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Priesthood of All Believers and Church Ministry in Lutheranism

Abstract: The article presents a Lutheran approach to the issues of priesthood of all believers and church ministry. It does so in three steps. In the first part, it reaches into the theological legacy of Martin Luther and his writings. In the second part, it analyzes the Lutheran confessional writings collected in *The Book of Concord*. In the third part, it refers to the contemporary Lutheran discussion in the forum of the Lutheran World Federation and the resulting documents.

Keywords: priesthood of all believers, church ministry, Lutheranism

We will look at the issue of the priesthood of all believers and church ministry in Lutheranism in three areas of reference. In the first part, we will look at the theology of Martin Luther, in the second, we will reach for the confessional books of Lutheranism, that is, *The Book of Concord*, and in the third we will deal with the studies on this issue that have been prepared over the last 30 years by the largest international organization associating Lutheran churches, namely, the Lutheran World Federation.

1. The theology of Martin Luther

The starting point for our considerations will be the question of the priesthood of all believers. Its formulation comes from the relatively

early writings of the Reformer. It was first discussed in *A Treatise on the New Testament, That Is, the Holy Mass* of 1520:

Thus it becomes clear that it is not the priest alone who offers the sacrifice of the mass; it is this faith which each one has for himself. This is the true priestly office, through which Christ is offered as a sacrifice to God, an office which the priest, with the outward ceremonies of the mass, simply represents. Each and all are, therefore, equally spiritual priests before God [...] For all those who have the faith that Christ is a priest for them in heaven before God, and who lay on him their prayers and praise, their need and their whole selves, presenting them through him, not doubting that he does this very thing, and offers himself for them – these people take the sacrament and testament, outwardly or spiritually, as a token of all this, and do not doubt that all sin is there forgiven, that God has become their gracious Father, and that everlasting life is prepared for them. All such, then, wherever they may be, are true priests. They truly observe the mass aright and also obtain by it what they desire. For faith must do everything. Faith alone is the true priestly office. It permits no one else to take its place. Therefore all Christian men are priests, all women priestesses, be they young or old, master or servant, mistress or maid, learned or unlearned. Here there is no difference, unless faith be unequal.¹

In a similar spirit, Luther spoke in the same year in his work *The Freedom of a Christian*, writing about the effects of faith:

Now just as Christ by his birthright obtained these two prerogatives, so he imparts them to and shares them with everyone who believes in him [...]. Hence all of us who believe in Christ are priests and kings in Christ, as I Pet. 2[:9] says; “You are a chosen race, God’s own people, a royal priesthood, a priestly kingdom, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” The nature of this priesthood and kingship is something like this: [...] for as priests we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things.²

¹ M. LUTHER: *A Treatise on the New Testament, That Is, the Holy Mass*. Trans. J. J. SCHINDEL. Vol. 35 of *Luther’s Works*. Eds. J. PELIKAN, H. T. LEHMANN. Philadelphia 1960, pp. 100–110.

² M. LUTHER: *The Freedom of a Christian*. Trans. W. A. LAMBERT, revised by H. J. GRIMM. Vol. 31 of *Luther’s Works*. Eds. J. PELIKAN, H. T. LEHMANN. Philadelphia 1960, pp. 354–355.

In both quoted statements, the universal priesthood of all believers is rooted in faith.

This view is supplemented by a fragment considered to be classic in the context of the common priesthood, contained in one of the so-called programmatic writings from 1520, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*. In it, Luther begins by tearing down the three walls with which the papacy secured its power:

The Romanists have very cleverly built three walls around themselves. Hitherto they have protected themselves by these walls in such a way that no one has been able to reform them. As a result, the whole of Christendom has fallen abominably. In the first place, when pressed by the temporal power they have made decrees and declared that the temporal power had no jurisdiction over them, but that, on the contrary, the spiritual power is above the temporal. In the second place, when the attempt is made to reprove them with the Scriptures, they raise the objection that only the pope may interpret the Scriptures. In the third place, if threatened with a council, their story is that no one may summon a council but the pope.³

The Reformer uses the doctrine of the common priesthood to break down the first of the three aforementioned walls:

It is pure invention that pope, bishop, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate. This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need be intimidated by it, and for this reason: all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. Paul says in I Corinthians 12[:12–13] that we are all one body, yet every member has its own work by which it serves the others. This is because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people.⁴

³ M. LUTHER: *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*. Trans. Ch. M. JACOBS. Vol. 44 of *Luther's Works*. Eds. J. PELIKAN, H. T. LEHMANN. Philadelphia 1960, p. 126.

⁴ M. LUTHER: *To the Christian Nobility...*, p. 127.

In this fragment, we can see that Luther connects priestly dignity not only with faith, but also with baptism.

Baptism and faith are therefore two points of reference for the universal priesthood in the Reformer's reflections. The universal priesthood makes Christians equal before God, regardless of age or gender, which is confirmed by the words of the Reformer from the *A Treatise on the New Testament* quoted above: "Therefore all Christian men are priests, all women priestesses, be they young or old, master or servant, mistress or maid, learned or unlearned."⁵ It also abolishes the medieval divisions into the clerical and secular states. However, this teaching is not the foundation of the egoistic individualism of Christians, who, drawing on the dignity granted to them, consider themselves self-sufficient and do not look back to the church to which they belong. The common priesthood is an obligation that strengthens the bonds between believers, because the priestly *communio* has not only a vertical dimension – communion with Christ, who gives Christians his dignity, but also a horizontal dimension, binding those who have received this dignity. It is no coincidence that in Luther's statements on the common priesthood in the cited writings, references to the place of Christians in the church were placed immediately next to the definition of what this priesthood is.

