

# The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

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## **1. The Ecumenical Impulse**

With the Second Vatican Council and its Decree on Ecumenism “*Unitatis redintegratio*”, the Catholic Church officially declared its irreversible commitment to ecumenism. Since then she has entered into dialogue with almost all the Christian Churches and ecclesial communities of both East and West. Besides the Anglican Communion the Lutheran World Federation was the first to start the dialogue. In this dialogue the doctrine of justification was prominent from the very beginning. For it was this doctrine which stood in the centre of the controversy in the sixteenth century. For Martin Luther this was the centre of the Gospel, the teaching by which the Church stands and falls and where one cannot give in.

Ultimately this was for Luther not just a theoretical problem; it was an existential question, about the core, the centre, the heart of Christian existence. His question was, how to find God’s mercy; how to get a merciful God? After difficult inner struggle Luther discovered that he cannot merit God’s mercy by his own forces and that we are not righteous before God on account of our good works. Rather, we are righteous because God declares us righteous by his sovereign mercy and accepts us as sinners. Thus we are “*simul iustus et peccator*”, righteous and at the same time sinners. Justification is not a matter of our own righteousness, a righteousness we do not possess as our own, but of the righteousness of God that, unmerited by us, God bestows because of Christ's merits alone, as grace alone and on the basis of faith alone (*sola gratia, sola fide*).

The Council of Trent also condemned the Pelagian doctrine that a person can save himself by good works. The question at issue, however, was not: justification by grace or by good works; rather, it was whether and to what extent God's action enables and stimulates the co-operation of the human person. The Council of Trent ended up saying that we can cooperate in our justification, not by our own strength but animated and empowered by grace. The Council also wanted to make clear that God does not merely declare us to be righteous but truly makes us righteous; that he makes us new within so that we are a new creation and can live as new human

beings. Faith must become effective in love and loving deeds. Thus, whereas Luther's concern was the sovereignty of grace, the council was concerned about the effective power of grace, which transforms us and makes us righteous.

These doctrines have divided us for more than 400 years, bringing great suffering to individuals and to many of the peoples of Europe. Through our missionary work we exported our differences in other continents. Only in the 20th century Christians in all churches became ashamed about their divisions. It is noteworthy that the Ecumenical movement started with the experience in mission lands that Christianity's credibility is called into question if Christians are at loggerheads with one another. Only a reconciled Church can carry forward its mission of reconciling. This problem takes on even greater relevance in the religious situation of Europe. Looking at Europe people have spoken of a drying-up of faith. Faced with such a crisis we cannot afford to continue with the old controversies.

Especially in their common resistance to the inhumane unchristian system of the Nazis, in the concentration camps and trenches of the Second World War, many Catholics and evangelical Christians discovered that they were not as far apart as had seemed. United in opposing an inhuman and unchristian system they discovered that there was more uniting than dividing them. Ecumenical theology after 1945 was able to make use of these experiences. We could mention a whole host of theologians from both sides who prepared the way for what has now been achieved: Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar. We are like dwarfs on the shoulders of these giants. I could also mention: Hans Küng, Harding Meyer, George Lindbeck, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Eberhard Jüngel, Carl Peter, Otto Hermann Pesch and many others.

When the official dialogue was started after the Council it was already able to draw on the results of theological research. The very first document from the dialogue, the so-called "Malta Report" of 1971, laid out a wide-ranging consensus about the doctrine of justification. The question was taken up once more and deepened by the Dialogue in the United States, published under the title "Justification by Faith" (1985), again with the same results. Even later, it was also treated when all the doctrinal condemnations of the 16<sup>th</sup> century were examined by a joint commission, after

the first papal visit to Germany. The results are presented in the book "Lehrverurteilungen - Kirchentrennung?" [*The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?*] (1986). Finally, the last document of the international Roman Catholic-Evangelical Lutheran dialogue remains to be mentioned: "Church and Justification" (1994) concluded once again that there are no longer any Church-dividing differences over this issue.

So the first thing we should note is that what is said in the "Joint Declaration on Justification" solemnly signed on 31 October 1999 in Augsburg did not drop out of the skies; it was prepared by decades of specialised international theological work and ecumenical dialogues under the auspices of the churches. Serious and famous theologians from both sides were involved; the results were made public and so from the very beginning open to discussion. All the more hard to understand and painful, therefore, have been the surprised critical reactions of some theologians after the "Joint Declaration", who obviously had overslept the previous international ecumenical debate over two decades.

