

GREATNESS AND LIMITS OF THE COMMON PRIESTHOOD IN LUTHER

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SUMMARY: I. *Prolegomena*. II. *Luther's experience of salvation*. III. *Luther's theological framework*. IV. *Greatness and limits of common priesthood*. V. *Concluding remarks*.

This not only praises our works as good fruit on earth, but it also elevates them toward heaven and offers them to God as sacrifices acceptable to Him for His special honour and His highest service. How could a Christian life be extolled more? And how could a person be urged and exhorted more strongly to live a Christian life than by the prospect of bearing such fruit, of serving such a purpose, and of enjoying such honour with God?¹

Christ's merit and sacrifice stands in contradiction to my sacrifice and work. Only one can be valid: either Christ's or my own.²

In 2017 the Lutheran community and the Catholic Church jointly commemorated 500 years of Protestant reformation.³ One of the basic principles of the Protestant reformation movement, as initiated by Luther, is the concept of common or universal priesthood, which belongs to the core of Protestant ecclesiology.⁴ Luther affirmed in the context of the 16th century the radical equality of all believers by explicitly referring to the priesthood common to all; for Luther, all believers are equally priests before God. By proclaiming and framing the priesthood of all believers in this way, Luther blurred the essential distinction between the Christian faithful and ordained clergy as maintained in Roman

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¹ M. LUTHER, *Luther's Works*, Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (eds.), 56 vols., Concordia, St. Louis and Fortress, Philadelphia 1955–1986 [LW], 24:243.

² LW 13:328.

³ LUTHERAN-ROMAN CATHOLIC COMMISSION, *Report From Conflict to Communion*, Joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commemoration of the reformation in 2017, published in 2013.

⁴ According to the Lutheran theologian Hans Martin Barth, the Evangelical Church is «the church of the universal priesthood—or it is nothing», in H.M. BARTH, *Einander Priester sein. Allgemeines Priestertum in ökumenischer Perspektive*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1990, 103.

Catholic doctrine.⁵ In Protestant communities, common priesthood is being exercised without this ministerial priesthood for five centuries. However, there are indications that the common priesthood within Protestantism nowadays is in crisis. The protestant pastor Wolfgang Hering asserted in 2009 that «in the Evangelical Church the phrase ‘Priesthood of all Believers’ is merely used as a standard expression, and most of the time without understanding its meaning».⁶ The hypothesis is that this crisis and loss of meaning might be due, among other causes, to the fact that within Protestant communities ministerial priesthood is lacking.

In this article I attempt to grasp Luther’s vision on common priesthood without the ministerial, to understand better and to shed some light upon the necessary mutual relationship between ministerial and common priesthood as alleged in Roman Catholic doctrine.⁷ At the same time, this study might contribute to the ongoing discussion by bringing in elements that could be relevant and perhaps open horizons in the ecumenical dialogue on a common understanding of a doctrine of the Church.⁸ In order to grasp properly Luther’s understanding of universal priesthood, I will first discuss his way of doing theology, the consequences of his approach and the basic assumptions for the theological discourse (par. 1 prolegomena). Then I will briefly describe Luther’s experience of salvation (par. 2), which forms the basis for his theological framework of the relationship between God and humans (par. 3). Furthermore, I will discuss the way Luther conceived the priesthood common to all believers;⁹ its greatness and limits (par. 4) and end with some concluding remarks.

⁵ Cfr. VATICAN COUNCIL II, Dogm. const. *Lumen gentium* [LG], n.10. Both the ministerial and common priesthood are forms of participation in Christ’s one priesthood, but each in an own and essentially different way.

⁶ W. HERING, *Zwischen Gott und Welt. Anmerkungen zum Priestertum aller Gläubigen*, «Deutschen Pfarrerblatt» 1 (2009) 1. See also BARTH, *Einander Priester sein*, 29 and R. MUTHIAH, *Christian Practices, Congregational Leadership and the Priesthood*, «Journal of Religious Leadership» 2 (2003) 167–203.

⁷ Cfr. LG 10.

⁸ Cfr. LUTHERAN-ROMAN CATHOLIC COMMISSION, Report *From Conflict to Communion* (2013), n. 211.

⁹ General biography on Luther’s priesthood of all believers: F. BRAVO, *El sacerdocio común de los creyentes en la teología de Lutero*, Editorial Eset, Vitoria 1963; C. EASTWOOD, *The Priesthood of All Believers. An Examination of the Doctrine of All Believers from the Reformation to the Present Day*, Epworth, London 1960; H. GOERTZ, *Allgemeines Priestertum und ordiniertes Amt bei Luther*, Elwert, Marburg 1997; P. O’CALLAGHAN, *God and Mediation, Retrospective Appraisal of Luther the Reformer*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2017; H.J. VOSS, *The priesthood of all believers and the mission Dei: A canonical, catholic and contextual perspective*, Wheaton, Illinois 2013.

I. PROLEGOMENA

Luther's theology is profoundly existential: the point of departure for doing theology is his personal experience,¹⁰ i.e. that of forgiveness of sins and salvation in a personal encounter with the triune God. In this experience Luther discovered that faith alone in Jesus Christ and personal adherence to him makes a human being just before God; salvation is a pure gift from God without any reciprocity on the part of humans.¹¹ Luther firmly grounded this existential discovery in Scripture, especially in the letters of St. Paul, the Gospel of St. John and the Psalter. This profound personal conviction provided him with a hermeneutical key to the whole Scripture, thoroughly scrutinising it for its affirmation.¹² Luther took his own spiritual experience and conviction as a firm basis for the interpretation of his relationship with God, making it paradigmatic and normative for each authentic religious experience.¹³ This personal experience with God caused Luther to reframe the relationship between God and humans in its essence. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is to be regarded as fundamental in Luther's doctrine and spirituality; it shapes his thought on all other issues.¹⁴

Due to the fact that Luther's approach to theology was thoroughly existential, also our way of proceeding in this article should be 'existential'. This means, firstly, that in order to understand Luther's experience with God and to grasp his *forma mentis*, it is not enough to read and listen what Luther says, how he says it and why he says it, but it is actually necessary to live—as it were—his experience of redemption in Christ and his encounter with God the Father through the Holy Spirit oneself. One should try to share his feelings, his way of seeing and perceiving reality, and endeavour to make them one's own, for this is the best—or perhaps even the only—way to establish a meaningful dialogue with him. Secondly, Dr. Luther's theological views are to be properly interpreted, above all, in the light of the life and experiences of Dr. Martin Luther himself, while

¹⁰ Cfr. EASTWOOD, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 10.

¹¹ According to Hamm, this is the essential characteristic of Luther's theology, B. HAMM, *Martin Luther's Revolutionary Theology of Pure Gift without Reciprocation*, «Lutheran Quarterly» XXIX (2015) 125–161.

¹² Cfr. R. GARCÍA VILLOSLADA, *Martin Lutero*, I, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, Madrid 1976, 228.

¹³ LW 39:249, «[...] whoever does not accept my teaching may not be saved—for it is God's and not mine. Therefore, my judgement is also not mine but God's». See also LW 45:347–348, «And I wish to assure you and declare to you frankly and openly that he who heeds me in this matter is most certainly not heeding me but Christ; and he who gives me no heed is despising not me, but Christ (Lk 10:16)».

¹⁴ Cfr. A. GARUTI, *Primacy of the Bishop of Rome and Ecumenical Dialogue*, Ignatius press, San Francisco 2004, 87.

the contrary is valid as well: the internal mutual relationships between Luther's theological positions and views, shed light upon his experiences, motivations and intentions. It seems, therefore, that the most adequate approach to Luther's theology and spirituality is realist phenomenology;¹⁵ the study of (Christian) phenomena such as they are given to us in reality, trying to discover their essences by confronting these experiences with—and in that same—reality, comparing them to and distinguishing them from similar phenomena. The realist phenomenological approach proposes to investigate thoroughly by rational inquiry the content of these phenomena, like sin, faith, contrition, mercy, forgiveness, salvation, sanctification, love, sacrifice, church, the communion of saints, solidarity, priesthood, etc., as experienced by humans in relation to God and others. However, Luther himself excluded from the very start this way of proceeding. After all, human reason, since it is part of the corrupted human nature, cannot know reality and can never be trusted.¹⁶ Luther allowed only one possible path for true knowledge of God's Revelation: the experience of the paradox of Christ on the cross; *theologia crucis*.¹⁷ He established as a hermeneutical and gnostic principle that God shows himself only and always as the exact opposite of human reality (*sub contraria specie*).¹⁸ God exclusively shows himself and his most intimate being to us where we do not expect it: in weakness, fragility, suffering

¹⁵ Realist phenomenology was developed in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century by young philosophers who gathered around Edmund Husserl. Inspired by the publication of his *Logical Investigations* (1900–1901), where he sought to refute the errors of Anglo-Saxon empiricism and Kantian transcendentalism by arguing that the essences of phenomena are given in experience and open to rational inquiry, these young men and women adopted the slogan “*Zurück nach die Sachen selbst*” (“Back to the things themselves”). Among these young realist phenomenologists were Max Scheler, Adolf Reinach, Alexander Pfänder, Dietrich von Hildebrand, Edith Stein, Hedwig Conrad-Martius and Roman Ingarden. Cfr. A.A.M. KINNEGING, *Realist Phenomenology and the foundations of natural law: the vindication of the moral order in the works of Scheler, Hartmann and Hildebrand*, «American Journal of Jurisprudence» 46 (2001) 257–276 and A. MACINTYRE, *Edith Stein, A Philosophical Prologue*, Continuum, London – New York 2006, 19–28.

¹⁶ See for Luther's complex relationship with ‘reality’ the work of Hubertus Blaumeiser. H. BLAUMEISER, *Martin Luther's Kreuzestheologie: Schlüssel zu einer Deutung von Mensch und Wirklichkeit; eine Untersuchung anhand der Operationes in Psalmos (1519–1521)*, Bonifatius, Paderborn 1995.

¹⁷ «*Ergo in Christo crucifixo est vera theologia et cognitio Dei*» (Thesis 20, Heidelberg Dispute of 1518). It was Walther von Loewenich, who first showed the importance of this hermeneutical principle in Luther's theological framework (*Luther's theologia crucis*, 1929), Cfr. BLAUMEISER, *Martin Luther's Kreuzestheologie*, 73.

¹⁸ Cfr. P. ALTHAUS, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1966, 34: «The theology of the cross means that God hides himself in his work of salvation and that he acts and creates paradoxically while camouflaging his work to make it look as though he were doing the opposite. This is precisely what God characterises».

and the scandal of the cross.¹⁹ Radical paradox, and thus dialectics, is essential to Luther's way of thinking about God and humans.²⁰ We can grasp God and true reality only 'in faith' and—as a matter of principle—not 'in reality', for in the temporal earthly sphere of common experiences, sinful humans are always deceived. 'True spiritual reality' grasped in faith is *always* the exact opposite of the reality as it appears to us in the temporal earthly sphere: the 'false or apparent reality', as grasped by human reason.²¹ Therefore, the act of faith *in itself* for Luther seems to include the rejection of human reason as such and the 'reality' as experienced by human reason, disqualifying it as mere false appearances.²² The realist phenomenological method supposes that human reasoning is capable to discover the essences of (Christian) phenomena, such as they are given to us in experience. The basic attitude towards phenomena is of trust and confidence in the goodness of God, who wants to be discovered by humans also in a rational way. At the same time it is true that humans are hurt by original and personal sin, a datum that undoubtedly must be taken into account while exercising (realist phenomenological) theology. Humans can err and do have to rely on God's grace to ascertain true knowledge of God and humans. However, a positive valuation of the capabilities of humans to grasp these realities, should not exclude human reason, but be open to its purification and elevation, also in the temporal earthly sphere of common experiences.

¹⁹ Cfr. BLAUMEISER, *Martin Luther's Kreuzestheologie*, 469; GARCÍA VILLOSLADA, *Martin Lutero*, I, 363–65; ALTHAUS, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 25.

²⁰ This way of framing has two major effects. Besides distrusting one's natural capacities to know God 'from below', i.e. from the created world towards the Creator by way of natural theology, this principle also establishes a fundamental distrust in Revelation itself, i.e. in the way God reveals himself to humans. After all, it presupposes that God *never* shows himself in normal ordinary circumstances in a form adequate to human understanding, but *always*—apparently to tempt humans—under an opposite form to provoke an act of faith. The normality of the life of Jesus on earth and his humanity is lost out of sight.

²¹ ALTHAUS, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 32–33: «Judged by the standards of reason and experience (of the world), true reality is unreal, and its exact opposite is real. Only faith can apprehend that true and paradoxical reality. To believe means to live in constant contradiction of empirical reality and to trust oneself to that which is hidden. Faith must endure being contradicted by reality and experience; and it must break through the reality of this world by fixing its sights on the world of the promise». See also BLAUMEISER, *Martin Luther's Kreuzestheologie*, 449.

²² One could argue that Luther does not reject reason as such but required that it should be illuminated by faith. However, Luther's concept of faith appears not very helpful, because it seems not to illuminate, but rather the contrary, it 'makes clear' that humans are capable of nothing in their relationship with God and only have to rely on Christ and trust in God's promises.

II. LUTHER'S EXPERIENCE OF SALVATION

Martin Luther (1483–1546) was a theologian and teacher, but, above all, he was a fervent believer with a deeply religious nature and a special sensibility to the existence of sin. Luther's ideal and main concern were to please the Lord; his greatest desire—turning often into anxiety—was that God would look upon him favourably.²³ Luther had, therefore, a keen interest in the issue of his salvation. His primordial question was: how do I know for certain that I am saved? By taking his vows and becoming a monk, he had entered the spiritual estate and formed part of the *elite* of Christendom. He had tried everything and had followed every advice of his spiritual directors to please the Lord and to become holy.²⁴ Yet, he still experienced sin in his life. After all his efforts, mortification and penance, he regarded—and felt—himself to be a great sinner, that he could not be propitious to God at all and that it was impossible for him to comply perfectly God's law by himself. Around 1515 his deeply felt longing for salvation was resolved. While studying the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans in his room in the tower, Luther finally learned and experienced—the so-called *Türmerlebnis*—that salvation was not the consequence of any human works, but solely a consequence of faith in Jesus Christ.²⁵ Jesus Christ has saved us by his sacrifice on the cross, once and for all. For Luther, this experience was not just an experience of consolation, but he thought of it as a real conversion from his former erroneous 'pelagian' concept of the Gospel trusting exclusively in one's works to the 'true' version of the Gospel, which is that God is merciful, if you only have faith in Christ.²⁶ Humans cannot rely on works, because they are sinful and therefore «we cannot find any consolation in them».²⁷ Above all things, Fr. Martin yearned for certainty in his relationship with God. The kind of certainty he was longing for was not just moral certainty about whether one is walking on the right path and doing—or trying to do—God's will, but rather he was looking for what we could call

²³ LW 54:75, table talk n. 461, «Beware of melancholy, for it is forbidden by God because it is so destructive for the body. Our Lord has commanded to be cheerful. In this world sadness generally springs from money, honour, study, etc. My temptation is this, that I think that I don't have a gracious God. This is [because I am still caught up in] the law». Cfr. GARCÍA VILLOSLADA, *Martin Lutero*, I, 143–144.

²⁴ Cfr. C. METHUEN, *Luther's life*, in R. KOLB, I. DINGEL, L. BATKA (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, 7–27, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, 8.

²⁵ Cfr. EASTWOOD, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 10. Eastwood points out that this was no mere academic conclusion, but Luther's personal history.

²⁶ HAMM, *Martin Luther's Revolutionary Theology of Pure Gift*, 147; cfr. LW 48:12; LW 54:75.

²⁷ Luther once remarked: «After confession and the celebration of the Mass I was never able to find rest in my heart, for the conscience cannot have sure comfort on the basis of works», LW 5:157.

eschatological certainty; the certainty of his salvation and destiny after earthly life. In order to obtain this kind of certainty, Luther put the emphasis on his relationship with God decisively on God's role to such an extent that his own role was minimised and reduced to nothing.²⁸ In this way, he safeguarded and secured the absolute primacy of God in relation to humans, who totally depend upon God, and at the same time, he established a firm basis for certain knowledge of his salvation, which could be paraphrased along the lines of Descartes' famous adage *Cogito, ergo sum* as *Credo, ergo sum salvus*. For only if God takes care of everything,²⁹ and humans have no role to play whatsoever, believers can be sure that everything in their relationship with God is well.³⁰

III. LUTHER'S THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Luther's theological framework is based on the feature that each believer has direct and immediate eschatological access to God the Father in Christ by the Holy Spirit to obtain personal eschatological certainty. In order to minimise the human part and role in their relationship with God, Luther deemed it necessary—rather paradoxically—to grant every believer this 'direct and immediate access' to God, which feature is closely connected with the priesthood of all believers.³¹ After all, only in this way, no believer depends on any other corrupt human being and any false human realities, but only and directly on God. Therefore, all believers are priests so that everyone for oneself may learn and hear directly and

²⁸ LW 26:66, «[...], I attribute everything solely to God and nothing at all to men. [...] Still my doctrine is one that preaches and worships God alone, and it condemns the righteousness and wisdom of all men. Here I cannot go wrong, for both to God and to men I ascribe what properly and truly belongs to each».

²⁹ Cfr. ALTHAUS, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 107: «God who causes all things is also the only causal agent. For the agent who really works in all things is God, and not the personal and impersonal powers of the world which we think of as causes. [...] They are only tools which he uses in the service of his own autonomous, free, and exclusive working; they are the masks under which he hides his activity». Cfr. LW 45:331: «Indeed, one could very well say that the course of the world, and especially the doing of his saints, are God's mask, under which he conceals himself and so marvellously exercises dominion and introduces disorder in the world».

³⁰ LW 33:289, «But now, since God has taken my salvation out of my hands into his, making it depend on his choice and not mine, and has promised to save me, not by my own work or exertion but by his grace and mercy, I am assured and certain [...]».

³¹ «Every priest (Heb 5:1) is appointed in order that he might pray for the people and preach. Thus every Christian in his own may pray in Christ and have access to God (Rom 5:2) [...]. Thus every Christian is himself taught and instructed by God (Isa 54:13): 'And I will grant that all your children shall be taught by God'. [...] Hence, it comes that Christ says in Jn 6:45: It is written in the prophets, *And they shall all be taught by God*» LW 36:138–139. Cfr. VOSS, *The priesthood of all believers and the mission Dei*, 205.

immediately, anytime and anywhere from the triune God the Word that they are definitely saved.³²

Luther seemed to have paid a high price for this kind of certainty. By framing the paradigmatic experience of his salvation as a direct and immediate eschatological access to God the Father, he also reframed the whole relationship between God and humans. In Luther, the centre of gravity in the human relationship with God changed and shifted to the believer's eschatological situation of direct and immediate access before God, which becomes the paradigmatic 'situation' of all believing Christians, here and now, while they are still travelling in the temporal earthly sphere. The consequences of this way of framing are tremendous, but in this paragraph I will only discuss three main features of Luther's framework of the relationship between God and humans.³³

a) Dialectical and exclusive relationship

Firstly, essential to Luther's way of proceeding is establishing a fundamental opposition between God and humans, which—during human earthly existence—is never overcome. This opposition is therefore not only dialectical, but also exclusive. This is expressed in the famous formula—which is the answer to the question of human salvation—: *sola fide, sola gratia, sola scriptura, solo Christo et solo Deo*. These affirmations are dialectically opposed to humans and their realities, such as human works, human reason (philosophy), magisterium and tradition, roman priesthood (pope, bishops and clergy) and religious life. The reductionism follows from and is expressed in the word *solus*. As we have seen, paradox and dialectics play an essential role in Luther's doctrinal framework, which not only contains a radical opposition between God and humans, but—as logical consequence thereof—also implies a separation between the sphere of 'the experience of faith' on the one hand and the sphere of 'temporal earthly experience' on the other. The latter has to be denied in order to make room for faith. Thus, Luther created two kinds of experiences, which are *per definitionem* in conflict with and radically opposed to each other; the reasonable experience of human reality, which is always false and the experience of faith that gives humans 'true spiritual reality'.

³² ALTHAUS, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 16, «'Inner' knowledge about how God the Father really feels about us is given by the Holy Spirit and the incarnation. Knowledge of the Trinity includes knowledge of the incarnation of the Second Person, and it is this knowledge of the incarnation, which teaches us how God feels about us in his heart».