This is perfectly visible in the tasks assigned to priests by the Reformer. In the fragment of the work *The Freedom of a Christian* quoted above, it was stated that it entitles one to stand before God and intercede in prayer for others.⁶ In the work *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation...*, the right to baptize and grant absolution is associated with the common priesthood.⁷ Luther summed up this issue in a work referring to the issue of the established servants of the church under the title *Concerning Ministry* from 1523, formulating seven rights belonging to priests: 1) preaching the Word of God, 2) baptizing, 3) administering the Lord's Supper, 4) administering the power of the keys, 5) intercessory prayer for others, 6) offering oneself as a sacrifice to God, and 7) deciding and judging on doctrine and spirit.⁸ This last aspect is also expressed already in the title of another letter from 1523: *That the Christian Assembly or Congregation has*

⁵ M. LUTHER: *A Treatise on the New Testament...*, p. 101.

⁶ M. LUTHER: *The Freedom of a Christian...*, p. 355.

⁷ M. LUTHER: *To the Christian Nobility...*, p. 128.

⁸ M. LUTHER: *Concerning Ministry*. Trans. C. BERGENDOFF. Vol. 40 of *Luther's Works*. Eds. J. PELIKAN, H. T. LEHMANN. Philadelphia 1960, p. 21.

*the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers. Established and Proven by Scripture.*⁹

Luther clearly distinguished between the priests in the church, that is, all baptized/believers, and the ministers of the church, that is, those who hold offices in it. In the work *Concerning Ministry* from 1523 he wrote: “A Priest is not identical with Presbyterian or Minister – for one is born to be priest, one becomes a minister.”¹⁰ He makes this distinction even more clearly in his exposition of Psalm 82 from 1530: “It is true that all Christians are priests, but not all are pastors. For to be a pastor one must be not only a Christian and a priest but must have an office and a field of work committed to him. This call and command make pastors and preachers.”¹¹

In the writings of the Reformer we find two lines of argumentation in favour of appointing servants of the church who hold church office. One can be described as running from the bottom up, the other as the opposite, “from the top down.” It seems that Luther saw no contradiction between them, since both appear already in his early writings, in which the emphasis is placed on the issue of the effects of the common priesthood of believers, and thus on the first line of argumentation. The justification from below refers to what believers received in baptism. In *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation...* we read: “For whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already a consecrated priest, bishop, and pope, although of course it is not seemly that just anybody should exercise such office.”¹² The reservation that it is not appropriate for everyone to perform this office results from the fact that, as we read in the letter *Concerning Ministry* from 1523, already quoted: “For since we have proved all of these things [i.e. the above-mentioned seven rights resulting from the common priesthood] to be the common property of all Christians, no one individual can arise by his own authority and arrogate to himself alone what belongs to all. [...] But the community rights demand that one, or as many as the community chooses, shall be chosen or approved who, in the name of all with these rights, shall perform these functions publicly. Otherwise,

⁹ M. LUTHER: *That the Christian Assembly or Congregation has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers. Established and Proven by Scripture*. Trans. E. W. and R. C. GRITSCH. Vol. 39 of *Luther's Works*. Eds. J. PELIKAN, H. T. LEHMANN. Philadelphia 1960, pp. 301–314.

¹⁰ M. LUTHER: *Concerning Ministry...*, p. 18.

¹¹ M. LUTHER: *Psalm 82*. Trans. C. M. JACOBS. Vol. 13 of *Luther's Works*. Eds. J. PELIKAN, H. T. LEHMANN. Philadelphia 1960, p. 65.

¹² M. LUTHER: *To the Christian Nobility...*, p. 129.

there might be shameful confusion among the people of God...”¹³ Luther reasoned similarly already in *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation...*: “Therefore, when a bishop consecrates it is nothing else than that in the place and stead of the whole community, all of whom have like power, he takes a person and charges him to exercise this power on behalf of the others.”¹⁴ The same reasoning also appeared in the criticism of the sacramental dimension of ordination in the third of the programmatic writings of 1520, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*:

Let everyone, therefore, who knows himself to be a Christian, be assured of this, that we are all equally priests, that is to say, we have the same power in respect to the Word and the sacraments. However, no one may make use of this power except by the consent of the community or by the call of a superior. (For what is the common property of all, no individual may arrogate to himself, unless he is called.) And therefore this “sacrament” of ordination, if it is anything at all, is nothing else than a certain rite whereby one is called to the ministry of the church.¹⁵

It is worth recalling another quote from *Concerning Ministry*, with which Luther supplemented the abovementioned argument: “For it is one thing to exercise a right publicly; another to use it in time of emergency. Publicly one may not exercise a right without consent of the whole body or of the church. In time of emergency each may use it as he deems best.”¹⁶ The Reformer therefore knows the distinction between an ordinary situation, in which it is necessary to maintain the proper order of ordination, and an extraordinary situation, in which every Christian has the right to use his or her priestly rights.

The church therefore needs to delegate to service. This was done in the rite of ordination. The issue of its course was not a primary one for Luther. In the first years of the Reformation, ordinations were not necessary because a sufficient number of clergy joined the reformed church. With the need for new servants, Luther decided to ordain servants for the church – the first ordination in Wittenberg was the calling of Georg

¹³ M. LUTHER: *Concerning Ministry...*, p. 34.

¹⁴ M. LUTHER: *To the Christian Nobility...*, p. 128.

¹⁵ M. LUTHER: *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. Trans. A. T. W. STEINHÜDÉUS-ER, revised by F. C. AHRENS, A. ROSS WENTZ. Vol. 36 of *Luther's Works*. Eds. J. PELIKAN, H. T. LEHMANN. Philadelphia 1960, p. 116.

