**HISTORY OF ECUMENISM: LUTHERAN AND CATHOLIC**

Dr. Paul J. Seastrand, for MT Synod Convocation, October 26, 2017

Sketching 500 years of Lutheran and Catholic ecumenism in my short time requires

unusual speed, so put on your seat belts! I sketch three things in this limited time:

1) The history, timeline, and topics of dialogue; 2) Our ecumenical theological

method; and 3) Challenges Ahead.

1) The history, timeline, and topics of Lutheran and Catholic ecumenism.

At the Diet of Worms in 1521, the teachings of Martin Luther were

banned and he was branded an outlaw and heretic. At the Diet of

Augsburg in 1530, Lutheran and Catholic differences hardened with

Lutheran subscription to the Augsburg Confession. The Imperial

Diet of Regensburg in 1541 (convened by Emperor Charles V) was

another failed attempt by Lutherans and Catholics (7 each) to agree

on the Gospel and justification. From here on, the Lutheran Reformation

and the Catholic Counter-Reformation produced the perception that

Lutherans and Catholics had hard and fast disagreements that dialogue

would not undo.

Then arrived the “ecumenical revolution” of the 20th century, when the

modern world, wracked by war, got much smaller and more talkative.

For example, Catholics and Lutherans participated in the World Alliance

for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches, founded on

August 2, 1914, the day after World War I erupted.

The World Council of Churches, constituted in 1948, became the most visible

organ of ecumenical activity in the 20th century, though the Roman Catholic

Church was not officially represented. Still, over the decades, it participated in

many national and regional councils, including the National Council of Churches

in the USA.

Why did the Roman Catholic Church not officially join the WCC or the NCC?

One reason is the issue of balance: the membership of the Roman Catholic

Church far surpasses any other member church, so what would the ratio be?

Second, the original charter of the WCC provided for the inclusion of national

churches, and the Roman Catholic is not that. Third, is the question of how to

handle any disagreements that arise with Catholic teachings, since the Roman

Church looks like “the elephant in the room” with its stances of papal primacy

and papal infallibility.

Be that as it may, for Lutherans and Catholics, this changed dramatically during 2

and after the Second Vatican Council initiated by Pope John XX111, 1962-1965.

Initial contacts in 1964 led to formation of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Working

Group, and up to the year 2015, there have been 11 international dialogues between representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council

for Promoting Christian Unity.

There have also been a number of national dialogues, as in the United States,

Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Australia, which have produced some brilliant

essays and studies (e.g., in the United States, *Eucharist and Ministry* (1970,

Dialogue 4), *Justification by Faith* (1983, Dialogue 7), and *The One Mediator,*

*the Saints and Mary*, 1990, Dialogue 8). These have directly affected global

Lutheran-Catholic ecumenism.

I should note that these dialogues do not speak for all Lutherans, but only

those who are members of the Lutheran World Federation, which numbers 74

million Lutherans in 145 member churches (98 countries; Roman Catholics

worldwide are 1.2 billion). These dialogues do not represent the churches of

the International Lutheran Council, which has a membership of 3.2 million, and

includes the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. The churches of the ILC tend to

embrace fundamentalist commitments on the authority of scripture and the Lutheran

Confessions. Nonetheless, the ILC and the Pontifical Council for Promoting

Christian Unity did have consultations in 2013 which committed them to three

years of international dialogue measured against a number of LWF sponsored

dialogues. It is interesting, therefore, for everyone in this room to realize that

members of the ILC are studying our ecumenical material with Roman Catholics,

and finding agreement in some areas where LWF Lutherans have not (e.g.,

ordination of women, ordination of homosexuals, same-gender marriages, and the

authorization of laity to administer the sacraments). I would also note that Lutherans

in the North American Lutheran Church are discussing membership with both the

LWF and the ILC, and they have established dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church.

With respect to our joint international dialogues, so far these have covered 11

topics. *The Gospel and the Church* (Malta report), 1972; *The Eucharist*, 1978; in

1980, *All Under One Christ*, which along with *Ways to* *Community* in the same year,

had in mind the irenic and unifying intent of the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg

Confession; *The Ministry in the* *Church*, 1981; *Martin Luther: Witness to Christ,* 1983,

which commemorated Luther’s birth in 1483; *Facing Unity: Models, Forms and Phases*

*of*  *Catholic*-*Lutheran Church Fellowship*, in 1984; in 1993, *Church and Justification*;

in 1999, *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification; The* *Apostolicity*

*of the Church*, in 2006; and in 2012, *From Conflict to Communion*.

These dialogues so not all carry the same weight of consensus, nor have they all been equally received by Lutherans and Catholics. So it is noteworthy that “the highest level of authority lies with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” which was signed by members of the LWF and the Roman Catholic Church (p 41, *From Conflict to Communion*).

