives and actively listening to one another is becoming increasingly vital. Both teaching and dialogue are essential.

In genuine dialogue, participants seek truth without evading difficult issues or pursuing superficial fellowship at the expense of their doctrinal beliefs. The goal of dialogue is to listen to one another, address doctrinal differences thoughtfully, overcome misunderstandings, and clarify the fundamental issues at hand. Participants take their confessional heritage seriously while remaining open to critically re-evaluating it. Ultimately, the aim is to collaborate toward a fuller realization of the unity of the Church of Christ.

### **Flaming enthusiasm**

I was so enthusiastic about the outcomes of the seminar that upon my return home, I wrote an extensive article for the *Finnish Theological Journal*, where I presented the seminar papers and even translated the reports of the working groups into Finnish. In retrospect, the rather hastily written reports may not have warranted 25 pages. However, the length of my article reflects the profound impact that my first contact with the Institute had on me.

I wonder if my excitement from the seminar contributed to an unfortunate incident one morning, during breakfast, when I accidentally cut my left hand deeply with a sharp table knife while trying to slice open a delicious, fresh roll. The knife went too deep, and there was quite a bit of blood. Fortunately, the friendly staff at the Institute took me

to the hospital to treat the wound. Even today, the scar on my finger serves as a reminder of the importance of ecumenical commitment! I had literally spilled my own blood on the altar of ecumenism in Strasbourg.

A significant part of the seminar program included a tour of the beautiful Alsace countryside and the Vosges mountains. One visit that left an indelible impression on me was to the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar. I often find myself recalling the Isenheim Altarpiece painted by Matthias Grünewald, which depicts the crucified Christ with John the Baptist pointing to Him. John the Baptist's finger, which points toward the suffering Christ, is unnaturally long, and at his feet, Grünewald has inscribed the words of the Gospel: "Illum oportet crescere, me autem minui" (John 3:30). These words have become a guiding motto for me, shaping my understanding of my ministry as a servant of Christ. We are not here for ourselves; "it is about giving Christ space within us and among us".

In retrospect, I am not surprised by the significant impact that the legendary summer seminars at the Strasbourg Institute have had and will continue to have in the future.

For more than 50 years, three elements marked these seminars, firstly, participants from all over the world and different churches, secondly, excellent speakers, so that participants did not talk only *about* other churches, rather *with* theologians who represented their churches well, and thirdly, excursions into the very rich cultural environment of Strasbourg.

From the very beginning, the management of the Institute recognized the importance of providing young people with a forum that enables them to meet other Christians and deepen their own reflections. We must be able to blend friendship with thought, as well as life with theology.

### **Lifelong impact**

I was inspired by the idea of taking on ecumenical responsibility at the Strasbourg Institute, and its impact has lasted a lifetime. Following my first seminar experience, I made several visits to the Institute, sometimes during my study trips, attending various seminars in both this building and in Klingenthal village. I even had the pleasure of showing my wife the Institute on a few occasions. As father of my own family I'm happy and proud, that my daughter Laura Huovinen, a pastor in our church, has visited the summer seminar in this house.

Since the early 1990s, Finns have played a significant role in the work of the Institute founded in Helsinki.

My university teacher, Juhani Forsberg, served on the Board of Trustees from 1990 to 1997, and the current Professor of Ecumenics at the University of Helsinki, Risto Saarinen, was a research professor from 1994 to 2000.

I had my own opportunity to take on responsibility from 1997 to 2003 when I served as chair of the Board of Trustees. At our very first meeting, I was struck by the historical continuity, as Marc Lienhard—who later became President of the Lutheran Church of Alsace and Lorraine—was also a member of the Board. The former Bishop of Bavaria, Johannes Hanselmann, who previously served as President of the Lutheran World Federation, was also present.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria, along with other German Lutheran churches, has always been incredibly important throughout the history of the Institute. I have learned a great deal from my fellow Board members; Turid Karlsen Seim from Norway, Eric Gritsch from the USA, and Ragnar Persenius from Sweden have all made a lasting impression on me.

Thanks to the Board of Trustees, I was privileged to observe the high-quality work carried out by the Institute's professors from an insider's perspective. It has been a tremendous honor to get to know them better: Michael Root, Theodor Dieter, André Birmele, Elisabeth Parmentier, Ola Tjorhom, Mickey Mattox, and Ken Appold. The contributions of André and Elisabeth as representatives of Strasbourg University have been vital for the Institute.

### **Joint Declaration on Justification**

I especially appreciated the talents of Mike Root and Theo Dieter when I had the privilege of being involved in the final editing of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.

The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* is arguably the most significant achievement that the Strasbourg Institute has helped to bring into being. It is no exaggeration to claim that this document could not have been developed without the ingenious ecumenical creativity of Harding Meyer. I'm also sure, that the lengthy and very conflicting process leading up to the signing of JDDJ would not have achieved the desired result without the continuous and dedicated efforts of the Strasbourg Institute.

The *Joint Declaration*, adopted and signed in 1999, stands as a significant milestone in the history of ecumenism. To this day, it is the only officially signed document between the Roman Catholic Church and a Western church. During the Reformation, disagreements over the doctrine of justification led to mutual doctrinal condemnations and ultimately resulted in a split between the churches.

