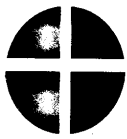


UNITED STATES CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE



NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CATHOLIC-LUTHERAN AGREEMENT SEEN ON JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

WASHINGTON--A committee of scholars has predicted that a forthcoming joint declaration by the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Lutheran World Federation will express agreement on those issues considered church-dividing on the topic of justification by faith, the doctrinal matter that was at the center of the Reformation controversies.

This was the conclusion reached by the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Coordinating Committee which met to review the proposed "Joint Declaration on Justification by Faith." The committee met at the Mercy Center in St. Louis (April 26-28) under the leadership of Archbishop Francis Stafford of Denver and Bishop Harold Skillrud of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The committee was appointed after the Ninth Round of the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue. Its report on the proposed Joint Declaration will go to the Holy See's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and to the Lutheran World Federation. The Declaration will be a common statement of faith by the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Lutheran World Federation.

Disagreement over the doctrinal issue of justification led to the separation of Lutherans and Roman Catholics after the Confession of Augsburg in 1530. Strong affirmations on God's grace and Christ's role in justifying the sinner are contained in the Lutheran book of confessions--the Book of Concord--and the Council of Trent. These affirmations about the Gospel also contain

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certain condemnations judged, in the past, to have applied to one another, Protestant and Catholic. After decades of careful biblical and historical dialogue among Catholic and Lutheran leaders and scholars, sufficient common ground has been found to be able to say at the highest levels that there is no longer disagreement on this central issue of the Christian faith.

The proposed Declaration will be before the churches for action sometime after 1997, when the 450th anniversary of the Decrees on Justification of the Council of Trent will be observed, and when the Lutheran World Federation will meet in Hong Kong.

A statement on justification by faith, which came from the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue in 1983, contained the assertion that "Our entire hope of justification and salvation rests on Christ Jesus and on the gospel whereby the good news of God's merciful action in Christ is made known; we do not place our ultimate trust in anything other than God's promise and saving work in Christ."

If the Joint Declaration is successful, it can be expected to contain a similar affirmation, with considerable implications for such issues as sinfulness, the doctrine of grace, the relationship of law and gospel, the role of merit and good works, and freedom.

The probable result of such an action would be that certain of the condemnations in the Lutheran confessions and the Council of Trent would be seen not to apply to the churches that are able to make the Declaration.

The Coordinating Committee provided suggestions for the final draft and strongly affirmed the intent of the Declaration. In this country the Joint Declaration would include the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Roman Catholic Church. Other Lutherans, like the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, would not be affected by such a judgment unless they were able to affirm, with Catholics, the Joint Declaration.

The results of the Coordinating Committee's work and the reflections of the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs were forwarded to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity by Bishop Anthony Pilla of Cleveland, President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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The Coordinating Committee also commissioned publication of a brief survey of the first Nine Rounds of Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue and made recommendations for the theme for the Tenth Round, to begin in 1997 or 1998. The recommended theme is The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries.

Koinonia, or communion, has come to be a central theme in ecumenical dialogues, not only of these two churches, but among the full range of churches committed to full visible unity, Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox and Roman Catholic, that have participated in World Council of Churches discussions.

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