

THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION: ECUMENICAL PROSPECTS

As most members of the CTSA are aware, collaboration between the CTSA and the Lutheran World Ministries has led in this anniversary year to the publication by Fortress Press of *The Role of the Augsburg Confession: Catholic and Lutheran Views*. Edited by Joseph Burgess, this book is a translation of essays by German Lutheran and Catholic theologians which originally appeared in 1977 under the title, *Katholische Anerkennung des Augsburgischen Bekenntnisses?* Three North American contributions have been added by Robert Jenson, Avery Dulles and myself, while one of the German essays was updated by George Lindbeck.

Since many have already read the book, I shall not attempt here to rehearse it. I wish instead to draw attention to some further points, related to the 1530 Diet of Augsburg, of which I was unaware when our book went to press, points which tend to strengthen the prospects of Lutheran/Roman Catholic convergence. They are insights which arose out of the reflection and research stimulated by the anniversary observance of the Augsburg Confession (henceforth: CA). Such ecumenically promising results tend not only to legitimate the time and money expended on such observances, but also to verify Pope John Paul II's words to the plenary assembly of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity on February 8, 1980: "If, after 450 years, Catholics and Lutherans can reach a more correct historical evaluation of [the CA] and a better establishment of its role in the unfolding of ecclesiastical history, a notable stride will be made in the march toward unity."¹

I

The year 1980 is not only the 450th anniversary of the CA, but also of the "confutation" of it on August 3, 1530 by the score of Catholic theologians present at the imperial Diet. Prior to reading that document for the first time in preparation for a symposium on the *Confutation* held in September, 1979 in Augsburg, I had assumed—along with many other Catholic theologians, I suspect—that this document embodied a flat, unequivocal rejection of the CA. A cursory glance at the source materials, however, reveals that the Catholic theologians offered more than one "confutation" to Emperor Charles V.²

¹ *Origins* 9, 38 (March 6, 1980).

² See the Latin and German texts in *Corpus Reformatorum*, Vol. 27. English translations can be found in J. M. Reu, *The Augsburg Confession: A Collection of Sources with an Historical Introduction* (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1930); selections have been reprinted without date by the Concordia Seminary Press. In 1979 Herbert Immenkötter published a critical edition of the final text, *Die Confutatio der Confessio Augustana vom 3. August 1530* (Münster: *Corpus Catholicorum* 33).

The first version of the *Confutation* was indeed a flat, mean-spirited rejection of the CA, except for certain articles such as the first on the one and triune God "which are not incompatible with our most holy religion." Even on such common articles of faith, however, the Catholic theologians tried to drive a wedge between the articles of the CA and some of the more dubious utterances of the reformers made earlier in the decade. This first version was so nasty in tone and so long (it would have taken twelve hours to read it aloud!) that the Emperor refused to endorse it. Several weeks later the Catholic theologians were able to present to the Emperor a response which he accepted and had read to the Lutherans on August 3. I find at least three things of ecumenical significance in this final document.

1. It is not a "Roman" or a "pontifical" confutation at all, but a reply to the CA made in the name of the Emperor. It is thus, above all, an "imperial confutation," as Heinrich Bornkamm had already seen in his RGG article on the *Confutation*. With regard to the *dogmatic status* of the document, then, Edmund Schlink has correctly noted: "Although a papal legate and some recognized Roman Catholic theologians played a part in formulating the *Confutatio*, it does not have the standing of a solemn doctrinal decision of the Roman Church. It was merely the reaction to the Confession demanded by the Emperor, and it served him as theological justification for his legal decision."³ Not even published until 1553, the document rightfully never found its way into Denzinger.

2. From the point of view of tone, the August 3 document is almost as conciliatory as the CA. Its authors sought to follow the Emperor's injunction "to praise and approve what in the Confession was said aright and in accord with Catholic doctrine, but, on the other hand, to note that wherein it differed from the Catholic Church and, together with their reply, to present and explain their judgment on each topic."⁴ In the majority of cases the reply to the articles of Part I, the doctrinal section of the CA (Arts. 1-21), begins with a positive acceptance of the substance of the article. Only afterward are demurrers made when deemed necessary.

