

# #773 “Full Communion” Relationships and the Mission of Christ

Colleagues,

Last Sunday we celebrated the resurrection of the Person who, among so much else, offered up the magisterial prayer of John 17. In his honor we choose this week to pass along some reflections by a Lutheran bishop who takes both the Person and the prayer with all the gravity that his Easter calls for. Marcus C. Lohrmann has led the ELCA’s Northwestern Ohio Synod for almost fifteen years. Those of us who know Marcus in other capacities will regard that synod’s congregations and pastors with holy envy, if there is such a thing. As Luther puts it in his great Easter hymn, “Christ alone our souls will feed / He is our meat and drink indeed”; and if any ELCA bishop has gone to inordinate pains to ensure that this food, and no other, gets served within his or her jurisdiction, it will have been Marcus.

Early in Lent Marcus presented an installment in an ecumenical lecture series hosted by Lourdes University in Sylvania, Ohio, a suburb of Toledo. He was kind enough to send us a copy of his remarks, with permission to send it along to all of you. And so we do, in two installments, the first of which reviews the rationale behind the several “Full Communion” agreements that the ELCA has entered into during the years of his episcopal ministry. Next week’s sequel will offer reflections on the experience of having lived and worked with them for a decade or more. Watch as you read for the way Marcus anchors his reflections in the word and will of Christ, especially as it emerges in the prayer of John 17.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

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## **Full Communion Relationships: An Ecumenical Way Forward**

**Lourdes University, Sylvania, Ohio**

**February 24, 2013**

“Remember your Church, O Lord; save it from all evil, and complete it in your love. And gather it from the four winds into your kingdom, which you prepared for it. For yours is the power and the glory forever” (Didache 10:5).

As I begin this presentation, I want to express my gratitude to this University and to the Sisters of St. Francis Theological Studies Department who offer this Ecumenical Lecture Series in cooperation with Toledo Area Ministries and the Diocesan Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Commission. This series says much about your desire to tend to the holy work of the church’s unity in Christ. At this significant time in the life of the Christian church, I include in my prayers the Roman Catholic Church as a new pope is selected and this university as you welcome Dr. David Livingston as your new president.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) entered into full communion relationships with the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Church of Christ in 1997, the Episcopal Church and the Moravian Church in 1999, and the United Methodist Church in 2009. During the course of this presentation, I briefly will review the foundation for these relationships, the gifts and challenges received through these relationships, and why these relationships provide an ecumenical way forward.

## A. Beginning with Thanksgiving and Yearning

As I begin this presentation, I do so with thanksgiving to God for the growing realization among Christians of the unity given to us in Christ Jesus by virtue of being joined to Jesus' death and resurrection in the waters of baptism. We realize that to "get Jesus" is to get the whole company of Jesus' friends. We have not always wanted to recognize that. Those of you who are my age or older, easily recall times when we viewed other Christians with suspicion. We thought we knew what they believed and how those beliefs betrayed the Gospel. Within my own extended Lutheran family, we could not commune with other family members of another Lutheran denomination and were not sure that we could pray with them. We could spend the rest of the day recalling such stories. But we won't.

Rather we begin by praising the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ by whose Spirit we are able to discern the body of Christ in other Christians. As a Lutheran Christian I praise God for our full communion relationships. And, much more: the congregations of our communities are working together, building Habitat Homes, feeding the neighborhood, tending the needs of the community. Toledo Area Ministries is one of many examples of that. But, even more, we often come together in worship to share our identity as brothers and sisters in Christ. We share in Thanksgiving Services, Holy Week Services, and we have learned to pray for one another. How precious it has been for me as Bishop of the Northwestern Ohio Synod for the past fifteen years to participate in worship with your bishops together with Lutheran and Roman Catholic and other brothers and sisters in Christ. I thank God for the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification received in October, 1999 by the Catholic Church and member churches of the Lutheran World Federation. I thank God for the Covenant between the Northwestern Ohio Synod and the Toledo Diocese signed in 2001. I am grateful for the recent

agreement between the Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Committee of the U.S Catholic Conference and the ELCA to begin working on a document, "Declaration on the Way" that in recognition of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation would include noting important areas of agreement. Thanks be to God that we could spend the rest of the afternoon recalling the manner in which we have learned more about what it means to be the body of Christ together. But we won't. However, let those memories provide a doxological framework for this conversation. Indeed, as the hymn declares, "The Church's One Foundation Is Jesus Christ Her Lord."