¹⁶ M. LUTHER: *Concerning Ministry...*, p. 34.

Rörer as a deacon. The ordination form from 1539, according to which clergy were ordained in Wittenberg, referred to baptism, in accordance with the order of calling and the intercessory prayer of the congregation. The laying on of hands did not convey any special gifts or authorization, but was considered an appropriate liturgical gesture combined with the Lord's Prayer and the singing of the hymn *Veni creator spiritus*.¹⁷

The content of this service in ministry, as can be seen in the fragments quoted above, is the Word of God, proclaimed in the sermon and administered in the sacraments. This service of office entails the fact that it is not accompanied by any kind of ontological change, there is no *character intelligibilis* in those who hold this office. In early writings from 1520, Luther even states that a minister should be treated as a civil servant, who remains so as long as he serves. A rite is also necessary, which will publicly introduce him to the exercise of office.

The same content of the church office is foreseen in those fragments of the Reformer's writings in which he included a second line of argument for the existence of the church office, led from top to bottom. In the work *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation...*, next to fragments about the election of the ecclesiastical office holder understood as the delegation to the public exercise of the rights that every Christian received in baptism, namely, the right to baptize and absolution, we also read: "I want to speak only of the ministry which God has instituted, the responsibility of which is to minister word and sacrament to a congregation..."¹⁸ The view about the divine establishment of the church office was found in the Reformer's confession of faith in the letter *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* from 1528: "But the holy orders and true religious institutions established by God are these three: the office of priest, the estate of marriage, the civil government."¹⁹ This type of argumentation for the establishment of a church office came to the fore most fully in the letter *On the Councils and the Church* from 1539, where it was mentioned among the *notae ecclesiae*. Luther characterizes this note as follows:

Fifth, the church is recognized externally by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers, or has offices that it is to administer. There must be

¹⁷ Cf. M. LUTHER: *The Ordination of Ministers of the Word*. Trans. P. ZELLER STRODACH. Vol. 53 of *Luther's Works*. Eds. J. PELIKAN, H. T. LEHMANN. Philadelphia 1960, pp. 124–126.

¹⁸ M. LUTHER: *To the Christian Nobility...*, p. 176.

¹⁹ M. LUTHER: *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*. Trans. R. H. FISCHER. Vol. 37 of *Luther's Works*. Eds. J. PELIKAN, H. T. LEHMANN. Philadelphia 1960, p. 364.

bishops, pastors, or preachers, who publicly and privately give, administer, and use the aforementioned four things or holy possessions [i.e., the preaching of the Word, baptism, the Lord's Supper, absolution] in behalf of and in the name of the church, or rather by reason of their institution by Christ, as St. Paul states in Ephesians 4 [:8], "He received gifts among men..." – his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some teachers and governors, etc. The people as a whole cannot do these things, but must entrust or have them entrusted to one person. Otherwise, what would happen if everyone wanted to speak or administer, and no one wanted to give way to the other? It must be entrusted to one person, and he alone should be allowed to preach, to baptize, to absolve, and to administer the sacraments. The others should be content with this arrangement and agree to it.²⁰

Thus, one can see the consistency not only in the content of the church office, but also, regardless of the argument used, in the indication that the church office has the task of ordering the life of the congregational community. Such a role of the office was connected with the necessity

For Luther, the key was of course the fundamental task of the church ministry, that is, the proclamation of the Word in sermon, administration of sacraments and absolution. The issues of the structure of this ministry were secondary to him. In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, writing about the ministry, he mentions the priestly office (i.e. presbyters) and bishops: "the priesthood is properly nothing but the ministry of the Word – the Word, I say; not the law, but the gospel. [...] Whoever, therefore, does not know or preach the gospel is not only no priest or bishop."²¹ It is therefore clear that he does not actually make a distinction between the tasks of the bishop and the presbyter. The office of bishop is in principle a special case of the church office, the only special element, described in the letter *Exempel, einen rechten christlichen Bischof zu weihen* (Example of consecrating a true Christian bishop) from 1542,²² which roots the understanding of the episcopal ministry in the texts of the New Testament letters (1 Tim 3:2, Tit 1:7, 9), is the supervision of parish priests,

²⁰ M. LUTHER: *On the Councils and the Church*. Trans. Ch. M. JACOBS. Vol. 41 of *Luther's Works*. Eds. J. PELIKAN, H. T. LEHMANN. Philadelphia 1960, p. 154.

²¹ M. LUTHER: *The Babylonian Captivity...*, p. 116.

²² Own translation based on: M. LUTHER: *Exempel, einen rechten christlichen Bischof zu weihen*. Vol. 53 of *D. Martin Luther Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Weimar 1920, pp. 231–260.

without, however, assigning the bishop any special jurisdiction. The development of the practice of appointing princes as evangelical *Notbischof* – ‘bishops out of necessity’, resulted from the fact that none of the bishops joined the Reformation. At the same time, there are attested cases that suggest that this was not the only model in the Reformer’s thinking, as evidenced by Luther’s consecration of Nicholas von Amsdorf as bishop of Naumburg. The office of the deacon is also present in Luther’s reflections – let us again recall the fragment from *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*:

And the diaconate is the ministry, not of reading the Gospel or the Epistle, as is the present practice, but of distributing the church’s aid to the poor, so that the priests may be relieved of the burden of temporal matters and may give themselves more freely to prayer and the Word. For this was the purpose of the institution of the diaconate, as we read in Acts 5 [6:1–6].²³

He therefore demands a reform of the diaconate in the spirit of its genesis described in the Acts of the Apostles. These three services associated with the office do not exhaust the issue of the structure of the office in Luther’s thought. In the already quoted confession of faith from *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528), the issue of the divinely established ecclesiastical office was developed as follows:

All who are engaged in the clerical office or ministry of the Word are in a holy, proper, good, and God-pleasing order and estate, such as those who preach, administer sacraments, supervise the common chest, sextons and messengers or servants who serve such persons. These are engaged in works which are altogether holy in God sight.²⁴

He also saw a place for school leaders within the ecclesiastical office. He himself, when referring to his office, often did not refer to the priestly orders he had received, but to the fact that he was a doctor of Holy Scripture.

