

Other Ecumenical Updates

Giving up on Justification by Faith Alone?

What do modern Catholics teach about salvation? Not medieval Catholics, but modern, post-Vatican II Catholics. The Roman Catholic Church still insists on purgatory, on the necessity of works, on the infallibility of the pope, on the immaculate conception of Mary, and on the meritorious nature of the sacrifice of the Mass.

These affirmations and more come from the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This "current, official exposition of the Catholic faith" shows that Lutherans and Catholics still have serious differences about justification.

Despite these differences Lutheran leaders are pushing Lutherans to declare officially that they have no church-dividing differences with Catholics on justification. Representatives from the Vatican and the LWF have drafted a *Joint Declaration* which says that Lutherans and Catholics agree on the "basic truths" of justification. An ELCA Press Release (3/6/97) says the *Joint Declaration* could end "four centuries of bickering" between Catholics and Lutherans.

The *Joint Declaration* does not say that justification is by faith alone in Christ alone. Catholics would never agree to this. In fact, the Vatican has insisted that two key affirmations — (i) faith is the assurance of salvation, and (ii) "justification" is the touchstone doctrine of Christian faith — be deleted from the final draft of the *Joint Declaration*. Even with these items deleted, Vatican representatives privately say they are not confined to LWF deadlines and are not enthusiastic about the text.

Lutheran leaders, in contrast, are pushing LWF member churches to adopt the *Joint Declaration* by May 1, 1998. According to William Rusch, the *Joint Declaration*, if adopted, will become an "official" ELCA statement which supersedes all other statements on justification — in other words, a new way of interpreting the Confessions (*Pro Ecclesia* 5/1996, p.283).

In October 1996 Bishop Anderson announced that the 1997 ELCA Churchwide Assembly will vote on the *Joint Declaration*. There will hardly be any time for churchwide discussion. ELCA leaders have not provided study materials on the key issues currently dividing Lutherans and Catholics: merit, faith alone, and the Christian as simultaneously sinful and righteous. German Lutherans have issued a succinct critique of these issues but ELCA leaders have largely ignored this Lutheran witness.

Given the top-down push for the *Concordat*, another top-down push for the *Joint Declaration* seems likely. A "Yes" vote at the 1997 Churchwide Assembly would commit the ELCA to the position that the ELCA agrees with Catholics "on the fundamental meaning and truth of our justification in Christ."

Catholics are not changing their teaching on purgatory, works, the saints and Mary, sacrifice of the Mass, and papal infallibility. Nevertheless Lutheran leaders seem determined to declare a fundamental consensus with Catholics on the "basic truths" of justification.

The Lutheran/Reformed Dilemma

The Lutheran/Reformed agreement seems to be dead. The inclusion of the United Church of Church (UCC) has been a red herring from the start. If the agreement had been with the Reformed Church of America and the Presbyterian Church it might have been adopted in 1997. The Presbyterian Church has one of the best systems of checks and balances of any mainline Christian church. This is illustrated by the recent vote to require chastity of single ministers in spite of opposition from top leaders. As one Presbyterian minister said: "This vote says to the country that Presbyterians are committed to reaffirming their biblical center for faith and practice."

Bishop Anderson says a key issue between Lutherans and Reformed Christians is the doctrine of the Lord's Supper (ELCA Press Release, 3/19/97). But this claim is difficult to maintain unless the criteria for what Lutherans require of the Reformed are much higher than for what Lutherans require of Episcopalians.

The real issue is the UCC, which, like the Episcopal Church, tolerates significant doctrinal diversity and ordains sexually active gays and lesbians. Both ecumenical proposals call for interchangeability of clergy. ELCA leaders have thus far avoided addressing the problems of being in full communion with churches that have different sexual standards for clergy. This is not a trivial issue in the 1990s and the coming decade. But if the issue is raised with respect to the UCC, it must also be raised with respect to Episcopalians.