## ***2. What we have reached?***

First we have to say: In this dialogue there has been no question of easy short-cuts or of false eirenicism, relativism, or liberalism. On the contrary, the number 14 of the "Joint Declaration", where the common understanding of justification is expressed starts with the statement: "The Lutheran churches and the Roman catholic Church have together listened to the good news proclaimed in Holy Scripture. This common listening together with the theological conversations of recent years, has led to a shared understanding of justification". We have studied the sources of our faith together and immersed ourselves in the Sacred Scriptures and our respective traditions. This gave us new insights which shed new light on the statements of the sixteenth century. Neither Church can give up the doctrinal statements of that time or disown its own tradition, but we were enabled to understand them afresh and in a deeper way.

So we neither discovered a new gospel nor we rejected what our fathers and forefathers believed as expression of revealed gospel. But we discovered again that this one and for all revealed

gospel is so deep and so riche that nobody, no council and no theologian can ever exhaust it. It is by the gift of the Holy Spirit that we were able to deepen our understanding; so we could recognise and re-receive our respective traditions. In the richness of the other we discovered our own richness. This new perception and re-reception is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who introduces us in the whole truth (Jn 16:13). There was at stake a Spirit guided development of dogma and understanding of dogma. So the event of Augsburg was first of all not only a formal signing of a document but over all a celebration of joyful thanksgiving to God in the presence of a big crowd of the people of God.

A second point is this: Although the documents mentioned above were produced by theologians and commissions which had been officially appointed, their results had no official status for the two churches. They were documents of theological commissions. So, after these fundamental theological preparations, it was time for the Churches themselves to take up the question and deal with the results of the theological dialogue. Thus it was that the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity decided to attempt a "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification".

This was a new attempt and we had no experience how to do this. It is well known that this was not to be easy. Not only the decision making process and the respective institutions in both churches are quite different, but also the understanding of magisterium and its authority in the church. On the Lutheran side the Declaration had to pass the Synods of all 130 member churches of the Lutheran World Federation. The Lutheran World Federation itself, after positive decision of about 80 % of the member churches, had the function to state and to declare a "magnus consensus". On the Catholic side, the "Joint Declaration" after some difficulties and discussions was approved by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Immediately after the signing, the Pope publicly expressed his approval and joy at what had taken place and has repeated his approval publicly on several occasions since. Of course, this was no infallible statement, where the Pope speaks with his full and highest authority, but to reduce the signing to a more or less private and personal act of the president of the Pontifical Council for Christian unity is a more than fantastic idea.

There were problems on both sides. But what counts is the result. The problems could be ruled out by an Annex and "Official Common Statement", which reassumed and confirmed the main result of the Joint Declaration. This "Official Common Statement" finally could be signed in Augsburg and through it the "Joint Declaration" was recognised by both Churches.

People who know a bit on the history of dogmas and Confessional writings as well are familiar with such kind problems; they are nothing surprising and nothing extraordinary. Of course, it is not possible that in such a statement of agreement every theologian finds fully his own concerns and theories. The fact, that there must be found compromises in order to reach consensus on the formulation of such a text is also known by the whole history of dogmas and Confessional writings. But not every compromise is a bad compromise; there are wise compromises too, which hold what is essential and leave other aspects open for further discussion. Such wise compromises one can find – as every church historian knows well – in almost all dogmas and Confessional writings, not the least in the documents of the II. Vatican Council.

The crucial thing is that through the "Joint Declaration" the Churches themselves, rather than just theologians or even groups of theologians, have reached a substantial and fundamental consensus. It is this that makes the "Joint Declaration" something new. It is a document of churches and even more a church event.

It is true that the "Joint Declaration" did not deal expressly with the problem of ecclesiology and our differences about this issue. Nevertheless it is wrong to say, that Augsburg did not say anything on the issue of ecclesiology. The event itself was an ecclesiological one. The "Joint Declaration" is not only a theoretical doctrinal statement but its signing was an event and in Augsburg and since Augsburg there was a living experience, that since the relationship between Catholics and Lutherans reached a new quality and intensity. We held out our hands to each other as Churches and we do not wish to let go ever again. Or let me put it in this way: The "Joint Declaration" does not entail a statement on the Church, but it entails and promotes a plus in Church reality, which now can inspire the reflection on the Church. As everywhere, life precedes reflection and reflection presupposes life.

