5-2-1981

Lutherans and Catholics After the Augsburg Anniversary

Thomas P. Rausch

Loyola Marymount University, trausch@lmu.edu

Repository Citation

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theological Studies at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theological Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu.
Lutherans and Catholics After the Augsburg Anniversary

The 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession provided the occasion for vigorous theological dialogue between communions. In celebrating the faith they share, both acknowledged the differences that divide them.

The 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession has come and gone. Between June 23 and 29, 1980, over 20,000 people gathered in Augsburg for a week of reflection, prayer and celebration. Most were Lutherans, including many from the new churches of the third world, but many Catholics also were present. At the concluding ceremony on June 29, Cardinal Jan Willebrands, president of the Vatican Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity, expressed his gratitude that at this great festival of the Lutheran family, the Catholic Church did not have to remain "outside the walls."

So Catholics and Lutherans did come together at Augsburg, at least for a time. But what has happened, now that the anniversary ceremonies have been concluded and the delegates have returned to their homes? What did the anniversary year accomplish?

There were some disappointments. For one thing, the Roman Catholic Church did not officially recognize the Augsburg Confession as a statement of catholic, ecclesial faith, as had been proposed by some ecumenists. Both Lutherans and Roman Catholics had endorsed this proposal as a step toward healing the breach between the two churches. Some had hoped that Rome might take such a step during the anniversary year. However, as the time for the anniversary celebration at Augsburg approached, some respected Roman Catholic theologians cautioned against such a Catholic recognition. One was the Archbishop of Munich, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who had initially expressed interest in the proposal. Yet in an article published in 1978, Cardinal Ratzinger argued that talk about "recognition" only awakened "false expectations" and should be dropped, even though he felt that dialogues should continue on the compatibility of the theological and ecclesial structure of the Lutheran confessional writings with the teaching of the Catholic Church.

The Rev. Avery Dulles, S.J., was cool toward the proposal. In an article published during the anniversary year, Father Dulles called attention to the "sweeping nature of the statements" directed against many Catholic usages and questioned, among other things, whether the Roman Catholic Church can "officially recognize a document that criticizes monastic vows and mandatory priestly celibacy with as few qualifications as the Augsburg Confession admits." Beneath the criticism of medieval Catholic practice, Father Dulles saw "certain doctrinal assumptions" which become explicit in formulations of the Confession on the Mass as sacrifice or in its restrictions on the power of the bishops to impose obligations binding in conscience. In a similar vein, the Rev. Jared Wicks, S.J., another respected Roman Catholic Luther scholar, pointed out that not all those practices characterized by the Reformers at Augsburg as "abuses" could be acknowledged as such by the Catholic side. Father Wicks argued that the "Confutatio," the official response of the Emperor Charles V prepared by the Catholic theologians at Augsburg, "spoke well for those who remained committed to tradition and to historically developed forms of life and worship. Its advocacy of such structures—against charges of inherent sinfulness—also deserves recognition."

Father Dulles also made the important point that the Lutheran movement was not simply an expression of Christianity parallel to Orthodoxy and Western Catholicism. It was a reform movement, a prophetic protest. Therefore, the Catholic Church cannot simply "domesticate" the Confessio Augustana as a "Catholic" confession without qualification. He suggested that Catholics and Lutherans may need to remain separated for some time to come: "Catholics must continue to ask themselves if they have fully heard the message of the Reformation, and Lutherans must continue to ask themselves whether their protest has not been in some respects too one-sided. Lutherans may well decide at some future time that even the Confessio Augustana, although perhaps more Catholic than general Lutheran belief and practice, is in some points insufficiently Catholic."

For Father Dulles, then, formal recognition of the Augsburg Confession by the Catholic Church "...still appears remote and possibly undesirable," although he sees the simultaneous Catholic and Lutheran character of the Augsburg Confession as helping to bring both groups closer to the day when they will recognize each other as belonging to the same ecclesial fellowship. Thus the 450th anniversary year did not see the recognition of the Augsburg Confession by Rome that some had hoped for. "A trial balloon fell back to earth," one German observer commented.

Some Lutherans in Germany were also disappointed as a result of the discovery of certain editorial changes in Pope John Paul II's anniversary greetings to the Lutherans at Augsburg. These changes became evident when, through what was apparently a Vatican gaffe, two different versions of the Pope's message appeared. The official version, read on May 25 at a general audience in Rome, was quite positive and conciliatory, encouraging Catholics and Lutherans to continue working together toward solving the remaining questions. However another, longer version had already appeared in Augsburg before the general audience. While substantially the same text,
the longer version was considerably more sensitive in tone to Lutheran concerns. In several sentences omitted from the official version, the earlier text used language similar to articles 1 and 3 of the Augsburg Confession on justification by faith and actually quoted part of article 4. It also pointed out that the church could not realize its full catholicity as long as authentic catholic elements remained outside her boundaries. Subsequent explanations that the longer first draft had been shortened to fit the time requirements of the general audience were not totally convincing and detracted from the generally positive impression created by the Pope’s remarks.