At the end of the considerations on the theology of the universal priesthood and ministry in the thought of the Reformer, it is worth quoting a fragment of the description of the service contained in the writing on *Von der Winkelmesse und Pfaffenweihe* (On the Secret Masses and the Ordination

²³ M. LUTHER: *The Babylonian Captivity...*, 116.

²⁴ M. LUTHER: *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper...*, p. 364.

of Priests) from 1533, which shows the relationship between the officiants and the congregation on the basis of the universal priesthood:

Behold, our priest, bishop or servant in the priestly office approaches the altar, properly and honestly and publicly called, but previously consecrated in baptism, anointed and born to the priesthood of Christ [...]. He sings publicly and clearly the order of Christ, established in the [Holy] Supper, takes bread and wine, gives thanks, breaks them and gives them [...] to us, to those who wish to receive them. And we, especially those who wish to receive the sacrament, kneel beside, behind and around him, man, woman, young, old, master, servant, lady, maid, parents, children, as God gathers us all there, all true holy co-priests, sanctified by the blood of Christ, Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified in baptism. And we are there in such an innate, hereditary priestly honour and adornment we are [...] and we allow our priest to speak the order of Christ not for himself, as his own person, but he is the mouth of all of us and we all speak with him from the heart and with an encouraging faith to the Lamb of God.²⁵

2. Lutheran confessional writings

The analysis of the issue of church ministry in the context of Lutheran confessional books cannot begin anywhere else than with Article V of the “Augsburg Confession,” whose title in Latin translates as “Concerning Ministry in the Church” and in German as “Concerning the Preaching Office.”²⁶ These two interpretations of the title complement each other well. They are concerned with a church office that is primarily a service, which is clearly expressed in the Latin text of CA V: “[...] the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted.”²⁷ The German text adds that it is “God instituted the office of preaching.”²⁸

²⁵ Own translation based on: M. LUTHER: *Von der Winkelmesse und Pfaffenweihe*. Vol. 38 of *D. Martin Luther Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Weimar 1912, p. 247.

²⁶ “The Augsburg Confession.” In: *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Eds. R. KOLB, T. T. WENGERT. Minneapolis 1966, pp. 40–41.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 41.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 40.

In order to answer the question of why a church office or service of the church understood as a service of preaching/teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments is needed, we should refer to the preceding Article IV. We read in it:

Likewise, they teach that human beings cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits, or works. But they are justified as a gift on account of Christ through faith when they believe that they are received into grace and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. God reckons this faith as righteousness (Rom 3[:21–26] and 4[:5]).²⁹

To arouse faith, an office/ministry was established, referred to in the Article V of the “Augsburg Confession”: “So that we obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted,”³⁰ these are means of grace: “For through the Word and the sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the gospel.”³¹

It is worth noting that the aforementioned means of grace: the preached Word of God and the sacraments are listed in Article VII of the “Augsburg Confession,” “Concerning the Church” as *notae ecclesiae*, that is, marks of the church, which are also conditions of its unity. If there is agreement in the purely taught/preached gospel and the sacraments are administered rightly, that is, in accordance with the gospel, then there is true unity of the church. All other aspects of its functioning constitute a space of freedom and are not factors dividing the church.³²

Importantly, Article VIII of the “Augsburg Confession” adds that sacraments are effective because of the ordination and command of Christ. Consequently, the effectiveness of a sacrament is not dependent on the dignity of the person administering it.³³ The issue of office in the first part of the “Augsburg Confession” is supplemented by Article XIV, which states in the Latin version: “Concerning Church order they teach that no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless

²⁹ Ibidem, pp. 39, 40.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 41.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Ibidem, pp. 42–43.

³³ Ibidem.

properly called.”³⁴ In the German version, both the title of the article and the content itself clearly indicate that the reservation of Article XIV refers to those holding a church office. The content of Article XIV, referring to the conditions of the unity of the church in Article VII, raises the question of the relationship between church office and *notae ecclesiae*. Modern commentators recognize that the office is included in *notae implicite*, and it is clearly subordinate to them, which protects the church from the independence of the office from the means of grace to which it was called by God.³⁵

Before we discuss the elements concerning the ecclesiastical office in the second part of the “Augsburg Confession” devoted to abuses that have been corrected, it is worth reaching for the noteworthy elaborations of the abovementioned themes of the first part in the “Apology of the Augsburg Confession.” Undoubtedly, the fragments of Articles VII and VIII, which strengthen the anti-Donatist argument of CA VIII, is worth mentioning herein. We read there in point 28:

Nor does this detract from efficacy of sacraments when they are distributed by the unworthy, because they represent the person of Christ on account of the call of the church and do not represent their own persons, as Christ himself testifies [Luke 10:16], “Whoever listens to you listens to me.” When they offer the Word of Christ or the sacraments, they offer them in the stead and place of Christ.³⁶

Also important is Article XIII of the “Apology of the Augsburg Confession,” in which Philip Melanchthon considers the sacramentality of the office. It should be recalled in this context that this question does not appear in the confessional writings authored by Luther, who limits the sacraments to two: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, referring to the Augustinian definition of the sacrament: “The Word comes to the element; and so there is a sacrament.” Melanchthon represents a different approach: “[...] we do not think that it makes much difference if, for the purpose of teaching, different people have different enumerations [of sacraments], as long as they properly preserve the matters handed down in Scripture.”³⁷ Hence his

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 47.

