

COMMON WORD

of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, Vatican (DPCU)

*Presented by General Secretary Rev. Dr. Anne Burghardt and Cardinal Kurt Koch
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SECTION 1

In the midst of a world that suffers from war and violence of many kinds, and from polarities dividing the human family, our commitment to the unity of the church intensifies. The ecumenical impulse witnesses to God's Spirit reconciling humanity and all creation. Today, in this celebration, we commemorate "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins" (Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed). With gratitude, we recall the sacramental foundation of our unity and renew our faith in the Triune God.

The ancient Christian Creed of Nicaea, whose 1700th anniversary we will celebrate in 2025, creates an ecumenical bond that has its center in Christ. As early as 1965, before the end of the Second Vatican Council, Catholics and Lutherans in the United States could testify together: "The confession that Our Lord Jesus Christ is the Son, God of God, continues to assure us that we are in fact redeemed, for only he who is God can redeem us" (*The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church. Summary Statement*, Baltimore, July 7, 1965).

SECTION 2

In baptism, God justifies. In the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)*, Lutherans and Catholics confess: "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 (JDDJ §15). Catholics and Lutherans rejoice in the consensus achieved on justification. Liberated by grace, forgiven, we are bound by baptism and faith, yet we also know of our "history of separation, which we cannot undo, but which can become part of our history of reconciliation" (cf. Preface to the Italian translation of the JDDJ, January 3, 2021).

The existential perception of the already existing unity, despite differences between Lutherans and Catholics, nourishes the longing for full visible unity. The international Catholic-Lutheran dialogue was able to contribute its part to the history of reconciliation, especially with the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. "How does a person enter into salvation?" - this crucial question, which led to the division of Western Christianity in the 16th century, found a common answer in 1999: "Justification is the forgiveness of sins (cf. Rom 3:23-25; Acts 13:39; Lk 18:14), liberation from the dominating power of sin and death (Rom 5:12-21) and from the curse of the law (Gal 3:10-14). It is acceptance into communion with God: already now, but then fully in God's coming kingdom (Rom 5:1f). It unites with Christ and with his death and resurrection (Rom 6:5). It occurs in the reception of the Holy Spirit in baptism and incorporation into the one body (Rom 8:1f, 9f; 1 Cor 12:12f). All this is from God alone, for Christ's sake, by grace, through faith in 'the gospel of God's Son' (Rom 1:1-3)" (JDDJ §11).

Lutherans and Catholics acknowledge justification as a sacramental reality, conferred in baptism. As sacramental reality, justification is the certainty of God's promise and the one hope in God's continuous action "to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10). We acknowledge that the gospel and church are bound together. "On the one hand the church lives from the gospel; on the other the gospel sounds forth in the church and summons into the community of the church" (*Church and Justification*, §170).

SECTION 3

The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* notes that "there are still questions of varying importance which need further clarification" (§43). Differing theological thought structures led to misunderstanding and conflict and finally division in the 16th century. The excommunication of Martin Luther is still a stumbling block for some today. It maintains its place in confessional memory, even though the excommunication has long since lost its immediate effect with the death of the reformer and Lutherans are not enemies or strangers for Catholics, but brothers and sisters, with whom Catholics

know themselves to be united through baptism and through “many of the significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself” (*Unitatis redintegratio* 3). Similarly, the fact that Martin Luther and the Lutheran Confessional writings refer to the papacy as “anti-Christ” is a stumbling block even though today the Lutheran World Federation does not support that view. Behind these two examples is ultimately the question of the Petrine ministry and the question of the mystery of the church, its unity and uniqueness. In the continuation of the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue, it therefore requires our special attention.

We are also painfully aware that the “past”, from the time of confessional “against each other”, can also directly or indirectly influence the “today” of our ecumenical “togetherness”. Yet, even in the 16th century, Luther’s excommunication and the Lutheran anti-Christ statements did not prevent encounter, notably the Augsburg Confession in 1530. Today, differentiating consensus allows Lutherans and Catholics to discern areas of consensus where our predecessors only saw insurmountable oppositions. We are able to recognize that the journey towards full communion is far greater than the contingencies of a particular epoch.

SECTION 4

The journey from conflict to communion led to the signing of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Augsburg, 1999) and to the Joint Commemoration of the Reformation (Lund, 2016). As we continue on this journey, we look ahead to the 500th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in 2030. This anniversary can encourage us to rediscover this confession in its original intention: “The express purpose of the Augsburg Confession is to bear witness to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church” (*All Under One Christ*, §10).

At the time of its writing, ecclesial unity was probably endangered, but ecclesial separation was not yet finally accomplished. As a “pre-confessional” witness to the unity of the church, the Augsburg Confession is therefore not only of historical interest; rather, it holds an ecumenical potential of lasting relevance. Its profound intention was “to maintain the unity of the church” and “witness to the truth of the gospel in its own time” (*All Under One Christ*, §27). A common reflection could lead to another “milestone” on the way from conflict to communion, comparable to the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.

Pope Francis explicitly encouraged such a “shared reflection” when he received a delegation from the Lutheran World Federation in Rome on June 25, 2021, the commemoration of the Augsburg Confession. In his address, he described ecumenism as a “journey of grace”: Ecumenism “depends not on human negotiations and agreements, but on the grace of God, which purifies memories and hearts, overcomes attitudes of inflexibility and directs towards renewed communion. (...) In this light, I would like to encourage all those engaged in the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue to persevere with confidence, in constant prayer, in the exercise of mutual charity, and in passionate efforts to achieve greater unity between the different members of the body of Christ.”

Through jointly rediscovering the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ for our time, Catholics and Lutherans recall the fifth Ecumenical Imperative to “witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world” (*From Conflict to Communion*, §243).