

# Ecumenical impasse? The Vatican on Justification by Faith: The Vatican on Justification by Faith

by [Richard E. Koenig](#) in the [October 14, 1998](#) issue

The issuing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification last year by representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church elicited great rejoicing. It appeared that an historic consensus had been reached on the central issue that has divided Protestants and Roman Catholics since the 16th century.

In introducing the document at its churchwide assembly in 1997, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America said that now "Roman Catholics and Lutherans would declare that the mutual 'anathemas' (condemnations) drawn up in the 16th century on the teaching of justification no longer apply to these churches." Ishmael Koko, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, whose member churches overwhelmingly endorsed the document, said: "This is what we have been praying for and hoping for after 30 years of dialogue." There was even talk of a celebratory event this year in Augsburg, Germany, at which officials of the two churches would sign the document.

But it appears that the rejoicing was premature. In June, Cardinal Edward Cassidy, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, announced that while the joint declaration was "without doubt an outstanding achievement," there were "limits" to the document which necessitated certain "clarifications." The Catholic Church, said Cassidy, "cannot yet speak of a consensus such as would eliminate every difference between Catholics and Lutherans in the understanding of justification."

The Vatican's tepid and ambiguous response was "the worst news I've received during my whole career," said Harding Meyer of Germany, one of the Lutheran drafters of the joint declaration. "This is not a basis for continuing dialogue." Horst

Hirschler, presiding bishop of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, who defended the declaration against the objections of 165 leading German Protestant theologians, said he was "taken aback" by the Vatican's stance.

Others put the best face on the situation. George Anderson, presiding bishop of the ELCA, said that whatever differences remain, the document still contains a powerful statement of agreement on Christ's saving work. Koko of the LWF said that in spite of Catholic reservations the LWF would work with the Roman church on how the "Joint Declaration process can be appropriately concluded."

Nevertheless, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that, as things stand now, the Joint Declaration project has failed in its objective. The Vatican's "major difficulties" with the text concern sections on:

- the believer as simultaneously justified and sinner;
- justification as the criterion for the life and practice of the church;
- the extent human beings cooperate in the work of salvation;
- the treatment of penance;
- and the "true ecclesial value" of the LWF's reception of the document.

The drafting committee had struggled mightily with the topic of "The Justified as Sinner," expanding and reworking the section until it satisfied both parties. It still didn't satisfy the Vatican, which said: "It is difficult to see how, in the current state of the presentation given in the Joint Declaration, we can say that the Lutheran doctrine of 'simul iustus et peccator' is not touched by the anathemas of the Tridentine decrees on original sin and justification." Specifically, the Vatican said that the phrase "at the same time righteous and sinner," as explained in the declaration, "is not acceptable" and is not compatible "with the renewal and sanctification of the interior man of which the Council of Trent speaks."

For some observers, the Catholic response is troublesome for what it means for the document as a whole. *Anathema* is the harshest term available for condemning another church's teaching. Wouldn't condemnation of one of the explications of justification affect the entire document?

The Catholic response also revealed a wide difference in the understanding of the process of receiving ecumenical documents. Lutherans proceeded under the assumption that once the text of the final draft had been agreed upon by representatives of the two churches, no further amendments or corrections would be

made, at least not without the other party's knowledge and consent. After all, it was only after arduous negotiations and reexamination by a task force made up of Roman Catholic and Lutheran and other Protestant theologians that the final text was agreed upon. Yet early in 1988 the Vatican signaled that it would have some questions about the draft.

No one on the Lutheran side, apparently, anticipated an outright rejection of significant portions of the document or, most startling to members of the LWF, a query about the validity of the LWF's capacity to authorize such a document. "One can ask why the Roman Catholic Church accepted the procedure [adopted by the LWF] all along only to call it into question at the end," commented the Bensheim Institute for Interconfessional Research.

Harding Meyer's charge that the Catholic response provides no basis for future dialogue points out the seriousness of the situation. A failure by the Roman Catholic Church to declare all its prior condemnations on the teaching of justification inapplicable and to recognize the ecclesial validity of the LWF could discourage further conversations. This action could mean the reversal or at best a chilling of what all parties agree have been enormous gains in ecumenical relations since Vatican II, especially on the local level.

Aware of what is at stake, the LWF appears to be following President Christian Krause's call for a careful, unhurried examination of the Vatican's response and for a comparison of that response with the LWF executive council's statement endorsing the Joint Declaration. Only such an analysis will show whether ecumenism has suffered a setback, Krause told the German news agency. Catholics also seem to be pausing to assess the situation and determine a future course for dialogue.

The two communions will have to address the apparent disparity in their understanding of the process of reception. For Lutherans, reception was an open process involving the presentation of a document created by a joint committee to member churches for their ratification and then to the LWF's executive council for final approval. This was clear from the outset. For Roman Catholics, reception meant approval in a closed process by the Vatican (after approval by Lutherans) with the privilege of amendment or rejection. In this context, the question of the validity of the LWF's authority to speak for Lutheran churches of the world after they had rendered their opinion must also be settled.

Further, the two parties have to address the issue of ecumenical language. The Joint Declaration featured a unique approach to the disparate ways the two communions express their understandings: it summarizes Lutheran and Catholic explications of the doctrines and treats only those aspects which were regarded as basic or fundamental. It was this approach that was attacked by theologians in Germany.

On this point, Bishop Hirschler, a member of the committee responsible for the Joint Declaration, defended the document by noting that it was not intended to say everything on the doctrine of justification but only to express the essentials in a form that could be said together by the two communions. The Bensheim Institute added that "the 'all or nothing' [method] kills the ecumenical dialogue and ultimately signifies a confessionalistic Catholic or Protestant 'return oikumene.'" In the light of the Catholic response, the two communions need to clarify their views on the possibility of finding ecumenical language that does not force one side to accept the terminology of the other.

Finally, the two sides might consider the reaction of the Swiss Protestant Church Federation to the Joint Declaration. Despite acceptance in principle, the federation complained that the document has a "fixation on the past. Problems are painstakingly and passionately solved here which, we believe, no one any longer has today, nor can even understand." The federation questioned "the practical, substantial relevance [of the declaration], which seems to be somewhat minimal for us today."

The Catholic response indicated an awareness of similar questions in its concluding paragraph:

It should be a common concern of Lutherans and Catholics to find a language which can make the doctrine of justification more intelligible also for men and women of our day. The fundamental truths of the salvation given by Christ and received in faith, of the primacy of grace over every human initiative, of the gift of the Holy Spirit which makes us capable of living according to our condition as children of God, and so on. These are essential aspects of the Christian message that should be a light for the believers of all times.

Ironically, these comments affirm a concern that Lutherans set out to address in 1963 at the Fourth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Helsinki. In fact,

relevant language for the gospel of justification by faith is a quest that Lutherans have been on ever since Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous prophesy of the emergence of a "new language" with which to preach the gospel.

The task before the churches is clear: to define and overcome the problems that surfaced in the process of preparing the Joint Declaration; to find ways to continue the dialogue; and, building on the consensus achieved, to develop a common witness that speaks to a postmodern society of God's abounding unmerited grace in love for fallen humanity.