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Ronald D. Witherup S.S.

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RONALD D. WITHERUP, S.S.

## Bringing an Ecumenical Milestone Out of the Shadows

Having just completed the Year of Saint Paul and now commemorating the Year for Priests, one might easily overlook an anniversary that marks a milestone in ecumenical relations. I refer to the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Lutheran-Catholic “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” on Reformation Day, October 31, 1999.<sup>1</sup> This article would like to draw attention to this anniversary and why it should not remain in the shadows.

### Background

The Joint Declaration (hereafter, JD) did not just suddenly appear out of the blue when officials representing the Lutheran World Federation and the Holy See signed the document in Augsburg, Germany on the eve of the third Christian millennium. Decades of painstaking dialogue had taken place to prepare for the Declaration. In the wake of Vatican Council II, many ecumenical dialogues were begun in earnest in the hopes that centuries of Protestant-Catholic division could, at least in modest ways, be bridged so that the heartfelt goal of Christian unity could be achieved.

By any measure, the multiple volumes of the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue testify to the success of this process. Experts and ecclesial representatives of both denominations participated in these fruitful dialogues. They covered topics like baptism, eucharist, righteousness, the papacy, and New Testament figures like Peter and Mary. These dialogues paved the road that led to the JD.

### *What Does the Declaration Say and Mean?*

The document contains forty-four numbered paragraphs and an Appendix. The Preamble points out that the doctrine of justification by faith has historically been central to the teaching of Lutherans ever since Martin Luther himself, reflecting deeply on Paul’s Letter to the Romans, came to the insight that the salvation offered to humanity by God in Jesus Christ was free gift, not something to be earned by doing “good deeds.” God justifies us or makes us righteous. Unfortunately, a by-product of this understanding, coupled with Luther’s dissatisfaction with various Church practices of his day, like indulgences and the seeming “selling” of sacramental rites, led to the Protestant Reformation. As the JD acknowledges, “From the Reformation perspective, justification was the crux of all the disputes.” (#1) That is why it was crucial eventually to reach a point where the topic could be addressed in depth.

The intention of the JD was clear:

The present Joint Declaration has this intention: namely, to show that on the basis of their dialogue the subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ. It does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does encompass a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations. (#5)

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RONALD D. WITHERUP is currently Superior General of the Sulpician Order, an international group of Catholic priests, and resides in Paris. He is a former dean and professor of Sacred Scripture at St. Patrick Seminary in Menlo Park, California. He received his doctorate in biblical studies from Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia.

When one considers the centuries of controversy over this one teaching, the achievement of the JD stands out all the more. Both Churches acknowledge nothing short of a *common* view of the principal understanding of justification by faith.

This common understanding is expressed vividly in the paragraph that is the heart of the document:

In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. ...Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works. (#15)

These remarkable words are revolutionary. For Lutherans, this understanding represents an acknowledgement of the role that "good works" play in ongoing faith. They do not *achieve* our salvation but bear witness to it. For Catholics, this agreement overshadows any latent Pelagian<sup>2</sup> or semi-Pelagian understanding that, in my experience, still rests in the minds of many Catholics. Our good works neither earn our salvation nor achieve a higher place in heaven. Rather, they give witness to the salvation that the incarnation, life, ministry, and especially the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, has once and for all accomplished. God's grace alone has been our salvation.

### What Questions Remain?

Despite this unprecedented agreement, some questions remain to be ironed out. Late in the process, and taking everyone by surprise, including the officials of the Pontifical Council on Christian Unity in Rome that had spearheaded the agreement, Pope John Paul II pointed out that the agreement might be a bit hasty on three points. He noted, quite rightly, that Lutherans and Catholics still have differences of understanding on three related topics: concupiscence (the tendency to immoral desires) and the notion of simultaneously being sinner yet saved (Luther's famous formula of *simul justus et peccator*); how to fit justification into the larger "rule of faith;" and the role of the sacrament of Penance.

Despite these demurs, the Pope acknowledged agreement to 41 out of the 44 paragraphs of the JD and permitted the signing to go on. He also insisted that these questions did not in any way call into question the essential matters of the agreement. In essence, the Pope said, there is more homework to be done! Thus the dialogue will continue.

### What Authority Does the Declaration Have?

Some experts have raised the question of what authority the JD exercises. From a Lutheran perspective, one must acknowledge

that the World Lutheran Federation does not represent *all* Lutherans, despite the fact that some 58 out of 61 million Lutherans worldwide are represented by this body. From a Catholic perspective, one might question what the JD means given the fact that Pope John Paul II had several demurs. But, as indicated above, the essentials of the JD remain in place and now become part of the ecumenical teaching of the Church.

In July, 2006 an even more interesting development took place that highlighted the possible impact that the JD can have on ecumenical relations. While meeting in Seoul, South Korea delegates from the World Methodist Conference voted unanimously to sign onto the JD, thus adding another significant denomination to the common agreement. This unexpected gesture hinted that promoting a common understanding of such a central Protestant teaching could have enormous positive effect on ecumenism.

### Why Promote This Anniversary?

A more serious pastoral question lurks in the background. How many Catholics really know (or care) about the JD? Even after a year recently devoted to Saint Paul, whose letters provide the source of this notion, one wonders how much of an impact the joint agreement has had. Justification by faith is a difficult topic to summarize from the pulpit. Many priests are hesitant even to broach the topic.

### A Pastoral Strategy

How does one succinctly and in simple terms explain Paul's teaching? I believe the tenth anniversary of the JD offers us another opportunity to promote this teaching in our parishes. While we live in a time in which the intense fervor of ecumenical dialogue so evident in the immediate wake of Vatican II has waned, it would be helpful if Catholics at least could understand that some real progress has been made in mutual Protestant-Catholic relations. We should no longer be caricaturing Lutheran teachings about justification. Nor should we be ignorant of our own Catholic teaching on the topic. As the JD notes, we now have a common understanding that accommodates two emphases, God's grace and our good works in response to it.

The JD instructs us to promote a better, common understanding of this all-important teaching. As Saint Paul insists, Jesus Christ has justified us, declared and made us righteous, and thus has called us to live exemplary, ethically upright lives.

Pastorally, I suggest that on an appropriately chosen Sunday not too far removed from the anniversary homilists present a short, focused instruction on the JD and its significance. This, of course, requires a little homework. The main elements of such a homily (or perhaps an adult education session) should be clear:

- define justification, perhaps simply by reading Paragraph 15 of the JD and making a brief comment on it
- explain a little of the history of how and why the teaching of justification contribute to centuries of Protestant-Catholic division
- explain the role of good works, not as means of obtaining something from God, who has already extended salvation freely through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, but as a way to testify to the world that we have accepted God's outstretched offer of salvation and are attempting to live it out in our lives
- give thanks for progress made thus far in Christian unity, symbolized well by the anniversary, and invite continued prayers for the deeper unity of the body of Christ.

In an age of mixed marriages and plentiful Protestant-Catholic contact, any promotion of better ecumenical understanding is bound to have a positive effect. Catholics should understand that our Church officially is still engaged in promoting Christian unity. It has not fallen by the wayside. This anniversary is a reminder that unity comes at a price. There is some give and take. Three denominations have now given *and*

received on this vital theme. Ten years is perhaps not a long time for it to have sifted down to the pews, but surely, it is an anniversary worth bringing out of the shadows.

### Endnotes

1. See "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," available on the World Wide Web at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html). I use the document's paragraph numbers for quotations. The document was accompanied by an Official Joint Statement and an Appendix of recommended resources. The Holy See also published an Annex that outlined Pope John Paul II's call for more dialogue on specific related issues.

2. This heresy began with Pelagius (ca. 350-425 CE), an ascetic teacher in Rome and North Africa. He promoted human free will and the ability to choose good over evil, seemingly denying the necessity of God's grace for salvation. Saint Augustine was a major opponent to Pelagius' teaching, although his teachings continued to influence many Christians over the centuries.