

Dialogue Theologians Must Hurry to Keep Up With Grassroots

Robert W. Bertram

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A note just arrived from Professor Jill Raitt, and thereby hangs a parable. Professor Raitt suggests that we schedule our flights together to New York for the next meeting of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Consultation USA. She is chairperson of the University of Missouri's new department of religious studies, and as yet the only woman on the Consultation.

So what is the parable? Consider: A Roman Catholic woman, a lay theologian at a state university, is so intent upon an interconfessional conference still three months away that she is already planning to use even the few hours' flight time to New York to talk conference business with someone from the other team. Conference business being what? Of all things, justification by faith. The LC-RC dialogue these days is like unto Jill Raitt's pluck.

When the consultation began a generation ago the doctrinal issue of justification was left off the agenda, partly because that would have been too controversial during the trust-building years but partly also, so I have been told, because justification no longer seemed all that relevant during those heady days right after the Second Vatican Council. Now almost two decades later—after remarkable convergence on such traditional sticking-points as sacraments, ministry and authority, after steady cultivation of mutual trust and, with that, mutual candor, after barnstorming the country in Catholic-Lutheran pairs during the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession—we have dared to confront "justification by faith alone" with all our differences, including differences within Lutheranism and within Catholicism.

What is more, we shall soon be finishing our draft of a common statement on that newly urgent issue—enough to occupy fellow travelers to New York. But how to do justice to honest differences and yet produce a statement which is truly common? Suppose our very differences could come to be seen as common property, not as differences which divide but as differences we share.

Erie Gritsch speaks of "magisterial mutuality," in which each communion offers to the other its own doctrinal insights yet without turning criticism into condemnation.

Father Avery Duties calls this "provisional acceptance": We Catholics accept what you Lutherans say about so-and-so provided that you in turn respect such-and-such cautions; and vice versa. Such a constructive exchange of "yes-buts" might have Lutherans saying to Catholics, for instance, "Yes, faith without works is no faith at all, but what makes

faith great is not its works but Christ in whom it trusts." And Catholics would remind Lutherans, "Yes, Christians are as much sinners, as non-Christians are, but baptism does make a difference."

The point is, each side needs the audible admonitions of the other and would be less of a church without them. So the differences serve to edify, and by swapping affirmations and provisos the two communions are already being church together. Although the results of the current series on justification are not yet public, the suspense has prompted theologians from outside the consultation—Catholics like Langley and McCue and McSorley, Lutherans like Braaten and Forrell and Jenson—to write up their own insightful suggestions to help the cause along, underscoring thereby how churchly that cause is.

There has been wholesome cross-pollenizing between the American dialogue and the international one, also on the theme of justification. That is no wonder, seeing that George Lindbeck, charter member of the consultation USA, is also co-chairman of the Joint Commission of the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

And as with earlier themes, so has the theme of justification found heartening agreement between Lutheran and Catholic biblical scholars. Thus some of the New Testament studies on justification which our dialogue assigned to John Reumann and Father Joseph Fitzmyer have already appeared as a separate volume. But at least as noteworthy, I believe, as all the theological summitry is the way in which the dialogue about justification has expanded to Lutheran and Roman Catholic grassroots. Of the dozens of examples which could be cited, here are three.

Tomorrow morning after church, across the river in Mascoutah, Illinois, the Lutherans of St. Martin of Tours congregation and Catholics of Holy Childhood congregation will, as they do each month, sit down over coffee and doughnuts to talk about their common faith—tomorrow, how it does (and does not) justify sinners. The format is not as contrived as it sounds. For their first three years, before the Lutherans moved into their own quarters—where today you will see office equipment and a Paschal Stand donated by their Catholic neighbors—they worshiped in the facilities of Holy Childhood, where today you will find a frontal and a chalice donated by the Lutherans.

Regularly they share their clergy in common liturgies, together provide 500 meals a month for the needy, and on Good Friday they close off Main Street to make the Way of the Cross in step with local Baptists, Methodists, United Church of Christ and Pentecostals. After that, talk about justification comes almost naturally. For the past four years the bishops in Minnesota, Lutheran and Catholic, have quietly been going off together at least once a year to work at a double objective: To talk through the theological topics of the national LC-RC Consultations—they began with justification—and to propose corresponding cooperation between their two communions at local levels.

This accords with the two-pronged advice to them by Father Killian McDonnell, himself a member of the national dialogue, namely, that for “grassroots ecumenism” both doctrinal unity but also “significant human contacts are essential.” Significant contacts have been multiplying, and not only the high visibility kind. Those too.” Archbishop John Roach preached at the Twin Cities Lutheran Reformation Festival, and at the archdiocesan cathedral in Saint Paul the ALC’s Presiding Bishop David Preus reciprocated.

But the less visible contacts are also significant, as Pastor Arnold Heumann observed. “It may seem a small thing that Christmas greetings are exchanged through the mail, but it also means that when a bishop falls ill, intercessory prayers are likely to be offered in his behalf.” Which assumes, doesn’t it, that prayers of faith are justified.

At Rochester, N.Y., last spring—as Lutheran campus pastor Ken Carlson understated it—“something happened.” The occasion was a two-day retreat for 75 Catholics and Lutherans, clergy and lay. The retreat had been a year and a half a-building through ecumenical friendships and planning meetings which themselves amounted to mini-retreats. Innocently enough the retreatants set for themselves a eucharistic theme, “Around the Table.” How were they to foresee that, after two days of hungering and thirsting together over this sacramental mystery, they would finally have to confront whether to do something about it, as one body, around the table.

Seldom have I sensed such poignancy as when they, out of deference to their respective churches, finally consented to forego the celebration—“for now.” But simultaneously they pledged, out loud, not to let go of one another. And sure enough, they will be coming together again this fall, meanwhile having upped the ante. This time their theme is, “Baptism, eucharist and ministry.” Aren’t they playing with fire—Pentecostal Fire?

If their faith—at Mascoutah and the Twin Cities and Rochester—is justified, then Jill Raitt is right: We theologians at dialogue will have to hurry to keep up.

Robert W. Bertram