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"Together at the Lord's Table": Reasons - Reactions - Reception

I. Separated at the Lord's table

The fact that Christians of different churches or confessions cannot celebrate the Lord's Supper or Eucharist together without restrictions is obvious and has been experienced as unsatisfactory not only in the present. Since the doctrinal differentiation of Christianity and the division into churches of different character, there have always been attempts to overcome it – even if ultimately largely unsuccessful.

Nevertheless, the separation of the churches was experienced as contradictory to the mission and witness of the church (John 17:21). The ecumenism decree of the Second Vatican Council of 1964 therefore already speaks in its "Preface" blatantly of a "scandal for the world" (Latin: "scandalo est mundo") – a characteristic that has been perpetuated since then in many church declarations, mostly without effect.

This "scandal" is particularly evident in the question of whether Christians of another church can officially participate in the celebration of the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist in a church that is not their own.

Already within the Reformation this was a serious problem for centuries, which could only be solved consensually in 1973 by the adoption of the "Leuenberg Agreement", insofar as agreement was reached on the understanding of the Lord's Supper and consequently pulpit and table fellowship was declared between the signed churches:

“18. In the Lord's Supper the risen Jesus Christ imparts himself in his body and blood, given up for all, through his word of promise with bread and wine. He thus gives himself unreservedly to all who receive the bread and wine; faith receives the Lord's Supper for salvation, unfaith for judgement.”

It is sometimes overlooked that there were parallel doctrinal discussions of varying status at the level of the Roman-Catholic Church und the Churches of Reformation and in the context of the World Council of Churches (WCC), which took up and sought to clarify major points of contention in the understanding of the Lord's Supper (such as the question of the Real Presence of Jesus Christ or the operative character of the Eucharist). However, none of these consultations were approved

by the official church and thus did not get beyond the stage of stimulating preliminary considerations.

In view of the situation of married couples of different churches, for example, this was a state of affairs that was difficult to justify in the long run: sharing life with one another, but separated at the Lord's table. The practice, experienced as unsatisfactory, urged a change in church theory - not the other way around!

In this context, the joint statement of the three ecumenical institutes in Strasbourg (France), Tübingen and Bensheim (Germany) "Communion is possible" marked an important milestone in 2003. In seven theses, a common understanding of the Lord's Supper and the Eucharist is developed and justified, despite all remaining differences, in order to draw consequences for practice:

"1. The granting of eucharistic hospitality finds a sufficient theological basis in the already available results of the ecumenical dialogue commissions. We call upon the churches to finally reflect on the results and to put them into practice.

2. Eucharistic hospitality is possible without first reaching complete agreement on the understanding of the Eucharist, ministry and church." [...]

But even this strong impulse remained limited in its effect to the circle of ecumenically interested theologians. At that time, the "Ecumenical Study Group of Protestant and Catholic Theologians" was already concerned with the attempt to justify, from the perspective of the various theological disciplines, the possibility of members of other churches participating in the Protestant celebration of the Lord's Supper or the Roman Catholic celebration of the Eucharist. Looking back, Prof. Volker Leppin, the Protestant scientific director of the Study Group from 2008 to 2021, describes the initial situation as follows:

"The development of the present study began about ten years ago. The starting point was the tension between the constantly repeated statement that ecumenism was stuck and the realization that many problems that seemed insurmountable in the church processes could long ago be seen as clarified at least to the extent that they no longer have to or may be seen as church-dividing and also not a compelling obstacle to the mutual recognition of the Lord's Supper."

Moreover, it had become clear,

"that ecumenical declarations cannot be content with theologically correct statements, but must also make it clear which concrete consequences can be drawn from them in a theologically responsible way."

II. The "Ecumenical Study Group" (EStG)

The foundation of the "Ecumenical Study Group of Protestant and Catholic Theologians" was due to a spiritual insight: The experience of a community in faith made during the Second World War, which first asks for the common Lord of the Church and not for the confessional origin and character, should not be theologically meaningless!

Against this background, since 1946, under the leadership of the Archbishop of Paderborn and later Cardinal Lorenz Jaeger, who himself came from a confessionally mixed marriage, and the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Oldenburg, Wilhelm Stählin, Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians met regularly in order to overcome the division of the church, which – as Cardinal Jaeger put it – *"once came about through theologians"*, through precise theological work: a noble and, in the pre-conciliar age of that time, almost utopian goal!