Obviously this agreement is not directed against any other church or church community or against the fellowship in the larger ecumenical movement. It is open for all and an invitation to the other churches to join us. With the Anglican communion there is already a substantial consensus with the document from the Anglican-roman catholic dialogue “Salvation and the Church” (1986). Since Augsburg we extended an invitation especially to the Reformed churches and the Methodist World Federation. We are happy that the latter one responded in an open and positive way and initiated a process of reception in its member churches. Thus, there is a promising “growth in agreement” among the churches.

Thirdly: When one asks about the content of the “Joint Declaration” one has to distinguish different levels of affirmation. The basic content is stated in number 15 of the “Joint Declaration”: “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”.

I think, this is a very large consensus, a consensus not only on justification but putting justification in the framework and on the fundament of the christological and Trinitarian confessions of the undivided church of the first centuries, a consensus in the centre and focus of the gospel. Without such an agreement on the christological and Trinitarian basis the agreement on justification would collapse. On this basis it was possible to integrate both concerns, the Lutheran one of the sovereignty of grace and the Catholic one of the effective power of grace, enabling us to bring fruits of good works. This fundamental consensus on the core of the Gospel is not only a theoretical one; it enables us to give common witness of the Gospel to the world which needs this message of grace and mercy. At the same time this consensus is the basis for the solution of all other questions dividing both church communities.

#### THE JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

Besides this fundamental consensus there remain several problems where we were not able to reach such a full consensus. To mention: the question of the “*simul iustus et peccator*”, the question of co-operation, the question how to speak about merits, and particularly the question of the central normativity of the doctrine of justification. In these and other questions it was possible to rule out formal contradictions; we were able to understand the concerns of the partner and to see convergences. But it remain different languages, different accents and emphasis, different concerns so that a full consensus was not reached. We had to refer these problems to further theological dialogue between the churches.

In the light of the fundamental consensus and of the still open questions number 40 and 41 of the “Joint Declaration” come to an twofold conclusion: 1) There is a consensus in basic truths (not: *the* basic truths) of the doctrine of justification between Lutherans and Catholics. In the light of this consensus the remaining differences of language, theological elaboration and emphasis in the understanding of justification are acceptable. Therefore the Lutheran and the Catholic explanations of justification are in their difference open to one another and do not destroy the consensus regarding the basic truths. 2) The condemnations of the sixteenth 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 condemnation from 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. They no longer apply to the other partner today if he stands by what is agreed in the “Joint Declaration”. But nothing is thereby taken away from the seriousness of the condemnations related to the doctrine of justification. Some were not simply pointless. They remain for us “salutary warnings” to which we must attend in our teaching and practice.

So we are dealing with a differentiated consensus rather than total agreement. There exists full consensus about key fundamental issues, in the exposition of which various starting-points, different thought-forms and expressions, and different emphases and statements are possible. So the “Joint Declaration” does not repeal the Council of Trent. For Catholics it remains just as valid as it was before. But it can be interpreted according to our present understanding of the

faith in such a way that Luther's doctrine, as set forth in the "Joint Declaration", is no longer ruled out as opposed to it and thus Church-dividing. The differences that remain are not contradictory statements but ones that complement and complete each other.

In assessing the "Joint Declaration" it all depends where one stands regarding such a differentiated consensus. This conception goes back to Johann Adam Möhler, the foremost known representative of the Catholic Tübingen School in the 19th century and one of the fathers and forerunners of today's ecumenical theology. In his early work "Die Einheit in der Kirche" (1825) Möhler distinguished between acceptable and even necessary internal oppositions (Gegensätze) as mutually complementary and heretical contradictions (Widersprüche) as incompatible with the faith of the Church. Whereas complementary oppositions belong to life and are therefore signs of a living church which is on the way, contradictions isolate themselves from the whole of church doctrine; the deny the complementary opposition, become one-sided and fruitless; so, in order to become again fruitful living opposition they have to be reintegrated in the whole of church life and doctrine.

This insights were taken up in the ecumenical theology of the 20th century; they became fundamental to understand what a differentiated consensus is all about. Differentiated consensus excludes definitively contradictions, but it includes complementary oppositions. To demand a full consensus would mean to make of the unity an eschatological affair. In this world only a differentiated consensus is possible and this means that the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church is an organic whole of complementary opposites. Or let me say in this way: The Church is modelled as image of the triune God who is oneness in diversity.