On the other hand, in spite of occasional disappointments, the anniversary year was not without some very significant results. First of all, the anniversary year observances brought Lutherans and Roman Catholics closer to one another than they had been at any time since the original negotiations at Augsburg in 1530. In the United States, Catholic and Lutheran communities across the country responded generously to invitations to join in the anniversary observances. Most significant was the extent to which, for the first time, the “grass roots” became involved. In New York an estimated 4,000 Roman Catholics and Lutherans, led by a number of their bishops and presidents, filled St. Patrick’s Cathedral the Sunday before the 450th anniversary “to celebrate the faith we share.” And in Los Angeles, over 750 lay people, representing 23 Lutheran and 23 Catholic parishes, met in groups of 12 for the six weeks of Lent to discuss Scripture and authority, sacraments, salvation and good works, and the nature of the church from the standpoint of their respective traditions. Later in June, all those who had participated in the Lenten dialogues gathered at St. Vibiana’s Roman Catholic Cathedral before the Cardinal Archbishop of Los Angeles and the district presidents or representatives of the three Lutheran churches for a joint worship service marking the anniversary. In Philadelphia, Lutheran and Catholic pastors and priests shared a retreat focused on the Augsburg Confession. In Lawrence, Kan., a Catholic university parish and a Lutheran parish joined together to host a month-long program. In Detroit, the archdiocesan newspaper dedicated an entire issue to an explanation of the Augsburg Confession. And so on across the country; in coming together for study and dialogue Lutherans

and Catholics so often discovered the degree to which they shared a common faith.

A second significant result of the Augsburg anniversary is the rediscovery of the catholicity of the Augsburg Confession itself, not just for Catholics, but even more, for many Lutherans. Several Lutheran theologians have made the point that a Roman Catholic recognition of the Augsburg Confession would require the Lutheran churches to reappropriate for themselves the catholic dimensions of the Confession. Herman Dietzfelbinger, the retired Lutheran bishop of Bavaria, wrote that such a recognition would require the Lutheran church “to show to what extent it will also in the future regard itself not merely as Protestant but as catholic in the original sense.” The American Lutheran theologian Walter Bouman argued that for Lutherans taking the Augsburg Confession seriously would mean acknowledging that “in many ways it no longer describes what Lutherans think and/or practice,” and thus, that Lutherans are summoned by it to “an older, more authentic identity and ritual.” Wolfhart Pannenberg has pointed to two important consequences of a Catholic recognition of the Augsburg Confession for contemporary Lutheranism. First, he states that Lutherans can no longer claim, as does the Confession, that the Eucharist is observed with greater devotion among themselves than among Catholics. They need to undo the damage done by the Enlightenment and restore the Lord’s Supper to its central place in the worship of the church. Those who work for this among Lutherans, Dr. Pannenberg argues, can no longer be accused of an unevangelical “catholicizing.” Secondly, he states that the Lutheran ordained ministry must once again assume responsibility for the unity of the church at all levels. If local Protestant ministers fail in their responsibility for universal church unity, then the Reformation itself will remain incomplete: “the 16th-century schism should not be seen as the legitimate issue of the Reformation, but as expressing its failure.”

The importance of this Lutheran rediscovery of the catholicity of the Augsburg Confession cannot be overestimated. If Lutheran Christians continue to rediscover and affirm the catholicity of their own tradition’s most basic confession of faith, then, as Richard John Neuhaus has suggested, these first Protestants may discover that division from Rome is no longer necessary and therefore no longer permissible. In this way Lutheranism could play a leading role in bringing the Reformation to its fulfillment in the renewal of the whole church of Christ.

A third important result of the anniversary year celebration is the 1980 “Statement on the Augsburg Confession” of the Joint Roman Catholic-Lutheran Commission. This statement has addressed some of the concerns, mentioned earlier, of Catholic commentators such as Fathers Dulles and Wicks; it has also taken steps toward the clarification of some of the issues in the Augsburg Confession which have remained in dispute between Catholic and Lutherans. Regarding the question of how the Augsburg Confession should be interpreted in light of the other Lutheran confessional writings, the statement calls the Confession the “basis and point of reference for the other Lutheran confessional documents,” reflecting “the ecumenical purpose and catholic intention of the Reformation.” This would suggest that the Augsburg Confession be understood as the principle of interpretation for the other Lutheran confessional documents, rather than vice versa. The statement affirms that the Augsburg Confession is still the doctrinal basis of the Lutheran churches and has binding authority for them even today. It emphasizes that the concern of the Augsburg Confession was not the establishment of a new church, but the “preservation and

‘Lutheran-Catholic relations in Germany are often complicated by the emotional residue of 400 years of division, a division which has taken on social and political form. German Lutherans are not always anxious for a Lutheran-Roman Catholic reunion which would change the status quo. . . . It may just be, then, that the ball is in the American court’
renewal of the Christian faith in its purity” in harmony with the ancient church and the “church of Rome.” And it points out that between Lutherans and Catholics “a broad consensus emerges in the doctrine of justification.”