³⁵ Cf. bibliography in: J. SOJKA: *Widzialne Słowo. Sakramenty w luterńskiej „Księdze zgody”*. Warszawa 2016, pp. 338–343.

³⁶ “Apology of the Augsburg Confession.” In: *The Book of Concord...*, p. 178.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 219.

considerations on the possibility of assigning the name sacrament also to priesthood. They begin with a clear opposition to understanding priesthood in sacrificial categories similar to the Levitical priesthood. Melancthon, however, understands it as “the ministry of the Word and the sacraments administered to others,”³⁸ and in view of the fact that justification was accomplished through the one sacrifice of Christ: “Thus priests are not called to offer sacrifices for the people as in Old Testaments law so that through them they might merit the forgiveness of sins for the people; instead they are called to preach the gospel and to administer the sacraments of the people.”³⁹ In the situation, however:

If ordination is understood with reference to the ministry of the Word, we have no objection to calling ordination a sacrament. For the ministry of the Word has the command of God and has magnificent promises like Romans 1[:16]: the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.” Likewise, Isaiah 55[:11], “... so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose...” If ordination is understood in this way, we will not object to calling the laying of hands a sacraments. For the church has the mandate to appoint ministers, which ought to please us greatly because we know that God approves this ministry and is present in it.⁴⁰

The polemical fronts on which Melancthon appears in Article XIV of the “Apology of the Augsburg Confession” are meted out not only against Rome. On the occasion of the discussion on priesthood, he emphasizes once again the conviction expressed in Article V of the “Augsburg Confession” that “[t]hey condemn Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Spirit comes to human beings without the external Word through their own preparations and works,”⁴¹ stating:

Indeed, it is worthwhile to extol the ministry of the Word with every possible kind of praise against fanatics who imagine that the Holy Spirit is not given through the Word but is given on account of certain preparations of their own, for example, if they sit idle and silent in dark places

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 220.

³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁴¹ “The Augsburg Confession...,” p. 41.

while waiting for illumination – as “Enthusiasts” formerly taught and the Anabaptists now teach.⁴²

The second part of the “Augsburg Confession” on the church ministry addresses two issues. First, the issue of permission for priests to marry. Melancthon here provides a broad argument that refers both to the apostle Paul and to the history of creation. The conclusion is:

It is not humanly possible to change creation without a singular gift and work of God. Accordingly, those who are not suited for celibacy should marry. For no human law or vow can nullify a command and institution of God. For these reasons our priests teach that it is lawful for them to have wives.⁴³

This argument is supported by examples from church history that prove priests could marry. A similar argument is found in “The Smalcald Articles” in Part III, Article XI:

Now, as little as the power has been given to them or to us to make female out of male or a male out of female – or to abolish sexual distinction all together – so little did they have power to separate such creatures of God or to forbid them from living together honestly in marriage.⁴⁴

The ban on marriage is also defined in this article as evidence of tyranny exercised by bishops loyal to the Pope.

The more important thread, however, is Article XXVIII at the end of the “Augsburg Confession,” entitled in Latin “Concerning the Church’s Power,” and in German “Concerning the Power of Bishops.” In it, Melancthon defines the power of the keys, or the power of the bishops. It is “[...] according to the gospel, the power of the keys or the power of the bishops is the power of God’s mandate to preach the gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer the sacraments.”⁴⁵ Bishops were granted it by divine law, and in addition to the elements mentioned above, it also consists of the following tasks: rejecting teachings that are incompatible with the gospel and excluding from society the godless, whose godlessness

⁴² “Apology of the Augsburg Confession...,” pp. 220–221.

⁴³ “The Augsburg Confession...,” p. 63.

⁴⁴ “The Smalcald Articles.” In: *The Book of Concord...*, p. 324.

⁴⁵ “The Augsburg Confession...,” p. 93.

is obvious. This power, however, has its limits. If the bishops establish something against the gospel, then the churches have not only the right, but the command of God to refuse to obey them.

The limit of obedience to the authority of bishops also determines the attitude of the Lutheran Reformation towards the issue of maintaining the ordination provided for in canon law, as well as the church order resulting from it. Article XIV of the “Apology of the Augsburg Confession” declares its readiness to maintain the ordination and the existing church government, even knowing that it was introduced by human authority. However, the obstacle here was the fact that the bishops persecuted the reformed congregations that want to adhere to the true, godly and catholic “Augsburg Confession.”⁴⁶

Martin Luther refers to this matter in a similar way in his “Smalcald Articles” from 1536, in which he admits that if bishops cared about the church and the gospel, they could be allowed, in the name of love and peace, but without coercion, to ordain evangelical preachers, provided that the accompanying “unchristian ceremony and pomp” were abandoned. However, the lack of will to do so on the part of bishops, who are more political rulers than performing church service in the sense already understood by the “Augsburg Confession,” cannot become a reason for the lack of servants in the church performing their proper service of Word and sacrament. Therefore, the Reformation side, referring to examples from the history of the church, decided to independently ordain those who are suitable for such service.⁴⁷

Similarly, the issue of ordination is developed by Melanchthon in “Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope” from 1537, a work that was a supplement to the “Augsburg Confession.” In addition to a broad discussion of the title issue, it also contains a section entitled “The Power and Jurisdiction of Bishops.” Melanchthon begins it by repeating a set of tasks that the gospel assigns to those “who preside over the churches.”⁴⁸ It is identical to the list already specified in the “Augsburg Confession,” so it includes the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and jurisdiction in the form of excluding from the community those whose crimes are known and granting absolution to those who want to repent. The abovementioned authority “is shared by divine right by all

⁴⁶ “Apology of the Augsburg Confession...,” pp. 222–223

⁴⁷ “The Smalcald Articles...,” pp. 323–324.

