

## **The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification**

On October 31, 1999, the 482<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary of Luther's Posting of the 95 Theses for church reform, church leaders from the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. The *Declaration* proclaimed to the world that the mutual condemnations of the sixteenth century no longer apply to what the Catholic and Lutheran churches teach today. And more than that, it set out what Lutherans and Roman Catholics can accept and confess together on this crucial issue concerning salvation in Christ.

The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* is a common statement written together that says that the central question of the reformation no longer divides our churches. It is an official statement, not a mere statement of consensus issued by theologians. We now have an official declaration by the chief teaching authorities of each church according to its own procedures. This means that a commitment has been made in a binding, authoritative way to this shared doctrinal consensus. The statement commits both churches to particular ways of understanding their own traditional teaching on justification.

It is interesting to note that each church made the binding authoritative decision differently and the agreement itself says: "Notwithstanding different conceptions of authority in the church, each partner respects the other partner's ordered process of reaching doctrinal decisions." (Annex 4). For Catholics the decision was made in Rome by the Pope and the bishops. For Lutherans the process was more complex. The Lutheran World Federation is not a church but a communion of churches and so could not make this decision on its own; each member church had to ratify the agreement. Over one hundred and twenty Lutheran churches around the world, representing eighty seven per cent of Lutherans, overwhelmingly endorsed the proposal. Notable dissenters from this agreement in the United States are the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

The statement attempts to do three things: to declare that sixteenth-century condemnations no longer apply to what our churches teach today, to express the conviction that each is not condemned by the other, and to express together "the main content of the doctrine of justification in an affirmative way."

The agreement does not bring us into full communion. It does not "lift" condemnations *per se*. Early on in the discussions a methodological decision was taken not to reargue the sixteenth century but rather to look at our respective churches today and see if the condemnations still apply. The *Declaration* "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 remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations" (JD5). Here we are concerned with what is enough consensus for unity, as opposed to resolving all of our differences. Some differences are part of the healthy theological debate that is always part of the church.

### **What do we say in common? What is the consensus reached?**

"In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the Triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners." (JD 15)

"The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ." (JD 15)

"Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father." (JD 15)

"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." (JD 15)

"Therefore the doctrine of justification, which takes up this message and explicates it, is more than just one part of Christian doctrine. It stands in an essential relation to all truths of faith, which are to be seen as internally related to

each other. It is an indispensable criterion which constantly serves to orient all the teaching and practice of our churches to Christ.” (JD18)

“We confess together that all persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for salvation.” (JD 19)

“We confess together that God forgives sin by grace and at the same time frees human beings from sin’s enslaving power and imparts the gift of new life in Christ.” (JD 22)

“We confess together that sinners are justified by the saving action of God in Christ.” (JD 25)

“We confess together that the faithful can rely on the mercy and promises of God.” (JD 34)

“We confess together that good works—Christian life lived in faith, hope, and love—follow justification and are its fruits.” (JD 37)

### **The Challenge**

To reach consensus after five hundred years is in itself remarkable. The *Joint Declaration* does not immediately change anything about how we practice our traditions. Nonetheless it can bring a new quality into our relationship. The old condemnations have formed our identities as Roman Catholics and Lutherans; not only has ecclesial awareness been traumatized but also the condemnations can be seen as general prejudices that have taken root in the consciousness of the members of our churches. We are challenged now to look at each other, not at the stereotypes we hold of each other.