The most recent document, received by our churches in 2016, is *Declaration on* 3

*the Way*, which draws attention to 32 agreements from over 50 years of dialogue

This document, however, was not produced by the international team, but by

representatives of the ELCA and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Accordingly, toward the end of its report, on p. 114, the report says: “We, therefore,

recommend that the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for

Promoting Christian Unity together receive, affirm and create a process to

implement consequences of the 32 ‘Statements of Agreement on Church, Ministry

and Eucharist.” In other words, the encouragement signaled by *Declaration on the*

*Way*, needs to travel from the United States to other global decision-makers in our

two churches.

2) The second item to sketch, is the theological method of our ecumenical

advance. The scope of our dialogues have been unflinchingly broad, yet

we made progress because it was realized that doctrines do change, even

while their intentions remain the same.

What is fascinating about dialogue in the past five decades, is that it has

traveled a continuum from condemnation to reconciliation; from impatient

rejection of the other to patient acceptance of the other; from proof-texting

errors in the other to appreciating the insights of the other. We have abandoned

the polemical theological method which defined your doctrinal position by

refuting the errors of your opponent. Instead, our churches have steadily

achieved a *consensus of differentiation*.

Not so long ago we dismissed each other with charges such as these: Catholics are

saved by works; Lutherans don’t need church and sacraments because they

approach God privately; Catholic Eucharistic theology depends on Aristotle

more than Jesus; Catholics worship Mary like they do Jesus (Catholics do not

worship Mary, but do pray to her and reverence her); Lutherans believe that the

pope is the anti-Christ; Catholics believe only Catholics go to heaven; Lutherans,

being exempt from the historic episcopate, have a completely defective ministry;

and Catholics still believe, like Tetzel, that you gain forgiveness and go to heaven

with an indulgence (when a person sins, to remit the mortal punishment of hell,

that person needs to confess and be forgiven, while to remit temporal, this-world

punishment, or the punishment of purgatory, the person receives an indulgence

for doing good deeds or prayers); and you can all think of other juicy accusations.

Now, there are often differences between what the books say and what the people do.

(For example, the Bible does not say that Jesus’ soul was raised, but that Jesus was raised

body *and* soul; yet I find most Christians believing that their soul goes to heaven

without their body, which is utterly wrong, in spite of Easter celebrations!)

Yet, at the level of what the books *and* the Bible *do say*, Lutherans and Catholics 4

have experienced such remarkable convergence that it appears each tradition is

sometimes saying the same thing in different ways with different accents—even though

this consensus may not be reflected by what the people in the pew believe and do!

For example, you will read in *Declaration on the Way*, that instead of three

offices of Ministry, Catholics actually affirm one office of ministry, but they

*distinguish* a special ministry of episcope *within* that one office (see p. 51).

Put this way, Lutherans can loosen their objections to Catholic teaching that

the episcopacy is divinely ordained, because Lutherans teach one office of ministry,

divine ordained, that can be variously ordered (though not that the “fullness” is

expressed by the bishops and pope). The difference appears to be emphasis.

Another example is the sacrifice of the mass. Historically, Lutherans charged

Catholics with repeating the sacrifice of Christ to propitiate God. Here we need

remember that there are two kinds of sacrifice: atoning and Eucharistic. Only

Christ’s sacrifice is atoning and unrepeatable, and this Catholics have agreed to.

The Eucharistic sacrifice is that of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. It was

agreed that what Catholics intend to say is that Christ’s atoning sacrifice is not

repeated, but re-presented in the Eucharist, making the once-for-all salvation

event of Christ available when the sacrament of the Altar is celebrated.

Or again, the teaching, say Lutherans, “by which the church stands or falls” (see

Luther’s Smalcald Articles, 1537, p. II, JX and redemption, pp. 300-301) is that

of justification, which is what divided Luther from his Catholic church at the start.

Justification is totally what God does, not what we do; Christ achieves and we receive,

we don’t produce his victory or even lay hold of it by our decision or will. This makes

the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of* *Justification* (1999) supremely illustrative of differentiated consensus.

At the Council of Trent (1545-1563), Catholics rejected the Pelagian doctrine of

works righteousness (based on Pelagius’s moral interest that sin is voluntary and grace is

instruction and enlightenment), but did see justification as a process between God and

the person which includes the collaboration of human free will. To quote *From*

*Conflict to Communion*: “It declared the essence of justification to be not the

remission of sins alone, but also the sanctification and renovation of the inner man by

supernatural charity” (#82, Justification, p. 36). To many Lutherans, this sounds

wrong, because it appears to diminish the entire work of grace.

Most Lutherans have held a “declarative” view of justification, whereby

God “declares” us righteous solely on account of Christ, and not for anything we

contribute. To many Lutherans, for God in Christ “to justify” means “to *declare*

righteous” more than it means “to *make* righteous.” Catholics have held a

“transformative” view, whereby the grace of God enables us to cooperate with

God’s will to make us righteous.