For me, it was a tremendous gift to witness the final steps in the creation of the declaration. The document was nearly complete when the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome expressed critical concerns regarding the understanding of the human passivity in receiving grace (*mere passive*) and of sin and concupiscence (*totus iustus* and *totus peccator*).

In order to cope with the Roman concerns, a supplementary explanation of sin and concupiscence needed to be developed swiftly. If I recall correctly, the decisive work on the Lutheran side was undertaken by bishop Hanselman and Prof. Joachim Track in a personal encounter with Cardinal Ratzinger, and in the following time by Joachim Track and Theo Dieter in constant dialogue with Ratzinger, mainly by fax and phone.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Institute again played a crucial role, with truth and love reinforcing one another.

### **Theo Dieter**

In this context, I would like to express my appreciation for Prof. Dieter, the former Director of the Institute and a dear friend. He embodies a highly learned expert in both theology and philosophy, a committed Lutheran, a broadly educated ecumenicist, and an impassioned thinker. Theo never settles for superficial or simplistic solutions, whether in theology or church politics. He is always willing to work hard to promote unity and its expression. Since 1994, Theo has selflessly served the Ecumenical Institute in Strasbourg, benefiting both the Lutheran World Federation and the broader ecumenical movement.

One indication of Theo's dedication is that his texts often arrive at the last moment — and sometimes even later—but they are always grounded in solid foundations. He would certainly not subscribe to the saying that we Finns are sometimes known to utter: “There are no perfect people — or there are very few of us.”

While I may not be qualified to assess all the theological sub-disciplines encompassed by Theo's encyclopedic knowledge, I can confidently assert that his understanding of Luther has played, and continues to play, a crucial role in Lutheran-Catholic dialogue commissions. As someone who has observed from the sidelines, I can also assure you that Theo's contributions were essential during the preparation and final stages of the *Joint Declaration on Justification*, despite the fact that he did not always receive the public recognition he truly deserved amid the tensions of church politics, especially in Germany.

Nevertheless, in 2017, Theo Dieter received a honorary doctorate from the Catholic faculty of Erfurt, where Luther studied and taught theology, a second honorary



doctorate from the University of Leuven (Belgium), which was among the first to condemn Luther's teachings, and finally the Ratzinger Price.

## **Love and truth**

Finally, allow me to reflect briefly on what was in the second half of the 20th century the basis for the churches in finding each other again. Let me propose that both practical and doctrinal reasons played a crucial role in this process of finding a common ground.

The shared sufferings of the Second World War inspired a new solidarity among churches. People from different countries and regions came closer together. We learned to know other Christians, to help them, and to pray together. Through missionary work and international aid we encountered previously unknown individuals who we recognized as sisters and brothers. For us Lutherans, the World Service Department of the Lutheran World Federation has played a crucial role in bringing churches together through its relief efforts. I call this approach an "ecumenism of love and encounter."

In addition to the ecumenism of love, there is also a need for an ecumenism of truth. In the last 60 years, there have been many bilateral and multilateral doctrinal discussions around the world. Today in this house we can be grateful for the reconciliation between Mennonites and Lutherans, as well as for the growing unity between Lutherans and Catholics.

Personally I have been particularly impressed how the Catholic chair of the first Lutheran-Roman Catholic commission, Professor Walter Kasper—then only 33 years old and later a Cardinal for Ecumenism—understood his role. Kasper's motto is *veritatem in caritate*, meaning "truth in love."

According to Kasper, love is intrinsically linked to truth; they are not separate entities but rather mutually illuminating and essential to one another. Truth serves as the light that gives meaning to love, while love embodies truth in action. Authentic love must be grounded in truth, and a true understanding of truth is realized through love.

The first document produced by the Lutheran-Catholic commission was the so-called Malta Document in 1972, titled *The Gospel and the Church*, clear and in a good sense simple, which provided guidance for further dialogue. This early document remains a significant ecumenical effort to explore various aspects of the Church in light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Even at that time, a first consensus was achieved regarding the gospel and the doctrine of Justification.

The representatives of both churches recognized the complexity of the issue of justification. In the following decades, the professors at the Strasbourg Institute focused on addressing the doctrinal questions that had previously divided the churches. In

subsequent bilateral commissions, Strasbourg played a strong role, publishing new documents on the Eucharist, Ministry, and other ecumenical topics. In 1994, the document *Church and Justification* was already preparing the way for the forthcoming Declaration on Justification.

In all other Lutheran-Catholic dialogues and processes, the role of the Institute and its research professors has been central. May I be so bold as to claim that, from the Lutheran perspective, their work has been decisive.

### **Responsibility for the Content of Faith**

Last but not least, the Lutheran churches bear a special responsibility for the doctrinal content of the Christian faith due to their own history. On one hand, we need to express the gospel in simple, accessible language; on the other hand, we must muster all our resources to explore the deeper mysteries of the faith.

Many people remember Martin Luther's teaching that the gospel should be preached in such a way that even a seven-year-old child can understand it. Yet, later, when Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon engaged in theological discussions and enjoyed some beer in the cellar of Wittenberg Castle, they spoke such profound and sophisticated truths that even God in heaven was said to be amazed.

The Lutheran churches can be grateful for the independent work of the Institute of Strasbourg. We will continue to rely on its expertise in the years ahead. The rapprochement of the churches cannot occur solely through shared actions; it also requires a deepening of our common faith. This is why persistent ecumenical-theological work is essential.