⁴⁸ “Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope.” In: *The Book of Concord...*, p. 340.

who preside in the churches, whether they are called pastors, presbyters, or bishops.”⁴⁹ At the same time, Melanchthon emphasizes that there is no difference in degree between bishops, presbyters (and shepherds). There is therefore one, non-hierarchical spiritual office. He sees the difference between bishops and presbyters in their tasks, and specifically in the reservation of the right of ordination to the former. However, in a situation where bishops betray the gospel, according to Melanchthon, the congregations retain the right to ordain their clergy, because there is no such difference in degree between presbyters and bishops. It is worth noting here that this is actually the only mention in *The Book of Concord* referring to the argument from the universal priesthood. The context for the entire argument is again the question of the limit of obedience to bishops. It is fidelity to the gospel. This criterion of obedience to episcopal authority in the “Treatise...,” similarly to the earlier Article XXVIII of the “Augsburg Confession,” does not concern only the issue of ordination, but the entire episcopal ruling. If it proceeds from premises that are contrary to the gospel, there is no obligation to obey it.

3. Reflection of the Lutheran World Federation

In case of the Lutheran World Federation (hereafter: LWF), the history of documents devoted to the church office dates back to the 1980s. Three fundamental documents were issued at that time. The first of them was entitled “Lutheran Understanding of the Episcopal Office.”⁵⁰ Its first part contains basic considerations. Episcopal office is rooted in the mission of Jesus Christ and placed within the concept of one ordained office. It is a response to the supra-local nature of the church. Episcopal office as an office of pastoral guidance and spiritual oversight was adopted by the Lutheran churches from the earlier tradition of the church. It is present in them in various forms and under different names. It is ecumenically significant that these differences do not constitute a factor dividing the unity of the church. The ecumenical commitment of Lutherans encourages reflection on the structure and understanding of the episcopal ministry. Such

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ “Lutheran Understanding of the Episcopal Office.” *LWF Studies* (1993), pp. 55–65.

reflection touches, for example, on the issue of apostolic succession understood from a Lutheran perspective primarily as fidelity to the apostolic faith and its continuity, and not a formal succession of episcopal ordinations.

The second part of the document is devoted to the responsibility and function of the episcopal office. It refers broadly to ecumenical arrangements (Lima Document,⁵¹ dialogue with Roman Catholicism⁵²). The key task of the office is to preach the pure gospel and to administer the sacraments in accordance with it. From these, specific tasks and the authority of the episcopal office were derived. An important one among them is the care for the unity of the church. The episcopal office does not perform its tasks in isolation from the community. The form of their implementation is shaped by cultural factors. It is important in this context that the episcopal office is shaped in a way that allows for the effective implementation of the tasks assigned to it.

The second of the 1980s' documents is entitled, "Women in the Ministries of the Church."⁵³ It begins with a discussion of the Reformation concept of the common priesthood of all believers rooted in baptism. The ordained ministry is placed against this background in a way that directly refers to Luther's theology and the "Augsburg Confession." The first part ends with an attempt to describe the common priesthood and the ordained ministry in the contemporary church. Attention is drawn to the need for their mutual conditioning; otherwise, the church risks falling into excessive egalitarianism or autonomous authoritarianism.

Part two of the said document analyzes the situation of women in ministries and offices in Lutheran churches. It points out that most large Lutheran churches have decided to introduce women's ordination. Its importance is evidenced by the fact that it has become a symbol of recognizing women as equal human beings and is an expression of responsibility to the gospel, because it makes it clear that there are no elements in the life and mission of the church that are not intended for everyone. It is emphasized that neither the Bible nor the confessional writings include content that directly negates the ordination of women, and according to Gal 3:26ff. all are equal on the basis of the baptism. The mission of the church – the proclamation

⁵¹ Cf. WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES: *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Geneva 1982.

⁵² Cf. "The Ministry in the Church." In: *Growth in Agreement. Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level. 1972–1982*. Eds. H. MEYER, L. VISCHER. Geneva 1984, pp. 248–275.

⁵³ "Report from the LWF Workshop on 'Women in the Ministries of the Church,' Le Cénacle, Geneva, February 25–28, 1983." *LWF Studies* (1983), pp. 63–93.

of the gospel – therefore demands that the question is not whether women should be ordained, but whether there are reasons to refuse them ordination. The decision to ordain women should entail a renewal of the pastoral office. Part two ends with an analysis of the broad involvement of women in various forms of the church's ministry.

The most extensive part third of the said document deals with factors influencing the practice of church life, which have an impact on the decision to ordain women: theology, the issue of socialization, understanding power and authority and leadership style, structures, systems and values in the life of the church, feminization in various areas of social and church activity, the context of the functioning of the church as an organization and employer, education necessary for competent involvement in the activities of the church. This part, focused mainly on practical factors (social and organizational), ends with an analysis of ecumenical challenges related to the decision to ordain women.

The last of the 1980s' LWF documents, "The Lutheran Understanding of Ministry,"⁵⁴ begins by defining the concepts of ministry, ordained ministry, and episcopal office. Part one of the document deals with the People of God, starting from the understanding of ministry proposed by the ecumenical Lima Document.⁵⁵ The foundation of the People of God is their calling by God through the power of the Holy Spirit. Through the gospel of Jesus Christ baptism creates their community, those people are endowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and their ministry is closely linked to the ministry of Christ. Worship, witness, and service play an important role in their life. Part two discusses the ministry of the church, rooted in the ministry of Jesus Christ, which is realized in the various ministries of individual Christians.