But accompanying this thanksgiving, at least for some of us and perhaps for all of us gathered in this space, is a yearning. The yearning is that we might more fully realize the unity for which our Lord prays as we gather at the Table of our Lord. In that meal, we come in our brokenness to receive the gift of him who was broken for us. In that meal, we experience reconciliation as we hear the words, "My body broken for you; my blood poured out for you." In that meal we learn what it is to be gathered into the Holy Communion as we are knit together in Christ by the Holy Spirit. In that meal we learn again what it means to be formed into the body of Christ for the sake of the world. In that meal as we catch a glimpse, a foretaste of the kingdom of God, we are pointed to its realization, to its fulfillment.

Two experiences come to mind. The first is the experience of visiting Gethsemani Abbey and spending a week with the monks in the hours of prayer. Yes, I got up in the middle of the night. But then I had the experience of sorrow as I respected the request, as a non-Roman Catholic, not participate to in the Lord's Supper even as I was encouraged to pray for the unity of the church. The second grows out of one of the most delightful, joy-filled experiences as bishop, namely, participating with Bishop Blair to provide leadership for an ecumenical journey

with forty-five Lutherans and Roman Catholics to Wittenberg and Rome. The Roman Catholics on the trip commented that in Germany they learned that, contrary to public opinion, Lutherans also have saints and relics. Every day we joined for evening prayer, recalling our baptism into Christ, singing the Magnificat. But in the mornings, we would have our separate celebrations of the Eucharist. How profound it was that one morning we gathered at a hotel in Berlin, with windows overlooking the former site of the Berlin wall, Lutherans and Roman Catholics in adjacent rooms, singing the liturgy of the Eucharist but separated by a thin wall. I understand the rationale for such separation. I really do. But what I experienced was a holy yearning. You too have your places of holy yearning.

#### B. A Yearning That Goes Back To Our Lord Jesus... and Before

The promise given to Abraham and Sarah was that "...in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3b). The prophets could speak of that time when "...the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (Isaiah 60:2b-3). The Gospel of John speaks of the Word made Flesh, who "...became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son" (John 1:14). This Word made flesh will declare the odd way in which God will be glorified as Jesus later declares, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth (ed. think 'death and resurrection'), will draw all people to myself." This glorified One does not want his followers to mess things up and so he prays also for them prior to his "lifting up": "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have love me" (John 17:22-23). Earlier he will pray, "...so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (17:21).

This "yearning" both expresses the reality (i.e. beloved in Christ) and the purpose, that is, for the sake of God's mission (i.e. that the world might believe). This yearning will be echoed by the Holy Writer who reminds an early church prone to division, "I...beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the body of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3). You already know the grounding for such evangelical persuasion: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (4:4-6). A holy yearning, indeed!

### C. An Introduction to a Lutheran Vision for Ecumenism

In 1990, early in its formation, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America adopted the statement, "Ecumenism: The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America." I will quote from that document in order that you might understand something of this church's rationale for full communion relationships. The following briefly summarizes the contribution of the Lutheran Confessions with respect to this discussion:

The Lutheran Confessions were the products of an effort at evangelical reform, which, contrary to its intention, resulted in divisions within the Western church. As evangelical writings, they stress justification by grace through faith alone as the criterion for judging all church doctrine and life. As catholic writings, they assert that the gospel is essential to the church for being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Their evangelical and catholic aspects are complementary, not contradictory. When a particular misinterpretation of the catholic tradition conflicts with the gospel, the classic Lutheran confessional choice was and remains for the gospel. They are concerned for

the oneness of Christ's church under the gospel, the preservation of the true catholic heritage, and the renewal of the church as a whole. That the Confessions have such concerns can be seen from the following points:

1. They always point to Scripture, with its stress on teaching the truth of the gospel—which they see as the only sufficient basis for Christian unity—as normative. Because of this evangelical stress they also point to Scripture's confession of one Lord and one church as basic for understanding Christian unity.
2. They begin with the ancient ecumenical creeds—Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian—as “the three chief symbols.” Lutherans always have a common basis with those who share these creeds and the Bible.
3. They draw upon the theological reflection of the early church leaders in East and West, and thus share a resource with those who also know and honor the theologians of the patristic era.
4. While many of the Lutheran Confessions were hammered out in the struggles of the sixteenth century and dwell on the differences with the Roman Catholics, the Reformed, the Anabaptists, and even some Lutherans, they also contained, whether specifically noted or not, many points of basic agreement with such groups.
5. The primary Lutheran confessional document, the Augsburg Confession of 1530, claims to be a fully catholic as well as an evangelical expression of Christian faith. Part I, which lists the chief articles of faith, states that the Confession is grounded clearly in Scripture and does not depart from the universal Christian [that is, catholic] church. The confessors at Augsburg asked only for freedom to preach and worship in accordance with the Gospel. They were willing, upon recognition of the legitimacy of these

reforms, to remain in fellowship with those who did not share every theological formulation or reforming practice [Augsburg Confession, Preface, Article XV, Article XXVIII and Conclusion]. It is in this historical context that Article VII is to be understood: “for the true unity of the church it is enough (satis est) to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.” The confessors allowed for diversity of opinion and discussion of many other matters (see Smalcald Articles, Part III, introduction).

Here it is important to note that when the confessors speak of the “teaching of the Gospel” the chief concern is that the church in its proclamation, life and witness make use of the incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord Jesus so that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, troubled consciences are consoled, sins are forgiven, and Christ’s righteousness becomes ours. When that good news is spoken, when baptism and Eucharist deliver it and when by the Holy Spirit such good news is received in faith, there is the church.

With that Lutheran confessional understanding, the predecessor church bodies of the ELCA were very much a part of the ecumenical conversations that multiplied in the mid-twentieth century. Lutherans made up the largest confessional group that was a part of the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. Ecumenical dialogues flourished in the next years. There was a new impetus for ecumenical dialogue with the entry of the Roman Catholic Church ratified by the Second Vatican Council. In addition to the Roman Catholic Church, Lutherans began or continued dialogues with Reformed and Presbyterians, Episcopalians, United Methodists, Orthodox, Baptists, and conservative evangelicals.

In 1983, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of

Churches relayed to member churches for their response and reception the document, "Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry." This document would provide another impetus for ecumenical understanding for the predecessor bodies of the ELCA and other Christian churches.

In 1984, the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation "...declared themselves to be in altar and pulpit fellowship" and the churches of the federation "...declared themselves to be a communion of churches." The 1984 Assembly then adopted a statement on unity that, I believe, has had implications for the full communion relationships that have developed with other traditions. It states,

*The true unity of the church, which is the unity of the body of Christ and participates in the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is given in and through proclamation of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. This unity is expressed as a communion in the common and, at the same time, multiform confession of one and the same apostolic faith. It is a communion in Holy Baptism and in the eucharistic meal, a communion in which the ministries exercised are recognized by all as expressions of the ministry instituted by Christ in his church. It is a communion where diversities contribute to fullness and are no longer barriers to unity. It is a committed fellowship, able to make common decisions and to act in common. The diversity present in this communion rises out of the differing cultural and ethnic contexts in which the one church of Christ lives out its mission and out of the number of church traditions in which the apostolic faith has been maintained, transmitted, and lived throughout the centuries. In recognizing these diversities as expressions of the one apostolic faith and the one catholic church, traditions are changed, antagonisms overcome, and mutual condemnations lifted. The diversities are reconciled and transformed into a legitimate and indispensable multiformity*

