**Tamás Fabiny: The presence of the church within society must be grounded in solidarity**

**The pulpit and altar fellowship of Protestant churches in Europe was made possible by the Leuenberg Agreement, signed 50 years ago. An international conference will be held to celebrate the anniversary from 9 to 11 March 2023 in Debrecen, Hungary. The Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary (ELCH) and former Vice President of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Tamás Fabiny will be among the keynote speakers. In this interview, we talked about challenges and opportunities offered by the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe; about divisions, differences, and fellowship in the past and in the present; and about solidarity bridging the fault lines.**

**Dóra Laborczi: This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Leuenberg Agreement, which allows Lutheran pastors to preach in Reformed churches, or Reformed Christians to receive communion from a Lutheran pastor, and vice versa. What was the historical situation at the time of its signing? What is the context of this agreement?**

**Tamás Fabiny:** The 20th century was an era of ecumenical movements. A World Missionary Conference was held in Edinburgh in 1910, attended by major and minor Protestant and Anglican churches. The conference was organized by famous American Methodist preacher John Mott. Religious colonization going on at the time was considered unacceptable and unsustainable by many. Major churches recognized their own responsibility in this matter and realized that in order to gain credibility in the eyes of society, they needed to be united instead of one another’s rivals. One of the insights of this missionary conference was that we must be a missionary church, not a church closed in on itself; but we must not compete with one another, because **we must not allow denominational and national differences** – whether one represented the German, the Swiss, or the Dutch mission – **to drive a wedge between non-Christians coming from different backgrounds.** So, this conference already had unity as its goal.

World War II put a damper on the movement; for instance, the first Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation could not be held in post-war Germany, which is why the LWF was founded in Lund, Sweden in 1947. The World Council of Churches (WCC) was established in Amsterdam in 1948. These events created the foundation for the bilateral discussions between the Lutheran and Reformed churches in the 1970s, in a much more relaxed historical context. The Methodists joined this discussion later on.

**D.L.: What were the aim and the significance of this agreement?**

**T.F.:** Its aim was the realization of Protestant ecumene. One part of this is fellowship in communion, that is, altar fellowship; the other part is pulpit fellowship, which is grounded in the same Word we preach. We are united in this missionary ministry of God’s Word as well as in practicing social responsibility.

Although pulpit and altar fellowship is, in principle, recognized in Hungary since Leuenberg, it is worth examining how well we use this opportunity in practice, whether we are pastors or members of a Protestant church in Europe.

**D.L.: Let me reiterate the question most often asked by laypeople: what actually is the difference between the two major Protestant churches, the Lutheran and the Reformed church?**

**T.F.:** Calvin was eight years old when the Lutheran Reformation began, so he was of another generation entirely. He started the French branch of Reformation in Geneva; Zwingli also belonged to the Swiss branch, and in some ways, he was even more radical than Calvin. Although they represent subsequent branches of the Swiss Reformation, they respected each other’s differences, and never split from one another.

There were examples of Hungarian university students who enrolled at Wittenberg and were students of Luther or Melanchthon, yet they became followers of the Reformed tradition after returning home.

There were differences between Luther’s and Melanchthon’s teachings within the Evangelical tradition, too: for instance, **Melanchthon was ready to accept the Pope’s authority on human grounds.** He did not believe that the Pope had any divine claim to authority or primacy, therefore he was not the Vicar of Jesus Christ, but Melanchthon believed the Bishop of Rome might serve and be accepted as the common representative of the Church. Luther held stricter views on this matter.

**D.L.: Lutheran and Reformed doctrine is probably most different when it comes to the teachings on the Lord’s Supper.**

**T.F.:** Indeed, communion is the subject where the greatest doctrinal differences exist. To put it simply – this is how I usually explain this matter to laypeople –, Lutheran teaching on the Lord’s Supper is closer to Catholic than to Reformed doctrine.Like Catholics, Lutherans believe in the presence of Christ’s real body and blood in the Eucharist; however, we do not believe the wine and bread are transubstantiated into the substance of the body and blood of Christ, nor that this happens as a result of liturgical acts performed by the priest during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Lutherans believe Christ is present *in actu,* that is, during the celebration of the Eucharist only; by the action of the Holy Spirit and in the presence of the Word, when the pastor offers the bread to the believer and says “This is the body of Christ”, then for them it is indeed – by faith – the body of Christ, and the wine is the blood of Christ.

Reformed Christians follow a more rational doctrine. Calvin says Christ cannot be in heaven and on earth at the same time. If Christ is ascended to heaven, he cannot be physically present in the bread and wine. This is more of a logical reasoning; he concludes that the body and blood of Christ are present as signs in the emblems of the Eucharist, and the presence of Christ is realized as pneumatic presence within the soul of the communing believer through the Holy Spirit.