Part three of "The Lutheran Understanding of Ministry" deals with the ordained ministry. Starting from the confessional writings, the document places it in the context of one ministry of the church. The key tasks of the office are indicated as follows: preaching and teaching the Word of God and administering the sacraments, as well as conducting the services of worship, witness and service in the congregation. The ordained ministry is also important for the unity of the church. It is also diverse in form and manner of organization already on the basis of the New Testament, as well as in the contemporary church. In this context, the openness to updating

⁵⁴ "The Lutheran Understanding of Ministry." *LWF Studies* (1983), pp. 37–54.

⁵⁵ Cf. WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES: *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*...

the understanding of the ordained ministry in new historical and cultural contexts is emphasized. In dealing with the episcopal office, the findings of the document "Lutheran Understanding of the Episcopal Office"⁵⁶ are repeated. A similar approach is taken in part four, which, speaking about the ordained office of women, refers to the document "Women in the Ministries of the Church."⁵⁷ Part five, dealing with the introduction to ordination, indicates the necessity of calling and ordination. Ordination is an act of God and the church, it is lifelong and does not equal full-time employment in the church, and it does not involve separation from other members of the church, the granting of any special characteristics, or a higher status. The last part deals with the issue of apostolic succession, indicating the self-perception of the Lutheran churches as successors of the authentic apostolic tradition. The task of the ordained is to serve this preserved continuity, even when a given church has not preserved the continuity of the succession of episcopal positions. The openness of the Lutheran churches to apostolic succession is emphasized, understood as a sign of the apostolicity of the life of the church, but only in a situation where it does not question the validity of previous offices. In the summary of the document, it is indicated that it is a summary of the Lutheran understanding of office at that time. Among the topics requiring further, also ecumenical, reflection, the following are indicated: the performance of offices by women and the triple ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon.

Work on the issue of ministry in the LWF continued in the 1990s during the consultations at Cartigny (1992).⁵⁸ Its work can be seen as an extension of the work of the 1980s, primarily in two areas: the ordained ministry of women and the episcopal ministry. The section on the ordained ministry of women⁵⁹ begins with a summary of the state of acceptance of women's ordination by LWF member churches and an indication of the interplay of theology and cultural environment that comes into play in this context. It then addresses the following issues: the reasons for ordaining women, resistance and opposition to women in ordained ministry, the ecumenical implications of the decision to admit women to ordained ministry, and the challenges facing churches ordaining women in terms of their full integration into the life of the church. The second section concludes with

⁵⁶ Cf. "Lutheran Understanding of the Episcopal Office...", pp. 55–65.

⁵⁷ "Women in the Ministries of the Church...", pp. 63–93.

⁵⁸ "Report: Consultation on the Ordained Ministry of Women and the Episcopal Ministry." *LWF Studies* (1993), pp. 7–36.

⁵⁹ "Report: Consultation on the Ordained Ministry...", pp. 11–19.

references to the LWF General Assembly resolutions calling for the ordination of women to the pastoral ministry (1984,⁶⁰ 1990⁶¹), indicating that this practice is an expression of obedience to the gospel. Those churches that have not yet implemented it were called upon to make appropriate changes, and those that have already done so were called upon to ensure the full integration of women pastors and to support with their experiences those churches that are still facing this decision.

The section on the episcopal ministry⁶² begins with an indication of the meeting of evangelical convictions and historical context in the debate on the structure of the church. Then, selected issues concerning the episcopal ministry are presented: its presence and form in the 20th-century Lutheranism, its understanding as an ministry of oversight (referring to New Testament and Reformation sources and the LWF's previous findings). Finally, the office is placed in the context of its role in the unity, continuity and identity of the church. The summary of the entire document⁶³ recalls the Reformation principle of evangelical freedom of the Christian and the church, indicating the process of change regarding the ministries of ordained women and the episcopal office, for which the Lutheran communion worldwide is seeking appropriate forms and practices. It is emphasized that the trust in this process is not placed in human wisdom and competence, but in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The first of the documents on church ministry created after the year 2000 deals with the issue of the diaconate. It is a report from the 2005 consultation: "The Diaconal Ministry in the Lutheran Churches."⁶⁴ The task of this consultation was to identify the theological parameters of the diaconal ministry guaranteeing its solid biblical foundations, its shaping by the Lutheran Reformation and its openness to changes depending on the ecclesiastical and social context. The report begins with a discussion of the basic context, that is, the issue of diaconate. After clarifying the terminology, the report presents the diaconal ministry in the Bible and the pre-Reformation and Reformation history of the church. Then the diaconal ministry is considered in relation to specific issues of theology

⁶⁰ Cf. "Working Group 6: Partnership of Women and Men." *LWF Report* 19/20 (1985), p. 227.

⁶¹ Cf. "I Have Heard the Cry of My People... The Message." *LWF Report* 28/29 (1990), p. 82.

⁶² "Report: Consultation on the Ordained Ministry...", pp. 19–32.

⁶³ Ibidem, pp. 32–33.

⁶⁴ "The Diaconal Ministry in the Lutheran Churches." *LWF Studies* 1 (2006), 81–89.

and church-social life, including the priesthood/deaconhood of all believers, the pastoral ministry, the Eucharist, and the relationship between the church and the world, that is, the issue of authority. The final conclusions include a call for the LWF member churches to review their ways of organizing church ministry, so that the diaconal ministry can take its proper place in the perspective of fulfilling the responsibility of the church's diaconal mission. Such an effort is not a universal remedy for the challenges facing the church as it confronts the changing reality, but it can be a significant contribution to the credibility and effectiveness of the one church ministry. These indications do not, of course, negate the fundamental necessity for God himself to lead and authenticate the church's mission through the power of the Spirit.