In the background lies a certain image of the unity of the Church for which we are striving: a unity which does not mean uniformity but a unity in diversity, or (as above all Lutheran theologians say today) a unity in reconciled diversity. The "Official Common Statement" expressly takes up this model and has thus given it official confirmation by the Church. This too is a much too less noticed remarkable result of the "Joint Declaration". Behind the declaration there is a ecumenical model for the unit we are seeking for not only between Catholics and

Lutherans but among all disciples of Christ. So the "Joint Declaration" points forward and opens a wider perspective.

### ***3. What has still to be done – New tasks and challenges***

The Pope has described the "Joint Declaration" as a "milestone". The image fits the situation exactly: we have reached an important staging post but are not yet at the final goal. The "Joint Declaration" is important even though it has limits. Its greatness lies in the fact that we can now give joint witness to what is at the heart of our faith, and with this common witness we enter together a new century and a new Millennium. Our ever more secularised world needs such common witness. Its greatness is also that it does not disguise its limits but openly names the issues that remain between us. So, clearly, the signing does not mean everything has been done. Rather we have to ask how the ecumenical movement goes forward now that the signing is over?

Ecumenism is a multi-layered process, where the whole Church has to be involved. We have to distinguish between the tasks on the ground, at the level of parish or diocese, and of the universal Church. Therefore on the Catholic side it would be wrong to wait for Rome for everything. There first the task of reception of what already is done, which takes place above all at the local Church level. The "Joint Declaration" should not remain a paper and a dead letter; it must become known and lived out; it must become a reality in the body of the church. There has been done already a lot but there is still to do a lot in catechises, continued formation of adults and of the clergy, theological teaching on the academic level. Nevertheless, here I shall limit myself to the level of the universal Church, and in particular to what the Council for Christian Unity can do.

First of all we shall have to review the questions about the doctrine of justification that have been left open after the "Joint Declaration". I am thinking, for example, of the particular contents of certain doctrinal questions, such as clarifying further the issue of "simul iustus et peccator" or the criteriological significance of the doctrine of justification. There are to clarify too several questions which are connected with the question of justification, for example the question of indulgences, which stood at the beginning of the Reformation and shape still today the collective memory on both sides. Even when the issue of indulgences is not a central and in the hierarchy

of truths not a priorital one, it is intimately linked with the theme of penance, which is central for Christian existence but today unfortunately often forgotten. So it was a common concern since Augsburg to take up these questions through symposiums and different dialogue groups and to widen the agreement already reached.

The first setting of future tasks brings me to a second one. We have to strengthen the fundamentals of the doctrine of justification. Here I am thinking first on further biblical work has to be done. The Bible, for both our Church communities, is the fundamental document of our faith and I have the impression that we can make further fundamental progress by more fully involving Scripture study in dogmatic questions. This is self-evident for Lutherans theologians, but it was also the official Roman response, which from the outset has called for a Biblical deepening. It is important to see, that the Bible besides justification uses manifold images and terms to describe the reality which justification means: kingdom of God, life, reconciliation, peace, redemption, grace and many others. These images and terms interpret each other and only all together give a full picture of the Biblical message.

Particularly in a Biblical perspective the message and doctrine of justification is rooted in the christological message of the Bible and of our common tradition as expressed in the Creed. The “Joint Declaration” speaks clearly of this fundament in its fundamental agreement. But it would be an illusion to think that this christological and Trinitarian fundament today is as accepted as it more or less used to be in the 16th century. In the meantime the problem has aggravated and became a new common challenge for both church communities. But justification tells us what Jesus Christ is for me and for us; so it is so to speak the subjective aspect of christology. Without the christological fundament it hangs in the open air and becomes an ideological affirmation. Therefor the Catholic side insisted so strongly, that justification can be the criterion of all church doctrine and practice only together with what is central in the New Testament: the message of Jesus Christ.

Third, I ought briefly to mention the important questions still at issue between us beyond the doctrine of justification. From the Catholic point of view there is above all the ecclesiological question, i.e. “Nature and purpose of the Church” as puts it the Commission “Faith and Order” of

the World Council of Churches. Intimately connected with these questions is the sacramental dimension of the Church. For justification by faith is linked with baptism as the sacrament of faith and with Eucharist, the centre and focus of Christian and church life. This questions come to head in the issue of church ministry, i.e., the priesthood of all believers and of the ordained, the ministry of bishops in apostolic succession, and the Petrine ministry. The “Joint dialogue commission between the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church” has already taken up some of these questions and has begun anew working on them.

To be sure, the solution to all this questions cannot deduced directly from the doctrine of justification; but the doctrine of justification points to the horizon, in which such a solution is possible and it shows us to what end sacraments and ministries in the Church are constituted and should be exercised. They are no ends in themselves but instruments and witnesses for God’s gracious and merciful justification.