*within the one body of Christ.*

*This communion lives out its unity in confessing the one apostolic faith. It assembles in worship and in intercession for all people. It is active in common witness to Jesus Christ; in advocacy for the weak, poor, and oppressed; and in striving for peace, justice, and freedom. It is ordered in all its components in conciliar structures and actions. It is in need of constant renewal and is at the same time, a foretaste of that communion, which the Lord will at the end of time bring about in his kingdom.*

The Vision Statement goes on to describe the manner in which the Lutheran tradition is open to critique:

*Even more boldly, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America takes its Lutheran theological heritage so seriously that it believes God's word of justification excludes the patterns of ecclesiastical self-justification, which have resulted from the polemical heritage of the sixteenth century. The first word, which the Church speaks ecumenically, may well be a word of self-criticism, a word against itself, because we are called to be seekers of a truth that is larger than all of us and that condemns our parochialism, imperialism, and self-preoccupation. If it can speak such a word of self-criticism, the Church will be free to reject a triumphalist and magisterial understanding of itself and cultivate instead an understanding of itself as a community of mission and witness that seeks to be serviceable to the in-breaking of the reign of God.*

I shared a draft of this paper with my nephew, Martin Lohrmann, who is a reformation scholar in his own right. He offered the following comment: "It crossed my mind while reading your paper that Lutherans view not only individuals as "simul iustus et

peccator” but that we also view the visible church that way. Born into sin, we and our institutions (including the church) are never free of sin in this life. At the same time, created by the call of God, the church on earth is also the place of divine grace and will never be otherwise.” He adds, “That gets to your point about Christian unity being a gift (an ‘already’) and a call to live into (a ‘not yet’).”

As it considers the development of ecumenical relationships, the Ecumenical Vision statement continues:

*The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is an active participant in the ecumenical movement, because of its desire for Christian unity. It seeks full communion as its goal, i.e., the fullest or most complete actualization of unity possible before the parousia with all those churches that confess the Triune God. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, both as a church and as a member of the wider communion of churches in the Lutheran World Federation, seeks to reach this goal, in order to express the unity of the Church and to carry out better the mission of the Church in proclamation and action.*

What follows now is a definition of “full communion”:

*Full communion, a gift from God, is founded on faith in Jesus Christ. It is a commitment to truth in love and a witness to God’s liberation and reconciliation. Full communion is visible and sacramental. It includes all that Lutherans have meant by “pulpit and altar fellowship,” but goes beyond that historical formulation because of the obligatory mission given by the gospel. Full communion is obviously a goal toward which divided churches, under God’s Spirit, are striving, but which has not been reached. It points to the complete communion and unity of all Christians that will come with the arrival of the Kingdom of God at the parousia of Christ, the Lord. It is also a goal*

*in need of continuing definition. It is rooted in agreement on essentials and allows diversity in nonessentials. In most cases, however, the churches will not be able to move directly from their disunity to a full expression of their God-given unity, but can expect to experience a movement from disunity to unity that may include one or more of the following stages of relationships.*

1. Ecumenical Cooperation
2. Bilateral and Multilateral Dialogues.
3. Preliminary Recognition. Here the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America can be involved on a church-to-church basis in Eucharistic sharing and cooperation, without exchangeability of ministers.
4. Full Communion. At this stage the goal of the involvement of this church in the ecumenical movement is fully attained. Here the question of the shape and form of full communion needs to be addressed and answered practically in terms of what will best further the mission of the Church in individual cases, consistent with the Lutheran understanding of the basis of the unity of the Church in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession.

The Vision Statement continues by offering a description of full communion relationships:

*For the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the characteristics of full communion are theological and missiological implications of the gospel that allow variety and flexibility. These characteristics stress that the Church act ecumenically for the sake of the world, not for itself alone. They will include at least the following, some of which exist at earlier stages:*

1. a common confessing of the Christian faith;
2. a mutual recognition of Baptism and a sharing of the Lord's Supper, allowing for joint worship and an exchangeability of members;
3. a mutual recognition and availability of ordained ministers to the service of all members of churches in full communion, subject only but always to the disciplinary regulations of the other churches;
4. a common commitment to evangelism, witness, and service;
5. a means of common decision making on critical common issues of faith and life;
6. a mutual lifting of any condemnations that exist between churches.