

Vatican “Clarifications” on the Catholic – Lutheran Joint Declaration on Justification

1. Like day and night. That’s what the last two issues of Lutheran World Information (LWI), the fortnightly newsletter of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), were. LWI’s issue of 23 June 1998 was all hype and hallelujah about the LWF council members unanimously approving the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)” with the Roman Catholic church. The moment of the event was even recorded: 10:37 a.m. on June 16. The council’s action came after it heard that a wide majority of LWF’s 124 member churches had said “yes” to the JDDJ. The churches that said “yes” have 54.7 million members, 95 percent of the Lutherans in LWF member churches. A photo shows LWF council members and staff singing “Now Thank We All Our God” after the vote. One headline said: “Passing ‘Joint Declaration’ is ‘big day’ for Lutherans.” And it was.
2. But then comes the LWI issue of July 9—so sober, so somber. It reports on the Vatican’s response to the JDDJ, a series of “yes, but’s” over the signature of Cardinal Edward Cassidy, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Even the date of Cassidy’s statement was a bit of an “ouch.” It was June 25, which just happens to be the anniversary of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession in 1530! But the big “ouch” is Cassidy’s text, so serious in its “buts” that some of LWF leaders quoted in the July 9 issue are patently shaking

their heads and (almost) wondering out loud where Cassidy has been all this time—even though he's been actively in the mix of Lutheran – Roman Catholic interaction for years. Of course, nobody says that in so many words. Ecumenical etiquette calls for more genteel language. But the hype and hallelujah of June 23 are gone. Captions in the July 9 issue are these: "Vatican's response to Joint Declaration to be carefully examined; High level of agreement achieved; No reason for disappointment or resignation." You don't have to be a rocket scientist to get the message.

3. What are Cassidy's caveats? His term is "clarifications," additional work needed to remove the "cloudiness" remaining in the JDDJ. He then offers "in order of importance, a list of points that constitute still an obstacle to agreement between the Catholic Church and the LWF on all the fundamental truths concerning justification."

- A. "For Catholics...the formula 'at the same time righteous and sinner' [a notoriously Lutheran expression jointly affirmed in the JDDJ] is not acceptable." Even though the JDDJ claims that the 16th century anathemas—from both sides—on justification have now been laid to rest, Cassidy says: "it remains difficult to see how this doctrine on 'simul justus et peccator' [simultaneously righteous and sinner] is not touched by the anathemas of the Tridentine Decree [=Council of Trent, 1546-63] on original sin and justification."
- B. "Another difficulty arises . . . where a clear difference appears in the importance . . . of justification as criterion for the life and practice of the Church." For Lutherans justification by faith is THE criterion, whereas Catholics integrate it

“into the fundamental criterion of the ‘rule of faith,’” namely, the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas “rooted in the living Church and its sacramental life.”

- C. The JDDJ soft-pedals, maybe even denies, humanity’s “cooperation with grace” in the event of justification. The document’s language of “merely passive reception . . . independent of human cooperation” needs clarification in order to move toward “consensus with the Catholic doctrine.” And what is that consensus? “That eternal life is, at one and the same time, grace and the reward given by God for good works and merits.”
 - D. The sacrament of penance in connection to justification is “not sufficiently noted” in JDDJ.
 - E. Although “the level of agreement is high,” the “paragraphs [in JDDJ] explaining Catholic doctrine” are incomplete. Cassidy’s “remarks are intended as a more precise explanation of the teaching of the Catholic Church” on these points.
 - F. His final concern is that the two signatories of JDDJ, the LWF and the Catholic Church, are dissimilar entities, one a federation of churches and the other THE Catholic Church. Cassidy praises the “great effort made by the LWF in order to arrive, through consultation of the Synods, at a ‘magnus consensus,’ and so to give a true ecclesial value to its signature.” Yet “there remains, however, the question of the real authority of such a synodal consensus, today and also tomorrow, in the life and doctrine of the Lutheran community.”
4. You can see why the euphoria has died down at LWF headquarters in Geneva. Cassidy’s first three points come very close to being Augsburg Confession time all over

again. As a pre-novice in ecumenical politics, and even more benighted about what the Vatican is up to, I have no idea what's going on here on that turf. I've seen and heard Cassidy "live" once or twice and was pleased that he was Rome's chief ecumenical officer. [After all, anyone named Edward can't be all bad!]

5. Cassidy surely knows the knee-jerk reaction Lutherans will have to his words about "grace plus reward." So what's he doing here? The same goes for his critique of "righteous and sinner at the same time," words "jointly" approved by the Roman partners who worked on the document. If JDDJ wants to move beyond the anathemas of the 16th century, why does he cite the Council of Trent so liberally to clarify the document's "cloudy" text? If the Roman participants in the long process that produced JDDJ left important "paragraphs explaining Catholic doctrine" incomplete, why didn't someone from the front office say so sooner, or get "better" Catholics to represent the doctrine? Other voices in the last LWI ask why this official Vatican response came from Cassidy, Rome's ecumenical officer, and not from Ratzinger, the chief of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, or from John Paul II himself. Maybe someday we'll know. What we do have is Cassidy's text and that prompts the thoughts that follow.
6. "Eternal life is, at one and the same time, grace and the reward given by God for good works and merits." That's what the Augsburg Confessors were protesting against. For them God's grace and the language of merits and rewards were two languages that couldn't be merged. Luther called them two differing grammars, each with its own logic that negated the logic of the other. The language of works, merit, reward is easily understood: you do something good, you deserve something good in return. It's the picture of

the classic scales of justice. Put something good into the dish on one side, and something equally good in return must be placed in the other dish to bring about equitable balance. Put something bad into one side and you merit "bad" in the other side of the balance. Makes sense.

7. But God's grace, claimed the Augsburgers, doesn't fit into that system. 'Fact is, it contradicts that system. The whole scripture talks about grace—"chesed" in Hebrew, and "charis" in Greek—as something else, both "good" and "new" [i.e., Good News] when compared to the debit-credit balance scales of merits and rewards. Classic is St. Paul (but not only he) in putting it this way: "In Christ God was reconciling the world unto himself, not counting our trespasses against us [i.e., not simply weighing us on the divine scales], but making Christ (who had no sin of his own) to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." The mind-blowing "grace" of this transaction is that our sin gets put into Christ's own scales and he takes the deadly consequences that come in the other dish, while his righteousness gets put into our dish along with all the goodies that God bestows on his side of the scales for anyone so righteous.
8. Isn't Cassidy still working with a scholastic notion of grace? Is it any more Biblical than it was in the 16th century? In my first year as a seminarian, St. Louis 1950, Jaroslav Pelikan took us novices through the Augsburg Confession clarifying for us the different notions of grace in conflict then. In scholastic theology, he said, "Grace is a metaphysical medicine channelled through the sacraments of the church for healing the defective state of sinners. When sinners appropriate it, healing begins, and for their good work of appropriating grace more grace is merited."
9. For the confessors the term had more explicitly Biblical

roots. Grace was God's favor toward sinners, a personal, relational reality. In the Augsburg tradition terms such as "forgiveness of sins" or "God's mercy" are synonyms for grace. Scholasticism tended to reify grace, view it as a "thing," to be sure a marvelous divine thing, replete with spiritual healing energy, but still a thing. And as a thing, a commodity replete with spiritual value, you can conduct transactions with grace. The sale of indulgences in the reformers' day was no accident. It was a logical deduction from the scholastic idea of grace.

10. For the Augsburgers linking grace and reward was merging law and gospel, God's two opposite ways of dealing with sinners. Of course, you can utter the two words together and assert their compatibility, just as you can say "square circle." But there is no reality that corresponds to the words. For eternal life it's an either/or. Either God counts trespasses (and good works too) and measures out just deserts, or God was in Christ upsetting the just deserts scales. There's no third option.
11. Is Cassidy pushing Lutheran – Catholic dialogue back to square one? Some of us might want to throw up our hands and say "Who needs this?" Can it be said that evidently it is we Lutherans who need it, since the Lord of the church has now given it to us.
12. More next time, d.v., on Cassidy's other two caveats: the doctrine of justification as a theological criterion and Christians as simultaneously righteous and sinners. These are both of a piece with the Augsburg foundations discussed above. For the Augsburgers justification by faith alone [JBFA] was not a doctrine strictly speaking, but a hermeneutic, a recommended way for doing all preaching and teaching. Augsburg speaks fundamentally of only one doctrine, the Gospel itself. JBFA, they say, is the Gospel's own criterion for how to preach the Gospel.

The simultaneity issue brings the term "sin" in for direct consideration. Here too Cassidy pushes us back to square one. The reality of human sinfulness and the way God justifies sinners were just two sides of THE issue at Augsburg. More about that next time. And after that back to Seminex stuff.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder