

SELECT GROUPS

- Topic: The Lutheran-Catholic *Joint Declaration on Justification by Faith*:
An Instance of Development of Doctrine
- Moderator: Jeffrey J. Gros, National Conference of Catholic Bishops
- Presenters: Margaret O'Gara, University of St. Michael's College
Michael Root, Trinity Lutheran Seminary

Margaret O'Gara developed three points: (1) the characteristics of this text; (2) the response of the Holy See in 1998; (3) the significance of the *JD* for the CTSA theme of development of doctrine.

This text differs from the dialogue results on which it was based in being a joint action of the churches. In this it is a moment in the reception of the results of dialogue and an event that changes the relationship between the churches. The form of the text is that of a "differentiated consensus" articulating areas of agreement, sufficient to claim that they are no longer church dividing, and areas of Lutheran and Catholic emphases: acceptable differences within the larger unity. Within the agreement on grace, examples were given of the treatment of renewal (#27), good works (#38) and assurance (#37) in the text.

The 1998 response of the Holy See came in two parts, a *Declaration* which stated the Catholic agreement with the consensus, and a set of *Clarifications* which articulated further difficulties which remained. This caused some confusion among Lutherans and some Catholics, and the press coverage diverged widely. The statement and *Annex*, released on June 11, 1999, represents the work of a year's careful negotiations. We have learned a good deal, as Catholics, about our internal processes and the difficulty others sometimes have in understanding them.

In relating this process to our understanding of the development of doctrine, Catholics need to be sensitive to the fact that Orthodox and Protestants may not use this framework and that it can cause difficulties in ecumenical conversations. The *JD* does, however, show us what Vatican II speaks of as a "growth in understanding," both of the doctrine itself and of the Lutheran partner in the dialogue. What was once seen as contradictory is now seen as complementary formulations of a common faith in God's gracious action in justifying the sinner. As the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* reiterates, dialogue itself leads us to new insights about the truths of faith.

Michael Root passed out the statement on the *JD* presented by Lutheran World Federation General Secretary Ishmael Noko and Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity President Cardinal Edward Cassidy, and its accompanying *Annex*. He then proceeded to present a Lutheran perspective, including: (1) the significance of the *JD* for Lutherans; (2) the difficulties presented for

Lutherans; (3) the process of reception and approval; (4) the present statement and its *Annex*.

For Lutherans justification is not just one doctrine but is the "principle locus" of Christian doctrine. This is not understood reductively, but as a central element in the Christian teaching shaping in various ways all that the church says and does. It will be on every Lutheran dialogue agenda, as it has been with Catholics since Vatican II. While the agreement may not be a surprise to professors, this official action of the churches makes it an historic and irreversible breakthrough. For this reason it can be seen as a real challenge to Lutheran identity.

While the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has not had difficulty with the text (Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is not part of the process), there were major debates in Germany around three concerns:

(a) The claim that the *JD* reached a "fundamental consensus of the Gospel." The text represents an "internally differentiated consensus." There is some concern in Germany about the meaning of *consensus* and *agreement*. This made the Germans, especially, sensitive to the Vatican *clarifications*.

(b) Lutherans are concerned about the role of justification as a criterion—the English uses *a*, the German uses neither *a* nor *the*, while the Italian translation uses *the*. There seem to be several uses: *criterion* (i) as criterion as we might understand it, (ii) as organizing principle, or (iii) as axiom from which all other doctrines can be deduced. Much of the German debate has centered around this confusion.

(c) The relationship of sin and concupiscence has been important from the Lutheran perspective. How can postbaptismal concupiscence be spoken of as sin in the proper sense (#28)?

The reception process has provided a particular challenge for the churches of the Lutheran World Federation. It is understood as a communion of churches, but the LWF itself does not constitute a magisterium to speak for the communion. Rather the national churches have had to ratify the *JD*, so the LWF has announced the consensus. Eighty-nine of the 124 member churches responded, 81 affirming, leaving 78 percent of the LWF churches agreeing to the *JD*. This represents an important ecclesiological development in worldwide Lutheranism as well as an ecumenical advance.

While the Holy See's 1998 response was meant as a *yes* to the consensus, it was read by many in both press and the churches as a *yes-but*, or as a *no*. For the Catholics the consensus was the central concern. For Lutherans the effects of the consensus, the reassessment of the sixteenth-century condemnations, was also essential. The June 11, 1999, statement makes the agreement unambiguous from both sides, with October 31, 1999, as the date of signing in Augsburg. The *Annex* does not go beyond the *JD* but reaffirms and clarifies its intent and content.

JEFFREY J. GROS
National Conference of Catholic Bishops
Washington, D.C.