3. The manner of argumentation is overwhelmingly biblical, especially in the response to Part I. Gone are the personal invective and the effort to convict the CA of inconsistency or dishonesty by contrasting its affirmations with early statements of Luther or Melancthon that marred the earlier drafts. In response to the key article on justification (Art. 4), for example, there is no objection whatever to the Lutheran confession that "we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith."⁵ The Catholic theologians do not confute, but endorse what they see in this article as a condemnation of a Pelagian concept of merit of eternal life without

³E. Schlink, "The Ecumenical Character and Claim of the Augsburg Confession," *LWF Report* 6, 7 (December, 1979), 15; in this essay Schlink regrettably cites only the earlier, rejected draft of the *Confutatio*.

⁴See Reu, *op. cit.*, pp. 348-49.

⁵The translation of the German text is by T. Tappert, *The Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1959), p. 30.

God's grace. Beyond this, their only concern in responding to this article is to uphold "merits that men acquire by the assistance of divine grace."⁶ To this end they invoke 10 passages from Scripture. Indeed, except for a fleeting reference to the unorthodoxy of the Manichaeans on this point, their argument is based on Scripture alone!

If the first point we have made about the *Confutation* questions the appropriateness of it being called a "Roman," a "pontifical" or even a "Catholic" confutation, the latter two points suggest that it ought not even be considered a "confutation," a term denoting complete rejection or refutation. Rather, according to Herbert Immenkötter, "it seems appropriate to stress very emphatically that the confutation proves itself to be an essentially successful effort to meet the questions and reproaches of the CA in a fair manner."⁷ This is by no means to say that the document itself is beyond reproach. In fact, as the next section shows, the drafters of the "Confutation" were able, in the next several weeks, to go well beyond the stand they took in their "fair" reply of August 3. We thus see an important reason for their failure to publish the "Confutation": it had already become obsolete.

II

The year 1980 is also the 450th anniversary of what might well be called the first ecumenical dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics. I refer here to the officially authorized discussions that took place during the month of August, 1530, involving representatives in equal number from each side. A "committee of fourteen" began its work on August 16, followed by a "committee of six" that met from August 22 through August 28.

The astonishing degree of theological agreement reached in those meetings has already been pointed out by Vinzenz Pfnür in his 1970 book, *Einig in der Rechtfertigungslehre?* His findings are summarized and, to some extent, expanded in his contribution to *The Role of the Augsburg Confession*. The most surprising disclosure Pfnür makes is that, according to John Eck, the chief spokesman of the Catholic group in both committees, the only doctrinal difference that remained after discussion of 19 of the first 21 articles of the CA (except for the propriety of the term "merit," which Melancthon later conceded in his *Apology*) was the doctrine of the invocation of the saints. This finding, it seems to me, shatters completely long-standing myths perpetuated by both Lutherans and Catholics from the sixteenth century to the present about the "radical opposition" or the "unbridgeable chasm" that allegedly separated Lutheranism and Catholicism from 1530 onward.

I wish here simply to present some results of recent work on materials that had not been available to Pfnür, which tend, however, to strengthen his contention that a remarkable *rapprochement* between Lutheran and Catholic theologians had already been achieved at Augsburg in August, 1530. Immenkötter, in consort with Eugène Honée of

⁶Reu, *op. cit.*, p. 350.

⁷H. Immenkötter, *Der Reichstag zu Augsburg und die Confutatio* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1979), p. 30.

Nijmegen, is publishing the "Akten des Hieronymus Vehus vom Augsburger Reichstag 1530." This collection includes the official minutes of both committees recorded by Vehus, Chancellor of Baden. On the basis of these minutes, Immenkötter, in *Der Reichstag zu Augsburg und die Confutatio*,⁸ provides us with a more exact state of the negotiations than Pfnür was able to do on the basis of his materials.

1. *The Committee of Fourteen.* Within two days, August 16 and 17, the committee reached a "remarkably far-reaching agreement" on the doctrinal articles of the CA. No difficulties at all were encountered in the articles which the "Confutation" had not challenged: 1, 3, 9, 13, 14 and 16-19. The committee was able to agree on the nature of original sin (Art. 2) by adopting a formulation proposed by Melancthon which emphasized, on the one hand, with the Lutherans, the lack of original justice and the concupiscence that remains even after baptism, while recognizing, on the other hand, the Catholic concern that original guilt was removed through baptism.

With regard to justification (Arts. 4-6), the Catholics granted that good works could only be called meritorious in and through God's grace. The Lutherans agreed to abandon the use of the word "alone" in order to obviate a false security about one's own salvation as well as the misunderstanding that faith "alone" justifies in such a way that neither grace nor good works were necessary. The committee also agreed to language according to which forgiveness of sins takes place formally and properly through sanctifying grace (*gratia gratum faciens*) and instrumentally through Word and Sacrament.

