

Prof. Dr. Joachim Track  
Moderator, Programme Committee for Theology and Studies  
of the Lutheran World Federation

**The Significance of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification  
for Future Relations between the Roman Catholic Church  
and the Lutheran Churches**

A new ecumenical consciousness has arisen in this century. Amidst all the differences which remain and current controversies, the churches are showing a new openness towards one another, in congregations at the local level, in the individual dioceses and churches, and world-wide. The dimensions of ecumenical encounter are many and diverse: in theological studies, in the sharing of prayer and celebration of worship, in cooperation on projects to relieve the world's suffering, in joint responses to the challenges of the times. Clearly it has been recognised that differences among the confessions are not only enriching, but also that the reciprocal demarcations between the churches, and above all their quarrels, are offensive.

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification belongs in the context of these efforts toward ecumenical understanding and moving closer together, in spite of all the setbacks and disillusionments which keep occurring. That there is success in agreeing on justification, on that doctrine which was the theological basis for the division of the Western churches, is reason to rejoice. It is already changing the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran churches. It is a decisive step toward recognition of one another as churches, and toward realisation of the Christian churches' common responsibility for witness and service to the world. But especially on this day, it is also an occasion for thinking together about the opportunities and obligations which are presented to us for the future in this Joint Declaration.

1. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: an experience which opens up and shapes the ecumenical future

The significance of the Joint Declaration lies first of all in the very event of this Declaration, in the process by which it came to be and the experiences connected with it. For the first time in history a common ecumenical document has been created through a joint process, from the beginning, of consultation between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran churches united in the Lutheran World Federation. It seeks to sum up and take stock of the results of the theological dialogues which have been conducted with special intensity since the end of the Second Vatican Council. In this way the process of dialogue is honoured, and there is a commitment, recognised by the churches, to the insights presented in the Joint Declaration.

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, even more so the Appendix, is a concise text compared with other documents. And when one thinks of all the interpretations and controversies about the doctrine of justification throughout church history, it has been created in a relatively short time. This has only been possible because of the intensive ecumenical efforts to bring about agreement on the doctrine of justification which began in the first half of our century and then took on new intensity around Vatican II. Research throughout the world on Luther and Thomas contributed to it, as did the efforts toward an agreement on the *Confessio Augustana* as an ecumenical document. This became part of the efforts toward dialogue, right up to two documents which are fundamentally important for the Joint Declaration as well as for their ecumenical

hermeneutics: "The Condemnations of the Reformation Era - Do They Still Divide?", composed under the chairmanship of Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, and "Justification by Faith", the report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue in the United States.

The Joint Declaration itself and its Appendix also owe their existence to the work of many, beginning with the first draft of a declaration by Harding Meyer, John Reumann, Eugene Brand, Lothar Ullrich, George Tavard and Heinz-Albert Raem; continuing with all the negotiations which were conducted between the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity under the leadership of Cardinal Cassidy, and the Geneva staff of the Lutheran World Federation under the leadership of General Secretary Noko, up to the initiative of my friend, the late Bishop Hanselmann, which made possible the conversation at Regensburg with Cardinal Ratzinger and our colleague Schütte. If it is to succeed, the ecumenical movement needs the commitment and the competence of many persons, and this will continue to be true in the future.

The Joint Declaration is a shaper of the future also because it was developed in a common dialogue in which each side gained in understanding of its own and of the other's doctrine, and shared with the other in speaking about both. In this way, despite all remaining differences in concepts of the Church and areas of unreadiness for mutual recognition as churches, recognition of one another, in church teachings and as churches, did take place. This is reinforced by the statements which have now been confirmed, that the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation conducted the dialogue as equal partners, and that each partner respects the regular procedure by which the other arrives at doctrinal conclusions. Such a process of dialogue is always difficult; one gets into critical situations and there are disappointments. However, among the experiences which allow us hope for the future is that in every difficulty, especially following the "Response of the Catholic Church", instead of breaking off the process the two sides looked for a solution together. Because of this, the trust in one another could grow without which there can be no ecumenical movement.

Within the Lutheran churches this process represented a challenge. For them too it was the first time that the Lutheran churches worldwide pronounced themselves upon an ecumenical document which was binding on those who voted for it. Through this process a definite tension among the different contextual and theological approaches within the riches of Lutheranism became visible, as did the community of understanding of the Gospel. It was an important learning process within the Lutheran community, and also in the community of churches which have joined in the Leuenberg Agreement. There too the critical reflection in the process of discussion and reception shows the need there was and is for future learning.

The Joint Declaration, the Official Common Statement and the Appendix have been and remain open to criticism on both sides. It is characteristic of such a fundamental process of agreement that it moves too slowly for one person's expectations, based on experience, but also hopes, of ecumenical community; while for others it goes ahead too fast, so that they suspect that no real agreement has been reached. An ecumenical movement which seeks agreement in its "communicating formulas" (Schleiermacher) without genuine agreement is not in anyone's interest. The criticising voices must be heard, and have been heard, especially when they owe nothing to deep-seated prejudice and when they include critical reflection on their own views. The discourse is not over with regard to the Joint Declaration, and it must continue, for the sake of the ecumenical future.

Sweeping judgments as to whether the concept of justification is still an essential concern for "people of today" and today's society do not get us anywhere. It has been very good, during this process, to see the doctrine of justification on the public agenda again in church and society. The concept of justification is a healing word which needs to be spoken, a liberating, faith-giving, forgiveness-promising, love-revealing and hope-founding insight for our lives and our world in and for our time. This is the calling which is on the agenda in our common witness, now and always, in the knowledge that our success can only be a gift given to us.

## 2. The Joint Declaration as ecumenical obligation and proving ground

Understanding and agreement are on a good footing when we are no longer talking about, but rather with, one another, where there is encounter rather than seeing the other from a distance in his or her otherness. This is the same for personal encounter as for the encounter with other worlds of lifestyle and text-writing, in the midst of a situation which is always already being moulded by our previous perceptions of others and of ourselves.

If that which is to be understood has to do with the truth of God, with living and dying, with our understanding of God, the world and ourselves, then our very selves are at stake. So I find it surprising that we are talking only about a consensus on doctrine. Does the debate about the Joint Declaration not show that indeed more is at stake here: our fundamental way of dealing with others and ourselves, our understanding of salvation and how it is communicated? As Christians we are defined by the truth of justification, and we know that it is not a truth which we can speak to ourselves. Even the trust in this truth is not at our disposal. This gives us, in all necessary seriousness, the freedom to see the historical character of the concrete statements about this truth, and to handle them in faithfulness to their acknowledged truth and in openness to new understanding.

In this sense, efforts toward ecumenical understanding and agreement have a spiritual as well as an ethical dimension. In the process of understanding we have to recognise the other as other and do justice to that reality. Understanding and agreement take place in the prayer for the Holy Spirit to be present in us and in the community of believers.

This also determines the ecumenical hermeneutic to which the Joint Declaration and its Appendix are committed. Listening to the Word in the Scriptures and in dialogue with the other, it seeks to discover whether it is possible to arrive at a process of understanding and agreement. On the basis of the common ground that we confess God the Three in One and God's saving act in Jesus Christ, we each explore whether we can recognise, in the interpretation of this confession in the teaching and practice of the other church, an understanding of the Gospel and a form of being a Christian and being a church which, though very different, do not fundamentally contradict our own understanding. This includes insight into the historical relativity of one's own understanding as well as that of the other, and also a new understanding of one's own and the other's interpretation through recognising their intentions as justified. This can be put into words in a joint statement of a understanding of the Gospel, and in one's own context as well.

Reconciliation in diversity, and not the conversion of the other to my confession, is the goal of the ecumenical hermeneutic, and not only when the issue is the unity of the Church. This is reason enough to acknowledge that the mutual doctrinal condemnations no longer apply to the teachings of the dialogue partners as they have presented them. The mutual condemnations of the past thus

have their place as salutary warnings, and at the same time are kept within bounds. This ecumenical hermeneutic is to be adopted and further discussed, tried out and made more precise.

The consensus formulated in the Joint Declaration is accordingly a differentiated one. This differentiated consensus on the fundamental issue of justification is a limited consensus in that the insights gained in it, into the problems which the Joint Declaration mentions (the relationship between the Word of God and church doctrine, as well as the teachings concerning the Church, the authority within it, its unity, the ministry and the sacraments, and concerning the relationship between justification and social ethics) can only be given full consideration in further dialogue. This dialogue will test the understanding of the doctrine of justification as measure and touchstone, as the criterium which no other doctrine may contradict and which points the entire teaching and practice of the Church toward Christ. This is the duty and the task given to us in the Joint Declaration.

No understanding can be established beyond any doubt, including one's own understanding. This is especially true of understanding in matters of faith. In principle one must ask of each consensus which is gained whether it is just an addition or a compromise in formulation without a common basis, or whether it merely covers over an existing disagreement. This is especially true of an explicitly limited consensus. It can be interpreted backward or forward, depending on the perspective of the person looking at it. This is why understanding which is gained and agreements made together must be tested in theory and practice. This too calls for openness with one another and mutual trust.

So in the continuation of the dialogue, the first thing to do will be to find out whether, behind the obvious difference in understanding of the Church, there is a fundamental difference which cannot be neutralised, which is included in the origins of church teachings. Can a consensus be made which reaches around such a difference?

In my opinion, a common agreement on the Church and its ministry will be possible when the full force of the reality is brought out that the Church owes its existence permanently to the saving action of God in Jesus Christ, and to the gifts in which Christ gives himself to us, his Word and sacraments. Through these gifts, God the Three in One creates the community of faith and the unity of the Church in all its living diversity. This is the way in which the Church becomes a sign, an instrument and a foretaste of the new age, a place which represents God's saving plan for all humankind and the whole creation. Every service which the Church does, in the service of reconciliation, must bring this out fully in teaching and practice. This is the responsibility given to us in the Church's ministry and the local congregation. When we share this understanding it will be possible for the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran churches to recognise one another, despite the tension-charged and enriching differences between them. This, for me, is the hope which we have in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.