**D.L.: Are these centuries-old doctrinal debates concerning the Eucharist or other theological issues relevant for modern people?**

**T.F.:** I do believe modern people still have a desire for the mystical. We can’t just be purely rational beings, not even in the 21st century. So many irrational things happen in this world that we cannot make sense of with reason alone – wars, conflicts, crises, illnesses, and so on. Humans feel the need to connect to things through more than reason: through their senses, for instance, through touch, sight, scent, and so on. Communion is a great opportunity for that. **Our remaining differences pose no problem within the unity of reconciled diversity. The ecumenical model of today is not aimed at uniting all churches in a single church organization, and there is absolutely no talk of “the big fish eating the little fish”, or smaller churches being incorporated into larger ones. We can work together in reconciling diversity, accepting our doctrinal differences, and living peacefully together.** This does not mean that we should not keep discussing theological questions such as the Lord’s Supper.

**D.L.: Is there a real possibility for complete altar fellowship among Christian churches in the near future?**

**T.F.:** This requires persistent theological groundwork, and we must not simply focus on the differences between Catholics and Protestants. Few are aware that Catholics are not even permitted altar fellowship with their Orthodox brethren. **The** **possibility of joint communion for Protestants and Catholics has become ever more realistic during the last decade, thanks to Pope Francis.** He took a tremendous step by reversing priorities and putting the aspect of pastoral care first. [He once said](https://ecumenism.net/2015/11/francis-visits-the-lutheran-community-of-rome-it-is-time-for-reconciled-diversity.htm) to a Lutheran woman who was married to a Catholic: “Life is greater than explanations and interpretations. Always make reference to your Baptism: ‘one faith, one Baptism, one Lord’, as St. Paul said, and take it from there. I would never dare give permission to do this as it is not my competence. One Baptism, one Lord, one faith. Speak with the Lord and go ahead. I dare not say any more.” He did not say that from now on, Protestants and Catholics could receive communion together, but he opened a door, at least for those living in mixed marriages. So, we can trust that these practical considerations will play a role in other areas as well. This does not mean that doctrine can be ignored, but it does mean that it can be approached from a practical angle.

**D.L.: The Leuenberg Agreement touches upon “new differences which cut across the confessions” that have arisen in the 450 – now more than 500 – years since the start of the Reformation. What are these new differences?**

**T.F.:** A new fault line, I believe, runs between a more conservative-leaning group – the so-called fundamentalists – and a more progressive-leaning group – the so-called liberals – within each church. These are essentially political orientations, and those should not be allowed to define the Church’s position. Yet this seems to be the case in Hungary, and I am not quite sure the way the Reformed Church is presented in the media corresponds to the actual stance of Reformed Christians in Hungary, the same as Hungarian Lutherans are not entirely represented by their church leaders, some of whom may be pro-government, others more critical of the regime. But church members do not necessarily fall in line with bishops’ positions. We might be in for a surprise if we took a closer look at that.

The church is often identified with its bishops. I believe it is among the key messages of Leuenberg that laypeople are just as important in church leadership as the clergy, on every organizational level within the church: within the congregation, the diocese, the archdiocese, and the entire church body. It is part of the Catholic tradition, and a testament to its influence that the bishop speaks for the entire church in all matters, and the media reinforces that rule. When they decide to ask for a church opinion on any issue, they always turn to the bishops. Lay leaders are rarely sought out, and lay professionals even more rarely, even though they might be experts in their own field, whether that be economics, media, the environment, or other subjects. This should be another key message of this 50-year anniversary: we should not allow the church to become too clerical, or too ecclesiastical; we should involve the laity more, and be more active as laypeople in the life of the church.

**D.L.: The occasion of this interview is the conference being held in Debrecen to commemorate the 50-year anniversary, organized by the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE). According to the invitation, its focus will be “on the contemporary significance of the realization of common church existence launched by the Leuenberg Agreement and the question as to how this might and must be shaped in the future”. I am asking you as one of the keynote speakers at this conference: what is the significance of this gathering, and what can we expect regarding the unity of Protestant churches in Europe going forward?**

**T.F.:** Mypresentation will be centered around the idea of solidarity, in a dual sense. Firstly, **the presence of the church within society must be grounded in solidarity. In a world full of suffering, affected by wars, climate change, and migration, the idea of solidarity is the only thing that can make the church’s actions authentic.** In an era of the climate crisis, our solidarity with all Creation must come first: we must practice solidarity with the victims of polluted waters, dying rainforests, and other environmental disasters.Secondly, we must practice solidarity with one another. This cannot be done by ignoring the political element. It is wrong to consign political positions to churches, confining one church to a pro-government stance, and another to a more critical or opposed position. **Our fellowship should not be based on our relationship with the current regime but on our common theological work, our Biblical and Reformation-based heritage, and our common history.** It is also paramount that we don’t act as rivals. The “big brother” should not look down on its “little brother” – I am speaking from the position of the latter, of course –, but the little one should not mock or speak ill of the big one either. We must live together in mutual solidarity, and I think we have a lot to learn in that regard.