

# Vatican: Thanks, But No Thanks

**No Real Consensus.** The official Vatican response to the *JDDJ* states that some of the differences between Catholics and Lutherans are not “simply a question of emphasis or language. Some of these differences concern aspects of substance and therefore are not all mutually compatible...” (§5). The Vatican lists in order of importance those points which “constitute still an obstacle to agreement between the Catholic Church and the [LWF] on all the fundamental truths concerning justification” (Preface). Some of the obstacles include:

1. The Lutheran “formula ‘at the same time righteous and sinner’ ... is not acceptable” (§1).
2. Justification is not *the* criterion, the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls; it “must be integrated into ... the living Church and its sacramental life” (§2).
3. “[D]ivine mercy makes man capable of responding to God’s gift, of cooperating with grace” (§3).
4. “[E]ternal life is, at one and the same time, grace and the reward given by God for good works and merits” (§3).

**Some Condemnations Continue Against Lutherans.** The Vatican makes clear that some of the condemnations of the Council of Trent in the Sixteenth Century against Lutherans, particularly on original sin and justification, still apply to Lutherans today (§5).

In the face of this clear rejection, it is meaningless to say that Lutherans and Catholics agree on justification but not on sin, faith, and merit.

**An Empty Consensus.** Bishop Anderson has said the “key conclusion” in the *JDDJ* is agreement on this sentence:

“By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are

*JDDJ on Merit:* “By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God....”

*The Vatican Response on Merit:* “We can therefore say that eternal life is, at one and the same time, grace and the reward given by God for good works and merits.”

*The Vatican:* “Some of these differences [separating Catholics and Lutherans in the doctrine of justification] concern aspects of substance and are therefore not all mutually compatible, as affirmed on the contrary in No. 40.”

*The Lutheran:* “Joint Declaration virtually ends Reformation argument.”

accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works” (*JDDJ* §15).

The trouble is this sentence is ambiguous; opposite conclusions can be drawn from it. On the one hand, Catholics can understand this “key conclusion” to mean that salvation is a process initiated by God but requiring good works before eternal life can be granted. On the other hand, Lutherans can understand this sentence to mean salvation is totally without our merit: Christ takes our sin on himself and gives us his righteousness.

**Doublespeak.** The alleged “key conclusion” is hollow if each side can draw opposite conclusions from it. The fact that Lutherans and Catholics do draw opposite conclusions should surprise no one. After all, on these basic questions of sin and merit neither Catholics nor Lutherans have changed in 450 years.

**There is No Middle Way.** Sadly, ecumenism has become the art of glossing over differences. The *JDDJ* claimed the remaining differences on justification are compatible because they are simply matters of emphasis or language (§40).

The Vatican responded that some of the differences are substantive and therefore not compatible, *contrary* to the claim of the *JDDJ*. So where do Lutherans stand? With Luther, that salvation is by faith alone, without merit? Or are Lutherans willing to accept the Catholic stance that salvation is by faith and “good works and merits”? These positions, as the Vatican points out, cannot be compatible. They are mutually exclusive.

Why did ELCA leaders vigorously support the *JDDJ*? The Vatican is clear about where it stands. Where then do Lutherans stand?