The second document from the 2000s is a response to the need to clarify the Lutheran position in light of the topics raised in ecumenical dialogues. It is entitled: "Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church"⁶⁵ (2007). It begins by indicating the importance of the topic for the Federation's ecumenical dialogues,⁶⁶ as well as the multitude of Lutheran traditions regarding episcopal ministry.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ "Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church." *LWF Documentation* 52 (2007), pp. 135–160.

⁶⁶ Besides the most important multilateral report entitled *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* following bilateral reports were mentioned at the global level: "The Ministry in the Church...", pp. 248–275; "Episcopate. Niagara Falls, September 1987 [i.e. The Niagara Report]." In: *Growth in Agreement. Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level. 1982–1998*. Eds. J. GROS, H. MEYER, W. G. RUSCH. Geneva–Grand Rapids–Cambridge, MI 2000, pp. 11–37; "Church and Justification. Würzburg, Germany, 11 September 1993." In: *Growth in Agreement (1982–1998)*..., pp. 485–565; "Called to Communion and Common Witness. Geneva 1999–2001." In: *Growth in Agreement. International Dialogue Texts and Agreed Statements, 1998–2005*. Eds. J. GROS, T. L. BEST, L. F. FUCHS. Geneva–Grand Rapids, pp. 449–476; "Growth in Communion. Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2002." In: *Growth in Agreement (1998–2005)*..., pp. 375–423; at the regional level: "On the Way to Visible Unity – A Common Statement. Meissen, 18 March 1988." *LWF Documentation* 49 (2004), pp. 129–145; "The Porvoo Common Statement." *LWF Documentation* 49 (2004), pp. 145–176; "Called to Witness and Service. The Reuilly Common Statement." *LWF Documentation* 49 (2004), pp. 201–230; "Called to Common Mission: A Lutheran Proposal for a Revision of the Concordat of Agreement." *LWF Documentation* 49 (2004), pp. 231–242; "Called to Full Communion: The Waterloo Declaration." *LWF Documentation* 49 (2004), pp. 243–248; BILATERALE ARBEITSGRUPPE DER DEUTSCHEN BISCHOFSKONFERENZ UND DER KIRCHENLEITUNG DER VEREINIGTEN EVANGELISCH-LUTHERISCHEN KIRCHE DEUTSCHLANDS: *Communio Sanctorum. Die Kirche als Gemeinschaft der Heiligen*. Paderborn–Frankfurt am Main 2000.

⁶⁷ For the documents discussed in this analysis, cf.: "The Lutheran Understanding of Ministry...", pp. 37–54; "Lutheran Understanding of the Episcopal Office...", 55–65;

After presenting terminological considerations on the concept of *episkope*, the authors move on to the second part concerning the biblical and historical foundations of the episcopal ministry. It contains an overview of New Testament references, selected traditions of Christian antiquity and the teaching of the Reformation on the office, including the episcopal ministry, as well as the circumstances of the Reformation criticism aimed at the then form of this ministry. It is emphasized that the Reformation transformation of the *episkope* ministry resulted from both the theological views of the Reformers and the historical circumstances in which they had to act. Attention is also drawn to changes in the perception of the ministry of *episkope* – for example, in the 16th century, the issue of apostolic succession did not play any role.

The next part, devoted to the mission and apostolicity of the church, begins with a presentation of the Christ-based mission of the church, that is, the proclamation of reconciliation with God and the practice of God's saving love in the world. Next, an understanding of the apostolic tradition in its context is presented, which is defined as the continuation of the marks of the church of the apostles. The fundamental role of baptism, which incorporates one into the church, is also indicated, and an understanding of how apostolic teaching comes to the fore. The Lutheran churches claim the right to this apostolic identity. This part ends with a presentation of the evolution of the understanding of the concept of apostolic succession.

The fourth part deals with the ordained ministry in the service of the mission of the apostolicity of the church, discussing successively such issues as: the relationship between the ordained ministry and the apostolicity of the church; the ordained ministry of women and men, the ministry of *episkope* exercised as an episcopal ministry, and the relationship of the episcopal ministry and the synodal structures of church authority. Next, the relation of the episcopal ministry to the unity of the church is addressed, focusing on two fundamental issues: unity as an attribute of the church and the mutual relations of the episcopal ministry, apostolic succession and the constitutive elements of the church.

The penultimate part deals with perspectives for the future, indicating the ecumenical importance of the reconciliation of the ministry of Word and sacrament. It is emphasized that further Lutheran debate is necessary, also taking into account ecumenical references in such topics as:

"Women in the Ministries of the Church...", pp. 63–93; "Report: Consultation on the Ordained Ministry of Women and the Episcopal Ministry...", pp. 7–36.

the power and role of ordination; the relationship of the ministry of *episkope* to the diaconal dimension of the mission of the church; the practical realization of the personal, collegiate and communal nature of the episcopal ministry; questions related to the realization of spiritual supervision and secular administrative tasks; and also, which is particularly important in the ecumenical context, the personal life and faith and the manner of exercising the episcopal ministry by those who have been called to it.

The document ends with a brief summary focused on the significance of apostolicity for the Lutheran churches, as well as on the importance and role of the analyses presented for the development of an understanding of the practice of the episcopal ministry in the interest of developing forms and practices that serve God's mission. As in earlier documents, the document concludes with a declaration of trust not in the wisdom of human analyses, but in the Lord Jesus Christ.

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