



NEWS

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**LUTHERANS, ROMAN CATHOLICS COMPLETE
COMMON STATEMENT ON SAINTS, MARY**

WASHINGTON--Culminating seven years of study and discussion, scholars representing Lutherans and Roman Catholics in the United States have approved a common statement setting forth their doctrinal agreements and differences on the role of the saints, especially Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the life of faith.

The document, titled "The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary," was unanimously approved Feb. 17 by the 20-member dialogue during a working session in Lantana, Florida.

Completion of the 223-page report was announced by the dialogue co-chairs, Archbishop J. Francis Stafford of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Denver and Dr. H. George Anderson, president of Luther College, Decorah, Iowa.

The document explores convergences and divergences between the two church traditions on the place of the saints and Mary in the life of the churches in light of their common belief that Christ is the "sole mediator" between the believer and God the Father.

In a section titled "Next Steps," signers of the document say: "Building upon our prior consensus about Jesus Christ and the gospel as the source and center of all Christian life, we have in this round of dialogue come to a deeper appreciation of the
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unique mediatorship of Jesus Christ and its normative role with regard to the issues before us. His sole mediatorship is the ground of our common hope and of the communion of all the faithful, living and dead, in the new life of grace."

The document concedes that Lutherans and Catholics are "still separated by differing views on matters such as the invocation of saints and the Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Mary." The report suggests that "our two churches would make greater progress toward fellowship by taking two further steps within the framework of common study and dialogue."

One step would be a Lutheran acknowledgment "that the Catholic teaching about the saints and Mary as set forth in the documents of Vatican II does not promote idolatrous belief or practice and is not opposed to the gospel."

Another would be acknowledgment by the Catholic Church "that in a closer but still incomplete fellowship, Lutherans, focusing on Christ the one Mediator, as set forth in Scripture, would not be obliged to invoke the saints or affirm the two Marian dogmas" (that is, the Immaculate Conception--the belief that Mary was preserved from original sin--and Mary's bodily assumption into heaven).

The just-completed document is the product of the eighth round of U.S. Lutheran-Catholic ecumenical dialogues. The oldest of many current bilateral dialogues between church bodies in the United States, it is widely regarded as among the most productive.

The series of dialogues is sponsored jointly by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

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Participants in the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue will mark its 25th anniversary at a September session in Erlanger, Ky. At the Erlanger meeting the two teams of theologians will launch a ninth round of talks, taking up discussion of the churches' use of Scripture and tradition.

In 1983 the dialogue completed a significant step with the approval of a common statement on "Justification by Faith." The topic of the saints and Mary was selected for the eighth round of discussions as a practical matter of church life by which to test the churches' use of the principle of justification. In the "Justification" document, published in 1985, the dialogue partners asserted that "our entire hope of justification rests on Christ Jesus and on the gospel . . ." so that "we do not place our ultimate trust in anything other than God's promise and saving work in Christ." At that time, conceding an "incomplete convergence on the use" of that doctrine in "the church's proclamation and practice," representatives of the churches called for further dialogue to test the use of the principle.

In earlier rounds of dialogue, the group dealt with other doctrines that have either divided the two traditions or led them toward closer unity since the 16th century split at the time of the Reformation--the Nicene Creed, baptism, the Eucharist, the ministry, papal primacy, teaching authority, and infallibility. Summaries and joint statements have been published from each round in the series.

In the current report, the signers express the hope that their work will "contribute to a clarification of the matters we have examined and will help our Churches to remove the remaining obstacles to ecumenical reconciliation."

The document identifies certain major divergences--the way
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Lutherans and Catholics use the term "saint"; the question of whether Christians should invoke the saints in their prayers, asking for help or specific favors; and whether Mary plays a mediating role.

In regard to Mary, the statement says, the most "difficult area" separating Lutherans and Catholics has to do with the two "Marian dogmas" defined by the Catholic Church since the 16th century-- the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption.

Dr. Anderson, the Lutheran co-chair, said in an interview that the most recent round of talks "has opened a window for Lutherans into Roman Catholic piety since Vatican II. Most of us have an image of Marian devotion that dates to before Vatican II. Understanding the depth of a piety that is not our own can make more real for us the Communion of the Saints, which Lutherans confess. It is in our creed, but we have not understood it quite as personally or made it quite as much a part of our life.

"Hearing what Catholics today say about Mary and the saints and-- this is the critical point--how they relate to Jesus Christ as the sole mediator with God is not only informative and instructive," Dr. Anderson said. "It helps us to review our own faith and piety in terms of another model."

"It has been a long and difficult round," said Archbishop Stafford, the Catholic co-chair, in an interview. "We addressed some neuralgic doctrinal differences that will not easily be resolved.

"There has been progress," the archbishop continued, "mainly in our understanding of the difficulties we face in the future. I believe we now have a better assessment of the different

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theological and philosophical underpinnings of our two churches."

Referring to the selection of Scripture and tradition as the topic for round nine of the dialogue, Archbishop Stafford said, "So much of our differences in the round we just completed centered on the understanding Lutherans and Catholics have of Scripture and its use. It is my hope that our principles of interpreting Scripture and our understandings of tradition will be clarified."

The new document includes an examination of 16th century differences, separate chapters setting forth perspectives of the two traditions on crucial issues, a discussion of the problem in the current context, a review of Scripture on the topic, a survey of studies from the second to 16th centuries, and a discussion of subsequent historical developments, including the Second Vatican Council. Separate sets of reflections written by Lutheran and Catholic participants are also included.

