



NEWS

Department of Communications

3211 4th Street, N.E. Washington, DC 20017-1194

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FROM: Sr. Mary Ann Walsh

O 202-541-3200

H 301-587-4762

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

U.S. BISHOPS LAUD LUTHERAN STATEMENT ON JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

WASHINGTON--The U.S. Bishops have applauded the passage of a statement by the Lutheran Church that Catholics and Lutherans share consensus on the basic truths of the Doctrine of Justification, an issue which has divided the two churches since the 16th Century.

The action by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) advances ecumenism and opens the way to further cooperation between Catholics and Lutherans.

The Bishops' response was voiced by Bishop Alexander Brunett, Chairman of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' (NCCB) Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. As Committee Chairman, Bishop Brunett speaks for the Bishops on ecumenical matters.

"We in the Catholic Church are delighted to see the progress represented by the ELCA passage of the Joint Declaration on Justification by Faith," Bishop Brunett said. "Our National Conference of Catholic Bishops as well as the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity have worked for many years on the solid theological basis for this agreement."

"This action represents a moment for rejoicing for the whole ecumenical movement as well as our two churches, added Bishop Brunett of the Diocese of Helena, Montana. "I am sure all of our bishops and people will find this a great opportunity for deepening our commitment to full communion, and for engaging our local communities more deeply in the ecumenical efforts, especially with Lutherans."

ELCA, at its Church-wide Assembly in Philadelphia, August 19, voted by over 97 percent to approve a Joint Declaration with the Roman Catholic Church on the Doctrine of Justification

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by Faith affirming "that a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics."

The six-page text, which was drafted by representatives of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, goes on to affirm that "the doctrinal condemnations of the 16th century, in so far as they relate to the doctrine of justification, appear in a new light: The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations of the Council of Trent. The condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this Declaration."

Lutherans and Catholic have been engaged in Vatican-sponsored dialogues since the Second Vatican Council and have proposed a wide range of agreement on different issues, including Justification. In the United States there have been nine rounds of dialogues with the ELCA and the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, which in 1983 proposed agreement on this doctrine that was the central doctrine which separated Lutherans and Catholics in the 16th century.

The text is an official statement by the two churches. Other churches of the Lutheran World Federation are in the process of taking action, as is the Roman Catholic Church. The Aug. 19 statement marks the first such theological common declaration with the Lutheran churches since the dialogue began thirty years ago.

At the ELCA church-wide assembly, Bishop Brunett brought greetings from the U.S. Catholic Bishops and cited Pope John Paul II's July message to the Hong Kong meeting of the Lutheran World Federation.

"As together we give thanks to God for the ecumenical path on which he is leading us, I pray that with his grace Catholics and Lutherans will strive with even more commitment to overcome the obstacles which still impede our unity," Bishop Brunett said.

Bishop Brunett outlined the importance of this development to the Catholic Church, and noted the rich diversity of collaborative and spiritual ventures in which Catholics and Lutherans are involved in parishes and dioceses across the country.

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On the basis of thirty years of dialogue, biblical and theological research and prayer the Declaration affirmed the following:

"In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works."

Cardinal Edward Cassidy, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, in an address to the Hong Kong Assembly, said he hopes that by the end of 1998 or at least by the Jubilee 2000 there will be an affirmative response from the Holy See as well. Cardinal Cassidy further noted the important pastoral implications of this document on justification in terms of common prayer, ecumenical formation, Lutheran and Catholic catechesis and preaching, and continued deepening theological dialogue.

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