To put it another way, Lutherans emphasize that Christ works salvation *for us,*  5

and Catholics emphasize that Christ works salvation *in us.*  Lutherans emphasize

the external gift, and Catholics emphasize the internal change (though Luther did affirm baptismal regeneration). Lutherans emphasize the divine decision, and Catholics

emphasize the divine and human process. (It is worthy of note that the Hebrew and

Greek words for justification and righteousness are the same. Righteousness implies

spiritual and moral integrity, and justification has forensic overtones of being

pronounced acquitted and forgiven.)

Many Lutherans have not agreed and have not welcomed the JDDJ, some (LCMS

Paul McCain, in First Things, 2-12-10) calling the JDDJ a fraud produced by revisionist Lutherans and Catholics. The participants in dialogue, however, agree that a close

reading of the New Testament, Paul, and even Luther, encourages both accents.

Here it is very helpful to realize that the Gospel proclaims the *atoning* work of God

in Christ, and the doctrine of atonement cannot be reduced to the word “justification”

alone, because there are other words and doctrines that describe the work of

atonement—like forgiveness, sanctification, reconciliation, salvation, and expiation.

Lutherans highlight the doctrine of justification, while Catholics have taught that

the event of atonement also involves sanctification. Lutherans tend to the position

that justification is the principle explanation of the Gospel, while Catholics take the

position that other doctrines of atonement also come into play.

On the basis of an ecumenical theology of differentiated consensus, Paragraph 15 of

the JDDJ affirms both the declarative and transformative accents of justification: “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.”

This agreement on two dimensions of justification is a powerful example of the theological method characterizing these dialogues, and it is a powerful proposal of the full nature of justification. (For some citations about “differentiating consensus,” see *From Conflict to Communion*, 49, 53) In the theology of differentiated consensus, Lutherans and Catholics express not exclusive alternatives, but different accents. What appeared in the past to be

“either-or” stalemates are now greeted as “both-and” opportunities.

3) Now the third topic in this sketch of Lutheran-Catholic Ecumenism: What

are the major challenges remaining? I mention six.

One challenge is cultivating the eager reception of these dialogues by church leaders

and church members alike. Thus far this has been spotty.

A second challenge is realism about religious culture. Everyday Lutherans don’t 6

get real excited about invoking the saints, reading papal encyclicals, and seeing

the Pope’s picture everywhere, and everyday Catholics don’t get real excited about

liturgy light, lutefisk, and seeing Luther’s picture everywhere. In other words, each

church *feels* and *thinks* the faith in ways that are slow to change.

A third challenge is papal primacy. Catholics are not going to let go of this, and

full communion—if achieved--would likely mean that Lutherans recognize the

teaching ministry of the Pope for Catholics as wells as themselves. The Pope would

remain “first among equals,” yet both churches could arguably interpret papal primacy evangelically (stipulating that under the Gospel, the Pope has primacy parallel

to the primacy of pastors and priests in congregations, bishops in synods and dioceses,

and presidents in seminaries and universities).

A fourth challenge is the ordination of women. Pope John Paul’s 1994 Apostolic

Letter banned the practice, and Pope Francis said this ban will continue indefinitely.

A fifth challenge is the doctrine of papal infallibility. Using justification as criteriological principle, no human or institution can be inerrant or infallible, because this is true only

of God’s justifying promise in the Gospel. If infallibility is interpreted evangelically to mean that the whole church strives faithfully to transmit the Gospel, and that God will preserve the truth of the gospel-centered Church, then the challenge is manageable. (This seems to be the direction of the dialogues, which construe “infallibility” in terms of the entire church’s “indefectibility”; that is, “its perseverance in the truth of the gospel” (*Declaration on the Way*, 34-5) through the Holy Spirit, not only through the episcopal and papal magisterium. Lutherans emphasize the articulation of doctrine through the participation of a wide sweep of people, including church leaders, theological teachers, pastors, laypersons, and congregations, (see *Declaration on the Way*, 82, 79-85), yet neither of our churches exempt the other from any error. Nonetheless, there has been significant convergence on the meaning of infallibility.)

A sixth challenge is the role of Justification as the principal criterion of authenticity for

our churches teaching and practice. I will say more of this in my later remarks, so suffice

it for now to say that both churches will continue to decide if and how Justification will

operate as the final criterion and judge of the church’s structures, proclamation, and practices, yet do this in a way that *increases*, and does not *decrease,* the credibility and reliability of the Gospel’s embodiments in sacraments, creeds, confessions, liturgies, teachings, and polities.

This would make Catholics less defensive about their traditions, and it would make Lutherans more careful about applying this criterion to their own teachings and practices. We will

continue to have differences on this point, but they may not be serious enough to be church dividing. (Catholics agree to the importance of justification, and can even say it has

singular importance in defining the Gospel, but they prefer to say that the criterion of all

church life and practice is the Gospel in all its dimensions and not only justification.

Lutherans tend to see “justification by grace through faith” as the principle explanation of the Gospel and its full embodiment.)