



**Statement by the Bishops' Conference on the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue documents *Communion in Growth: Declaration on the Church, Eucharist, and Ministry* (2017) and *Communion in Growth between Lutherans and Catholics: Towards a Joint Declaration on the Church, the Eucharist, and Ministry: Summary prepared by the Finnish Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue Commission* (2024)**

The Bishops' Conference thanks the Dialogue Commission for its work. The document *Communion in Growth* is thorough and draws on a wide range of ecumenical material. It draws on the fruits of the Finnish School of Luther studies and on many years of ecumenical experience. Both the document and its summary reflect the tradition of ecumenical dialogue that has emerged from the Finnish context and make an important contribution to the global ecumenical dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics.

The document addresses questions about the Church, ministry, and sacraments from the perspective of "differentiated consensus". Differentiated consensus recognises shared faith convictions within which different theological emphases and expressions can be accepted. This approach makes it possible to avoid perceiving historical and theological differences as necessarily church-dividing. Rather, differences may be understood as perspectives that complement each other, or that are at least not mutually exclusive.

Methodologically, *Communion in Growth* draws on the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, in which Lutherans and Catholics acknowledge their common understanding of the basic truths of the doctrine of justification. The model of differentiated consensus seeks to identify the basic truths on which the parties agree, as expressed in different theological approaches. This is followed by an examination of the differences between the

theological approaches that are foreign or objectionable to the other party to the dialogue. To establish a differentiated consensus, it must be possible to demonstrate that the identified differences neither threaten nor contradict the identified consensus. The Bishops' Conference draws attention to the title of the dialogue document, which identifies it as a "declaration". The document is not a joint declaration in the same way as the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, but rather a contribution by the Finnish dialogue to the international Lutheran–Catholic doctrinal discussion as it prepares for a possible joint declaration on the Church, the Eucharist, and ministry.

Communion in Growth recognises significant common understanding between Lutheran and Catholic thinking on the nature of the Church. The Church is understood as communion in the Triune God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. The document states that the Lutheran way of describing the Church as a creature of the Word (*creatura verbi*) and the Catholic understanding of the Church as the sacrament of the world's salvation (*sacramentum salutis mundi*) are not necessarily opposed to each other. Both Lutherans and Catholics may describe the Church as a community of believers (*congregatio fidelium*) and a communion of saints (*communio sanctorum*). At the heart of the document's ecclesiological discussion is the question of the Church's sacramentality and its connection with the Church's structures and external signs. The document refers to the Church as "like a sacrament" in which the reality of Christ is mysteriously present in the visible Church. The Lutheran view of the concept of sacramentality is explained along the lines of the Finnish School of Luther studies, in which God's word is sacramental, influencing and bringing about that of which it speaks.

The ministry is understood as a gift from God to the Church. All the baptised participate in the priesthood of Christ, but the ministry of word and sacraments is a specially instituted office to which one is ordained. Ordination is a lifelong vocation in which the gifts of the Holy Spirit are transmitted through the laying on of hands. Theologically, the document places the ministry within the framework of a "sacramental communion ecclesiological approach" (§ 179). The interpretation of the Church's sacramentality in the section on ministry is linguistically stronger than in the section dealing with ecclesiology itself. In addition, the document takes the Lutheran framework as a given in interpreting the

threefold ministry, where “ordination describes [...] a sacramental act which integrates a person into the order of bishops, presbyters, or deacons [...]” (§ 205).

The section on ministry contains two clarifications: one on the Catholic understanding of the hierarchy of the three ministries; the other on the episcopal ministry as the fullness of the sacrament. The Lutheran position in the document considers both to be at least possible. Issues requiring further clarification include the ordination of women to the priesthood, the role of the papacy in the service of unity, and questions concerning the doctrinal authority of the Church (papal infallibility and jurisdiction). Mutual recognition of ministries will probably require sufficient resolution of issues related to the hierarchy of ministries and the gender of those ordained as priests.

The Communion in Growth document deals with the Eucharist in the broader context of the sacraments. The document draws on earlier German Lutheran–Catholic dialogue to state that the doctrinal condemnations of the sacraments issued during the Reformation are no longer applicable today. At the same time the document notes that achieving even a differentiated consensus on the Eucharist requires clarification of disagreements concerning ministry (the validity and sacramentality of ministry) (§ 166). Communion in Growth agrees with the broader Lutheran–Catholic dialogue in recognising that disagreements concerning the celebration of the sacraments, especially the sacrament of the Eucharist, do not directly concern eucharistic theology but rather the question of the ministry required for the valid administration of the sacraments (see, for example, *From Conflict to Communion*).

The Bishops’ Conference considers the document *Communion in Growth*, produced in the national ecumenical dialogue, to be both significant and an expression of the close ecumenical relationship between Lutherans and Catholics in the Finnish context. The document presents common fundamental convictions concerning the Church, the Eucharist, and ministry, which the Bishops’ Conference considers to be in alignment with the teachings of our own Church. The document expresses the need to continue ecumenical dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics. It envisions a way to deepen theological connections between Lutherans and Catholics. The Bishops’ Conference hopes that the document will bear fruit both in the life of our own Church and in future international dialogues between Lutherans and Catholics. Critical feedback on the

document indicates that it is also necessary to engage in theological discussion of the Church, the Eucharist, and ministry among and within the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation.

Helsinki, 27 January 2026

Bishops' Conference