

HOMILY FOR THE CATHOLIC-LUTHERAN PRAYER SERVICE
St. Agnes Church, Springfield, Illinois
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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Twenty years ago, the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church received a consensus document called the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, which had been prepared, over thirty years of discussion, by a special committee of the Roman Catholic-Lutheran Dialogue Commission and submitted to the competent authorities in February 1997. On June 16, 1998, the Lutheran World Federation Council declared that an almost unanimous response from the synods had been favorable. The council therefore approved unanimously the joint declaration. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, after much study and discussion in close consultation with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, announced on June 25, 1998, that “a consensus had indeed been reached in basic truths of the doctrine of justification.”

At the time, I was the Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Chicago, having been appointed to that position by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin in 1992, and in which capacity I continued to serve under his successor as Archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Francis George, following Cardinal Bernardin's death in November 1996.

One of my duties as Chancellor was fielding inquiries from the media, especially if the topic touched on theology or canon law. So it was in that context that one day I received a phone call from Ernest Tucker, then the religion writer for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. His assignment was to write about the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* and he asked me if I could give a brief explanation of the document.

As is often the case in such circumstances, the challenge is to try to take some complex technical matter and explain it as clearly and as succinctly as possible in a brief sound bite. So, at the risk of oversimplifying matters, or so I thought, I described how for almost 500 years one of the basic points of contention between Catholics and Lutherans was the doctrine of justification, and how the classic Catholic view was that justification came through works while the classic Lutheran view was that

justification was by faith, but the consensus declaration was that justification was through grace, and that both faith and good works are possible only through God's grace.

That was as far as I got when the religion writer interrupted me and said, "Whoa, hold on there, Father Paprocki, you're getting way too theological on me!"

I said, "Ernie, it's a theological statement; I don't know how else to describe it!"

Mr. Tucker said that he understood that, but he was afraid that his readers would not understand the theological nuances. I said that was his job as religion writer to figure out how to put the concepts into words that his readers would understand. In the end, Mr. Tucker did a creditable job of explaining that "the joint declaration was designed to resolve a doctrinal battle that was at the heart of the Protestant Reformation. The dispute was over what theologians call 'justification,' or how salvation is achieved."¹

I know that our Lutherans and Catholics gathered here today are much more theologically sophisticated than the average person, still, this is not the time or the place to get into a detailed explication of all the

doctrinal nuances and subtleties regarding the doctrine of justification. We should however, note, exactly what was said that was so significant in our ecumenical dialogue that makes it possible for a Catholic Bishop and a Lutheran Bishop to be together here today, leading our respective communities of faith in this prayer service, and so I quote the key paragraph, number 15 of the *Joint Declaration*, as follows:

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.²

Cardinal Edward Cassidy, then President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, gave an address on September 17, 1999 to identify the main points of agreement between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation as expressed in the *Joint Declaration*. In his address, Cardinal Cassidy presented what may be termed the three basic truths on the doctrine of justification on which the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church have reached consensus, which I quote as follows:

First, justification is a free gift bestowed by the Trinitarian God and centers on the person of Christ, who became incarnate, died and rose. In being related to the person of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit, we enter into a condition of righteousness. This is not something that we merit, but is freely bestowed. And so “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.”

Second, we receive this salvation in faith. Faith is itself God’s gift through the Holy Spirit, who works through word and sacrament in the community of believers and who at the same time leads believers into that renewal of life that God will bring to completion in eternal life. Hence, the reality of justification is linked to faith but not simply as an intellectual assent of the mind. Rather the believer is to give himself/herself over to Christ in the renewal of life.

Third, justification points to the heart of the Gospel message but must be seen in an organic unity with all the other truths of faith, Trinity, Christology, ecclesiology and sacraments. “It stands in an essential relation to all the truths of faith, which are to be seen as internally related to each other. It is an indispensable criterion which constantly serves to orient all the teaching and practice of our churches to Christ.”³

Twenty years after this *Joint Declaration* and five hundred years after the reformation initiated by Martin Luther, we give thanks to God for the progress that has been made in our ecumenical dialogue, yet we acknowledge that much more work needs to be done to heal our divisions

and attain the unity sought by Jesus Christ in His prayer that “all may be one.”⁴ Indeed, not all Lutherans and not all Catholics have accepted the *Joint Declaration*.⁵ At the same time, it is encouraging to note, as we heard earlier, that the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, solemnly signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church in 1999, has also been signed by the World Methodist Council in 2006 and, during this past year, by the World Communion of Reformed Churches and by the Anglican Communion.⁶

As a Catholic Bishop, I share the sentiments expressed by our Holy Father, Pope Francis, the Bishop of Rome, as he recalled his participation on October 31, 2016 in the ecumenical gathering in Lund, Sweden, to commemorate through common prayer the beginning of the Reformation, in which he said:

True ecumenism is based on a shared conversion to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Redeemer. If we draw close to him, we draw close also to one another. During these days let us pray more fervently to the Holy Spirit so that we may experience this conversion which makes reconciliation possible. . . .

This joint commemoration of the Reformation was important on both the human and theological-spiritual levels. After fifty years of official ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans, we have succeeded in clearly

articulating points of view which today we agree on. For this we are grateful. At the same time we keep alive in our hearts sincere contrition for our faults. In this spirit, we recalled in Lund that the intention of Martin Luther five hundred years ago was to renew the Church, not divide her. The gathering there gave us the courage and strength, in our Lord Jesus Christ, to look ahead to the ecumenical journey that we are called to walk together.

In preparing the common commemoration of the Reformation, Catholics and Lutherans noted with greater awareness that theological dialogue remains essential for reconciliation and that it is advanced through steadfast commitment. Thus, in that communion of harmony which permits the Holy Spirit to act, we will be able to find further convergence on points of doctrine and the moral teaching of the Church, and will be able to draw ever closer to full and visible unity. . . .

At the conclusion of the day of commemoration in Lund, and looking to the future, we drew inspiration from our common witness to faith before the world, when we committed ourselves to jointly assisting those who suffer, who are in need, and who face persecution and violence. In doing so, as Christians, we are no longer divided, but rather united on the journey towards full communion.⁷

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Ernest Tucker, "Catholics and Lutherans agree – Local leaders hail easing of rift," *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 28, 1998.

² Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, n. 15.

³ Cardinal Edward Cassidy, "The Meaning of the Joint Declaration on Justification," September 17, 1999, accessed November 18, 2017 at <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=1334>.

⁴ John 17:21.

⁵ See, for example: Paul T. McCain, "A Betrayal of the Gospel: The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," *First Things*, March 12, 2010, accessed November 18, 2017 at <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2010/03/a-betrayal-of-the-gospel-the-joint-declaration-on-the-doctrine-of-justification>; and "The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in Confessional Lutheran Perspective," The Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, St. Louis, Missouri, 1999.

⁶ Joint Statement by the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity on the conclusion of the year of the common commemoration of the Reformation, October 31, 2017, accessed November 18, 2017 at <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/10/31/171031a.html>.

⁷ Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Members of the Ecumenical Delegation from Finland on the Occasion of the Feast of St. Henrik," January 19, 2017, accessed November 19, 2017 at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/january/documents/papa-francesco_20170119_delegazione-finlandia.html.