In a clarification of points traditionally disputed and raised in the various anniversary year articles, the statement acknowledges that the church always includes sinners; it agrees that “a special ministerial office conferred by ordination is constitutive for the church and does not belong to those elements which the Augsburg Confession denotes as ‘not necessary.’ ” In respect to questions raised about Catholic practice in the second part of the Confession, the statement acknowledges that changes have come about “in the life and judgment of our churches which largely remove the grounds for the sharp criticism” and the “sometimes severe polemical position” expressed there. Specifically, the statement argues that “it is impossible to continue to maintain the severe condemnation” of monasticism and the life of the religious orders. On a key point that has not usually been recognized by Lutheran commentators, the statement acknowledges that the “Confessio Augustana affirms a ministry of unity and leadership—set over the local ministers—(Confessio Augustana, 28) as essential for the church . . . even if the actual form to be given to this ministerial office remains open.” Thus the statement acknowledges that the Augsburg Confession recognizes an episcopal function, an office of supervision or oversight (episkope), even though it points out that among the open questions and unresolved problems are “certain aspects of the episcopal order and the church’s teaching office.” The Joint Roman Catholic-Lutheran Commission is currently working on the question of the episcopal office. Other unresolved questions include the number of the sacraments and the papacy.

Thus the anniversary celebration of the Augsburg Confession has borne fruit, both on the level of the theological dialogues and in the growing discovery of a common experience of faith for Lutherans and Roman Catholics at the grass roots. This latter is especially important, for as Lutherans and Catholics discover how much they have in common, it becomes more and more difficult for them to understand why they cannot share together in the Eucharist. Indeed, intercommunion has become a question of increasing urgency.

What lies ahead? Difficult questions still remain. Roman Catholics still await a clear statement from Lutherans that the Eucharist can only be celebrated under the direction of an ordained minister. Lutheran practice in Germany is occasionally lax in this respect. And in the United States, there are still many on both sides who resist gestures or steps toward reconciliation. Still, it remains true that more progress has been made in the United States than in Germany. As Pastor Neuhaus recently wrote, “it is no secret that over the last 15 years it is the American and not the European theological dialogues that have made the most notable and substantial progress.” Lutheran-Catholic relations in Germany are often complicated by the emotional residue of 400 years of division, a division which has taken on social and political form. German Lutherans are not always anxious for a Lutheran-Roman Catholic reunion which would change the status quo, and their theologians, as Pastor Neuhaus says, are “not accustomed to taking their theological lead from America.” Even ownership of the local cathedral or parish church can be a touchy question.

It just may be, then, that the ball is in the American court, at least as far as Lutheran-Roman Catholic relations are concerned. Perhaps it is time for some symbolic gesture on the part of the Catholic Church in the United States which could both acknowledge the growing communion between Catholics and Lutherans in this country and at the same time provide an example for the continental representatives of their respective traditions. It has been suggested that some sign from the American bishops, an official reception of the agreed statements of the U.S. Lutheran-Catholic dialogue or a statement that the two churches in the United States were close to the stage of agreement which would precede intercommunion, could provide the incentive necessary to revitalize the ecumenical movement and to resolve the remaining problems. If something like this were to happen, then the Augsburg Confession might yet play a historic role in the reconciliation of Lutherans and Roman Catholics.

“Thomas P. Rausch, S.J. is assistant dean of liberal arts and assistant professor of theology at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, and a member of the Los Angeles Lutheran Roman Catholic Committee.”

JANICE A. BROUN

Russian Christians have experienced Christ’s Passion, and now they look for a sharing in His Resurrection

There are many aspects of life in the Soviet Union that are difficult for Westerners to understand. One is the revival of Orthodoxy within the last decade among the younger generation and the intelligentsia; for the Russian Orthodox Church has been notorious for its passivity and complete subservience to the state, a church primarily of old, poorly educated women, a church devastated by Khrushchev’s brutal persecution, when about 10,000 churches, more than two-thirds the total number were illegally closed.

The extent of this revival is reflected in the Government’s vicious clampdown on Orthodox activists prior to the Olympic Games. They found themselves faced with a church now containing an articulate and critical group of committed layfolk, whose first loyalty is to God and who refuse to compromise with Caesar as the hierarchy does. To understand this situation, we must look back a few years.

At the outbreak of the war with Hitler only a few hundred churches remained open. Stalin’s desperate need for support, and the astute initiative of the acting head of the church, Archbishop Sergei, in calling Christians to fight for their fatherland, led to considerable concessions on the part of the Government. Twenty thousand churches were reopened where all visible signs of religious life had vanished. Russian Orthodoxy is rather like that; it was far more deeply rooted in the minds and souls of people than Communists could believe. By the late 1950’s, it was so flourishing that Khrushchev, a dogmatic Communist, tried to crush it. It was many years before Western Christians heard and started to piece together the story of those bitter years.

Even though all the resources of the atheist state were thrown against the church, it soon found that it had to follow