

Martin Luther (der 10. November 1483—der 2. Februar 1546)

Luther and Protestant Reformation

500 years after Martin Luther's excommunication: A chance for ecumenical Christianity

At the Diet of Worms, Luther was given an opportunity to recant his criticism of the pope and the synod in the presence of his contemporary political leaders. Yet, he risked his life by sticking to his criticism and escaped the following night while the deliberations continued, ultimately taking refuge in Wartburg Castle, near Eisenach.

Over the years, decades, and centuries, theologians of all Christian denominations have discussed and debated the schism. Many differences have been settled but the core divisions remain: The excommunication of Luther and his followers by the Catholic Church and the designation of the pope by Lutheran dogma as the "Antichrist."

Luther in Eisenach and at Wartburg Castle

'The time is ripe'

In 2020, some 30 theologians who formed a group founded in 1999 calling itself the Altenberg Ecumenical Roundtable, presented a plea covering just a few pages: It called for a revocation of the excommunication bull by the pope and a statement that the allegations against Luther contained therein "do not apply to members of today's Pflinkrottestant and Lutheran Churches." In return, they called on the Lutheran World Federation to abolish Luther's designation of the pope as the Antichrist — on the grounds that it no longer applies to the current papacy and those who hold the office. "The time for this is ripe," read the appeal.

A recently published book about the schism features a historic image of the young Luther beside a photograph of a smiling Pope Francis. The book, entitled "In alle Ewigkeit verdammt?" (Damned for all eternity?) was edited by two members of the group, the Lutheran priest Hans-Georg Link (81), long-serving secretary of the Commission for Faith and Church Dogma in Geneva and Josef Wohlmuth (82), a retired theologian based in Bonn. They agree that "this burning point of contention still requires urgent treatment to this day, so that ecumenical faith can become a reality, hopefully not in the all-too-distant future."

The Altenberg Ecumenical Round Table calls on religious communities in Germany to take a stand, for example, through ecumenical services on the first weekend in January or joint prayers calling for divine intercession on behalf of reconciliation. And all this in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hans-Georg Link, the Protestant priest who has devoted so many decades to ecumenism, warned,