In their reflections, the Catholic team writes that Jesus Christ "is always found in the company of a whole range of his friends, both living and dead. It is a basic Catholic experience that when recognized and appealed to within a rightly ordered faith, these friends of Jesus Christ strengthen one's own sense of communion with Christ. It's all in the family, we might say; we are part of a people. Saints show us how the grace of God may work in a life; they give us bright patterns of holiness; they pray for us. Keeping company with the saints in the Spirit of Christ encourages our faith. It is simply part of what it means to be Catholic, bonded with millions of other people not only throughout space in countries around the world, but also throughout time. . . . honoring of all the saints, or one saint, or of Saint Mary, serves to keep our feet on the gospel path."

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The Catholic reflections also caution that devotional practices operating "within a disordered faith" can lead "a person to transfer ultimate trust away from Jesus Christ toward Mary or the saints." Such practices "deserve critique," the document says.

In a section on "Lutheran Perspectives," the dialogue's Lutheran members write: "The crucial issue in this dialogue for Lutherans . . . remains that of the sole mediatorship of Christ over against the invocation of the saints and Mary. Although Lutherans do not deny that deceased and living saints join together in praising God--indeed, this is affirmed in some eucharistic and other liturgical celebrations--they have difficulties with the customary definition of invocation when it applies to someone other than Christ: namely, as the practice of calling on someone and asking for something for one's benefit. Lutherans believe such practice detracts from the sole mediatorship of Christ because it seems to assume or to imply that Mary and certain deceased saints are somehow more accessible or benevolent than Christ."

A common statement by the two sides lists 19 convergences on the dialogue topic which the participants commend "for consideration within our churches and beyond them."

The two sides agreed, for example, that the term saint is used in both traditions "for all those justified by the grace of Christ, and, to one degree or another, for certain individuals among them, marked by holiness, who live the life of faith in devotion toward God and love toward the neighbor in exemplary ways, calling forth praise to God."

Among the other convergences cited:

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--"Devotion to the saints and Mary should not be practiced in ways that detract from the ultimate trust that is to be placed in Christ alone as Mediator."

--"In the fellowship of living and departed saints, believers are inspired by others, as examples of God's grace, to greater faith, to good works, and to thanksgiving for one another."

--"Among the saints who have played a role in God's plan of salvation for humanity, Mary, who bore Christ, is in particular to be honored, as 'God-bearer'. . . and as the pure, holy and 'most blessed virgin'. . ."

In considering whether divergences need be "church-dividing," the document says, "The difference of usage of the term saint in our two traditions can make for some difficulty of communication but is not of itself church-divisive, since neither church actually rejects the usage of the other."

The writers indicate that the dialogue "has not reached agreement on the substantive issue whether invocation of saints is legitimate and beneficial. Catholics deny that the practice in and of itself is idolatrous or injurious to the honor of Christ the one Mediator, even though the practice must be protected against abuse."

Lutheran participants in the dialogue, the report says, hold the opinion that the practice of invoking the saints "is not church-dividing, provided that the sole mediatorship of Christ is clearly safeguarded, and that any closer future fellowship members would be free to refrain from the practice."

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The statement adds that "Catholics could enter into a fellowship where there would be freedom for Lutherans to proclaim the one Mediator, with their particular conviction that the invocation of the saints would thereby recede. Catholics could live in such a fellowship with the understanding that their own tradition of worship would be respected and not impugned as idolatrous."

Until Lutherans and Catholics find a way to transcend their differences on the two Marian dogmas, "they must be acknowledged as an obstacle to full fellowship between our churches, though they need not prevent a significant advance in the relationship that already exists," the document says.

Roman Catholic participants in the dialogue are:

--The Most Rev. J. Francis Stafford (chairman), Archbishop of Denver, Denver, Colo.

--The Rev. Avery Dulles, S.J., Fordham University, Bronx, N.Y.

--The Rev. Robert B. Eno, S.S., Theological College, Washington, D.C.

--The Rev. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

--Sister Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.

--The Rev. Killian McDonnell, O.S.B., St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minn.

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--The Rev. Carl J. Peter, Catholic University of America,
Washington, D.C.

--The Rev. Walter Principe, C.S.B., Pontifical Institute of
Medieval Studies, Toronto, Ontario.

--The Rev. Georges Tavard, Brighton, Mass.

--The Rev. Frederick M. Jelly, O.P. (consultant), Mount Saint
Mary's Seminary, Emmitsburg, Md.

--The Rev. John F. Hotchkin (staff), Bishops' Committee for
Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America participants are:

--Dr. H. George Anderson (chairman), president, Luther College,
Decorah, Iowa.

--Dr. Robert W. Bertram, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago,
Chicago, Ill.

--Dr. Joseph W. Burgess, Philadelphia, Pa.

--Dr. Gerhard O. Forde, Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary,
St. Paul, Minn.

--Dr. Karlfried Froelich, Princeton Theological Seminary,
Princeton, N.J.

--Dr. Eric Gritsch, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Gettysburg,
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--Dr. Kenneth Hagen, Department of Theology, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wis.

--Dr. John Reumann, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pa.

--Dr. Daniel F. Martensen (staff), Office for Ecumenical Affairs, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Chicago, Ill.

Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod participants are:

--Dr. Horace Hummel, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo.

--Dr. John F. Johnson, Inter-Lutheran Council for Continuing Education, St. Petersburg, Fla.

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