From the beginning, the Ecumenical Study Group saw itself as an independent body of theologians (later also of women theologians) and did not claim any overarching doctrinal authority of its own. Until the 1960s, it met in self-imposed discretion in order to enable an unbiased exchange among each other. It was not until 1963 that individual lectures held so far were published in an anthology and thus – in temporal proximity to the Second Vatican Council – brought to the attention of an interested public.

In the following years, at least two study projects met with a broader response and led to corresponding publications:

- a) First, "Lehrverurteilungen – kirchentrennend?" ("Doctrinal Condemnations – church-dividing?", 1986), which investigated the question of whether and to what extent the mutual condemnations of the 16th century in Western Christianity still affect the churches in the 20th century in the same way and

"whether, in view of the changed relationship of the churches and their members to each other, the church-dividing effect of the condemnation statements must still be maintained."

The Study Group believed it could deny this for good theological reasons.

- b) The other study was published in 2014: "Reformation 1517-2017. Ecumenical Perspectives." Here the members of the Study Group were concerned to sound out whether and how, in view of the long history of separation between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, a common

appreciation of the concern of the Reformation could be achieved. The special feature of this pronouncement, according to the academic directors, Prof. Volker Leppin (Tübingen, now Yale University) and Prof. Dorothea Sattler (Münster), lay in the following:

"In the multitude of opinions about the year of remembrance 2017 the EStG contributes something not happening in other places in this form: A synopsis of the historical reconstruction of the events in the 16th century in combination with fundamental questions of ecclesiology with the leading point of the need for reform and the capacity for reform of all churches. In the EStG there is consensus about this principal ecclesiological statement. It provides the basis for further scientific studies within the horizon of the contemporary challenges faced by ecumenism." (Reformation, 32)

The last sentence of the quotation leads directly and logically to the latest publication of the Study Group.

III. "Together at the Lord's Table"

In 2019, more than seventy years after its foundation and after about ten years of preliminary work (under the protectorate of Karl Cardinal Lehmann and me as well as under the academic direction of Prof. Dorothea Sattler and Prof. Volker Leppin) the EStG presented its statement "Together at the Lord's Table" as a manuscript.

The Study Group had deliberately taken up the challenge of saying something fundamental and common with regard to this central controversial theological topic. Undoubtedly, in the background of the efforts there was also the obvious distress of conscience of many people who live in a confessionally mixed marriage and who predominantly have to experience that, at least in the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant spouse has been or continues to be excluded from communion for a long time.

But quickly the members became aware that the question of mutual admission is not only limited to exceptional cases! Rather, if theology wants to do justice to the claim formulated by Cardinal Jaeger, it must be clarified in principle.

This prompted the representatives of the various theological disciplines to examine the doctrinal traditions of the Lord's Supper and the Eucharist from their own perspectives: exegetically, historically, liturgically, and dogmatically. The result of these analyses is summarized as follows:

"The Ecumenical Working Group of Protestant and Catholic Theologians considers the practice of mutual participation at the celebrations of the Holy

Communion / Eucharist, respecting each other's liturgical traditions, to be theologically well-founded. It is in particular a pastoral requirement for interdenominational families. Up to now, the solutions have been most unsatisfactory both in individual cases and as a general rule. Our current plea implies the recognition of the respective liturgical forms as well as the leadership ministry obtaining in the congregation which invites persons of other denominations baptised in the name of Jesus Christ to join in their service." (138)

This pointed statement was guided above all by insights from biblical scholarship. The participating exegetes were able to convincingly demonstrate how pluriform the testimony of the New Testament is with regard to the understanding of the Lord's Supper and its celebration in early Christianity:

"The New Testament texts open up various possibilities for conducting the Holy Communion / Eucharist. Even regarding the question of who presides, it is not possible to derive a rule directly from the texts of the New Testament. The proclamation of the Word of God, the communion of all who believe in Jesus Christ, prayer and song, blessing and thanksgiving are the constitutive components of the Holy Communion / Eucharist which can be justified by New Testament tradition. According to the New Testament, the congregations carry out all these actions in the face of their Lord Jesus Christ." (104)

This pluriformity is reflected in the different forms of the celebration of the Lord's Supper, so that one cannot assume an originally uniform understanding of the Lord's Supper, which in the course of historical development – as a deprivation – has distanced itself from its archetype. Rather,

"it is necessary to bid farewell to the idea that full content of the institution by Jesus Christ could be celebrated in a single form. This means, however, that one can recognise and accept in other traditions components, that are not to be found in one's own tradition. With regard to the Eastern Churches, the complementarity of liturgical celebrations is acknowledged." (108)

This historically founded insight does not lead to arbitrariness, but it demands all the more strongly the naming of similarities, insofar as one concedes or is convinced that the celebrations of the Lord's Supper and the Eucharist, although not identical, are similar in nature. To this end, the statement in the section "What can we say in common?" identifies six points (summarized by Prof. Leppin):

- "1. Christ is the inviter in the Lord's Supper.*
- 2. Although there may be disagreement about the exact conditions and circumstances, Christ is present in the Lord's Supper.*
- 3. In the Lord's Supper, Christ forgives our sin and establishes fellowship.*

4. *The celebration of the Lord's Supper requires physical and understanding participation.*

5) *It is presided over by an ordained person and should normally be celebrated in both form [= blessed bread resp. host and chalice].*

6. *It is always to be performed in a manner that brings out the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice on the cross according to Heb 10:10."*

It was also clear to the members of the Study Group that under this condition the question of the church ministry and its confessionally different understanding had to be addressed. Here too, however, it was believed that, even if there was not yet agreement, there were convergences. The mutual invitation to the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist does not have to fail because of the question of ministry:

"The common convictions regarding the origin, mission, characteristics and importance of the ministry for the unity of the Church concern fundamental definitions of the apostolicity of the ecclesial ministry. They dispel the Protestant reservations about the Roman Catholic view of the role of the ordained ministry and allow the Roman Catholic side to see that the ordained ministry in the Protestant churches serves to maintain the apostolic tradition. Faithfulness to the apostolic origin is not humanly guaranteed in the discipleship of Jesus Christ, but is rather a gift of the Spirit of God. It is crucial for the New Testament concept of the apostolate that people give public testimony to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and thus assume responsibility for the formation and maintenance of the Christian community. Since this is guaranteed both in the Roman Catholic Church and in the Protestant churches, no theological argument stands in the way of the mutual recognition of the apostolicity of ministries. Church ministries work in the power of the Spirit of God through the proclamation of the gospel in word and sacrament; the spiritual efficacy of the ministries which can be experienced and perceived by the fellowship of the baptised is the basis for spiritual judgment of the valency of the ministries." (132)

In addition to what the statement explicitly says, it is nevertheless important to note what it does *not* say:

It does not advocate a joint celebration of the Lord's Supper / Eucharist in the sense of intercelebration or intercommunion, but only a reciprocal invitation! Possibly in this respect the title of the statement "*Together at the Lord's Table*" is blurred, because it could awaken expectations which the text does not intend. For the time being, its intention remains limited, even if it goes beyond the existing doctrinal restrictions of the Roman Catholic Church.

And – in order to avoid further misunderstandings – it is not a matter of opening up a "pastorally" justified exception for individual cases in such a way that members of other churches can participate in the Catholic celebration of the

Eucharist without any need of conscience – and vice versa. No, the emphasis is clearly on the theologically justified prerequisite that, despite all ecclesial differences in the understanding of Eucharist / Lord's Supper, there is now a common basis which, after conscientious personal examination, makes it possible in principle for Christians to receive the Lord's Supper / Eucharist in the respective other church under the conditions governing there!

IV. Presentation

The statement of the Ecumenical Study Group was presented to the public – even before the German-English edition went to press – on September 11, 2019 by Prof. Dorothea Sattler and Prof. Volker Leppin as academic directors and the two episcopal chairmen, Bishop Georg Bätzing (Limburg) and Bishop Martin Hein (Kassel). The remarks at the press conference culminated in two top remarks:

Bishop Bätzing expressed expectations in view of reservations already to be suspected on the Roman Catholic side:

"The only thing I cannot imagine in the discussion process that is now beginning is an apodictic: not like that! Then I will ask back: how then? How else?"

And Prof. Leppin explicitly called for a reversal of the line of argument. No longer the mutual invitation, but the restrictions on the participation of Christians of other denominations would have to be justified on their part:

"From an Protestant point of view, this text does not 'only' achieve communion at the Lord's table. Rather, a central element of church fellowship has been achieved in it. For according to Confessio Augustana VII, it is sufficient for fellowship that the gospel be proclaimed purely and the sacraments be administered rightly. Today we can say that this is the case - and so, in all our diversity, we can see ourselves together as members of the one true church of Jesus Christ.

With this, I am not afraid to say: Today is a historic day for the Church. And our statement argues on such a broad biblical and scientific basis that the burden of argumentation is reversed in relation to what is customary: anyone who wants to say something against communion needs very strong reasons."

V. First Reactions

a) The Council of EKD

In the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) and the Protestant regional churches (Dioceses), the reaction initially remained benevolently restrained. This may have been due to the fact that Protestant churches had long declared the so-called "Eucharistic hospitality", i.e. it is already a proven practice for them. The statement of the Study group now gives a substantive impulse to mutuality!

The Council of EKD dealt with this at its meeting on December 6/7, 2019:

"Decisive [...] for the Protestant Church is that this text, with a theologically substantial justification, takes the burden off the consciences of those who already participate in the respective other form of the Lord's Supper, celebrating, praying and hoping. Experience shows that mutual participation in each other's Lord's Supper celebration without loss of identity or intercelebration has become a de facto used form of ecumenism even beyond married couples."

Taking up this line of thought, the Council published an official statement on the statement of the Study Group on February 28, 2020, in which the close connection between baptism and the Lord's Supper is guiding!

Building on this, it hopes,

"to deepen the common ground already achieved in many respects, also with regard to the present practice of celebrating the Lord's Supper or Eucharist."

The explanations of the statement would guarantee that both Protestant and Catholic Christians *"can recognize their faith in it."*

At the same time, it sees the Protestant practice of "Eucharistic hospitality" strengthened. The Council of the EKD, however, does not fail to recognize,

"that in this perspective questions are also connected to the Protestant practice of the Lord's Supper with regard to leadership and organization."

This rather general formulation conceals concrete Catholic questions concerning an ecumenically compatible understanding of the Protestant ordained ministry, the handling of the elements after the Protestant celebration of the Lord's Supper, and the constitutive connection between baptism and the Lord's Supper.

b) First official Roman Catholic reaction

From March 2 to 5, 2020, the spring plenary assembly of the German Bishops' Conference (DBK) took place in Mainz – for the first time under the chairmanship of Bishop Bätzing.

In the concluding press conference, Bishop Bätzing went into detail about the discussion that had taken place in the context of this plenary assembly on the statement of the EStG. Bishop Bätzing stated the following:

"The plenary assembly has recognized in the text a theologically knowledgeable and differentiated contribution that seeks to promote the concern of Eucharistic and church communion. The text is based on the common faithful conviction that Jesus Christ makes himself present in the Lord's Supper under bread and wine. The document wants to provide a theological framework for respecting the individual decision of individual believers to join the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper, but not to make a common celebration of the Lord's Supper possible. It is gratifying that the study presupposes various aspects of the understanding of the Eucharist that are of particular importance from a Catholic perspective."

Nevertheless, he said, there were queries that needed further work – both Catholic and Protestant:

"But the text also raises questions that need to be considered in further theological and pastoral-liturgical debate. They mark a need for clarification on the Catholic side, for example, when communion under both forms is seen as a regular form or when there is talk of misleading formulations in individual liturgical texts with regard to the sacrificial character of the Holy Mass. Other questions, such as that of presiding at ordination as a prerequisite for the celebration, are addressed to the Protestant side."

**c) Joint Appreciation by the Contact Discussion Group between
Representatives of the German Bishops' Conference and
Representatives of the Council of EKD (May 2020)**

The Contact Discussion Group recognized as essential and as common ground the insight set forth in the study, according to which Jesus Christ himself is present and acts in the celebration of the Eucharist and the Lord's Supper:

"There is a real presence of Jesus Christ as much in the Catholic celebration of the Eucharist as in the traditions of the Protestant celebration of the Lord's Supper. This fundamental assessment should be perceived as a common starting point for further development in this subject area."

However, there are further questions to be clarified: the regular communion under both forms, i.e. bread and wine, the understanding of the "sacrifice" of Christ, the leadership of the celebration of the Lord's Supper and thus the implicit question of ordination, the relationship between baptism and the

Eucharist, and last but not least the understanding of church fellowship in its relationship to the communion of the Lord's Supper.

Expressly, therefore, the "Common Appreciation" emphasized:

"For the Catholic Church, the open questions are so weighty that it does not see itself in a position to permit mutual participation on a general basis before they have been clarified, especially since the question of the unity of the Catholic Church is also touched here."

Basically, this was already a stop sign on the part of the Catholic representatives. But in this clear reservation also the fact did not change that one believed again to have to emphasize together:

"It is precisely at this central point of our common Christian practice of faith that the public within and outside the church is waiting, for good reasons, for visible progress that gives credible witness to the common confession of Christ."

VI. The Intervention of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Reaction of the Ecumenical Study Group

For the time being, it remained with these reactions of the church leaders. But Rome had in the meantime become alert. The Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Luis F. Cardinal Ladaria, a Jesuit like Pope Francis, sent a letter on September 18, 2020, to the president of the German Bishops' Conference, Bishop Bätzing, who since 2019 – in succession to Karl Cardinal Lehmann – has also been at that time the Catholic president of the Ecumenical Study Group.

Cardinal Ladaria elaborated on his concerns:

"The doctrinal differences are still so weighty that they preclude an alternate participation in the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist. The document, therefore, cannot serve as a guide for an individual decision of conscience about joining the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist."

The publication of the concerns, which the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith formulated in four questions in the appendix of the letter, suddenly generated the attention in the Protestant churches as well as in the general public, which the Study Group had wished for from the beginning, but would probably never have achieved!

The inquiries can be summarized as follows:

(a) On the approach:

The "prevailing hypothesis of a hermeneutics of diversity of origins (which at the same time indicates reserves vis-à-vis a continuous and organical development), is actually a confessional one, rather shaped by the newer Protestant exegesis."

In contrast, however, it is precisely "unity" that is the

"criterion of origins. This unity belongs to the substance that transcends the ages and is the basis of the sacramental constitution of the Church."

b) On the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church:

"The core theological problem of the document appears to be the consideration of the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church. The repeated thesis that Christ is the sole host of the Eucharist and that it is not for the Church to establish criteria of admission [...] seems to establish a separation between Christ and the Church, which cannot be accepted by Catholic theology, since Christ has entrusted the Church in a special way with the sacramental mediation [...]."

c) On the Real Presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper:

"Regarding the doctrine of the sacrament of the Eucharist, the idea of a consensus based on a common rather minimal denominator appears in 'Together at the Lord's table'; a clear commitment to the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist [...] is missing."

d) On the relationship between faith and the Lord's Supper or Eucharist:

"An anticipation of unity in the Eucharistic meal communion without having attained unity in faith is in danger of relativating all further efforts to resolve the outstanding differences of faith. This is all the more significant because, unfortunately, there is as yet no viable consensus on the content of ecumenical efforts."

The Ecumenical Study Group responded in detail to the comments and objections raised in its "Statement" on the "Doctrinal Notes" of January 6, 2021.

This does not need to be presented in extenso here, because the decisive arguments that the EStG had unfolded for the mutual admission to Holy Communion are again highlighted and explained. Moreover, there would be misunderstandings in the intention of the text of the EStG in some of the enquiries:

"Certainly, full, comprehensive Eucharistic and Lord's Supper communion between churches presupposes the declaration and realisation of their church fellowship. [...] In contrast, the reciprocal, guestwise opening of communion celebrations to Christians of the other confession is a small, first and humble step which cannot replace, but can inspire the effort to fully restore communion in faith."

VII. Three side views

a) A Statement from the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church

It may come as a surprise that the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (SELK) also spoke out in the current reception process of the statement by publishing a statement.

On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear why a "Lutheran response" is being made on the part of the SELK, or rather had to be made: for every jointly described and jointly shared basic requirement with regard to the Lord's Supper and the Eucharist affects in principle in two respects the self-understanding of a church that defines itself expressly and exclusively as *Lutheran*: on the one hand, in relation to the Roman Catholic Church, and on the other hand, in relation to the Protestant churches in Germany, or at least to the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD).

The extensive statement emphasizes an irreconcilable contrast to the Lutheran doctrine, as the authors for their part interpret it: "Non possumus!" ("We cannot!"), they say.

This rejection results from the reproach that an insufficient, because underdetermined interpretation of the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Lord's Supper is decisive here. The understanding of the presence of Christ expressed in the statement of the Study Group would be oriented toward the leveling tendency of the Leuenberg Agreement – an accusation (or reservation) that is also found in the "Doctrinal Notes" of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

"To Lutheran Christians, therefore, the study of the EStG must seem like a frontal attack on their confession as it is to be found in the Lutheran confessional writings and the writings of the Reformer."

Catholic members, it said, would have *"thoroughly turned away from the doctrinal tradition of their church"*.

The verdict of the Catholic Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith could not have been harsher than this statement!

b) Spotlights on reactions in the field of academic theology

The discussion picked up speed in 2020, especially among ecumenists, but has not been concluded. Only a few highlights may shed light on the different directions of reception. In my view, at least three strands of argumentation can be identified in the criticism:

- The statement of the EStG says nothing new, but broadens the theological basis.
- It does not adequately reflect the Catholic and Lutheran understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist / Lord's Supper.
- It does not do justice to the Catholic doctrine of Eucharist and church communion. The objections of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith are therefore justified.

c) An orthodox voice

In the anthology "Alles gleich-gültig?" ("Everything equally valid?" resp. "Everything indifferent?"), edited by the German priest and canonist Markus Graulich ODB (Freiburg 2022), which deals with "Together at the Lord's table" in various essays, mostly critically, there is also a contribution of Orthodox origin. It comes from Georgios Vlantis, the Managing Director of the regional "Working Group of Christian Churches in Bavaria".

He rightly criticises the fact that no Orthodox theologians were consulted for the preparation of "Together at the Lords' Table" – whereas the Study Group had decided to clarify the questions of the Holy Communion / Eucharist initially only between the churches of the Western tradition:

"One must not play off the ecumenism between Catholics and Protestants against the dialogue between Catholics and Orthodox."

Vlantis also points out that only theologians from the German-speaking world were involved, which could lead to a narrowing of the perspective.

In detail, he criticises that the Eucharistic impulses from the time of early Christianity and the Church Fathers are not sufficiently appreciated and emphasises the importance of the "right faith":

"Orthodoxy insists on the importance of the proclamation of the right faith (orthodoxia) precisely in the strongest manifestation of the unity of the Body of Christ, in the Eucharist. Christ, his body and the truth cannot be separated."

And he concludes:

"An official Roman Catholic acceptance of certain theses of the statement would mean for the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue that common ground is abandoned on the Catholic side (for example, the community of faith as a condition of Eucharistic communion) [...]."

Finally, he pleads once again for Orthodox participation in a *"revision of the theses"*.

VIII. Outlook: Reception

Four remarks should be given to the further, still outstanding ecclesiastical reception process:

1. At times, the clarifications brought by the 1973 Leuenberg Agreement in view of the centuries-long inner-Protestant Lord's Supper disputes are critically challenged from various directions. "Leuenberg" appears almost as the culmination of an improper theology of the Lord's Supper.

In contrast, it must be emphatically emphasized from the Protestant side that there is no going back on the formulations found at that time, for well considered reasons. Rather, the balance between Lutheran and Reformed tradition must be made strong as a successful example of ecumenical rapprochement and fellowship!

2. The statement of the Ecumenical Study Group is not directed solely and exclusively at the Roman Catholic Church.

Such an assessment would actually miss its intention. Protestant theology and church are also given tasks to work on in the light of the differentiated consensus that has been reached. The statement requires above all that the discussions and different decisions on ordination and the ordination-bound ministry that have taken place in the Protestant churches during the past decades at least be reviewed again in an ecumenical perspective and commitment.

3. Since the publication of the statement, the situation in the church has changed, and not only in Germany: The discussion on how to deal with the unmistakable number of cases of sexual abuse by priests has

triggered a comprehensive reform process in the Roman Catholic dioceses in Germany: the so called "Synodal Path". It is viewed extremely critically by some bishops' conferences outside Germany, but above all by the Vatican.

The question of the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church, which culminates in its theology of ministry, and the conflict of the German Bishops' Conference with Rome have come to the fore in such a way that actually no further statement on "Together at the Lord's table" is to be expected from the Vatican. Unfortunately, the concrete reception is faltering on all levels.

4. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to stick to the path intended by the EStG. It appears to me to be crucial to open up the perspective and not to limit the discussion to Germany. The question of the participation of members of other churches in Holy Communion / Eucharist is ultimately an essential one that will determine the future of ecumenism.

This must not be exhausted in an 'institutionalized permanent reflection' with endless exchange of arguments and counter-arguments. It must be purposefully directed towards changing practice.

And that means: We should really want to overcome the separation at the table of the Lord – as the next step *"on the way to the goal desired by God: the full visible unity of the Church in the presence of the Kingdom of God."* (140)