A forth and final, but a very important and urgent point. Many Christians today no longer understand the formulations of the sixteenth century. That is especially true of us Catholics. Speaking about justification is not part of our normal catechetical language. We prefer to speak about salvation, grace, new life, forgiveness and reconciliation. However the real reason why many Catholics and Protestants as well do no longer understand the term justification, lies at a deeper level. We do no longer feel the burden of guilt and sin as Luther did, we don’t live in the fear of God’s judgement, we have all become too deistic, that is to say it seems to us that God has quite withdrawn from our world and our everyday existence. So the question about the merciful God, which moved Luther so deeply, leaves us somewhat cold. The question of justification seems to be at odds; we welcome that the churches finally were able to solve the problem, but it is no longer an existential problem for us.

We have thus to translate both the questions and the answers of the past into the language and the problematic of today, so that our language will touch and hit again our deepest experiences, our anxieties and hopes and will stir us as much today as in the past. This is not only a matter of language and of translating a few dogmatic statements, and even less of lapsing into trendy

jargon. This is ultimately a question of new opening and interpreting of our experience of hopelessness, of desire of meaning and mercy. So the problem of justification raises deep anthropological and theological questions and is linked with the over all question of evangelisation.

Thus in order to discover anew the deep meaning of justification we must delve more deeply and ask: What does God mean? What does it mean to believe in a merciful God? What does Jesus Christ mean for us today? What does it mean to believe to be saved and redeemed by his cross and resurrection? What does this imply for our personal and our common life? The question of justification brings us back ton the centre of the Gospel and to the basic questions of our human existence.

Since Augsburg there was done some work to open our eyes for the deeper actual meaning of justification and to help for its proclamation in today's context. It was made clear that, the doctrine of justification wants to say to us that we neither can nor should "make" our own life or its fulfilment: that we cannot accomplish this by our own efforts. Our value as persons does not depend on our good or bad achievements. Before anything we ourselves do we have been accepted and affirmed. Our life stands under the horizon of mercy and is ruled by a merciful God who through everything and despite everything holds us in his kind hands. We are able to live by God's mercy. This makes us free from fear, gives us hope and courage and fills us with the joy of the children of God.

Understood in this way justification is not only good news for our individual life. It enables us to live as individual persons and opens us at the same time for our neighbour human beings. As we can live by God's mercy so we can and should be gracious and merciful towards our fellow men and women. So justification enables and sends us to work for justice and peace, for the recognition of human dignity and human rights. Because we all live on God's mercy and love, justification enables us for and donates us with community. For that reason we can bring hope to a world which is suffering on injustice, lack of mercy, cynism and which is disorientated and lacks most hope, indeed has become nihilistic.

#### ***4. Conclusion: Courage in Ecumenism***

Many think the process of ecumenical rapprochement is going too slowly. They even say we are making no headway in ecumenism. It is certainly laborious, and needs patience and a great deal of staying power. The "Joint Declaration" has shown that progress is possible. This can give us new ecumenical confidence and momentum.

We should more be grateful for what we already achieved. On the beginning of the 20th century nobody would have expected where we are now. It was a successful journey from isolation, hostility and competition to tolerance, respect, mutual co-operation and even friendship. We discovered our already existing real and deep though not full communion in Jesus Christ. The "Joint Declaration" enlarged and deepened this already existing communion.

The next step to achieve full communion will not be easy. To be honest, there are not only complementary oppositions, there are still contradictions to overcome. And unfortunately there is the danger that in the sociological change we face today new contradictions in ethical questions arise. Or perhaps it would be better not to speak on new contradictions but on new challenges. In any case: Full communion can not be achieved by convergence alone but even more by conversion which implies repentance, forgiveness and renewal of the heart. Such a conversion is a gift of grace too - sola gratia, sola fide.

One day the gift of unity will take us by surprise just like an event we witnessed on a day just over ten years ago. If you had asked passers-by in West Berlin on the morning of 9 November 1989 "How long more do you think the wall will remain standing?" the majority would surely have replied "We would be happy if our grand children would be able to pass through the Brandenburg Gate some day". The evening of that memorable day the world saw something totally unexpected in Berlin. It is my firm conviction that one day too we will rub our eyes in amazement that God's Spirit has broken through the seemingly insurmountable walls that divide us and given us new ways through to each other and a new communion. Hopefully we don't have to wait another 400 years.

THE JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION