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Responses to the US Lutheran-Roman Catholic Statement on Justification: Introduction to the Responses

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Introduction to the Responses*

The great divide between Lutherans and Roman Catholics in the sixteenth century was constituted by different understandings of the doctrine of justification. How do human beings become righteous before God? Luther answered that they are justified on the basis of faith alone, not by works. This doctrine of justification by faith became for Lutherans the hermeneutical principle for understanding the entire gospel. In a paraphrase of Luther's words, the Smalcald Articles (2, 1), spoke of it as the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. Originally a soteriological principle, in the later Lutheran tradition justification by faith was to function increasingly as a critical principle to test the authenticity of other Church teachings, structures and practices.

In the official dialogues begun between Lutherans and Roman Catholics after the Second Vatican Council, the doctrine of justification by faith was taken up, first briefly by the International Lutheran-Roman Catholic Study Commission in its so-called Malta Report (9 February, 1972),¹ and at length in the US Lutheran-Roman Catholic agreed statement, *Justification by Faith* (1985).² According to the Malta Report, 'a far-reaching consensus is developing in the interpretation of justification' (no. 26), though it noted that other questions remained, such as the use of the doctrine as a critical principle (nos. 28-29). The report went on to recommend occasional intercommunion (no. 73), though three Roman Catholic members were unable to agree on this point.

The Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue in the United States turned to the doctrine of justification in round seven of its work. After almost six years of dialogue and study, the dialogue issued its statement, *Justification by Faith*. Though it noted the presence of 'contrasting theological perspectives and structures of thought' (no. 121) in the two communions, it found 'a convergence (though not a uniformity) on justification by faith considered in and of itself, and a significant though lesser convergence on the application of the doctrine as a criterion of authenticity for the Church's

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1. Malta Report, in *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level*, ed. Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer (New York/Geneva: Paulist Press/WCC, 1984).

2. *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, ed. H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985).

proclamation and practice' (no. 152). The dialogue statement was then offered to the two communions with the hope that it 'will serve them as they face the need to make appropriate decisions for the purpose of confessing their faith as one' (no. 165).

That was 1985. Official responses from various Churches and official bodies representing the two communions have been slow in coming. But in the last couple of years, several have appeared.

The first response, 'An Evaluation of the Lutheran-Catholic Statement *Justification by Faith*', was released by the US National Council of Catholic Bishops on 22 March, 1990. The response saw the document on justification not just as representing 'a significant step toward reconciliation between Catholics and Lutherans' but also as addressing in its presentation of God's creative mercy in Christ 'a major source of distrust on the part of other Protestants' (no. 2). But it pointed to three areas needing further clarification, the use of justification as a hermeneutical or critical principle, the need for some 'adequate agreement' on purgatory, the papacy, and the role of the saints, and the necessity to reach a mutual recognition of ministry before any consideration of even a limited admission to the Eucharist (no. 2.4).

Two more responses appeared in January of 1991. The 'Response to *Justification By Faith*', formulated by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was published on 28 January. It was also quite positive. The ELCA response noted that the authors as Lutherans were able to accept the most basic affirmation of the document, that it represents 'a fundamental consensus on the gospel between Lutherans and Catholics' (no. I.b.). More specifically, they noted a 'significant convergence' on the ways of conceiving the justification of sinners and a 'fundamental consensus' on the gospel (no. I.c).

The response acknowledged a criteriological and not only material agreement on justification' (no. III. b.), but it pointed out that the particular critical application of the gospel represents the greatest area of uncertainty in the statement. Though it respects the different concerns on the side of both communions, a Lutheran insistence on the vigorous application of the norm and a Catholic concern that structures established by Christ and the Spirit not be eroded through its application (no. III. c), the ELCA response still sees the document as the decisive but not the final step towards full communion between Lutherans and Catholics (no. IV).

The final statement, 'A Response to the US Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue Report VII, *Justification by Faith*', published by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod on 25 February, 1992, is perhaps the most difficult to assess. The response focusses from the beginning on the justification document's conclusion that a 'fundamental consensus' in the gospel has been reached, and that whatever differences might remain need not be Church-dividing (no. 2). After briefly reviewing the statement, the response judges that 'fundamental doctrinal differences still exist between

Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism on the doctrine of justification' (no. 4). The objections of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod seem to be primarily inter-Lutheran; their response argues that the dialogue 'has failed to present the role which the doctrine of justification plays in Lutheran theology in its full radicality' (no. 4 c). The final sentence states that 'beneath the "differences on theological formulations" often noted, there remain substantive differences between the Churches which go to the very heart of the gospel itself and are therefore divisive' (no. 5).

The responses of the US Catholic Bishops' Conference and of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America follow below in full, with substantial extracts from the response of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

THOMAS P. RAUSCH, S.J.

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