³³ For a more extensive discussion I refer to my doctoral dissertation *Greatness and Limits of Common Priesthood in 16th Century Reformed Theology. A Realist Phenomenological Study of the Common Priesthood in Luther and Calvin from a Roman Catholic Perspective*, Pontificia Università della Santa Croce, Roma 2019.

b) Subjective act of faith

Secondly, the believer's experience of salvation and faith in Christ is a personal one, but merely subjective.³⁴ The two separate spheres, the 'true spiritual reality' on the one hand, and on the other the 'false apparent reality of common experience', always seem to run completely parallel to—without ever touching—each other. The two spheres are inverted exclusively in the believers' mind by a subjective act of faith, since *for the believer*, and only for him, 'spiritual things'—like salvation and holiness—become 'true spiritual reality' and 'false apparent reality'—like sin—becomes its opposite in the sphere of 'true spiritual reality': God's glory.³⁵ Since all the emphasis on the relation between God and the believer is laid upon the act of faith by the believing subject, the phenomena of 'hope' and 'love' seem to dissolve into the concept of 'faith'. For Luther, 'hope' and 'love' leave too much room for uncertainty.

c) Passivity towards God

Thirdly, in Luther's experience and framework, humans *per definition* cannot give anything to God, for allowing this would increase the human role in their mutual relationship and consequently decrease the believers' certainty of salvation. The issue here is not the evident fact that humans have received everything as a free gift of grace from God by creation and redemption, but rather to which extent humans, in their capacity as redeemed creatures and children of God are capable to give freely—with God's aid—back to God what they have received from him, and in this way could cooperate—and thus love—with Christ in the temporal earthly sphere of common experience. For Luther, it is far too risky to give humans any role—even a small one—in the temporal earthly sphere towards God.³⁶ He deemed it safer to move around exclusively in the sphere of faith, denying any human role in, and thus withdrawing from, the sphere of temporal earthly existence.³⁷

³⁴ ALTHAUS, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 115, «man can never reach the objective view but must always—being a creature and not the Creator—remain in his subjective views».

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 118–119: for Luther, «God always creates *ex nihilo* and out of its opposite. God creates life out of death, righteousness out of sin, exaltation out of humiliation. Confessing faith in the Creator thus means confessing one's own inability and that one expects everything from God alone». Cfr. *ibidem*, 142, «Making sin great is inseparably connected with exalting and praising grace».

³⁶ LW 26:66: «Furthermore, it is much safer to ascribe too much to God than to men».

³⁷ This attitude is also reflected in Luther's writing against Erasmus, *De servo arbitrio* (1525), after having argued against human free will, at the end of his writing, Luther stated the following: «For my own part, I frankly confess that even if it were possible, I should not wish to have free

In short, the foregoing implies—and that was the price Luther paid for his eschatological certainty—that a communion between God and humans in this temporal earthly sphere seems hardly possible. Even more, it appears that in Luther's framework, the human recognition that communion between Christ and the believer *in the temporal earthly sphere* is not possible, constitutes a prerequisite for the believer's salvation *in faith*, or better, the believer's *certainty* of salvation in faith.

IV. GREATNESS AND LIMITS OF COMMON PRIESTHOOD

a) Greatness

It is important to realise that for Luther 'immediate and direct access' did not only mean a right of the believer to appear before God's throne, but also entails an obligation for each believer to stand before God face to face, here and now. Thus, while standing in faith before God's throne, believers find themselves simultaneously in the world, where they are or are supposed to be holy and acceptable to God in all they do. It follows that all Christians must be perfectly holy and are called at each moment in life to the highest form of contemplation, i.e. holiness in the midst of the world, while standing before a judging God. Each Christian possesses the same authority and responsibility, to be exercised in the midst of the world in all daily activities.³⁸ All believers have a common dignity (baptism) and only differ as to the function, which they exercise in the world, whether church, household or state. For Luther, each ministry is a divine calling, a gift and a service as any other service. There are no fundamental differences as to the persons who exercise the different ministries or as to the content of these ministries. Whether shoemaker, pastor or civil servant, all

choice given to me, or to have anything left in my own hands by which I might strive toward salvation. For, on the one hand, I should be unable to stand firm and keep hold of it amid so many adversities and perils and so many assaults of demons, seeing that even one demon is mightier than all men, and that no man at all could be saved; and on the other hand, even if there were no perils or adversities or demons, I should nevertheless have to labour *under perpetual uncertainty* and to fight as one beating the air (1 Cor 9:26), since even if I lived and worked to eternity, my conscience would never be *assured and certain* how much it ought to do to satisfy God», LW 33:288–289, italics added.

³⁸ LW 24:243: «This not only praises our works as good fruit on earth, but it also elevates them toward heaven and offers them to God as sacrifices acceptable to Him for His special honour and His highest service. How could a Christian life be extolled more? And how could a person be urged and exhorted more strongly to live a Christian life than by the prospect of bearing such fruit, of serving such a purpose, and of enjoying such honour with God?».

equally honour God through their work.³⁹ This is the greatness of Christian life and priesthood.

The theological manoeuvre to grant each believer ‘direct and immediate access’ to God is in part revealing, for it shows true things, like the fact that we are all sinners and we really do totally depend on God, and that all humans are equal when standing before God’s throne. However, apart from re-discovering and highlighting the greatness of common priesthood, this manoeuvre also causes confusion and disillusion, simply because believers are not yet standing directly before God’s throne to hear God’s definitive verdict over their lives and actions. Luther was so anxious to hear God’s positive and definitive verdict now that he anticipated particular judgement and the definitive reception of eschatological benefits.⁴⁰ Luther prematurely identified the world (the profane) with the sacred,⁴¹ which resulted in an important shift in the focus and attention in the life and spirituality of Christians. Luther saw himself forced by the reality of space and time to harmonise his spiritual experience of anticipated eschatological redemption in faith with that of the temporal earthly sphere in which believers are still travelling.

b) Limits

Although Luther—by situating the believer in faith directly before God’s throne—touched upon the greatness of common priesthood, yet at the same time, he put certain limitations on the common priesthood in the temporal earthly sphere, conditioning the possibilities for believers to reach this contemplation in the world and to effectively perform spiritual sacrifices agreeable to God. Hereunder, I discuss briefly the following limitations of the common priesthood in the tempo-

³⁹ M. LUTHER, *Reformation Writings*, I, 116. «A shoemaker, a smith, a farmer, each has his manual occupation and work; and yet, at the same time, all are eligible to act as priests and bishops. Every one of them in his occupation or handicraft ought to be useful to his fellows and serve them in such a way that the various trades are all directed to the best advantage of the community, and promote the well-being of body and soul, just as the organs of the body serve each other».

⁴⁰ HAMM, *Martin Luther’s Revolutionary Theology of Pure Gift*, 141–142, «At the time of his lectures on Romans (1515–1516), Luther had already broken with this catholic model of the road to heaven and its gradualism. For him the moment of justification and the moment of acceptance of salvation no longer fall to pieces. Instead, they come together in a single moment, in that he fundamentally rejects the reigning thinking regarding gifts, conditions, and causality. He is now convinced that in justification the final acceptance of the sinner into eternal blessedness has already happened—an unconditional acceptance of human beings apart from any qualities or morality of their sanctified lives».

⁴¹ According to Charles Taylor, «the two spheres are collapsed into each other». C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, Belknap Press, Cambridge, London 2007, 266.

ral earthly sphere: a) the limitation of Christ's priesthood and sacrifice, followed by b) the intent to separate Christ's sacrifice from the sacrifices of the believers, c) a shift from self-giving to self-denial, d) an exclusive focus on the world and, finally, e) the oblivion of the believers' task to consecrate the world to God.

c) Limitation of Christ's priesthood and sacrifice

Luther put a limit on the continuation of Christ's priestly office. To understand how Christ, according to Luther, continues his priestly function after his ascension into heaven, we have to take into account the separation between the believer's experiences in the temporal earthly sphere and their seemingly opposite experiences in the spiritual sphere of faith. In the temporal earthly sphere Christ has redeemed humans by his historical sacrifice on the cross. In reality—or in this sphere—Christ is the only Mediator capable, because totally free of sin, to redeem humans, and being the true priest, he has performed the one-and-only true priestly sacrifice on the cross once and for all. Therefore, it is not necessary anymore for believers to sacrifice, or at least not in the way Christ did. Christ's real sacrifice is over and belongs to the past and collective memory of humans. In the reformer's spiritual sphere of interior faith, Christ continues his redemptive work by interceding for humans to the Father not to pay attention to their sins and wretchedness in the temporal earthly sphere. Christ only continues his priestly work on earth directly *in* and *from* heaven, which is accessible for each believer individually by a personal act of faith by means of the Holy Spirit, who brings the believer in direct contact with Christ and God the Father.

d) Separation between Christ's sacrifice and the believers' offerings

As a matter of principle, believers do not participate in Christ's sacrifice in the temporal earthly sphere. Luther endeavoured to separate the believers' sacrifices from Christ's eternal sacrifice.⁴² Although he does speak of 'sacrifice' in connection to the priesthood, this is mainly to carefully distinguish the believer's 'offering up of oneself' from Christ's (real earthly) sacrifice on the cross. Since Christ's sacrifice does not continue in the temporal earthly sphere, nor are the believers' sacrifices united to Christ's heavenly offering,⁴³ the believers' sacrifices become an

⁴² LW 13:328, «Christ's merit and sacrifice stands in contradiction to my sacrifice and work. Only one can be valid: either Christ's or my own».

⁴³ Luther explicitly considered that Christ also 'continues to offer himself to God the Father in heaven for the believers', but in Luther's own interior experience of his encounter with Christ and direct access before the Father, it seemed that Christ nonetheless did not unite Luther's sacrifices to his own heavenly offering (cfr. LW 35:94–103). The reason for this seems to be that Luther

imitation of a past example; these sacrifices cannot be united to Christ's sacrifice in the temporal earthly sphere—only in a moral sense of solidarity—and they do therefore not have any redemptive value. In other words, believers can intercede, give thanks and praise in Christ, but they do not offer up their sacrifices in Christ; they 'merely' perform these acts as an imitation of his example.⁴⁴ It follows that believers, according to Luther, although 'priests' and doing 'good works' in Christ, do not enjoy the priestly privilege of being co-redeemers in and with Christ for their sacrifices are separated from Christ's sacrifice.

e) A shift from self-giving to self-denial

While standing directly before God the Father in Christ, believers experience their nothingness and feel that they are not capable of giving anything back to God, other than their nothingness. Within this frame,—which seems to regard believers just by themselves—, the centre of gravity and attention of the believers' sacrifices shift from self-giving (love) to self-denial. Since believers apparently are standing before God on their own, although next to Christ, they are not capable to give themselves like Christ did, but only to deny themselves and trust on the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice and God the Father's promise and leniency.⁴⁵ This implies that in Luther's view, believers not only *don't have to* give anything back to God,⁴⁶ but they fundamentally lack any possibility to give anything back to him. This shift becomes manifest in the fact in Luther's spirituality praise, thanksgiving, intercessory prayer and service to neighbour are considered sacrifices in the sense that these acts necessarily imply acknowledgement of God and neighbour and denial of oneself. However, thanksgiving and praise are acts, which in themselves, are not sacrifices, but rather indicate the purpose or motive of the underlying

'felt' himself and regarded all that he had to offer as completely sinful and thus unworthy to be offered up by Christ to God the Father.

⁴⁴ Luther employed various arguments to prevent believers from uniting their sacrifices to Christ's sacrifice: i) it is not possible because the sacrifice belongs to the past, ii) believers can't because they are sinful, iii) it is also not necessary anymore for Christ has done it for you, thus iv) it would be ungrateful, blasphemous and even arrogant. These arguments, however, do not seem to hinder Luther from recognising that believers can be co-operators with God on the level of creation, sharing in his divine creative attributes in the governance and rule of the world.

⁴⁵ Hamm described Luther's experience of God's saving Word as follows: «In the midst of their sin human beings receive God's acquittal: 'For me [God the Father] you are for Christ's sake righteous and saved, not simply righteous now and one day saved, but already now—before you have or do anything good and apart from having to provide some ability, gift, merit or satisfaction—I give to you my fullest blessing and accept you into my blessedness. Let it be said to you and trust it!'. ».
HAMM, *Martin Luther's Revolutionary Theology of Pure Gift*, 142.

⁴⁶ Cfr. *ibidem*, 143.

act of self-giving: gratitude or praise. Self-denial (humility) is a condition for sacrificing (love), but not its essence. It thus appears that in Luther's spirituality, the act of self-denial is seen in dialectical opposition to praising and thanking God; in the very act of confessing one's nothingness and sinfulness, the believer praises God. Due to the frame that a believer cannot give anything back to God—even not in Christ—love, gratitude and praise seem to be seriously hindered and perhaps even impeded. Recently Paul O'Callaghan argued, in order to show that grace heals human sinful nature (his deeply rooted ingratitude), that—although according to Lutheran theology humans do not respond to grace by 'giving' anything back to God but by being grateful to him for the gifts received—, this response is nevertheless a truly human action, which also can be refused to carry out.⁴⁷ It seems to me that the response of gratitude to God's gifts can only be considered a truly human action if humans are deemed capable in Christ to give themselves and their received gifts back to God.

Due to this shift in perspective, mortification and penance in Luther's spirituality are not seen as manifestations of self-giving love, but they are foremost regarded as the believer's duty as sinner in order to struggle against his sinful nature and being in order to comply with the Decalogue and in this way obey God's will. Due to the framing that believers are supposed to imitate Christ and to carry the cross but separated from Christ and his sacrifice in the temporal earthly sphere, the meaning of the cross and suffering in the lives of believers alters. Christ's invitation to become his disciple and to follow him by bearing the cross (cfr. Mt 16:24; Mc 8:34) is lost out of sight and the focus shifts towards the mandatory character of the cross bearing as God's necessary instrument to conform believers to Christ: believers have to endure the cross and suffering to withstand the temptations of the devil to test their faith: it is this faith which saves them.⁴⁸

f) Exclusive focus on the world

All Christians are equal before God's throne. This claim—without taking sufficiently into account that we are still travelling—, has profoundly changed the

⁴⁷ P. O'CALLAGHAN, *Luther and 'sola gratia': The Rapport between Grace, Human Freedom, Good Works and Moral Life*, «Scripta Theologica» 49 (2017) 201.

⁴⁸ Moreover, this way of framing seems to lead to an inconsistency; after all, Luther had reproached the Roman Catholic Church for exactly this issue: the allegation that Catholics performed self-righteous works of their own and on their own, thus without Christ. However, by presenting human cross bearing and suffering in this way, i.e. disconnected from the substance of Christ's redemptive sacrifice, Luther himself also ran the risk of performing these works without Christ and thus on his own.

view of how Christians live the tension between the world (the profane) and God (the sacred). Luther has tried to eliminate the differences between the different vocations and states of life. Whereas the medieval view had resulted in an equilibrium in the tension between the radical demands of holiness and ordinary human flourishing,—people could ‘travel at different speeds’, in various states or walks of life: religious, clergy or lay Christians—, Luther, however, could not agree with this discrimination, and did away with this order altogether, in favour of lay Christians, who became the model of the saint in the midst of the world.⁴⁹

Thus, Luther’s framework does not provide for the possibility that the believers offer sacrifices directly to God in Christ. The believer can do so only indirectly through service to neighbours, which would be the only way to please the Lord. This way of framing implies an exclusive focus on the world, since according to Luther, a believer could not ‘leave’ the world or renounce matrimony (i.e. for sake of the heavenly kingdom) to please the Lord. God apparently does not or cannot ask this of humans—no doubt related to Luther’s view of the corrupt human condition—, but God would only sanctify humans directly in the midst of the world. For Luther, ‘leaving’ the world and renouncing matrimony is ungrateful and a form of escaping the tasks and duties in the world, through which humans cooperate with God’s creative power in building up the world.⁵⁰

g) Oblivion of the task to bring back the world to God

Christ became our priest to reconcile the world with God and to bring it back to God (cfr. Eph 1:10). Christians somehow participate in Christ’s priesthood precisely in order to cooperate with this mission. However, Luther—despite of the exclusive focus on the world and the intent to ‘spiritualise’ the laity by pointing out that believers are co-operators with God in the governance and rule of the world—seems to have ignored the task of Christians to perfect the world in Christ and to bring it back to God. Due to his framework in which the believer is situated directly and immediately before God’s throne, this aspect of the common priesthood appears to have fallen outside the scope of his radar.

⁴⁹ Cfr. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, 45.

⁵⁰ J. SCHWANKE, *Luther’s theology of creation*, in R. KOLB, I. DINGEL, L. BATKA (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, 209: «For Luther, the government and rule of human beings is grounded in the fact that God does not keep the power of creation for himself [...]. As a God who shares himself with his creatures without reservation, God gives human beings a share in the divine attributes [...]. With this gift of God’s participation and the resulting participation of the human being, a marvellous cooperation of divine and human energies takes place in the strictest sense: God gives himself into human hands, into human mouths, gives human beings divine creative attributes, and therewith a share in God’s own work».

So Luther recognised that believers—being creatures of God—could ‘cooperate’ with him on the natural plane of creation, but refused to accept any human cooperation with respect to redemption, i.e. on the supernatural plane. As we have seen already, this theological position leads to the result that humans can use the gifts of creation to build up the world, but that they cannot give these gifts and the world back to God. Believers, instead, praise and thank the Lord for the gifts of creation they have received, but they feel unworthy to give them back to God. It seems thus that work, service to neighbour and spiritual sacrifices are done by believers, not out of love (self-giving), but positively—being justified—out of gratitude and to praise God and, negatively—being a sinner—as self-denial and out of duty of ascetical mortification to comply with the Decalogue (obedience).⁵¹ Work and perfection of creation as such do not have in Luther’s theology any intrinsic sanctifying value.⁵² In Luther’s spirituality the focus shifted in the understanding and exercise of the believers’ priesthood; believers use the goods of the world out of gratitude, praise, service to neighbour, or out of mortification, but their priesthood does not include the capacity to bring back the world in Christ to God the Father.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

For Luther the core of universal priesthood is the capacity and obligation of all believers to appear in faith directly before God’s throne in heaven to hear their definitive verdict. At the same time Luther emphasised that believers are not worthy to offer anything to God and perform any good works by themselves. In this view, although touching upon the greatness of common priesthood and holiness in the midst of the world, believers seem to have no possibility—in the temporal earthly sphere, nor in the heavenly spiritual sphere—to join their works, sufferings and human realities to Christ’s sacrifice, which hinders the exercise of common priesthood. Instead, Luther stressed the incompatibility of Christ’s work and sacrifice with any human work and sacrifice, in order to avoid any possible pride, arrogance and ingratitude on the part of believers. It followed that in the temporal earthly sphere communion between believers and Christ became impossible and the focus and attention in the understanding and exercise of the priesthood by all believers shifted from the act of self-giving (love) to God to the act of self-denial (humility), an act that is conceived in a dialectical opposition to praising and thanking God.

According to a Catholic understanding humans are capable—despite their misery and weaknesses—to be in sacramental communion with Christ, and in

⁵¹ BRAVO, *El sacerdocio común de los creyentes en la teología de Lutero*, 338.

⁵² Cfr. J.L. ILLANES, *La santificación del trabajo*, Palabra, Madrid 2001, 60–61.

this way able to participate in his priesthood and sacrifice in the temporal earthly sphere. The Catholic framework with a double form of participation in Christ's priesthood seeks to render Christ's eternal priesthood and sacrifice to the Father present on earth and to make the exercise of common priesthood by all believers possible by uniting their work and suffering to Christ's offering, not in order to obtain a 'right' into heaven, but out of love and gratitude. The Lutheran and Catholic frameworks differ in their basic concepts and attitudes, such as the way and nature of the believers' access to God, human freedom and capacity to give adequate responses to divine realities, the consequence of sin on human freedom, the need for absolute eschatological certainty in relation to filial confidence and hope and the possibility for believers to be in communion with Christ in the temporal earthly sphere. All these themes, ways of reasoning and underlying lines of thought—considered in their mutual and internal relationship—are important to include and deal with in the ecumenical dialogue in order to come to a satisfactory result. The greatness of the common priesthood of all believers could be a leading motive in the ecumenical dialogue.

ABSTRACT

In the context of 16th century Luther affirmed the radical equality of all believers; to obtain absolute certainty about one's eschatological destiny all believers have 'direct access' to God the Father in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. This situation of the believer standing in faith before God's heavenly throne to hear the definitive verdict is paradigmatic for Luther's vision on earthly priesthood. His theological and existential move touches upon the greatness of common priesthood; all believers are called at each moment and in the midst of the world to the highest form of contemplation and responsibility. Yet, at the same time, Luther put certain limits on the priesthood in the temporal earthly sphere, where believers cannot be united to Christ and his eternal sacrifice, but instead pray, give thanks and praise God in Christ.