

No Church Dividing Differences?

Is the Pope going to change the official *Catechism of the Catholic Church* if the Vatican approves the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)*?

After all, the official *Catechism* affirms merit, purgatory, Mary as Mediatrix, the infallibility of the pope — the whole system of grace under the Roman Church.

By adopting *JDDJ* the ELCA Churchwide Assembly committed the ELCA to the position that there are no more church-dividing differences between Lutherans and Catholics on justification.

The "most significant act of Philadelphia" was the vote on *JDDJ*, says Edgar Trexler. (*The Lutheran*, 10/97, p.58). Just think, it happened without debate! The first delegate to the microphone said her children went to a wonderful Catholic school — ergo, the Assembly should adopt *JDDJ*. The second delegate moved the question. The Assembly voted 958 "Yes" and 25 "No." It was over.

Roman Catholic ecumenist Brother Jeffrey Gros came to the microphone and urged everyone to pray to the deceased Lutheran ecumenists, Warren Quanbeck and Arthur Carl Piepkorn. After all, having voted that there are no church-dividing issues on justification, who could object to "praying to the saints"?

A Failure of Leadership. *JDDJ* should never have come to the Assembly floor for many reasons: 1) Any assembly can only deal with one controversial issue. Delegates were exhausted from the wrenching decisions on the *Concordat*. 2) Two seminary faculties, Luther and Philadelphia, had pleaded for delay on *JDDJ*, citing the complexity and seriousness of the issues at stake. 3) ELCA synods only saw the text in April 1997 and they were not given interpretative materials or time to understand its claims and consequences.

Across the Atlantic German Lutherans have been analyzing the equivocal theological arguments of *JDDJ*. The United German Lutheran Church (VELKD) has already said there are serious church-dividing differences with Rome on justification. When the VELKD meets in October, it will object to the sweeping claims of *JDDJ*.

But Bishop Anderson simply ignored ELCA theologians who urged delay. After the Assembly vote he read from *JDDJ*: "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God...." But as you can see from the

Catechism of the Catholic Church #2010 (below) Catholics understand "grace alone" to mean only that believers cannot merit "the initial grace ... at the beginning of conversion." But believers do merit "for ourselves and others the graces needed for our sanctification and for the attainment of eternal life." There is no agreement that we are saved by faith alone. What a travesty this vote was.

The Vatican Speaks. Below are a few modern Catholic doctrines on salvation taken straight from the current official *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

#85. "The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome."

#885. "The pope enjoys infallibility when he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals."

#956. "The saints intercede with the Father for us, as they proffer the merits which they acquired on earth."

#1031. "Certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come, that is, in purgatory."

#1032. "The church offers prayers for the dead, above all the eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God (i.e. heaven). The church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead."

#2010. "No one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion, but, moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification and for the attainment of eternal life. Even temporal goods like health and friendship can be merited in accordance with God's wisdom."

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The truth is that Lutherans and Catholics still profoundly disagree about justification. There is no consensus on basic truths, including merit, faith alone, sin, and above all, justification as the doctrine which alone rightly orders all other doctrines.

But who in the upper echelons of the ELCA is asking about the truth of the gospel?