After drawing closer also on the question of church membership (Arts. 7 and 8) and on the real presence, by speaking of it as "vere et realiter," or "wesentlich" (Art. 10), the committee decided to discuss Article 11 on confession and 15 on church practices in connection with Arts. 25-27 of Part II.

Only three doctrinal points remained controverted. In Art. 12, although the Lutherans were able to recognize "satisfaction" as the third "part" of the sacrament of penance, they still did not think "satisfaction" was necessary for the remission of punishment due to sin. With respect to Art. 20, the Lutherans agreed that works done out of faith and through grace are pleasing to God and would be rewarded by God, but they still doubted whether they should be called "meritorious." (Melancthon, as was already noted, did accept the legitimacy of this term in his *Apology*.) Finally, concerning Art. 21, there was agreement that "all the saints and angels in heaven pray for us to God and that the church's custom of commemorating the saints and asking God that the prayers of the saints be of benefit to us, is Christian and therefore worth continuing." Nevertheless, in the absence of a biblical precept, and on account of prevalent abuses, the Lutherans did not think invocation of the saints should be a matter of obligation. (Neither does Trent, as I pointed out in *The Role of the Augsburg Confession*.⁹)

⁸See pp. 33-39.

⁹See p. 147, n. 10.

Two questions suggest themselves at this juncture. Which Lutheran or Roman Catholic theologian—or historian!—prior to 1970 would have listed the above three problems as those which divided Lutherans and Catholics in that first ecumenical dialogue? More importantly, which theologian today would regard these as church-dividing issues?

2. *The Committee of Six*. On August 22 the committee of fourteen gave the results of its deliberations to the respective leaderships who, in turn, agreed to another set of discussions involving a committee of six. According to Vehus, Immenkötter reports, "In this small circle it was very quickly seen that the decisive obstacles lay *not in the three still controverted doctrinal questions*, but in the articles of Part II of the CA."¹⁰ To be sure, theoretical divergences undergirded these "articles about matters in dispute" concerning "abuses which have been corrected," as the title of Part II has it. It is clear, however, that, at this decisive stage of Lutheran/Catholic encounter, *orthopraxis* rather than orthodoxy was the main issue, especially with regard to the lay chalice, marriage of priests and private masses.

But even on these matters of disputed *praxis*, however, according to Vehus, a complete agreement was reached in the final document prepared by the committee of six. Melanchthon, Brück and Heller, the Lutherans, explicitly accepted a proposal by Vehus and Eck which had incorporated some key Lutheran categories concerning the articles of Part II. According to this document, the Catholics would permit the lay chalice if the people were instructed in the doctrine of concomitance. The decision concerning married clergy would be left to the Emperor (!). So-called private masses would be allowed to continue (mainly because of obligations arising out of legally binding wills). Other questions concerning the mass would be left to the decision of a future council. Still flourishing monasteries were to be left undisturbed and these were to take in monks who had been driven out of their cloisters. Administration of the incomes of suppressed monasteries would be undertaken by the Emperor.¹¹

Growing impatience on the part of those waiting outside the closed committee room at the expensive Reichstag, hard-line letters from Luther, Nürnberg and other cities, which matched the unconciliatory spirit of the papal legate, and the increasing talk in the imperial camp of the use of force—these were some of the elements of division which conspired to overpower, though not refute, the agreements made by the participants in the dialogues.

We are called in this anniversary year to refuse to allow our vision of the Reformation to be obscured any longer by the smoke and dust raised by the forces of division. We are called to look at the evidence for the case that the year 1530, far from being the year in which an unbridgeable gap set in between Lutheranism and Catholicism, was actually a year in which Lutherans and Catholics were closer in the faith than they had ever been before or since—until our time.

¹⁰ Immenkötter, *Der Reichstag*, p. 37; emphasis mine.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

A reporter once heard Luther say "at table": "I'm afraid we'll never again be so close together as we were at Augsburg."¹² He was right. But only for his and succeeding generations—not for ours. For, to use the words of John Paul II in the above-mentioned address: "In our dialogue with the Lutheran World Federation we have begun to rediscover the deep links that unite us in faith which were masked by the polemics of the past."¹³

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¹²WATR 4, 495.

¹³See footnote 1 *supra*.